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NB: Welcome to this edition of the Being a Writer podcast—a podcast that explores writers’ creativity and resilience. This series is part of The Literary Consultancy’s new programme of support for writers that focuses on cultivating and safeguarding literary creativity. With a range of special guests, we explore what it means to be a writer today.

In this podcast, we speak to psychotherapist and writer Dawn Estefan about the relationship between writing and wellbeing. We explore how writing helps us to recover our sense of self, why we are vulnerable to things like imposter syndrome and self-doubt, and the coping mechanisms we can employ to overcome them.

This episode was recorded at home on our laptops whilst observing social distancing during the COVID-19 lockdown.

NB [00:00:49]: Hi Dawn, welcome to the Being a Writer podcast. It’s lovely to have you with us.

DE [00:00:52]: Thank you for having me, thank you for asking me to take part.

NB [00:00:56]: It’s going to be a very exciting chat, I’m sure. How are you feeling today?

DE [00:01:01]: Alive.

NB [00:01:04]: That’s a good start!

DE [00:01:06]: Alive. Yes, it is. And present, I think, is the other thing.

NB [00:01:10]: Yeah, well that’s important. I’m really glad that we’ve got you on an episode of the Being a Writer podcast, just because I feel like your topic, in particular, is a really interesting one. It’s a really thought-provoking one, and I feel like it’s something everyone can listen to. So, today we’re going to be talking about the importance of exploring the self, and re-writing the narrative of self, and one’s core beliefs. And this is, kind of, in relation to a wider topic, of writing and wellbeing, which I’m sure you can shed a lot of light on, and I’m really exciting to have you talking about it.

DE [00:01:43]: Well I’m hoping I can give all of that and more. Yes, it is a very important, and I suppose, not much explored, I think, when we’re talking about general health and wellbeing, that explorative aspect to the self, and getting to know the self. I suppose, if you’re looking at it in therapeutic terms, that’s very much part of my job, what I do with the people I work with. And I think that using those kinds of concepts in a wider context is quite unusual.

NB [00:02:20]: You’ve obviously written, but you’ve also worked across other platforms, like TV and radio, If I’m correct, so I think there’s a lot to learn here. I wanted to started with quite an open question, which is why do we write?

DE [00:02:35]: It is quite a broad question, which, I suppose to some extent, depends on whether we’re writing for ourselves of writing for others. But if I’m to assume that this question doesn’t include writing for something such as an exam, or some other formal document, I suppose writers write, in essence, to satisfy some primal urge to make connection with others. To tell people who they are. Or to unveil some hidden part of themselves. To amplify their voice, or even have a voice from the start.

NB [00:03:17]: Do you feel like writing can help someone gain more of a self of self? Does it make it easier to recognise who you are?

DE [00:03:25]: Well, you know, writing can give you the tools towards self-reflection to experience feelings of liberation, or give you the opportunity to influence the thoughts of others, or even the actions of others, with your work. I think that writing can, rather than it does. It can, in itself, prove to be a therapeutic and an explorative process for the writer, whether you write from the personal narrative, or through the realisation of the characters you create. Depending on style, it can be the chance to work through some difficult neuroses, for example, in the way that you revisit themes and topics that are important to you over and over again, to gain greater insight. So, I think it can be part of a journey towards the self, because you’re constantly awake to listening to what’s inside of you, pushing it out, and kind of re-jigging it. Trying to make sense of it and constantly listening to yourself and make better sense.

NB [00:04:44]: The reason why I asked that question is because I’ve recently thought about journaling, as a prime example of that. The idea of emptying yourself out.

DE [00:04:58]: I think there’s been a real trend towards journaling over the last few years. I know it’s something that’s been around for a long time, but I hear about it a lot more. You can buy specific journals for different tasks, work wellbeing, gratitude. We’ve even seen a move away from traditional pen and paper, towards online journals, or apps. In terms of the work that I do, journals can serve different purposes. Some of the clients I work with use journals to help maintain psychological wellbeing, or to track symptoms or triggers from stress and anxiety, or simply to just organise their thoughts, between or after sessions. Personally, I’m a big fan of free-flow, or free-writing, or, as they call it in the psychotherapy world, free association, and that’s where it comes into journaling, where you just write whatever comes out of your head onto the page without formal edit, or within a limited amount of time. Journaling is a good way to empty. It’s certainly one of the most cited methods of cure to something such as writer’s block.

NB [00:06:24]: It’s brilliant that you’ve brought us onto that topic, because writer’s block is something that I wanted to cover in this episode. It’s a problem that a lot of people deal with. We get it all the time. People hit this wall and are not sure how to overcome it.

