

Ep #101: (Part 1) Taking Yourself Seriously and Striking Gold with Hope Dunbar



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Leah Badertscher

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If you have an emotional reaction to something that you're working on, you honor that and you say, "That is not a mistake. That is not just because I feel sad today." It's because something's getting you right in the feels. And so, it took me a lot of rehearsal with that song by myself to sing it and cry, sing it and cry, and continually singing it and crying until the day where I felt like I could get up in front of a microphone and sing it to the audience and not cry.

Leah: Well, that's wicked amazing.

Hope: That's where the rubber hits the road. I mean, you're having a conversation with your own work. Your own work is talking back to you and busting you open a million times and you're also charged with this job to take the message outside yourself.

I could have very easily said, "This belongs to me. It's so special." It's because I cry all the time. The harder work was to say, "This is special. It's just for me. And also, I need to hear it, then somebody else definitely needs to hear it and I owe it to that person out there to get all the tears out so I can walk up on a stage and deliver the song so they hear it.

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That was a clip from my recent conversation with singer-songwriter Hope Dunbar. Hope is a pioneer of the new American prairie style, the incarnation of Americana and country folk sound, staking claim under a big sky, shouting at the north wind, digging in and refusing to leave.

Hope is from a small town, Utica, in Nebraska. And it's there that she writes her songs. She finds her inspiration all around her in what most would consider empty vista, a dirt road disappearing through fields toward a flat horizon. This is where Hope sees art in the simple. And she spins tales of limitless possibility, conjures stories of people near and far, living lives inside similar walls, internal and external.

Where you'd least expect to find the mystical is where Hope Dunbar's songs live. And, as I think you will see revealed through our conversation, Hope is a consummate storyteller and she does occupy this wonderful place, the intersection of very grounded down to earth and the mystical.

One reviewer of her album *Three Black Crows* wrote, "This is an album filled with vivid stories, not unlike the ones you'll find on Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska*. If you are a fan of the craft of songwriting, this is definitely an album you should check out.

Another wrote, "And Hope Dunbar, from little Utica, Nebraska caught me off guard with some incredible language and truth-telling, including the mystical *We Want*."

In addition to being a powerhouse singer-songwriter, musician, performer, Hope Dunbar is also an extraordinary member of the Art School Mastermind. So, I'm thrilled to be able to share this conversation with her today. We talk all things creative process, community, and the art and

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practice and way of life of dreaming big and then, every day, doing the work to create that and live into that reality.

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.

Welcome, everyone, to another episode of *The Art School Podcast*. I hope this finds you all safe and doing well. It is a beautiful October here in Michigan. We are enjoying just the beginning of the leaves changing, the brisk air. It is such a beautiful time of year here. I love all of the four seasons. There is something to love about each of them and fall in particular holds a special magic.

And so, hopefully someday, when COVID is over and my studio is built out back, I am dreaming of holding an opening, a reception, and exhibit, also Art School reunions. So, maybe we will rendezvous. I really hope so, someday. And I think this time of year would be such a beautiful time to do it.

The farm is incredible right now. Like I said, the leaves are changing. There are still flowers blooming on the prairie. The air smells different. We have had some bonfires in the evening, so there's that wonderful smell of that, the crackle, the warmth. And I've taken yet another trip with my children to the pumpkin farms where we've loaded up on more pumpkins and more mums.

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So, it's looking very festive around here and certainly seems like we should be having a large gathering or party. But we will save that for another time when it's safe. And in the meantime, sending you the best of these gorgeous harvest vibes, also to our friends in parts of the world where I know it's not autumn right now.

So, yeah, let's just set the intention that we will have a lovely autumn celebration together someday. And I'm totally digging the vision of it being around this dream studio that I have in mind.

So, today, I'm so excited to share Hope with you. You will hear, as we move into the podcast, I love the organic conversation. And I've noticed sometimes, for myself and for others, that when you say, "Okay, now we're recording," it somehow changes the tenor of it. And there are so many times when I'm talking to clients, either in the Art School or the Mastermind when I am just in love with the moment and the conversation that we get to be having in that moment. and I think, "Oh gosh, I would love for more people to be able to hear this," because I think it would be so helpful, so insightful, and so fascinating to bring more people into the conversation.

And that kind of magic happens organically all the time and I've been having many conversations with Hope over the years. In fact, here's some fun backstory about my history with Hope Dunbar is that she was one of the first original 10 clients I ever had.

I hadn't met her before. In order to finish my certification – this was over 10 years ago – I had to create a program that ran for six weeks and I had to take 10 people through it for free. So, Hope came along at the behest of her friend Marci, who was a good friend of mine and my husband's.

