

Series 3 Episode 3

[00:00:00] Hello, and thank you so much for joining me. This is the third episode of series three 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, and a podcaster. 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 dream a reality. With a combination of small daily steps and the heady power of ten to help us, we will live a more satisfying life. If you'd like to engage with this conversation, please follow me now @intenyearstimeofficial on Instagram or Facebook. I respond to all direct messages, and if there's a topic or question you would like me to research and discuss, I'd love to hear your suggestions. [00:01:00] I've spent the last few years trialling ways to live a more creative life, and I'm distilling all I've learnt in thousands of hours of research into this podcast series so that you can embark on a similar journey.

In this series of the podcast, we're exploring a theme of amplifying, and today I want to talk about sleep, rest, napping, dreaming, and something called hypnagogia as a creative tool.

The author John Steinbeck is quoted as saying, 'It is a common experience that a problem difficult at night is resolved in the morning after the committee of sleep has worked on it.' I've been fascinated by the power of sleep and its relationship with creativity and idea generation for several years.

It happened to me so often that I would wake up with an idea or story or concept in my head. Sometimes they would be so fully formed, it took my breath away. As I started [00:02:00] writing songs more prolifically, it happened more frequently. Sometimes I would wake up with a verse already written in my mind. Very occasionally, I gratefully woke up with whole songs: melody, harmony, lyrics, the lot. And let me tell you, when that happens, it is staggering. It's magic. Has that ever happened to you? You've woken up with an idea, or a way to solve a problem or an artistic concept. I believe that this is something that can happen to us more often and that we can nurture it.

It is said that Einstein slept for 10 hours a night and took frequent one-minute naps. He did this because he found that his mind was better able to solve problems after a nap. Now Einstein was simply observing his own experience and replicating what worked. He claimed to have come up with a theory of relativity while he was asleep, dreaming about electrocuted cows.

Now Salvador Dali describes a similar process. I'll read to you what he said [00:03:00] in his outrageously egotistical book, '50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship.'

You must seat yourself in a bony armchair, preferably of Spanish style, with your head tilted back and resting on the stretched leather back. Your two hands must hang beyond the arms of the chair. To which your own must be soldered in a supine-ness of complete relaxation. In this posture, you must hold a heavy key, which you will keep suspended, delicately pressed between the extremities of the thumb and forefinger of your left hand. Under the key, you will have previously placed a plate upside down on the floor. Having made these preparations, you will have merely to let yourself be progressively invaded by a serene, afternoon sleep. Like the spiritual drop of anisette of your soul rising in the cube of sugar of your body. The moment the key drops from your [00:04:00] fingers, you may be sure that the noise of its fall on the upside down plate will awaken you. And you may be equally sure that this fugitive moment where you had barely lost consciousness and during which you cannot be assured of having really slept is totally sufficient. Insomuch that not a second more is needed for your whole physical and psychic being to be revived by just the necessary amount of repose. For it is exactly, and neither more nor less, what you need before undertaking your virtuous afternoon labours.

Now, Einstein and Dali were drawing on experiences from their own lives. However, in 2004, a study at the University of Lübeck in Germany tested the impact of sleep by training participants to play a number game. They found that most were able to get the hang of the game with practice over time, but there was a quicker way to improve [00:05:00] if the participants could uncover a hidden rule. They contrived an eight hour gap for the participants and they found that those who had been permitted to sleep in the eight hours were more than twice as likely to gain insight into that hidden rule than those who had remained awake. So what's behind all of

this and how can we better use our overnight sleep and carefully scheduled naps to tap into our creativity?

Let's start with what's happening overnight. The medical community tells us that each time we sleep, our brain enters a series of cycles lasting approximately 90 minutes. In each of these cycles, there are four phases of sleep, which include a falling asleep phase, a light sleep phase, a deep sleep phase, and then REM, or rapid eye movement.

This final phase is when we dream. I know some of you will be familiar with this, and some of you will be saying, 'Now, I'm sorry, Tricia, but I don't dream.' It's highly unlikely that this is true. The [00:06:00] neurosurgeon and neuroscientist Rahul Jandial, author of 'This is Why You Dream', explains that dreaming is an essential evolutionary trait that offers critical cognitive benefit. And the most likely explanation for those who believe they don't dream is simply that they don't remember their dreams.