DE [00:06:39]: While you were asking that question, I was trying to think who it was who famously wrote prolifically, after journaling, as a way to cure writer’s [block]. I think it was Graham Greene [who] went through a series of journaling, logging dreams, writing freely over and over again. And suddenly he found himself unblocked from the curse. Writer’s block, it’s one of those things. I think block is a good word for it, because I think it’s a kind of war between desire and anxiety, and the reason I say war between the two is because there’s a lot of anxiety around what it is you’re going to produce, who you’re producing it for. And there’s also a huge pressure around the desire to create something great, something perfect that’s going to please others as well as please yourself. And all of the angst that comes from that, the historic narrative that might be attached to that, about pleasing, creates, literally, I’d say, a blockage in your thought process. Sometimes you hear writer’s block referred to as drying up. I don’t think it is a drying up, I think it is, literally, a block where you become so overwhelmed by all the emotions you feel that you’re no longer able to spring forth.

NB [00:08:18]: So that brings you to a standstill?

DE [00:08:20]: Yeah, literally.

NB [00:08:23]: Where is that rooted, that writer’s block? I know you mentioned feeling overwhelmed. Do you think that’s pressure that we put on ourselves, or it’s an external thing?

DE [00:08:34]: I think it’s quite a complex thing to unravel, where does the pressure come from. We can have external pressure. We’ve got to think about working to deadlines, expectations of others, you know, people ask you to write a particular thing, a specific thing. There are expectations around that. But the expectations that we have internally are often rooted in what I’ve been referring to as a historic narrative, and that will be the internal parenting that you have inside. So, for example, we call that the super ego, and it’s the internalised parent, the thing that tells you what to do, with very strict guidelines. And that super ego is usually made up of very early childhood experiences, perhaps with the parents [themselves], but perhaps with other caregivers and other figures of authority. That’s how you begin to internally parent what your expectations of yourself are. So, you know, if you’ve had very external, very punitive direction from the outside, and you’ve managed to internalise that, that’s a way you would perhaps treat yourself in the same way. Things not being good enough, kind of ideals around how hard you should work, or how much you should be doing. I have to say that’s also impacted on by cultural and social expectations that are also externalised.

NB [00:10:19]: Of course, it can all go back to a much earlier point in someone’s life, I’m assuming.

DE [00:10:24]: Absolutely.

NB [00:10:26]: Rooted in much earlier stages of a person’s life as well.

DE [00:10:31]: Absolutely. And I suppose that’s where we go back to our understanding of how the self builds. The development of the self is usually made by our feelings of first interaction with the mother, where there’s a mirroring effect, where you see yourself reflected favourably in the mother’s eyes, or the initial caregiver’s eyes, and that lets them know that you’re acceptable, lets you know that you’re acceptable, and that starts to the very early formation of the self, and what it means to have a self. And sometimes that’s interrupted if the conditions on the outside aren’t as favourable as they should be. Sometimes, you know, it doesn’t have to be anything too drastic, but enough to shift your secure feelings of is it okay to be you.

NB [00:11:26]: Yeah. It’s enough to influence the way that you see yourself as well.

DE [00:11:32]: Yeah, absolutely.

NB [00:11:35]: So, in terms of overcoming writer’s block, what does that look like for a person, in relation to the self? How do we overcome that feeling of feeling blocked, or like we’re at a standstill, or we’ve put too much on ourselves?

DE [00:11:52]: I think, first and foremost, in dealing with writer’s block and not particularly thinking of doing some huge explorative bit of psychoanalysis or therapy on yourself, I mean that’s a journey that could be part of that, but I think in the instance, with writer’s block, the important thing is to take the pressure off as much as you can by yourself. People tend to do that by moving into something else, doing something else, giving yourself a break from the writing, taking some time away from the desk, the screens, doing something else that stimulates your mind in a different way. Does that make sense?

NB [00:12:50]: So kind of just taking your mind off it entirely for a minute, and resetting.

DE [00:12:55]: Yeah, pressing pause, I think. The benefits of that are very much underestimated. We have got into a culture of it’s just more and more and more and more. Something that really ties into the times that we’re in at the moment, whilst this chat is happening, [during] Covid, is how we’ve been really forced to stop, and how that’s proving really difficult for a lot of people. Yes, because of all the other things, and being able to earn or the way we’re used to living. However, there’s also a psychological stop as well, to stop and to rethink and reset. Sometimes it’s very helpful to set yourself free, allow yourself to roam around in your mind a bit and to pause on the things that control our thoughts or the way that you’re doing things. People sometimes suggest writing to help writer’s block, in terms of something like journaling, writing about something else that proves to you, unconsciously, that the issue is not with you actually being able to write, you can still write, it’s just that perhaps you’re overloaded. That speaks to the catharsis that writing can often offer people. If we think about the word catharsis, which is Greek and means to cleanse or to purge, I think that’s exactly what you can do with writing, to kind of have a look at who you are and to cleanse and to purge your internal world. Kind of like therapy, but not exactly like therapy, but a way to bring things up to the surface, so you’re able to look at how you see yourself with a keener.

