

Ep #108: (Part 1) The Beauty of the Unexpected with Betsy Pearson



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With Your Host

Leah Badertscher

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The other way I learned it creatively was in poetry, the way poetry is, I for some reason decided that I just had to trust that there was something inside of me knew something and was going to – like you say, the inner-organizing principle. Like, I knew, I just have to keep going here. And it's something – because poetry isn't expected to be so linear, I think that was maybe the first place I created. That was the first creative thing I did.

And it was so fun because it was just like, I don't have to develop this idea linearly. I can develop something and then, just like, I thought it was going here, but oh well, I guess it's going here. And then oh, it's all inside you and it will come out whenever it wants to. And it is the same thing. And that is the same thing with process, like you said. You just have to kind of relax and let weird things happen.

So, for me, a friend of mine said to me the other day, this woman who's been my best friend for 25 years, she's like, "You know, I've always thought that you were very creative and productive." But she goes, "What happened the last two years? What happened? You're just so massively creatively productive."

She literally asked me that and I was like, "What?" And then I was like, "Oh, guess what it was..."

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That was a clip from my recent conversation with Betsy Pearson. Betsy is an author, a scientist, painter, translator, a life coach, a mother, and a wife. And that's just for starters. In short, she is a true renaissance woman. And she is also a brilliant and beloved pillar in the Art School Mastermind.

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Betsy has the kind of breadth, depth, and originality to her creativity and intellect that is surprising. Surprising in a delightful, astonishing way. She is the sort of person who, when she speaks, everyone gets quiet and leans in to listen.

In this episode, Betsy shares, as hinted at in that intro clip, how she manages to be so creative, so productive, and also live a beautiful, deep, romantic life along the way. I hope you too will lean in to listen to what she has to share.

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 am recording this again for you during the Thanksgiving week. Actually, Thanksgiving Day, which I am grateful to be sharing it in this even kind of virtual way with you, even just this small part.

I am grateful too that, while this has been a year of challenges, and this week definitely has for sure – it has invited me to double down on my gratitude for my own journey and for, like, being a product of my own work. Because it has been a challenging year. It has been an incredibly challenging week for me actually, the last two weeks. And I am proud of myself for the way that I have come through. And it's very challenging, but in a way where I don't feel burdened.

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I feel my strength. I have felt the depth of the difficulty. I have felt all the emotions, from what we, quote unquote call the negative ones. I have faced all the adversity and held a space as well for the adversity and challenges and triumphs of others. And I feel strong. And I feel the depth and solidity of my own deep inner sacred ground more than ever.

And this too in turn, I feel like, allows me such a freedom and a greater capacity to feel joy and wonder and appreciation for this journey that I have been on and this journey of growth. And I think there would have been a time not so many years ago when I would have thought, "I can't handle that. I don't want to handle that. I don't want for that to happen."

And now, I'm very proud of the way that I've been able to navigate and also hold a space for myself and others. And I think that's a part that maybe is not talked about enough in this industry, that of course, there are the creative achievements and there are the highlights and the goals and the dreams. But absolutely every bit as important as that is the ability to move through all of life, to not just talk about the hero's journey in a sort of pollyannaish whitewashed sense. But that there is real fire to walk through sometimes.

And there is real growth in digging deep that must happen. And I would bet on myself any day of the week to be able to come through, even if it means weeks like this, I did my best to get my podcast done earlier. And you know what, it wasn't happening. And so, still, I'm able to carve out time on this quiet Thanksgiving morning while my husband has so graciously taken the kids out to play football and spend an hour being grateful for Betsy, this conversation I'm going to share with you for the 10 years that I have known this incredible woman and the gift that her life and her friendship has been to me and to anyone she's come in contact with.

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I know many of the Art Schoolers could tell you stories of how Betsy has impacted their lives. And that's just in our Art School community. Not to mention everyone else who knows her in many other ways.

So, I'm grateful then too to spend this time with you. And from my family to yours, even though you're receiving this a week later than Thanksgiving, even though many of you are listening in from around the world, I'm grateful for your presence on this journey. And I want to just offer you a moment too to reflect back on the hard things that you have done this past year, and to be grateful to yourself for your strength and for growing this capacity for self-love and self-compassion along the way, which really allows you to reap a greater wisdom, to harvest and feast upon all of those experiences, which again is very much aligned with the energy of this season that we are in and of this year that we are in.

So, so much adversity. So, don't neglect though the seeds of strength and growth and resilience, and also creativity. I feel like my creativity, it's like someone has poured fuel on my fire because of a lot of the adversity and challenges, and the invitations of those this year. So, I hope you take a moment too and offer yourself that same gratitude, deep appreciation for your strength and harvest the wisdom and strength you have grown throughout this year and celebrate that.

So, just real quickly, before I introduce you formally to our esteemed, brilliant guest for today, Betsy Pearson, I want to share with you one of my stories of celebration and gratitude in the hopes that it gives you fuel for your own fire.

You know, three years might not seem like a short period of time for transformation, but it really is. There's something that can happen over the

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span of three years. I'll talk about that more. I have an exciting, exciting workshop coming up in December. I'm going to reveal some secret and I believe very original strategies there. So, stay tuned to that. Make sure you are on my waitlist to hear more about that. And watch Instagram.

But anyway, I was thinking back, three years ago, this holidays season, how very different it was, even though I also had many things at that time to be grateful for. And definitely very fortunate and have a lot of privilege in my life and good things happening. I was also feeling very frustrated and overwhelmed and still struggling and still wondering why I was working so hard in a lot of areas and not gaining as much traction as I would hope for all the effort that I was putting in.

