

Narrative Shifts

Session 3: Recommended Reading. *In Summer 2024, we invited [Katie Lee Ellison](#) (whom we published in [Issue 16: Proximities](#)) into Session 3 for the second hour. We asked her to bring in 3-5 “stones of wisdom,” as we call them, about how she relates to permission. Below, you’ll find her stones of wisdom, as well as a condensed transcript of our conversation, to get you thinking about permission before our session together.*



Katie Lee Ellison’s stones of wisdom:

The below is based on her conversation within the session, which is far below, so her stones may be referencing something that appears further down in the document.

- **Ready isn’t a thing I get to be.** To better articulate this, the sensation is that the time has come. I can’t push away or choke on the thing anymore and it’s more intrusive to keep doing so than to write. I suppose this is a kind of readiness, but what it feels like is squeezing a tube of toothpaste when you haven’t taken the little tab off the top yet. My body is the tube, squeezed. You get it.
- **Starting from what I know.** There are these huge stories I want to take on about things so far beyond me, and I immediately collapse beneath them. I’m not a journalist, my mind snaps. I’m not a scholar. But there’s the anger, there’s the experience, personal and otherwise, with that big thing. To take on “politics,” or anything big—mental health, abortion, race, class, war, genocide, and other huge issues that effect all of us everyday—I have to find the way in through something that is daily. Something that creates the anger in particular, every day, a thing I carry, which is how I know it’s real. It’s how I imagine I can best convey the thing to a reader. If it’s that real for me, it can be made that real for them, if I do my job, if I use all the skills I have, learn new ones, have a genius writer/editor friend or two read the thing and help translate what I’m doing. If everything is political, then the circumstances under which I have my first sip of water or tea in the morning is a way into what I’m desperate to tell. <3
- **Permission is a way into desire.** It’s a powerful thing to become aware of how much our ideas about ourselves prevent us from fulfilling our deepest and most essential desires. Those ideas often protect us from ourselves, from experiences we’re not ready for or can’t handle. So when they lift, when desire for something new or different wins out, and the whole body releases you into a

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new realm, it's a whole new relationship with power and agency. To give this a more concrete definition, I came out late in life. Coming out late for me meant that there was a world of myself I didn't allow myself to experience previously. This also gets into the previous "wisdom stone" about getting into bigger forces at play: American society, homophobia, Christianity in many forms, antisemitism, and a myriad of other messy and huge elements played a major role in why I could not and would not see myself. Still, taking hold of the power I had, decentering cis men, their approval, their choices, their *permission* meant a whole new world of freedom I gave myself, and had played a role in keeping from myself. There is some permission we can't always give ourselves for the dangers to our very lives that our sweet desires present. To know when and where to allow ourselves into those desires safely is a door flung open into art making and revelation.

- **You can invite yourself to the party you want to go to.** What I mean by this is, being a writer means receiving an enormous amount of rejection. It means putting yourself and your work up for scrutiny by invisible people who judge whether they want to let you in, and you never get to know why they do or don't, mostly. You just have to keep going, believing in yourself, trusting what you're doing is worth it. What I've learned is that by building structure for the communities you're already in, you create a party people want to come to, which in turn makes you someone they want at their parties. And by parties I mean anything: funding, publication, friendships, opportunities to help and be helped, which is the most beautiful thing in the world maybe? By party, I mean community in large part. And when I say "the party you want to go to," I mean that the party you want to go to might shift and change the more you give, the more you learn about the places you thought you wanted to belong, the funds you thought you wanted access to, etcetera. The party you want to go to might just be the one you throw yourself, and it might be really surprising how much support comes through to help you throw the party you love.

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You can see the condensed transcript of our conversation with Katie from the summer session below.

Katie Lee Ellison: As soon as I was thinking about permission, I was thinking about desire. In doing the reading for this session and thinking about what you guys have been thinking about, obsession kind of struck me from left field because I've found in the past that when I write from obsession, it's a compulsion. It's a thing that has control over me. And I usually become obsessed with something because I'm not given permission into it, because I'm not allowed space into it. And what I thought about immediately in thinking about permission was that I just turned 40 in March, and everything they say is true about you just stop giving so many fucks. And I feel like there's so many ways that I feel like I was about to say I'm allowed. I give myself permission to do the things that I want to do. Now I have permission because to do x, y, or z, barring tyrannical behaviors, of course.

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I was thinking about desire and how juicy and good it feels to have permission to give myself permission to kind of take that power back for myself. I'm really into the enjoyment of permission and the juiciness, the messiness and the multi-directional, how undefined desire is. Giving myself permission means that I get to be hungry and pursue that hunger in whatever way, in whatever moment. It's satisfying. It feels insistent and wild and urgent, and I get to explore all the ways that I can quench that thirst. Making your own rules, this is what permission feels like to me.

Joyce: You host [Nonfiction for No Reason](#), which asks people to come with fresh work. Things that they're putting their vulnerability into on the page. I've been to those readings and sometimes there are people who don't maybe identify as a nonfiction writer first and foremost. And then they do it and it's incredible. I guess my curiosity is, how do you, in your writing, know when you feel ready to write about something? How do you know when you are ready to write something?

Katie: Ready is never a thing that I get to be. I feel like I start writing about something when it's eating at me so hard, it's going to go through an organ or something. It's totally how I wrote the essay for Seventh Wave. That prompt was so gorgeous and brilliant, per usual, and came at just the right time. Just the right time. And you guys

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are so genius. You find these words that are like, you don't know why it strikes something in you, but it does. And it was just the right thing that I needed to crack the door open and then step in. I think something just becomes too painful, too itchy, too urgent. The desire becomes too great. Also, I think a big part of this too, and in large part, this is how NFNR was born: there's this huge desire to share. I don't want to hold this on my own anymore. I need someone else to take this from me. Take it and use it. That's how I know it's time. It's like I can't stand chewing or sucking on it anymore. It's got to get out somehow.

