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Interview with Ross Gay

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Interview with Ross Gay

Ross Gay is the author of four books of poetry: Against Which; Bringing the Shovel Down; Be Holding, winner of the PEN American Literary Jean Stein Award; and Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude, winner of the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award and the 2016 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award. In addition to his poetry, Ross has released three collections of essays—The Book of Delights was released in 2019 and was a New York Times bestseller; Inciting Joy was released in 2022, and his newest collection, The Book of (More) Delights was released in September of 2023.

Interviewed by Ellie Smith

Inscape Journal: Ross, in my view, proximation with one another is where hope is born. Your writing feels proximate. I read your work and, I think, “oh yeah, me too!” You make us think of our own delights. First, I want to thank you for that—your words feel like friends—but I also want to ask, how do you do this? How do you write about the world as if you are close-up?

Ross Gay: Well, I try to be close-up to the world. That’s the practice. Second, writing that way doesn’t just happen. It’s a skill. I try to write like that. My work is highly edited. It’s gone through many drafts. I’m a writer after all. It doesn’t just come out the way you read it. You should see my notebooks, they’re just a mess. I write my essays very fast, and by hand in a notebook. I find it’s easier that way, to separate myself from making it the “right” way. It’s harder to not be yourself in a notebook rather than a screen. Often, it’s when I am writing that I actually discover what I am thinking. Kind of like being my own first reader. It’s a great practice because it separates the writer from the outside voices.

Inscape: What are the “outside voices?”

RG: Most of the writers I know have those voices, and they are often like those sort of perfectionist-making voices, those writing block-making voices, and those are the voices that kind of know what a thing should be or what a thing might be before you even endeavor to do the thing.

Inscape: Ah, I see. These are the voices that tell the poem what it is before it is written.

RG: Yes, and that’s not how it works, or at least how it works well. To the extent that those voices are present, I would say, just become aware of them or something. Just see if they are there, and then maybe think about what are, you know, actually like are there ways, again, are there physical, mechanical ways that you can kind of evade those things? Thinking about those things is very powerful, you know?

Inscape: Yes! What would a “mechanical” way of evading those voices be?

RG: I feel like I’m fundamentally a coach. I like stuff where I can be like, oh, okay, if we’re going to work on your left hand, let’s just count every left-handed basket as three points, and every other basket you shoot with your right hand, a one point. So for me, like, writing by hand is a really good way to work on the three-point-left-hand shot and disarm that part of my writing super-ego or whatever you call it. I think that when you type, you can always disappear the process by which you’ve arrived, so that there’s something about some of our technology, the way that we use it, some of us, me, that tries to actually hide the fact of our transformation in the process of making something, which is also to say that it sort of maybe makes a dream of the finished thing. It might hold the dream of the finished thing. The notebook holds no such dream. Notebooks are a mess, you know?

Inscape: Just like us!

RG: I’ve been transcribing these notebooks, actually, by reading them into the computer, and I’m trying to figure out what the hell I’m saying. I’m like, reading through all my crossouts and all this stuff, which to me is really moving because it’s the evidence of how I’ve come for the moment to arrive at a thought, you know? I’m not thinking to disappear how I’ve arrived to where I am now. This also, I think, just as a practice, a writing practice, feels also kind of interesting. It’s a way to practice being in relationship, you know? It also lets me, to the best of my ability, also understand that everyone’s in the process of changing.

Inscape: Regarding this process, it feels to me as if you are changing as you approach the notebook page with the ego separated. You're allowing yourself to change on the page in front of the thing you are creating. As we talked about earlier, you're your first reader, so you're changing in front of yourself, then you're allowing other people to witness this change.

When we talk about proximation, I think your way of showing up to the page is, perhaps, why we all have a feeling of "me too!" when we read your work. I think we feel this because you're allowing us to witness change. That's amazing.

RG: Yeah, yeah, yeah. There're two things that I want to say about that. One is that it is also a kind of unbecoming, you know? You're watching yourself unbecome yourself. As opposed to this other thing of like, I'm asserting myself, or I'm imposing myself. No, you're kind of witness to your unbecoming.

Inscape: Yes! I think going to the page as a writer is a spiritual practice of unbecoming. On the page you get to separate what you think and what is coming out, then choose what to unbecome.

RG: It feels like a useful thing. The other thing I wanted to say [about being accessible] is that I had someone, I can't remember, they wrote a letter or something, and they were like, "I was reading your work, and I was watching you in an essay kind of stumble around for the right word, and I was like, why don't you just do the right work? Why don't you just go to the right word?" And then they had the realization, they understood, "oh, you're showing us that you think, you're showing us that you have to work through things to arrive at the right word for the time being." It's so beautiful, because that person's email then offered me what I was sort of offering. They were discovering what they thought as they wrote it. First they were kind of annoyed, but then they appreciated that I went back and forth.