He goes on to explain that when we're in REM, we're paralysed, which allows our brains to create bizarre scenarios whilst not letting us get into any physical harm. Many specialists in the field believe that our dreams are ways for our brains to map scenarios in a way that would be potentially harmful for us if we experienced them in real life.

The book by Jandial is fascinating. I devoured it. So let's dwell on his findings for a moment longer and explore why dreams are so good for our creativity.

He suggests that we think of our brain as having two networks, the executive network and the imagination network. He says, and I quote, [00:07:00] 'the executive network is composed of structures on both sides of our brains that coactivate and are responsible for logic, order and reality testing. When we dream, the executive network is essentially switched off. So in our dreams, we cast aside the rules of life and we're not limited to the laws of physics, gravity, time, or reason.'

Jandial says that the creative process is similar to dreaming. To think creatively, we must break out of our common thought process to find new perspectives, new connections and creative solutions to problems.

Some researchers call this creativity ‘divergent thinking’ and suggest that by nature, it's unconventional, unlimited, and creates the conditions for creativity to happen. But let's think about it another way. Have you ever really concentrated on remembering something, perhaps the name of an acquaintance you've just run into, or the name of a movie star that you know you know, but you just can't grasp. You [00:08:00] try as hard as possible to think of the name.

I think of this as rifling through my own internal filing cabinet to seek the information that I know is in there, but you can't remember. The conversation moves on and the moment passes, only to find, later, when your mind is temporarily wandering, the name comes back to you.

When our logical brain is engaged, one of the neurotransmitters responsible for keeping us safe, adrenaline, is flowing. When we dream, it's like our guard is down, our adrenaline drops to zero, which allows for greater cognitive associations to be formed. Cool, hey! So, if that's what's happening while we dream, what about when we're awake? I'm so excited to tell you this.

I found a study in the National Library of Medicine that I will refrain from recommending you read because like a lot of medical research it is incredibly complex and academic. Nevertheless, if you are someone who has the patience to decipher such things, and you're keen for a deeper dive, the link is in the show notes.

The biggest headline for me from this work [00:09:00] came from a brain imaging study conducted with participants writing poetry. By analysing the activity in the brain, including the levels of adrenaline, the researchers found that when the participants were in the process of writing their poetry, their adrenaline levels dropped. Therefore allowing what Jandial calls ‘the imagination network’ he identified in our dream state, to take over.

When the participants started editing or revising the work, the adrenaline levels came back and his so-called ‘executive network’ was dialled back up again. This result was consistent, regardless of the level of experience in writing poetry. The first-time poets or experts all got the same results.

I've said in previous episodes that creativity is good for us, but researching this episode has given me even more weight to this argument. In a

pressurised world where our nervous system is constantly reacting, the very act of quiet creating can help us regulate the [00:10:00] hormones that keep us on edge.

Perhaps that is what is happening inside our bodies when we experience flow state. That's something that's on my list to research.

What then about Dali and his daily naps? Can a routine of napping help us be more creative? I love a nap. I'm famed for it among my friends. When my kids were smaller, I often went on holiday to Cornwall with friends whose children were the same age, and they found it hilarious when over the kitchen table at breakfast time, we'd talk about our plans for the day. Everyone would say what they fancied doing. You know, 'let's do a long walk along the coast, tip tap on the beach.' Some wanted to swim, others wanted to run. And I would always want to try and get a nap in. I'd say, 'well, we could walk this afternoon, but if we walk in the morning, I can have my nap.'

I'm pretty skilled at napping. I can lie down and sleep for anything from 10 to 90 minutes in the middle of the day, depending on what time allows, and not feel any ill effects. In fact, I [00:11:00] feel the opposite, a great renewal of energy. I can often fix creative ideas or songs after a nap. I'm not trying to show off here about my great napping skills, although I know some of you will be very envious of this unlikely ability.

