

EPISODE 4

Tricia: [00:00:00] Welcome to episode four of *In 10 years time: How to live a creative life*. Thank you so much for being here. I'm Tricia Duffy. I'm a songwriter, a media consultant, a singer, 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 that creative dream a reality.

[00:00:30] With a combination of small daily steps and the heady power of 10 to help us, we will live a more satisfying life. If you would like to engage with this conversation, please follow me @intenyearstimeofficial on Instagram or Facebook, or @intenyearstime on Twitter or TikTok. I respond to every direct message, and if there is a topic or question you'd like me to research and discuss, I would love to hear about it.

I've spent the last two years trialling [00:01:00] ways to live a more creative life and I'm distilling all I've learned in thousands of hours of research into this podcast series so that you can embark on a similar journey. On my website, intenyearstime.com, you'll find free resources which include a 10 year plan template, a creativity finder, a feedback cheat sheet, and ideas for creative things you can do if you only have 10 minutes.

I'll keep adding more resources over the coming weeks and months, so please do let me know if there's something you would like to see.

[00:01:30] On with today's episode.

We're going to talk today about creative process, as opposed to the creative outcome. We spent some time last episode thinking about what life might look like and feel like in 10 years time. We explored how the benefits of long term thinking allows you to chart your course and live with a sense of direction that's true to your authentic self. I believe that it's a powerful tool that will serve you well, [00:02:00] particularly if you're embarking on a journey of creative discovery or creative mastery. But when it comes to day to day creative practice, there's something

liberating about setting intention and direction. And then investing your energy in the process of creating without any expectation of the end goal, outcome, or product.

The psychologist, David Niven, author of *The 100 Simple Secrets of Happy People*, has uncovered his secrets to happiness by mining the findings of psychological research residing in scholarly articles and journals. [00:02:30] And he's found that there are a number of consistent themes.

I want to focus on just two of those themes now, as the book is not strictly a creativity book, although there are many crossovers with becoming a more creative person. And, as always, I'll add a link to his book in the show notes. The first of his simple secrets that I'll draw your attention to is that happy people tend to have a strategy for happiness. In other words, knowing what you want, why it makes you happy, and making a plan to get it. [00:03:00] Like my 10 year plan.

Let's park that for now because the focus of this episode is another of Niven's secrets, that happy people are able to focus on process rather than end results of their activity. He found that life satisfaction is 22 percent more likely for those with a steady stream of minor accomplishments than those who express interest only in major accomplishments. Processes are made up of small things, daily practice [00:03:30] and activities.

Both these simple secrets relate to my philosophy. A clear, long-term intention, coupled with small, manageable steps, with little or no expectation in and of themselves, will lead to a satisfying and truly creative existence. So, let's break that down for a minute. Because this way of looking at happiness might run counter to everything you've heard. Surely a 10 year plan is focused on the end result? But not so. [00:04:00] A 10 year plan is far enough away to be a dream, an aspiration, an inspiration. It gives you a broad roadmap, a north star to follow. The focus on process in creativity is taking the lens to the moment of creating, rather than the thing you will create.

For example, if you are a painter, focusing on the act of painting, not the artwork you will have at the end of an art session, will be the thing that makes you content. Now again, that's not to say you don't have an idea of what you're making. [00:04:30] When I sit down to write a song, I prepare with the necessary objects, a guitar or piano, a notebook and pencil, my computer, maybe my microphone. I may have an intention to write a song about a particular topic, but what I try to resist is any expectation of how that song will turn out. I'm just focusing on the process of creation and trying to enjoy that. Expectations for your, as yet uncreated art, is the death of creativity. [00:05:00]

Let's unpack this. Creativity is like a muscle. Let's go back to the marathon analogy I used in a previous episode. If I got up one Sunday morning in April and tried to run the London Marathon with no training, I would definitely fail. Not only that, but I would likely cause myself an injury and maybe substantial long term damage to my health.

If I want to run a marathon, if that is the long term vision, or dare I say the equivalent [00:05:30] to a 10 year goal, then I must start small. Walking, running short distances, gradually building up my stamina and my strength and skill. Imagining that moment I cross the finish line offers me great incentive.

I know why I'm training, I know the direction of travel. But if there's no joy in the individual runs. No pride in the moment that I run my first 5km. No elation at the end of that first 60 minute run [00:06:00] when I arrive home and know I could have run further. Then it's unlikely I would stick to the weeks of training and get to that finish line at all.

The same thing is true of creativity. Focusing on process is something we need to build into our daily life, something to practice. I mentioned the author Oliver Burkeman in his book *4000 Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* in the first episode of this series. But I mention him again here because one of his ten tools [00:06:30] for embracing your finitude is to decide in advance what to fail at. This really amplifies what I'm trying to say. We know that society is results focused, and we talked

about success measures in that first episode. And like our careers, even our hobbies or creative pursuits are often defined by what we might achieve, or the goals we set for ourselves.