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And Marci knew that Hope had launched into singing and songwriting. She was like, “Oh, you’ll like this.” And she brought her along. And my first program was called Soul Genius. And again, it was six weeks with these 10 amazing volunteers, and that was the first time I met Hope. So, our worlds met, rendezvoused, collided more towards the beginning of both of our artistic careers.

And we stayed in touch and both kept continuing down our paths and then when I launched the first ever Art School, Hope was one of the very first ones to sign up. And there’s a pretty cool backstory to how that all transpired, but I think I will save that for another time.

But Hope really is a dream client. Just the kind of talent that I am so honored to be able to witness and hold space for, and also a dream client in terms of what she contributes to the community and what she brings. And I am very happy to say that she is the standard the gold standard, which is the standard for the Art School and for the mastermind. And it’s really the individuals, the artists, the creatives like Hope that make that community, that experience so extraordinary.

As you’ll hear her talk, it is very much about coming in with this idea that we are all here to play and at a high level and we love the process of creativity and being creatives and are all about, you know, what can we do to evoke deeper and more profound levels of creativity from ourselves and from each other? And how can we contribute to the world through our own art, but also through being generous creatives and being generative creatives in community, uplifting one another, being both vulnerable and real and also putting our best selves forward because we know that’s what contributes to the rise of the entire community.

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It is just extraordinary to have Hope there and others like Hope. And I also am such a fan of her music. And I have been from the beginning. And I fancy myself having a really good picker when it comes to music and it's been incredible to watch her continue to rise and to see her begin to receive the recognition that she deserves. And it's also only the beginning.

And the part two of this podcast, we kind of allude to, she's had some experiences, achievements of late that are mind-blowing, that are everything you hope for. And then it still is incredible to be in the moment and witness it happening. So, I think you might feel some of that enthusiasm bubbling through. And hopefully someday in the near future, I'll be able to share with you what those things are. But in the meantime, there is so much to celebrate about Hope Dunbar.

So, I launch right into conversation with her. So, before I introduce you to that, I want to share a little bit of her bio with you. And also, we are hopefully going to be able to weave in some clips from her music into these episodes because that is such an amazing introduction to her as well.

Also, another little backstory. When we were in Miraval for the Massive Magic Retreat last January, Hope was there, brought her guitar, and literally blew everybody away. Everyone was speechless and overwhelmed and we had the good fortune of having her serenade us a number of times and sitting around the fire at night while she played and sang. And it truly, it was magic.

So, here is Hope's bio. She is a singer-songwriter who lives in small-town Utica, Nebraska with her husband John and their three teenage sons. A writer, dreamer, and music lover for as long as she can remember, she

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came late to the craft of songwriting, not penning her first composition before age 30 at home raising three very little kids.

From there, she grew as a writer and touring musician, to date having released five solo albums. One album with her ukulele trio Star Belle. And another with her sister-in-law, Emily Dunbar as a collaborative project Blue Stern Salter, described as a collection of liturgical americana hymns, sacred verse, and song.

Dunbar describes her sound as that of new American prairie, rooted in the pioneer spirit, weathered by the elements, and every inspired by the vastness of a big blue Nebraska sky. She is a three-time Kerrville Folk Festival New Folk Songwriting Finalist. She earned second place in American Songwriter Magazine's Song Lyric Contest, and has toured extensively in the US and abroad, supporting her album Three Black Crows, which was released in 2017.

In 2019, Hope recorded two new full-length records entitled You Let the Light In and Sweetheart Land, presently awaiting release. She is the cohost of the songwriting podcast Prompt Queens, which is awesome and hilarious, I will say, and host of the new humanities and advocacy podcast CASA Talk, produced by Southeast Nebraska CASA. And now, please enjoy this conversation with Hope Dunbar.

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Leah: I like to leave enough room for magic on these episodes too.

Hope: Totally.

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Leah: And just let it be, like, not just – but I love the organic. And I know, on some of my favorite podcasts, they have an edited version and an unedited, I'm like, "Whoever listens to the edited?"

Hope: I'm all for the unedited. That's my jam.

Leah: Unedited is my jam too.

Hope: Yeah, big time.

Leah: So, yeah, leave her wild.

Hope: Yeah, 100%, let's do it.

