**Keynote Speech to the National Writers’ Conference, Birmingham UK, June 2018**

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When I thought what I might usefully speak about today, I thought about a few recent conversations with friends and decided to talk about confidence, as it applies – or more often, fails to apply – to writers. That immediately made me think of the Birmingham dub poet Moqapi Selassie’s brilliant chant-poem, [Confidence](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVqPI-LlzJc&ab_channel=comeunityarts).

The second thing I thought of was my own best lesson in confidence. Once upon a time, a few years ago, I did two gigs on two consecutive nights. I performed the exact same set at both: the same poems, the same ad libs, the same introductions. On the first night – why darlings, I was *brilliant!* I held the audience in the palm of my hand. My ad libs were perfectly timed, my profound works were heard in reverential silence. My funny poems got raucous laughter, and my contemplative masterpieces were greeted with the thing that all poets crave – The Poetry Noise. A worshipful audience came up to get books signed and to tell me they loved me.

The second night? I died on my arse. Those same ‘profound’ poems were suddenly dull and trite, the funny ones crass and vulgar. The contemplative ones were greeted with a look of such scorn that I could barely get out fast enough. My confidence, raised so high by the first audience, was dented by the second. Thank God it was that way round or I might have retired hurt and never stood on a stage again. One thing I learned from that, and which I keep learning, was the difference between an ego boost and real confidence. Real confidence comes of knowing one’s craft and believing that, whether an audience likes it or not, your writing has hit a rich seam that you alone can mine. The confidence the first audience gave me was like a warm bath – the second audience gave me a cold shower, and no doubt I benefited from both.

For most of us, the validation of an audience is necessary at some point. And external validation is a very affirming thing. A promising letter from an agent or a publisher, a commission, a fee, an advert that your mum can see on TV: all of these can be very nourishing (the fee in particular). We certainly need confidence to bring in that tax-returnable stuff. We also need a deeper confidence to believe in the whole enterprise of writing, at a time when it may not seem like the most useful thing in the world to do.

Most of us here are professional writers. At the very least, you’re aspiring to make writing a self-supporting part of your life. So I want to deliver some practical advice from my own freelancing experience. It falls under four headings: the confidence to say yes, to say no, to say please and to say thank you.

**The confidence to say YES:**

Firstly, all of you here have had the confidence to identify yourself as a writer. You have laid claim to that name, and that is a big deal. I didn’t call myself a poet with confidence until, some years into a career of writing, publishing, mentoring and teaching poetry, it occurred to me that no other word would really fit.

Many writers are perversely fearful of saying *yes* to things that cost them very little effort, but which might boost their confidence immensely. It’s easier *not* to submit your work to a big competition or apply for that MA. It’s easier to believe that success might have been possible, than to experience certain failure. Especially at the beginning of your writing life, every rejection amplifies the big NO in your head and every acceptance makes only a small dent in it. We work really hard to justify our own fear. Here are some of them things I have heard good writers say, with a few answers that might make them less fearful.

*I don’t think I stand a chance, so I won’t apply.* [You certainly don’t stand a chance if you don’t apply.]

*There are going to be a lot of better writers out there* [Yes there are, always. Let them make their own way, and carry on with yours.]

*I entered this competition last year and didn’t get anywhere* [Perhaps, but under a different judge, with a different piece of writing from you, and you had less experience then]*.*

*That job or residency isn’t meant for the likes of me.* [That’s not for you to decide. Apply, and let the people who make the decision, make the decision. You may be just the person they wanted.]

*I won’t apply for a bursary for the course I can’t afford, because it’s intended for people who have no money.* [If you can’t afford it, then you need the bursary. Many bursaries go unclaimed because people rule themselves out in this way].

*I won’t send my work to the press I actually want to publish me, because they might not like it.* [They might though. Why second-guess them?]

*I won’t send my work to the journal I admire, because I don’t think I’m ready.* [Again, let them decide. If they accept the work, then you are ready. If they don’t, try again in six months.]

*I won’t enter that competition, because my kind of writing never wins.* [Do they have the same judge each year? If not, your chances are as good this time as they were last time.]

*I didn’t know what to charge* [So you didn’t do it, and made nothing at all. Ask someone who does similar work, and ask them for guidelines.]

*I don’t even know who to approach about reading at Festival X.* [Ring up festival X, and ask them.]