But the more we do that, we run the risk of becoming detached from the real reason we're on a creative journey, and the joy we can get from our practice. [00:07:00] Setting goals should be aligned to our own personal intentions as opposed to external pressure to succeed in societally defined ways. By switching our gaze from the results to the process, we allow ourselves freedom.

Freedom to experiment, freedom to fail, freedom to move in unexpected directions that will develop our art, our creative expression, to new places and possibilities. If you're starting out in creative practice, it's easy to [00:07:30] get disheartened if you don't get great results each time. And I'm here to tell you that's completely normal.

And the experience of every single creative person that has ever lived. One of the very reasons I wanted to start this podcast is because I'm on the journey with you too. I fail just as much as I succeed. And every single successful artist, those who have won awards or make a great living from their creativity, has been there too.

[00:08:00] If you're already living a creative life there might be a different flavour to this challenge. How do you push yourself further? If you do get some success it is very easy to allow what started as a truly creative life to become routine. Success can be a joy and a burden if you find yourself replicating something that works over and over again for commercial gain and losing the love for the act.

There's a useful book that deals with that particular phenomenon by Kent Nurbun called *Dancing with the Gods*. He unpacks [00:08:30] when art is really art, or when it's going through the motions because societal and commercial pressures are interfering with your creative practice. He asks us to remember that the greater your success, the greater the forces that will try to confine you.

Though people will become hungrier for your work, they will become more specific in what they expect your work to be. Something he describes as the 'golden handcuffs of success'. Which seems like a lovely concern to have, right? [00:09:00] Maybe. But it is a concern, no matter, and I want to encourage you to keep all that we are talking about in this episode close to you as you go on this creative endeavour, so that you don't inadvertently spoil the very thing you are seeking. I'll put a link to both the books I've mentioned in the show notes.

Whatever phase of your creative journey you're at, it's a common tale that we become so focused on the results that fear and doubt creep in and stop us from even starting. [00:09:30] And I'm not immune to this. Even now I will sometimes find myself unable to start a piece of writing because I have this inner critic that tells me there's no point because it will be crap.

That inner voice is a pain. I've called mine Sebastian. I've even written a song about him. I'll put a link into the show notes if you'd like to hear it. He's really not a great guy.

In creativity, the process is more important than the outcome. [00:10:00] We have an intention, preparation time, and a generation stage. Let's take each of these steps in turn. Intention is critical and it's very helpful if it's specific. Taking time to think about what we intend to create can be liberating. It can often be about experimentation too. If you set an intention to see what happens if you experiment with, say, a new artistic technique - perhaps you're a painter and you want to see what happens if you use an iPad - you might set an intention [00:10:30] to experiment using Procreate, the digital illustration app, to see what it can do. As a songwriter, I might set an intention to write a song in a different way, such as with a question title, or to experiment with an unusual time signature.

Next we prepare. For our painter, the iPad and the pencil must be charged, the app downloaded, perhaps a YouTube tutorial on the commute home from work as well. A songwriter gathers the necessary

equipment: instruments, guitar [00:11:00] or piano, paper, pencil or computer. But most creative endeavours don't require that much equipment at all.

So don't let the lack of tools, space or time stop you from creating. It's another form of blocker, putting up invisible barriers to prevent you getting started. Minimise the preparation as much as possible, particularly if you're starting out. Let me expand on this. I have a friend who has a way with clothes. [00:11:30] She says that one day she will live a creative life by creating patterns and making her own clothes. But she will only do that when she has a dedicated sewing room. And that might be a wonderful aspiration for her 10 year plan, but I suspect she would get more value out of such a space in the future if she could dedicate a few hours now to setting up her machine on the dining room table or going to a sewing class.

We've set our intention and we've prepared. Now it's time to generate. This is the creative act itself. [00:12:00] Making a mark on the iPad and responding to it in the moment until the work emerges. When I'm writing a song I often start with lyrics, keeping a long list of writable ideas on the go all the time in the back of my notebook. Carrying a notebook or having a notes page on your phone is a very good practice for us all by the way. I might start mind mapping an idea from that list or responding to a feeling I have in the moment. Or I'll free write about something specific, building prose and then mining it afterwards for song lyrics. [00:12:30]

Last year I participated in the Song A Week Challenge run by a wonderful man, James Tristan Redding, in Nashville. Each week you challenge yourself to write a new song and he offers a prompt as a jumping off point and you never know what you're going to get. One week, the prompt was, 'Oh no, it's the Plantagenets'. Can you imagine? I hadn't been particularly attentive in school history lessons. So I did consider skipping that one, but I really wanted to write something every week for the project.

