

# Series 3 Episode 1

[00:00:00] Welcome to the third series of *In Ten Years' Time: How to live a creative life*. This is episode one. I'm so happy 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 all live a more satisfying life. And 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.

I've spent the [00:01:00] 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 the second series of the podcast, we focused on a theme of overcoming. In this third series, I want to talk about amplifying our creativity, how we build on the foundations we have made already. How we challenge ourselves to take another brave step into the unknown, how we boost and increase the reach of our creative work, our ambition and our impact.

Living a creative life involves repeated leaps of faith. Some are from one stepping stone to another across a calm stream that involve us stretching our legs, but with limited risk of getting wet. Others feel like steps into a vast, terrifying abyss. And we really don't know where we will land. We [00:02:00] just know that we have to take the step.

In this series, I want to arm you with ways that you can take those steps. The small ones and the enormous leaps, to extend and amplify your creativity. You are creative. You are brilliant. I see you and I want to empower you to go further.

This amplification will look different for everyone. This is about finding a creative balance that's right for you and you alone. This is not a one size fits all podcast that will try and convince you to do exactly as others have done. I will provoke you and challenge you to take the next step on your

own journey. That might be a sideways step. It may be about reframing some of your ideas. It might mean adding a new form of creativity to your portfolio, or it might be something way more ambitious. A creative life comes in all shapes and sizes. Whatever it looks like for you, whatever your personal circumstances, you are welcome here.

Sometimes to [00:03:00] take another step on the creativity stairway, we need to do absolutely nothing! So, to amplify our creativity, today we're going to focus on embracing the times in between, using what Gestalt theory calls the 'Fertile Void'.

But before we do that, let me just remind you about the In 10 years' Time philosophy. I spent decades working with creative organisations as a strategy consultant, helping them to understand how they could achieve success. I saw that the organisations with a long-term strategy and vision were better able to react in the moment.

The vision or goal acted as a north star and empowered everyone in these organisations to make better decisions each day. To take small, daily steps towards their goals, even when they were reacting to changes that were outside their control.

In the very first episode of series one, I talked about how the measures for success for individuals are likely to be more complex than for a [00:04:00] business. If you're in the process of working out or re-examining what success means to you, I would recommend you go back and remind yourself of that conversation.

A few years ago, I made a decision to completely change my life. I craved creative balance and I wondered: if I applied the long term planning strategies I'd used with the most successful commercial creative clients I worked with, would I get similar results?

Since then, I've been on a journey of discovery, of trial and error. And I'm convinced there's an incredible power in the combination of ten-year planning, coupled with small daily steps. A ten-year plan is powerful because ten years is close enough to be imaginable. You can make some predictions about some things in ten years, but it's also far enough away to provoke dreams and aspiration.

There's no one year plan, no three- or five-year version. We look ahead to 10 years and then each day we take tiny steps towards our North Star.

[00:05:00] On my website, there is a free 10-year plan template and you can listen to episode three from series one for a step by step guide to creating your own plan. Once you've created your 10-year plan, use it as a guide for your daily decisions. How you spend your time will have a direct impact on your future. And once you know the direction of travel, it's easier to invest that precious time in activities that make you more content in the moment and align with future you.

I recommend you update your 10-year plan every year or so, because after all, as I've said many times before, this is not a legally binding contract that once committed to paper you never revisit. The process of creating your plan will enable you to start walking a variety of different paths, and the steps on the path will in turn inform your direction of travel and your dreams.

Right, on with today's topic: the fertile void. The in between. Oscar Wilde said [00:06:00] 'to do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world, the most difficult and the most intellectual.' Have you been there? You finish a piece of art or a creative project, a performance or an exhibition. You make a speech, you deliver the commission, you release your podcast, you submit an article, you sell a collection of prints or jewellery. We finish the term, the research is submitted, the exams are complete.

These moments of accomplishment are joyous. They're the things we look forward to, the milestones we agree or set ourselves to help with the creative momentum. But what happens when they're over? Sometimes we pour so much energy into those moments of conclusion that we can feel lost when they are done. We feel exhausted and maybe a bit aimless. We ask ourselves, 'where has my purpose gone?'

Remember when you took your exams at school? The preparation, the climax of sitting that [00:07:00] exam, and then, it's all over! And for a moment, it's almost like you don't know what to do with yourself. If you've ever celebrated a milestone birthday with a big party, do you remember that next day feeling?

Perhaps of joy and gratitude? But also a sense of loss. If you've ever married, the same thing applies: you plan, you complete many small tasks over months and months and the big day comes and it is - I hope - glorious. Everyone celebrates and then the next morning when the cards have been read, there's a big cavernous space.