NB [00:15:17]: Going back to what you said about making time to pause sometimes, I feel like, even before this crisis happened, we do live in this culture where life just moves at a million miles-per-hour. This isn’t specific to the publishing industry, but it’s so easy to see so many books being churned out all the time, and just wonder when is it me? when is it my turn? Putting that extra pressure on yourself to produce some form of genius. So I think your suggestion to maybe just pause, and write for the sake of writing and just having it out there, unwinding, is a really good suggestion.

DE [00:15:58]: Absolutely, and it’s a really great way of helping you to deal with some of those pressures, in terms of what your expectations are around your piece of work. When you stop for a minute and there’s perhaps a moment of silence, you can perhaps think about why you’re writing, and what that particular piece of work means to you, why you’re doing it, which then helps frame what your expectations around it could be.

NB [00:16:31]: I think it’s really important to get back in touch with that question: why are you writing? What does it mean to you? Just going off the topic of writer’s block, another, not problem, as such, but area of discussion for writers, and something that a lot of people have in common, is the topic of imposter syndrome. I’ve got it myself, but I’ve heard a lot of people in the past say that sometimes their imposter syndrome is so bad they can often feel like it’s a person sitting in the room with them. How do we unravel that feeling like you’re not good enough, or you’re at your best?

DE [00:17:16]: I have to say, and this probably going to seem like I’m pushing therapy because I’m a therapist, but I actually think that this is an area that therapy could come in handy, in terms of unravelling that and, perhaps, moving out of a very circular way of thinking. The key is to be able to travel, as many writers do when they’re writing books, through time. Going backwards in time and moving forwards, to create movement in the thoughts and the way that you see yourself, and also to set the plot, and to see where the crime, for example, took place, and to be able to slowly unravel it like a great mystery. When we think about imposter syndrome, when we’re looking at therapy or looking at it from a more theoretical point of view, we’re talking about what would be known as the forced self. The forced self develops within an individual when you’re quite young, again, when there is a belief that who you are is not acceptable. Then you create another version that makes other people happy. But, unfortunately, the two things, the real self and this self, come into conflict, because the false self is not sustainable. They don’t get on, we could say, to put it really simply.

NB [00:19:06]: I guess it’s armour you put up.

DE [00:19:11]: Yes, and I love that, I love that you used the word armour, because, actually, if you think about an armour, as much as it is protective, it can be really restrictive, and you wouldn’t wear it all the time.

NB [00:19:23]: No, you’ve got to take it off at some point, and that’s when you are yourself.

DE [00:19:27]: Exactly. Because there’s this kind of rub, or disconnect, between the [real] self and the false self that you’re wearing, you can often find yourself in situation where you just don’t believe how you got [there]. You don’t know whether it’s you, or whether it’s the self that you’ve got everyone believing. And I think where therapy can help, is it can help you to uncover the layers, to work through the layers, and get back to a voice, or a sense of being that feels like the real, or authentic, you. Gosh, I really hate that phrase! The authentic you, the thing [you] feel that you can carry and walk around anywhere, and feel more comfortable with. A way, instead of splitting off, and splitting off psychologically usually refers to something around the creation of anxiety, and how we split into different pieces, to deal with the uncomfortable feelings that we have, and work towards more of a sense of consolidation. We kind of do that again, going backwards, and we can do that to some extent, when we do things like journaling, but sometimes we need a little help in putting all the information that we found, together, that help us understand it, rather than going around in [circles]. To get out of the information that’s known, I should say, and dig even deeper into the unknown. In this case, meaning digging deep into the unconscious mind.

NB [00:21:20]: I think, with imposter syndrome, I feel like it takes a lot of unlearning, because it doesn’t matter how long it’s been. You’ve told yourself enough times that you’re no good enough, or as good as. You have to teach yourself to undo all those sayings.

