Series 6 Episode 5

Hello and welcome to episode five of the sixth series of *In Ten Years Time*, I am so grateful you are here. I'm Tricia Duffy, and I'm here with an aim to inspire you to live a creative life, to find a balance of creativity that works for you, and to encourage you to make your creative dreams a reality.

Before we get going today, I wanted to quickly drop in and tell you about how you, by listening to this podcast, are supporting a radical act of creativity. But this is a small podcast without big advertisers, and I've been funding this myself so that I can bring my ideas to other people and inspire them to live a creative life.

I'm close to the end of what I can afford though, so I'm running a campaign to cover the costs of the next series. And if you can help with a one-off or monthly donation towards the running of this podcast and all the free resources and the newsletter that comes with [00:01:00] it, please go to www.intenyearstime.com/donate. Thank you.

In this series, we are thinking about the science of creativity, about what is happening in our brains and our bodies when we engage in our art or craft. About how we might be able to use our creativity to improve our health and wellbeing, and how creativity can heal. We've explored how having a craft or artistic practice can support us as we age and talked about how social narratives and myths influence the way we think about our brains. We've tried to sort the facts from the fiction. Researching this series has been enlightening and challenging, and I hope it opens your mind and your heart to embrace the creative person you are and always have been.

Today I want to talk a bit about the ways that we create and think creatively and why and how that might be different for everyone. I want to get into the topic of [00:02:00] neurodiversity and neurodivergence because they are different things and explore regardless of whether we are neurotypical or divergent how we all have unique preferences in the

way we create, solve problems or go about our daily lives. I believe that by thinking about this together, we might be able to enhance and optimise our own creativity, which is of course good for our cognitive health, but as an added benefit, it may make us more understanding about our own and other people's preferences and what drives us to do the things we do.

I've mentioned before that our brains are not only completely unique, but arguably becoming more unique every time we learn a new skill, because the brain changes and adapts based on the things we experience and repeat. So, let's start by talking about neurodiversity. I need to talk definitions here because in the academic world, ‘neurodiversity’ would be a term that can be applied to everyone.

That's [00:03:00] because along with our own personal preferences and personalities, we are all also neurologically diverse because we have differences in the way we think, learn and behave. We have natural variations that are just that: variations, not deficits.

We must acknowledge though that the phrase ‘neurodiversity’ is used colloquially to refer to those who are in academic or medical speak ‘neurodivergent’. That is, over and above all our individual brain differences those people who have specific conditions that may or may not be officially diagnosed. I'm talking about conditions here such as ADHD, some types of OCD, dyslexia or autism, and there are many, many more, that can and do very hugely in how they present themselves in every individual case.

Of course, to have neurodivergence, we must inherently, at least academically, accept there are a swathe of people who are neurotypical. You [00:04:00] may be wondering if I am neurotypical or neurodivergent. I've never had a formal diagnosis, but when I first started to research this episode, I planned to tell you something soft that acknowledged that I am aware I do display a few characteristics that align with an ADHD diagnosis.

However, plot twist! When I was fact checking this episode, I took advice from two people. One was a neurodiversity consultant, and the other was one of my best friends in the world who also happens to have both an ADHD and autism diagnosis.

Chatting with my friend over a glass of wine, I mentioned to her that I was planning to share this about myself, and she practically spat out her wine saying, “oh, thank goodness. I've always thought you were ADHD since we met. It's such a relief to hear you say that.” Wow. That was quite a reaction. When I asked her what made her think that she cited quite a few examples. She notices, for example, that I have an incredible capacity for productivity, which is true, and I have been known to describe myself as [00:05:00] a ‘high-capacity’ person. She also observes that when something doesn't interest me, I find it absolutely impossible to concentrate or even pretend to concentrate on it. I have ants in my pants and it feels almost as if this thing, usually a meeting that's gone on too long, is quite literally killing me. Now that sounds very dramatic, but until recently I just thought it was boring everyone. Simple as that!

A couple of days later, I went into university and chatted with friends in my cohort, one of which had a late ADHD diagnosis. Likewise, he said, “I thought you were fellow ADHD-er from the day I met you.” So perhaps the way I see myself is not exactly as others see me. I have much to ponder for sure.

