

Ep #11: Negative Space: Making Something from Nothing



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Leah Badertscher

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Have you ever wished you could make something out of nothing? Artists and creatives of all kinds that come to master their art forms eventually gain mastery of the use of nothingness. Musicians, painters, dancers, comedians, writers, they're using this all the time. They use nothing to conjure up magic.

This nothing that I'm talking about is negative space. And in the visual arts, negative space is defined as the space that surrounds an object in an image. But rather than being just emptiness around the image, negative space actually helps to define the boundaries of the positive space – that's the image – and brings balance to a composition.

Negative space is also a concept that is emphasized in eastern philosophy. The Taoist philosopher, Laozi, illustrated the importance of emptiness and how that emptiness gives purpose to things. So here is a passage from the Tao Te Ching, "30 spokes share the wheel's hub. It is the center hole that makes it useful. Shape clay into a pot, it is the space within that makes it useful. Build walls for a room, it is the space within that makes it useful."

So today, I want to talk to you about nothing, and this particular kind of nothing, negative space, because it is so potent and mysterious, and not only in its applications to art, because I think those are more well known. But today, I want to talk to you especially about how to use this nothing to create a life that, ironically, will feel more fulfilling once it's less full.

You are listening to *The Art School Podcast*, a show for artists and creatives who want to become the next greatest version of themselves. Learn how to cultivate an extraordinary way of being and take the mystery out of making money, and the struggle out of making art. Here is your host, master certified life coach, artist, and former lawyer, Leah Badertscher.

Hello everybody and welcome back. I just got back – well, this Sunday, I got back from masterminding in Savannah with a bomb group of women

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entrepreneurs. And there is so much going on and this week was full and full of wonderful things. Like, for instance – I just have to spill the beans, I was so excited – last week, I pitched Ashley Longshore, who is one of my art heroes-sheroes.

She is on my imaginary board of directors. I can type out the exercise if I haven't already. It's awesome. And she was a dream guest for me for the podcast. So on the way down to my mastermind, I had several flight delays and I had my laptop stowed away, so I was spending more time on social media than I usually do, and I just thought, what the heck. I'm going to send her a professional pitch.

I was drafting it, but I'm also just going to reach out on Instagram because she had had this amazing post with this Frida Kahlo painting. And I just said, like enthusiastically and sincerely, "You're my dream guest and here is a little bit about what *The Art School Podcast* is about and what *The Art School* is about. I would love to have you as a guest and to also send a proper and professional pitch. But in the meantime, heads up, I think you're awesome. A pitch is coming."

And she commented back and said, "Sounds awesome. Email my assistant." So I did, with the proper professional pitch, and she is going to be on the show. Yay. So we're getting it on the calendar. So that will be probably beginning or mid-March. So, very excited about that.

And that also aligns with something else I wanted to talk to you about today, because I've gotten a lot of questions about moon-shots and how to plan your moon-shots. And actually, pitching her to be on the podcast was one of my action steps, my massive action steps, that I had lined up for Q1, this first quarter.

And so, again, just a brief review of those action steps that you want to have quarterly as part of your moon-shot plan, plan for 25 things that are

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going to be a stretch for you. Like, you kind of know there's some amount of risk involved, some amount of emotional risk. You're not sure that it's going to be a yes, but you know that if it is, it's really going to get some traction for you.

And a way that I like to encourage people to do this, to know if you're really digging in and really getting traction, is when you're listing out the massive action, the steps you're going to take, in the left-hand column. Make, in another column, make another column over to the right that is titled result.

So, when you think about the action you're going to take, I want you to think about what result, if it goes through, is that going to produce? Because that will get you out of just doing busywork and kind of avoiding real work and just procrastinating through busywork, and instead focusing on what is really going to get me the traction and the results I need to move me forward towards my moon-shot goal?

Because some of you have written in and told me about your plans, and some of it sounds awesome, but the places where I would suggest tweaks are where you're planning out your action, you have things like – if you're writing a novel, for instance – you have, “I'm working on my novel this many hours a week.”

And I would have that result be more quantifiable. And even if you really want to up the ante, like yes, get those pages done, but then have also actions in there where somebody's going to be reading the pages that's going to give you feedback that moves your book closer to being published, if that's your ultimate moon-shot goal.

So, kind of be onto yourself with the places where you are staying in busywork, because it feels kind of productive and satisfying, but you know also you're not really getting traction, you're spinning your wheels. Think about where the emotional risks are that you're avoiding and go right for it.

