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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 episode of the Being a Writer podcast, we speak to Write and Shine founder, and author, Gemma Seltzer, about finding inspiration in the everyday. She talks us through her creative practises practices in the early hours of the day, finding and building a writing community that works for the individual and how to reinspire yourself when feeling overwhelmed, fatigued or demotivated.

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

NB [00:00:51]: Welcome to the Being a Writer podcast, Gemma, how are you feeling?

GS [00:00:54]: Oh, I’m feeling good, thank you. How are you?

NB [00:00:56]: I’m very well, thanks. It’s quite a gloomy November’s morning, but I feel great about this episode because we’re talking about inspiration today.

GS [00:01:04]: Everyone’s favourite subject.

NB [00:01:06]: Everyone’s favourite subject. I think we could all use some right now. So, as the founder of Write and Shine, I think it’s safe to say that you’re a morning person, but what I really want to know, is do you ever allow yourself to have a lie-in?

GS [00:01:20]: That is a great question. Do I ever allow myself to have a lie-in? Yes, I do. I definitely do. Yeah, I run Write and Shine, and the programme is all about peaceful morning creative writing workshops, events, we’ve got an online library of courses as well and we focus on generating writing during the first part of the day. [It’s] the most creative time, I’d say, the morning, and I set it up because I love mornings, and most of the time I love to leap out of bed, I’m bright and focused in the early hours, and I get a bit dull in the afternoon and evening, so it’s definitely my natural rhythm to be up early, and being awake before anybody else. I like to write just as the light comes. But yeah, I do believe in a lie-in. I know I need to rest sometimes, but for me, you know, a lie-in is eight, eight-thirty in the morning?

NB [00:02:22]: You would hate my timetable. 8am for a lie-in is still quite early.

GS [00:02:28]: It is. I think pay attention to my moods, and to the season. I like to move in a rhythm that feels okay, [and] I’m not too hard on myself about it. I think I naturally wake up early, so then I might just stay in bed a little bit longer. When I had a full-time job and was travelling and commuting, I definitely would try and get up early early early. Now, I’m not doing all those things, so I’m a bit more relaxed.

NB [00:02:56]: Okay, so that’s really interesting that you say that, because… in the spirit of recording this episode of the podcast, I thought I would also have a go at early starts, 6-7am, and I have to say, it does make a world of difference. You do feel that little bit more productive in the day.

GS [00:03:15]: That’s exactly it. You feel more productive, you’re moving with the energy of the day. Also, you just trick yourself into getting going before the other bits of your mind start being active, so you can start writing or doing a few tasks before the rhythm of the day begins.

NB [00:03:37]: So, inspiration is usually at the heart of all creative practice. What inspires you?

GS [00:03:42]: What inspires me?

NB [00:03:44]: It’s a really good question.

GS [00:03:46]: I know! Well, having goof conversations, like this. I love a good conversation. I love reading. Reading’s always been the first thing, that first bit of inspiration, so I read a lot of short stories. I’m reading Leone Ross’s short stories at the moment, and Sylvia Plath, [whose] short stories are just so dreamy and surreal, and Grace Paley, [whose] stories just begin in the middle of a conversation. You’re just straight in there with people chatting. A lot of reading.

I like walking. I think a lot about walking in the city. I think writing, creativity and walking are all interlinked. There’re lots of studies and writers and artists who think the same thing, just how the body changes as you start walking, and you get lulled into a rhythm, all the thoughts start rising up. Yeah, I think walking is inspiring and helps me think, and I love the stream of images that come up, and the sounds and everything that you hear when you start walking. You know, the freedom of being on the move, that feels really pertinent right now, what it means to walk around in a city, especially women. I’m really interested in defiant women, who move around the city, [and] how freedom’s been restricted now, so walking in the city feels like a dream. It feels like that freedom was a long time ago. So yeah, walking.

Trees. I love a good tree. I’ve got a huge monkey puzzle tree outside of my living room window, and in the morning it’s filled with parakeets and great tits and coal tits—it’s just a really nice cross-section of birds in that tree. I’ve got a magnolia tree outside another window, so, because we live in a top-floor flat, I kind of look down at the top of these trees, so I find those hugely inspiring

NB [00:05:44]: That’s really love. And what a lovely contrast between those trees and walking through the city.

