EPISODE 108

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09.3] AT: Welcome to The Portfolio Life with Jeff Goins. Jeff believes that every creative should live a portfolio life, a life full of pursuing work that matters, making a difference with your art and discovering your true voice. Jeff is committed to helping you find, develop, and live out your unique world with you so that you too can live a portfolio life.

Where do great ideas come from? Do they come from brainstorming or a more strict structure? Do they come from an individual or from the group? Today, we'll find out where great ideas come from by talking with professor, researcher and author Keith Sawyer. Thanks for joining us today.

Here is Jeff and Keith Sawyer.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:51.9] JG: Hey Keith, welcome to the show.

[00:00:54.5] KS: Hi, it's great to be here.

[00:00:55.4] JG: Keith, I'm a huge fan of your work. For those of you who don't know what you do, would you mind just sharing a little bit about who you are and what it is that you do?

[00:01:05.3] KS: I am a creativity researcher, a psychologist. I am a professor at the University of North Carolina. I am particularly known for studying group creativity and collaboration and how to use groups to enhance your own personal creativity.

[00:01:21.9] JG: So, that's how I first stumbled upon you is I was reading a series of books and one book led to the other, led to the other and what I was experiencing myself as a writer, I live in Nashville, Tennessee and it's becoming a smaller but growing hub of creatives and entrepreneurs especially people who are working in online business and online marketing and

so I lived here for about five, six years and just saw this stuff starting to happen and I was like, "What is it that I'm missing?"

Because I want to be an author, I want to write books, I want to speak, I want to do this and I'm just not in that scene and I realized that the social dynamic of creative careers was an important part of it once I got into that, things started to take off and that was really fascinating to me and so years later now I'm looking back on that and I am seeing how some people succeed or don't succeed based on the groups that they're a part of.

So, like I said, I read one book it led to another, led to another and then I found your book, *Group Genius,* which I loved because it described some things that I had sensed intuitively but didn't know how to name and I love how you outlined the way innovation and creativity happened. But what does it mean to you, "group genius"? Because I think more and more refining people disapprove this myths of creativity as our mutual friend, David Burkus talks about. One of those myths is the myth of the solitary genius, which you teared down in *Group Genius* but what is your argument there?

[00:03:03.7] KS: Absolutely and you can tell from the title *Group Genius* that silently, it's opposed to the loan genius, this idea of really inter creative individual coming up with a genius idea and all of the research shows that's just not the case. We looked back through history, you look at contemporary innovations, you look at successful entrepreneurs, all the products that we use every day on the internet even products from 50, 100 years ago.

They emerge from a long sustained process that involves dead ends, false starts, really tiny ideas that come together overtime to gradually result in something awesome and incredible and it's that process that results in great creativity. It's not the brilliant flash of insight. That's really where I focus my own research and my creativity advice and key notes and consulting is to help individuals and groups successfully get through that process.

It's actually really good news that creativity isn't about the big flash of insight, because if it is, then you just have to sit around and wait for that to happen and then if it doesn't happen, you're just stuck and not creative so the rest of us who don't have the insights we can forget about it

and that's just not the way it works. There is a consistent process of deliberate creativity that works for groups, that works for individual, it works for organizations.

[00:04:31.6] JG: And it's frustrating, right? If all these geniuses out there having these flashes of insight and I'm not, I'm going, "What's wrong with me?" Or, "I will never get that lucky." Or, "I can never be that brilliant," and like you said, it can lead to this malaise where you're just going, "Well I'll wait for the muse to strike."

[00:04:48.8] KS: That's right, so the myth it doesn't work for the people who feel like they aren't creative because then you'll just feel un-empowered and frankly, it doesn't work for the creators either. All the exceptional creators that I've talked to they hate that myth of the brilliant flash of insight because it diminishes the hard, sustained work that they have to put into the process.

[00:05:10.3] JG: Yeah, I tweeted this once you've probably noticed it, just kidding. You probably don't watch my Twitter feed. I tweeted this once and some people didn't like it but I said, "A better compliment than telling somebody that they're gifted is to congratulate them in all the hard work they've done." Because I get the idea, "Oh you're really gifted or you're so smart or brilliant or whatever." It's a nice compliment but it suggest as you said that they didn't work hard.

That they didn't necessarily earned that, that they were just sitting on the mountain top somewhere and the muse visited them and then this brilliant thing happened and that's interesting that the people you've talked to don't like that idea either.

