

Series 5 Episode 6

Tricia: [00:00:00] Hello and thank you for joining me. This is the sixth episode of the fifth Series of In Ten Years Time: How to Live a Creative Life. I'm so grateful you are here.

I'm Tricia Duffy. I'm a songwriter, a media consultant, a singer, a writer, a public speaker, and a podcaster. And I'm here with an aim. 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.

I believe there is great power in the combination of a ten-year plan coupled with small daily steps. The long-term vision lets us know where we are heading and taking one tiny action towards that vision every day, perhaps just for five minutes, will make us instantly more content.

This is the last episode of the current series. I will be back with another [00:01:00] batch of podcasts very, very soon. In the meantime, if anything you've heard in this series has struck a chord, provoked a question or a comment, or you'd like to carry on chatting, please find me @intenyearstimeofficial on Instagram or Facebook. I love hearing from you, and if there's a topic you'd like me to research, I'd be delighted to investigate it. Or you can send me a message or an email via my website intenyearstime.com. I would value your suggestions for topics you'd like me to research for the next series. And there's a toolkit of free resources on the website to help you achieve your creative potential.

This podcast is advertisement and sponsorship free, and I would love to keep it that way. If you've enjoyed the content and you can afford it, please consider buying me a coffee, and you can do that on the website too.

Thank you so much for helping me carry on. In this series, we've been thinking about maintaining our creativity, about how we keep on

keeping on when the going gets tough, when life gets in the way, or when boredom sets in. About how building good habits can support us and about how we might manage the financial implications [00:02:00] of living a creative life in today's economic system.

About how we can always find something in our backstory to reinvigorate our creativity or our art, and how pushing through the darkness can sometimes reveal the most staggering work of all. Today I am honoured to introduce you to my friend, Dr. Angela Chan, to have perhaps the most important conversation I will ever have about living and maintaining a creative life.

Angela is a mum, an artist, an academic, a researcher, a singer, an inclusion and AI expert, a wife and a professor. She is, I'm proud to say also a very good friend, someone who challenges me and holds me to account and opens my eyes to ideas and thoughts that would've perhaps gone unnoticed, but for her turning my head towards them.

This may be emotional. A very warm welcome to *In Ten Years Time: How to live a creative life*, Angela.

[00:03:00] **Angela:** Oh, hello. What an intro. Can you speak at my funeral?

Tricia: We're going straight there. Are we?

Angela: I mean, it's what we want, isn't it?

Tricia: I've wanted to interview you on this podcast for a while and there's been so many times when I could have spoken to you about different themes of different series, but we've never been able to make the diary align. But I think life does work in mysterious ways sometimes, doesn't it? And when I was thinking about the topic of maintaining our creativity, and also I've been thinking about a phrase that you've used before as well, the question, why me?

It seemed just obvious that you were the person I needed to talk to about this. Would you like to explain to the listeners why I thought that might be an interesting - I'm using the words carefully - idea?

Angela: You want to say why that might be a good idea? I'm wondering the same thing!

Tricia: It's not a good idea.

Angela: Trisha, I'm so honoured to be asked and you're right, the timing's [00:04:00] absolutely right. I think you've asked me, apart from being marvellous and your friend because I was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, 16 weeks ago.

I had cancer six years ago and I reached that five year mark and they say, you know, at five years you're as likely get it again as anybody else. So I thought I was in the clear, although always with my fingers crossed. But this time it's back without me really noticing. And I have seven tumours. Two in my lungs, five in my bones, and I feel okay and I look fabulous.

Tricia: You do look fabulous.

Angela: For about the first eight weeks I thought I had lung cancer. The hospital thought I had lung cancer. And that, although no one was really saying, is about a year and a half, maybe 10 months. Happily, it did turn out to be breast cancer, so I'll probably have a bit longer, but I sort of feel like the race is on and I've taken up that challenge with glee! You know, there feels like nothing more urgent to me than to create [00:05:00] my, first instinct on diagnosis was, oh God, I haven't done all the things that I wanted to do! And most of those were, creative endeavours. But my God, if you ever needed a motivation to get out of your creative inertia, someone telling you you don't have ten years to think about it, maybe you've got 10 months, if you're lucky, maybe you've 10 years. Nobody knows.

But it gives you a sense of urgency that I've never had before. And, you know, I'm really, really going for it.

Tricia: You sound so positive. You describe yourself as 'lucky' to have breast cancer and feeling kind of joy in this urgency and creativity that you have coming in abundance with you now. I think most of our instincts would be, and I've cried many tears over learning about your diagnosis because we are such good friends and the horror of it all just feels just so, so utterly devastating. And yet there you are. Smiling, laughing, always ready to text and say, wanna meet for breakfast? Can you just tell us [00:06:00] how that happens for you? How you are able to be so positive and optimistic in the face of this diagnosis.

Angela: It is a really good question and one I've asked myself. It certainly didn't feel like that initially, and I personally find relentlessly positive people really irritating because I think, I think.

Tricia: Ironically!