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Another question I've received, like, why such an emphasis on the cash, in my moon-shot, for instance? And many reasons – like, one is, why not? And the second reason of many reasons is, I talk to a lot of people who have creative aspirations, are very creative and talented, have creative dreams, and overwhelmingly, the number one reason I hear about why they are not spending more time on their creativity and making their art or pursuing their dreams is money.

So that is a lot of fuel for my fire. As I've said before, I want to be an example of what is possible, that you can create your creative dream, you can create a life that is aligned with your values and in integrity for you. And you can be powerfully creative and you can make money doing it.

It both, like, breaks my heart to hear so many people list money as the reason, when that's not a reason. That's something you can figure out. That's figure out-able. It's not a reason to die with your music still in you. Sorry, not going to pull the punches there.

So if you don't think that your money block can be overcome, sign up for a discovery consult with me and we will work through it. I have some of those left before *The Art School* starts and I love doing money work with people, and it's very effective. So I do have some of those spots left if you want to grab one before *Art School* starts.

So, the other thing that has come up a lot, both with my private clients and in some consult calls and conversations I've had with people over on *The Art School* Facebook group is that people are kind of getting into overwhelm mode with their dreams, with their moon-shots, with their goals. And they're kind of getting bogged down in the grind.

Part of it might be this time of year. I think part of it too is when you take on something really big, we almost think it needs to be inevitable that we're

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going to be overwhelmed. Whether that's true or not, you don't have to stay there.

And it seems like a small piece of advice, but trust me, it's huge – I discounted this for so long because I was just too dead set on taking myself seriously all the time, but trust me on this – add more delight into your life. Less grind, more delight. And I'm not saying shirk your duties, blow off your dreams, don't stick to your massive action plan.

I'm saying do those things, build that trust in yourself that you keep your word to yourself and follow through, and find ways to delight in doing it. But also, add in delight in other ways, because it's not about grinding and it's not about working all the time. Find delight in – I just posted on Instagram, there was a \$7 bouquet of roses that I bought that's lasted all week, and I said, you know, \$7, but it makes me feel like a million bucks.

Like, that, to me, is delightful. The friends that I made this last weekend at the mastermind, like, utterly delightful, the dance class that's local here that I adore going to, so delightful. Delighting in, like when I remind myself to really listen to my children's voices and how adorable they are, that's so delightful.

So it doesn't have to cost you anything, but make delight one of your intentions this year, that you're going to infuse more of anything you do with delight. And then also, one last thing – so people struggling with the grind and things not working – this was a question I got a lot this week too.

So a quick suggestion there – think of the last three things that you did do that worked and do those. And if they didn't get you a big enough result, think about how could you take the essence of what you did there that worked and ten-times it.

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So that was really just a quick more specific coaching rundown. And if you have coaching questions, like, I would love to hear from you. Feel free to write in. Or again, you can join us over in *The Art School* Facebook group. That is going to be open and live until *The Art School* program starts, and I'll probably have to archive it for a while so I'm not too scattered and I can open it again once my attention is not just all on *Art School* students.

So, onto today's topic, the concept of negative space. As I said in the intro, negative space is defined as the space that surrounds an object in an image. This is how it's defined in visual arts. If you're a musician, think of it as the rest or the pause or the silence. If you're a writer, think about it as the words that you don't use and how you whittle down your words and leave some room for the reader's imagination. Think about, if you are in design, the concept of just not having clutter.

So again, in visual arts, it's defined as the space that surrounds an object and an image. And rather than just being emptiness, I want you to think of it actually as negative space is something. It's a nothing that's a something. And that negative space helps to define the boundaries of positive space, positive space being the image, and it brings balance to a composition.

So this is a concept that was actually one of the themes in *The Art School* and I think, to me, it seemed it was one of the favorite themes because people really ran with it. And whether or not you define yourself as an artist or a creative, I promise, this concept of negative space will really revolutionize how you conceive of the many spaces in your life; whether it's the space in your mind, the space in your conversations, in your relationships, the words you use, what you choose to think about, the space in your home, the space in your calendar. That's a huge one.

So, this is a really fun topic. And again, if you listen today and apply some of the ideas, I would love to hear from you and what that looks like in your life. Another really fascinating thing about negative space is that negative space and positive space – so the nothingness in the image – not only

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depend on each other, but they actually really create each other. You can't have one without the other.

So, think about how often we don't think about it this way in our daily lives, like we have any space and so often, we feel pressure to run and fill it up; whether with being productive, or there's always something else we could be doing, because we think that is what is going to create fulfillment. So we do this, though, over and over again.

And over time, we start to realize that we feel crowded out of our own lives and like we're just spinning our wheels to get traction. And we want to do something that really matters and live in a way that really matters, but the more we do, the less we feel like we're actually fulfilled or that we're actually finding meaning.

