

Author Talks: Poet Maggie Smith on loss, creativity, and change

In her latest book, Maggie Smith writes about new beginnings as opportunities for transformation.



Photo by Patri Hadad

In this edition of *Author Talks*, McKinsey Global Publishing's Raju Narisetti chats with Maggie Smith about her latest book, *Keep Moving* (Simon & Schuster, 2020). In her collection of poems and essays, the bestselling author celebrates the beauty and strength on the other side of loss. An edited version of the conversation follows.

How can leaders be authoritative while maintaining a beginner's sense of openness and curiosity?

It's funny. I think being a parent, in some ways, has prepared me for this duality. Because I would argue it's a balance and that it's important, even as an authority—whether it's with your children, or in your workplace, or both. It's important to maintain beginner's mind and openness as much as possible, even as you rely on your experience and your authority.

I think we've all probably been in workplaces where someone has said, "But that's the way we've always done it," as an excuse not to make a change, when a change was probably necessary or would be helpful. And it makes sense. Because change is uncomfortable, right? We often resist it, because it's uncomfortable. And, frankly, uncertainty, not having all the answers, is uncomfortable. It feels so much better to be confident when you know everything. But we don't. And in a professional setting, it's important to value expertise and experience. But it's also important to value

adaptability and flexibility and innovation and imagination and all of those things that make us able to—change our minds, maybe, and take in and process new information without relying on the way we've always done it.

Think like a kid

How can people be more creative in their daily lives?

In the arts and in our professional lives and in our personal lives, newness, innovation only happens through experimentation and play. You can't get to it without trying something and maybe falling flat on your face. You have to be willing to fail. And so I think part of what we need to do, as adults, is learn to be more like children in that we're willing to try things and not worry so much about our ego, not worry about failing, and thinking that that's going to reflect poorly upon us.

In order to have or make any breakthrough—personal or professional—we have to put ourselves out on a limb. And it won't always work, and that's OK. One of the ways that I've kept myself from getting too stodgy about things is by trying to spend time with young people and glean as much as I can from their open and curious worldview. But I also think there are other ways to access that. And part of it is finding things that bring us joy and making room to do those things in our daily lives,

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whether it's reading, or meditation, or running, or dancing. Whatever the thing is that makes you feel alive, I think we need to carve out space for that. Because it will help us get to that mindset.

What problem are you trying to solve with this book?

I think the problem I was trying to solve was a problem of my own, so not a problem for the reader, so to speak, but a problem in my own life. As I began the project, I was writing notes to self every day, these sort of self-pep talks, and posting them.

And the problem I was facing was really a problem of perspective, which is, what do I do now? How do I keep moving forward in my life? How do I face the future with courage and positivity, even though things seem really dark and difficult right now?

It was the end of my marriage. I was trying to regroup. And so I was writing for myself. The strange thing that happened was that, then, people responded. And my hope is that, now that the book is out, I've been seeing people say that they are buying it for their friends. And they're buying it for their staff or their neighbors. My hope is that it might find someone who had the problem I had when I wrote it, which is to say, they don't know what's coming next for them. And maybe they're feeling fearful or insecure or worried. Maybe the book will provide some reassurance or comfort or a little shot of hope when they need it. And frankly, I think we all need that right now.

What surprised you most about writing this book?

I think the level of response to the book has been really surprising to me, because it started out

as a project that was literal self-help. I wrote the book to help myself. So, to have so many people responding to it has been really surprising. Also, I did not know, when I was writing this book, that it would be released during a global pandemic. And what I've been hearing from people, again and again, is how the book feels just right for this moment, which I could not have anticipated.

But indeed, I think we are all facing our own "what-now" life crises right now, whether it's work-related or family-related or health-related, due, in large part, to the pandemic. And so the book coming out this year, honestly, feels like just the right time and not something I could have or would have planned for.

The pandemic time warp

What is the most interesting thing you've learned from somebody else's book recently?

I am rereading a book called *The Order of Time*, by Carlo Rovelli. I wanted to return to this book, because it's about time. And this year, because of the pandemic, I think we have, at least I have, a feeling that time's gotten distorted, because of all of this time that we have alone. And so I went back to this book.

In a certain section, he's talking about heat, which he calls, "the microscopic agitation of molecules." I love that, as a phrase. And he writes, "Every time a difference is manifested between the past and the future, heat is involved," which blows my mind. "Thoughts, for instance, unfold from the past to the future, not vice versa. And in fact, thinking produces heat in our heads." I love that.

Speaking of the concept of time, what does the future mean to you?

I wrote a poem that appears in my last book, *Good Bones*, about how the future is empty. It was inspired by a question that my daughter, Violet, asked me in the car when she was three years old. And her question was, what is the future? The poem is called "Future."

Everything that hasn't happened yet.

The future is tomorrow and next year and when you're old but also in a minute or two, when I'm through answering.

The future is nothing I imagined as a child, no jetpacks, no conveyor-belt sidewalks, no bell-jarred cities at the bottom of the sea.

The trick of the future is that it's empty, a cup before you pour the water.

The future is a waiting cup. And for all it knows, you'll fill it with milk instead.

You're thirsty.

Every minute carries you forward, conveys you into a space you fill. I mean, the future will be full of you.

It's one step beyond the step you're taking now, what you'll say next, until you say it.

Maggie Smith is a poet and freelance writer based in Ohio. **Raju Narisetti** is the publisher of McKinsey Global Publishing, based in the New York office.

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