DE [00:21:40]: One of the ways of dealing with those negative internal voices, a method I use in the work that I do, often with artists or creatives, is to ask them to ask themselves who does that sound like? Where did they learn that piece of information? Where did you learn you weren’t good enough? Who do you sound like from your past, when you hear yourself saying, maybe not those particular words maybe not those words where it was actually saying to you, you’re not good enough, but where did you first get the sensation of not being good enough? So you start building a picture around whose voice it is that you’ve internalised, so that you can do a little bit of work around that, [and] recognise it as somebody else’s voice, and make your way back to your own voice. Very often when I speak to people and I listen to them, I detect that they’re quite mean to themselves, and I draw their attention to that. I draw their attention to how punitive the language they use is around themselves, or how critical, how harsh they are. And I usually follow that up with, where did you learn that? Where did you learn that way to be towards yourself? Generally, we start to unravel an earlier narrative where they seem to have internalised the way they were treated, and now believe it to be the truth.

NB [00:23:40]: Do you think some of that also comes from an inability to also trust yourself?

DE [00:23:48]: Absolutely, if you’ve never been taught to do that, and how you’ve been taught to do that by people in other ways. If we’re working together for example, in the studio, and every time you set up a piece of equipment, I go off and I reset it, that’s a constant and persistent undermining of what you do, there’ll a point when you won’t do it. Not because you’re angry at me for redoing your work, but perhaps there’ll be a little voice in you that says maybe I don’t do it right? Maybe that’s why she corrects me all the time? And so you start to pull back. My hope would be that you would have a strong inner voice, one that’ been encouraged to go out there and do things and believe that you can do them, inside of you, which would have been nurtured by those around you, early and current, that would make you eventually just question me and ask me what the hell I was doing. But for some people it doesn’t work like that.

NB [00:25:05]: It’s fear

DE [00:25:07]: Yes.

NB [00:25:08]: Fear of making the same mistake and being in the firing line again

DE [00:25:15]: Yes. If they have a history of being, particularly, treated in that way, then it’s quite easy to hold on to further negative narratives that follow in the external world, if they matched with the ones that are happening internally.

NB [00:25:33]: Okay. Just on the topic of fear, how does movement of thought and body create that feeling? Because, ultimately, that really gets in the way, especially when you’re writing. There could be so many things you are fearful of, fear of not completing it, not getting published or just achieving the end goal that you’ve got in your mind.

DE [00:25:55]: If we look at our world in terms of mental and body health, and we think about how, if [you have] feelings of depression or very low in mood, and how you might take to your bed, and it actually feels like you physically can’t get out of bed because you feel so low, that feeling is emotional and psychological that somehow ends up speaking to the body. So, if we become mentally quite fearful of things, then we’re also able to pick that up in the body, and the body behaves in a fearful way. It’s a somatic response to what’s going on in the mind; a physical representation of what’s going on in the mind, so if you’re fearful, your body becomes fearful in the sense that you tighten up. Your body responds in a way that you would do if you were in a fearful situation. You climb into yourself. You get tight. You create protective shapes. Shoulders up, hands in front of you. You’re not loose enough to flow. It all gets trapped inside the body, and that’s why it’s so important, when we’re in pressurised situations, or we’ve been sat in a particular position for a long time, at a desk, typing away, to get up and just walk. Shake it off a little bit. Get some movement going. Get your eyes away from the screen. That’s movement. Make a cup of tea. Your mind’s on something else. That’s movement. Walking towards the kettle. That’s movement. And all of that helps to release you from that very tight positioning [and] help you unwind.

NB [00:27:55]: The last time I spoke to you, we discussed this idea of checking in with yourself, and asking yourself how you’re feeling every morning. I think it’s something that a lot of people really don’t consider. I definitely don’t do it, and I think it goes back to having this culture where we move at a million miles-per-hour because there are things to be done. We rarely ask ourselves how we’re feeling, because we’ve got our eyes set on another task, or several tasks throughout the day.

DE [00:28:30]: I think it’s really funny, though, if you think about being a writer and producing a piece of work and that piece of work is going to be filled with your words and you want everyone to listen to those words, hopefully, right?

NB [00:28:43]: Right.

DE [00:28:44]: You want people to take note of those words and read what you’ve got to say, and it seems, almost, obscene, that you would wake up and not want to hear what you’ve got to say when you’re expecting everybody else to.

NB [00:29:00]: Exactly. I don’t think a lot of us think of it that way. I certainly didn’t, up until now. So it is important to take that time every day to just check in.