And it was around this holiday season too, and my children were obviously all still there, three years younger, which is a different labor-intensive sort of dynamic going on. We were in a different house, renovating it as we were going along. And I was also renovating my business and renovating my art.

And I just remembered thinking, I kind of felt like Dobby the House Elf in Harry Potter, in trying to create magical season for my family and my children and myself. But also feeling like Dobby the House Elf, like kind of magical, but still stuck in a grind sort of reality while also being able to sense liberation and freedom and this magical world just outside the door.

And I just used that time too to decide, okay, I'm figuring this out. There's no way I'm not figuring this out. But I'm not going to stay in this loop forever. I know, using all the tools that I have at my disposal, using my imagination, it was really harvesting the difficulty in that time too. And not dwelling there, but using it to help me jettison my imagination to, "Well, if I don't want to feel overwhelmed and in the grind, what does it look like? And

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how could I begin laying the foundation, paving the way for something to look different down the road?"

And here I am, three years down the road and we are in our dream home on our dream property. I, just this week, even though there was so much difficulty, and this is my dream, to be doing this work, this meaningful work, this life-changing work, this deeply gratifying, profound work is the dream. My family, my friends, my clients, my colleagues, the conversations we get to have, the creativity, the collaborations, what's coming down the road for myself and my clients. Like, this is the dream.

And then also, just speaking very specifically, this Thanksgiving, I'm recording this for you in my beautiful home in front of the fireplace. There's a light snowfall, and I have reserved for myself the parts of Thanksgiving preparation which I love, you know, baking certain sorts of things which are my favorite to cook or to make.

But the rest, I took a nice long quiet drive over to one of our favorite places over on Lake Michigan yesterday because I had placed an order for pretty much most of the Thanksgiving feast. Which was beautifully prepared. All that's left for me to do is to put it in the oven today, finish cooking it.

My kids and I are gathering things from around outside to decorate the table. It's going to be a leisurely and also very festive celebratory day, making it as beautiful and as nourishing for me as for my family. And so, I was thinking last night, as I paid for my family's Thanksgiving feast, and also for myself with this money that I have generated from this beautiful business and practice that I have.

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And I stopped along the way. There's this farmer's market that's also a nursery and there's hardly anyone in there because it's about six o'clock the night before Thanksgiving. And I stopped to meander around and pick out some beautiful, fresh flower arrangements, evergreen arrangements and candles and also just feeling like I'm so grateful for the me that was three years back, and 10 years back, and 15 years back that was like, "Okay, alright, we're working hard here and we also see there can be another way. And it is okay to want that and it is okay to create that. And we also are going to do that."

And here I am living into that. Not only because of my work. Definitely, I will own that. Also because of mentors I've had, the shoulders of others that I have stood upon, books that I have read that authors have generously written, shared their wisdom, the people in my life who love me and support me, and then also those like you, who are interested in hearing this message and also passionate about building this paradigm where we thrive Creatively, with a capital C, and we build this paradigm of thriving creatives or humans, living, expressing their potential.

So, thank you for that. I will count you among my blessings at our dinner table today. And so, now, also, one great blessing life has bestowed upon me has been to know Betsy. And that is to say the least. So, I gave you a little bit of Betsy's bio in the intro. So, here's a little bit more. And it still is going to be just a snippet of what she really is.

Betsy is an engineer. She had degrees from Brown University and the University of Nevada. She's managed, planned, designed, and supervised construction of water, waste water, road, and river restoration projects for 15 years. She also has done natural channel hydrology and it's from that work that she developed her river as a life coach sensibility, which she has

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also worked into her manuscript, Like a River. And into her work – she has a blog of the same name, Like a River: Stream Restoration Lessons for Living a Wild and Scenic Life.

And when that manuscript is ready to go and off to an agent or when it's published and is a book, we're going to have to have an entirely other conversation about this because this is something that anyone who knows a little bit about Betsy's Like a River work begs her to say more on. It's so fresh. It's so original. It resounds of Truth like a capital T and you can't get enough.

Betsy also has a degree in anthropology from Brown. She is a poet; she had taught and practiced yoga for over 25 years. She's also a certified practitioner of Myers Briggs type indicator and she said she's been in love with this tools and all things Carl Jung since the 80s.

She also did her life coach training with Martha Beck. It was actually at a Martha Beck retreat, writing retreat, where Betsy and I first met 10 years ago.

So, Betsy's interest in human thriving has led her down all of these paths. And then also most recently it's one of her motivations, I know, for publishing the Stairway of Surprise book, a daybook of wonder. Because this inroad of documenting, it's a different kind of gratitude documenting what surprises and astonishes you, which is so apropos for her because, as I said in the intro, she has the kind of wisdom and creativity in mind that surprises you in an astonishing and incredible, touching, and also fun, lighthearted way while also you know you're dealing with a rare mind.

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A way that I often describe Betsy is that she is a person who seems totally other worldly and also so deeply of this earth, grounded and centered, and also incredibly expansive.

You know, one of my grand intentions of the Art School is that it's the kind of experience for people who already are beautiful, powerful, creative human beings, that already are brilliant and have these high-functioning amazing lives. They've done very meaningful things. And it's this experience yet also along their way that causes them to say, you know, there was before the Art School and there was after. And that the Art School has changed my life in such positive, profound ways.