Angela: You know what I mean? It's like: you can't be. But certainly for the first weeks, you know, you do sort of disappear into clouds of despair, but you can't stay there very long. I mean, maybe you could, but it would kill you a lot sooner. And I think I came to the conclusion that - and this really sounds kooky - but I really came to the conclusion that my creativity could save me. And I'm sure it's not an original thought. I think how to glitter a turd. You know, I'd call it radical optimism. And the one thing they know, is that people who frame their illness differently and who have a positive outlook and who feel optimistic about [00:07:00] their journey - not necessarily about the outcome, but about the journey - do better.

So it's not manufactured, but like once you've got over crying for yourself, I literally had no more tears. I mean, I have occasional days when I'm tired, like everybody where I where I get down about it, but the truth is the grief is for something you imagined you would have. So it's a grief about an imagined future, which you never had. And we all

have that all the time. We often feel sad for ourselves because of the things we we'll never achieve, but it hasn't happened yet. So I think your framing of In Ten Years Time is a great one. If you have ten years, I'm sure there's some older people listening to your podcast who also don't know if they have ten years.

You know, we are all dying and it shouldn't be a shocking thing. It's just a matter of when. I just happen to know what I'll probably die of. But I've become much more about crossing the road because it would be really ridiculous to go to all this trouble and put all these other people to all this trouble giving me medication and [00:08:00] trying to keep me alive, if I were to walk out in front of a truck.

So I remain optimistic. I remain careful crossing the road. And I am going hell for leather to do all the creative things. I sort of thought I should get round but never quite did.

So the minute I recovered from crying. It probably took me a couple of weeks. I decided - I've been a producer, I've been a television producer for a long time, and a producer of events etc at quite a senior level. I thought, God, it can't be beyond the wit of man to book myself a band and a gig. And I used to sing in my twenties. I've carried on singing in operas, choirs, but always with others, but never quite confident enough to say, 'come and listen to me. It's about me. And actually it's about my talent and sharing it with you.'

That is something I think we all have problems with, and particularly women, saying 'yes, I'm good at this!' And so I booked a band and then I went looking for a jazz club and I thought, well, 'I'm gonna [00:09:00] contact all the best London Jazz clubs and see if they'll have me.' And eventually actually, I found plenty who would have me...at a price!

And eventually I decided to just share my story. So the Bulls Head in Barnes, which is a small but very famous jazz club where I had my first date with my husband, we booked the band for our wedding. I

thought that'd be kind of cute. And I told them what was going on. I wanted to do a jazz gig for charity, and they said 'you can have it for free. And not just that, you can have it for free anytime you like. Just pay the barman and pay the sound man.'

Tricia: So there's a lot of goodwill coming as you share your story and you are very open in sharing your story. That there's sort of like a unified 'we'll get behind that and we'll help you out and we'll make things possible for you'. What about your, visual art, because you are a painter as well?

Angela: Well, I'll, I'll tell you a funny story my visual art. For the first time in maybe the first 47 years of my life. I believed I could not draw a stick man. My brother was the artist. That's the message I'd got from my [00:10:00] childhood. And I was allowed to be good at anything but art and I was very academic and art was his thing. So I really got a clear message. I'm sure my parents were trying to praise my brother for the thing he was very good at and still is, but I was told that was his thing and I wasn't quite so good at it, so maybe I should focus on other things. And I remember any time I showed my mother a picture and sometimes she would say, 'I could do better than that.' It was quite cruel really. But I'm sure she had her reasons. So I really believed I couldn't paint and I would skilfully avoid anything that involved mark making.

I took up photography as a teenager because it felt comfortable to carve my own space. I became a filmmaker professionally. I did almost anything creative I could think of other than paint. So during COVID, I thought, well, 'what could I do that's at home?' You know, like many people, that I could just order in supplies and start doing. And interestingly, I drew a portrait of but from the back! Like I couldn't even look, at myself. Also, I can't draw faces and I still can't. But [00:11:00] then, you know, Picasso, loads of people choose not to draw faces. So I started painting and I really started enjoying myself. I used to have a studio in a place called Johnson's Island, which you

may have heard about in Tricia's previous episodes where she wrote her River Stories.

And I started to paint and I really tried not to worry too much about what I was painting or how I was painting. And the great thing about being part of an artist community wasL people would come in, nonjudgmentally, other artists, would say 'if you are painting something and you love it, other people will love it! If you are painting and you feel something, other people will feel something! And sometimes they won't like it and sometimes they will like it, that's life.' Maybe they'll tell you, maybe they won't. But I just started to use it for expression. I don't think of myself as somebody who can do representative art very well, but sometimes I do. So I really paint things that I feel are emotionally expressive, and it is incredible when people come to our open studios.

Sometimes we have nearly [00:12:00] 2000 people through the studio, and the way people respond to something is incredibly accurate in terms of reflecting the feeling I've put into it or what I was feeling.

Tricia: That's amazing!

Angela: Isn't it? It is extraordinary on a very sort of complex, emotional level, and that always surprises me, but it also gives me confidence. So, you know, I hope that's an encouragement to people to share your art, not because you should, but because you don't necessarily understand what's in it until you get the feedback.

Tricia: Yeah. Well we've had that experience before, haven't we? You and I, when I wrote a song in your studio. And I will include links to the episodes that Angela's referring to because you loaned me your artist's studio for a few days so that I could write the River Stories Collection. And one of the songs, a song called Water Log, you wrote me this very long note. I remember saying how much you loved the one that was written from the perspective of a log that was actually a feminist anthem! And I hadn't realised that it was until you said that to

me. And I was like, of course it is! It's actually autobiographical that song. [00:13:00]

Angela: Your barely concealed subconscious!