Leah: Let's do it. And I will open this too with reading, not now, but a recorded version of your bio. So, we can just cut right to the conversation. And one of the reasons I was so excited, of many, to have you here is because I would just love to be a fly on the wall for your creative process. All the elements of it. And two, because you have this songwriting career and it obviously includes the music aspect and two, you have now – 10 years ago, you did the life coaching work with me. And then now, come full circle the last two years, being in this coaching realm.

And so, I think you have a very unique perspective as a singer-songwriter musician and then there's also the unique perspective you have as Hope Dunbar. It's always so delicious.

Hope: Thank you.

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Leah: And so, there's a number of themes that I love to talk about including community and, like, the right kind of community. Because you're in a few different ones and you've talked about how being in this, like your Monday Night Songwriters group, for instance, and also the special chemistry of a group where you're going for it and people are going for it. So, it's not just like Kumbaya. And it also feels very nurturing. And that existing, as a possibility, that people can curate that.

Hope: Yeah, it takes thought and knowing what kind of people – everybody's drawing the line differently. Everybody's putting their line slightly differently and deciding what's possible for them and what's not possible. And certain groups work until the line needs to be moved. And hopefully, you're self-selecting to find people who are always interesting in moving that line and redefining what your barrier is or where your fences are built and then kind of saying, "I'm open to the idea of switching the property line."

Leah: Yeah, so how did that start for you as a baby singer-songwriter?

Hope: As a baby singer-songwriter, if we're going to go back to the beginning, I think I was trying to beat my own personal best. At the very beginning, I had my sister-in-law Emily as kind of the example of how to be a songwriter and raise kids and be home and be in a small town in Nebraska and still feel total green light permission to be an artistic person.

She was really an example for me. And then, when I started doing my own work and my own creation, for me, it was that idea of trying to get my ability level to match my taste level. And I was already a listener of music. I already was a lover and a devourer of the artform. Only I hadn't gotten to where I wanted to be. I wasn't a Brandi Carlyle yet and it was very clear to

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me. And when I looked at the page, this isn't where I want to be. And so, it was constantly trying to out-write my last song.

Leah: How long ago was that?

Hope: So, that was 13 years ago because my youngest son was six months old.

Leah: Really?

Hope: Yeah, so I remember it very, very vividly, that very first kind of spark of inspiration to become a songwriter. It just hit me like a wildfire and once I started writing songs, I started writing that first song when the babies were all asleep that afternoon. It was one of those magical afternoons where all kids were napping at the same time. And it's like, "I'm just going to try it. I'm just going to see if I can write a song and see what happens."

And I did, and then look out world, I could not stop. I could not stop. I was thinking about songs and writing songs all day every day while doing dishes, while pushing the kids in the stroller, swinging at the park. That's all I could think about. And for a long time, I thought of it almost like a magical spell I was under. And at the beginning, I mean, it was super-fun until all of a sudden, I almost got scared in my own mind, thinking if I don't feed this fire and continually write, my biggest fear was I was going to wake up one day and it would be gone, and the idea of it going was unacceptable.

So, what started out – it was always very inspirational and very much self-motivated. I just wanted to all the time. Then, as the months got closer to a year and then a year turned into the second year, if I hadn't gone a day without looking at music or if I'd gone a couple of days because life was

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busy and I hadn't been able to write something, all of a sudden, alarm bells would start ringing in the back of my mind, like, "If she goes away, what will you do?"

And so then, you just – thankfully, in music, I was always able to kind of meet myself where I was at and be super-honest with myself. I don't know why. I can't really explain it. And by that, I mean I could clearly see I had to change my relationship with it from I was under some spell to, "No, I now know how to wield this sword. This is not something that will magically disappear out of – just because it fell out of the sky, doesn't mean it will go back up into the sky because I can't write for a few days.

Leah: Yeah, I can so relate to that, beginning with painting while the stars align, and babies are sleeping. And then not being able to get enough of it. And then the fear that, if you stop, that it was like some kind of stroke of magic, and what if I couldn't do another one? And then moving into, like, you step into, "Oh no, it's not just some magic spell that was a fluke. This is something within me."

Hope: Yeah, I really do think that bring an artist, the way I would describe my own growth is that there are ages and stages to being an artist, just like raising kids. And of course, I track a lot of my art development with raising children because, like I said, my youngest was an infant. And so, I'm like, I know with his birthday coming, I know how many years it's been that I've been working at this.

And I think that there are ages and stages to an artist's existence and that wildfire stage is definitely a thing. And then I think that there is a stage of opening up, like the bravery to then share this very intimate, very personal

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self-expression with the world. That's a stage. You have to figure how that works. It's not immediately obvious how to do that.