GS [00:05:48]: It’s so nice. Yeah, and this all makes me think the city, I love the city, I love travelling to cities, [but] one of the things I love, I was thinking this morning, about what has been inspiring me recently, in these times that feel quite, you know, more narrow and more restricted, [that] I really like the chance encounters that I see so often on the streets. People aren’t seeing each other or interacting in the same way, so you just see neighbours bump into each other. This morning, when I was up early, I went for a run and the rubbish trucks were out… and two of them passed each other on the road and they started honking their horns. They were just delighted to see each other, two rubbish trucks going the opposite way, and it gave me such joy. These are [often] how we try and connect and interact with each other.

NB [00:06:40]: You get to really treasure really small human interactions nowadays, [and there] is something really unique and special about that now.

GS [00:06:50]: Totally, yeah.

NB [00:06:52]: So what is it about the morning in particular that appeals to your creative side?

GS [00:06:57]: Well, I think, as a writer, I’m really interested in the stuff of everyday life. I love those ordinary interactions. That really appeals to me, and really inspires my work. I’ve always risen early, and just been maybe a bit more sensitive in the morning.

Back in 2013, I collaborated with a photographer on a digital and literature project. It was called 5am London, and we got up early and we travelled to different parts of London once a month, and the aim was to capture the city in the early hours of the day and just see a different side of London.

I was born in London. I’ve lived in different places, but I was born here, and returned here a good few years ago. [I] was always interested in unpeeling the layers on London, and at 5am it was very interesting. There were people on their way to work, or on their way home after a night out, and it really felt like we were walking around in a dream, and our minds were buzzing with ideas each time. We created a fictional blog, with his photos and my writing, and it just made me feel very excited about these secrets sides of the city, and who is awake early in the morning, and how incredible it can be to just be alert and aware and in that moment.

That was my beginning of really thinking that mornings could offer something creative. The more I’ve looked into it, and looked into different studies, I think it’s true that when we wake up we’re more sensitive to the sights and sounds of our environment. I think it’s the best time to think, and imagine. Afternoons, studies show, are better for editing and critiquing. I just like moving from bed; moving from [a] sleeping state to my notepad, and exploring the edges of my dreams as I start writing.

NB [00:08:57]: That’s beautiful. That’s a lovely way of putting it: the edges of your dreams. And with that project, [which] sounds amazing,[and] obviously it must have varied from season to season, as well.

GS [00:09:09]: Yeah exactly.

NB [00:09:10]: Just like, borrowing hours of daylight and sunrise and things. That must have been incredible to see.

GS [00:09:15]: Yeah, and a really nice way to chart the city, or chart our interaction with the city. We’d go once a month, so we’d have to travel somewhere to be somewhere at 5am. Yeah, 5am in midwinter was dark and cold and everything. I think our final one was in the summer, in Hyde Park, and we were just by the water as the light lifted, and you know, just being in the dawn. The day felt like it was really beginning around us, which is so different from navigating the dark spots in the cooler days.

NB [00:09:51]: That’s lovely. So, going back to Write and Shine, what has it taught you about your own writing and creative practice?

GS [00:10:00]: What’s it taught me? I think I set up Write and Shine because I was looking for a place to write and think clearly. I didn’t want the formality of a creative writing workshop. I’ve been to loads of creative writing workshops in my time, and they’re often linked to academic institutions and focused on an academic structure, and focused on publishing as the main outcome. Like that was the reason people were writing, to be published. I think I wanted to find somewhere where there was just more joy in writing, where the sessions gave you energy and hope, and let unexpected ideas arise. I realised I liked writing just with no known outcome.

NB [00:10:52]: Just for the sake of it.

GS [00:10:54]: Just for the sake of it. For the joy, and, you know, it not being something competitive, where there’s always that thing at the beginning of workshops, which I hated, where you go round and introduce yourselves. It can become a jostle for status about who’s done what and who’s published what. And also, the student-teacher power dynamic, sometimes that can silence a lot of writer, and the group dynamic isn’t right for everybody, writing in a big group.