Joyce: For the piece you wrote for Seventh Wave, was there anything that surprised you? How did permission factor into the writing of that piece?

Katie: In terms of what came out on the page, I think the thing that surprised me the most was how much it was about that plant that I thought was a banana tree, but was actually a bird of paradise that surprised me. Although it shouldn't have because I knew that I had it because of my mom. And if you've read the essay, then you know what I'm talking about. And if you haven't, then this is weird, but I think in terms of permission, what I didn't realize until yesterday was how much writing this essay broke open my whole world. And I'll tell you the little story of why.

I was in the editorial process with you and with Briana at the same time that AWP was coming to Seattle in 2023. And this was the point of choking down what I was working on. I knew I was sitting on something powerful in working through it with you guys, and there were literally hundreds of opportunities all over my own city to share it, and I had no invite. So in creating this event through the process of creating Nonfiction For No Reason, this avalanche in my life started with this desperation to share this story.

I've joked a lot recently, but it's very much true: [Nonfiction For No Reason](#) is my whole personality at this point in my life. It's such fulfilling work and I'm doing everything I can to figure out how to make it my job for realsies. So what surprised me is the potency and the power to make it about permission, to give myself permission to write about something that is extremely painful, that is and is not my story to tell. And that's like the crux of what drives me to encourage people to share something that feels risky, because that's where the pulse is and where something alive is and where things will get interesting both in the room and afterward. Relationships form because people reveal things about themselves that they don't expect to at this reading and in general.

Resident: Thinking about permission, a few of us thought about it in a collective sense, whether it's family or community members, whatever groups we're a part of. So I'm curious about permission in terms of the consequences within capitalism. Especially in the work of writing about yourself narratively, as opposed

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to fiction, navigating holding your own truths and being vulnerable with that, but also being aware of what's going on around you, too, if that makes sense.

Katie: Great question. I try to focus very specifically on my experience and on what is immediately true around me, what I know to be true. For example, this essay that I wrote for Seventh Wave was about my mom's suicide, but an element of that is so much bigger than me, and I've really struggled to figure out how to write about it. The way marginalized communities are treated in the healthcare system or the lack of care system specifically around mental health issues. It's very easy for me to just fall down the hill of anger and despair when it comes to this and not be very articulate. It's still a process to figure out what it is that I want to say about it that's going to be something that we haven't heard or said in a way that we haven't heard it or is something that I specifically need to say.

There are so many ways to do it. I feel like we all bring these really individual unique strengths to these huge questions that are in our faces every day right now. But that's my way of dealing with it: get really, really personal and be willing to feel my own physical pain about it. Tell that story as true as I can, and hope that it reflects, do the work to make sure that something about that reflects other people's experience beyond my own. I hope that's helpful.

Resident: How do you make that safe space for yourself to move into?

Katie: I think before I try to answer this question, I just want to confess something that's sort of on my mind lately: in talking to writers who have recently published memoirs, people are starting to talk about how the process of writing a memoir is traumatic. Tessa Hulls has been very public about the breaking open process of this 10 year project of creating her graphic memoir [Feeding Ghosts](#), but there are lots of other writers talking about it now, too.

My experience with writing essays and with attempting to complete a memoir over a long period of time now is that I can't control it. And the more I try to control it, the worse it gets, especially when it comes to structure, but also in terms of protecting myself or deciding that I'm going to get into this but not that. It's really not in my control if it's going to be any good. And I feel like at this point, and this is very new and essential, it all relates back to what I was saying before about having this be about pursuing desire, having this be because I've presented myself with the question many times of, What if we just don't do this? What if we just cash out on this whole, "I'm going to be a writer thing"?

Drop the expectation, let it go. Do something else. Sit around not knowing what to do for as long as it takes to do anything else. I've given myself that out a couple of times, and the first thing I find myself doing is taking notes on my phone or taking a note

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somewhere. It's just, there's no way out for me. This is an obligation that I have that comes from within. Because of that predicament that I cannot get myself out of and continue to exist, how do I pursue these questions that will not let me rest? How do I satiate this desire to find some ways of telling what happened, of understanding what happened that create connective tissue for me instead of feeling so alone with my specific experience? How do I build community in the process of being by myself, writing on the page?

And the way that I'm finding I'm doing that more and more lately is by looking at other artists. One artist, BuBu de la Madeline, has me kind of compulsively engaged. I'm thinking a lot about my uncle who was a lifelong actor and am looking into watching performances of his that I never got to and exploring the history of this house that I lived in that now this interior designer lives in, and the decisions we make about home and what it looks like, and just getting into these aesthetic questions that are a way into other people's brains as well as my own, as a way of letting other people hold this really hard stuff that's underneath all of it. While I do the work.

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Katie Lee Ellison is a writer of essays and memoir, and a UX writer/content designer. She was born in New York City, grew up in Los Angeles, and calls Seattle home. She's the founder, curator, and host of [Nonfiction for No Reason, a teacher](#), wrote a children's book about [Bob Marley](#) for Penguin Random House, and a script for this [Nestle AI humanoid named Ruth](#). She holds a BA in English Lit from Wellesley College and an MFA from the University of Idaho. She was a 2016–2017 Hugo House Fellow, a 2018 fellow at the Yiddish Book Center, and attended the Tin House Summer Workshop in 2020. You can read Katie's essay, "[like \[my\] mother, like me](#)," which was published in Issue 16: Proximities, [here](#).