Tricia: Unbelievable. But now I can see it for what it is. And I can see so much of myself in the lyrics of that song, which I wasn't able to disentangle during the time I was writing it. I mean, obviously it came from me, so it was autobiographical, but to the point that you are making about how someone looks at a piece of art that you've created and the painting you've created and interprets it and plays back to you. I have the same thing with my art form, which is songwriting.

Angela: Yeah, and it's not just the one-off, is it? it? I've done a lot of masters, it's a level of study I like to do because you go deeper into your practice but not for too long. And then then I also went on to do a PhD, but that was something quite different. But at master's level, I did a fine art photography masters. The main thing I took from that was the idea of having a creative practice, which doesn't mean *to practise*, although it includes that, but a practice being a body of work where you go deeper and deeper and although you explore quite freely, you will find yourself exploring similar themes and drawing them out in your work.

[00:14:00] Sometimes subconsciously, sometimes you don't realise until you've reached the end of a project, but unless you continue to do it, and I know you've been talking about 'keeping on,' unless you continue to do it, you don't see what it is you're surfacing subconsciously until you suddenly reach one image or song or painting where you go, 'oh, that's what I was trying to say.' Or someone will say it to you and you go, 'that's right.'

I mean, just to share with you, I had an extraordinary experience with one painting. I very rarely paint from photographs or reality. I just paint from my imagination and I painted a lake, and it wasn't until I went

to the home I grew up in and stood by the lake that's behind my house, and I thought, oh, actually, I've imprinted the landscape on my mind. Completely subconsciously. To the point where that painting reveals every single contour of every tree and I had no idea I'd taken that in. And a woman came into the studio, unfortunately when I wasn't there, but she wrote to me [00:15:00] afterwards and she said, 'when I came to your studio, and I saw that giant pink painting,' a lake landscape and I painted it with great peace and great feeling, and it made me feel peaceful. And she said, 'when I saw it, I cried because it made me feel a of peace I haven't had since I lost my daughter.' And I'd also lost a baby some years ago, but it just moved me so much because I thought, actually, 'yes, I'm really channelling my subconscious there and I'm trying to paint myself into this peaceful place, this place of home. And sadly I'd sold it but I was like, I'll paint you another one!' But, you know, I was so moved that she found that in there, and it may not have been in there when I painted it, but it was certainly a place of healing for me. So you paint not just for yourself or your create, not just for yourself, but for the unspeakable things that you communicate to other people that they cannot articulate.

Tricia: Yeah. And the benefits of creativity [00:16:00] regardless of the outcome, actually. The process of actually stepping into your studio, painting and having that interaction, that communion with your art are well proven in hundreds of studies in terms of what that's doing to your cognitive function. Your ability to retain your memory, even, parts of left brain, right brain hemisphere, which enables your body to stay physiologically, better functioning as well. Do you get a sense of the benefits of creating from a process perspective as well as this sharing that you are describing?

Angela: Yeah, I mean, starting with the creative space, I think that is really important. Well, one, because I'm extremely messy and I often paint my shoes and my bottom and my elbows and everything else. But if I had to get oil paints out at home, it would never happen because I'd have to do so much prep, you know in terms of shielding

my house from the mess, and then a child would interrupt me and then the doorbell would ring and then it's over. So to go to the [00:17:00] studio, even the little walk there, is to give yourself time to move into that head space. To commit to an hour or a few hours where you're going to do it, and usually to go with some sort of plan: I'm going to finish this or I'm going to finish that. And actually once I step into that space, everything from unlocking the gate, quietly unlocking the rather awkward heavy lock on the door. The moment of entering the studio. That's sort of part of this walking meditation, preparing my brushes. And then standing in front of your work and thinking what is done and what is not done? What needs to be done, what should be left alone? That is crucial: what don't you do? And then I begin to paint and I usually have music on. I often paint on a Sunday and there's a really marvellous sort of period in the day where 6Music gets quite wild and the painting becomes a bit like jazz. Sometimes I end up painting six things at once because I found a colour I like and I add bits and [00:18:00] pieces. But the whole thing is like a meditation.

And by the time I'm really into my painting, I have no idea how long has passed. I enter something like, I think it's called a theta state, and I recognise it from that moment between sleeping and waking.

Tricia: Mm-hmm.

Angela: Where my brain is really in a different space and I tend to be an overthinker. I'm an academic now, so life is overthinking.

And if you write, I find I also overthink when I write. So painting is the one place where I do not think I'm just in it. I'll find myself discarding my brushes and starting to paint with my hands. And actually, I know once my hands get involved, I'm in the zone and I often paint by taking away. So I start to find unusual methods just because that's what needs to be done. But that that couldn't happen if I wasn't in the space. Now that's sort of a privileged perspective, right? Because I can afford a studio, but I have to tell you, it is always cost neutral. So my only goal with my art is to cover my [00:19:00] costs. And it's a little bit of

manifesting, really, but it does come in. I'm sure if I manifested I need 20 grand I'd work a bit harder! But cost neutral will do for me at the moment.