And then, how do you respond when the world doesn't respond the way you want them to? That is a development. That's part of a person's development and understanding who they are and your relationship with the art and oddly how it starts out as being very personal. But it is a conversation with not just you and the page. And you can't but deny that because there is a part that is public to this artform.

And so, inviting the public in is scary and wonderful and terrifying. And that's part of it. And then, like, settling into an understanding, like a maturity. There's another stage, for me at least, where I honestly thought the minute someone hears my songs, they are going to whisk me away to Los Angeles and put me in a castle and all doors will be open to me.

There was a time where I really thought that I was so, so good it was undeniably clear to me that all it took was singing the song in front of the right persona and everything would just take care of itself. Which is awesome. But I find, for me at least, part of my development was also listening to people who've been doing it longer than you have and asking yourself, what haven't I learned yet?

Leah: Well, a number of things come up because I have experienced you performing in person and I'm like, "Yeah, the right person hearing her at the right time." And I hope they don't put you away in a castle, but I hope they put you up on some stage... That's my vision. It's going to be the right person hearing her and they'll be like, there's the stage, like the Ryman, like that stage.

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And then, something else, when you were talking about beginning, feeling that initial spark, that wildfire spark when your youngest was six months, was that? That reminded me, I wish I could clip into one of the songs on one of your most recent albums, and the line, “I’m good at babies, I’m good at men, I’m good at carrying both of them.”

Hope: Oh yeah.

Leah: When you talked about that, I got the chills because that line just wafted right through my mind. Were you thinking of that, when you wrote that song?

Hope: Yeah. I still remember where that line showed up in my brain. I was making a left-hand turn in Lincoln, Nebraska. And that song is a very true to life song. And I credit music and songwriting for getting me closer to the truth and getting me closer to the heart of the matter, whether that be what I’m trying to write as a writer, but also what I’m trying to feel and experience as a person.

If I hadn’t had that musical outlet – it’s a very clarifying artform. And listeners are very sophisticated these days and they can hear bullshit and they can hear truth. And you owe it to them to speak truth because they can see through everything else.

Leah: Well, would you mind speaking that particular truth that is the title of that song, and also a refrain?

Hope: Yeah, so the title of the song is Woman like Me (Sing the Prettiest Songs), is that what you’re referring to?

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Leah: Yeah, that is exactly what I'm referring to.

Hope: And when I first wrote that song, it felt like a big fish. And I reached out for help to people who were a little further along in their musical careers than I was. I knew I needed some help with it. At that time, I don't think I was strong enough to be able to discern what advice was good and what advice I needed to just say no thank you to.

I wanted to make people I admire proud of me and happy and I wanted them to like it. And so, I spent a good six to eight months floundering kind of like, "Well, this is what they said. How am I supposed to do what they said?" And it was very hard for me to get back to the essence of the song that I originally started with, which was personal inspiration.

Like, I know what needs to be said. Then you throw it out there to the public and you get feedback on what it's supposed to say. And then you're like, "What am I supposed to do with this? I don't understand what they're talking about." Number one. And number two, "I can't write this from a trying to please my mentor point of view. It won't work."

We had a songwriting teacher once at a workshop that said, it's like you're excavating – he was describing songwriting like sometimes you get a burst of inspiration, like that line, "I'm good at babies, I'm good at men, carrying both of them." It's almost like you're walking through a field and you see a femur sticking out of the ground. And now your job is to very methodically and lovingly excavate the dinosaur.

He's like, "You don't exactly know what you have." You know you've got some gold, but you don't know the rest of the gold. It's your job to figure out how to finish this skeleton. And he's like, "And some of us, some of us don't

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like to excavate skeletons. We like being proud of that first bone we found, and we want to hurry up and finish it. So, some of us are sticking dog's butts on the ends of dinosaurs and pretending like it's done when you know full well that's not how it's supposed to be."

Leah: That is priceless.

Hope: Isn't that funny?

Leah: Yes.

Hope: It's very clear that you're not honoring the importance of the work that you're doing. So, anyways, I had to wrestle with critique and I also had to wrestle with feeling stuck. And it took me a while to get back to where I started, right? The magic at which I started the project needed to be rediscovered in order to faithfully and appropriately finish this song. And that isn't always easy to do.

Leah: No, and it implies a devotion to the craft and an honoring of that initial femur, that gold, that spark that you get.

Hope: So, when I finally finished that song and I think I got it to a place where I believed it was done, I couldn't sing it without crying every time. It busted me open, which is how I knew that I had something that was right. I always feel like alarm bells should go off. You should know that you have gold when you start crying because you can't fake it.