[00:05:54.1] KS: That's right, maybe there are some people might like the myth because it makes them seem really special and unique and connected to some higher being or whatever but no, the people who are professionally engaged in creative professions, they know how they do it and they know it's not any easier for them. It's not because they have some gift.

[00:06:18.8] JG: So Keith, you wrote in Group Genius and I want to move onto your more recent book, *Zig Zag*, in a minute but I just love this book for a lot of reasons. It confirmed a lot of things that I was dancing around in my understanding of creativity and business and success and how all these things fit together maybe more than what I was led to believe before reading

your book. But you wrote this on page 29, I liked it, "The key to innovation is always to manage a subtle balance of planning, structure, and improvisation."

You have a chapter about improvising innovation. You talk about jazz music improvisational comedians and actors and how it's not just about plotting along and I remember Walter Isaacson talked about this in his book, *The Innovators*, where he talked about the digital age and the invention of the computer and he said, "There's two schools of thought, there is the brilliant flash of insight school of thought and then there's the plotting along just constantly iterating building on whatever the previous person or previous generation did," and he blended those two together.

It seems to be that you're blending those two approaches together as well where you talk about improvisation in creativity. Can you explain that and am I understanding that right or am I missing something?

[00:07:37.0] KS: That's exactly right and yes, Isaacson's book is very similar to the message I have in *Group Genius*. It seems like that book is published in 2007 and what I've noticed is since then, collaboration and this notion of improvisation emerging, it's become even more prominent. My main message is that this creative process especially in groups, it is improvisational. It has to be improvisational if you're going to generate something surprising and new.

So I was able to draw on my own research on Jazz ensembles and Chicago improvisational theater groups and extract lessons about how do you balance the need for planning with the necessity for spontaneity and improvisation? In a real organization, you can't just have chaos with people improvising whatever they want. So it's the tension to, really it's the paradox of organizing for innovation is to balance what I think of as a bottom of emergence of this improvisational creativity with some kind of guiding top down structures but much looser than the bureaucratic hierarchies that we've had in the past.

[00:08:52.8] JG: So how do you do that? I'm wondering how you do that into two outlets. One would be the organizational outlet. There is a chapter in your book called *Organizing for Improvisation* and you've got the 10 secrets of the collaborative organization and you mentioned

that it's not top down bureaucratic do this to be more creative and I think there's more organizations and businesses who want to be more creative.

They read the stories in Fast Company or whatever about Apple, "We want to be innovative," without actually understanding how you structure for it without over structuring it. So I'm wondering how do you do that in an organization practically and then how do you do it in your personal life? Because I've noticed that when my life is a mess, when my office is a mess, it's distracting. Too much chaos is distracting from the creative process for me.

But at the same time, I can constantly reorder things and try to plan everything out and there are those flashes of insight and to me, it feels like a dance. So how do I approach my work as a creative or how would an organization make room for improvisation without things being a mess and without things being overly structured?

[00:10:06.0] KS: Good question. I'd say it's very similar at any one of these levels. In *Group Genius*, the book's loosely structured into three parts and one is how to foster creativity in teams but the other is maybe the individuals in a team, how to foster creativity in an individual and how participating in teams can help individuals be creative and then, you get up from the team to the organization.

So you've asked what can organizations do, and also what can individuals do? Very different messages but what they share is you need to have the flexibility and room for improvisation for unpredictability to be able to follow, I call it a zig zagging path that leads to successful creative outcomes but yes, there is even in your own personal life something that guides you. Some sort of vision, some sort of notion of the client or the consumer or what the problem is.

So there's even in your own individual creative career, there's that same balance a necessity for room for improvisation but also you can't really plan. You can't have a plan, you can't really put it on your calendar, you can't know when it's going to end, but you can guide it.

[00:11:26.6] JG: So one of the endorsers of your book, *Group Genius*, was Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi which is fun to say but not fun to spell.

[00:11:34.7] KS: You got it.

[00:11:36.9] JG: And he authored the booked called *Creativity* which I'm sure you're familiar with and I loved but I shared it an article one time and I talked about the social dynamics of creative success and some people responded to that negatively and I'm sure you're familiar with the whole System Theory of Creativity and I see pieces of that in *Group Genius* and I'm wondering how do you respond to somebody who says, "Well I can't be creative because I'm not part of this system, or this community or I don't live in that city"?

I think as we're understanding and you certainly proved this and were one of the pioneers in this in my mind that creativity is not a loan effort that some of the greatest innovations were the result of collaboration and people being in the right place at the right time or with the right people who can create friction that turned into something brilliant. So what about the person who says, "Look, I live in Nebraska or I live in some far off pacific island. I don't feel like I I'm a part of a community where I'm going to get that sort of connection, can I still be creative?"