And for me, there is a before Betsy and there is an after Betsy. My life was rich and beautiful, profound before meeting Betsy, and also having met her that weekend at that retreat left such a mark on me. And the relationship, able to be in her orbit since that time, there has been this AB period, this after Betsy period.

It's one of the reasons I am so passionate about Betsy's work getting out into the world, about taking what is in her and putting it on the page or in audio form like this, like, whatever form will help it flow. Because I know I'm not the only one. I've seen it happen in the Art School too, the Betsy effect. So, lean in. I am so excited, honored, and delighted to share Betsy Pearson in this interview with you today.

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Leah: I definitely would love to have you speak about your process. And I don't know if you want to talk about all the books today. Because I find particularly moving – and I think others would too. Like the river work is

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work you've been doing for a while. And the Dao is something you've been interested in for a while. And just to have you speak on your process...

Betsy: So, you know what, I do have to talk about all the books when I talk about my process because that is my process. You know when you're painting, how if you have at least two but maybe up to, I don't know – my teacher says he has sometimes up to seven going at the same time. And then you move one to the other.

And so, I just think, for one thing, it really accelerates the process, in painting at least because you're learning the whole time. And so, if you're just doing one painting, or I'm just doing one book, you know, you do something – well, with paint maybe you want to let it dry, right? But also, maybe you just hit a stopping point and you're like, you almost can start to feel bored or you just don't know what to do or frustrated or whatever it is.

And if that's the only project I'm working on, then I just have to go away and do nothing creative for a little while, which is fine. But if instead you move to the next painting and you're like, well I know for sure I was going to put in some big black things, and then – but meanwhile, then you, on the second one, you're learning from the first one. And it's the same thing with the books.

And then meanwhile, so, not only are you resting from the one project, but something else is getting done. So, it's just sort of practically more productive. But also, it's like each one informs the other one. I literally learn that way. And I like writing, but I do get sick of a project, or I just reach an impasse where I just don't know what to do.

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And so, this book, the surprise book, I know to you guys in the Art School, I think it looked like I'm working on this river book and this Dao book, and all of a sudden, I pop out this surprise book, like surprise out of nowhere, right? But oh yeah, didn't I mention this surprise journal?

But this book, I started first. I'll have to look at that date. But I actually wrote this book for my friend's birthday present. And I made one myself. Like, I printed it out on a printer and had the copy shop do a spiral binding on it and I gave it to her. And it was her birthday present. It was cool and I thought – and it was really old. It was a long time ago, I used like Microsoft Office clip art.

So, then I was like, "This is cool. This is perfect for publishing." It's perfect for self-publishing because it's kind of a niche thing, you know. And so, but then I realized that that Microsoft Office clip art is not – you're not allowed to use it in projects you sell. You can use it for anything like church bulletins and things like that, school pamphlets, but not something you're going to sell.

So, I was like – I had to try to find... anyway, I just stalled in terms of that. So, I just topped that and I went onto something else. And a lot of something else. And a lot of something elses. And once in a while, over the years, I would think, "Okay, maybe I'll do that book."

It wasn't stressful. It was never, like, angsty, like I have to do this or anything like that. Or every once in a while I'd meet somebody and I'd say – you know, an illustrator, and I'd say, "You want to do this project?" But it didn't work out. And then I decided, "you know what? I really want to do it." So, it just seemed to really ripen.

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And this is something you and I have talked about, how weird it is that you can do work and go away and come back and it's actually better. I don't even think that's it's an imagination or perspective. It's honestly like getting better on the shelf. I mean, I know it sounds weird. And it's the same thing with paintings too.

And with paintings, like, maybe they are. Maybe the paint is chemically altering, I don't know. I can't explain it with writing, but it's true. And so, I was like – I pulled it back out one day and I fell in love with it. And I was like, I really want to do this. So, I really was going to do it myself, laying it out. And I'm like, why? I don't know how to design.

So, there's a really great, great designer in our town and I didn't think she'd do it and she did. And then she – so then collaborating. This is the first written project that I collaborated with somebody on the product. And it was so fun because then she brought – her felt sense was different than mine and her aesthetic was different than mine and so good.

And so, then she had these ideas. And then we did some back and forth, you know, which was super-fun. That collaboration where you don't have to do everything yourself.

Leah: Oh my gosh, yeah, and you are enlivened and things in you are sparking because of the other person's creativity and brilliance.

Betsy: Exactly. It's not like delegating. It's not like I'm going to hire somebody to do this. It's much different than that. Actually, the only collaboration I had done creatively was in theatre, which I think is the most collaborative of all the arts because you flat can't do it, period, without somebody else. Even if it's a one-person show and even if you're, like we

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saw with Zohar Tirosh-Polk's play, the meeting she did on Zoom last night, even then, you've got to have a technical person, you've got to have – it's very helpful if you have a director and a technical person, let's put it that way. And then I know those pieces.

Anyway, that was super-enlightening to me that I got a boost, an energetic boost. And some editing happened because of that both ways. And it was better. And it just got better and better. And then, the place where we printed it, quite frankly, both of us were shocked at the result. I don't know how to describe it. But you felt it...

Leah: It's beautiful. I am very much a tactile analogue – I still love to hold books and it matters to me the feel. I love a book that feels beautiful to hold, especially if it's one that is a journal. Like, that matters to me that the texture and feel and the heft of it. And this one has that cover. I don't know how you describe – it's soft and...

Betsy: It's called Matte. And I don't know, the size, you wanted it to be able to fit in your bag but still, if a book is too small and you've got to write in it and you can't...