*No point in applying: that will go to a white, middle class male and I’m brown/ female/ dyslexic.* [It certainly will if nobody else applies. Let’s be confident, not complicit. And let’s congratulate the white middle class male if he got it on merit.]

*I hear that Instagram is really good for promoting work but I don’t know how to use it.* [So learn. Set aside one evening and play around with it.]

What we’re saying, in each of these cases, is “I am afraid”. Of what? Usually, what we fear is looking like a fool. Is that really so bad? Reader – I have danced on a mirrored floor in a nightclub called Climax. I’ve walked through Manchester town centre with my dress tucked into my knickers. If you’ve ever spent time with intelligent children or an old Etonian, you’ve already been made to feel more foolish than writing can ever make you feel.

This fear of foolishness reminds me of a recent chat in a Facebook group dedicated to knitting. I may as well ‘come out’ as a knitter. Like many in that group of 17,000 people, I knit on trains, in waiting rooms and other public places. One woman in the group admitted that she wanted to knit in public more often, but people stared at her. She felt self-conscious, imagining that they were all thinking ‘who is this mad woman, doing something in public which ought to be confined to her front room?’ Someone in the thread commented ‘Ask them *why* they are staring. Start the conversation.’ Emboldened, she went forth and bravely knitted on her commute to work. When people stared at her, she said hello and asked what they were thinking. She asked one person, two, three, four – and all of them said the same thing. *It’s fascinating. I wish I could do that. You’re amazing; it’s brilliant that you’re doing it in public.* And one of them said: *I’ve knitted for years but never dared to do it in public. I’ll bring mine tomorrow.*

No-one is going to laugh at you for dreaming you might be a real writer, for the simple reason that you are one. If you’re in this room, if you’re reading this online, if you WRITE – then you’re a real writer. Free yourself from that impostor syndrome: it is a millstone. Most people are impressed by the courage of those who use such a powerful word to describe themselves, with confidence. Some are mystified; that’s fine, we are not all the same. And some may indeed think you are a fool. Sod them. We, your tribe, know better.

You’re also a human, with large experiences of failure or disappointment or loss. Nothing that a writing career can bring will challenge you half as much as these. Nothing that you yourself can do on the page, and nothing that the page can do to you, will offer you anything like the challenges you have already overcome. If you’ve ever left someone you once loved, or lost a parent, or given birth – no rejection in writing will never hurt you as much as that. We have enough external barriers without making our own.

How can we dismantle the *real* barriers to confidence? First, identify them. If race or class or gender hold you back, look at people who started from a similar place. There is great solidarity and comfort to be found online: Twitter and Facebook are full of people passing on news of jobs or mentoring schemes. Follow me, on Twitter @jo\_bell or Facebook. Talk to the people at Writing West Midlands, and look at their mentoring schemes which are designed precisely to help writers. Apply for bursaries – the Arvon Foundation bursaries, for instance are always under subscribed. Say yes to those things that can help you.

Say YES too, to the things you can’t do yet – because that’s how you learn how to do them. I used to be an archaeologist and I remember saying to a colleague that I wasn’t going to apply for a particular job, because I didn’t think I could do it. Sensibly, he said – “why would you apply for a job you can already do? You’ll be bored in no time. Apply for something that daunts you, and that way you will always be learning, always getting better and more skilled.”

Likewise say YES to work you aren’t experienced in, because that’s how you get experience. The poet Ian McMillan famously says yes to everything; that’s why he’s always on your radio. In writing, as perhaps in life, say yes whenever you can, if you fancy having a go. Your skills are immensely transferable. I applied to a playwriting scheme, though I wasn’t a playwright. I agreed to write a radio programme, though I hadn’t done that. And now, I’ve done it. The one thing that all those writing competition winners have in common is – they entered the damn competition. They didn’t put themselves off at the beginning; they told themselves it was possible. So say yes to those opportunities that present themselves.

Here’s an example of saying yes to opportunity, with a good outcome. Some years ago, I applied to be the director of National Poetry Day and got it. Other, better qualified people had ruled themselves out, thinking the job was beyond them and that there would be dozens of applicants. After I’d been doing the job for a year I realised that I had, in fact, been the only applicant. The job had been lined up for someone else, who I believe got pregnant and decided to withdraw from work for a few years. I only got the gig by default; but I got it all the same. At the time, applying had felt like a terribly audacious thing to do. In fact there was simply no competition. It was all in my head.