That discovery as I go, whether it's speaking or on the page, is precisely one of the things that I do. I think actually you're right, doing it this way makes readers be like, "oh, yeah, me too." I never know the right word right off the bat.

Inscape: Yeah, me neither. And it's not just with words, it's with feelings. The same process of discovery applies.

RG: Yeah.

Inscape: Oh, I really love that, and I love the idea of a process of unbecoming. My brain is kind of spinning with that right now, because we always talk about becoming. I kind of love the idea of unbecoming. Where did that idea find you?

RG: Hmm. I can't remember. I can't remember, like, I remember sitting in a program I was teaching for the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary with my buddy J. Kameron Carter, the theologian and a beautiful writer and thinker. We were reading a poem called "Zong" by M. NourbeSe Philip, and it's just a very, it's an incredibly beautiful, powerful, difficult, difficult poem. It's sort of, it's an almost impossible poem, and that's what it needs to be, but somehow the conversation that we were having was about questions of the spirit. J. was a theologian, so he had the sort of chops to do all that, and you know, questions of the spirit were always very present in the thinking and talking, but there was something about that discussion that made me think that connecting to witness our own unbecoming is part of the reason we turn [toward writing]. Writing can hold our unbecoming. Something about that conversation made me think, oh, this is a kind of relationship to the work that feels more real, and it sort of articulates more what I'm thinking about. Now that I think about it, in my *Inciting Joy* book, that essay about grief is also very much about unbecoming.

Inscape: You're right, it is. Regarding that essay, "Grief Suite (Falling Apart: The Thirteenth Incitement)," and the essay which immediately follows it "Oh, My Heart (Gratitude: The Fourteenth Incitement)," which are both in your book *Inciting Joy*, they surprised me! It's a novel concept for most people to hold both grief and joy. How do you hold these at the same time when the world is upside down? Social, political, and ethical crises abound and yet, as I'm reading your essays and poems, it feels to me that you have learned how to hold delight in one hand with deep concern in the other. Somehow, you come to the page impassioned and joyful rather than impassioned and bitter.

RG: I think partly the reason is because joy is never separate from grief. Joy is never separate from devastation or catastrophe. Joy is always acknowledging, aware of, and in the midst of those things.

Inscape: Yes, joy and sorrow are two sides of the same thing, but what I feel like you have done that I am striving to do in my life, and I think many people are striving to do, is to allow the joy in while sorrow sits waiting. I no longer want to wait sorrow out before feeling joy.

RG: That's Beautiful.

Inscape: Is that a learned practice? I mean, how did you arrive at a place of gratitude, joy, delight, because I assume, and from what I've read and learned, your life has the same challenges everyone else's life has?

RG: Yeah, I mean, in a practical way, I feel like when my mind became sort of, difficult to be with, I was shown books, teachers, et cetera, who maybe gave me some kind of possible way. The writers Pema Chödrön—a Buddhist nun, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Chödrön's teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche mean so much to me. A book, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* by Chögyam Trungpa, affected me so much when I read it. Then, later in life I reread it and was looking at what I had underlined back when I was 32 and 33. One of the underlines was something like, [paraphrases Trungpa] you know that you're sort of moving toward this kind of the peaceful warrior as a loving, compassionate creature, if you are smiling with the tears in your eyes. I've had many other models than that too, but I feel like those models came at a time where it felt in a way very hard to sort of be alive, you know.

Even in the "Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude" poem, it kind of starts in the orchard and all this stuff, but early on there's like a bell [a bell of awareness ringing to the poem's speaker]. I think of it like a bell telling you, it's the orchard that might help you stay alive even. You know, studying things like this: the orchard, the celebration, the gathering, the care, the planting, the tending, is one of the ways we stay alive; one of the ways that we survive in the midst of the horror, you know?

Inscape: Yes, this is important. I'm also thinking about how you hold on to seemingly discordant positions and still manage to find joy. You're writing about delight, gratitude and joy, and I wonder how do you write like this without losing yourself or your positions? You aren't weak. Your essays strongly hold both joy and sorrow. How?

I think of the essay "Snoopy" which is about watching the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade with your mom, who you love, while being frustrated by the "global corporate dominion," represented by this parade. That doesn't feel simple. So how are you holding both joy and sorrow in the moment?

