

Recap Series: Episode 6

[00:00:00] Hello, and welcome. I'm your host, Tricia Duffy, and this is the last episode of a special miniseries of the podcast *In Ten Minutes Time*. I'm diving into the back catalogue and giving you some bite-sized ideas on how to live a creative life.

My philosophy is all about how to find a balance of creativity that works for you. But what if ten years feels too far away? I'm revisiting ideas we've explored in the show and combining them with new research and a new idea of how you can be more creative right now.

For the last episode of this recap series, I want to return to the fertile void. I found myself [00:01:00] plunged into a version of the fertile void again in January and February this year, two months of doing very little, not really having a project on the go, but doing what I felt like.

This might be a familiar feeling to many of you, too. I suspect that it was partly stimulated by the weather, as in the UK, we had around 40 days of consecutive rain. A creative friend, Richard Cranefield, back to episode six of the first series to learn more about him, recommend I read the book *Wintering* by Katherine May, and the themes that she presented in this compelling prose really allowed me the opportunity to embrace a fertile void for around six weeks.

I took life slower, and you know what? Everything was okay when it ended, and I feel raring to go again. Let me jump in here to the original episode on the topic, a summer void, which had some very different qualities to this winter slowdown.

RECAP START

[00:02:00] Oscar Wilde said, to do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world, the most difficult and the most intellectual. Have you been there? You finish a piece of art or a creative project, a performance or an exhibition. You make a speech, you deliver the

commission, you release your podcast, you submit an article, you sell a collection of prints or jewellery, the research is submitted, the exams are complete. These moments of accomplishment are joyous. They're the things we look forward to, the milestones we agree or set ourselves to help with the creative momentum. But what happens when they're over? Sometimes we pour so much energy into those moments of conclusion that we can feel lost when they are done.

We feel exhausted and maybe a bit aimless. We ask ourselves, 'where has my purpose gone?' If you've ever celebrated a milestone birthday [00:03:00] with a big party, do you remember that next day feeling? Perhaps of joy and gratitude? But also a sense of loss. If you've ever married, the same thing applies. You plan, you complete many small tasks over months and months and the big day comes and it is, I hope, glorious. Everyone celebrates and then the next morning when the cards have been read, there's a big cavernous space. You look at the photographs, you enjoy the first few nights of restful sleep and the release of the pressure. And then what? A fertile void.

In creativity, I believe that this is something we need to get used to. It might not be as dramatic as a post wedding comedown, but if you think about your creativity as a cycle, there is inevitably a moment of pause between phases of your art or creativity.

Gestalt is a psychological theory originated in Germany in 1890 by Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Kohler, and Kurt Kofka. [00:04:00] The main premise is that Gestalt is made of many things which together have greater meaning. The theory isn't used so much as a psychological theory these days, but it has been adapted by some creative thinkers because it is a useful way of examining all the elements of creativity, including negative space or voids.

If you search Gestalt Cycle on the internet, you'll be presented with images that offer a circle divided into eight phases. The phases are sensation, recognition, mobilisation, action, contact, satisfaction, withdrawal, and fertile void. It's a continuous loop, so after the Fertile

Void, it carries on with sensation, recognition, and so on. It's a cycle, a loop. But I have to pick a place to start, and for me personally, it makes most sense to start with sensation.

This may be subconscious, but in all creative acts, [00:05:00] we have a sensation before we become cognisant of our idea. To use our wedding analogy again, perhaps this sensation comes when the couple in question start to unconsciously realise they would like to be life partners.

Before there's been a proposal, or even a conscious understanding, the idea is forming, but without the couple's awareness. In creativity, our subconscious is always working away at ideas. If you've ever woken up with a well-formed creative idea, you will know that this is possible. I'm talking about the moment *before* you know.

If you recognise you are thirsty, the next phase, this means that before you even know you are thirsty, your body will have been sending all sorts of signals to your brain, creating sensation. Dry mouth, perhaps a headache. We become aware we are thirsty. We realise we have met our life partners. We have a creative idea or intention forming in our conscious mind.

So that's the first two phases. [00:06:00] Sensation followed by recognition. With me so far? Now the third stage we mobilise, we prepare. For our brides or grooms, it might involve choosing a moment for a proposal. For our thirsty person, they make a step towards the glass and the tap.

In creativity, we prepare, we find time, we surround ourselves with our equipment, or we coalesce others to help us with our idea. We plan, we research, we think about the 'what ifs'. Next is action. The moment of proposal. The drinking of the water. Or in our case, the creative act, the making of marks on the paper, the strumming of the guitar, the tapping on the silver or the pinching of the pot.

So we have four stages so far, sensation recognition, mobilisation, and action. An action is the creative act, but we're not done there. As I mentioned, there are eight phases. Gestalt says that the next phase is contact. Now for our bride and groom, this might be the [00:07:00] connection with the partner. For our water drinker, it's the moment the brain receives the message that they are being quenched.

In creativity, this is potentially more complex, but for me, it could include the sharing of an idea, a work or a concept. Or it could simply be finishing a piece of art. That contact creates the next phase, which is satisfaction. Our bride or groom said yes! Our thirst is quenched and our headache is starting to subside.

