

Conjuring Up Courage #89

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Kelly Cutchin

Shohreh Davoodi: You are listening to episode #89 of Conjuring Up Courage. If you don't already know Kelly Cutchin, I can't wait to introduce you to her. Kelly is a writer and teacher, and the host of the Casual Magic writing community. In this episode, we chat about who gets to call themselves a writer, when it's appropriate to write from the wound versus the scar, the role of feedback in writing, the dreaded grammar police, and so much more. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/89. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/89.

As a reminder, the show has officially changed names and will no longer be known as the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. With this name change comes an expansion of scope that will allow me to speak with even more amazing people doing impactful work in the world. While things may look and sound a little different around here, this is the same show, and I'm bringing the same style that you have come to know and love through over 80 episodes thus far. So, let's get to it.

[Music plays]

This is Conjuring Up Courage, and I'm your host, Shohreh Davoodi. As a self-trust coach, I help people come home to themselves so they can be more of who they are and less haunted by who they think they're supposed to be. I created this podcast to celebrate what's possible when you commit to being brave. You'll hear from diverse guests who are refusing to let fear and self-doubt stop them from building fulfilling

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lives and creating a better world for everyone. I'll also teach you my favorite tools, strategies, and mindset shifts so you can do the same. Consider this your invitation to stop living according to "shoulds" and to step into your motherfucking magic instead. Stay open, get curious, and let's grow together.

Shohreh: Kelly! I'm so excited to have you on the podcast today. You don't even know. Welcome!

Kelly Cutchin: Thank you so much! If you could see my face, I am just, the biggest smile of all the smiles.

Shohreh: This is a podcast match made in heaven. So excited to talk to you today. But first! Tell me—what is your story? I want to know everything about you.

Kelly: Oh, Mylanta. I'll give you a more condensed version as I tend to be a person who tells *the* story, as opposed to a story, singular. [Shohreh laughs] I am from a tiny town in rural, middle Tennessee. It's called Gladeville if you ever need to look it up for any reason? [laughter] I promise it exists. I'm not making it up. I grew up there, and I knew what I wanted to be when I was little when I was six. I decided when I was six years old, "I am going to be an English professor. That is what I am doing. The end."

And I used to write poems sitting on a sled. Now, again, middle Tennessee; we don't get snow really. I'm sitting on a sled in between my house and my neighbor's house, on this tiny little patch of yard, writing poems on a spiral notebook. And I had, like, a fly swatter so I

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could attempt to kill, like, any pests that were coming by. And like, writing was my favorite thing, that, it made the most sense to me.

And so I decided that I'm going to be an English professor because it seems to me that when you really love something, you want to teach it to other people. That's what you do. And when you're passionate about the thing you love, you want other people to have it. So, I decided that's what I'm gonna do. So I went to college, I went to grad school. I started teaching in grad school, and I did not stop for a very long time. I taught at high schools, I taught middle school. Community College is where I've spent most of my career because I love that it's open admissions. We want to teach whoever wants to come in the door.

And that's also very important to me in my new business. Whoever wants to come, whoever wants what I have, hooray! Let's go. I love a low barrier of entry. I love for whoever wants to be invited, to be invited. Whoever wants to come in, to come in. I don't want to continue perpetuating the idea that writing is only available to talented people who are white, and male, and cisgender. And I don't want to keep doing that.

So, I started teaching. I kept teaching for a really long time. I'm still teaching a little, but I'm also transitioning out of it because I find it to be an incredibly dehumanizing experience to be a faculty member most of the time, especially during a pandemic. And I am starting my own business.

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Shohreh: Yeah, you are!

Kelly: I did! I started a writing workshop. I call it a workshop, but it's really a community of people. And workshop historically have been this world where like, people bring in a piece and everybody picks it apart. And it becomes this like, critique-driven, ego-driven thing. And that's not this at all. It's a space where people come. I have prompts prepared. We all write together. We share if we wanna share. You don't have to share. People are poets. People are not considering themselves writers at all, and they still come in and write.

And so, I feel like that's my work now, is letting people know that writing is a tool that is available to you. Creativity is available to you. Art is available to you. And probably all of the ways that formal education and public education has failed you and hurt you, I want to undo a lot of that damage. I want to undo a lot of the disbelief in what you're capable of creating. And what you're worthy of creating. So now, that's what I'm doing!

Shohreh: I love this. I love that you saw this need in so many different places. And that moves you to create a space where that is something that's possible. Also, let me just say that I'm trying to remember if I even knew what a professor was when I was six years old, [Kelly laughs] so I love that you just were like, "I'm gonna be an English professor." [Laughter]

Kelly: It very much tracks with me as a person who, if I find out a thing exists, I'm like, "Okay, well now I must know everything about it." If I find out a

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thing is possible, that this is what, if you love a thing, you want everybody to have it, so you teach it. "Oh, okay, well, that's a thing? I'm now going to find out everything about it." Like, the origins of teaching at six years old.

Shohreh: I love that this was your six-year-old mindset, especially because so many people have this very negative mindset of, "Those who can't do, teach." Right?

Kelly: [Audible gasp] Yes.

Shohreh: Which I completely disagree with because it's bullshit. But the fact that you were able to kinda conjure up in yourself like, "No, if you love something, you're gonna teach it!" Like, that's awesome.

