

Series 6 Episode 2

[00:00:00] Hello and welcome to episode two of the sixth series of *In 10 Years Time*, I'm 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 make your creative dreams a reality.

Before we get started, I know this podcast changes lives because I get emails and messages every week from people who tell me their personal stories about how much it's helped them find and amplify their creativity.

This is a small podcast without big advertisers, and I've been funding this myself, but I'm close to the end of what I can afford. 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 the podcast and all the free resources and the newsletter that comes with it, [00:01:00] please go to www.intenyearstime.com/donate. You will help me keep this content going and it really does change lives.

In this series, we are thinking about the science of creativity, about what's happening in our brains when we engage in our craft, and about how we might be able to use our creativity to improve our health and wellbeing, and how creativity can heal.

I want to explore how having a craft or artistic practice can support us as we age and think about what it means to be creative in the context of neurological differences. I'm exploring social narratives and the myths about our brains and trying to sort the facts from the fiction.

Researching the series has been both enlightening and challenging. I hope it opens your mind and your heart to embrace the creative person you are and always have been.

The mathematician, Henri Poincare said "It is by logic we [00:02:00] prove, and by intuition that we discover." And in the last episode, we discussed the evidence for the cognitive benefits of creative living

offered by scientists. Decades of research in labs and universities has proven the benefits of creativity on our cognition, brain health and wellbeing. We can't always perceive these long-term benefits, although there are often immediate life enhancements when we spend time in creative practice in the moment, such as a reduction of our stress hormones.

But as we all know, getting around to being creative is not as easy as it might seem. Let's say we finally sit down to paint, write a song, or make a sketch. It might be that this experiment doesn't quite turn out how we hoped. Perhaps on this occasion it's a slog and we don't always enjoy it, and the result is a bit crap. There's a lot of strong internal narratives, views, and social [00:03:00] norms that say we should probably give up and not put ourselves in the position of creating something so lousy ever again.

I met a man at a conference a few months ago who told me he'd always wanted to learn to dance, so he'd signed up for a class, and although he enjoyed the first lesson, he thought he was terrible, so he never bothered going back. I was so sad to hear this. There's no quick way to become a good dancer, and he even acknowledged he enjoyed the class. So as this example illustrates, even though we can pragmatically tell ourselves that the process is key and that the outcome doesn't matter, and we can take the vast number of studies that prove our brains will respond, and we will get better. In the moment it can be hard to keep the faith. Our inner critic is on hand to tell us that we should never put ourselves in the position of failing like that again, that pesky critic is just trying to protect you, but we need to push back against those narratives and [00:04:00] find an inner guide, a little faith in the unknown. And that's what I want to talk about today, a faith in arts. About the spiritual side of our practice and about the things we cannot see, and how opening up ourselves to the idea of synchronicity can serve us on this path.

This episode has the potential to be a bit woo-woo. Fair warning, I want to get into a little bit of that, but I am a pragmatist at heart, so I will try

and strike a balance. Whatever your beliefs in the universe, in God, in synchronicity or the power of things we can't see, you are welcome here and I hope you can find a way into thinking about this with a balance that works for you.

So let me ask you, what do you believe? The definition of a belief is something that we accept to be true regardless of evidence or absolute proof. [00:05:00] Whether we are part of a formal religious doctrine or not, we test our belief system every single day in small ways. For example, in my work as a consultant, I often find myself hypothesising about how changing an organisation's structure will help create smoother processes or improve optimisation.

I use a combination of evidence and experience to make these assertions, but I can't ever really know what the outcome will be until those changes have been made. In my day-to-day life, I have been known to quietly salute solitary magpies, and I have friends who are otherwise perfectly rational, sensible people who will greet a single magpie every time, regardless of their circumstances in the hope that it will ward off bad luck. One academic colleague tells a story of a particularly uncomfortable business meeting in the Netherlands where they were sitting facing a window only to find that an odd number of magpies consistently appeared in their [00:06:00] line of sight, and they felt it necessary to repeat the mantra "hello, Mr. Magpie, how is Mrs. Magpie?" every time they accidentally glanced up and caught a glimpse of the birds. Quite disruptive for conducting business!

And it is easy to laugh about these types of superstitions, but they are built up in social cues and norms over centuries in some instances. Perhaps you have religious beliefs, and if so, you are joining around two thirds of the world's population who describe themselves as religious. Many religious people believe that God exists, but there's no universally accepted proof. Whatever your beliefs, such religions require us to believe in things that are beyond what can be scientifically proven or seen. They require a sense of simply *knowing*.

Now to understand how the idea of faith or belief in the unknowable or unseeable might impact our creativity, let's start [00:07:00] exploring the work of Swiss psychiatrists and psychoanalyst Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology. Jung coined the term 'self-realisation', which he used to refer to his belief that the purpose of life was to understand and fulfil our own individual potential. He believed that every human being had a unique path or calling, and that exploring our unconscious minds would allow us to find meaning in life.