DE [00:29:12]: Absolutely. I think some of us just bounce into the day without even knowing how we feel. And then, before you know it, the day’s caught up with you and you don’t know that today you were meant to treat yourself a little gentler, or to be a bit slower with yourself, or to be a bit more thoughtful, or that you were really angry and that actually you should go carefully with people around you because you feel a particular way. I think it’s really important to check in with yourself, see how you’re feeling, and then also you’re able to locate, to check in how those feelings you had at the beginning of the day have changed throughout the day. So, for example, if I wake up one morning and I feel great, I feel peaceful and happy, whatever that is, and I get to the middle of the day and I can see that my mood’s changed, I can feel it, I can hear it, and I just suddenly feel that way, and I feel disorientated by that because it’s taken me by surprise. I think one of the ways of being able to manage your emotional state is being aware of what it is, and when it changes, and why it changes. What happened? What happened to make me feel less happy than I felt this morning? Well, this happened, and this happened, and this happened. I didn’t just wake up and go into the day and then, suddenly, it feels like the whole world’s happening to me, because I’m not aware of how I feel in myself. Being inside the body is really important, in terms of emotional wellbeing.

NB [00:31:03]: I think it’s especially important, what you said about writers putting their thoughts and emotions and everything on the page, and expecting everyone to listen when they’re not really listening to themselves. And in relation to writing, sometimes it’s a very personal thing, and it can also be very isolating, because it is just you and your work. How do we cope with that? How do we get around that? And how do we ensure that we maintain our mental and physical wellbeing while doing it?

DE [00:31:34]: Well, I think first of all, what we need to do is establish there’s a difference between solitude and isolation. I believe, and some people may disagree, so it might just be about the language that’s used, there’s a huge difference between the two words. And I think that when you’re writing, what you need to create around you is solitude, and not necessarily isolation. The difference between the two, in creating a quiet space of solitude, and the cutting off that happens with isolation, is that you need to keep in touch with your senses. [In] solitude, you’re still in touch with your senses. [In] solitude, I will take a break to make a connection with a friend or another person. [In] solitude I might set the mood to write, I might have some music in the background, I might nibble on a biscuit and a cup of tea so I’ve got taste going. I’ve got sight going. I’ve got smell. Some people sit in coffee shops and write, some people don’t have offices. I use my kitchen table. There’re things around that keep you stimulated. I think when you go into isolation, it’s a very deadening sensation.

NB [00:33:15]: So it’s telling the difference between the two?

DE [00:33:17]: To be able to deal with that kind of isolating process of writing, is to make sure that you are keeping in touch with the senses that prevent isolation. To be alone, and to write, and to be in solitude, is one thing. To be isolated, where you’ve lost contact with any world outside of yourself, either by touch, smell, sight etc…, that’s the stuff that’s damaging. Get up, get out, take good care—all the stuff they’re asking people to do at the moment, because of the self-isolation. Still they’re asking for people to go out for an hour and move around, and keep in contact with friends. Kind of all the tricks that are out and about now.

NB [00:34:18]: Now that we’re on the topic of lockdown, and I know it’s a difficult situation for a lot of people no doubt, but do you have any tips or coping mechanisms that you feel work really well helping people get through the day? Is there anything working for you, in particular?

DE [00:34:27]: I’m going to go with all the usual government mental health guidelines, which are things such as monitor what comes in, so that means only look at the news from verified outlets, make sure that your information’s coming form a good source, [and] perhaps don’t do too much of the news, to help manage anxiety. I personally just listen to the bulletin, and I do that around six o’clock, and that’s it for me for the day, just so that I can keep up. Also, in terms of monitoring what comes in, I’m quite strict, actually I think I drive people insane with my restrictions with what’s texted to me through WhatsApp. I was really quite strict when we first went into lockdown. I didn’t want to hear any horror stories. I don’t want to hear things like that at the moment, because I just think, if you’re sending it to me, you’re sending it to loads of people who, probably, can’t deal with that sort of input as much as others. For me, another thing is the going out aspect. I’m actually shielded, so I haven’t been going out for the hour’s walk, but what I’ve made really important, and I this, I think, for people who write is very important, is I’ve changed my space. I sometimes work in the garden, I sometimes work in the kitchen. I just try and be in different rooms, so that I am stimulated in different ways.

NB [00:36:28]: A change of scenery is always a good thing.

DE [00:36:31]: Absolutely. And I mean, just in terms of lockdown, talking specifically about lockdown, yesterday the garden was a school classroom for my son. Sunday morning, we were jumping up and down doing a dance routine with YouTube, so it was a dance studio. So we’re just constantly changing up the space, so that we can make the most of the space that we’ve had, but also not feel too squashed. And the other thing, apart from taking breaks, is what we call in our house, freak out hour.

NB [00:37:26]: That actually sounds like a lot of fun.