Kelly: Yeah. Ugh. I have a whole lot of feelings about that obviously. Of course, the first thought is, "bullshit." Yes. And I can't blame people. It feels as if many people have been affected in a lot of terrible ways by bad-faith teachers and bad-faith actors in education. There are so many. And so I can't blame people for the experiences they've had that led them to this conclusion.

I think in any industry, in any field, there are people who, I don't know why they're there. I don't know why you would get into teaching if that wasn't something you were passionate about. But there are people who don't enjoy their jobs, who don't enjoy who they do it for. And that's just the opposite of me.

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There's so much scholarship. There are so many fields of study about how people learn and how to best teach them, that, ugh, on one end of the spectrum, one side of my brain is, yes, I totally understand why people feel that way. I'm sure that they've had some really negative experiences, as have we all. And also, on the other side of my brain, I'm like, but you don't know! I know so many things about, ooh, psychology and neurobiology. And, here! Let me tell you.

And like, I'm trying to present them with this, and [they're like], "I don't care? That doesn't undo my really terrible English teacher who made me feel like an idiot for the rest of my life." Because that's what happens, you know, [you're] 10 or 12 years old and someone tells you that you're not good at something and you tend to believe that for the rest of your life.

Shohreh: Yeah, and in the same vein, you have the opposite side of that where those really good, impactful teachers stay with students forever. For the rest of their lives you remember those people. Because the reality, and what this dichotomy really shows, is that being a teacher is a powerful position.

Kelly: Mmhm.

Shohreh: You have the ability to literally shape people's lives and how they see themselves.

Kelly: Yes.

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Shohreh: And so that power in the wrong hands, or in less capable hands, or, to be fair, in hands that are underfunded and not-respected, can cause damage, and you can see where people could come to this. But I have had so many wonderful experiences with teachers. I do a lot of teaching as a coach—it's a huge part of my job—that I have so much respect for anybody who dedicates themselves in service to teaching others because it's not an easy thing to do. And I agree with you. I think when you really love something, when it's important to you, if you can also teach that, what a gift that is to other people.

Kelly: It really is. I'm seeing this happening with a lot of people. I hope we start aiming higher in our critiques. That it's not teachers on an individual level or teachers as a profession. Because teachers are like the public face of education, as opposed to the members of your school board or who designs your curriculum, which is also voted on by the school board. I hope that we start to bring that level of energy and interest in teachers to the people who overwork and underpay our teachers. Let's really level up our critiques and aim higher. If we do in fact respect our teachers, and we do in fact love our children the way that we say we do, we've gotta show up for the people who make teachers' lives difficult. And we've gotta find ways to, in so many ways, get them out.

Shohreh: I agree. We've gotta take aim at these systems because they are far-reaching and they are dangerous.

Kelly: Indeed.

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Shohreh: So, I'm excited to talk about writing.

Kelly: Ooh yeah.

Shohreh: Alright. So, I think that writing is, like, one of the most incredible tools that we have as humans. Similar to you, I started writing when I was very young. I am the writer in my family. Like, if someone needs something edited or looked at it, it comes to me. Everyone else got a whole lot of math and science smarts that I did not give a fuck about. [Laughs] But I was the writer, I was the English person. And that has continued on.

It actually makes me laugh that I have a podcast, because writing is my much more natural place that I like to be, but we can do both. [Laughs] We can have a variety of interests. So we're here now. We're using vocals as well.

But I've always had this incredibly strong connection to writing and the ways that it's not only helped me process things, but the ways that I've been able to put it out in the world and the effect that it can have on other people in helping them process things. But there are a lot of people who feel like writing is not for them. And to be clear, nobody has to like writing. There are so many awesome tools that people can use. But I've had a lot of clients say things like, "I'm just not a journaling person. I'm just not a writer." And I'm curious how you feel about that.

Kelly: Oooh, so many good things in there. The first thing I would wonder, is [I would] ask, "Okay, well, who is a writer in your mind? Who is a person who journals? What does that person look like physically?"

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Because I think we all have a lot of very clear reference points for who a writer is, and it looks like Hemingway, and Mark Twain, and these people who are capital W writers.

Shohreh: White men in nature. Yes, a very clear viewpoint.

Kelly: Yes! Yes, you have to escape into nature because life has gotten too complicated. Okay.

Shohreh: What privilege you have to be able to escape your life and go into nature.

Kelly: It must be so hard for you, Walt. Whitman didn't do that. I have a whole thing about Whitman. It's fine. But I would say to that person, I would wanna know first and foremost from them what a writer looks like in their minds, who they were taught a writer is, what they were taught a writer writes. Because I think a lot of people put, and I deal with this as well, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves when we talk about writing. I'm gonna sit down and what? Write the great next American novel? Like, is that what I'm? No. And not having that as a goal is completely fine. Nobody is telling you that you have to sit down and write something that has never been written before.

I would wonder if they could check their expectations around who is a writer, what a writer writes, and what is so different about them as a person that that isn't available to them as a means of expression?

I mean, I deal with this all the time. It's part of why Casual Magic is called "casual." I cannot make a thing a thing. I have to have a thing be

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integrated into my day in this very sneaky way. Where it's almost like I don't think about it and I can sneak up on it. Because if I confront it head on like, "Okay, Kelly, for the next hour, we're gonna to write the best sentences that have ever been written." Oh, okay, no. No. That will not happen. [Shohreh laughs] I will immediately start crying, and then I will eat 14 peanut butter sandwiches, and maybe just lay on the floor. But if I say to myself, "Hey, Kelly. We should just go hang out with our friends and just see what happens."