Leah: I need to be able to kind of get in on the page with certain journals. Like, I need some room to get in on the page and move. I'll carry the tiny, tiny moleskins to jot down quick ideas when I'm walking. But other things – and it's this way for me painting too – I like a piece that I can move into.

Betsy: Absolutely. That is so beautifully said. And we were originally – there are a lot of accidents, you know. Like with any creative thing, like, whoops. Because originally, we wanted it to be sideways. And we didn't understand which direction, six by nine, which was width and which was height. And I

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think was that between us or with the printer? But then, it would have been too floppy. I just knew I wanted it big where the margin wasn't impinging on you. And it has to do with how thick the book is compared to the height and width too.

Anyway, this just turned out we're really pleased with it. And so, beyond us, there was these people who we've never met, seen, or even talked to at the printer. It's just all automated. So, it was just literally the total is greater than the sum of parts. It's just kind of magic.

And the other cool thing about that then is I don't know also that I've ever been so easily enthusiastically able to promote something that I made. And part of it is because it's a collaboration so there's not that cultural thing of the, like, oh my gosh, naughty girl, you're promoting yourself.

So, part of it is because it's not just me. It's Janae Neeson is the designer. And she's spectacular. But part of it is because it is its own thing. So now, I realize that's true with every creative product. There's no shyness in promoting a book, a painting, a play, a song because it's not you.

Leah: Yeah, exactly. I felt that's where you were going. I think that's not just a convenient way to think about things so that you can promote. I just do feel that that's true and I think that there are, especially if you are listening and you're a creative entrepreneur and you do feel hung up about promoting your work, first of all, I'm a 100% champion for being unapologetic and unabashed about loving your work and what it is and sharing it with the world.

And also, I find it really resonates as a truth to some people to reorient to, is this me? Or is this not mine? And is each creation, even if you do make it

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on your own, is it really just you or is that a bigger conversation and collaboration?

Betsy: It's like Liz Gilbert's Big Magic book. And she says that. The idea is its own thing and it's going around knocking on doors like, "Hey, want to channel me?" basically. And all those people who do channeled work, I get it now because that's what it feels like. Anybody who's done anything creative knows that. That's exactly what it feels like.

And then maybe too, for those people, it is easier to promote it, or to just be solid. Like, let me just lay this truth on you. It's a truth because this channeled being told me so. And whatever. Then there are people who just absolutely won't listen to anything if there's something, talk like that, that seems, like, woo-woo to them. But I hate to say it. I do think that that's the reality.

Leah: You know, you can also be like – even if you are trepidatious about channeling or connecting to a higher force, even if it's like channeling Creativity with a capital C, I think if you're also heavily pragmatic, this also works to be like, you know what, it works. Being in your own way because you think the work is just you, that limits the work in my opinion and that limits the potential for it. And I think there is so much subconscious baggage going on with then the ability to share it and promote it and sing from the rooftops about it to the world. And so, actually, what works there is this variety of tools of, like, developing an alter ego or, like...

Betsy: Right, maybe that's why people use pen names, one of the reasons. I never thought of that.

Leah: And stage personalities, like Beyoncé, right?

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Betsy: Or even Dolly Parton. I mean, when she says, “Decide who you are and do it on purpose,” you know, it isn’t that it’s not her, but it is parts of her carefully assembled into what carries the essence of her most effectively. And then too, then you have a tool to clearly remind yourself that your work is not the same as you.

Leah: Yes, and you can just see too, you can work on your mind forever, or it’s like you can shift to this other place where you use your imagination to create a grander architecture for the story of your life and your self-concept. And I do believe that once you create that grander space, something more vast has room.

Betsy: Build it and it will come, absolutely, I agree. And I also agree with you when you said, “I don’t know, but is it useful?” And that’s the tool I apply to every idea that can’t be exactly proved. Like, this water is, like, 90 degrees. That can be proven. But this coffee is delicious, or ideas flow through me – so, this other book I did, this Dao of Laozi book, I have a lot of assumptions in the way I did tis translation.

And I even say in this introduction that I made some assumptions. But nobody can prove, nobody knows for sure when Laozi lived or what script Laozi would have used to write in, or if the Tao Te Ching was an oral book or a written book. All of the unknowns, there’s basically nothing known other than here’s this received text we have.

So, when it comes to any belief that you can’t prove, then I apply three tests. Is it useful to believe one way or the other? Does it make me feel free, you know, well, alive? And I can’t remember the third one right now. I remember there are three of my own ideas, but I can’t remember the third one.

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But they almost always line up. They do always line up. And if I start to feel just believing it because I like it is, like, that can be problematic to our culture, like, “Oh you’re deluding yourself or you’re selfish,” or something like that. So, I put that aside and I go back to, is it useful? And unless somebody can prove to me that creativity isn’t flowing through me, isn’t a greater force flowing through me and it’s useful, like you said, it’s useful for the making, it’s useful for the promoting, it’s less exhausting.

Because then you open yourself up. And then all the decisions, like you were saying with that project you have now, you’re like, this is what was given to me. This is what I have. This is what I’ve got. And when you just be like, if it wants to be something different – and especially when you’re doing something that’s not in line with whatever the standard is in that. Like if you’re writing a poem that doesn’t look like a poem, you’re painting a painting, et cetera, et cetera, it helps also to be like, “I would make it like everybody else’s but it would be so hard because that’s not what I’ve got.”