I would need more than one podcast episode to get into all the aspects of Jungian psychology, but there are a couple of specific things from his theories that can help us to explore this topic.

The first is synchronicity. Jung believed that meaningful coincidences that sometimes happen in our lives were not just random events, but connected in some way. He encouraged his patients and his followers to observe synchronistic events, to show them that they were on the right path when they needed guidance. [00:08:00] Has that ever happened to you?

You chat to a friend who tells you about a writing retreat in Italy, and the next person you speak to tells you they're going on holiday to Italy, and then two days later you open up a magazine and the page falls open on an advertisement for an Italian villa. Are these random coincidences or a sign that you need to book the writing retreat in Italy? Now, whether you believe in synchronicity as Jung did or not, there could be two explanations for this turn of events.

The first is that there's a universal power and a collective unconscious that, if accessed, can help us find meaning in life and point us to the things that we need. Or for the more pragmatic among us perhaps you notice these Italian references because your unconscious mind is processing the idea of the writing retreat in Italy, and so you notice them more because that is what's on your mind.

For example, before you learned about the retreat, you might well have flicked over the page in the [00:09:00] magazine without a second thought. There are a few cognitive processes happening here. The first is a phenomenon known as 'frequency illusion'. When you become aware of a concept object or even a word, your brain is primed to spot it, which gives us the illusion that it's appearing more often.

Second, we are constantly filtering information in our brains, which would be overwhelming otherwise. So when your attention is drawn to something, your brain is actually prioritising that thing, which makes it stand out and seem like it's appearing everywhere.

Something the scientific community call 'selective attention'. Finally, there's confirmation bias at play. Back to these beliefs again. When your attention is drawn to something, your brain looks for the simplest, most efficient way to back up information. It deliberately seeks out and believes information that supports your awareness.

And in the case of the Italian retreat, your brain is reinforcing the idea that [00:10:00] it is appearing with unusual frequency. Whichever the cause or your beliefs, the effect is the same. It gives you a clue as to your real desires and therefore purpose and perhaps gives you the confidence that booking that retreat could be *for* you and is just what you need right now.

At various times in my own life, I've looked for ways to open myself up to synchronicity, usually when I've been unclear about my direction or suffering from inertia - episode two from the last series, for more on that topic. When I've been unclear about whether I'm on the right path or unsure about a decision, I've started to see signs that appear to be leading me in a particular direction.

Now, as I said a moment ago, perhaps I'm at one with the universe and there's a greater consciousness at play. Or perhaps I'm just hyper-alert to the things I want to be true and experiencing [00:11:00] confirmation bias. In either case, and it doesn't really matter which, the point is that

these synchronicities have given me confidence that I'm on the right path, that I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

Have you ever experienced something and felt so sure that despite the twists and turns that got you there, whether that included heartbreak or joyful steps along the way, that you are exactly where you are meant to be? I've mentioned my music project titled *Being Serafina* before in previous series. This is an album I created from the perspective of Serafina, a character in the play *The Rose Tattoo* by Tennessee Williams.

I can create a clear narrative or story. I tell myself that the turn of events that brought me to create this project started when I was just 14 years old when I was given a copy of *The Rose Tattoo* as a Christmas present. I still have that copy [00:12:00] now. And as far as I know, no one else in the world has decided to create an album of songs from the perspective of Serafina, the main protagonist in *The Rose Tattoo*.

This is a unique piece of work. The copy of the book given to me when I was a teenager might have been the first clue, or perhaps it was before that when I learned an extended monologue from a different Tennessee Williams play during a drama class. Or perhaps the important moment was after that when I decided to get my own Rose Tattoo inked on my body. At the time without really thinking about it very hard! And I know that seems unlikely because of the permanent nature of tattoos, but I had an overwhelming feeling that I was meant to get this tattoo.

That was a long time before I had decided to change the creative balance of my life to pursue a career as a songwriter and podcaster. Were these elongated clues, slowly leading me to this songwriting project? A project I have been known to describe rather [00:13:00] dramatically as 'the work of my life'. Maybe in this context, it really *is* the work of my life, or at least the work of life events and life clues or synchronicities that brought me here. Regardless of whether a universe-like force external to me has been guiding me here, or whether this

inner knowing was inside my unconscious mind, it has taken a myriad of twists and turns to get me where I am today.

And just to bring us back to Jungian theory, it's the combination of these creative projects and the following of clues that do indeed give me purpose and meaning. And as Jung put it, self-realisation. The effect is very strong that I'm on the right path, and that is a path meant just for me, and it is this feeling that makes me feel more content in my everyday life.

I came across psychiatrist Dr. Anna Yusim during the course of this research who uses Jungian theory in [00:14:00] her medical practice, stating that synchronistic events can provide us with a sense of purpose and direction, but additionally, it is a sense of spiritual interconnectedness to others and the collective unconscious that both enhances this sense of meaning and allows us the opportunity to gain insights into our own psyche and therefore achieve self-realisation and greater personal fulfilment. For me it feels sort of like a continuous feedback loop. An article from Dr Yusim in the show notes of course.