And that's what happens at Causal Magic. [Laughs] We hang out. We write if we want to. We share if we want to. You don't if you don't. Every single time, people come away with such stunning pieces because there's no expectation that you have to do something amazing.

Shohreh: And for those who don't know, Casual Magic is your free writing workshop community gathering that you host multiple times a week where people can just show up, and write, and chill.

Kelly: Yes. I keep saying it like it's some established fact in the world, like it's Walmart. [laughs]

Shohreh: Well, it is to me! But!

Kelly: Right. It is to me, as well. [laughs] People who come are poets or are looking to journal, "This is how I feel today." And there's something about seeing it on paper that also makes it so official. When people like write down in that physical journal. For me, I do most of my writing either on my phone or on my computer.

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There's something so important about writing, about assigning words to how you feel and feeling like those words reflect you, and you did that. Nobody else could write for you. That's also another big point of pressure. Nobody else can do it. Oh, no, that's so scary. And I'm sure that a lot of people have probably had difficult educational experiences where, like, reading out loud was a thing. By the way, I still don't know why those things happen. You messed up a word, so that mean you're stupid. There are these really intimate scars that people have around that. But yeah, I would pay attention to who you think a writer is, what you think a writer writes, what you think is worthy of writing. And why aren't you worthy of writing about? Like, why is that something that's not tenable for you?

Shohreh:

I agree with that completely, because I do think people come in to writing with these expectations. And with no fault of their own. I mean, we as a society, like you said, have these ideas of who gets to write, what even is writing. And I've also found that in so many areas of life, people get caught in this idea of, "I shouldn't do the thing unless it's gonna be 'good'." And maybe they've been told they're not a good writer. Or they just don't see themselves that way. And so they're like, "Well, why would I put time into doing this thing, if it's not gonna be good or if I'm not going to publish it?" Where it's just like it has to meet these certain parameters to be worth it.

And I think with writing especially, it's like, you could literally write stuff down and throw it into the fire afterward, and that still would have been, in my opinion, a great use of your time, and there's so many

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things that you still could have gotten out of that experience. And we get so obsessed with this, like, idea of the finished product instead of the actual act of doing it.

Kelly:

Yes. Oh, I love that you said that 'cause it's so true. In my experience of people coming to writing and using writing, the way that you move in the world after having written is fundamentally different than how you sat down to write. You begin acting differently. It's like your spine gets straighter. It's like you start to feel more self-possessed. [laughs] I feel super strongly about self-possession. Hot take! You know? [Laughter]

But I have seen the process in itself be worthwhile more times than the product. And you're totally correct. The product oftentimes, I don't want to say doesn't matter, but isn't the point. Or if it's part of the point, it becomes less of it, or it starts sharing some of the credit with the process. It's also why I love being in process on a lot of things. I have been someone who has loved having written and sharing it, and also feeling really trapped by that.

So, say I go, and I write by myself, and I'm just suffering in silence, whatever that looks like for me. I turn up having written something wonderful. I publish it, but I have not shared any of the behind-the-scenes stuff about what I looked like, how long it took, any of that stuff. Any of the stats behind it. I show up, I publish it, people love it. Everybody's just fawning all over it. For a lot of people that means, oh, I necessarily have to hide away and write something pretty, and I don't get to come back out until it's perfect. I don't get to share until it's perfect.

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And that's absolutely incorrect. It's the most incorrect of incorrect things. And I think we're all doing ourselves such a disservice by hiding away and feeling like we can't share and we can't be in the world until we're done. Whatever done is.

Shohreh: Yeah, I love how you've started sharing rough drafts of pieces as well, because I think that is really uncommon. We're so used to only seeing once the thing is polished. Professional authors who put out books, you rarely see anything that went into that book. They don't tell you about, like, "Oh, well, here's what this chapter used to look like," and "I went through all of this effort." I mean, some of them do talk about it a little more honestly, but it's not the norm. And it does give this idea of like, we need finished work. Which, finished work, honestly, for someone like me, who is a writer, I find a completely laughable concept. Nothing is ever fucking finished.

Kelly: No!

Shohreh: [Laughs] Like, I feel like I could rewrite something 100 times over and I still would not think that it was finished. And I don't know anyone else who doesn't feel that way. Like, it's always changing and growing and like you would wanna say something different. Like, if you get so hopped up on this idea that it has to be finished, you just won't write.

Kelly: No, you certainly won't. And people I think forget about revision. Revision literally means "re-see". So, whatever rough draft I have, which, agreed, everything I have is a rough draft, like, technically speaking. Because if my writing, if I think my writing is a tool for me, to

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check on myself, to explore things about who I am, who I'm becoming, what I'm doing. If I feel that way, then everything I write will essentially be a rough draft, as I am constantly over time changing, making different choices, making new choices.

And also, as time goes on, I'm able to re-see other moments of my life with a little bit more clarity. Like, if there's a particular wound I'm writing about. If there's something that's just really traumatic and awful, with a little more time, I'm probably able to write about it with a little more clarity. And does that necessarily make the first time I wrote about it wrong or incomplete? No! All of your work is in this beautiful anthology of you.

Oh, wow, that sounds like a Jewel album. [Laughter] I just named the lost Jewel album.