Leah: And a couple of things come to mind too in terms of, like, is this useful? Does it work. I mean, that is an essential question at the core of philosophy, true philosophy, like what makes life work. And so, it’s like what works in order to create and to be an artist and to create any result that is aligned with your values and your vision for life and the world?

And then there is like – and how is your life in the process of applying this principle and living this principle? And I feel like it reminds me of another quote of Liz Gilbert’s from Big Magic which I’ll paraphrase, like, the difference between a creative life and a tormented life is obviously just a question of curiosity. I think I’m not getting that quite right. But it’s a very small nuance that makes a world of difference. Like, what beliefs can you

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adapt so your creative life, your life is an interesting one, one of curiosity and courage and meaning versus a tormented one.

And I feel like that also reminds me of you and the way you approach any creative process, the process of creating anything is this, like weaving together of all these principles that work and it's a fusion of something very divine, maybe abstract, Creativity with a capital C, and very pragmatic.

Betsy: Thank you for saying that. You know, so we got this little puppy. And I was thinking about that combination of things. It's just like when you have a baby, there are a lot of little things you have to do, like cleaning up poo and pee and going out in the middle of the night, or getting up in the middle of the night, or just, quote unquote disruptions. And so yeah, I think you're right. You have to have both. You have to be very practical. It helps to know how to train a puppy or what ways to bounce a baby or hold them, or what they don't like to eat or whatever, all the little helpful – I love that stuff. Nowadays they call it a life hack or whatever. And willing to do it, right, willing to put in the time doing something that if you were to write out your ideal life, it might not be getting up at 2:30 when you're so tired and you want to cry, and being nice about it.

But that's the whole thing you always say. Like, if you know you're going to do something anyway, now let's look at how. And then maybe that's right. That's when it really helps to tie into the, like you said, the divine. And there's a really big, big thing happening here, every time you do any little detail. Then it makes it beautiful or fun or romantic, as we like to say. You know, I'm like, out at 2:30 with this puppy and I'm looking up at the sky and, you know, I'm really not outside at 2:30 very much anymore.

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And you have to go out, no matter the temperature, and that's what's nice about farming and ranching is you have to do chores, right? And maybe there's a tie that the more pragmatic things you have to do in your life, the more easily you connect to the divine, for some reason.

Leah: I do think that there is so much truth to that. I know, growing up, I grew up on a farm and we had chores to do in the morning before we went to school, or really early in the morning if we had weight-lifting practice or something before school. And it was dark, cold in the winter. But beautiful too, to be out at that time of day. Like, time of night, early morning, and the stars. And you know, out in the countryside where there's very little light pollution there.

And you did feel this connection at that time, that otherwise you wouldn't have. Or I think of riding in the combine with my dad during harvest season, and you'd come back really late and night and just seeing the world at that different time, doing something very pragmatic and felt very holy.

Betsy: Yeah, so I'm thinking – who was it that said that God is in a grain of sand?

Leah: William Blake.

Betsy: Blake, yeah.

Leah: Okay, first you bring that up, because I've just written down a note to something you were saying earlier, like, there's a thread here, a few threads that when you were talking about just working with how things work and not judging your own work because it's not you, it's something channeled and that this is just how it is, all apologies and respect to

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whatever the conventional and esteemed institutions are in that area of art or science or literature. And yet, this is what wanted to happen through me.

I was on a hunt for a Blake poem that I couldn't find in my own books. I was Googling. And I came across this – he was also an artist, which I remembered but I didn't know that much about. And he was commissioned in his early 20s to do this one work for someone who is a big fan of his work and was all excited to commission this young genius.

And then Blake did these religious or spiritual paintings and the man that commissioned them was a reverend. And the reverend did not like his take on what were to be a holy, religious, spiritual commission that was like way too out there for him. And I look at it now and I'm like, "Well, it's a stretch." But if you look at what renaissance depictions are, like maybe that's what he was – and Blake, being a very young man was – I'll paraphrase – sorry, dude. This is what came through me. I can't apologize. And if you don't understand holiness then I'm not going to waste my breath talking to you, was essentially what he said. This is what I do and I can't apologize for it because this is just what happens.

Betsy: And you know, back to the tormented artist stereotype, I really think that those people, that if you don't do what you just described, which is – in a way, it's taking your own work seriously. In a way it's not at all because you know it's not you. In a way, if you don't do that, I think that's when you can get really just messed up in all kinds of ways.

Like, we were recently talking about Clarissa Pinkola Estés' book *Women Who Run with Wolves*. And in that Blue Beard tale that's he has, which is about, quote unquote the inner saboteur, which I may or may not believe in

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exactly, but basically we all know, we can get sideways somehow with ourselves. And really bad things can result. Truly bad things for us.

And when she analyzes that fairytale, like using Jungian kind of metaphor tools, like we do in dream analysis, and she comes out with basically how do you avoid this and what do you do when it happens? But one of the things that she says in there is, when she teases out the symbols, is like you take yourself, take your work, your creative life seriously. And if you don't these really destructive things can happen.

And it's like, I think that's right. And you look at the people who do that and they aren't these stereotypes of the tormented artists. If they get sideways in any way, like, wanting society's approval, they get all tortured.

Leah: And I think you just said something so profound there that I want to go back and highlight when you were talking about taking your work seriously, and embedded in this context, I think taking your work seriously and that that sometimes means that to everyone else, it will look like you are defying conventional standards of what it means to take your work seriously.