[00:12:45.0] KS: Great question and I had two immediate reactions as you were asking the question and the first one was, "No you cannot be creative alone. Isolated individuals are not creative. That's not how creativity happens." But then my second reaction was, "Don't tell me you're not creative because any way you can be creative, it's just a matter of learning the research and going through the process." So my two reactions I felt within myself, maybe there's a contradiction there.

[00:13:12.1] JG: Yeah.

[00:13:12.5] KS: I think when people say they can't be creative, it's almost always an excuse for not working harder at it and not learning how to go through the process. It's really a cop out. On the other hand, you're right, what if you do live in woods somewhere and you never meet anybody else? It's going to be pretty hard to be creative if you never meet anybody but very few of us are in that situation of being the mountain man.

You don't have to be in Palo Alto and it's not being in a certain place that is going to be the key to being creative. I think just about anywhere you are, you can find those networks and those

collaborations especially now that we have the Internet available where you can form part of social networks and a lot of virtual collaboration. As a matter of fact, I am working on a second edition for *Group Genius*. It will be published in 2017, that's going to be the one new chapter I add. It will be about social media and virtual collaboration.

[00:14:09.3] JG: Oh cool. Yeah, a lot has changed since you published it in terms of the way people get to collaborate with each other.

[00:14:15.5] KS: It's become even more important in collaboration especially with the growth, as I said social media. There is a little bit of it around 10 years ago but it really has taken over.

[00:14:25.6] JG: So you said anybody can be creative. This is as I understand it, is the argument of your newer book, *Zig Zag.* Well how can anybody be creative? That is something that I think more and more people are adopting that term but just last night my wife was like, "I'm not creative unlike you are," because every night I sing my toddler a song before he goes to bed and I go, "What song do you want buddy?" And he goes, "I want an excavator song."

He's way into construction machines and so he'll just pick random objects and I have to sing a song to it, which is usually sung to the tune of some other song but if he recognizes that tune like twinkle, twinkle little star he goes, "Uh-uh no, you've got to make it up," and so I go make up some melody. And so my wife came down stairs and she could hear me singing to him over our baby monitor and she said, "That's why he keeps asking me to sing songs that I don't know."

She said, "I can't be creative like you." So I think there's still this idea that, "Oh you're a creative person, I can't do what you do I'm not creative." *Zig Zag* debunks that. Why do you think anybody can be creative?

[00:15:37.0] KS: There's a huge body of research, first of all I would say there's no evidence that there is such a thing as "a creative person". All these decades of personality research, no there is no such thing as a creative personality. There is no such thing as one person who just has the trait of being creative. So what we know now, after more decades of research, is that creativity is based on every day brain processes that everybody uses every day.

There's not a special part of the brain creative people can turn on that the rest of us don't have access to. So that's where my key message comes from. It's just knowing that research and it's empowering honestly to know that what's going on in my brain every day is really the same components of what's going on in the thought of people who are exceptionally creative. It's just a matter of learning how to put them, those thought processes, learning how to put them together in the ways that they are associated with successful creativity.

[00:16:39.2] JG: So a lot of books like this that talk about creativity almost as a linear process and it doesn't feel that way to me. I like your word picture, "zig zag", and there is this forward momentum that happens. You do feel like you're moving forward but I am working on a book right now and I do feel like it's a few steps forward, a few steps back and overtime progress is made but it feels less of a straight line and more like a zig zag. Am I understanding that analogy right?

[00:17:08.6] KS: Absolutely and that is the nature of the creative process in pretty much any field I've studied. Whether it's the arts or music composition or design, industrial design, invention. So many stories anytime you look at the back story of the successful innovation, you're going to see the wondering path, you will see the dead ends, you will see starts and stops. You will see almost always the process starts with a totally different conception than what comes out of the end. It really doesn't matter what you start with, what matters is going through the process of deliberate creativity.

[00:17:49.6] JG: So you've for eight steps in the book *Zig Zag*, is that the process?

[00:17:55.6] KS: The process involves all eight of those and I'm hesitant to call them steps, but I didn't really. There are chapters in the book. You could call them stages or steps. I think of them almost like habits of mind. So the way that I think about these eight chapters of the book are that each one of them is based on the body of psychology research on things that go on in your mind and that, in particular, go on in people's minds when they are engaged in the process of deliberate creativity.