Everything can be rough, and all of your stuff is for you anyway, hopefully. Hopefully everybody gets the chance to write for themselves first, and you can come back to anything any time. Re-see it over time. And that's also super cool. I keep multiple drafts of everything I write.

Shohreh:

I wanna talk about wounds because you just mentioned them, and you had some great recent posts addressing the common phrase, "Write from the scar, not the wound." Which is such an interesting thing to think about, especially in the age of social media. So, maybe first just explain what that phrase is typically considered to mean, and then some your analysis of that.

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Kelly:

The way that it's been offered to me in the past is, "Hey, whatever wound that you're feeling and experiencing, writing from it, it may not make sense to someone else. It may be a particularly messy piece of writing. People may not like it. It may make people uncomfortable. It just may not be good. So maybe wait until your wound has healed into a scar, and then you can talk about it. Because then you'll be able to offer it up to people as a lesson."

And I don't think it's terrible advice necessarily. I do think that people who don't have adequate access to certain kinds of resources shouldn't be writing from wounds. Like, if, there are times I have tried to write from a wound and it has the potential to re-traumatize me. Some people do use writing as a tool to explore trauma and cope with trauma. If I didn't have access to medication, a therapist, a supportive friend group, a supportive family, what have you, any of those resources, I would be re-traumatized and I might actually do more damage. So yeah, writing from that wound is not a great idea for someone who's writing about trauma that is particularly fresh.

And I do also think it's well-intentioned to say, "Hey, if you're writing about this and sharing it, and if you're at all thinking about an audience, maybe that's not a good time. Because if you're worried about how people are gonna react, you might then start to censor yourself. You might not tell the truth of the story or tell the whole story, and then you may be dissatisfied with what you wrote and kind of not feel fulfilled." So it's like, what was the point?

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How I feel that it has been offered to me by the people it has been offered to me by, what it sounded like was, "Hey, messy lady. Keep your shit in check. Nobody wants to see it." Or they've also been afraid of how they might come across in the thing that I'm writing because they might necessarily be part of the subject of what I'm writing about. Who are you to tell me? [Shohreh laughs] Because, oh, it's gonna make you look bad? Okay, so what you're concerned about is how you look. Got it.

Depending on their intentions and your relationship with them, it comes across really shitty. Don't show up here until you've got something pretty, and until you've got something that you can produce that will teach us all a lesson. And your job as a writer is to teach people lessons and give people knowledge so that they don't have to experience it on their own and they can kind of like bypass whatever mess you went through.

Well, that's not the point of me! And I don't think that people want that from me either. I don't think people like come to look at my writing and they're like, "Oh, perfect. So, she's felt these feelings in this way, so now I don't have to." I don't think that's how any of this works.

Shohreh: And I think that this idea that wounds always can even become pretty little scars is bullshit.

Kelly: Yeah, sometimes they just are, and that's the nature of being a human.

Shohreh: I tend to agree that there have certainly been times where I have written when I was still too in something. And whenever I've done that,

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I know it. It's not like you are oblivious to this fact once it happens. It's like, it goes out, and you're kinda like, "Ugh, I don't feel as great about that as I thought I would. I think I might have been writing that for the wrong reasons." So, it's clear.

But more often, especially as I've been able to tell that in advance so it doesn't necessarily go out, is that when it's messy, it's often more helpful for people than something that is wrapped in a bow. I think.

And I'm saying this as someone who literally yesterday, like, dumped a post about my divorce publicly for the first time on Instagram. And it's a fucking messy post. And I waited six months to post anything about my divorce because I wasn't in a place to talk about it yet. I was still so deeply in it that I was like, "I'm figuring this out. I don't know what to say." But I didn't wait until, like, I'm perfectly healed and my life is like, on the happiness track and everything is wonderful before talking about it because that felt dishonest to me. So, I needed to speak about it from the trenches, and say, "This is what it's like right now. Here are my feelings."

And Instagram is a little bitch [laughs] and took down the original post, [which] I'm not going to go into right now, for unnecessary reasons. I've reposted it. So, I will put a link to the new version in the show notes.

But I've gotten so many comments and DMs from people who are like, "I wish I could have read things like this when I was going through my divorce. It would have made me feel less alone and like, less shameful about how I was feeling."

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And that's the problem with advice like, "Write from the scar and not the wound" is that shit is happening in the wound!

Kelly: Mhm.

Shohreh: And people deserve to know that they're not alone, and it's ok and it's normal to have these feelings. And sometimes if you don't see anybody else going through that and being honest about it, you just feel extra lonely and like you must be the only person.

Kelly: Absolutely! And, I mean, we can completely take the audience out of this. Don't I deserve to see how I'm feeling? If I don't even share it? I think a lot of us, me included, we get caught up in thinking of writing as always for an audience. It's not. I would say like 70 to 80% of my writing doesn't see an audience right now. Because it's for me, and I need to have my time with it before I offer it to anybody else.

And there's something else about the dynamic that you have to, or that you necessarily engage in and mediate between you, your writing, and your audience, when you decide to publish it, or when you decide to put it somewhere where people can see it. It depends on what you're trying to do. So if I want to share something because I am feeling it and it would feel dishonest not to, which is so important to me and I was so grateful that you talked about how you would feel inauthentic not to communicate this. When you're a person who walks through the world as an authentic individual and helps other people do the same, it would feel hypocritical to not talk about it. So when you want to talk

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about it because it feels like you need to, to what degree do you owe the audience anything in terms of how you present it?