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so, it took me a lot of rehearsal with that song by myself to sing it and cry, sing it and cry, and continually singing it and crying until the day where I felt like I could get up in front of a microphone and sing it to the audience and not cry.

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I could have very easily said, "This belongs to me. It's so special. It's because I cry all the time." The harder work was to say, "This is special. It's just for me. And also, if I need to hear it, then somebody else definitely needs to hear it and I owe it to that person out there to get all the tears out so I can walk up on a stage and deliver the song so they hear it.

Leah: And listening to this song, it hits all the feels because I think it hits that place where you've tuned into the truth of something that is deeply personal for you and then therefore is universal for many of us.

Hope: I hope so. That's what I was trying to do. That's what I'm always trying to do.

Leah: Yes, because I think – the thing that gets me about that song is I can never remember if the title, and I listen to it a lot, I'm like, "Wait, is the title A Woman Like Me Sings the Prettiest Songs? Or is it Women like Me Sing the Prettiest Songs? Because when I listen to it, I want to think it's Women Like Me, so I can be one of those women who have this experience of

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raising your art and raising your creativity while deep in the work of also raising a family and while you are somewhere that is not LA or Nashville, or places that people would think you have to be to do this kind of creative work. And it hits you on that soul level, like so many different aspects of that yearning.

Hope: Thank you.

Leah: And I'm so glad that you brought it back around to this journey of this one particular song because when you were saying earlier about the importance of there's the creativity you do and then there's the part of the phases of creative development where you need to move it out into the world and you do seek mentors or allies or colleagues and friends. And I wanted to ask you then, how did you develop this discernment between, "Okay, I know I need to have work and I need to receive feedback," or I want to, and then what part of your development did you acquire this ability to be like, "I value this mentor's opinion, this colleague's opinion. I hear it and I still know when to trust myself to return to my own original magic?"

Hope: That also was a road I had to walk and a lesson I had to learn. So, I attribute a lot of my development as an artist to the fact that, for some reason, and I don't think I can take credit for it, but for some reason, I did not hold onto my work and keep it precious for very long after I started. Right after I started, I was immediately looking for somebody to help me.

So, very early on in my writing career, in my music career, I don't know why, but I immediately started seeking out critique and feedback. So, the two things lived side by side for a very long time, almost from the very beginning. I did have that "I'm amazing, I'm the next Dolly Parton." But I

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also had this voice in my head that said, “Someone has to help me. I need help. I need someone to help me because I don’t know what I’m doing.

And I wish, again, I wish I could take credit for it because it’s kind of a sophisticated idea. And I think it just fell into my lap. The idea of, I know I have a good gut instinct, but I also know that as a craftsman, as someone who crafts chorus and verses, I’m new to that and there’s tools that I don’t have in my toolbelt so I’m looking for somebody to help me with these tools.

What I didn’t know and what took me a while to realize is I got to a place – and a friend of mine mentioned this, she said, “I think I spent too many years looking for feedback. I got so married to the idea that I wasn’t there yet that I didn’t trust my own voice, that I spent too many years in critique, to the point where I think it was probably a weird twisted desire to have my butt handed to me.

I wanted musical boot camp and the only way I thought I could get it was people telling me, “Yeah, your first verse is good. Your second verse sucks. Go back and rewrite it.” And I took a measure of pride in saying, “I’m the kind of songwriter who is not afraid of having someone say, “Your second verse sucks.”

What I didn’t do though is I didn’t ask myself when it was time to start walking away from that critique and moving to that next stage of development, which was trusting myself and knowing I had all the tools I needed. I didn’t need any more song camps. I didn’t need any more workshops. I mean, I love workshops and I still go to them, but I go looking for something slightly different than what I was looking for, for probably like six or seven years.

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Leah: This is so awesome because I feel like this brings...

Hope: It's telling you a lot about Hope Dunbar...

Leah: I always love learning more about Hope Dunbar. And it also is a perfect doorway into weaving in this other aspect, which is like the coaching aspect. And you articulated something so well, no surprise, on a recent mastermind call, about the paradigm that is very important to me in the Art School and in the mastermind that can be different from other places or other communities that also have good intentions of self-development and growth.

And we were talking about the essential difference being the power differential. Like, is there a power differential? Do you go – and owning that that is all on you, right? To establish that power differential, that you do not need to enter into environments, even if they seem to be set up so as to establish a power differential and they really want you to agree with it.

You can either just walk yourself out of that door or be like, “No, I’m going to approach this a little differently.” And so, do you remember that conversation that we were having at the mastermind? You articulated it really well.