Each of those eight habits of mind are grounded in every day thought processes that we use every day. None of them are special to certain individuals so yeah, you could think of them as

habits of mind or discipline. I almost thought of using terms like that but it sounded maybe a little bit too new age-y to say that they were discipline. It's like meditating or yoga but that's really a good way to think of them, just sort of frames of mind that you occupy at various points while you're going through the process.

So these eight of them, they're fairly similar to some of the linear models of creativity that are out there, but what's different in my approach is that zig-zagging, right? It wanders, you start and stop, you curve back around, it spirals in a sense and I guess you could say it's improvisational.

[00:19:19.0] JG: Did the publisher make you say steps?

[00:19:21.9] KS: No, no.

[00:19:23.3] JG: People like steps.

[00:19:24.5] KS: It just seemed like easier than saying disciplines or habits of mind because then you've got to say, "Well what are disciplines? What are habits of mind?" So yeah, "steps" is fine or "stages" and the book is linear, right? You start with page of mind, you go through to page, whatever it is, 200 and something. That is one reason this non linearity just about in December, two months ago, I released a creativity card deck, Zig Zag Creativity Cards.

[00:19:55.6] JG: Right, yeah I heard about that.

[00:19:56.7] KS: I like the notion of the card deck because it's not linear. You can take the cards and shuffle them up and wander around through the eight stages. In the card deck, there basically are eight suites, each one corresponding to one of these steps, so one of these habits of mind.

[00:20:13.8] JG: And then under each step in the card deck or under each suite, what's on the card?

[00:20:19.9] KS: Each one has a technique that you can use to enhance your creativity in that one of the eight and each card's technique is taken in the book, *Zig Zag*. The main idea with my book is hands on practical techniques that can enhance your creativity based in the latest research. So the book has over 100, just slightly over one hundred of these techniques and of course you can't put 100 cards in a card deck.

So I picked about — it's about half of them and each one is one a card so exactly, you shuffle the deck, you take a different card every day, you can use that card to concentrate on that day then pick another card the next day. They're so small, the card deck, you can just keep it in your briefcase.

[00:21:06.7] JG: Yeah, I love that. It's like Russian roulette with creativity instead of killing something, you create something.

[00:21:13.6] KS: Right, you never know what you're going to get.

[00:21:15.7] JG: Yeah, that's cool. What I'd love to do is go through this eight steps or habits and I realize that it's not a linear process but we'll just go through the eight in the order that you have them in the book and kind of like with the card deck, it would be fun to just have you share a little bit about each step, each suite in terms of what's something practical that we can do to develop this discipline a little bit more today? How does that sound?

[00:21:42.9] KS: It's sounds good, yeah.

[00:21:43.8] JG: All right, you're ready?

[00:21:44.5] KS: I've got to give you some — I'll pause in between.

[00:21:47.6] JG: Sure.

[00:21:47.9] KS: Otherwise I could be going on for a while with the eight different steps.

[00:21:51.4] JG: Yeah, I can start us off. Step one is ask.

[00:21:54.5] KS: That's right. Each of those steps, I have one syllable that's easy to put on a card deck. So "ask" is the first and ask, I will expand and say that's the ability to come up with really good questions or really good ways to formulate your problem and that's strongly associated with exceptional creativities. In creativity research we call it problem finding. It's a contrast with problem solving.

Solving problems absolutely requires creativity but if you don't know what the problem is or you don't even know how to formulate the problem, then your first step is figure out what the problem is. That problem finding is associated with much greater creativity of much more breakthrough creativity, exceptional creativity.

So in this first step, the first chapter of the book, *Ask*, I have a series of activities that are designed to basically it's like exercise to pump up your muscles and your brain that help you get into this mindset of, "Am I asking the right question? Maybe it should be this other question?" But you don't know how to reformulate it, right? So that's why I'm hoping this exercises they will get your mind stronger in doing this.

[00:23:13.2] JG: Yeah, you said that, "Mastering the discipline of asking means you're always looking for good problems, always seeking new inspiration, you know where you're going and yet you're receptive to questions that emerge unexpectedly." So I love that because that also feels like a zigzag where, "Okay I'm going to move in this direction but then I might get new information that will change the direction." Writing a book for me feels that way like, "Here's the thing that I think I want to say" and then you go down that direction and it can change. Is writing like that for you by the way?

[00:23:45.3] KS: Every book is that way. *Zig Zag* when I submitted the proposal to the publisher it was called The Compass so I knew there were going to be eight and I was looking for visual metaphors for eight. I have actually done this and workshops with executives, think of things that are eight. That might be something related to creativity and I had three pages of this ideas and The Compass was the one I ended up sending around. Zig Zag wasn't even on the first three pages. Sometimes, the final idea comes pretty far along in the process.