Tricia: You talked about the fact that you were originally diagnosed with breast cancer, five or six years ago? Did creativity, either your painting or your writing or your photography help you with the difficulties of dealing with that diagnosis and also your big change in career, which happened at a similar time?

Angela: [00:20:00] I've had a few changes of career and they usually were trauma triggered. But it's a positive trigger and you then start to see the trauma as fortunate because you wouldn't have done that thing otherwise And I think that's what creativity does for you. Six years ago it was slightly different.

I was in the middle of an MBA and I was working in a very high powered job. I'd also had, my mother had had died of cancer the year before, so when my diagnosis came about a year later it was a terrible shock. I really wanted to say to the doctor, 'no, no, that's not me. That's my mother. She's had cancer for 34 years. I don't have cancer!' So it was a bit of a strange one and it was a hell of a shock, but I was also really determined to go back to work at that point. So I enjoyed the time I had off, but I didn't allow myself enough time. I didn't have my studio then.

I started to write a book. I started to write a blog. But interestingly, that time it didn't take off. And do you know what stopped me? It was the voice that said, why me? [00:21:00] I've only had a little bit of cancer. I haven't even had chemotherapy. What do I know?

Tricia: So somehow that you didn't deserve to share your story because it wasn't bad enough. Is that what you're describing?

Angela: Yes! And this time, I'm like, well, you couldn't say that this time. I don't know anyone with more cancer! So what are you waiting

for? But yeah, I found it the other day. I started a rather wonderful little website called the Creative Cancer Companion, and I wanted to invite women to ,my father has a Japanese gardening business, a bonsai business, and a Japanese wellness centre. I mean, you couldn't be more set up to do it! But that 'why me' question stopped me from doing it and I'll tell you how it felt. Because I started great. And after a few sessions the 'why me' got so loud. I was like, oh, it's totally cringey. And the idea of inviting people over to share that with the why me. That sense of illegitimacy, it stopped me from doing all of it!

So I [00:22:00] went back to work. I spent that six months not resting and recovering or enjoying myself but finishing my MBA. I spent six months writing my dissertation, and that was quite useful in that it led me to the PhD, which is how I escaped from work hamster wheel eventually. But as soon as I got back to work, I thought, 'oh this isn't creative. I've done this before. This is a toxic environment, I've been here before and this isn't good for me.' And it actually made me ill again. And you know, that time it affected my mental health, it affected my energy, it affected everything, and I just knew I had to step off.

So you could say it was a step along the way, but, the 'why me' definitely stopped me from living. my best life,

You know, I'm writing a blog. and within those 16 weeks, it's had 12,000 viewers, which isn't bad. I'm hearing from who I don't know now who are saying it's helping them, so that's great. I haven't really written it to help them. I've written it to help me! But I'm delighted if it helps [00:23:00] them. And still, you know, when I sit down to write the book, I'm struggling, but not for the why me, but because actually structuring something and energy is difficult.

But I'm much better at finding creative solutions now. So I started to think, well, I tend to write this in the length of time it takes in a waiting room? So why not write things that it takes the length of time to read in a waiting room. Because that's about how long you've got when

you've got cancer. You don't want a long book. You want something you can dip in and out of, short essays.

Tricia: Is there something that you would say to yourself now, looking back at that time about your 'why me' then that you might give as advice to yourself and to others listening about how unique and incredible their story is, regardless of how severe their cancer is, or how dramatic their life is, or how incredible their art is, because actually it's the nuance and individuality of ordinary stories that brings us together and allows us to connect. And sometimes those ordinary stories can be absolutely fascinating [00:24:00] and really inspiring.

Angela: I mean, you're absolutely right. I think I started to write a book about cancer and I thought, I don't know that much about cancer, and that was true. And actually there's so only so many times you can describe the thing that's happening. You want to describe the shock and that's actually a good instinct. But what I found from writing the blog now is that what tends to resonate with people is the really ordinary details. So I spend a lot of time in A&E and I've realised that the little pods that they put you in are a soundscape.

So I describe the sounds, I describe things that are going on around me, and sometimes the misunderstandings are the funniest bit. You know, last time there were hot policemen in A&E, that was funny, but you know, the detail is what people love.

And the messages kept coming in over the Tannoy: could Mrs. Brown please come to the Disney room? And I'm like 'what? Really?' So, you know, there's comedy everywhere and I have discovered I'm a comic writer. You would expect a blog about cancer to be sad. But there is a lot of comedy because you're in extraordinary situations. And so you're finding the [00:25:00] ordinary in the extraordinary. And I have often wanted to just paint things that were nice. I remember being very stunned by the criticism of my photography tutor during my photography masters when she, said, 'You are making everything as you want it to be rather than how it is.' And I was actually

photographing a group of friends of my mother's with secondary breast cancer who'd all had mastectomies or double mastectomies. And I wanted to make it beautiful. I had wanted to make it like classical art, and I think that's just part of a healing instinct in me. I wanted them to have something beautiful, And I also wanted it not to seem like a horror show. But she wanted me to make something raw and documentary. And that wasn't my instinct at the time.

Tricia: Another thing that occurs to me is, how your practice has changed since you had your diagnosis?