I think I just really believe, and through doing Write and Shine I believe it even more deeply, that we learn to write through doing the writing, and we have to learn to trust our own voices, and that only comes from within. Finding a community that supports and sustains that is really important, as writers.

I set it up myself because that’s what I was looking for—a space to write and think and be part of a supportive community, where publishing isn’t just the final outcome.

NB [00:11:57]: I think it’s really interesting that you say that, because, a lot of the time, I feel like it’s really easy to lose sight of why you started writing in the first place, or why it made you happy. Because we’re so geared towards that final outcome, or the pressures of seeing everyone else with that finished product that we so badly want, that we forget why we began doing it in the first place.

GS [00:12:21]: But also, not everybody wants that. A book is not the only way to be a writer.

NB [00:12:27]: It’s not linear, there’s no concrete way of measuring whether you’ve achieved something or not with your writing. I think the fact that you write is the best thing.

GS [00:12:37]: Yeah, and just people from all walks of life coming together to explore their creative ideas outside a fixed path. That fills me with a sparkle of joy. If you don’t know what the outcome is, and you start writing, the world opens up. In Write and Shine, we don’t critique or review our work. It’s about generating material. I just found, especially for women, finding a space to write is hard, so offering a short writing workshop before work, before the working days begin, and then you leave the workshop with a few different pieces to develop in your own time. For me, that just helped me understand what I value about writing; what the path is for me, and how it can be just so different for everybody and what happens if it isn’t a competitive environment, [but is] a community [that’s] supportive, and everyone is on a different path but we’re all alongside each other.

For me, that has influenced my own writing and my own approach to writing really deeply.

NB [00:13:45]: That’s a really beautiful way of looking at it—I think-just generating a sense of community where everyone feels like they’re there for the same reason.

GS [00:13:55]: Yeah, and I will say, even though we do meet early, we tackle big subjects in our writing politics, equality, feminism, climate crises. For me, one of the things I can do with Write and Shine is introduce our community to writers and artists who aren’t always offered the platforms they deserve, and our guest tutors. The programme is about a really broad divert of voices, foregrounding women and people of colour and lots of work in translation. I love that, because I see value in that, in making sure I foreground a real wide range of voices, it’s endlessly inspiring to me. I put a lot of work into uncovering new writers [and] creative, and if you come to any of our sessions, you would find [that] the examples and extracts, I hope, are representative of the wider world and different experiences. That is hugely inspiring, to go beyond the limits of your own life, and into other people’s experiences.

NB [00:15:00]: That’s a really brilliant sense of community that you’ve created. It’s wonderful. Back to you, do you have any everyday routines or rituals that accompany your early starts; little things that kind of built up to help you create Write and Shine? [Is] there anything that you’re still doing, just parts of your day that just have to have?

GS [00:15:24]: That’s a nice question. I really like routines and rituals. I like thinking about them. I often feel a bit overwhelmed and slightly obsessed with my to-do list. I like stationery as well, so I’ve a very beautiful to-do list pad, this pink pad that just love filling up with [my] to-do list.

NB [00:15:49]: Personalised notebooks with fine lines and stuff, that’s my jam.

GS [00:15:52]: What have you got? What kind of things do you have?

NB [00:15:55]: I really love the Papier journals. I think they’re so stunning, and I love that they always bring in an artist to create the next season’s worth of journals. They’re just beautiful.

GS [00:16:05]: That’s an answer to this as well—just having some items, you know, tools for your writing that fill you with a bit of happiness or give you a bit of delight to look at.

I guess I do have a morning routine that I tweak and variate. It’s a mixture of Julia Cameron’s morning pages, a few pages of free-writing, and then I combine it with Morning Miracle, [by] Hal Elrod, who has this idea [about] the key things you need to do in the morning, including visualisation and meditation. I’ve been really inspired by the great Bernardine Evaristo, and I saw an interview that she did with gal-dem where she talked a lot about the value of affirmations, so I’ve added in some affirmations in my morning. All of those things combined, affirmations, visualisations, a bit of meditation, and, if I have time, I like reading, a bit of exercise and writing as well. So, maybe an hour that starts the day that’s a combination of those things. On a perfect day, that would set me up.