[00:24:26.4] JG: Which is interesting. I feel like you need structure but in some ways it's inherently arbitrary and you just picked eight and I'm like, "Pick a number and then we'll fill it in," and then you do your research and start filling things in so that's fun. Okay, step two is "Learn".

[00:24:46.5] KS: Learn, that's right and this is basically mastering everything that you need to know to be effective in your field or your discipline. You might think of this as, I don't, but the boring and tedious part of creativity, it really matters that you pay your dues and learn everything that's come before, that definitely enhances your creative potential.

So when you put it that way maybe it just sounds like you're sitting at the library and studying all the time but what we know from research is to be creative the learning that you need to do it's different than what you typically get in school where you are memorizing information and then you're regurgitating on a test. To learn for creativity, you need to focus on deeper patterns, deeper conceptual understanding.

So it changes, if you're doing it right, if you know this research on learning, it changes the way you approach learning, the way that you try to master information in your field. It's not just memorizing, that's superficial. What's associated with creativity is the deeper understanding of how things are connected beneath the surface.

[00:25:55.1] JG: Yeah, wow. Step three is "Look".

[00:25:59.3] KS: Look is really being aware. It's a certain way of seeing what goes on in your life every day. I mean all of us, those are the days commuting to work, eating lunch, fixing dinner at night, so we get into patterns and routines and you're doing the same thing over and over. You really stop paying attention because you're on auto pilot.

This is partly based in research on what's called mindfulness as oppose to mindlessness where you can go through the day and be fairly mindless because it's so automated. So this awareness that I call "look", if you really pay attention to what's going on in your environment especially unexpected and new things, that's pretty highly correlated with effective creativity because it's getting you outside of your every day and bringing in new and surprising material that you otherwise wouldn't notice.

[00:26:55.0] JG: How do you do that? I mean, is there a practical way to do that? What's a way that you do that or you recommend to people do that?

[00:27:03.1] KS: That's the one that I have almost probably more techniques than any other step because they're just a lot of fun and they're really easy to do every day. One of them, one of the cards, it's called "Shape Your Day". So if you draw this card, I've got a picture of a circle, a triangle and a square but that's just to get you started and I say, "In the morning select a basic geometric shape. It could even be a zig zag and as you go through your day just look for examples of that shape." So you're going to see everything you see every day anyway but now, you're looking for a zig zag. You're just going to look differently at all the same stuff and that's going to exercise your mind and that just awareness mentality.

[00:27:48.9] JG: Yeah, you said this in the book. You said, "You're constantly quietly aware, you just don't see what you expect to see, you see the new, the unusual, the surprising." I was talking to someone recently about this subject of creativity and I love this, they said that artists see things that other people don't see and what I love about the message of *Zig Zag* is you're arguing that anybody can see that if you just practice these creative habits, you can see this things, you can notice this things.

But I think that's true, that artist, creative people, they're the ones who are bringing things to light and they go, "Oh yeah, that's brilliant. That's amazing," and even that idea is brilliant. You're almost like shining a light on this thing that's here but somehow we just failed to notice it. So I love that. I love that exercise. Okay step four is "Play".

[00:28:41.9] KS: Play and then it has the best name maybe, fourth is play and it's being playful and it's based into a body of research into what we call incubation or mind wandering. It's when you take time off from the hard work and you just do something completely unrelated to your problem. You take a walk or you go to the coffee shop.

In creativity research we call it incubation because it's this metaphor of adding something sit on the back burner and stew a little bit and that's important to the creative process to release your conscious mind from actively focusing on the problem and allowing your subconscious mind to

sort of stew a little bit and combine different subconscious ideas that your mind wouldn't do it if you were actively focused on your problem.

[00:29:37.8] JG: Yeah, I love all that psychology research on play and the importance of it because our world is so busy and this amazing technology can also keep us constantly engaged in all kinds of activity that don't give us space to daydream or wander or play and I love what you wrote in the book about it. You said, "You free your mind from imagination and fantasy letting your unconscious lead you into uncharted territory," and that feels like a waste of time but it doesn't have to be, does it?

[00:30:15.4] KS: You are taking time away from the task that you have to do, right?

[00:30:20.7] JG: Yeah, right.

[00:30:21.2] KS: That the deadline is coming up. So yeah, if you're working 80 hours a week, I would predict that you are not going to be that creative.

[00:30:28.3] JG: Yeah, wow. "Think" is step five, what is involved in that?