I think I got good at it because I practiced from an early age. When I was 19 working on cruise ships, our schedule was relentless on some days. As crew staff, you could be sending off a tour to see the Mayan ruins in Mexico at 5.45am and later that day performing and hosting evening shows until midnight.

When I became assistant cruise director in my 20s, I had to write a daily report for the hotel manager every night before I went to bed. That was often slipped under his office door at 1am, so that he could read it and could adjust, for example, the numbers of bar staff in each room on the ship, depending on how much the passengers were enjoying the activities.

On consecutive port days, I often got to bed around 1.30am and had to be back on the gangway for 6am the next day. Now not all days were like

[00:12:00] that, the schedule was very inconsistent. But I learnt to nap as a response to the reduced sleep available to me on some nights.

I was young but I remember being tired a lot of the time during those years. That made sleep easier. My most efficient nap was when I would arrive to call bingo in the afternoon. Fully made up, in my blue blazer and cream pencil skirt, I would lie down backstage on the floor, position my wrist on my chest so that my watch was in my gaze as soon as I opened my eyes, and I could nap for as little as five minutes. This is good training. Okay, I can't get to sleep in five minutes now.

My mind's too busy for that. But I try and get a nap in a couple of times a week, even if it's only at the weekends, to keep my skill and to get the cognitive benefits. Sometimes when we feel as though we have a spark of creativity or we solve a problem, it feels instantaneous. However, what is usually happening behind the scenes is there's a gap between when we first thought of the opportunity or were presented with the problem [00:13:00] and us having that moment of inspiration.

People who know me - know me well -will know that I often say when I'm working on a song that I need to send it to my 'back brain' for computing. And this is really how it feels for me. I'll give you a real example from my life this week. The song title is 'solitude'. I might think broadly about the themes that could be included in that song, and then I literally put it to one side and stop actively thinking about it. A few days later, I will use the morning writing session. The mornings, when I've recently woken up, are so much better for this and I will attempt to write.

And, will you look at that, the song, at least the draft, flows out. And this is what I wrote two days ago using this process.

Crisp amber leaves jostle for entry

At the windows and the doors

As I creep past them in the dark

Seeking quiet, seeking solitude,

Find my favourite chair that looks

on to a cherry tree with scarlet bark

Force my gaze to the white pages

I write, I write words and phrases

In solitude and calmness

In solitude and stillness

I am art, I am poetry,

I am stories and philosophy

I am fiction and creativity

In solitude

Signs of life are subtle first

A solitary light and

A distant alarm, snoozed again

Reluctantly I re-engage

Stand and stretch and yawn

Wondering what today will bring

Tuck my pencil inside the pages

Leave behind the words and phrases

In solitude and calmness

In solitude and stillness

I am art, I am poetry,

I am stories and philosophy

I am fiction and creativity

In solitude

I don't have a bridge yet but the song is coming along and I know it will get there. Now I need to get the adrenaline flowing and use my 'executive network' to revise it and deal with some of the [00:15:00] cliches. I'll work on the melody with a musical colleague for this one because I think it could work as a song for TV and film.

So why are naps so useful? There's limited research available on this, but the scientific community have identified that so-called 'sleep spindles' happen during our lighter sleep phase overnight, and we can access these 'spindles' in a nap. Sleep spindles are bursts of neural activity that occur in the brain during lighter non-REM sleep. As I say, the scientific research on this is still very much ongoing, but the hypothesis being offered by neuroscientists is that these bursts of neural activity can play a role in learning and integrating new memories. They're also useful in diminishing our responses to outside stimulus while we were asleep. As the spindles occur in the lightest phase of sleep, the phase we enter when we first fall asleep, we can access them in a nap.

There's something else here that we need to touch on before we [00:16:00] finish today, a state called 'hypnagogia'. This is the word used to describe the transition between awake and asleep. This state is fertile ground for creatives. I've included an article published by MIT, which found that REM

was not necessary for creativity and participants conjured inherently more creative stories after just entering the first phase of falling to sleep, when woken or prevented from getting to sleep, and asked to complete a creative task in comparison with those who did not enter this falling asleep phase.