But regardless, as I sit here right now in my little home studio, I'm okay not knowing for sure. Although as I state this out loud, I would be remiss not to acknowledge a couple of key factors. First, that there was huge stigma attached to any [00:06:00] form of neurodivergence when I was growing up. And attitudes towards many of the conditions we are aware of has changed significantly in recent years. Second, medical research has historically been conducted from a male, neurotypical, point of view, and we know from numerous studies that women and girls are better at masking such conditions.

It could be that my reluctance to find out is informed by these societal norms.

So, to recap, when we think about this purely from an academic point of view, there are three ways to consider individuals on a neurological scale. As I stated, the scientific research community tell us that we are in fact all neurodiverse because our brains, our neurology is entirely unique, as unique as your fingerprint.

But that aside, researchers tend to consider that people can be categorised either as neurotypical, as diagnosed neurodivergent and those, like me, who have considered for themselves that they may be neurodivergent [00:07:00] without a diagnosis.

The ways in which those who are neurodivergent are able to navigate the neurotypical world will also vary hugely depending on the extent of their individual differences and requirements. There are significant barriers and stigmas attached to these terms and conditions. So, as you are listening to this, I invite you to be open, to be kind, and accepting of yourself and others.

So let's talk about creativity and neurodiversity. Some people who are neurodivergent will face extra obstacles and challenges in working or creating and need extra support to do so. Others might talk about the fact that creativity allows them to navigate a world which has for so long failed to understand them. But I think it's worthwhile for all of us, no matter where we sit in those three categories. I set out to think about the conditions or circumstances which better allow us to create, given the unique way our brains work.

Perhaps [00:08:00] it's deeply uncomfortable for you to do your best work where there are certain conditions in your environment such as light, noise, distractions, and so forth. The point is this, there will be things that you can control, at least to some degree, that make it easier for you to create and leaning into this maybe just what you need right now to take your next artistic step forward.

Of course, there is a tension here between staying in our comfort zone and pushing ourselves out of it. Can you find a way to balance this? Can you both soothe your preferences and any specific neurological requirements while simultaneously finding new - potentially slightly uncomfortable - ways to challenge yourself? This might lead to your best work yet.

Recently, I was asked to complete the 'creative types' test from Adobe. It was in the context of team-working for my PhD research, which I started last semester. Now I should say that I'm loving being part of a PhD cohort and the training part of my study [00:09:00] has been thoughtful and challenging.

This was the first time something got my hackles up a little bit. The professor introduced the test as a bit of fun and did acknowledge the downsides of tests like this. This test asks binary questions like, would you describe yourself as optimistic or resilient? And I find it instantly challenging because I truly believe that I'm both those things and they are not mutually exclusive.

It took all my adulting not to stamp my toddler feet and cry out: "I don't want to choose." But despite my reservations, I have included a link in the show notes of this test if you would like to do it, certainly as a form of self-reflection these tests can be useful and fun, but I find them limiting and they don't always resonate with me.

To understand more about preferences, let's talk about another more prevalent personality test to see what that might tell us. Have you ever been asked to do an MBTI test, perhaps for work? MBTI stands for [00:10:00] the Myers Briggs Type Indicator. It was created by mother and daughter team, Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers.

Interestingly, it was specifically created to help women find work based on their personalities or as the pair described them, 'their gifts' after WWII. It was an idea of fitting the person to the job rather than fitting the job to the person, and their intentions were really good.

Isabel was interested in building the conditions for people to be able to categorise themselves without ever labelling them as good or bad, abnormal or normal. So they created a questionnaire that allowed everyone to identify as different and with a different combination of strengths, weaknesses, communication styles and ways of accessing information or thinking about the world. And all this sounds very worthy, but we are all so individual and capable of change that putting ourselves in boxes feels very uncomfortable to me.

I've [00:11:00] included a couple of interesting articles on this topic in the show notes, one from Melissa Block about the motivations behind the creation of the personality test. And another from Quinisha Jackson Wright for the *New York Times,* which makes the point that these tests which are intended to promote diversity can inadvertently stop workplaces from being inclusive.