That won’t always be literally true. Sometimes there are real barriers in your way, but much more often we deny ourselves opportunity because of some entirely imaginary obstacle. Put your hat in the ring, and let others decide whether you are fit for a job or a residency or a publishing contract.

**Ask yourself: what have you said YES to and been glad of?**

**The confidence to say NO:**

Now we come to the second kind of confidence; the confidence to say No. I realise that for many of you struggling to secure enough work in the first place, saying NO to work seems like a luxury. But once you’ve got past the basic hurdles of calling yourself a writer and beginning to get some work, the confidence to say no to some of it is important. We aren’t *lucky* to be working as writers. We’re no more lucky than an electrician is to be working as an electrician. If she has the skills and the inclination and she can get the work, then she’s entitled to her job and so are you. You’re not lucky; you’re skilled.

To any freelancer, saying no to work feels like a dangerous indulgence. Of course sometimes we all have to take a gig we don’t find fascinating. But those of us who are freelancing haven’t done that in order to punch a clock and do work we don’t enjoy. If I’m doing that, I might as well get a proper job in insurance or management, that pays me a decent wage and gives me a pension. If there is a particular kind of work that you don’t enjoy, and you CAN say no to it in order to generate some work that you do enjoy…. then have the confidence to say no to it whenever you can, and use the space it makes to generate new work, within the spectrum of work you do enjoy.

I have a couple of friends who have said NO to very lucrative contracts – not thick on the ground in poetry – because they didn’t agree with the values of the client. Perhaps it was a fast food company, or a company with bad employment practices. Success on terms that compromise you, is not success. In taking that risky decision, they made space for community work which paid less but which they enjoy more.

Have confidence, then, to direct your own workload when it’s possible. After all, for writers there is no Personal Development Review meeting where you get to say where you see yourself in five years. You have to choose the direction of your own career, and steer it as best you can. Of course you have to take the work that pays the bills. For some of us there is very little discretion in what we do for money. But if you have a rough plan of where you’d like to be in a year, or three or five years, then you may have more confidence in rejecting something that doesn’t take you any further down that particular path.

For me, the thing I said NO to is working with schools. It’s a lucrative and pretty reliable source of work for the jobbing poet. There’s only one problem with it: schools are FULL of children. Many writers find young people the most rewarding and exciting to work with. I see why, of course. Personally, I prefer to work with adults and explore adult themes. So I decided that on the whole, I would say NO to schools or young people’s writing groups and instead, actively pursue working with adult groups. I’ve subsequently worked in prisons, domestic abuse refuges and conference settings; work that I find much more interesting. As it happens, one of the things I said YES to – that playwriting course – was a creative dead end for me. It turns out that I am not gifted, or even very interested, in stage writing; so I now say NO to that particular thread of opportunity.

We can say no, too, to small things that impede our daily writing lives. Try (just try) saying NO to Facebook, at least on your phone. Say NO to too many emails. My email signature includes a quote from Neil Gaimain – "There was a day when I looked up and realised that I had become someone who professionally replied to email, and who wrote as a hobby. I started answering fewer emails, and was relieved to find I was writing much more." People are much more understanding now when I get back to them slowly. And if, like me, you find yourself agreeing to things on the phone which you later regret, say NO to phone calls altogether – or train yourself to utter the simple phrase, ‘I’ll just need to think about that and call you back’. Say NO to helping out with the grandkids every single weekend – you are as entitled to your writing time as your children are to some rest.

Above all, say NO to working for free whenever you can. It undermines other writers, reduces your own value in the eyes of others, and often means that you are actually paying to work. Caveat: we all do freebies for good causes or local groups. We all do work cheaply when the client truly can’t afford a proper fee. But if someone tells you that ‘they are a small charity’ tell them that you are not. If a venue offers you an unreliable door split instead of a performance fee, thereby making you shoulder some of their risk, you can say *no, sorry, I want a flat fee* even if it’s twenty quid. And when they say, ‘it will be good for exposure’ remind yourself that you were already exposed enough for them to find you in the first place. We have to stand our ground; and if you find that hard, think of it not as obstinacy but solidarity. Think of yourself as setting up expectations for the next writer who comes along, so that they can benefit from your groundwork.