[00:30:32.5] KS: That refers to thinking of ideas and this is step five but for a lot of people when they think about creativity, they think of it as step one is having the idea. So I think it's really important that it would be down there with step five because you really aren't going to have good ideas unless you engage in all these other practices first.

The ideas come from the process, the ideas don't come before the process and step five, I grounded in a body of research on divergent thinking is what creativity researchers call it. It's this idea of generating lots and lots of possibilities and you don't settle on one idea early on. Even if you have an idea that you think is pretty good, you still keep going.

Do 10 more, do 20 more, take your one idea that you think is good and do 10 variations of that one or try to think of the exact opposite idea that you think of the one that is good. All of these techniques are focused on the same idea, which is to generate as much as possible. Don't settle on one thing too early and the techniques that I have in the book are designed to again

stretch that part of your mind to get you thinking broadly and really about I guess sheer volume of ideas.

[00:31:49.1] JG: So is that the same as brain storming or is that different?

[00:31:52.5] KS: Absolutely, yeah. This research on brainstorming, which goes all the way back to the 1950's, the technique of brainstorming emerged in the 1950's at the same time as this research on divergent thinking was starting. So yeah, that's what brainstorming is designed to do. It's designed to generate as long a list of ideas as possible. Unfortunately, as I talk about in my book *Group Genius*, there's a lot of research showing that brainstorming often is ineffective.

[00:32:21.7] JG: Right that was my question because that's what I'm hearing more and more is people saying, "That doesn't work."

[00:32:26.7] KS: Right and we know it doesn't work from research because it doesn't work to generate a long list of possible ideas. It's better if you have individuals generate ideas alone and then you actually get way more ideas. Does it make sense because when you're in a meeting one person is talking to you at a time, someone is writing on the whiteboard, everyone else is quiet and thinking.

So yeah, get everybody in their office typing ideas and you will end up with two or three times many ideas. But you still need to come together in the group and what groups are really good for is working through a list of ideas that's already there. So you bring everybody's ideas together and then you use the group to examine each idea to think about what's good about it? Which ones are worth pursuing?

[00:33:13.2] JG: Wow, fascinating. Step six is "Fuse". What does that mean?

[00:33:17.6] KS: Fusing is combining ideas, bringing material together and that's so often associated with creativity. Even Steve Jobs has said, "Creativity is just connecting things," and there's research to back that up. What goes on in your mind when you have an idea, your mind is combining two existing ideas, right? Ideas don't just come down from on high. You have to have a lot of stuff in your mind and something goes on your mind that combines two pieces of

information, two mental structures and that's a new thing but it's still doesn't come out of nowhere, right?

So we know what goes on in the mind when people are forming these mental combinations and that's what my techniques are designed to do is, it's again to exercise your ability to generate the connections and in particular, what we know results in greater creativity is connections between really different kinds of stuff. Really different ideas, really different disciplines in a business, different functional areas.

So it's those distant connections that result in greater creativity and a lot of my techniques in the *Fuse* chapter are designed to help you identify and spot those distant connections. We're all pretty good at combining simpler things but combining very different things is not something we do every day.

[00:34:40.1] JG: I once heard a business author say that if you want to build wealth, what you need to do is you need to find two different industries, two different groups of people and introduce them to each other and he actually sighted Steve Jobs and said, "This is what Apple did." They took designers and the creative crowd and the artist and they connected them with really great engineers that could make really beautiful products and that's the genius of Apple is what he argued.

So it's fascinating because under *Fuse* you said, "Creative minds are always bouncing ideas together looking for unexpected combinations," and you just said that the best thing to do is to find two things that are very different and then combine them. I wonder because people say this, "I don't have any ideas. I don't have anything interesting to say," and the more you read, the more you realize that. The more you realize that, "Man everything has been said before."

But it sounds like this might be an opportunity where you can say something new by borrowing these two ideas or combining these two things in creating something new out of that, which I think is what you're saying but practically that sounds great. I'm going, "Okay, how do I do that? If that's the secret to wealth and that's the secret to making creative connections and becoming the next Apple or whatever?" Obviously, it's not as simple as a one sentence answer, but what is something practical that you can do to start fusing things together?

[00:36:09.3] KS: Well first I should say that creativity research cannot tell you how to be rich.

[00:36:14.7] JG: That's not the promise of your book?

[00:36:17.3] KS: Right. I could have written a different book for that one but yeah.

[00:36:19.7] JG: Awesome.