There's no longer any urgency to finish making the decorations. Paint your nails or deal with last-minute guest dilemmas. You look at the photographs, you enjoy the first few nights of restful sleep and the release of the pressure. And then what? A fertile void.

In creativity, I believe that this is something we need to get used to. It might not be as dramatic as a post wedding comedown, but if you [00:08:00] think about your creativity as a cycle, there is inevitably a moment of pause between phases of your art or creativity.

Gestalt is a psychological theory originated in Germany in 1890 by Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Kohler, and Kurt Kofka. They were exploring behaviour and argued that perception was greater than the sum of its parts, hence the word Gestalt, which in German translates to 'an organised whole.'

The main premise is that Gestalt is made of many things which together have greater meaning. The theory isn't used so much as a psychological theory these days, but it has been adapted by some creative thinkers because it is a useful way of examining all the elements of creativity, including negative space or voids.

Thinking about the elements that make up our creativity, we can apply this Gestalt thinking. Each creative act is made up of a series of micro activities or sensations. So let me break [00:09:00] this down using Gestalt as a way for us to understand it. If you search 'Gestalt Cycle' on the internet, you'll be presented with images that offer a circle divided into eight phases.

The phases are: sensation, recognition, mobilisation, action, contact, satisfaction, withdrawal, and fertile void. It's a continuous loop, so after the fertile void, it carries on with sensation, recognition, and so on. It's a cycle, a loop. But I have to pick a place to start, and for me personally, it makes most sense to start with 'sensation.'

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

Before there's been a proposal, or even a conscious understanding, the idea is forming, but without the [00:10:00] couple's awareness. In creativity, our subconscious is always working away at ideas. If you've ever woken up with a well formed creative idea, you will know that this is possible. I'm talking about the moment before you know.

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

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

In creativity, we prepare, we find time, we [00:11:00] surround ourselves with our equipment, or we coalesce others to help us with our idea. We plan, we research, we think about the 'what ifs'. Next is action. The moment of proposal. The drinking of the water. Or in our case, the creative act, the making of marks on the paper, the strumming of the guitar, the tapping on the silver or the pinching of the pot.

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

In creativity, this is potentially more complex, but for me, it could include the sharing of an idea, a work or a concept. Or it could simply be finishing a piece of art. That contact creates the [00:12:00] next phase, which is

satisfaction. Our bride or groom said yes! Our thirst is quenched and our headache is starting to subside.

Our art is complete or our idea is shared and we feel amazing. After the satisfaction comes withdrawal. That come down feeling I talked about earlier, the day after the big gig, the day after the proposal or the wedding, the end of the glass of water. And now finally we reached the eighth stage, the fertile void, the nothing. The in between. Before we feel the sensation of thirst again. Before we embark on our next life changing goal. Before we start the next creative act. In Gestalt the cycle starts all over again: sensation, mobilisation, action, contact, satisfaction, withdrawal and back to the fertile void.

And what would happen if we just skipped a stage? If we just went back to mobilisation, we just finished the work and avoided the feelings of withdrawal by picking up the brushes, tools and instruments and starting again? [00:13:00] Let's indulge ourselves in the void now and dwell there for a moment. In the in-between. These in-betweens, these fertile voids could be small and happen almost without us realising them, as in the case of our thirst quencher.

But for creatives, sometimes we take a long time to create something with a focus on a significant climax or delivery moment. And this sense of loss and nothingness can be hard to trust.

Let me share with you an experience of my own to bring this to life. A few months ago, I completed a Masters in Songwriting. My final research project was all-consuming. I spent six months on my academic research and creating a collection of 12 songs to accompany it. In the final weeks, it took every second I had to get to the finish line. I worked diligently every day in between my day job and my other responsibilities, and I loved it.

Then the final day came. I had to present my research. [00:14:00] Everything I'd done for months was leading up to that moment. And then suddenly it was over! For weeks I'd been getting up a little bit earlier to have a couple of precious early morning hours at my desk. I had declined or cancelled social engagements so that I could focus. Then one Wednesday morning I woke up with absolutely nothing to do. I exaggerate because of course there's always stuff to do, but I'm sure you understand the

sensation. I'd filled my time with one thing so thoroughly, it was like going from 100 to 0.

Anyone with small kids may know the book 'A Squash and a Squeeze' by Julia Donaldson. This was a favourite with my children when they were small. It's the story of a little old lady that lives all by herself in a home that she thinks is too small. She meets a wise man who hears her complaining that there's not enough room in her house and the wise man tells her to take in her hen. 'Take in my hen? What a curious plan!'