Angela: I think it's changed quite a lot because I filter less. I filter through fear, I filter less [00:26:00] through the why me and it's much more internally focused. In terms of deep expression, I think through my art I'm able to say things I cannot say or write. And I do write a lot of them. I do share a lot, but there are things I can't see. And although I'm completely public about my cancer, I think I'm very private about my feelings and I've masked a lot of that. So in a way, art allows me to grieve generally externally. I celebrate. But I grieve through my art. So when I sing, I really sing the blues like I mean it. And I can see that that has a different effect on people, whether they know or not. And when I paint, I've actually started to paint my body. The other day I actually started to paint a nude of myself, and I found myself painting my muscles with my hands, and it felt very visceral. I started to identify my tumours in the painting. And my plan is to cover them in beautiful rhinestones, but just to enter that physicality [00:27:00] to find what's written on the body was important to me. And certainly when I write now, I'm going to places I never thought I'd share. And that does take some courage because I'm really out there, you know, people I met once, people I've never met are starting to comment on very personal things and you have to decide if you're okay with that.

But I think, you know, this time interestingly, I'm not doing any therapy or counselling. I haven't really felt I want to because there are things I can paint that I can't say. Things that I sing that I can't say.

Tricia: Sort of like that healing power of creativity. It gives you an ability through the process to heal and deal in in your own way.

Angela: Yeah, I can't always communicate it, so I'm trying every different medium. But you have to trust. Trust the process that you are communicating it. Both to yourself on a deeply internal cellular level and to others.

Tricia: As you know, the title of this podcast is *In Ten Years Time: How to Live a Creative Life*. And you've obviously touched already on the fact that [00:28:00] you now have a little bit more clarity than most about what the kind of trajectory of your life expectancy might be. I mean, I really want to challenge myself about this. What do you think of this philosophy I have of using ten years to set this North Star that allows us to make decisions, better decisions each day, to support our creativity and our stories. Do you have a kind of a challenge for me on that? Should I reject this policy, this philosophy, now that I've got a friend that's facing the circumstances you find yourself in?

Angela: It certainly looked different to me to me after my diagnosis. You know, I'm a great supporter of your philosophy and your method. I suppose the danger is by saying in 10 years' time.

You're projecting forward that much. I know that you advocate for people doing a little and often, but I suppose my challenge to your listeners would be, what if we change this frame to in ten months' time? And, you know, I really did start to think around [00:29:00] less than a year, so some things take a little longer, so I thought, okay, well. You know, when I start a new job, these high-powered corporate jobs, I'd always have a hundred day plan, because that's about as far as you can see. Because you don't know what's coming at you. And that was always quite good.

And if you looked back at after your hundred days you go, yeah, I did put some of those things in place, but ten months is enough to see

ahead. You sort of know roughly the shape of your year. But even a year for me feels too, 'I'll do it later'. So with 10 months - I have more than 10 months - but with 10 months ahead of me knowing that that I'm going to be through treatment, et cetera, I start to think, okay, 'well it takes a little while to book a venue and find a band and rehearse. So I booked that for July. I booked that for like a few months after I was diagnosed and I would really like to have a solo show. A dear friend of ours, Jean Terry, who's an artist on Johnson's Island, died recently of brain cancer and she'd never had a solo show and her work looks so wonderful together. [00:30:00]

So we put on the solo show for her and she would've loved that. It looked spectacular together. Her work in one space, and you could see the journey. And we told the story of her life a bit and I thought, well, I don't want to wait till I'm dead for someone else to do that. I also started throwing away a lot of stuff because they showed everything and I wouldn't want everything on show. It made me clear up!

So if you were thinking in 10 months' time, what would you do? What's your plan? Go to the place that you're really scared of. For me it was booking a gig at a professional venue, booking a professional band, and thinking I am enough to hold that. Now, I may invite a few friends, for instance, to come and sing the odd song.

Tricia: It's in my diary already!

Angela: And I think in a way that celebrates the creative community I'm part of, to invite people to sing with you, to invite the audience, to sing with you, to invite people on that journey. And I know you're talking about the hero's journey, but not to be to make yourself the hero of your own story. [00:31:00] We all are. That's the nature of life. And hero's journeys aren't up and up and up. They're up and down. That's why you're a hero, because you've overcome. So I've given myself something to overcome. Some days I think that's really crazy and I don't want to do it and I wish I hadn't. But I'm going to do it.

And it's friends and family. I love the idea of piloting something or doing something risky in a safe space so you can take some of the of the risk out. But just do it. Because what are you waiting for? No one is going to come and do it for you.

Tricia: Absolutely. I think that's one thing I've really learned. That sentence that you just said really resonates with me. The fact that I spent about 25 years of my life waiting for somebody to ask me to sing and no one ever did!

Angela: Me too! Much longer! I like the shower. But it doesn't applaud.

Tricia: Exactly. Exactly. It is Tricia here rudely interrupting my own podcast to give you an update.

I tend to have a bit of a gap between recording the podcast and the episodes [00:32:00] going out. So when I first approached Angela to be on the show, it briefly crossed my mind that I might have to make an amendment before the episode was released.