So it was my grandma Donna who became an art teacher in the second half of her life, after my grandfather passed away. It was my grandma Donna that was the first one to teach me about negative space.

I remember being a young girl and I sat down with my sketchbook at her dining room table for a drawing lesson. My grandma was a meticulous and beautiful housekeeper. Her home was immaculate and smelled lovely. And I can distinctly recall how the sunlight was streaming in through her windows and how it just laid across that gleaming pine floor.

And I also have this image for her walking over to the cabinet and taking from the shelves a curvy white pitcher, like a pitcher of water. So she turned around and held it up so I could see, and she just traced her finger along the outline of it. And it was this very beautifully curvy pot, and she explained that this space that was surrounding the body of the vessel and that this was the same for anybody, whether that was the body of a person or the body of an object, like this picture, is the negative space.

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And so, she also told me about how the negative space is just as important as the body and form itself, because it's the negative space that allows us to really be able to see, understand, and really take in and appreciate what we are seeing.

And this is all because the relationship between what is there, which is the positive space, and what isn't there, the negative space, creates a boundary that our eye and our mind can understand. So, in art, what she told me is that negative space is what brings balance, and that is very pleasing to us.

It makes a composition work. And even more than that, like, the more I thought about this, the more it really struck me that without negative space, there is no way we can conceive of the object there. They really do create on another. And I wasn't sure why, for the longest time, why out of all the special times I had with my grandmother, that that one stood out. Like, it had a lot of negative space around it.

It was clear and stark in my memory, but it definitely stayed with me. And part of it was because it fascinated me in art, but then I also realized I had so much more to learn from it in life. And I knew then that I really wanted to make it one of the core teachings of *The Art School*, because it is this beautiful concept that has countless literal and metaphorical applications.

And I don't want to over-talk them because I would just rather give you some negative space to think about that concept, about how not only is the nothing, the negative space, just there, but there actually could be no positive space without it, that those two really create each other. Because I think, we're so focused on the positive form, on what we put into the world and into our lives, that we forget the magic and the creative energy that is in the negative space.

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And I know in our lives that we have this often overwhelming pressure that, in order to create more, we must do more. And in order to be more, we must do all the things and have more and fill our days, our weeks, and our years until they're stuffed to the brim. And I know what it's like to feel like your mind is stuffed to the brim too and that there is no end to what's out there that you haven't read yet or haven't done yet that you still feel pressure to do.

So, something that was very ironic for me, when I was contemplating my moon-shot goal, was you'd think if you'd contemplate a moon-shot, that you there would be more of the more. And really, I couldn't conceive of any way of getting to my moon-shot goal without having so much more spaciousness in my life and without applying this concept of negative space.

Again, there is just limitless ways that I have been applying it lately, but I will say, like, that one of the big ones is interesting because you hear negative space, you hear negative, you hear negate. And something I've had to put into play is saying no a lot more, and no to a lot of great things, and no to situations where people might have been disappointed, or I might even have been disappointed to say no.

But I really could see, like once I embraced that moon-shot perspective, that I wasn't going to get there without a lot of spaciousness and without a lot of sacred spaciousness. And here's where I think some of the practical magic comes in, because the magic of leveraging negative space is that you can actually create more with less.

So, negative space applied to your life as a whole is about creating room around your most important priorities. That's redundant, but I think I still need that reminder; most important priorities, the things that you really love, that are your top values, and the things that make you feel most alive.

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So, negative space then is the opposite of FOMO, fear of missing out, because negative space is trust. And from that place of trust, you can let go. Negative space is also abundance. And when you are truly abundant, you don't have to fill up all of life. Negative space is room to breathe; room and time to pay attention to yourself and your life. And negative space offers generous gracious room, time, and permission to go more deeply into your own life and into your own mind and into your creative process.

Negative space is saying no to that which doesn't serve you and yes to what does. And again, like I said, sometimes negative space is also saying no to things that do serve you and things that do serve others, but once push comes to shove and you really need to decide on priorities, negative space is sometimes saying no to things that are difficult to say no to. Negative space is also though, more clearly, saying no to settling, saying no to low expectations for your life, and saying yes to what you truly love and want and saying yes to believing in your dreams until you're living them.

So, negative space is saying no to the doubts that crowd out the belief, and doing that over and over again, the same way you have to clear the clutter and put away the laundry that accumulates. So, when we focused on this in *Art School*, we focused a lot on how all these different iterations of negative space are very relevant to becoming more powerful and more effective at creating the progress towards goals and dreams.