**What have you said NO to, and been glad of it?**

**The confidence to say Please**

Let’s be confident enough to say please. By that I mean asking for opportunities which may not exist yet – asking for funding, residencies and festival appearances which haven’t been offered, but might be available.

I recently posted a reminder on Facebook that festivals don’t necessarily approach writers to offer them a slot. Very often the agent, the publisher or the writer themselves have approached the festival to offer their services. If you have a book to promote or you want to put together an event, or the Hay Festival has a theme of ‘trees’ this year and you have a tree-themed novel, you can drop them a line. To my surprise the poet Sheenagh Pugh, whose work I have always loved, replied to my post that in 45 years it had never occurred to her to ask for a festival slot: she thought you had to wait to be asked. Many of us think like this: but who writes those rules? Who says we have to wait to be asked, and why do we believe them? If you’ve worked behind the scenes at a festival, you know what a gift it is to have a published writer submit a viable pitch.

What might *you* say please to? Please can I do a reading at your festival Q&A on how to write a novel: please can I appear in your local writers slot at the library: please can I run a workshop with young people in your book fair on the Saturday afternoon, or a poetry slam in the pub?

Toni Harrison says, “If there is a book you want to read and it doesn’t exist, you have to write it.” Likewise with projects. A lot of writing prompts online seem to me rather anodyne and unchallenging; but I and other writers regularly use the kind of prompts I would have liked to use in an earlier stage. So I said, via the internet – *Please, writing community, may I offer you a weekly writing prompt?* That impulse became the 52 project, an online group which ended up winning a Saboteur Award and resulting in two books. The blog and community made no money and weren’t intended to – but eventually those two books were funded by saying please again – *please will you crowd fund us?* The answer was so resounding a yes that the project was funded twice over within a week. That was the sound of people having the confidence to say Thank You, which we will come back to.

A couple of years ago I was asked to teach an Arvon course. Yes, I had the confidence to say YES. But I also wanted to say please: **please** can we do something to improve the diversity of these courses? They already had a bursary fund, but we wanted to target specifically BAME people who we knew were good, but who would not perhaps have the confidence to say YES to this course. My co-tutor Tania and I gave some of our fees to create targeted bursaries. The course was properly mixed in terms of age, race and class; and everyone benefited from the chemistry of a more lively and diverse group. You can make real change happen by confidently asking for something; the worst that can happen is that someone says no, and you don’t get to do something you weren’t doing anyway.

Say PLEASE to the Arts Council by applying for a creative development grant. If you don’t know how – neither did I, the first time I did it. ‘I don’t know how’ is never a good excuse. Find out how: go to someone who knows, and say PLEASE, can you help me learn to use Instagram or write a press release? There is a room full of people here who know how to do it, or have done it, or can tell you who does know how to do it. There are so many books and websites out there to help you. And of course, Writing West Midlands exists to help you do it.

**Finally: the confidence to say thank you.**

What we do as writers is, to a greater or lesser extent, to put our innermost emotions on display and then ask for approval. It makes us vulnerable. It makes us particularly vulnerable, as many of you will know, to mental ill health, but also to simple feelings of exposure and risk, far out of proportion to the risk and exposure we’ve actually suffered. So we have to help each other out; and that takes a kind of confidence too.

We have to thank each other. Paradoxically, it takes confidence to be humble, but none of us travels alone in the writing life; we should acknowledge the great teachers or mentors who have helped us. Mine are Ian Duhig, and more than he realises, Jonathan Davidson. I’ve had great help from Carol Ann Duffy and Patience Agbabi, both of whom offered me opportunities as their own way of putting something back into the writing community. Jane Commane, my publisher, is a phenomenal force for good in the poetry world. And by the same token, I myself have been very much comforted by the kind words of the people in the 52 group, still publishing work which originated there, when they take the trouble to thank me.

A simple post on Facebook to thank someone for a good reading, or a kind review of their book on Amazon, will make their day. We *all* fear that we are not real writers, including the people you think of as real writers who are usually holding down two jobs and wondering if this writing lark is worth it. Congratulate them if you want to; let them know if a poem they wrote has helped you in a time of sadness; go back and thank them for posting a job opportunity, if you got the job. Click on the ‘buy me a coffee’ button if your favourite blogger has one, or subscribe to give £1 a month on a Patreon funding call. Above all remember that another writer’s success, no matter how you may secretly resent it, does not diminish you. There is enough to go round.