DE [00:37:28]: Freak out hour is actually—it can be. I’m trying to think how I can describe it. It’s an hour where we just allow ourselves to say that everything’s a bit crap right now, and we can express that in whichever way that we want to. Sometimes we just shout and we scream, and occasionally I let my youngest use the odd profane word. He enjoys that immensely, because he wouldn’t normally be allowed to. And I shout, and sometimes, again, we dance, and sometimes it’s not with each other. Sometimes I might call a friend and say yeah, I’m not doing so good, which is quite hard for therapists to do. We can make sense of everything, and it’s not just because I’m a therapist, I think it’s because there are lots of people who’re really high-performance, they’re really good at getting things done, done, done. And I think there’s a real space for creating balance for good mental health. The definition of good mental health is to experience a full range of emotions, and very often we stay at one end of perceived positive emotions, you know, everything’s got to be great, happy, I’m doing well, I’m doing fine, and actually that does create an imbalance within the self, because we don’t acknowledge, or balance, that sometimes we don’t feel so good. So, for me, freak out hour, whether it’s once a day, or once a week, is an absolutely essential tool, especially during lockdown. And I think sometimes during writing, when you’re having that moment and you feel like writer’s block is creeping in, to just stop and let everything go.

NB [00:39:27]: To just let it out of your system?

DE [00:39:29]: Yes.

NB [00:39:30]: That’s a really interesting point, actually, and I think it’s something that we can all take with us. Just to know that it’s okay to have those moments when you are completely vulnerable or you feel like you want to tell people you’re not okay.

DE [00:39:43]: I think vulnerability is really underrated. It’s been kind of perceived as something that makes you weak and insipid and unable to cope, and it’s actually the absolute opposite. If I could, I would just get it all redefined. I think the ability to show vulnerability and to experience vulnerability makes you so powerful.

NB [00:40:06]: And I think, in the context of writing, that vulnerability is important. Acknowledging when you’re having a tough time, or when you feel like it’s not going so well, trying to acknowledge that there is something there and you’d like to address it.

DE [00:40:24]: Yeah, it helps you to deal with issues around things like perfectionism, and fears. You know, there’s this thing where, when we’re talking about things like fear, for example, if you think about how movies are set, and when something frightening is going to appear, the camera will span to a particular space and the music will help set the mood and they’ll keep looking at the same spot all the time, and your senses are being heightened by the music. We’re scared before whatever’s supposed to jump out of the box or the cupboards or the floorboards has jumped out. But the thing is, once it has jumped out, it’s no longer scary. We’ll scream, but we’ve seen it. So if you play that film back over and over again, you will never get the same response again. And I think it’s very much the same with when we’re dealing with fear and exposure and vulnerability. If you just bring things up to the surface, and you name them, they’re just not as scary as they would be initially. For example, whenever I do any public speaking, if I’m particularly anxious or nervous, I literally will stand there for a little bit and then I will say I’m really nervous. And then I will go on to, usually, present something that doesn’t seem like I’ve got any nerves at all. And the reason for that [is] I’ve taken the power away from the fear, by naming what it is. Name it, expose, and then—I’m not saying it flies out the window, but it takes some of the power away.

NB [00:42:19]: But at least you’ve acknowledged it, and now you kind of know what you’re working with moving forward.

DE [00:42:25]: Absolutely.

NB [00:42:28]: Something else I wanted to talk about in relation to writing, I mean obviously there is the writing journey itself. Then there’s also this idea of success, and this is something [that] I feel comes up time and time again, where a lot of writers are under the impression that a published book is the end goal, and that’s my definition of success. Success comes in many forms, and I think it’s just so important to put it out there that it’s vital to acknowledge that success doesn’t have one particular look or route. It’s so different, and it’s a case-by-case scenario.

DE [00:43:11]: Well, again I think that’s why the whole concept of spending time talk to yourself and to find out why you’re writing and who’s it for is a very interesting self-conversation to have. Because sometimes we’ll realise it might even steer what you write, or who you’re going to present it to, or what medium you’re going to present it in. With being published, there is a perception and a fantasy around great swathes of wealth coming along with that which is not always the case, either. And obviously, if you are a writer you would like to earn from that writing. However, again, breaking things down, is having a published piece of work the only way that I could earn from writing? Who am I writing for? Is there a particular market that I want to reach? Can I reach them through writing in other ways?

NB [00:44:18]: So, in relation to success, I think self-sabotage is something worth talking about, just because… it’s very easy to scare ourselves into thinking it won’t happen. Whatever our idea of success is and whatever we’re doing and whatever our end goal, it just might not be. And I think sometimes that can disrupt the writing process as a whole.