I do think it's worth thinking about why you're sharing and what you're sharing, and hopefully you're not like, "I can't wait for this post to go viral." Like, I hate when I see that. "I can't wait for this to go viral." You can want people to want to read your thing, but I do wonder about that need to see your words seen and consumed by so many people. That all kinda freaks me out a little bit, but it's important to think about why isn't writing for myself also the most important thing?

Shohreh:

And for the record, there are pages and pages and pages and *pages* of journal entries from the last six months [laughs] about my experiences going through my divorce and about my emotional processing and all these things. Things that will never see the light of day, that no one will ever read but me, that I needed, that really helped me through this experience and to get my thoughts out on paper. Compared to this one, singular post [laughs] that now exists on Instagram.

And so, I think there's room and necessity for both, and that yeah, the vast majority of people who do a lot of writing, most of it never goes public. That's one tiny piece of the overall writing experience. And it's a complicated piece because like you said, there's all these extra considerations of, yeah, we don't wanna be writing for virality. We don't wanna be writing because the goal is like, well, we just wanna get all the likes and the comments and stuff like that. When that happens, when a piece of your writing resonates, it's of course a really nice

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experience, but it can change your writing when you write for that reason.

And then there's also, like, all the insecurities and all the mental checks when you're pressing publish on a piece of writing of like, have I thought of this from all the inclusive angles that I can, what will be the perception, am I missing something because of my own privilege that goes into it, that I don't have to have all of those extra barriers when I'm writing for myself. There's more ease when I'm writing for myself, frankly.

Which is not to say that those things are a bad thing for public writing, I think they're necessary. I think, too often, people go unchecked in writing very offensive or discriminatory things, and that's not something that I want to contribute to, so those checks are necessary. But sometimes you just like, wanna just fuckin' stream of consciousness write whatever the hell you're thinking without having to worry about that, and I can't do that in an Instagram post.

Kelly:

Right.

Shohreh:

So, considering this idea of, again, we wanna be careful when we are writing, especially with things that are going to go public, I would love to talk to you about the role of critique and feedback in writing. Especially, you were talking about Casual Magic and how people don't have to share if they don't want to, people don't have to get feedback if they don't want to, but critique and feedback can be really helpful in our writing. So how do you view that?

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Kelly:

Oh, I love this. Back when I was first in grad school, we were introduced to this scholar, I shit you not, his name is Peter Elbow. I can't remember the full title, it's one of those academic titles, but in essence it's called, "The Believing Game." And this is something that I adopted then and I still adopt now. When I approach anybody's writing, regardless of what it is, my first job is to believe what they're saying. As in, try to understand the human being that has produced these words and that is in relationship to these words and the people they're presenting them to.

So my job first is to try to get on your level and level with you with regard to what you're trying to do and really understand. Because if I don't understand what you're trying to do, I can't actually give feedback. And by feedback, I mean good-faith, constructive pieces of advice and even conversation. So much of my feedback and critique is conversations. It's not inserting comments into Google Docs like, "You need this here." or, "You need this there." I mean, that's grammatical stuff that is, I can get into a whole thing about grammar being so incredibly hateful, and problematic, and racist, but we'll get there later maybe.

But feedback for me is a conversation. "What were you trying to do? How did you feel?" That's the first question I ask after anybody shares. If I don't immediately chime in after someone shares, someone will say, "So, how do you feel?" Because it's important for us to acknowledge that you just gave us something that you didn't have to give, and we want to know how you, the person, feels after sharing it, having

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produced it, having said it out loud. Because that feeling is just, to me, unparalleled. Once you've said a thing out loud, it's amazing and also terrifying.

And so I want to understand, what were you trying to do? How did you want us to receive it? How did you want to communicate it? And then, how can I help you say it in a way that feels closer to the thing you have in your mind? Because sometimes you don't have a thing in mind when you sit down to write. You're just, "I'm brain dumping. I am free writing. The end." Oftentimes, somebody's got something in their mind that they're trying to make this thing into. So, okay, how can we get this thing... Can you explain the thing that you have in your mind and the goals for that thing? Okay, well, let's figure out how we can move you closer to that. Maybe you need more explanation here of this thing because I see that you touch on it.

And this is the other thing that is so telling. Writing is so telling. Soooo telling. You can tell, in writing, when someone is not wanting to talk about something in detail. And part of my job is to kind of witness and minister to that, whatever it is. There are times when I gloss over stuff in my writing. It's because I'm not ready to talk about it. I'm okay to mention it, it's okay to mention, but that's not a place I'm going right now. And my job is to see that and say, "Hey, I see that you kind of touched on this. Maybe this is what's missing and this is the thing that will get you closer to the thing you have in your mind. And also, maybe you're not ready for that yet. And if you're not ready, then you're not ready."

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Mary Karr says that all the time in the Art of Memoir. "If you're not ready, you're not ready." You know, nobody can make you write the things. They can't. And so, critique for me and feedback for me is really understanding the person, understanding how they feel about what they did. 'Cause how I feel about it doesn't matter. I mean, truly it's secondary or tertiary to how the person feels about what they did and how they did it. And it's really my job to see what they're trying to do and get them closer to that thing in their mind.

And also, maybe what they just did is more spectacular than the thing they have in their mind. It maybe is perfect as it is. And perfect is a weird word, but maybe it does what it needs to do without it being some grand thesis. Maybe like, four sentences that just broke your heart is better than 300 pages of whatever. You know what I mean?