NB [00:17:24]: That sounds great. There are so many great tips in there, and you’ve kind of just got a bit of everything.

GS [00:17:30]: Yeah, mix it all up. I like not having a fixed routine. I think, if I felt like every morning I had to get up and do x, y, z, I’d find that overwhelming. Having a few things to pick and choose from, I’d genuinely always do a little bit of meditation in the morning, and my morning pages, but everything else I might change up a bit.

NB [00:17:54]: So, you say that, for you, writing doesn’t always exist on the page, and that there are so many ways to create and share a story. What should writers bear in mind when thinking about, or starting, a new project?

GS [00:18:08]: I think just keeping a sense of openness as you develop ideas. I genuinely would start with just free-writing, [setting] myself writing prompts and [seeing] where I end up. But I wouldn’t start with, I’m going to write a novel. Or this is a short story. I think an openness to think, okay, well maybe this could be a performance, a recording, a film, a dance, a note you leave in strangers’ pockets somewhere.

If you want to be a writer, writing is at the heart of it. What it ends up being can vary, and it depends what you want out of it. It is great to have books published and pamphlets published. You have a great boost of confidence if others want to read and understand your work, but I love the idea that [there are] so many different ways to share your voice.

I’ve really benefited from an openness to collaborating across artforms. I love working with dancers. Some of the dancers I’ve worked with have described how they look at the world [as] from behind their bodies, if that makes sense? They see their body in space, whereas, as a writer, I feel like I’m always honing my observation skills, so I see the world through my eyes, in front of me. That shift of how you things around you, I find that so interesting. Some of the dancers I’ve worked with have taken my worlds and used them as choreographic instructions, and that’s a really wonderful reminder to me that writing can sometimes be for other writers, [but] what if we write thinking okay, it’s for dancers, or it’s for people who are in tune with their body in a different way?

To think about Write and Shine and how it all interlinks, I often bring in other artists from across the spectrum to lead out workshops. So we’ve had creatives who lead creative writing workshops, but they’re not writers. We’ve had a florist and a puppeteer and a filmmaker and a photographer. I like the idea that writing can be stimulated and shared outside of the structures of literature and publishing.

NB [00:20:36]: I love that you bring so many different kinds of people together to inspire writing. That’s incredible.

GS [00:20:44]: Yeah, I like people. I like exploring how other people’s minds, or creative minds, work, especially working with dancers. It kinds of blows my mind, when you understand that people see the world so differently from you. Their [approach], how they move around spaces, how they talk to people [is] entirely different. It’s definitely inspiring for my writing, so I love that I have the opportunity to share it with others.

NB [00:21:21]: And it really shows that you can draw inspiration from just about anywhere, really.

GS [00:21:30]: Openness and listening, they really help when I’m beginning to write something, or beginning a project.

NB [00:21:41]: By the time this episode comes out, hopefully we won’t be, but we’re in another lockdown at the moment, while this is being recorded. I think what I really wanted to ask you was under these current circumstances I think it’s pretty common for everyone, regardless of what they do, to feel uninspired and demotivated at times. What do you recommend for these moments, where you kind of just feel like you don’t really want to do any more?

GS [00:22:05]: I don’t know. I think it’s just acknowledging that these are weird, weird times, and it’s affecting us all differently, and you look around and people seem to be being productive and doing things and putting stuff out in the world. For a lot of us, it’s hard every day, just to keep focus. There’re a lot of distractions. There’s the news. Everything can feel very heavy. I’ve got a really great coach that I speak to once a month, and she talks just about whenever you’re feeling demotivated or uninspired, just dropping the tension somewhere in your body, so just scanning your body and holding that tension. For me, it’s my legs for some reason, like my legs are gripping the ground, or whatever. So, just letting that go can help you relax, and then move forward.