What of this though? What difference does it make if we think about and mindfully follow these clues? Indulging in this feeling of following a calling. Is it just a way to make us feel better about our decisions? And if it is, does that really matter? Is it any different than simply choosing what we believe in? The mind is very [00:15:00] powerful.

Ellen Langer, a mindfulness expert and psychologist has written extensively on mindful creativity and learning. In her book, *Mindfulness* Langer says of mindlessness, if something is presented as an accepted truth, alternative ways of thinking do not even come up for consideration.

Langer's huge volume of research shows that actively changing our mindset can have profound impacts on our physical and mental health and change our very perception of reality. Particularly interesting in the context of growing older, one of her most famous studies illustrated

how a change in mindset can actually reverse the signs of aging. Link in the show notes of course.

As I've discussed in previous episodes, we are very capable of telling ourselves that we are not creative, not talented, or are undeserving. Or we can tell ourselves we are artists, songwriters, singers, [00:16:00] ceramicists, poets or writers. Easier said than done sometimes, but as Langer points out, this really is our own empowering choice.

James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy* is reported to be one of the biggest selling self-published books of all time. When it was published in 1993, it spent a whopping 165 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The novel is reported to have sold over 23 million copies and to have been translated into at least 34 languages, and it still sells today.

It's considered by some to be a sort of new-age cult classic and given that Redfield had no agent, publisher or marketing budget to speak of, it is also regarded as one of the best examples of a word-of-mouth success story. Some literary scholars criticised the book because its plot is [00:17:00] relatively simple and recent critique has included more detailed analysis of how Redfield claims to offer solutions to societal dysfunction, while routinely repeating gendered and racialised themes and promoting conservative Christian values.

There's huge tension here. And if you are interested in thinking more deeply about these issues, I recommend a fascinating essay about this from Misha Hoo from the University of Sydney who writes on gender and race.

I bought a copy of the *Celestine Prophecy* when it first came out in 1993, recommended by a friend. I was searching for something, for meaning, and this book - with all its flaws - gave me a feeling of calm and almost instructed me in letting go of the little things I couldn't control.

Reading it now, some of the gendered tropes make me cringe. That's 30 years of life experience for you. But there's no getting away from the fact that this simple story of a person's spiritual awakening, a new-age guide [00:18:00] dressed up as fiction, has been incredibly popular. In researching this episode, I found multiple discussion groups centred around the book on Facebook, Mumsnet and Reddit, and on a movie chat website. The chat divided opinion, but there was a repeated and common thread of individuals finding the book comforting even today, and a sense almost that they were given permission to open themselves up to the synchronicities of life by reading it.

So with that in mind let me tell you what I believe. I believe that you are an artist, a creative person, capable of the most extraordinary, unique, and brilliant things. I believe that you are meant to find this podcast and hear my voice, and that you should allow me to encourage you to live your truest, most creative life. Om.

Okay, I am [00:19:00] getting a bit creative fairy godmother now, but really! Open yourself up to asking what's the worst that can happen if I go for it?

I think that's a great moment to stop and offer you a challenge, a question, and a recommendation. The challenge is this. Think about the synchronicities in your life. The friend who called you when you were just thinking about them. The book that gets mentioned three times in a week by three different people in a completely unrelated context. The poster you pass by offering an art class just when you were thinking about finding a way to learn. Journal on these and open your mind to more clues.

Perhaps there are things from your past that can be excavated to help you not only build your confidence in your craft, but help you to understand and fulfil your potential. The real challenge, of course, is to act [00:20:00] on them. Can you sign up for the class or call that friend? The phrase originally coined by Locard used in forensic science seems

relevant here. 'Every contact leaves a trace.' What creative trace will you leave today?

The question is this. If creativity takes a change of mindset, what can you choose to believe in today? Push yourself to the limits.

And the recommendation is twofold. First, a lovely book by Margaret Heffernan called *Embracing Uncertainty*, which explores how uncertainty is a critical part of creativity and artistry, and how leaning into uncertainty and following clues and observation can help artists thrive. She offers examples of great artistic endeavours that have only come about because the artist was willing to dwell in the uncomfortable [00:21:00] unknown, allowing moments of chance to guide them and asks us to consider what we can learn from them. Stating that our own reliance on rigid systems and technology to provide constant certainty can stifle innovation in all aspects of our life.

Second, I will point you to a fun newsletter titled *The Fantasy of the Saved Folder* that discusses whether bookmarking on social media platforms is useful, or whether acting on something we see and want to remember or use as a stimulation might be more useful if we immediately wrote it down in a notebook, shared it with a friend, or made creative use of it.

Next time, I'm going to delve a bit deeper into the left brain, right brain science we touched on last episode to help us sort the fact from the fiction and understand how societal hemisphere dominance has impacted us for centuries. Until [00:22:00] 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.