[00:36:21.7] KS: So I will give you an example of one of the cards in the card deck is to combine concepts like, I have a few examples on fuse card number four: Draw some sketches of a piece of furniture that's also a kind of fruit. So furniture and fruit are very distant concepts. If you are drawing a piece of furniture that you can sit on, well those a very similar ideas. You're going to come up with really obvious chairs and couches.

But even if you say draw a piece of furniture that you can stand on, you're still going to draw a wooden chair or stool or a bench or something. But now, a piece of furniture that is also a kind of fruit, it's not obvious. Actually that forces you, or exercises you in making those distant connections.

[00:37:11.3] JG: Awesome. So step seven is "Choose". This is my least favorite thing to do is to make choices. What do you have to do here?

[00:37:20.2] KS: Yes, choosing is something that we all have to do at some point in the creative process, is to make decisions. But a lot of past creativity research has talked about choosing as something that comes right at the end where, "Okay, we've had all of our ideas now we're going to pick the one that moves forward and all the other ones are going to stay in the trashcan and this is going to be it." But that's not the way the successful creative process works.

You're making little choices all along the way because I've already said, the creative process isn't about one big idea. It's about lots of tiny ideas continually being revisited and revised and built on in this zig-zagging process. So what I call *Choose*, again it's a kind of mindset that you apply throughout the process every time you have a small idea.

I don't really think of it as a yes-no decision, thumbs up or thumbs down, but the way I think of this habit of mind of choosing is, it's more like revising and editing and improving. So when you're looking at an idea, you're not thinking, "Does this suck or not," right? You're thinking, "What's interesting about this idea? What potential does it have? If I twist it around, could it be this other thing?" So yeah, that's why choose sounds bad because it sounds like it's a thumbs up or thumbs down but it's really a mindset of evaluating, intuiting, revising and improving.

[00:38:50.9] JG: Yeah, I like it. The last step is called "Make".

[00:38:56.3] KS: That's right, making is, well, now we have a maker culture, right?

[00:39:00.8] JG: I know, yeah.

[00:39:01.4] KS: Which is pretty closely related, there's all sorts of research showing that when you get your ideas out into the world in some visible form, it really drives your creativity forward. So that's the exercises I have in the eighth step or *Make* is ways you can get your ideas out into the world, visualize them or externalize them or build them. Anything you can do to get it out of your head.

You might think of it as prototyping, right? But even before prototyping, something you can do an hour or a day, anything you can do that then you have an interaction with what you put out there and that interaction would drive your process much faster than if you just sat there with everything in your head and thought harder. If you put it out there in the world, it makes everything so much easier.

[00:39:52.5] JG: So I'm a writer. I love this concept but as a writer, I struggle as I know many writers do with my own ideas and stories and things that I want to say and I know that putting it out there is going to give me all kinds of feedback but most of my job is sitting in an office or coffee shop or whatever and pounding away on the keyboard and I have to discipline myself to prototype and put this stuff out there and get reactions from it.

But I know a lot of people who just don't do that. They're afraid of someone stealing your ideas especially if you're writing a book, right? That's really precious and you're really hesitant to share it with people. So practically, how can I do this? How can I not publish the final thing? Because then it's too late. I can't iterate on it. I might get all kinds of negative feedback in the form of amazon reviews or whatever and I go, "Oh no, I made a mistake." I don't want to make that mistake. I want to prototype, I want to put it out there but there's all that fear and all that hesitation. How does somebody like me do that?

[00:41:01.0] KS: Even if you don't share it with anybody, it's important to put it out there for yourself so that you can interact with what you've externalized. It's like expanding your brain into the physical world. So yeah, you can do it all by yourself in the office with the door closed. They key is getting it on paper somewhere and then it's going to enhance your own individual creative process and then you point it out that it does give you opportunities to share and collaborate once it's out there but even if you're not showing it to everybody, it's still it's going to drive your creative process forward.

[00:41:38.3] JG: Yeah, that makes sense. It's the thing that I am most hesitant to do because then it's real and when it's in my mind, it's perfect but when it's on paper, I go, "Oh, it's not as cool as I thought it would be. Now, I've got to make it better," and that's a painful process for me.

[00:41:56.4] KS: It's a huge creative block for a lot of people. It's this idea, the thought that whatever I make has to be awesome and then what goes along with that is once you've made something, you feel like it's this precious thing. So that causes all sorts of problems. First is, if it has to be awesome and then you're not going to generate the necessarily small crappy things that you need to get the process driven forward and you're just going to sit there not doing anything.