Shohreh: I love your process with this because I think it allows for generosity with the person who is writing that is often not given, especially in terms of feedback. So often with feedback, you know, we just wanna go straight to, here's what's wrong with this. [laughs] Here's how we can make the thing better, without first stopping to try to understand the person and saying, "Well, what were you going for? What were you trying to get across here?"

And if we allow people that reading of, I want to give this the benefit of the doubt from where you're coming from first, it also allows for much better feedback because we are making sure we're coming at this from the angle that this person wants to. Otherwise it's so easy to misread another person. Because of course, when we read a piece of writing,

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we're coming at it with our shit, our baggage, our beliefs, and we don't know where they're coming from. And so you have to find a way to bridge that gap in order to give feedback that's even helpful for somebody.

Kelly:

Right. I want to enjoy everything I read. That's my goal. I want to be excited and enjoy what I read. I mean, I always ask, "How do you feel?" because a person wrote these words. The person in front of me wrote this. What a cool gift they just gave me that they didn't have to give. I would be doing me and the whole world such a disservice if I didn't first say, "How do you feel?" And also, "Thank you." Because people don't have to share their writing. The fact that we do sometimes to me is a small miracle, and I want to continue to highlight how much of a gift it is and how much of a treasure to me it is when someone says, "I wrote this, can you read it?"

I mean, ugh, I get full body chills when someone says, "Can you read it?" because they're asking me to see something and bear witness to something that was likely really hard for them to do, and is likely not an easy thing to look at, even if it's about, like, a super-fun subject, like rainbows and unicorns. [Shohreh laughs] Our writing is so personal. It is an extension of our being in the world through language. So, yeah, I think we need to be a lot more generous, and kind, and grateful, and express that gratitude in being kind to people when they do decide to share things with us.

Shohreh:

And I do want to pull grammar into this conversation because I think that grammar is one of the most common ways that we shut down

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other people's writing, and we say that, "I refuse to even look at this or witness this because you didn't write it in the way that I think is 'proper'."

Kelly:

Mmhm. I mean, grammar, ugh! Ooh! I usually don't tell people that I have been a professor. I say, "I'm a writing teacher." So when I say writing... At first, when I said anything it was, "I'm an English teacher," and the number one comment is, "Oh, I better watch my grammar around you." And I'm like, I don't know what that means. Like, I can't hear a comma. [Shohreh laughs] And oh no that you think that that's my goal in speaking to you is to police you?

Policing, by the way, is essentially what grammar is. It gets to say who is and isn't worthy of being heard, and seen, and written, and read. It's a gatekeeper. I know that it's completely false and total bullshit. And it keeps so many people away from sharing their writing, sharing their stories, sharing experiences that are necessary to the world.

Shohreh:

And this goes back to this idea again of people who are intent on misunderstanding the writing that they're getting. Because the reality is, like, most of the time, regardless of where the commas are, regardless of the spelling, the essence of that writing is still there, and you're still able to understand what that person is trying to express. And so this idea that it is somehow less than if it has the wrong grammar is ridiculous.

And I'm also saying this as someone who used to have major perfectionist tendencies and was like one of those grammar sticklers.

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And I feel terrible about that now. It's absolutely not something I would ever do now, but I grew up thinking that like, that was okay. And that everyone should aspire to have better grammar. And that if you didn't, you just didn't care. And that was so wrong. It was a complete wrong and privileged thinking to even get to that point. And I'm so glad that I have been able to see that that is not true at all.

But I still see this with a lot of people. I mean, I see it on places like fucking Twitter. Who cares what a person's grammar is on Twitter? And then you have people just denounce an entire thread of critical information because they're like, "Ope, you used the wrong 'there'."

Kelly:

Yeah. I wanna be fair to some people, because I've been teaching for so long that I know so many students and so many people who have come through my classrooms or come through any tutoring or mentoring sessions that I've done, who understand that grammar is bullshit, and they also know that they need it. And it would be irresponsible of me to be like, "No, but you don't."

Well, yeah, when someone comes to me and they have a resume or they have a cover letter and they want me to check it for any spelling errors, sure! Absolutely. Because your goal is to get this job and to do whatever else is next for you.

It would be really irresponsible of me, and quite frankly would be a real asshole move, if I were to be like, "No, let me liberate you from the idea that grammar is..." No! Not at all. And I've had so many students over the years who understand it, and will nod to it with me, and will

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say, "Yes, this is stupid. And also, I want to know more about it." Cool, if that's what you want, that's what I can do for you. And I can help you in as much as I can.

And, I say, I'm from Tennessee. There's no reason for you to suspect that from hearing my voice. That is on purpose. I had a very thick accent [laughs] for a very long time. My mother has a very thick accent. My mother, her whole side of the family. My dad used to have one. When he started, he worked for Kroger. Which I don't know if y'all have Kroger.

Shohreh: We do.

Kelly: Okay, so he worked for Kroger for his whole professional career. Started back in like the meatpacking/meat-cutting department and ended up being a logistics manager for I can't tell you how long. When he started working, people made fun of his accent and just assumed he was stupid. And he learned very quickly to get rid of that accent and present himself in a certain way and that would give you a certain kind of respect and a certain kind of attention. So, that's what he did.

And I learned that from him growing up. And I gave my mom such hell growin' up because I loved English and language, and there are rules and you had to follow those rules, and that's what was right. Well, she didn't speak that way. And so, I was trying to get her to ascribe to written Standard English, which by the way, no one speaks, so that people would take her more seriously.