Yes, I do remember how the book goes [00:15:00] by heart, even though my kids are now 16 and 19!

Then he tells her, 'take in your goat' and then the pig, and finally her cow. In exasperation. She goes back to the wise old man who tells her, 'take out your hen, goat, pig, and finally cow'. And yes, you guessed it...now she thinks her house is enormous! It isn't a squash and a squeeze.

This is the sensation I had after completing a master's. The time I had seemed vast. My first instinct was to immediately reach for my own template and revisit my ten-year plan, which could be seen as a form of mobilisation in Gestalt. I was missing my research so desperately and I thought I could write a new plan which articulated how I could extend the research into a book or creating some specific songwriting resources. I started writing frenzied emails to various people about next steps, usually at 1am in the morning. Fortunately, I didn't send them.

Then something made me stop. [00:16:00] I knew I'd changed dramatically as a person during the two years it took me to complete my master's, and even more so during the last few months of deep research. It was so tempting to capture the perceived evolution of my priorities immediately, but instinctively I knew that if I did that too soon, I was in danger of prioritising the wrong things. I needed to give my mind - my subconscious self - time to compute, and as uncomfortable as it felt, lean into doing nothing. To 'noth' for a period, not forever, not even for months, but it was summer, and I knew that I could afford to indulge in not making any big decisions for at least three to four weeks.

For me, time bounding my unstructured period helped a lot with this. And it's something that I would recommend if you're able and you feel really uncomfortable in the void.

By giving myself just less than a month to see what emerged, I was able to offer myself some useful limitations and [00:17:00] these parameters are important for quelling the ever present inner critic that we've discussed before. Nothing's harder than doing nothing. Ha! Some people might laugh at this, but for many it's so true. That inner critic can get pretty vocal about this. We've been conditioned since we were children to 'get up, don't be lazy, stop daydreaming'. In the 80s there was even a TV show called Why Don't You?, in which the theme tune said 'why don't you just switch off your television set and go out and do something less boring instead?'

It's virtually impossible to relax and do nothing without feeling guilty about it. Being lazy is seen as inherently bad. And we know from our previous discussions in the very first episode of series one, that busy-ness is glorified by society. The busier you are, the more you are perceived to be contributing societal value. Maybe the idea of doing nothing makes you feel indulgent or even selfish. Perhaps you feel judged or worry that there will be nothing to show for your time off [00:18:00] or perhaps you're afraid you'll be bored.

Now there is a duality here because, as I said already, you can't really do nothing. For me, I still had some day job work to do, but I also had a huge amount of available time, because as I mentioned already, I'd cleared every single optional thing out of my schedule for months to focus on my creative research.

Rather than fill that time with big decisions and creative projects, I tried to identify activities that would allow free thought to occur without forcing it. I tidied up. I walked, journalled, read books - mainly fiction, which was a joy after two years of reading almost exclusively nonfiction and academic books. And the strangest thing happened. When I was least expecting it, one morning I was sitting with my morning pages - that's early morning journaling - and I had an epiphany. I love songwriting with all my heart. But I also love this podcast.

And I realised that as I'd been drifting around in my [00:19:00] fertile void, The thing that kept whispering in my ear was 'In 10 years' time' this



podcast, the resources I create for you...I became more and more sure that this is where my heart lies and that it needs to have an equal prioritisation alongside my music career for me to live a satisfying creative life.

I suspect that this would have become clear to me at some point in the future and I can't ever prove otherwise, but I'm pretty sure that if I jumped straight back into mobilisation without the fertile void and this emerging sensation that came out of it, I may have taken longer to get there.

Now back to the void and an important health warning. There is an entire industry dedicated to the business of using your attention. And it is in your pocket. As soon as you have any time available, it's right there, ready and waiting to use up any spare minutes. When I was completing my master's, I would turn on the Do Not Disturb mode on my phone so that I wasn't distracted.

It took me about a day and a half of completing [00:20:00] that research to lose the discipline. I didn't have a need to be in Do Not Disturb mode so often and I was looking forward to reconnecting with friends. I probably don't need to spell out what happened to my screen time. When I checked at the end of the first week of my void, I was utterly amazed that I seemed to have clocked up nearly three hours of screen time on my phone every day. That's just my phone, and not including the screen time on my computer that I use for work!