But I dismissed the thought quickly and decided just to hope that I wouldn't have to think about it. I didn't expect to be inviting Angela back to give you some news.

Angela, welcome back to *In Ten years time: how to live a creative life*. Would you like to share why we thought a little update was in order?

Angela: I'm speaking to you from beyond the grave! I didn't realise you thought you were going to have to bin it because you thought I'd be dead!

Tricia: Oh, I would never have binned it. I would've just had to ask permission from your husband and children to go ahead and release it, or had to kind of come and visit you in the hospice to say, do you mind if I still publish it? Shall I put it out now before you go? But I

didn't really give it much thought because I just didn't want to think about it really.

Angela: Well, Tricia, I'm happy to say that the opposite is true. I'm not speaking to you from [00:33:00] beyond the grave. Some weeks after I spoke to you, I had astonishing news. On my very first check-in PET scan - three months after the correct diagnosis that I had breast cancer as opposed to the incorrect diagnosis that I had lung cancer and was going to die in a year - I found that all eight tumours had gone.

Just to remind you, I had stage four breast cancer with eventually, once they'd finished counting them, two tumours in my lungs and six in the end, throughout my bones. And literally three days after I found out about the eighth tumour, they told me that they'd all gone.

Now, I didn't know that could happen, and I'm still wondering what to do with that idea. But while I was waiting for that to happen, I'd sung my first jazz gig. We raised £17,000. I'd started writing a [00:34:00] book. My blog reached 20,000 readers. And I just kept going and, you know, as you would correctly predict, I would never say creativity saved my life, but I would say it did have something to do with it.

Tricia: That's amazing. It makes me want to cry. Just hearing you say that. All for joyful reasons. I'm happy to say.

Angela: It's hard to say it as well. Because it sounds like fantasy.

Tricia: It does. Yeah. I mean, I remember when you were first going through the process of finding out about this, and you and I were talking and texting about various different things and you said, don't worry because I'm a unicorn. And what they're going to find out is that I'm not like normal people. I've got unicorn blood and I remember I bought you a tattoo of a sparkly unicorn that I thought you could put it on your butt to surprise a doctor or something when they were going to be giving you some awful injection or whatever, had this crazy idea. And so when this happened, and I remember you telling me, you

know, [00:35:00] you've had this amazing news. I was really just so overjoyed, and it really felt like 'I knew this would happen'. That's why I didn't think too much about an amendment of the podcast. I knew it would never come to this, but it does feel like a miracle, doesn't it?

Angela: Well, it is a miracle, and I'm cautious. It's a cautious miracle. When you're stage four, they'll never say you're not stage four, and they'll never use the word remission. But as you point out, I had been determinedly irritating since the beginning. And any doctor who tried to give me a prognosis I said, you wait, they'll all disappear.

And I thought, I'm just going to maintain this happy illusion because you may as well. If you say the sky is going to fall, your sky will fall. If you say I am going to die, I think you could probably make that happen. If you say I'm miserable, that's what's going to happen. If you say it's never too late to become a rock star. I'm going to be singing on the London Jazz Circuit in a few weeks' time. [00:36:00]

If you say, I'm going to write a book, if you say, I don't really care what anybody thinks, I'm going to do it, then it happens and you know, you can make yourself ill overdoing it and trying to make all those things happen. But I think what it's taught me is that the deep belief, I think I'd managed to get myself into a space where I had a really deeply committed belief in what seemed to be absolutely impossible, and it did feel ridiculous. And I remember on the day when they called me in the middle of lunch with a friend and said, 'oh, sorry, you've got an eighth tumour we forgot to tell you about.' It went from, you've got two tumours in your lung and two in your bones to gradually, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8!

And on the eighth, I remember being very upset on the train, on the way home, on the Friday, thinking 'you're an idiot.' You know, you shouldn't go around saying stupid stuff like, 'I'm a magical unicorn and I'm gonna be fine'. Sorry. It's really emotional.

And then [00:37:00] two days later, they phoned me up. I was in a deep, deep sleep. And they said you've had a complete metabolic response. And I knew, I knew what that meant because I had actually met somebody, just one person at the beginning who'd had that. And a friend had said, 'do you want to speak to this person?' And they were cautious about, you know, my feelings.

And I said, 'yeah, I wanna speak to them.' And I remember feeling slightly sort of jealous because I thought, well, this person's had this amazing reaction and that probably won't be my outcome, but it might be. To anybody listening who's lost hope, hope is an amazing thing. Hope keeps you afloat and music keeps you afloat and making art keeps you afloat and friends and all their wishes and their prayers, whether you are religious or not. You know, I think, I really believe in the deep resonances that that art and friendship [00:38:00] creates in your life.

When I sung, when I was rehearsing for this gig, I sung day after day to myself and I could feel that resonance doing something. I think I might have mentioned I went to see an energy healer and I could literally feel things like bad electrical currencies escaping from my body. It literally cracked out of me.

And you know, I consider myself some sort of sceptic, which is a big joke because I'm like the sceptic who'll try anything. And then I'll believe it. And you know, I think I might have quoted this line to you before, because I quote it a lot. There's a Lloyd Cole song that says, I'll believe in anything if it gets me what I want / gets me off my knees.