Hope: Yeah, about how to proceed with them for example, a coaching platform, is that what you’re suggesting? Or a learning platform?

Leah: Right, because it seems very similar, as you just started to say, now I take myself into workshops, but I take myself in with a different approach.

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Hope: Yeah, I think that so many of us, especially – and I think that your listeners are inherently lifelong learners, you know, they are always looking for an opportunity to grow and to ask themselves deeper questions. That's why they listen to you.

And I think, for lifelong learners, we have just been taught that there's a certain power differential, that there's a power balance. You walk into the presence of a master and the master imparts knowledge to you. That's what I was doing for years, going into workshops with cool songwriters and saying, like, teach me. Let me absorb what you have. Full of knowing that they had something special that I didn't have. But that there's another way. There's another possibility.

And now, after all of those years being teacher-student, understanding of how information gets passed from one to the next, when I walk into a workshop now, I walk into the workshop confidently understanding that I know who I am and I know what my work is. I love to be in the presence of other people who know who they are and know what their work is.

There's no power differential. There is no other Hope Dunbar in the world and so they can't teach me how to be Hope Dunbar. But there's only one Peter Himmelman in the world. He can't teach anybody how to be Peter Himmelman. He's still a master and somebody who I really admire and love to learn from.

So, when I walk into a workshop but with Peter, I don't feel like there's anything that I need to get in order to reach his level. I think it's important to start a conversation as peers who both are in love with songwriting. And in the conversation revolving around the artform we were talking about, my circumstance of songwriting, when two people who are in love with

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songwriting start talking and he shares his thoughts and I share my thoughts, we both walk away richer.

It's like I'm both teacher and student. He's both teacher and student. That's why he does it. Not just because he loves to impart knowledge, but because every time he walks in with curiosity, just like a student does. And he's interested in hearing what these other hearts and minds want to talk about and dig into when it comes to songwriting.

And so, when I think about growing and workshops now, that's what I'm into. I am into string people who want to talk about songs because they love them. And if somebody's got a Grammy and I don't have a Grammy, that's fine, man. That doesn't exclude each other from the club. We're in the same club because we're in love with this work.

Leah: Yes, so can you say more too about opting in, putting yourself in the way of, quote unquote clubs, the proximity of people that are here to play at this level? They're not here to find where they are in a hierarchy of things. They're here, like you said, for the love of the work, the love of the process, the craft. And can you talk about the importance of putting yourself in proximity with a group like that? Because I know you have the Monday Night Songwriters group.

Hope: Yeah, great question. For a long time – and I'm just going to speak from my own personal experience, because that's the only one I really know about. For a long time, songwriting was like a deep, deep love of mine. It's always been – I mean, ever since I discovered it, it has been something that I truly believe is what I'm supposed to do here on earth.

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I was holding it at arm's distance and I was trying to keep it light in order to kind of balance this, "How can you be so in love with songwriting living in obscurity in a small town in Nebraska?" Like, how do those two things go together? And in my own mind, I was suffering from dissonance going, "Everybody knows I don't make a million dollars on songwriting and I'm just raising kids in Nebraska with my husband. So, I should play down the thing about the songwriting love and I should find this weird balance between it's a really big deal and it's also no big deal."

And it was through coaching that I realized how much energy I was giving away to, "It's no big deal," that I could have been using to funnel into my passion and drive to write the best songs I could possibly write. It was just trying to shrug away all the things that were hallmarks or road signs that pointed to me being in love with songs and songwriting.

And it was through coaching that I was able to see that what I thought I was doing was making peace with my present circumstance. I'm a songwriter in obscurity. I'm pulling in many different directions. What I thought was making peace was actually doing a detriment to the work that I was doing because I was constantly like stealing from its pockets.

Like, I was going through its pants while it was sleeping, and I was trying to take out all the money I could and give it to the housewife so she could go to Target. Like, that doesn't help at all. And I was doing it a long time. And I walked away from that idea into, "I am willing to take myself seriously." And the reason why I'm willing to take this seriously is because it means a lot to me to use the time I have here on Earth to do the best work I can possibly do.

Leah: Period, pause.

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Hope: Period, pause.

Leah: I just got cascades of the chills. Amen. Yes. Because when you stop discounting yourself, and we think these are innocuous little things we do, the ways we discount ourselves. But it is like that death by 1000 cuts.

Hope: It is death by 1000 cuts, man.

Leah: And you're like, "Wait, but I'm not dead. I'm still the housewife that goes to Target. I look okay to everybody else." But meanwhile, that spirit inside you is the one.