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And, oh, every class I teach reads Amy Tan, *Mother Tongue*. Author Amy Tan, incredible. People treated her mother so disrespectfully. Told Amy Tan, "Well, because you're Asian, we don't think you're gonna be a writer. You're just, you're math and science. Good luck." Her mother knew and understood so many things, but executing a language that's an acquired language is so much more difficult. Your language performance can't really tell people a whole lot about how smart you are.

Anyway, all of this is to say, I used to have an accent. I don't anymore, until I'm really, really tired, because when I went to college, no one had accents and I felt like an idiot. [laughs] And people let me know about it.

Shohreh:

So, similarly, I grew up in Texas, and I went to college in Wisconsin. And I didn't have a particularly thick Southern accent. I grew up in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area in the suburbs. And my mom is from Wisconsin, so she has a Wisconsin accent, and my dad is from Iran, so he never got a Texas accent. So, what I had was just sort of, a little bit of a lilt from that area.

But when I went to college, I remember people, like friends, asking me to repeat things because they thought it was so funny how I said them. And so, it took no time at all for me to eliminate all traces of a southern accent from my voice, just like you, because I didn't want to be made fun of for the way that I spoke.

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So I have had that experience as well. I think it's extremely common for a southern dialect. And I want to go back to what you said, too, about the writing. Where we have to navigate the world that we have, while also understanding that this is not the ideal and not holding it against people where we can.

Because you're absolutely right. There are certain instances where it's really important. I'll give you a great personal example. I have a transcriptionist for the podcast, and then I also go back and edit the transcriptions, because it's really important to me that the transcriptions express what was actually said in the podcast. Because there are people who are deaf or hard of hearing for instance, who don't have access to the audio, I want them to be able to get a true picture of what was said in the podcast. And then there are just people who aren't gonna listen and they'd rather read, and I want them to be able to get a true picture. So, in those cases, if the commas, and the grammar, and everything is a mess, it's going to make it harder for them to understand what has happened here on the show.

So, there's always gonna be places where grammar is important and where there are certain things that will help us express ourselves better because of the world that we live in. And then I think there are so many places where it doesn't matter at all, but people want it to matter. And I'm like, please stop!

Kelly:

Yeah, in those instances, like you said, on Twitter, it's particularly lazy and hateful. And I use the word "hateful" purposefully. To me, it is hateful to dismiss and degrade someone, not even just their argument,

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but the person, too, because a person wrote those words, based on the fact that they used the wrong “there.” No, that’s lazy. That’s hateful. And again, I’m gonna continue to emphasize that, like, a person wrote those words. It’s a person. [Laughs] We are people.

Shohreh: Yes, and neither you nor I are the right person to talk about the racism aspects of this, but I just wanna note that they do exist. They are there. When we’re talking about language and how we look at people, there is a ton of white supremacy and colonialism that runs through that as well, and I would be remiss not to mention it.

Kelly: Yes.

Shohreh: So, for anybody listening who is like, alright, maybe I’ve been a little bit afraid to explore writing before, but I’m feeling a little bit intrigued about it, where might you suggest that they start?

Kelly: Ooh, so a lot of people will tell you to start reading. I would start with writing. My home office is the right side of my couch. I don’t have, like, a room or, no. It’s my couch. It’s my couch, me, and my phone. Sometimes it’s my laptop.

Shohreh: And your dog.

Kelly: Yeah, and awww, my dog.

Shohreh: I know!

Kelly: He, ugh, he’s something else.

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So, I would start with writing. I would start with sitting wherever you're sitting, opening up your Notes app, and writing in your Notes app. Ooh, also there are a lot of people who prefer doing voice memos. I am someone who when I think of an idea, I will either write it or voice memo it to myself, because sometimes your voice can capture the moment a little bit better. So, if you're just going about your day and you think of something fun or something that you'd like to write about, if you use your voice, your memory will likely be able to pick it back up a little more quickly. But I would just start writing stuff in Notes.

Don't make it a big deal. You can start with things like, the first prompt, the prompt that stays with every Casual Magic session is number one, "How are you feeling?" How are you, comma, really? Meaning, how are you actually doing? And you can start with saying things like, "I have been feeling..." or, "Lately, I have felt like..." And that phrasing is important to me so that people don't continue to conflate, like, their whole selves with how they're feeling. Like, "I am angry." [versus] I have been angry. It doesn't mean I'm going to be angry forever. Maybe I am. I don't know.

But I would start with something that's so low stakes, simple, easy, accessible, built into things that you already use like your Notes app, voice memos. I also don't use a fancy journal. I use a yellow legal pad. Because there's no fancy cover. I don't use fancy pens. I mean, I use, like, pens from hotels that I've stayed in in the past. Like, remember traveling? How fun.

Shohreh:

Mmm.

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Kelly: But I have, like, just a random Bic pen from 2009. Who cares? It's very low barrier of entry, flip open a page, there it is. You don't have to do a lot of thinking. And it becomes a thing that I kind of sneak up on writing every day. Somehow, I haven't caught it, whatever it is, but I sneak up on it in this way that doesn't make the thing a thing.