Another thought is, I guess I’m finding a lot of people are finding solace and calm in the rhythm of nature, or at least we’re paying attention o it more. I don’t know if you’re feeling the same, but the natural world seems to be more visible. I love concrete and windows and interiors. I love the buildings of the city, but I feel more open to seeing the seasonal changes, like the frost that was on the ground this morning, the light shifting. I think it affects us, the seasons and what’s going on in the natural world. We don’t always have time to acknowledge it. For me, that’s something that can help with you not feeling so motivated.

NB [00:23:54]: I completely agree with you there, because, when I’m thinking about myself as well, I know it’s a bit colder or a lot colder, actually, I think just watching the season change brought me that little bit of happiness, because I just felt like it was something new, in comparison to what we’ve had for the last six or seven months. I just felt like, oh this might be a fresh start, this might be something different.

GS [00:24:18]: that’s such a nice way of putting it. Yeah, and just seeing the change happen before your eyes, like you say, can give you a bit more optimism, and it helps you realise that things are constantly evolving and changing. The seasons are always moving around us, and tuning in to the natural world really helps us with our creativity and clarity of thought.

Everything is in flux. You can feel really stuck. I’ve definitely been feeling really stuck recently, [regarding] how to move forward. Then you might look outside and notice that tree has been dropping all of its leaves and its moving through change, like we are as well.

NB [00:25:03]: The change in air, the change in colours as well that you see as you’re out and about. I think it makes a massive difference to your mood.

GS [00:25:09]: What’s your favourite season?

NB [00:25:11]: Oh, it’s autumn.

GS [00:25:13]: Okay.

NB [00:25:15]: Just because of all the change that comes about through autumn. I also just don’t like heat, so anything that’s a little bit colder is nice, I feel.

GS [00:25:25]: Yeah, cold cheeks walking around outside.

NB [00:25:28]: That’s right. And it really does feel fresh, it really does just feel like a new beginning in the year.

GS [00:25:34]: Yeah. I’m enjoying the cooler, you know, this time of year, because the light is so interesting, even though it’s annoying it’s getting dark earlier in the afternoon.

NB [00:25:45]: Sunrise is beautiful.

GS [00:25:47]: The sunrises are incredible. Yeah, we’ve been noticing that as well.

NB [00:25:50]: We have indeed. There’re really beautiful streaks of pink and orange across the sky.

GS [00:25:57]: I feel like, maybe we wouldn’t be noticing it so much. I definitely had a much faster pace, you know, out and about a lot more. I just feel like it’s one of the things that I feel kind of grateful for. When I notice the natural world outside, I’m like yeah, this is the moment we’re living in, this is right now.

NB [00:26:17]: That’s a really lovely way of looking at it. How can we reinspire ourselves at a time when we’ve all been taken out of regular routines? How can we ground ourselves and find enough familiarity to carry on, but enough spark to feel inspired by something new?

GS [00:26:32]: Well, Netflix helps. I don’t know, I’m definitely doing more cosy things. Small pleasures. There’s a Write and Shine exercise that I really enjoyed bringing to our community, which is to write down 10 things that you love; 10 simple pleasure that make life worth living, like the first sip of tea in the morning, taking a bath, fresh bedsheets, writing a letter, pencils—pencils are one of my favourite things—dancing, reminiscing with old friends. Just having that list somewhere nearby that you can just glance at. Maybe in your notebook, or in your desk or something, just as a reminder. You don’t have to be doing those things all the time, but a reminder that there are th4se things that give you a deep sense of joy at this moment in time.

I heard Zadie Smith on a podcast, she talked about ambient sameness—this sense that we’re all going through this similar experience, but it’s sort of flattened because it’s not unique. We’re all experiencing the frustrations and the limits on freedom, and it becomes this ambient sameness, she said.