How was that even possible? Some days it even tipped over four hours. The attention economy is incredibly subtle. It convinces us that we're being productive, that we're relaxing, learning and connecting when we scroll. And sure, yes, there will be elements of that in our scrolling. Even without my master's to occupy me, I couldn't understand how there were that many unoccupied hours in the day to be absorbed by Silicon Valley.

We all have some dead time, when we're commuting, waiting for an appointment, on a lunch break. [00:21:00] But that dead time could be used differently, if we choose. I was suddenly tempted back to scrolling for hours alongside working, looking after my kids who were home in the day, with no university or school taking them out of the house.

It takes a huge amount of discipline to resist the attention economy. And I'm not the only person who's battled this and ironically, somebody on

Instagram recommended I read the book, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* by Jenny Odell. I didn't always find it to be the most accessible book, but of course the details are in the show notes if you're interested in reading it yourself. But what Jenny did give me was a framing for resistance. She calls out the capitalist culture that is rewarding us for engaging in other people's fake news rather than investing in our own ability to slow down and engage in what is around us. She gives us permission to do nothing.

Let me read a quote from Jenny:

*In a situation where every waking moment has [00:22:00] become the time in which we make our living. And when we submit even our leisure for numerical evaluation via likes on Facebook and Instagram, constantly checking on its performance like one checks a stock. Monitoring the ongoing development of our personal brand, time becomes an economic resource that we can no longer justify spending on nothing.*

With that in mind, perhaps Oscar Wilde is right. Perhaps alongside an intellectual act, doing nothing is also the bravest thing we can do as creatives. Allowing ourselves to sit, staring at the wall, twiddling our thumbs and letting our minds wander. Just to see what might emerge.

Back in Wilde's day, it probably felt like a privilege to do nothing. Now it could be a radical act of resistance and one of huge consequence for our creative output.

In defence of your time, we must come to the end now. And [00:23:00] as with the previous series, every episode, I offer a challenge, a question and a recommendation.

The challenge is this: I would like to challenge you to do nothing. Start small, do nothing for just two minutes. There's a website called *donothingfortwominutes.com* and it has a timer and a picture of some waves. My challenge to you is to try it out and see how it feels. See what emerges during two minutes or after. And if you manage it, give yourself a huge pat on the back. This is intellectual stuff. Oscar Wilde said so!

The question: please, look at your phone and check your screen time. My question, my provocation, is are you happy with the number of hours or

minutes you spent looking at your phone? Think about your day and when you start scrolling and carve out some of that time to create or journal or listen to a podcast [00:24:00] or do nothing. Really push yourself to resist the attention economy and do nothing is the bravest, most creative thing you can possibly do.

Recommendation: I would like to recommend a fantastic resource for writers called the London Writer's Salon. I've only just discovered this myself, but it is incredible. If you're not a writer in the traditional sense, I still think this is valuable to you.

There are lots of additional resources for writers of poetry, books, newsletters, academic writers, children's writers, songwriters. But more, the most brilliant thing they do could be used by anyone living with creative balance. Four times a day, they run a Zoom call for anyone wanting to write. People join to write in their journals or write their morning pages as suggested by Julia Cameron. Or they come to edit their novels, write poetry, comedy, articles, dissertations or newsletters.

Every time I have joined the call, over 100 people have been there alongside me. The session [00:25:00] starts with a quote and an offer for everyone attending to share an intention. Then in silence, on mute, but with the camera on, we all just write! The London Writers' Salon suggests two rules for this precious hour. Write or do nothing. The Zoom call gives us all additional accountability. And after 50 minutes of writing, we join back together again for 5 minutes of sharing. I can't stress enough how magical it is.

I urge you all whatever your creativity is to give it a try. To write something and to have this incredible communion while you journal or create. As you know, I'm very keen to ensure this podcast stays ad free. I think it is 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've had some value from my research, please consider making a small donation. Think of it [00:26:00] as buying me a coffee or a salad so that I can keep the content free of ads. You'll find a donation tab on my website where you can do that. And I thank you so much for considering this generous gesture.

Next time we're going to talk about 'reframing rejection'. It's a topic I've become so inspired by that I could probably do an entire series on it. I'm diligently working to distil everything I've learned into a 20 minute or so episode and I can't even put into words how excited I am to share it with you. It's been a complete breakthrough for me. And I can't wait to have the conversation with you.

Until then, please engage with the conversation on Instagram or Facebook. Sign up to my creativity newsletter on the website and if you know someone who might benefit from everything we've been thinking about, please just open your phone right now and text them a link to this episode. And then close your phone straight away so you don't add to your screen time! I suspect they will appreciate it as much as I will.

Until next time, keep creating. Peace and love.