RG: I probably do and don't hold both in the moment. I should also be very clear, like I'm a writer, and my books are a crafted thing. I'm just a mess like everyone else. I'm thinking about things and writing things and I'm just good at revising, you know, so there's that. The way that I read that essay, and that last line especially, like, I'm loving Snoopy, but I'm also wondering, why won't he give Linus the water? He did it again. He keeps on not giving Linus, the sick person, the water, you know? To me, even that moment of trying to redeem the experience by talking about how much I love Snoopy, in that setting, in that midst, I hear both how comical Snoopy is, but I also hear, yo, hey, Linus needs a drink.

Inscape: Your explication is, to me, another example of holding joy and sorrow, both in life and in writing.

RG: Yeah.

Inscape: I find in your work an awareness of impermanence. It seems not to scare you. Instead, it feels as if impermanence fuels your delight and joy. Can you talk a little bit about that and if that is also a part of your spiritual practice, a part of your writing practice, both?

RG: Yeah, it's so neat that those Buddhist teachers would surely have been places where I would have been encouraged to think hard about coming to terms with impermanence, you know, to really think about it. Like a lot of people, I have been told, and have kind of believed in, making a thing that lasts forever as an aspiration. You know, like, *how cool if someone three-hundred years from now was reading my work, or a thousand years*. That's the kind of thing we're told to aspire to as artists. And at some point, I started to think, *not only do I not have any aspiration for that, but that I don't know if it's a good idea to want to last forever*.

Inscape: Why is it not?

RG: It's sort of like, it's time to let other people, you know? There is some deep occupying part of ourselves. Like we just want to be there and stick around and take up all the space. It's a kind of egotism

to imagine that the things I'm wondering about are going to be of use beyond this moment.

I want to practice being very concerned about and joining my questions with the people with whom I share the planet at this moment. Even more particularly, I want to join my questions with people I might run into at the vegan bakery, or the Afghan place, or at the basketball court—now. My friend Patrick Rossell, a beautiful poet, talks about the local a lot. And it's sort of like that. It's sort of like, there's all kinds of locals. And I feel there's a kind of temporal localness too. Like, maybe it's okay to only talk to people who are your neighbors in both place and time. If it happens that some connection goes beyond that, all right, great. Whatever. But really, to have that aspiration, I don't know, it feels dangerous actually. The spirit behind that feels kind of harmful. It feels acquisitive, as if you are saying "I want everything. I even want the future." At the same time, I like to plant trees in part because I like the idea that trees will be around for a long time. I want to acknowledge that there's some kind of contradiction. I don't know if there's a contradiction in that, but anyway, you've provoked me into writing an essay. I know I am going to write one.

Inscape: This is so interesting because I'm thinking, how is an essay different from a tree?

RG: That's the essay. That's the title. That's the title. I'm going to write that down. How is an essay different than a tree?

Inscape: I had this experience once while hiking. I was tired and put my hand on an aspen tree to rest. I felt a zing of pain in my hand, so I pulled my hand away from the aspen. When I looked at the tree to see what could have hurt me, I saw freshly carved initials in the aspen's bark, right where I had put my hand. I carefully put my hand back on the aspen and I swear, I could feel the pain of this tree. That was the first time that I learned that a tree could teach me. Since then, trees are my friends and someone else did plant them. They were here before me, and they'll be here after I'm gone. When I put my hand on my copy of *Inciting Joy* placed on the table next to me, like I did that aspen tree, it teaches me. I think about all the literature that's come before. To think we wouldn't have it is devastating. From what would we learn? It's troubling to me to think we should assume we have nothing to learn from thinkers of the past. And yet, I see what you're saying in that it is kind of dangerous arrogance to assume our writing could inform the future. I don't know.

RG: Yeah, yeah, yeah. At least it's a question. It might be the case that certain questions, seem to periodically, or resurgently, or steadily be useful, but we can also imagine, I can imagine ways that certain questions remain useful to a set of values that maybe could like change, could go away.

Inscape: I guess that takes us to a question of what is everlasting, and what is temporary? Is there anything everlasting? ...I think love is everlasting.

RG: Yeah, that seems right.

Inscape: Maybe it's the only thing that is.

RG: You're right. It feels too, like in terms of that, of joining one's work to that...

Inscape: ...to love...

RG: ...yeah, offering it to love feels to me like a reasonable thing to do. Not offering it to the permanence of "the state" and carving it in marble—which is all a fraud anyway. It's a brutal fraud. But to think of offering my work to an actual permanent thing, which is called love, which I would also say trees are an eminence of, that feels right.

Inscape: And it also begs the question, does our work belong to us?

RG: Yeah, totally.