Hope: That's suffering. You're doing the detriment to your own spirit. You're not helping anybody. You're drinking the poison to make somebody else at peace, but you're drinking poison, man.

Leah: Exactly, it's not imaginary. Just because it might not be visible to other people yet, it's not even helping the housewife going to Target, for god's sake.

Hope: It isn't. Rooting through the pockets of the thing that you love the most is not doing anybody a bit of good. And I saw places where I was doing things out of habit or doing things because everybody else was doing them and when I stopped and took a minute and said, "Is this really serving the work that you want to do?" the only answer I could come up with was, "No. No it is not."

It is not serving my work to go to another conference because I think that going to the conference will get me in front of the right person who will give me a gig. But I'll have spent three days kind of sad and bummed out and

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maybe a little jealous of some of my colleagues because they're playing on bigger stages than I am. And how is that making me better?

And I think we just live in a world that we look around, I think that's really good, you know, humans are given so many great ways to assimilate and learn and take social cues from one another. You kind of – you don't know how to speak the language, but you watch somebody else, how they set the table in Japan and you're like, "Okay, that must be how you set the table." And so, you kind of try to copy what they do in order to follow the cultural rule.

And we do that in all walks of life. You look to your left and your right and you try to follow what they're doing, especially if you're not sure at all what you're doing. Right up until the moment you have to ask yourself, "Is this really what I want to do? Is this really feeding the soul and the spirit and the heart that has this one lifetime?"

And I got to a place where there were a lot of choices that I was able to make that I never thought were even available to me. And when I started making those choices to lean into a stronger more serious more dedicated songwriting identity, gosh, I just felt so much better. Gosh, I was able to work so much harder and enjoy my life so much more.

Leah: And I know, you and I had a conversation recently in the virtual retreat. It was just you and I. And we were talking about that realization, that epiphany of, "Gosh, if I am built for this, what is the point of me trying to outrun it? Why discount it? Why do this, going through my own pockets at night? Why the death by 1000 – if I am never going to outrun this, why not instead turn around and serve it and just be like, "No, all my energy, my

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precious time is going to go to serving this and not fighting myself, not trying to outrun that which I just can't outrun."

Hope: I mean, I'm so thankful for you, Leah, because I think that it took me a while to learn the lesson. But if it weren't for you explaining, your deepest desire will keep showing up. It will keep showing up and it will not leave you alone.

And I had lived that for many years and thought to myself, "Oh, it's just me wanting to act out. Or it's me feeling stuck because whatever, I don't have a day job and I'm raising children. It's just me going through a phase, like a child." But I'm not a child. And there's no point in treating myself like one. And the idea that the reason why it keeps showing up is because maybe it's true. Like, it's the truest thing going on right now.

Leah: Well, thank you, because having you in these communities and having seen the persistence of your spirit, again, it's just another one of those places that gives me goosebumps and affirms the work because you can see, on the person level, the social self level you're fighting. You're dismissing it, discounting it. But by god, it's so clear to me that something in her is, like, not having anything of it. It keeps showing up and it's not going away and it's not going away.

And I find that so reaffirming, that not only do we not have to try to outrun ourselves, but man, if we just relax into that thing in us that wants to happen, like for you the songwriting wants to happen, if you can turn and serve it, what a beautiful thing that is.

But I think, to me, just the fact that that's real, that's palpable in you and it has been for a long, long time and it just keeps coming and keeps coming

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and to see then you participating with it and the way it unfolds. And also seeing others see you do this work is also such a gift. And I don't want to speak for you, but I know for me, seeing in community the dynamic, the chemistry of women, seeing other women discounting themselves, it's like, you're like, "Oh no, that's not an imaginary pain you're inflicting on yourself." You can't do that without there being some – witnessing another woman do it to herself, it makes you realize that it's very real...

Hope: It's very real.

Leah: What we inflict on ourselves, and you see another woman doing it and you're like, "Oh, please stop. Please, don't do that. Stop." And then seeing her hold in her presence, stay in her gift. Like, we talk about it in the Art School as, like, period pause, and not going into the diminishment of comma, but, right? And it's like we all love seeing another woman, another artist, creative stay in period pause, stay in strength, not fleeing your luminosity.

Hope: Right, and I mean, for anybody who's listening, I will go in and out of my strength like it's going out of style. I mean, it has not been a linear upward projection of momentum and what feels great about doing it in community with other women is that feeling like I might be in a moment where I can't see my truest self. Like, it's blocked from me for some reason or other. But I know that these women can. I know that they can see me and that they can hold – we talk about holding space for one another.