Confidence is built by small increments. Your first published work matters far more than your fifteenth published novel, because it has far more impact on your self-belief. Confidence, after all, is a gift we can give as well as receive from the writerly community. We all know how generous writers can be with their time, with their critiquing, with their advice on who to speak to or where to find an agent. Lean in to your writerly community, and accept its support to lend you confidence when you feel like there’s no point.

We are all writing, I think, in an attempt to understand just what the hell is happening in the world, and how we fit into it. This is more true now than it has had to be for seventy years, since we last confronted the growth of fascism. At a time of growing confusion in the world, we are the people who can articulate difficult ideas and feelings; can express subtlety and compassion; we are the people whose words can change the world. A lot depends on our own willingness to build self-confidence, and to step into our own authority as writers, and as professional writers. But confidence is also in our gift, as something we can build in others. Writers as a group have the power to stand against any force on earth; to change the national mood; to put into words the difficult, shifting truths and the stark fears that we all face; to challenge and question and bolster the resolve of readers, listeners and audiences. We can do that for each other too. Take heart in your own writing, and let no-one dent your confidence in that.

Your homework: In the next week,

1 Say yes to something, especially if it daunts you a little.

2 Say no to something, especially if it helps you to concentrate on what you really want to do.

3 Make an opportunity for yourself: contact a festival, apply for a bursary, contact an artist you want to work with.

4 Do something for someone else’s confidence: pay them a compliment, leave a good review of the book you enjoyed, recommend them for a job you don’t have time to take on. The thing that you said no to, might be their chance to say yes.

PS: I threw the subject of ‘confidence’ out to my audience on Twitter, and here are some of their very helpful tips:

@Swissss said: Great work, great money, great client. Start by insisting on at least one of those - work your way up to all three.

@bbanyard: The key phrase in times of self-doubt ought to be ‘f@ck it - why NOT me?’ Easier said than done, I know, but your work is your offspring - fight for it in that same overprotective, irrational way.

@BHALush: My practical advice is try and save up 2/3 months salary and squirrel it away in a savings account. It’s amazing how it improves your confidence and ability to say no to crappy underpaid jobs.

@HayleyNJones: Confidence often follows action. Write, submit, take courses, join a writing group, etc. Even if you believe you are wasting your time, effort and money. At worst, you are learning from the experience. Encouragement, support and confidence will emerge as a result of your actions.

@AlanRain3: Believe in your ability to succeed, even if you occupy a space well outside the parameters others have decided are appropriate.

@cherylpea: I sometimes get so wowed by other people’s writing that I think mine doesn’t deserve the same attention. I once said to my friend, “But I can’t write like that!” And she said “Yes, but X can’t write like you, only you can.” I always try to remember that when I’m feeling wobbly!

@jennybhatt: For me, confidence comes from pushing myself just that little bit out of my comfort zone. With each writing project, push yourself further, take on something new & challenging. Each such project will show you what you're capable of & where you could learn more.

@taniahershman: If what you want to do - that writing residency, that online community - doesn’t exist, create it. You don’t have to wait til someone else sets it up or apply for a pre-existing position. You can set it up yourself without having a clue what you’re doing - I’m living proof :)

@sarahlooseleaf: Say yes to jobs you go Wow! to even if you’re not sure you can do them. My first writing gig was a theatre programme for a brilliant company who thought editors wrote copy. Never looked back.

@davedhjones: Exposing your writing to examination isn't easy but always remember that you've probably dealt with worse things in life like rejection and bereavement.

@tomcopy: Social media lies. Don't compare your 'backstage' to everyone else's 'highlights reel.'

@shinybiscuit: My biggest issue has always been worrying whether my work was coming from somewhere experienced enough. Even if there are intimidatingly amazing writers out there in front of you, use them as inspiration! Your voice is valid and deserves to be heard!

@rosieauthor: Saying 'no' to a gig / offer can be unnerving, as though by saying no, you'll never be offered anything, ever again. You will. And it will be even better. You don't need to say yes to everything.

@sheenaghpugh: Don't ever agree to chat on the phone unless you're sure you can say no on it! Not easy, much easier by email.

@betarish: Never forget that just because someone looks confident, doesn't mean that they are – so you should take heart from that. Everyone else is as nervous as you are, they just hide it better.