So, you know, behind your question [of] how is it we can break out of that, find inspiration, find solace. Walking is really helping me as well, just taking a short walk out and about and just seeing things. And also, maybe, taking stock of your writing life. If writing is important to you and you perhaps haven’t been finding the right headspace or time, I think it’s true it takes a lot of energy to write and generate ideas and be creative, and you do have to create some order and space in your life for the writing. So, right now, I’m living in a tiny flat, I don’t feel like I have a room of my own or any kind of space, and I long for empty days in which to write ad I don’t really have them. But I’m also a fan of taking stock of where you are regularly [and] writing in snatches, if that’s what you need to do. It’s really surprising what you can get done, just writing whilst the kettle’s boiling, whilst you’re cooking dinner—just 10 minutes every day. I love that, if you don’t feel like you’ve got time to write, or that you’re just not feeling very inspired, taking a step away or taking a step back or breaking it down into manageable chunks can be really useful. If you love stationery like we do, it’s a nice thing to do. Get your nice notebook out, start making plans, starting looking at where you can find some extra space.

NB [00:29:20]: On the subject of routines and being taken out of them, routine is sometimes subject to the season, and a lot of writers’ moods are affected by shorter hours of daylight around this time of year in particular. How do you change or alter your writing habits according to the time of the year, and what works for you?

GS [00:29:38]: That’s such a good question. I definitely feel sensitive to the seasons—like you say, a lot of writers and artists do get affected in that way. At Write and Shine, even, we run in seasons, so we have our spring season, where we take inspiration from the light and the growth around us. The seasons give us invitation to pay attention to what’s around us, so in the morning, when I’m beginning to write, I might just notice one thing about the season that day, like if it feels cold or what the leaves are doing or what the light is. So just grounding yourself in that moment, exactly where we are, being really present to it.

I like writing the date at the top of my notebook, today is this day, and this is who I am and this is me writing, just to keep aware and alert and see how it affects you. Of course it finds a way into your writing as well, and you might not even realise it. These darker days, probably, are influencing what you are writing about.

Just thinking about Write and Shine again, I love that the seasons and the amount of daylight can affect what’s coming out of you on the page. In December this year we’re doing a December festival, which is the first time we’ve done that. Just a month of workshops about revelry and imagination—playful events to brighten up December. We’ve got one about poetry and taxidermy, a writing retreat to greet the dawn, a solstice event on midwinter day. The darkness sometimes just feels really weird. I think [in] the dark seasons we risk isolating ourselves, or withdrawing a bit.

NB [00:31:43]: It’s really hard, especially when working from home, [to see] it get darker around four o’clock. It can really kill your mood, ever so slightly, because you think, oh my God, where did the day go?

GS [00:31:58]: Exactly. And there is the sense of the darkness [coming] so you feel interior, or you stay inside.

NB [00:32:06]: You feel like the day’s over.

GS [00:32:08]: And what else [is there]? You just want to hide away a bit. That is the risk when the seasons change, so I do believe in acknowledging that, [and that] maybe trying to work in the rhythms of the season can be really helpful. This is the time that we just need to slow down a bit and just take stock and assess where we are.

I also think that continuing to be motivated can be hard, so finding a community that you like being part of, or finding space in your day to write, it feels a lot harder this time of year, but valuable as well, because the seasons are affecting our writing in ways we don’t even know, really.

NB [00:32:54]: With regards to your mood being affected when you’re writing, I think it’s quite easy to hit a wall or feel like [you’re] not sure [you] can do anymore. What do you recommend for those moments where writers might feel completely demotivated?

GS [00:33:12]: I think stepping away from your work, if you’re writing and you’re feeling like you’re not getting anywhere, stepping away, taking a walk, doing something totally different, having a shower, you know, doing some other tasks, can really give you some breathing space. It can be really useful.

I just think there’s great value in having a writers’ community. I’ve got a really great writing group, and I am so glad to have found them after so many years. We’re a group of six women, and we all write but in different ways. There’s a graphic novelist, a poet, a playwright, someone writing for radio. We’re all writing, but in different ways, [and], as I say, I just find them, I love all their work, I’m really inspired by each of them, I trust them all and I love the comments they give on my work, I find it really useful. It does sustain me for the time, you know, we meet once a month, but it sustains me for the time between when we might. I might just think myself, what would they say? I might just message our WhatsApp group, and we all can just offer each other support and encouragement, in a really honest way. We don’t have to pretend that everything is going wonderfully with our writing. That’s been a really powerful tool.