Betsy: Yeah, that's right. And I want to hear what you think that means. But one of the things that strikes me is obviously just sheer content and form and actually what you're saying and how you're doing it. But also, how you live your life.

If you don't look like a tormented creative or you're not, like whatever, some people think that if you're truly creative, you're going to be poor and living in a hovel, sacrificing everything for your creativity. And if you're not – I literally have a white picket fence out there. Does that prevent me from

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being unconventionally creative? No. No more than – I'm not whatever somebody's stereotype of a creative is. So, what were you thinking when you...

Leah: I think too, taking yourself seriously means honoring what wants to happen. And that doesn't necessarily look like seriousness.

Betsy: No, right.

Leah: I know that that's sometimes, like, what is expected. And since – I mean, I'm fascinated with how we educate humans at all stages. And since at this stage in my life, I'm obviously involved in the education of my littles, my own children. But then working with so many adults who are already successful and highly educated, sometimes with many degrees, having achieved high levels like yourself and having achieved, like, high levels of professional success and beyond competence, into expertise. And that there is now this other thing wanting to happen through them. They have this next dream, this next vision for something to create, but I think also for their life and for themselves.

That challenges the identity of the person that succeeded seriously according to society, like a well-behaved professional. And that challenges ideas about – a lot of times, people will say, well, I just have respect for the form or respect for the art form. And to me, it's just you have to be – the invitation is then to go deeper into trusting yourself and be like, absolutely okay to honor in the form, but form over what? If there is no life that flows through the form, it's like being nuanced enough to be like, are you honoring form or are you clinging to security, that this is a known way where other people will say, yes, they are doing great work.

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Or do you want – it's like working within that vertical pillar idea of you can be a genius in a vertical way. There's an established method. There's established thought and you can become an expert and innovative within that vertical column. Or you can be a lateral thinker and attempt lateral thought. And it's going to challenge that vertical.

Betsy: Yes, and I see what you mean, like people could say you're not taking it seriously. Because if you were taking it seriously, you would just try to stay within that vertical, like here's what we're doing. And you're off over here.

And of course, it's so easy in retrospect, everybody that's ever created anything cool or new, whether it is the greatest painters, the greatest scientists, whatever, they always looked like literally foolish, which is probably the opposite of serious. I mean, play is sometimes an opposite maybe. They look playful, which they do. Most of them look kind of lighthearted and playful. But also just foolish, you know. So, yeah.

Leah: I think too that the idea even that having an artist or a creative being very financially well off, for a lot of people, triggers ideas that they are not taking their work seriously.

Betsy: Yeah, it's kind of like, honesty, you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't because if you're not making a living at it, then it will be not considered real by some people. But if you're making a good living at it, people are like, yeah, they must be selling out. And the inoculation to every one of those things is to just do it, do the thing that comes to you as it's given to you or as it comes to you. And what was that quote I saw the other day where it was like – I think it was Georgia O'Keefe. She's like, "I had everything clear within myself, so it didn't matter if it was criticism or praise,

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they all washed down the drain the same way.” Like, and that’s right too. It’s a blessing, once you experience that. In anything, where you’re like, now I get it. Like, I know this is the only thing for me to do right now. This is what I have. And so, it really doesn’t matter.

Leah: Is that something you think you’ve always had or have you acquired that too? Because you are known in the Art School community for being able to impart that sort of perspective and clarity and share it with others. Sometimes, it’s like just a look, even over zoom. And other times, with a few words. And it’s such a – it’s grounding and clarifying for everyone because, again, you have this ability to be both so grounded and also so expansive and brilliant with the ideas that you can entertain and the way that you think.

Betsy: Thank you, Leah. Thank you. You know, you think that creativity, just practicing it, you end up again with those two things. Because it is so nitty-gritty, no matter whether you’re mixing paint and figuring out how to wash the important brushes. And also you get into the flow state. So, that is the experience of the divine, I guess I would say. So, I do think that the more you do it, the more you do it with creativity, in that perspective.

And then two things in terms of how have I always had that. One thing is, I had an outsider type of childhood. And I think kind of everybody does. If you look at most coming of age stories, it doesn’t matter if you lived in the same place your whole life or you moved to a foreign land, that’s what coming of age is. But it’s kind of helpful because, as a kid, you learn you have to figure it out. And kids do. They figure it out, that they are okay inside, even when whatever is happening on the outside.

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And so, in some ways, I can look back and think, “You know, I just always had that.” And I think it was because I was the only person that looked like me or spoke like me where I was at that time. And so, I had to figure it out. And I did. But then sometimes, I also think – I can remember, it was pretty recently in terms of creative work, where I did one painting that, like, I just love it so much that literally it matters not even the tiniest bit to me who says what.

And an actual working artist actually said some kind of – gave me some feedback on it that was not like, “Oh, this is horrible,” but it was not positive. It was like, “Change this or this or this or this.” And I honestly didn’t care. And maybe that’s where you get into that take your work seriously. Should I care that that person said that? I don’t know, but I simply can’t. That’s one advantage of that painting is I realize I can’t even bring myself to care because I love it so much. It is exactly what it wants to be. And that was new, I’m not going to lie. And that was last year when I was 59 and I was like, “Oh my god, I get it now.”

Leah: Yeah, well that’s a great place where your advice about the two, three guidelines bears out because you can say, what is my vision for my creative life and my art and painting, and if loving it supports it, that bears out. And as you were speaking, it was reminding me of – I was watching this workshop with a jazz pianist, Herbie, I forget his last name. But he was actually saying, he said, for parents, if you’re going to get your child an instrument, he would recommend not starting them with lessons right away because he felt that it was important and significant for the child to encounter the instrument in their own way and to start to develop a relationship with the instrument in their own way.