And God did it get me off my knees. So I'm still singing. I've been asked to do a proper gig. I mean, the other one was a proper gig, wasn't it, Tricia?

Tricia: It was a proper gig!

Angela: And it raised a lot of money. But I've been asked to do a gig at the Pheasant tree, Jazz Club [00:39:00] in Chelsea at the end of November.

I've got my inaugural professorial lecture coming up. I've got a fill 300 seats to talk about what, I don't know. But I think, I think this year has just taken the fear away. It is still there. Not just the fear, but the saboteur who tells you you can't, why you, why should anybody listen to you?

Maybe it'll go wrong and it doesn't really matter. The funniest thing is, as you'll remember, the jazz gig, I opened my mouth and it did go wrong. The very first note!

Tricia: I don't remember that at all.

Angela: I was looking at my pianist and she looked like she was chewing on a wasp, and I said, 'fuck, I've got it wrong already!' And it was the funniest moment in the whole evening. It didn't really matter. Everyone just thought it was hilarious. I was like, let's start again. And, you know, there is a lot of latitude if you do things with joy, if you do things with honesty. That's what people are there for. They're not there for perfection. you know, they're there to see you express [00:40:00] something deeply true about yourself or emotions that goes beyond words.

Tricia: Exactly. Exactly right. Can I ask you: I know you're very, very clear about modern medicine and the role that that's played in your recovery, but can you talk about whether creativity has had any additional benefits that you didn't expect?

Angela: Yes, and it's not just a sort of an ephemeral thing. For me, creativity is something I do with my body and through my body. So when I paint, I paint in large, smooth strokes. It's very much a sort of Japanese approach to painting. When I play my sound bowls, it's with my body and on my body or on somebody else's body. I trained as a

sound healer two years ago, and that had a profound effect. So I think I realised that that vibration that you see, for instance, if you put water in a sound bowl that's what's going on in your body all the time.

And so this idea of a very profound somatic effect of the arts, of creativity, of making [00:41:00] creative work. I think it is under explored. And we keep this mind-body separation, but you know, creativity doesn't just happen in your head, it happens through your body. And I really feel that's been an important route for me back to health and now for me to maintain my health.

Tricia: We talked at length about the concept of *In Ten Years Time* in the face of what you were dealing with at the time. How do you feel about the concept of having a ten-year plan now?

Angela: I'm not bothered by ten years, Tricia you can keep your ten years! Now I know that you are not suggesting people do things *only* in ten years' time. But my God, if you start off with your *In Ten Years' Time* plan, what will you do in ten months? What will you do in ten weeks? So the space between me learning what my cancer was, the wonderful modern medicine - not just creativity - that has saved my life was exactly ten weeks. What about in ten weeks' time? I never thought, I mean that's probably the longest ten weeks of my life, [00:42:00] but man, I laid a lot of plans and I'm still having to see them through, you know, I didn't get to do them all in ten weeks, but I did quite a lot of them actually.

You know, you can achieve quite a lot in ten weeks. You can achieve quite a lot in ten months. And in ten years' time to honour your concept, your life will be completely transformed.

I've had to get there through a very extraordinary sharp wedgie in my life that said, get the fuck up and do it! What are you waiting for? You know? And when you examine the fears and the reasons why you don't do things, it's largely nonsense. It's largely fear. Things that somebody once said to you, things that once maybe went wrong, but generally

not. Generally, just fear that something *might* go wrong. But nobody cares. That's what I say to my children the most. It sounds cruel, but I go, really? No one cares. Yeah, just do it. Just enjoy it.

Tricia: I think it's a fantastic message. And actually I've been contemplating, as you know, the ten year plan is to set the North Star, but really the action comes in ten [00:43:00] minutes a day and you know, for even ten weeks, ten minutes, what can you achieve in ten minutes? And the idea of kind of compounding that creativity because picking up the phone to a venue to say, can I do a gig? It takes ten minutes. And that changes the course and direction of your life potentially.

Angela: Well, I like that because I do actually have ten-minute phases in my day when I go, I'm going to email them. I'll get the devil in me and think, 'oh, well it worked last time'. Let's just email them and ask. And you know, I love your theory of rejection. Actually nobody's rejected you. I mean, you can't half play the cancer card! You know, I think maybe that charm will wear off. I think the interesting thing about an incurable diagnosis, it's also just terribly freeing because you think, well, if I don't do it now, I literally never will. And you know, often you live out your dreams and you think, oh, well it won't be as good as I've been thinking it will be. It really was.

Tricia: It was better.

Angela: I would say that that jazz gig was one of the best nights of my life, and here's the best thing, I thought, well, I don't want to do it alone. Actually, we do very few things alone. [00:44:00] So I asked you, I asked two other friends, I asked everybody I knew to turn up and they did. Then I thought, oh, well they think I haven't got cancer anymore, so they won't turn up again. They keep turning up.

Tricia: Yeah, of course they do.

Angela: And it is really important. We've been talking a lot, you and I, and there's a lot of talk in the media about AI and art and you know, I love technology, but fuck that. It's about the process, stupid! You know? And actually, it doesn't really matter what the outcome is, it's all process. And when you share your process and when you love your process, it doesn't take ten years. It literally takes ten minutes.