Perhaps that's exactly what Salvador Dali was doing with his giant key and upturned plate? There is a lot of other research into this and if it's piqued your interest, I encourage you to look it up. But there's one final thing I want to mention in this episode and that's remembering our dreams. There's a really good blog on calm.com about this, which I'll include in the show notes. I absolutely love remembering my dreams and I'm going [00:17:00] even further now to see if I can learn how to lucid dream. This is the state where you are dreaming with awareness so that you can actually direct your dream. I've only managed to do this once and I've been trying to do it for several months.

Luckily, I can try it in my sleep so it's not a massive investment of my waking hours. The important thing to remind ourselves is that just like mastering a craft or an art, it takes practice. Remembering our dreams is incredibly satisfying and there are a few ways to increase the likelihood of that happening.

It might take a bit of getting used to, but the first is to auto suggest. That is to tell yourself before you go to bed, 'Tonight I will remember my dream.' I mantra this statement a few times over before I go to sleep. I also have a journal next to my bed. It's the same one I use for my morning pages so that when I do remember my dream, I can quickly write it down. I also use voice notes to record a dream sometimes, although that could be a little antisocial if you have someone [00:18:00] sleeping next to you.

Both the beauty and frustration of our dreams is that they are fleeting. And they will disappear like wisps of smoke so fast when you wake up. Time really is of the essence. The writing down straight away part also takes practice. There's great benefit in telling people about your dreams, especially the funny ones. I have a practice of leaving my friends a voicenote when they featured in my dream and they get a kick out of it. If you've ever managed to lucid dream and you're experiencing any connection with your creativity as a result, please do send me an email or a

direct message. I'd really love to hear about your experience of this for future research.

Now to the challenge, the question and recommendation of this episode.

The challenge: I would like to challenge you to schedule a nap. Start off by picking a day where you don't have a bunch of back-to-back appointments or meetings, ideally in the afternoon. And there's a couple of ways you can approach this. [00:19:00] Either set an alarm for 10 to 20 minutes and immediately journal or create when you wake up. If you have the experience of feeling groggy after naps, you can try the coffee nap technique, or what some people call the 'nappuccino'.

To do this, you have a coffee right before you go to sleep for 15 minutes, and then the caffeine is just kicking in when you wake up. It's actually one of my favourite hacks. You may find that the first few times you start to practice your napping, you aren't able to get to sleep. But hopefully, like with any skill or habit, with a bit of practice, you'll get better at it.

The question: what's your relationship with sleep like? Is it as healthy as it could be? How can you prioritise it? Many people have a fraught relationship with sleep and will go through periods of their life when it's better and when it eludes them.

Don't panic. It will go back to normal and you probably know all of the good advice around sleep hygiene already and what might be triggering this period of poor [00:20:00] sleep, so I won't go into it here. I have put another podcast I recommend in the show notes though.

The recommendation: I've got to recommend the book I've referred to a couple of times in this episode, Rahul Jandial's 'This Is Why You Dream.' It's a non-fiction book backed up by science, but I found it fascinating and very easy to digest. If you'd like to delve further into this topic in more detail, it's well worth getting a copy.

Thank you so much for being here. If you're enjoying this series, please follow and rate the series wherever you get your podcasts. It helps an independent creative like me keep on keeping on.

Speaking of keeping on, I'm keen to ensure that this podcast stays ad free. I think it's better for you to listen to these episodes and get to your creativity without the pressure to listen to several minutes of ads.

So, if you can afford it and you have had some value from the series so far, please consider making a small donation. Think of it as buying me a coffee or a salad so that I can keep [00:21:00] on making this show. You'll find a donation tab on my website where you can do that.

Thank you so much for considering this kind and generous gesture.

Next time, I'm going to talk about how we might embark on a bigger creative project. Perhaps something that is made up of multiple creations or requires deeper research. Until then, please engage with the conversation on Instagram or Facebook @intenyearstimeofficial.

Sign up for my creativity newsletter on the website and if you like the series, give me a rating and tell a friend who needs it in their life.

Until then, keep creating. Peace and love.