DE [00:44:43]: Everything that I said early on about the creation of the false self is also part of that, in terms of where did that internal narrative come from? About what you’re able to achieve and what you’re not able to achieve. But I think the other thing, when we’re looking at self-sabotage, is perhaps also when we look at things like success, we’re frightened at failure but sometimes we’re frightened of succeeding, which is something that’s less spoken about. So, for example, self-sabotage could come from the fact that you’re actually afraid of the success process, and what does that mean? Well, first of all, you’d have to break down what success mean[s] for you. So we’re not just talking about the ability to pay bills, or to live comfortably from the process of writing. We’re also talking about a more subtle thing, such as, success means perhaps I might be seen. I’ve worked with authors who have had very successful books out, and one of the things they’ve struggled with is being seen. Being seen is not something they’d signed up for, for example. They’ve started writing because perhaps they didn’t have a voice, or their particular genre of writing was to represent people who weren’t seen. And so all of a sudden, success becomes interviews, and being seen, and things like that.

NB [00:46:43]: And putting yourself out there.

DE [00:46:45]: And putting yourself out there, or our agent putting you out there. So then what happens after that, why I’ve ended up seeing some of these authors, is actually they’re struggling with the second book. And what we’ve uncovered is that there was such a fear of what success actually meant, that it was working against them working to produce more work. Sometimes people, in terms of what they see success as being, perhaps there was a successful parent, who was successful in business, who was never at home, and the family dynamic broke down. Perhaps somewhere in your subconscious is success related to painful things happening. Success is related to unhappiness. So it’s really interested to question yourself what does success mean to you. So first of all talk about money, doing what I want to do and making a living form what I love doing. But then dig a little deeper, and think about what are your representations of success internally, psychologically. That can help you deal with the self-sabotage aspect. Understanding why you would unconsciously try to prevent something from happening, because you understand it, and that would help you work towards achieving your goal.

NB [00:48:19]: With regards to the writing journey itself, I think boundaries are something worth giving a quick mention to. How do we ensure that we’re maintaining our wellbeing through the writing journey, with these kinds of boundaries? What kinds of boundaries should we be creating for ourselves?

DE [00:48:39]: Boundaries, writing journey or not, is a huge topic. I think there are the boundaries that you draw around yourself, and there are the boundaries you draw around others. Saying no, for example, is one of those boundaries that is so difficult to do. Being able to push back and say no, having a boundary around your writing time. How long am I going to write for today? That’s an actually drawing of a boundary, to give yourself the space to recharge and create. This is also part of generally looking at your self-care aspect, part of self-care. Boundaries of what people want from you, what you’re able to give. The list is, really, endless. There are boundaries that are for others, and one of the big ones is something like no. and the boundary for yourself, for example, would be around things such as time management. How long am I going to spend doing this? Am I going to make time for a break? Am I going to make time to reconnect with others? So kind of look at them in categories for other and self, and take a look at where you’re feeling the most pressure, because that’s what dictates to you which boundaries you need to work on a little bit more.

NB [00:50:09]: Okay, I’m glad you mentioned self-care, actually, because it’s one of the things I wanted to round-of with. Self-care, I feel personally, [has] become heavily commercialised, and while it’s great because it’s raised a lot of awareness amongst people about the topic of self-care, I wonder what else self-care means. How would you define self-care? What does it look like to you? Because I feel like it’s so much more than just a face mask and a candle. Those are really great self-care things, and I use them all the time, but how would you define self-care? If we get to the root of self-care, what is it, before it became really colourful hardback books and, you know.