NB [00:34:44]: On the subject of networks and finding a sense of community, you’ve mentioned on your website that a lot of your collaborations are intimate and quiet, in terms of networks. What do you recommend, and where can writers start with finding that sense of community, or, in essence, finding their people, where they can feel vulnerable and comfortable and open?

GS [00:35:07]: That really nicely links to this idea of having a good writing group or a writing community. I think, if you’re not part of a group, or you’re looking for a new space, being open and exploring and attending other writing workshops and other writing communities, [helps] to see what works for you. I love what we do at Write and Shine because it’s a very friendly, democratic, fun, production space. You might try some different writing groups and see which one’s for you, and also work out what you need in terms of a network. Is it to do with the publishing pathway? Is it to do with some solidarity? Is it [that] you want to share work? And also, what kind of environments do you think you would thrive in? I like one-to-one scenarios; I like talking with writers one-to-one, or in small groups. I think that big writing groups can be intimidating. In Write and Shine, I use break-out sessions quite a lot, so people are working just one-to-one with one other person. So, I think working out where you might fit and what you would find useful. And, I guess, Twitter, Writr—I love writing Twitter, [which] is great and good for connecting people, following authors or literary folks who are interesting have got something useful to say. I think that can be a really nice community.

NB [00:36:37]: That’s really lovely. And I think that’s something that’s overlooked sometimes. I understand that social media can sometimes be quite heavy with really difficult news or things that aren’t very easy to digest, but there’s also a world of good out there, too, especially for the writing community. We’ve come across so many amazing things happening every day, just through Twitter.

GS [00:36:58]: Yeah, the TLC twitter account is full of opportunities and ideas and, you know, an upbeat but pragmatic tone. If you’re looking for a community, just exploring Twitter for organisations that you think align with what you’re [doing, is useful]. When I first started out, I felt like there was one way of being a writer, or one way of networking, and it had to be in a commercial publishing world. But, of course the indie publishing scene is so interesting, and there are so great wonderful writers and books coming out, and lots of literature organisations. I think exploring and seeing what resonates with you, personally, can be really valuable.

NB [00:37:49]: It’s true, and I really do believe that there is something out there for everyone.

GS [00:37:55]: Yeah, there is. And, you know, just doing some personal work to see what you need as a writer. Is it a group, is it one other writer, is it a website listing lots of competitions you can attend? What is it that makes you feel excited and joyful about writing? It’s hard work being a writer, it’s hard work being creative, so you need to find the things around you that will give you some brightness, and [remind] you why you do it and why you’re committed to writing, because it should be something that makes you happy and will support other people as well.

NB [00:38:36]: What you’ve just mentioned there is absolutely key, remembering your why. That’s so important.

GS [00:38:43]: Yeah, and I think it’s not always easy to know. That’s some work you can do through your writing—why are you writing? Why do you write? Ask yourself why am I writing, why am I writing.

It’s the same as, every so often, taking stock of your writing life and your writing routine, and also asking yourself why you’re writing. Because, only you have that answer. And a community is great to be part of and a writing group is great to be part of, but at the ned of the day, you’ve got to have it within you to keep motivated and keep going and see value in what you’re doing, and trust that the writing will take you where you need to go.

NB [00:39:19]: Well, that’s a lovely way of looking at it. In terms of finding inspiration in the everyday, is there a particular thing, or person, that you find yourself always turning back to, in order to get yourself going again?

GS [00:39:30]: I guess the morning rituals that I mentioned, definitely, and the small pleasures. A cup of tea in the morning, I love. I have a lot of different kinds of tea and I take a lot of pleasure in making… and drinking tea. Reading. I think friendship is something that I will turn to, if I need to ignite some ideas. Some of my really good friends, like long friendships, I will turn to. I’ve been writing a lot about my teenage years, and I’ve been rereading some old diaries, and I’ve got one friend who I just call up and share with her some of the old diary entries, and it’s just so hilarious and so much fun. It’s just a way of just connecting with somebody in this difficult time. We’re remembering these things we did.