[00:13:00] So, I just cracked on. I actually used AI. I asked ChatGPT to tell me the story of Queen Maud, and used that as a source. Sometimes AI can help us in spite of its limitations. The song is quite fun, but not useful for any commercial gain. But I was pleased with it. It's buried on YouTube somewhere. I'll find a link and put it in the show notes.

Finally, when we stop our session or finish our work, we can allow ourselves the chance to evaluate. [00:13:30] I'm going to talk about evaluation in a lot more detail in the next episode, but here's a point to consider now. It's only fair to evaluate against our intention. If you set out to experiment with the digital illustration app Procreate and you have a piece of art, then regardless of your own artistic opinion of that work, you've achieved something. You've learned how the tool works. You may have had inspiration come that could end up influencing your painted work. Not every picture you create [00:14:00] will be worthy of awards, but in many creative activities, volume is key. It really is a numbers game.

For songwriters, we often say you have to write ten bad songs to get to the eleventh that was any good. And I've learned over the last few years that writing, writing anything is better than doing nothing at all. Even if the song sucks. And believe me, some of them really do. They're just in the way. I've got to write them, get them out of my system to make space for the good stuff. [00:14:30] You don't have to show them to anybody, but just know that it can be a helpful exercise in and of itself.

It's worth saying that your intention may not always be clear to you and it may evolve during the process of creating. Indeed, what you set out as your intention may not actually be your real intention at all. Your mind plays tricks on you. The conscious mind tells you one thing, but your subconscious mind has a bigger goal in mind. [00:15:00]

This has happened to me on numerous occasions. I once set out to write a song from the perspective of a waterlogged log floating down the river. I was fascinated with the power of the log, its ability to destroy or support, and its history as a living tree. When the song was finished, I

realised that it was actually a feminist song. I was using the waterlogged log as a metaphor. This song will be released later in the year so I'm sorry I can't share it with you right now. [00:15:30] The point is that knowing your intention is important, but flexing it may also be valuable to you.

Sometimes you don't fully know what your brain has in mind. If you ever feel blocked or stuck, there's another useful way to think about your creativity. Create a fake intention that's super easy and focus on the act of doing. For me, I might say, 'I'm just going to write a bad verse and chorus by noon today.' [00:16:00] Most times I've tried this, I've inevitably written more than a verse and a chorus by 10am, and almost always something I have some pride in. By removing my expectations of success or results, or even creating a fake deadline, I liberate myself to just write. I know that this is a mind trick that a lot of authors use too.

As I've said, the topic of intention and its relationship to evaluation is something that we'll come back to in the next episode because it's extremely important when it comes to giving and receiving feedback. [00:16:30] Sharing your work is part of living a creative life, and I want to support you to manage that part of the process next time. It's time for me to offer my challenge, question, and recommendation for today.

My question to you is this. When you think about your creative life, Are you more excited by the idea of doing the practice, the creative act, or the end results? [00:17:00] Take some time to meditate or journal on this question. There are no right answers, but it's something useful to reflect on, I think.

And my challenge is to try something new. Set yourself an intention to get out of your comfort zone and experiment. If you're a painter, try another medium. If you're a dancer, challenge yourself to a new step. If you're a songwriter who starts with lyrics, try music first. If you're a potter who does wheel throwing, try coil construction. You get the idea. [00:17:30] Set an intention to experiment and only evaluate your results against that intention. The experiment you select will be

interesting in and of itself. Your mind has much to offer if you liberate it from a need for a specific outcome and where it leads you might really surprise you. Even if it's to conclude that you don't want to try it again.

The recommendation this week is a fun little book by Austin Kleon called [00:18:00] *Steal Like an Artist*. In this book, Kleon encourages all of us to embrace and remix others' ideas creatively and use them as a way to push ourselves to innovate. It's really digestible and easy to read. Austin himself recommends that you use it as a daily course in creativity. And once you've read it, pass it on to someone else to keep the love flowing.

I just passed my copy to a fellow songwriter and she's loving it. The book gave me confidence to mine life for ideas and as a result [00:18:30] I steal like an artist myself every single day. Whether it's something someone said to me at the bus stop or a quote I find on social media, they all go on the long list to be used and turned into something original later.

I once saw a Confucius quote chalked on the pavement in Trafalgar Square that read, 'You only live twice, the second life begins when you realise you only live once'. I stopped and wrote it down. A couple of days later I learned that the songwriter [00:19:00] Chris Cornell had died. And while I was waiting for a meeting, I wrote the lyrics for a song called *Hard to Live*, for the duo I was in at the time, which includes that quote.

If you'd like to listen to it, I'll put a link in the show notes. Thanks for joining me today. If you have any comments at all, please send me a message on Instagram or leave me a comment on my website. I would love to hear from you. As I touched on earlier, next time we will talk about sharing your work and how to manage feedback.

I can't wait to have that conversation with you. Until then, peace and love.