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And I thought that was profound. It was just a quick little sidenote that he made. And I paused the video to let that soak in because I think that's something, as adults, especially if you have been a high-achieving adult, to give yourself that opportunity to develop your own relationship...

Betsy: Yeah, that's super-interesting, both with kids and adults, first of all, I'll just say I have three grown kids. And the first two, I was like, piano lessons because I just thought that was a fundamental of life, right? And they didn't like it and there were the battles of practicing. And I eventually gave up because I was just tired and thought, how many battles do I want to have?

And then the third kid, I didn't even – I think I said, “Do you want piano lessons?” And he was like, “No,” right? Guess who plays the piano every day. The third one. And he's never had a lesson. He was in band with trumpet, so he can read music. But he doesn't actually read music. He composes music by ear and just noodles around the piano and has great pleasure in doing that every single day.

So, he did – and that's one cool thing. People often do have a piano in their home and the kids often do have a relationship with it. They're just tinkling around on there. So, that's super-interesting. And then yeah, so with painting, that was maybe the first place I had allowed myself something like that, where I had no illusion that I was anything, because I had never done that kind of art. And I didn't consider myself a creative person. And there was no pressure there and all I did was literally have a relationship with the paints.

I did go to a workshop with this great teacher who was just, that was thankfully the way it worked with that too. So, yeah, I started extrapolating

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that to, like you're saying with adult education, if we do want to learn something, or not even learn it but do something, then just do it. Nike. Just do it.

Leah: And I think to re-trust, trust again maybe for the first time our nurturing instincts, because if your instinct with your painting is like, not now. Maybe sometime down the road I will be open for that kind of feedback, but not now, this is not the time. And it took me a while into adulthood, like only in the last few years actually to realize that I can trust my own nurturing instincts when it come sot my life and my work. Because I had been conditioned that the only way to be is openminded. And really, what was beneath that – and I value being openminded very much. But what I needed to learn was really underneath that, that I needed to tease out was that openminded does not mean that you ever subvert your own instincts or opinions.

You can be open and entertain others, but it doesn't abdicate your own authority. Because you could have somebody who's an expert in an area you long to grow in tell you it's no good, it will never be any good. And it could just be that that person is not seeing the seed of what's there, even though they're like a great teacher, great person in many other respects. And I think we sense this. We know this. we are equipped with everything necessary to nurture and to also find the resources and the environments that nurture our gifts and our dreams.

And I think we have a sense, when people come in who, our brain is like, "Oh, but they're the expert. They're a good person. They want the best for you." But that doesn't ever mean, like, abdicate trusting your own instincts about how you take feedback. When you take feedback...

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Betsy: And how you work, it's so true. And this linear idea, like now you're doing X so you're going to do X every day, or you're going to do it solid for the rest of your life or whatever. And I remember, it was yoga where I learned that I could trust myself a little bit because I had this idea, like, now I do yoga and so here's the path I'm on. I'm going to start doing increasingly more complex physical poses. I'm going to do this much a day, blah, blah, blah.

And I did for years. And then I just didn't want to and I was undoing my identity because that was, like – but I just trusted myself and I didn't do yoga once for like a year. I don't even know why. And then I did it again and I was like, "I don't know." I'm just going to trust that that was what had to happen. And whenever I have not and I think, like, don't be a pansy, push through. Like, I get injured, or if it's not physical, it just goes to crap. I start to hate the thing I loved. I don't like the work that comes out of it.

And I've also noticed that the other way I learned it creatively was in poetry, the way poetry is. I, for some reason, decided that I just had to trust that there was something inside of me knew something and was going to, like you say, the inner organizing principle. Like, I knew, I just have to keep going here. And it's something – because poetry isn't expected to be so linear, I think that was maybe the first place I created. That was the first creative thing I did.

And it was so fun because it was just like, I don't have to develop this idea linearly. I can develop something and then, just like, I thought it was going here, but oh well, I guess it's going here. And then oh, it's all inside you and it will come out whenever it wants to. And it is the same thing. And that is the same thing with process, like you said. You just have to kind of relax and let weird things happen.

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So, for me, a friend of mine said to me the other day, this woman who's been my best friend for 25 years, she's like, "You know, I've always thought that you were very creative and productive." But she goes, "What happened the last two years? What happened? You're just so massively creatively productive."

She literally asked me that and I was like, "What?" And then I was like, "Oh, guess what it was..." Art School. Honestly, Leah. And I think it's because, like, this Stairway of Surprise project, she's the one I wrote this for, that friend who said that to me. And so, that was like, I think 10 years ago. Maybe 12 years ago.

And then the river book that is still not done, I started 10 years ago. But I didn't have a full working draft until this last year, which I do now. And now, I'm turning that into something that I love at that level, that kind of love that I just love. The Dao project, that's only, quote unquote, two and a half years old. So that, by my standards is just like, whipped that baby out.

And then the art, the painting that I've been doing. So, all of that was in me. And it just was never being finished and reaching that point where I loved it, it just – I was trying to be easy on myself and just think like that's just not who I am. I like to tinker around with things. But I didn't know why. I felt back about it, like why don't I actually finish these creative projects to the degree I like? And then honestly, your podcast really lit me up. And then I wanted to work with you because of the podcast. I really made so much projects just with the coach with me things.