Maybe there’s something in comfort and nostalgia, and reaffirming the relationships with others, that helped me get going or helped me feel strong in the world, that I could keep moving forward.

NB [00:40:48]: They bring a sense of familiarity, at a time when there’s so much change and there are so many things happening at once. Even if you’re starting a new project, having that sense of familiarity to go back to is really lovely sometimes.

GS [00:40:43]: Exactly. What about you, and this idea of finding inspiration in the everyday? Is there something you turn to?

NB [00:41:09]: I think what you mentioned earlier, about writing your list of 10 things that you really love, that’s something that I quite often, and I just sit there, and I’ll make a list of all the things that bring me so much happiness and joy. It’s more like a gratitude list, so things that I’m grateful for. And sometimes there are really small things that end up on the list, like buying new stationery, for example. Sometimes there are the bigger things, like friends and family, and just loving my job. There are so many things to be grateful for and find small pleasures in, so I think that inspires me a lot, and it always keeps me going.

GS [00:41:44]: That’s nice. That sounds like something we both agree on, not like strict, but like a regular practice of reminding yourself of these things that do really matter; things you don’t really need to share with everybody; things you don’t need to be doing all the time, but just remembering that you enjoy them can be really powerful.

NB [00:42:04]: Sometimes, taking a minute to just stop and think about what it is that makes you happy is really important. I feel like we have, especially in this day and age, we have a culture of just moving at a million miles-per-hour for everything, because there’s always a deadline, there’s always something to do, you’ve always got a target for something. But it’s just nice to, sometimes, stop and be still for a minute, and think about the things that bring you so much joy.

GS [00:42:32]: Definitely.

NB [00:42:34]: On the topic of inspiration, again, what has been your biggest inspiration to date, do you think?

GS [00:42:40]: I think books. I’d say books. You know, whenever I’m stuck, or want escape, or need an answer for something, I do find solace and great happiness in reading. I’ve got comfort reading that I really like. I’m a big fan of inter-war women writers, writing about what connects them and what’s complex about female friendships and relationships. I read Rosamond Lehmann and Elizabeth Bowen, a lot of Jean Rhys I like as well, so finding great writers that I will turn to, and books about thinking and wandering in cities. I like Teju Cole’s *Open City*, I read that quite frequently, and Rebecca Solnit’s *Wanderlust*, and Patrick Hamilton’s *20,000 Streets Under the Sky*—lots of moving around the city and what it means to be a person walking the pavement, slipping between doorways and being in urban spaces, [and] how that affects us as human being. I find that really inspiring.

So, book’s, I’d say. Reading, as well as walking, mornings, friendship, chocolate (big fan of chocolate). That keeps me going.

NB [00:44:12]: To round of this incredible session, if you had just one piece of advice to give to writers right now, what would it be?

GS [00:44:20]: Can offer two quotes, actually? That’s what I would do. The first is from Dolly Parton, who [is] a great contributor to so many things, [and] says, “If you don’t like the road you’re walking, start paving another one.” That’s what Dolly says. And Rita Dove, a poet I really love. She says, “Without imagination, we can go nowhere.” I think both of those things feel important and resonate with me at this moment, because we’re in restricted, frustrated, unknown times, and as writers we can try and write about what we’re living through, as well as lift ourselves into imaginative space, to try and imagine what the future looks like, who we want to be as writers, and making plans in that direction. So yeah, the combination of Dolly Parton and Rita Dove is what I’m going to say.

NB [00:45:31]: Gemma, thank you so much for joining us. There were so many piles of wisdom scattered throughout this podcast, and I have no doubt people will feel inspired when they have a listen. I’m really grateful for your time, thank you for joining us today.

GS [00:45:45]: Thank you so much for having me. I love our shared joy when it comes to stationery and the natural world around us. That’s just great.

NB [00:45:53]: It’s been absolutely brilliant, Gemma, thank you so much. Take care.

GS [00:45:56]: Thank you.