Don't go buy an expensive journal. Don't buy fancy pens. Don't buy, like, fancy candles, and blankets, and sweaters, like you're Diane Keaton in any movie ever. [Shohreh laughs] You don't need it. You really don't. Like, the pens aren't the thing. You are the thing. The pens aren't the magic. The journal's not the magic. The candles aren't the magic. *You* are the magic.

So, as soon as you start to realize that and really show up for it in ways that are consistent and really easy. Like, I cannot stress to you how easy I have to make it on myself. I know that there are people who like, "I wake up at 4, and I write in my closet for two hours before my kids wake up." Like, whatever works for you. If that's what works for you, hooray! And I'm glad that you found that. I don't think it has to be that serious. I really don't.

Shohreh: I think the running thing here that's really important for people to realize is that you can absolutely make this your own in whatever way feels good for you. I think a theme that we've had throughout this episode is that these parameters and these ideas that you have about writing and being a writer, they don't exist.

Kelly: No!

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Shohreh: They're fake. You can do whatever you want.

For example, I'm someone who my teal notebook makes me very happy, as do my purple pens. They make me excited to write 'cause I'm like, "Fuck yeah! Purple pen!" Also, I'm an Evernote Pro subscriber. I have an advanced network of notes in Evernote on my phone that are organized to a T, because then when I'm writing down my little notes and my things here and there, they have a place and it makes my brain happy.

So, like, lean into whatever you know to be true about yourself. If you want candles and you wanna look like Diane Keaton, go for it. If the only way you're gonna write is if you let all of that go, and you just have a notepad and a pen out, or you have your phone ready, or you wanna talk into your phone, all of that is fine, too. Just think about what already works for you in other areas and just see how you can apply that to writing to encourage you to write a little more, if that's something you wanna do.

Kelly: Yeah, the ideas don't exist. It doesn't have to be about the things. It can really be about your words and showing up for that. And also, 1000%! Have the Evernote Pro! Do the things, like you're saying, that are indicative and representative of who you are and how you best show up for yourself, whatever that means.

And those things obviously change. I was not always like this. I used to go before work and write in my little office that I had in my home with the candles and the things, and it was beautiful and wonderful. I don't

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do that anymore, in part because my physical space has changed, and also, I've made it enough of an event that I don't need to do the production anymore.

And also, if you love the production, hooray! You're like throwing yourself a parade or a party every day. That's what it's like to throw yourself a little party. Congratulations!

Shohreh: And it can change.

Kelly: Yes!

Shohreh: You might write one way at one point in your life in a certain environment, and then at another point in your life in a different environment you might write in a different way. Like, be flexible. It doesn't have to be the same all the time.

Kelly: Yes, I've written in my car. I mean, literally anywhere. It's totally fine. And also, it's completely available to you in whatever way you want.

Shohreh: Also, I don't know about everybody else, but like, I have an exact image of Diane Keaton in my mind, and I'm like, trying to think of what movie it's from, 'cause it's very specific. She's in this, like, white cream-colored sweater. She's got glasses. And I'm like, "God, she really does look like that in every movie."

Kelly: I want to say it's Something's Gotta Give with Jack Nicholson and Amanda Peet, and they're at the beach.

Shohreh: Oh, that could be it, yeah.

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Kelly: Yeah, where she's an actual writer there. She's a playwright, and she writes this play about... yeah, and she, like, collects seashells every day or like a rock every day. [laughter] Everything is white. Why is everything white? Do you not eat condiments? Where is the ketchup and the guac in your life, Diane? Are you okay?

Shohreh: And I'm sure she drank wine in the movie, and it's like, are we really combining your red wine with the white sweater? I don't know. I couldn't do it. I can barely wear white as it is. It's a mess.

Kelly: No, if I wear white, I'm also covered in a white bag because I am a mess.

Shohreh: [Laughs] Thank you so much for being here, Kelly. This was fucking delightful.

Kelly: [Laughs] I'm so glad.

Shohreh: How can people find you, and should my listeners want to support you, what is the best way they can do that right now?

Kelly: I am only on Instagram @kelly.m.cutchin. Kelly period M period Cutchin. My website is in progress. How exciting! And yeah, you can come to Casual Magic. It's every Saturday at 10am, Mountain Time, and every Monday, 5pm, Mountain Time. And I'm gonna add another one, probably on a Thursday.

But yeah, Instagram is the best way to find me. And I love DMs from whoever, whatever, wherever. That is something I always respond to.

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So if you want anything, need any advice or some assistance, hit me up!

Shohreh: Perfect. I will put all that in the show notes. I will also update it once your website is done, so that that will be in the show notes as well in the future when you have that website.

And yeah, y'all! Right now, Casual Magic, it's completely free! Free.99! You can just go, and be around people, and have some great music happening, and just write and have fun. And I know that in the future, you're gonna be offering some paid opportunities as well, which is great! But right now, you can just try it for free, which is perfect.

Kelly: Yeah, it's super important to me that people get a feel for how I work and what it would be like to work for me. Or work for me? To work with me. So that, if you ever are interested in doing one-on-one coaching or small-group coaching, that you already know what it's gonna be like.

Shohreh: Amazing. Well, I'll put all those details in the show notes. Thank you again for making time for this. This was such a great conversation, and I'm so excited to see everything that's coming down the pipeline for you.

Kelly: Me, too! Thank you so much.

[Music plays]

Shohreh: And that's our show for today! If you're enjoying Conjuring Up Courage, don't forget to subscribe through your podcast provider of choice so you never miss an episode. Additionally, if you haven't left a

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