

Your other job

Nick Makoha

I have been a writer for most of my adult life. When people ask, *What is your other job?* there is no other job for me. I knew from the start of my writing journey that I would either go all the way or not at all. For better or worse, I have stuck at it. Nothing good is achieved by staying in your comfort zone. If I'd have given myself a back door, I would have used it and spent the rest of my life blaming the world for the life I did not have.

I did not start out as a writer. My mother recently told me that I wanted to be an architect when I was eight years old, so that I could build her a house. But as is typical of the African way, I ended up studying the sciences for my A levels and went on to study Biochemistry at university. My father was a doctor, you see. So, if I followed the normal trajectory in life, I should have been a biochemist. But I did not want to come home smelling of formaldehyde.

After university I worked in customer service, before working at a bank. It was there that I came to a crossroads. I had a Groundhog Day vision of my life – me serving customers offering and accepting money, watching their lives as mine passed me by. I could have shrugged off this subliminal fear as an afternoon daydream and continued down the predictable route of

banking, or I could roll the dice. I chose the latter. A week later, when I finally mustered the courage to pursue my dream, I decided to burn my banking suits. I stayed up all night to watch them burn to a crisp. Why, you ask? I needed a burning bush, a moment in my life when I would no longer cleave to the past but rather be willing to do all I could in the present to contribute to the world around me.

The day after I burnt my suits, I still had bills to pay, rent due, student loans and a whole heap of responsibilities. The only immediate solution was to take a part-time job. My thinking was I could use my free days to write, perform, learn and network. My colleagues at my part-time job loved me. The writer in me, hated me.

I thought, let me start work as a workshop leader. I have to thank Apples & Snakes, Spread the Word, and Creative Partnerships for training me and taking me on in those early years. I had just become a dad. For the sake of my family and, I now realise, my own growth, I had to let go of my selfishness and bad habits. Ask me how many times I filed a tax return late in those early years. But even this proved burdensome. I was burning the candle at both ends. It was taking a toll on my family life, my mental health and my writing. I found myself asking – am I a workshop leader who writes poetry, or a poet who does workshops? The truth was I was a writer hiding in the comfort of workshops. On that realisation I withdrew from public view and started to work on my craft – of being a husband and a dad.

Being a husband and a dad are a daily challenge. I am not sure who said it, but if you think you are doing it right, you are doing it wrong. Being a father triggers all your survival instincts. You start to worry about things like your

mortality, your financial worth. These worries can often distract you from your purpose of being the most stable element in volatile and changing situations. The most important feature in any room is the floor. This is because it is what supports and holds things together. When I am being the floor for my wife and kids that's what holds me together as a writer.

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Nick Makoha is the founder of The Obsidian Foundation. In 2017, Nick's debut collection, *Kingdom of Gravity*, was shortlisted for the Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection and was one of the *Guardian's* best books of the year. Nick is a Cave Canem Graduate Fellow and an alumnus of Spread the Word's 'Complete Works' programme. He won the 2015 Brunel International African Poetry Prize and the 2016 Toi Derricotte & Cornelius Eady Prize for his pamphlet *Resurrection Man*. His poems have appeared in the *Cambridge Review*, the *New York Times*, *Poetry Review*, *Rialto*, *Poetry London*, *TriQuarterly Review*, *Boston Review*, *Callaloo* and *Wasafiri*. He is a Trustee for the Arvon Foundation and the Ministry of Stories, and a member of the Malika's Poetry Kitchen collective. nickmakoha.com

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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