So then I'm like, "I'm going to work with Leah." And you're like, "Actually, the only way to work with me right now is this group." And I was not, as you know, excited because I'm like a lone wolf out here in the west, on the

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prairie, in the mountains. But I really wanted whatever you were dishing out, right? I'll have what she's having. So, I did it. Well, all of that is that same thing we're talking about. Your self just kind of guides you if you let it.

And sometimes, you just get too exhausted trying. I didn't really have the strength to not do it at that point. But somehow, then I got guided into being part of this group, which was the last thing I thought would ever be helpful to me. And I still don't completely understand why it is, but I can't ignore, it is just literally when I'm in the Art School, I make work I love and finish it in a way that seems like I'm not even doing anything. And pop, there it is. Pop, there it is, over and over.

So, again, those tormented artist guys, they usually are trying to do the lone wolf thing. Occasionally not. Sometimes, they have a group of tormented ones that get together and be tormented together. But whatever, anyway, for me that's how it is. Just like you said, you kind of find yourself steered into something.

Leah: Because the thing, you have been an incredibly prolific creative. And then also not forcing, which I think sometimes, when people first hear, "She's letting things come together," the proof is in the pudding because you've created process that works. And also, you came – you had put in your years too. You are a scientist, that methodology of push through and rigor and...

Betsy: That's the thing, it's very hard to describe. Actually, it's not. It's flow state. That's what it is because – and it's described in that book *Flow* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. But like, it's not not doing anything. It's doing a ton of stuff.

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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. And this week, you get a two for one again. Because not only do I want you to lean in and work with me, coach with me, but I want you to be able to lean in and work and coach with Betsy Pearson as well.

So, in the spirit of her the Stairway of Surprise: A Day Book of Wonder book, we are going to offer you an assignment to vitalize your own life by adopting a practice of surprise. So, let me just read to you this bit from her intro to the book.

“Dear reader, each of the following pages has space for you to record the unexpected. My experience is that when I make an effort to notice the surprises of daily life, I notice them more often, appreciate them more uniquely, and feel like a bit more vitally.”

And so, while Betsy is a poet, she is a poet, she is also a scientist and she is very knowledgeable. She knows the science and the research behind how our central nervous systems respond to noticing different phenomena, including surprises.

We've talked a lot about gratitude. Noticing surprise is a different kind of gratitude practice and it has a definitely vitalizing effect on you, a calming effect on the central nervous system. It also feeds and nurtures your creativity, that fuel that gives you the life to move through life with joy and engage in your process, engage with flow.

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And so, Betsy doesn't just drop you off either in the journal and give you blank pages. There are quotes and prompts throughout this journal that you get to engage with, to already they delight you and surprise you with their wisdom and the generosity of spirit. So, I wanted to share a few of those with you today because your assignment, if you should accept it this next week, is to note every day something that surprises or astonishes you.

So, for instance, in day 333, a lucky creative number, Betsy writes, "Ecstasy originally came from the Greek for not in stasis and meant displacement. Our modern meaning is rapturous delight. Ah, rapture, from the Latin word for ceased. It transports us with emotion, carries us off spiritually. We are unstuck."

Day 141 gives you a little bit of a glimpse into Betsy's smart sense of humor. It's titled Cheap and Easy, "Trying to avoid surprise by thorough preparation is strenuous. Trying to plan elaborate ways of being entertained is tiresome. Both can be costly. Enjoying the surprises life springs upon you brings a sweet happiness with much less work."

Day 93, Wait, it's Art? "As you said about uncovering the unknown, you find yourself inventing opportunities for discovery and crafting new experiences. Suddenly, you are deep in the creative process."

And here's the last one I'll share with you. If I haven't convinced you to experiment with this surprise process yourself, day 52 she writes, "Enjoying surprise. Some benefits of being surprised; it feels good. After weeks of recording the unexpected, you are probably experiencing how, above all, surprise feels strangely agreeable, a sensation more intense than regular pleasure. It is delightful. Or, as Lewis Thomas put it, a contended dazzlement."

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Thank you for listening to another episode of *The Art School Podcast*. If you've loved this podcast, if it's been useful, inspirational, empowering for you, the best thing you can do to pay it forward is to share, is to subscribe, and is to go to iTunes and leave a review. And when you're ready to take this work deeper, when you're ready, as Betsy talked about, to take your creativity, to take your productivity and your creative life and to really elevate every aspect of your life. When you're ready to do that, we would love to have you in the Art School.

We have already begun filling seats for the winter-spring 2021 sessions of both the Art School and the Art School Mastermind. If you would like to be on that waitlist to receive information, to be the first to know about our current early bird tier discounts, there are limited spots available for those, please email us at support@leahcb.com and we'll make sure to answer all of your questions, get you the information you need, and just overall take excellent care of you.

I wanted to close today's podcast with the quote, the lines of poetry that open Betsy's *Stairway of Surprise* book. These lines were from a poem that Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote about Merlin from the *Tales of King Arthur*.

"Pass in pass in, the angels say, into the upper doors. Nor count compartments of the floors, but mount to paradise by the stairway of surprise."

And so, dear listeners, just think of that, mount to paradise by the stairway of surprise. Can you imagine the conversation we'll be having at Thanksgiving, the gratitude that we will be acknowledging and celebrating a year from now if we all undertake this practice?

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Have a beautiful week, everyone. Thank you so much for being here. I am grateful for you. In the meantime, I look forward to talking with you next week as you join Betsy and I for part two of this conversation.