Our art is complete or our idea is shared and we feel amazing. After the satisfaction comes withdrawal. That come down feeling I talked about earlier, the day after the big gig, the day after the proposal or the wedding, the end of the glass of water. and now finally we reached the eighth stage, the fertile void, the nothing. The in between.

Before we feel the sensation of thirst again. Before we embark on our next life changing goal. Before we start the next creative act.

[00:08:00] In Gestalt the cycle starts all over again: sensation, mobilisation, action, contact, satisfaction, withdrawal and back to the fertile void. And what would happen if we just skipped a stage? If we went back to mobilisation, we just finished the work and avoided the feelings of withdrawal by picking up the brushes, tools and instruments and starting again?

But for creatives, sometimes we take a long time to create something with a focus on a significant climax or delivery moment. And this sense of loss and nothingness can be hard to trust. Let me share with you an experience of my own to bring this to life. A few months ago I completed a Masters in Songwriting. My final research project was all consuming. I spent six months on my academic research and creating a collection of 12 songs to accompany it. In the final weeks, it took every second I had to get to the finish line. I worked diligently every

day in between my day job and my other responsibilities, and I loved it.

[00:09:00] Then the final day came. I had to present my research. Everything I'd done for months was leading up to that moment. And then suddenly it was over. For weeks I'd been getting up a little bit earlier to have a couple of precious early morning hours at my desk. I had declined or cancelled social engagements so that I could focus.

Then one Wednesday morning I woke up with absolutely nothing to do. I exaggerate because of course there's always stuff to do, but I'm sure you understand the sensation. I'd filled my time with one thing so thoroughly, it was like going from 100 to 0.

My first instinct was to immediately reach for my own template and revisit my ten-year plan, which could be seen as a form of mobilisation in Gestalt. I was missing my research so desperately and I thought I could write a new plan which articulated how I could extend the research into a book or creating some specific songwriting resources.

I started writing frenzied emails [00:10:00] to various people about next steps, usually at 1am. Fortunately, I didn't send them. Then something made me stop. I knew I'd changed dramatically as a person during the two years it took me to complete my master's, and even more so during the last few months of deep research.

It was so tempting to capture the perceived evolution of my priorities immediately, but instinctively I knew that if I did that too soon, I was in danger of prioritising the wrong things. I needed to give my mind, my subconscious self, time to compute, and as uncomfortable as it felt, lean into doing nothing, to 'noth' for a period, not forever, not even for months, but it was summer and I knew that I could afford to indulge in not making any big decisions for at least three to four weeks. For me, time-bounding my unstructured period helped a lot with this. And it's something that I would recommend if you're able and you feel really uncomfortable in the void.

[00:11:00] By giving myself just less than a month to see what emerged, I was able to offer myself some useful limitations and these parameters are important for quelling the ever-present inner critic that we've discussed before. Nothing's harder than doing nothing. Ha! Some people might laugh at this, but for many it's so true. That inner critic can get pretty vocal about this. We've been conditioned since we were children to 'get up, don't be lazy, stop daydreaming'. It's virtually impossible to relax and do nothing without feeling guilty about it.

Being lazy is seen as inherently bad. And we know from our previous discussions in the very first episode of series one, that busy-ness is glorified by society. The busier you are, the more you are perceived to be contributing societal value. Maybe the idea of doing nothing makes you feel indulgent or even selfish. Perhaps you feel judged or worry that there will be nothing to show for your time off, or perhaps you're afraid you'll be bored.

[00:12:00] I tried to identify activities that would allow free thought to occur without forcing it. I tidied up. I walked, journaled, read books, mainly fiction, which was a joy after two years of reading almost exclusively nonfiction and academic books. And the strangest thing happened. When I was least expecting it, one morning I was sitting with my morning pages, that's early morning journaling. And I had an epiphany. I love songwriting with all my heart. But I also love this podcast. And I realised that as I'd been drifting around in my fertile void, the thing that kept whispering in my ear was In Ten Years Time, this podcast, the resources I create for you.

I became more and more sure that this is where my heart lies and that it needs to have an equal prioritisation alongside my music career for me to live a satisfying creative life. I suspect that this would have become clear to me at some point in the future [00:13:00] and I can't ever prove otherwise, but I'm pretty sure that if I jumped straight back into mobilisation without the fertile void and this emerging sensation that came out of it, I may have taken longer to get there.

Let's wrap up this recap now with the ten minutes time challenge. Can you tap into a 10-minute void by meditating or clearing space for nothing? To 'noth', as an old academic supervisor of mine used to call it. Who knows where it will take you?

And the question is this: what would you do if you had nothing to do? How would it be to just do what you feel?

And the updated recommendation is to read *Wintering* by Katherine May, an inspiring read any time of the year.

Thank you so much for joining me for this recap series. [00:14:00] The next series, all about the ethics of creativity, is in progress, and I can't wait to share that research with you.

Until then, join me for a workshop, find me on Instagram or Facebook @intenyearstimeofficial to keep chatting, or email me via the website, in10yearstime.com.

If you've enjoyed this episode and you know someone who needs it, please send them a link. They will appreciate that as much as I will. Until the next series, peace and love.