



## The Best Advice I Received as a Writer

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**T**HE BEST ADVICE is unspoken. Unwritten. Unasked for — all the *uns*. It is by example. The best advice I received as a writer was in the form of all the artists who came along for retreat sessions to the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Ireland and the Blue Mountain Center, New York, in 2003.

I was twenty-six and getting increasingly frustrated with the day job which was, as I saw it, getting in the way of me writing my magnum opus. I'd gone from five days a week to four to three so the direction I was headed in was clear (ie out the door). However, I was nervous about taking the final plunge. I decided to apply for the Tyrone Guthrie Centre which I'd heard about from countless poets. My plan was to see if I could stomach writing and my own company for a month. If so, I would hand in my notice immediately on my return.

It took me a plane and three buses to get to Tyrone Guthrie but I felt at home as soon as I arrived thanks to a wonderful sign at the gate: 'Workplace for Artists'. Once inside, I was met by a collection of artists around a generous table — Mags who worked with stained glass, Ardal O'Hanlon of Father Dougal fame, the poets Mark Roper and Ciaran O'Driscoll, Caroline from America who told me later that she too was a nervous ninny about reading her work aloud to people but you've just got to do it.

So there was actual advice but the real, unspoken advice was that they



were all there. All doing it. Managing with or without a day job. It struck me when I came down for breakfast the following morning that there was nothing to stop me from joining them at their metaphorical table.

The second-best piece of advice I received was at the Blue Mountain Center in New York's Adirondack Mountains in a very beautiful Fall later that year (I was in danger of becoming a 'retreat bum' — you can spot them by the Acknowledgments at the front of their books). Allan was sat in the kitchen putting off and putting off his writing. I came down for snacks and coffee and kept catching him unmoved. 'I suppose,' he said to me laconically after a couple of hours, 'a bit of work wouldn't be a bad thing.' I realised then that I didn't have to pretend to love every day at my desk, as I had been doing and feeling serious imposter syndrome. It was okay if I couldn't be bothered. If I felt like I'd rather do *anything* else.

So, in summary, be a writer. Throw your hat in the ring. Expect it to be a slog at times. Find role models. All advice I try to live by. And, I suppose, as I left my job that same year and never looked back, throw away your life-jacket. Take a risk.