Tricia: Exactly that. Thank you so, so, much for coming back on the show. And you had me there as well. Thank you for being so open and vulnerable with us because that is true artistry. I guess nothing more for me to say, but let's rejoin our fascinating conversation.

I like to finish with a challenge, a question, and a recommendation, and obviously make life easy for myself when I'm interviewing someone by asking them to [00:45:00] pose the challenge, the question and the recommendation.

Angela: Yeah, so, my question would be fuck, ten years. What are you going to do if you have 10 months? And it's a serious question because you never know! And if you did what you mean to do in 10 years, in 10 months, my God, you'd get a bit further. But what feels like stepping off a cliff? What feels like somewhere that is safe to go, but the way you perceive the risk, if you really examine it, isn't a risk.

I would say that whatever that thing is, yes you have to plan some practical direct steps to get there, but take the slightly longer road. So when I'm trying to go deeper with my creativity, it's better not to go straight at it. Usually a conversation with somebody who works in a different art form, a visit to an exhibition, listening to music, finding analogous things in the work, getting reflection on it. That can just be one trusted person. You don't [00:46:00] have to have a whole audience do something else. You know, for me, the concept of a creative practice isn't, I am a painter, I'm a songwriter, I'm a collector of objects. I have never stuck to one thing. I used to see that as a weakness, being a kind of jack of all trades. And I now see it as a strength because I can see the line between singing, jazz and painting.

I can see the line between my painting and my writing, and I write about my painting and I paint about my writing.

And all those things are part of makes you an artist. But you know, you are curating this collection of things to do with you and to do with human life and your story. And we all have a unique story and it will generally resonate with somebody else's. So don't be afraid to try different disciplines and art forms and talk to people about it and learn from others, and then it will happen much sooner than ten years.

Tricia: That's definitely the case for me. I mean, even notwithstanding the fact that I've done this ten-year plan and I will look ahead. When I first started this exercise, which I did privately and [00:47:00] quietly just for myself as a little tool, rather than sharing it as I do on the website. I described creative balance in ten years' time that I now live with today, which is what, four years on?

So things do definitely happen more quickly. I guess the secret to success with this is to have the imagination and the faith. That leap of faith you described, it's like Indiana Jones where he throws the dust and he has to step out into the abyss and there's the path. It's there beneath your feet when you need it.

Angela: Yeah and also like the rolling rock moment in all those movies, I constantly feel like I'm just sliding under the rock before it shuts me in. You know, you've got to find your escape hole. One other bit of really practical advice would be to have stuff right there. So, although I have a studio. I always have some on my kitchen table, an annoying pile. Right now I've kept a high quality sketchbook on my kitchen table, and I keep some light watercolours that don't make a mess so that when I have the urge, I can [00:48:00] go straight to it. And I can start to create, because that five-minute thing, that doesn't happen if you've got to get to a studio, I need to be able to put it down now. And actually all those little iterations build up to the big painting. You know, it's pretty rare, although I do do it and it's a little riskier, to dive straight in.

So just things that you can do every day that are to hand that makes a massive difference, I think, to building up creative muscle.

Tricia: And do you have a recommendation for people, a book or a film or something that you would like to guide people towards?

Angela: Two books. One to do with painting, one not to do with painting. Trust the Process by Shaun McNiff is an old favourite. But I think until I read that book I didn't really understand that all art is process. It's not really about the output, actually, it's about you as a human, expressing your humanity, and maybe that will resonate with others. But he talks about everything from painting and drumming, all forms of expression. So that's pretty wonderful. It's an oldie but a goodie. And there's a woman [00:49:00] called Marion Milner who's a psychologist, and she wrote a book called How Not to Paint, and she does sort of automatic painting where you're trying to surface things from your subconscious. But she's also writing about psychology. So that's pretty wonderful. Those two, you can't go wrong.

Tricia: And I would like to add my own recommendation. Two different things. One is Angela's blog. It's called The Breathe Blog for People Living with Secondary Cancer, which is absolutely profound and as she's described, funny and, just provoking, and I'm sure that you learn and be inspired with every post. And also her art and I will include links to Angela's art website as well in the show notes of this episode. Thank you so much for joining me. I was sort of preparing myself with my tissues that I'm, we might end up in a sort of emotional heat together, but it's been such a joyful conversation.

Angela: Yeah I don't go there. I don't go there. Sorry, not to fulfill the weeping request.

Tricia: Thank you so much for [00:50:00] being here. As I mentioned, this is the last episode of this series, so I do need to do some big thank you so to you, Angela, for agreeing to do this important interview and conversation. To the brilliant Rachel Balmer, my producer. Thank you

as always for your guidance and expertise. You are such an important part of this team, and I'm grateful for everything you do to help me maintain this podcast. To Thad Cox for the beautiful design. And of course to all of you listeners, for being with me on this journey. I enjoy creating this content for you so much.

The research has been inspiring, motivating, fascinating. If you've enjoyed the podcast, please tell a friend about it. And don't forget to sign up for my newsletter via the In Ten Years' Time website intenyyears.com. I send recommendations and creativity tips every fortnight.

Right. We are standing down for a few weeks. Another six episodes are already planned, and I look forward to sharing them with you very soon. In the meantime, peace and love creative [00:51:00] souls. Go forth and create!