Inscape: Do I own the words I put on the page? I mean, I don't know. I'm sure you wondered the same. I'm sure every writer does. More times than not, when writing that I'm like, yeah, this is me writing. But there have also been times where it feels like a flow from somewhere both inside and outside of me. It's usually when I'm writing in nature. It feels like the words are coming in and coming through me and coming out. So if I write them down, do those words belong to me? And if they don't belong to me, then couldn't they belong to everyone before me and after me?

RG: Exactly. I think what you just said is like an expression of gratitude.

Inscape: What is the difference between joy, delight, and gratitude? I noticed that the title *Inciting Joy* uses a verb, whereas your books on delight don't have verbs in their titles. Is there a difference between joy, delight, and gratitude?

RG: So just real quick, "incite" is an adjective too. It's a verb and an adjective, which is why I partly like it.

Inscape: Inciting joy. I love it as an adjective!

RG: You know, I do too. Joy is inciting. I firmly believe that our practice of tending to one another is an incitement that will afflict such things as a brutal system. Inciting will be a violence to brutality. Our capacity to care for one another in radical ways, to plant trees together, to care for each other, to rely on one another, that's a violence to a system which needs us to believe that they are the ones who are going to care for us. That "It," the system, is the one that is going to care for us. It's not true. And so, when I chose the word "Inciting," I meant it.

But here's how I think of the difference between joy and delight: This was articulated for me by this guy named Michael, in Northampton, Massachusetts. We were talking about joy, and how the connection of joy is sort of like mycelium, which is sort of like love actually. I think of joy and love as being pretty much the same thing. But like, the fact that we are connected, threaded together to one another is amazing. Joy to me feels like the practice of witnessing and attending to that connection. It's there. But we, for various reasons, often do not acknowledge it. Delight, and this is what this guy got me on, he is like, *oh, delight is like the mushrooms, periodically popping up through the mycelium reminding us to remember, it's all connected.* So that's how I'm thinking about it these days.

Gratitude, it's funny, in my head I kind of have an overlap of gratitude, joy, and love—like a trinity. I think of gratitude like understanding connections, and also understanding that practicing gratitude is how anything meaningful has arrived. Any bit of care, any bit of love, any bit of tending, any bit of nourishment, any bit of anything. What we have is impossible to catalog, absolutely impossible to catalog, no matter also the destitution that we're in. Which is often why the best teachers of gratitude, I think, are the people in the midst of profound trouble. It's not the people in the midst of profound ease, it's the people in the midst of profound trouble who can teach us about gratitude. And the thing about gratitude, I think, is that in acknowledging that, whatever you call it, the sort of ongoing, ever-changing, ever-replenishing oceans of care, it inclines us to join the care. It inclines us to be more generous, because we understand.

By acknowledging the care, we understand that we've never done anything by ourselves, despite all of the mythologies to suggest it was otherwise. What a relief to be like, *yeah, no, I didn't do that amazing thing. I worked on it, I worked on it, I put a lot of hours in, da-da-da-da, but it would take me about, oh, ten minutes to come up with a hundred things completely outside my control that were done on my behalf, in order for the amazing thing to happen.* Some of those things might be like the sun shone. And some of those things might be like, you know, my mother cooked for me every night she could. And she had a mother, and her mother had a mother, and her mother had a mother, and her mother... you know, at which point you're sort of like, oh, I guess maybe I should do my damage to chip in to this thing with my gratitude. I will accept that I'm special in the fact that I'm like part of this whole thing of care, but also, maybe I should figure out how to chip in to life.

Inscape: Talking about the idea of interconnectivity brings me back to the "how is an essay like a tree" thought. If nothing actually belongs to any of us, and nothing is created in isolation, then it seems to me that you could, theoretically make something that lasts beyond yourself without violence, because the thing you made was never yours to begin with. Is that part of chipping in with gratitude?

RG: Yeah, yeah, that's right.

Inscape: Ross, your voice is so distinctive. I know that if I picked up a book and didn't know anything about it, I would read one page and know it was yours. How did you develop your voice, and do you feel, based on our earlier discussion, that you are unbecoming something you were made to be, or do you feel like you're discovering who you were meant to be?

RG: I definitely feel like every good bout of the thinking that is "writing," is a process of unbecoming. So, my aspiration is a kind of unbecoming into something I can't imagine. Finding voice this way is also a kind of curiosity I feel like I'm—I am in the process of always developing a voice by copying other

writers who I love. Just thinking about who I want to sound like, and practicing. It's as simple as that. When I was a kid learning how to sing, I would listen over and over and over again to Terence Trent D'Arby, and Lenny Kravitz, and Bono, and Tracy Chapman, and Al Jarreau, and Simon and Garfunkel, and Al Green, and Michael McDonald, and The Doobie Brothers. I'd come up with a way to sound like something, that is again, not original, but is a kind of gathering up of other people. In writing, it's the same thing.