And while all of that physical work out in the world, the actions, are very important, what I really want to focus on with you here today is the sacred negative space you create in your mind as it pertains to who you believe yourself to be.

A question that I love to ask my clients, and to remind them of, because they hear it a lot, and I remind myself of this all the time too in my own self-coaching – and that question is, did you know that you get to believe whatever you want about yourself? You get to believe whatever you want

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about the kind of person you are, the kind of life you get to live, and you get to decide what is possible for you to create.

The thing is, if you know that and you believe that, then it's very important to choose, consciously and with intention, the thoughts that align with that, the thoughts that align with what you want to believe. And it is also equally important that you insist on negative space around those thoughts.

So just as important as committing to your dream and the thoughts that support your belief that you'll create it, negative space teaches us that it's equally necessary to cultivate a discipline of not indulging in believing and thoughts that don't serve you; self-doubt, self-loathing, destructive self-criticism, second-guessing, self-pity, wondering if it will happen, wondering if this is the right decision or something else is and that constant back and forth and sitting on the fence, instead of believing that it will and committing to believing that exclusively.

Something that's come up a lot in conversations with clients and things this week is that they can feel like then they're doing something wrong when they do have thoughts of self-doubt or of self-loathing that comes back. And what I want to say – those are human emotions, human thoughts, and it happens to all of us.

And it's never fun, but I will say what helps tremendously is if you've done this work and really immersed yourself and entrenched yourself in a belief that you're going to be there for yourself no matter what, and that while you're feeling, like, the pain of self-loathing, don't abandon yourself at that moment. Instead, find a way to be a compassionate presence for yourself.

And what I have found for myself and for others is that when we're experiencing those things and then we try to hold a space of love and compassion for ourselves, we stop because we think we're failing because

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we don't find relief. So, this is an analogy that has helped me tremendously and helped me clients is to think of emotional pain a physical pain.

So, when I have a sick child, god forbid, knock on wood, and they are up with a stomach flu and they have a terrible stomach ache and they're vomiting, I am a loving presence for them. I am there with them through the night and I am loving on them.

That doesn't make their stomach ache go away. That doesn't make the vomiting stop. But I'm with them through that until the morning. And that's how we can learn to be with ourselves too, as our bodies are flushing out these really violent feeling emotions, think of the meta being of your spirit holding you as you process these emotional pains.

So that's also then creating space around the pain so it doesn't just feel like, you know, those really hard emotions consume all of you. I, again, love this concept of negative space because I think there are endless ways to apply it to the sacred art that is your everyday life. There is nothing too mundane and there is nothing too sophisticated.

So this now brings me to the part of the podcast where I want you to do more than just listen. I want you to really lean in here and work with me, coach with me. I'm going to give you the assignment that is, far and away, one of the most favorite assignments, according to the feedback I get. And that's to take this concept of negative space and the definition of it and apply it to a physical space in your life.

So it can be a drawer, it can be a shelf, it can be a corner where you have a chair and a table and you like to sit and read. But I want you to pick a space in your home or your work environment or your studio and dedicate that space as a sacred space, clean the entire thing out, and for a week, just keep it clean and empty and see what comes up for you when you just are still and look at that clean and empty space.

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So that's why I really prefer something you can definitely clear out, like a shelf or a drawer. You could do an entire room. I did that a couple of years ago with my art studio. I cleaned out the entire thing and then deep-cleaned it, painted it all white, and then I was like, "Oh no, I don't want to put anything back in there."

And I was sharing that story with a friend of mine, Amanda Gibby Peters, who has this amazing feng shui business called Simple Shui. And she was saying, "That's really interesting because in feng shui, they have a prescription for after you clean out a space like that. There's a certain amount of days where you don't put anything back in. And then after that amount of days, the only things that you put back in are things that you really are feeling compelled to."

And so I played with that, and at first, I was like, oh no, what if I don't want to put any of my work materials back in or my art supplies? But I kind of trusted that and I felt like it was a turning over of the energy. And it was also at a time when I was shedding some things and reimagining my work and myself. And slowly, I did start to put things back in very intentionally.

So, if you do this exercise, the coaching you can do with it in terms of metaphor is so fascinating. I would be happy to hear what you think of it, and if you send in your examples from your space and I will reply to as many as I can get to. And overall, if you're interested in creating more with less, I'd love to hear about how you think you'll apply this concept to your life.

So, what ways do you think negative space could help you create some magic in your life? And one thing in particular I want you to think about is what is one thought you know – this would be your positive form thought, your object thought, that if you could believe it would be just amazing?