And we do it for one another on the regular. Like, not everybody is batting 1000 every day. And on those day where we're not batting 1000, the idea that there are 12 other women who have every confidence that I will show up back as the real Hope Dunbar and we're just going to wait for her to

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show up and we're going to encourage her to show back up instead of giving the encouragement of, like, "Oh, honey, that was so sweet. You'll get it together."

But no, there's a fierce, like that wild feminine fierce love of saying, "Listen, lady, you have a job to do. And it would be wrong of us to back off. It's our job to remind you of who you really are and step back into the circle. I know you can't see it, and maybe it will take a day or so, but we're holding this circle and we're keeping the torch lit and we're waiting for you to come back." That's amazing.

Before Art School, I mean, I have like amazing women friends who are doing amazing things. We didn't necessarily have the tools and the vocabulary to talk the way that we talk in Art School about staying with one another and asking those whys and those hows and the big dreams. But man, having that and normalizing a culture around women helping women stay strong, there's nothing like it. It's amazing. I couldn't have done it. I could not have done it without the group. I mean, I'm sure I could have, but it would have taken me 15 years instead of three.

Leah: There's magic in a group. I just think, when it's all together, you're like, "This is what it's meant to be." That's an overwhelming sense that I have, like, "Oh, this, this is not only that it can be. This is what it's meant to be." We work as an organism, so you can have an off day, but you don't have the sense of, "Oh, now things are going to hell in a handbasket." You have a sense that your life, your gift is not going to fall through the cracks.

And I think for all of the, like you said, it can be a messy process and it's not linear. But what I see happening – and I think what was the seed of the vision that I had, but didn't have evidence for it yet – the soul, that deeper

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part, that gift, you know, whatever inspires for you a love of songwriting, it's moving. It's wanting evolution. It's moving forward and then, on our human level, we can have all these ups and downs, non-linear. But the soul is moving forward. And we need space for then these souls to get together and be all together, we are rising.

This is about rising, collectively rising. And I think too, the other thing that I love, you pointed out there is a fierce love to the group where they are not going to meet you where you think you are. They are going to have – if it's not aligned and consistent with who you really are, they're not going to meet you where you think you are that day. They're going to be like, "No, we're not having that."

Hope: No, and I think it points back to how painful it is to see a woman, like a fellow traveler get foggy or get lost and confused. We've all lived it. So, when we can clearly see what she's meant for and who she's meant to be and she gets foggy, it affects us. Or it immediately points me back to the time where I was foggy and I didn't believe a word anybody said, but it was important to stay there, to keep showing up and to keep remembering that they're holding something that I can't see right now, and that it hurts when we see a woman struggle.

And the best thing we can do for her is to say, like, step into that truest identity, we're going to help you step into that truest identity because to abandon it is a tragedy. And we see it too much all over the place. Like, the last thing we're going to do is let one of ours step away in tragedy.

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This brings me to the part of the podcast where I want you to do more than just listen. I want you to lean in and really work with me, coach with me. So, since this is a two-part conversation with Hope, I want to offer you just one question to ponder for this week. And then, we'll return to this coaching and follow up in next week's episode.

Just like Hope described, she realized she had been holding this identity of being a singer-songwriter and taking herself seriously at arm's length. That really jumped out to me when she said that because that's something I hear a lot from clients, no matter where they are on their journey, whether they're starting out or whether they are a seasoned veteran, but there is something else that they want to grow into, evolve into, leap into. And they're holding it back, still at arm's length.

So, what might that be for you? So, between now and next week, think about that, write it down, journal about it, and also consider this. How much energy is that costing you to do that, to hold that off at arm's length while you're also still considering it?

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I knew I needed to close this part one of this conversation with Hope Dunbar with this quote from Dolly Parton, "Find out who you are and do it on purpose." I think that sums up so much of what you have heard Hope

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talk about in today's episode. And we also joke, but we're pretty serious about Dolly Parton being one of the patron saints of the Art School.

We quote her often, talk about her often, and particularly what this quote means and how it is really that philosophy, finding out who you are, doing it on purpose, not holding it at arm's length is absolutely one of our main missions in the Art School. And it is something that Hope articulated so beautifully today. And I might add, the reason she's able to articulate it so beautifully is because she's absolutely doing it.

So, I want to leave you with those inspiring words, "Find out who you are and do it on purpose." Saint Dolly. Have a beautiful week, everyone. And I look forward to having you join me for part two of this conversation with Hope Dunbar on next week's episode.