Recently, I was going back to reading the writer John Edgar Weideman, who was one of my most important writers. It had been some years, and I was like, "oh shit, that's how I learned to write a sentence." Even another friend read Weideman and said, "Ross sounds so much like this guy." And there's so many other people I can say that about. Our beloved Gerald Stern, the poet and essayist who died about a year ago, he is all in my voice. Even in terms of like, some of his syntax, some of his inclination to repetition, his pulling the delightful and the sorrowful right next to each other again and again, his tendency to digression...in my work, that all comes from him, you know? Not from him alone, but from him. I could talk about the writer Rebecca Solnit.

Inscape: Oh! I love Rebecca Solnit...

RG: ...Oh I love her too, amazing! The writer Toi Derricotte, her voice is all in my voice. The writer Jeff Dyer, or David Shields, or June Jordan... There's so many I could list and I sort of think, "oh I'm just gonna imitate some of that. I'm gonna try to learn how to talk like they talk."

Ultimately, I want my voice to sound how I love a thing to sound. I'm trying to make something I love, so that's important too. By the way, making something you love is different than trying to make something that's good. I'm trying to write stuff that when I finish it, I'm like yeah, I love that!

Inscape: Because like you said, you are your first reader. I like the idea of seeking to write what we love over seeking to write what's good because what's good is determined externally whereas, what we love is determined internally.

RG: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Inscape: The internal versus external is an important distinction, because, as you know, being a writer comes with a lot of rejection. What would you say to the writers who are in the midst of submitting their work and experiencing nothing but rejection?

RG: Yeah, we've all gone through that. It's kind of the way of things, but more importantly, there's the kind of professional and also social kind of the publicness of submitting to journals and all that whole life, but there's also something that feels really important to keep track of and I try to remind my students of this and it's not always easy because I feel like the pressure is very hard but I would want to remind emerging writers that you are not a bad writer because your stuff doesn't get accepted into a given journal nor are you a good writer because it does.

We need honest and loving readers of our work, through whom and with whom we can actually understand whether or not something that we've made is beautiful. For myself, I always have other people who I really trust read what I work on. The one thing I know by now is that it's simply a losing game to put our belief in how an editor (who's sleepy, hungry, has to go home and, like, cook dinner, and just themselves got rejected 11 times last week) is gonna respond to your poem. You gotta be a little more like, yeah whatever. It's also useful to remember, as we're having strong feelings about this stuff, that when we read those magazines we're aspiring to get into, we don't like everything or even half of what's in them. Basically, we gotta stop measuring ourselves by these false things. What I really need to say is, we have to stop measuring ourselves, and just write.

Writing and being in community feels to me like the most important thing. And, yes, publication can be an attempt at being in community with other writers. This actually took me a long time to understand, but my most important advice for those in the face of rejection, is to love other writers' work.

Inscape: Oh, that's beautiful! and in that way, based on everything we've been talking about you get to become a part of their work in loving their work and being grateful for their work, you are a part of that tree, you are a part of that mycelium.

RG: That's right.

Inscape: So, what are you working on now?

RG: Well, I have a handful of books I'm in the midst of writing. I'm very excited to say that in January I'm gonna start in earnest on a book about my garden. I've been working on it on and off for the last few years, but I kind of have a form set up for it, so I'm excited about that. I've been writing a lot about this very intense book tour that I've been on and that's feeling very interesting. In the midst of writing that is where I discovered that in my writing I'm actually the one writing and reading what I'm writing at the same time, so, you know, that's been fun. There might be some poems percolating around there.

Inscape: That's exciting! I love everything you write about your garden. My husband is a gardener and whenever I read about your garden, I think of him. He finds God in his Garden. Ross, who or what is God to you?

RG: God is that love we were talking about, that connection.

Inscape: Do you feel like writing is a way to connect to that?

RG: More like, to connect to whatever is here. When I'm writing, I'm writing to connect as deeply as possible to what is right here, and that to me feels like the spiritual practice. The connections between us might feel like what I think of as God, you know?

Inscape: Yeah, I think I do. Thank you, Ross.

RG: You asked all the good questions. You challenged me. You inspired me, actually your questions kind of really energized me.

Inscape: I'm so glad you energized me, so we shared that today

RG: Yeah, that's what we did. We shared.