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And then, of course, you know this question is coming; what is one thought you'd like to be rid of? This, by the way, has been by far and away some of the most profound self-coaching work I've done because I've realized, in so many iterations of my dreams, when I would envision my future, and I did that over and over again – finally, what struck me was not so much what was there, but what was absent.

And what was absent was just that, like, incessant self-conscious chatter. And once I realized that, I worked on that and I've started applying it to other areas of my life, like other areas where I was just really craving space, but fearful that, in giving myself the space I wanted, would result in me not achieving my goals when it's actually been the other way.

I have more space in my calendar and in my days than I have ever had in my life and I'm creating more and I'm feeling like I'm getting more traction than I ever have in my life. So it really does feel like there's a leveraging, like a sacred leveraging, that when you trust enough to keep central, in your life, the things that you love and to allow plenty of space around those things, that trust creates a real traction.

So, I wanted to come back around full circle, because I know I started after the intro, this podcast, telling you about how full like has been. And I forgot to finish my ironic joke, because again, I've also never had so much space, and so much beautiful space and margins around the things that I really love. And for me, one of the most powerful things about considering this year and the next three years and the next five is the real shift I've felt around allowing myself to have the spaciousness that my creativity is really craving.

So again, I'd love to hear from you. If you take this concept of negative space and run with it and apply it to any area of your life, your home, your work space, your calendar, your conversations, your thoughts, I'd love to hear about how you take this concept and take negative space to really create a life that's less full and yet so much more fulfilling.

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Thank you again for joining me for *The Art School Podcast*. If you are someone who loves this concept of negative space, who wants to be someone who creates more of what she really wants in her life, more fulfillment, and wants life to be less full and more spacious and have more time and room for what matters and to be someone who really gets traction towards her goals and her dreams, you would love *The Art School*.

And we're starting again in February with the winter 2019 session. I really believe it is the best creative coaching program out there and it's unlike any other program, for artists, coaches, or entrepreneurs, or executives – I have a lot of executive clients and MDs. It is about creating your life.

And it's not a passive class. It's one you bring your goals and your dreams to and we do together so that you are cultivating a way of being in mind, body, and spirit, that makes the result that you desire to create inevitable. So whether you are already achieving at a high level and you just want to do it in a more healthy, loving, fun, delightful, creative way, or if you've struggled with progress toward your goals before or you know how to work hard, you're just not getting traction, you're definitely not seeing results for all the work you're putting in, this class will meet you where you are.

Some clients that I've only ever worked with one on one have said, "You work so intuitively, I don't even know quite how to describe to other people how your coaching works, so how are you able to do that in a group?" And to tell you the truth, that was one of my concerns before I ran the group program.

And I'm so glad that I just held a group program, because the dynamic with the group is really powerful. And there is a different energy going on and it is intuitive, and at the same time, it's amazing how all the people are coming from different backgrounds and have different goals. It's that concept of what is most personal is also most universal, and that the collective energy of that group, that there's something really exponential and powerful and magical about that.

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So if you have something that you are craving to create in 2019, whether that is art or a career goal or an additional \$5000 or \$10,000 a month or a move across the country or relationships or you want to write a book, let me know what your objective is. We can set up a time to talk and we can talk about whether the program is a good fit for you.

Also, if you want to learn more or reserve your spot, you can do that at my website, www.leahcb.com – and you'll find a link to *The Art School* on my homepage. You can also go to www.leahcb.com/the-art-school and all of these links will also be in the show notes. You can go there and learn more. And you can also go there to book a call with me.

I'll be taking as many of those as my calendar commits. I'm still honoring plenty of negative space around my own art and studio time and my own family time. But if you're interested in one of those calls, I do still have some openings. So you can sign up for those and I would love to talk to you about it.

Thanks again so much for listening, everybody. I do have one more thing that I wanted to share today before I go, because today is a really important day. It's a day to celebrate the life of an amazing artist, an amazing poet, and amazing woman.

Mary Oliver passed away today, the day that I'm recording this podcast, January 17th, 2019. And as I was thinking about her many, many poems and volumes of poetry that I love, that what possibly could I share? She's meant, and her work, has meant so much to me, that I couldn't record an *Art School Podcast* on this day and not celebrate her and her work in some way. So, in closing, this is the poem that I chose.

"I was a bride married to amazement. When it is over, I want to say, all my life I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking the world in my arms."

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Thank you again, everyone so much for listening, so much for letting me know you're listening, for leaving a review. That means a lot to me. I really appreciate it. keep writing in, keep listening, keep sharing, and until next week, have an awesome one and I will see you all next time.