DE [00:50:58]: It’s really interesting. I did a workshop with the Young Vic last year, and there was this conversation about, it was for performers and dancers, and one of the things we were saying was what can we ask for from the people who are asking us to present a piece of work? So we were talking about things that you wouldn’t think of that come under self-care. Doing funding applications and stuff like that. Maybe you should ask for a bit of money for therapy, or shoes, the right shoes to be able to do your craft. I think you’ve really got to look at what it is you’re doing as a writer and think about the tools you need, and what parts of yourself that you really need to look after. You need to look after your mind. If you had budget, okay, so then maybe you could get some therapy. If it’s not about looking at clinical issues, [it’s] about keeping your mind really juicy—I really like the concept of a juicy mind. You keep your mind juicy by sleep, rest, time away from the screen, you know? Changing the subject, getting your attention to exercise in other areas, [not just] the piece of work you’re trying to produce. Self-care means being in contact with others. It might not be a big thing for you, not everybody’s super social, but make contact with people outside of yourself so that you can feel alive. Take breaks, take fresh air, feed your body as well as your mind, in different ways. Say no. make time for yourself. When that phone rings—I have to say at the moment I am really struggling with telephones and screen work, because I do that all day, but it’s also another way of keeping in touch with friends, and I’m finding that I’m becoming more isolated, because after a day’s work I’m finding that I don’t want to talk on the phone again, or be on a screen. So I think, as well, listening to yourself and saying what you feel and pleasing yourself—huge self-care tool. We always think of pleasing ourselves as selfish, and actually it’s one of the hardest things we can do, to be able to say to somebody, no. to place yourself further up on your priority list. And sometimes it’s a good idea, actually, in that conversation with yourself to say, well where am I, on your priority list. And sometimes when I speak to people, they’re not even on the list. And when I say priorities, we might not even be talking about putting other people in front of yourself. You may be putting your body of work in front of yourself, and for you to be able to support that body of work, you need to be healthy. You need to look after yourself, so that you can support that body of work being produced.

NB [00:54:24]: Right, and allow it to flourish, because I feel like we pour so much of ourselves into our work, often we’re just completely careless with regards to what we’re like on our own, away from everything else.

DE [00:54:38]: Absolutely. And it impacts on the work, whatever it is that you’re doing, whether you’re writing, whether I’m seeing a client. If I’m not looking after myself, I can’t look after anyone else.

NB [00:54:53]: Just really quickly, before we round-off here, you mentioned before that there are check lists of questions you can ask yourself, and things to do every day to make sure that you’re taken care of. Is there anything you could share, with regards to that?

DE [00:55:10]: Well, I have to say, that most things that I’ve mentioned today are things that I also do myself. They’re not just recommendations for clients. My grandmother, who I swear should have written something, a little handbook, she used to say to me that when you point your finger out to someone, three of your fingers point back to yourself. So, if I’m giving out information, I generally try to take that information inside as well. For me, the key questions that I ask myself when I get up every day [are] what do I feel like today? I ask myself whether my body hurts. And if it does, what is it telling me? and if I’ve got pain in my neck, from leaning over a laptop late at night, or if my hands feel stiff and swollen, if my eyes are burning, you know, a lot of people believe they need glasses, but what they’ve got is a drying of the eyes from having too much screen time and that can make your vision feel blurry. So, things like that. Just kind of looking at my body and understanding what is my body telling me.

NB [00:56:26]: Listening to yourself.

DE [00:56:57]: Yeah, [what] I need to do to feel better. And the most important question that I ask myself, above all, is what can I not do today? And I think what we ask ourselves is what can I do today.

NB [00:56:46]: How much can I get done in this space of time.

DE [00:56:48]: Yeah, and I think it’s good in terms of being able to make a better assessment of how you use your time. And I also think it’s really important to, if we feel that we’re high performers, and we get everything done, I feel it’s really important to really check in with yourself and understand that perhaps your ability to withstand pain is quite high. And that actually you really need to check in with whether there’s something that you could leave, for the day. You don’t have to, again, looking at historic narratives, sometimes maybe we’re brought up to push through, and, you know, shake it off and just get on with it and go for a good brisk walk, and not really let anything settle in. and I think, sometimes it’s really important to recognise what our behaviour[s] like, and how does that impact on us, on our ability to stay well. So, ask yourself what can’t you do today? Make space. Manage time in a better way.

NB [00:57:59]: Well, thank you so much. That was really interesting, and a great way of looking at things. It’s certainly a different way of looking at things. This has been an incredible conversation, Dawn, thank you so much. I feel like I’ve learnt a lot, and I hope our listeners will take something from this as well. I’m so grateful that you joined us for this episode.

DE [00:58:18]: Thank you so much for inviting me. I think it’s actually helped me to refresh some of my own practices around what I do for myself, especially, you know the lockdown period is incredibly numbing. People are feeling quite numb. But I also think it’s a really great time to reflect and reset on the way that we look after ourselves and value ourselves. And I we can move out of this process, and [be] healthier and happier individuals, that would be a good thing, just by tweaking a few of our practices. And I think that talking to ourselves, there’s lots of taboo and stigma around all of that, but actually who knows you better than you? Have a good chat with yourself. See how you feel. See what you’re thinking. And value your own opinion. It helps in all areas—in moderation, I hasten to add!

NB [00:59:22]: Thank you so much, Dawn, this was absolutely wonderful.

DE [00:59:24]: No, thank you.

NB [00:59:26]: Take care, thanks for joining us.