Kevin Smokler
speaks to California Writers Club (Berkeley Branch), September 2015:

I’m in the homestretch of finishing my next book. The last one which I have with me came out in 2013 and though it feels like long ago, I also remember this stage of the process all too well, the so much to do, so little time but so near the end but not quite stage. I am sure many have you have been here and recognize this vital yet frightening moment of the writing process and its seeming contradictions.

It requires tenacity even though the amount of work feels insurmountable.

It requires both focus on the end goal and also each of the steps to get there.

It requires hope, an idea of the end of the tunnel while the tunnel still feels very long.

The last and most important requirement contains no paradox at all.

This final stage and all stages of the writing process require courage.

I’ve chosen this as our topic this afternoon not just because I could use a little of it right now…

But because in addition to my own work I have spent the better part of the last 15 years speaking to, coaching and teaching other writers.

And what I’ve seen is that all successful writers have in common not talent, or brains, or connections or luck.

It is courage. So that’s what we’ll talk about this afternoon

Now when I say courage as it applies to writers what to do I mean?

1 Defining Courage.

What it is not...

Courage is not just the cowardly lion version of courage the summoning of
bravery in the face of fear. I’d call that “guts”

It is not just the willingness to keep going in the face of obstacles. I’d call that “persistence.”

It isn’t just having an iron will despite challenges to your beliefs and values. I’d call that “conviction.”

Courage for writers is more complex emotion, some portion of all of these and a few more.

It is more prism than light source, refracting as situation and circumstances turn it. But the prism itself is a single shape. None of its sides work without the others.

My own sense of this Prism of Courage for Writers is that it has five sides. We’ll talk about each of those and then leave time for your own questions and stories of crucial points when you’ve felt the need for courage in the writing process.

I think you’ll see that it happens to all of us, more often than we think.

1 Courage to Think Big.

Set goals. dream big. None of this is worth it if you don’t dream big. And by dream big I don’t mean size, I mean personal need.

I don’t need to tell you that the only writers who succeed on any terms at this are those who do this because they must, they would do it if not one bit of conventional “success” came their way.

The dream big is why you need to do this, I need to tell this story, find out what happens to this character, see this project to its end, etc.

If the why is “to be famous”, to “make money” to “get published” to “get my work out there” stop. That can’t be the first “why.” It is not a big enough dream.

It is a paucity of courage to devote the kind of effort and time writing takes to a small dream.
To both want and NEED to write is the courage to dream big.

Along with the courage to dream big.

II. Courage to Think Small

Our big dreams must also be attainable goals. And by attainable, I mean breakable into steps that can be learned. Otherwise, it’s a fantasy, it’s chasing unicorns.

Any fool can chase unicorns.

It requires courage to have realistic, attainable goals and actually work for them.

Realism. Set goals you can achieve.

III. Courage to be abundant. (continue on despite criticism).

There will always be criticisms, bad reviews, negative feedbacks, seeming opportunities that turn out to be dead ends.

Those will always hurt a little. Because initially they are like getting punched.

Courage we must have around rejection is not pretending that it didn’t hurt, is not saying “well I’ll show them” it’s knowing we have other options, that opportunity is abundant.

It is fear-based to think that there is only one opportunity, the one we are currently seeking. It might be the one we want but it isn’t the only one. It’s never the only one.

Acting as though it is, spares us having to find an alternative and it allows us the denial of saying “well we tried.”

It alleviates responsibility and effort.

It is an approach of limitations not abundance, not of courage but of fear.
And it will not give you the results you want.

My last book went out to 13 publishers, I had given up. Yes, I spent some time angry, disappointed, but once I got over myself, I started thinking, could I self-publish, could I turn this into essays, what would my next project be? How soon can I get started?

Could I be better at writing period? Ok, how would I learn that?

Acting like something is the final verdict, and you should go slink off without actually seeking out abundance is denying reality. There is nothing less courageous than not living in reality.

Also, the lack and fear of abundance hinders your ability to be generous towards others. You're too up in your own head feeling penalized and deprived to help anyone else. Being unable to help anyone else means they won't be willing to help you. And nobody succeeds in the writing business without help from others.

IV. Courage to be open. (conviction, but not stubbornness)

I mentioned conviction earlier, which is a subcategory of courage. The courage to stick to one’s principles. I believe in this. I believe you are never going to write successfully if you don’t need and want to write what is in your heart.

The first part of this is conviction is to be clear and true to what you are writing. If you can’t say it and say it proudly, you can’t write it with any conviction or heart. If you are afraid to speak well of your own work, it will convey that you don’t really believe in it.

If you don’t, no one else will.

Second part of conviction: If your goal is to have it read, inevitably someone is going to ask you to change something.

You have to decide how that works for you. I will say this though. Courage is not the same as obstinance. Conviction is not the same as stubbornness.

Them asking is not always wrong, you saying “no” does not make you a hero.

What are they asking? How significant are the changes? Are they disfiguring or are they just “not how you imagined it”
Does saying yes here, give you leverage to say “no” on down the road? “

How difficult will saying “no” make this project for you in the future?

These are all-important considerations and must be taken seriously.

I usually pair this one with the courage to be abundant. I’m not going to win every battle. I don’t have the energy to fight every one either.

If I lose this one, there will be more. Because I’ve always got 2-3 other projects I could be working on. That’s trying at least to think abundantly.

V. Courage to Learn

Are we always trying to get better? Are we reading, studying, learning, not just about our topics and our projects but about the writing environment itself.

I can always tell those who are trying to get better. Because they listen more than they talk.

Learning is not about whether we need it. Value neutral. Everyone does. Everyone needs to get better. No one is immune from learning no matter what kind of success or levels you have reached.

When I mentioned I was speaking here, I heard about the motto of the California Writers Club:

Sail On!

Joaquin Miller’s poem, *Columbus*, reads:

BEHIND him lay the gray Azores,
Behind the Gates of Hercules;
Before him not the ghost of shores,
Before him only shoreless seas.
The good mate said: "Now we must pray,
For lo! the very stars are gone.
Brave Admiral, speak, what shall I say?"
"Why, say, 'Sail on! sail on! and on!' "

Sounds like the classic definition of courage. I also like to think about what is not there. It does not say “sail on, then burn the boats when we arrive”

It does not say “Sail On and screw you good mate for saying otherwise”

It does not say “Sail On because we have no other choice”

Miller’s “Sail On” has power because it encompasses the different refractions of courage…

To dream big but ask thoughtfully, to be firm but not pigheaded, to learn from our mistakes.

It is no easy task to sail on, to write with courage, not least of which is all that courage can mean.

Do you have the courage to take in all the light of what courage can mean?