I should declare now that I have changed my mind quite radically about the use of these tools in the last 15 years or so. When I was working at the BBC, I had a large team of people and while we were a happy and productive team in the main, we sometimes ran into communication issues. I would get frustrated by some members of the team who would routinely leave tasks to the last minute while they would get equally frustrated by my apparent need to 'worry' about everything way in advance. I felt misunderstood because I wasn't worried. I just wanted to think about the project, the deadline, the preparation in advance. They [00:12:00] also felt misunderstood. They had plenty of time to create whatever we needed for the deadline. So why oh, why did I insist on thinking about it so early?

So we hired a facilitator for a team building day, and she suggested using MBTI as a way to understand our team preferences, which at the time I thought was a really nice way of putting it. I have to admit, at this stage, I'd never heard of Myers-Briggs, and it all seemed to be very credible, widely used by large organisations all over the world and equally interesting. So I agreed.

We were required to fill in a questionnaire before the session, and that asked things like, do you get energised by being around others or spending time alone? Do you focus on facts and details, or do you just focus on the big picture and how things could be? Do you focus on fairness and justice, or harmony and forgiveness?

Do you like to make plans or are you more spontaneous? The questions are all designed to determine the following [00:13:00] preferences. Extroversion versus introversion. In other words, where do you get your energy? Sensing versus intuition, which is all about how you like to take in information. Thinking versus feeling, which explores how we like to make decisions. And finally, judging versus perceiving, which is how we approach the outside world.

It is the combination of these four categories that allows us to further categorise ourselves into one of 16 personality types. When I did the test back then, I came out as an ESTJ. This is an extrovert sensing, thinking, judging type. I was borderline on the E and the I. But I find being considered an extrovert quite challenging because I really do need a lot of solitary time. And there's another complication with this, which the article from the *New York Times* I've already mentioned deals with quite brilliantly, and that is this.

The extroverts ruled the workplace at the time, and I think [00:14:00] they still do to some extent. The Es were the decision makers, and I believe that there was a perception that extroverts made better leaders. So while I felt a bit uncomfortable with the label on the one hand because it didn't accurately describe who I was, I was also complicit in my acceptance of it because I was acutely aware that as a woman in a senior role at an organisation like the BBC, I was probably going to find life a bit easier if my peers and my bosses thought I was an extrovert. It's absolutely extraordinary to say this out loud to you, but thems were, and maybe still are the times.

So let's talk more about some of those little boxes I was put in. At the time my job was Head of Transformation, which in short was a thankless

task that required me to save a billion pounds for the organisation. The S means I have an appetite for the details and the T in ESTJ indicates I'm a thinker rather than a feeler. Now, given my job involved [00:15:00] making very difficult decisions, the only way I could possibly do that was by taking the emotion out of it and focusing on detailed evidence. But does that mean it's my preference? I don't think so. As a songwriter, I believe being emotionally connected is one of my great strengths.

The last letter, the J or the P, judging or perceiving is one I can get behind. The J type personalities are the planners. The Ps are more spontaneous. I score very high J, and to be fair, that's something that has helped me. Because when I'm going on holiday, I like to get my suitcase out in advance and put my jeans in that I'm going to take now so that I don't have to wash them again.

My husband, on the other hand, will pack his bag about an hour before we are leaving. We both get the exact same result. We both turn up at our destination with all of the items we require for our holiday, but it's clear that we have vastly different preferences about how we approach this. This particular category has helped me no end in both understanding his perspective on packing [00:16:00] and planning in general, and to articulate mine.

When I pack in advance I'm not worrying about our holiday at all. I'm simply taking care of the packing process over a longer period of time as it occurs to me, to save time and avoid last minute washing. Likewise, when he leaves it to the last minute, he's not being reckless, he simply prefers to think about a task quickly and intensively and doesn't mind taking a pair of once-worn jeans on our trip: harmony is maintained with a little understanding.

A lot of details there about something I declare I don't believe in. Right? Well, I'm telling you all of this for a reason. Because as I have stated, we are all different. We are all biased. We jump to conclusions about people. We like to put people in boxes so that we can claim to understand them better, and we make judgements of others based on

the personality traits they display. MBTI practitioners will tell us that our preference never changes, but I dispute [00:17:00] this. I think our environment can amplify certain traits, as we've seen from my own tolerance for being cast, allegedly, as an extrovert type personality.

However, I do believe that sometimes these tests can throw up things that we can helpfully use to understand how we best create. If you find that you get more energy from being around others, whether or not you've discovered that through life experience or through a Myers-Briggs test, is it right to spend time alone creating your art, or would you be better served joining a dance class, art group, or working in a shared space?

If you create your best work with tight deadlines like my husband or the P-type personalities in my team at the BBC, can you find a way to create deadlines for yourself to give you that push? Or if you're a planner like me, how far in advance do you need to start thinking about things? I researched this episode of the podcast more than three months before its release. I need to get this [00:18:00] right and allow myself time to think through the points I want to make. Or maybe the opposite can be true. Perhaps if I pushed myself to turn things around in an extremely tight deadline, I might tap into some new part of my creativity well. Though of course it might stress me out and affect the people around me.

If you have an appetite for details or the bigger picture, think about how that informs your creative medium. Some things may be more appealing than others. Think about detailed portraits that have a very strong likeness to the subject and build over hours or days, or maybe something fast and impressionistic suits you. And when it comes to your way of making decisions, how can that inform the purpose behind your art? Does that lead you to create something that represents the views of the one or that changes things for the many? They are both legitimate ways into our art.

Do you remember the invitation I made earlier? To think about where [00:19:00] you do your best creative thinking, when you are most able to apply yourself to your creativity, how you get motivated, and to start to mentally identify the things that help.

Is that by forcing deadlines as we discussed earlier, or finding a space to work in solitude? Or if that's not available to you, finding the right set of noise cancelling headphones to give you some distance from the world. I asked you to think about the ways you might soothe your preferences and specific neurological requirements while simultaneously not staying static in a comfort zone that stops you from stretching your creative muscles. This is the balance that we need to address to do our best, most ambitious work. There's a beautiful article written by Autism Ambassador @Tistje on medium link in the show notes that really brings this tension to life.

As always, in this podcast, we [00:20:00] come back to the question of balance, when to push ourselves and make the leaps of faith and when to settle into our tried and tested environments to feel safe and held as we create. A massive advocate for the leap of faith, researching this episode has allowed me to understand the value of both. And perhaps that will mean I'll put a little less pressure on myself going forward. We shall see.

With that thought in mind, I think it's a great moment to stop and offer you a challenge, a question, and a recommendation. The challenge is this: I would love to invite you to consider what you know about yourself in the context of your creativity. Please journal on the times you have felt challenged to the point of joy, and when you have felt safe and relaxed to do your creative work. Think about how your relationships with these conditions changed as you became used to specific environments. And if you find stepping out from under the comfort blanket really terrifying, think about one [00:21:00] small thing you might be able to do to change without disrupting your ability to function or feel safe.

The question is this, do you recognise any of the things we've been talking about in yourself or someone else? Does thinking about this offer you any perspective or greater understanding of the different preferences those around you might have? What could your creativity do to help others or yourself?

And the recommendation is this, to listen to a beautiful album of songs written by Lauren Alex Hooper called *Too Much and Not Enough*. Lauren uses her music to highlight human experiences including autism and mental illness. Her song, *The Loneliest Whale*, is particularly haunting and based on the true story of the so-called loneliest whale who sang at 52 Hertz, a different frequency to all other whales.

They made a film about this phenomenon in 2021, although I actually believe that [00:22:00] scientists have since discovered at least one other whale who communicates at this frequency. Link to both in the show notes. I'm sure there have been times when all of us have felt misunderstood. The loneliest whale is a relatable story for us all.

Next time I will be interviewing Ben Miller: social designer, tutor, facilitator, and neurodiversity advocate to talk more about his experience of how creativity can impact our minds. Until then, please engage with the conversation on Instagram or Facebook. Sign up to my creativity newsletter on the website, and if you know someone who might benefit from everything we've been thinking about today, please just open your phone right now and text them a link to this episode. I suspect they will appreciate that as much as I will. Until next time, keep creating and learning, peace and love.