So that's one thing about, "Oh my God it has to be awesome." Horrible idea. It's going to suck Anne Lamott has a book about writing it by. She calls it you need to generate shitty first drafts and that's just the way it is. It has to suck at first. So that's one. The other thing is, it's not precious and if you put it out there and then you think, "Well now it's great I can't change it," well then you're not going to go through the creative process.

The creative process is one that is constantly revising, killing, removing, editing, cutting, changing something dramatically in a different direction. Effective creators learn a process where you put things out there, they're not precious, they're not going to be great but you need to get the process started.

[0:43:06.9] JG: "Necessarily crappy", I love that. You mentioned creative blocks, there's debate on writer's block and creative blocks, is this a thing? Do you believe in this?

[0:43:18.2] KS: People get blocked all the time, I think there's always an explanation for why they get blocked. If you mean, is there some mysterious thing where you're neurons aren't firing? No, that's not true. It's pretty predictable what's going to lead you to be blocked, I just gave you two examples, one is they has to be awesome, another is, well once it's there I can't change it.

Another, everything is connected, all the blocks are going to be connected with misconceptions about the process. Once you know what the process is, if you follow the process, you will not be blocked, I guarantee it.

[0:43:53.9] JG: And you'll be rich.

[0:43:56.1] KS: Well, I already said, I can't promise that. There is all sorts of creativity that accomplishes other things in the world than making money but any time people do make money, it's a result of creativity and innovation.

[0:44:09.8] JG: Wow, I tease of course. So you go through this process and this is not a linear process, it's a zig zag but it has a predictable outcome, you said you be blocked and that's interesting that I think there's a lot of people that would say that creative blocks like, "Yeah, just go for a walk or just do this thing or do that." Anne Lamott says it's not about being blocked.

There's a difference between blocked and empty. If you're empty, you need to go get some more input, go read a book, go sing a song, go do whatever. But, you know, I've always said, "You've just got to slog through it." I love the idea that a block is based on a misconception, you're just misinterpreting what's going on and it's true, I'm worried of failing, I'm worried of

sucking and what that means is I'm unwilling to create that necessarily crappy thing so that then I can iterate on it and make it better.

[0:44:59.1] KS: Yeah fear is a block. You're going to be taking risk, you're going to be failing. It sounds scary at first but once you done it a few times, you learn to trust the process. You realize, "Yeah, this is happening and I expect this to, I expect to fail. I know that's what's going to drive me forward." So you don't perceive as a mistake or a failure anymore, you perceive it as part of the process.

[0:45:25.2] JG: Okay, so we know that creativity won't necessarily make you rich but I love what you said there that anytime somebody does make money, they're exercising this process, which is a neat way to think about it and I don't think that that's a motivation for a lot of people.

But here is my question: why should people care about this? What does creativity do for you? To the people who go, "I'm not creative or I'll leave that to the artists," or whatever. Why should we even care about being creative, or being more creative?

[0:45:56.5] KS: Well, I'll go all the way back to the beginning of our interview when you were talking about singing songs to your child and your wife saying, "well I could never sing songs, I'm not creative." One of the biggest stereotypes about creativity is that it's associated with the arts, it's music…

[0:46:12.6] JG: Yeah, of course.

[0:46:12.6] KS: …it's writing poetry, it's dancing, it's producing plays or movies. Absolutely those things require creativity but it really is a misconception that creativity is restricted to the arts. Everything you do, you can do better with creativity even if you're stuck in traffic and you're looking for a new route to the office or you're cooking one night and you're out of some key ingredient and you need to improvise a work around, you're in a meeting, in my case, I'm a teacher, I'm in a meeting with a student. Student presents a problem or concern that I never encountered before. I need to be creative to interact successfully with that student. Every day, everything you do, your life can benefit from creativity.

[0:47:00.0] JG: Yeah, you said, "Creativity makes everything you do better." I love that. Do you think being more creative gives you an advantage in the world or the workplace or in your personal life? Is there, you said it makes it better, is there things that we can have an advantage over other people doing what we do if we exercise these habits more often?

[0:47:27.5] KS: I think so but with a caveat that we know from a lot of research that if you start with that intention, it tends to interfere with the creativity.

[0:47:37.4] JG: Really?

[0:47:37.9] KS: If you start with the intention of, "This is going to make me more successful, this is going to make me compete better, this is going to help me get that next job." Thinking about that external goal, thinking about the end point, interferes with the process.

[0:47:52.1] JG: Can you talk more about that because I think that's fascinating.

[0:47:56.3] KS: Well anytime you're focused on an end point, you aren't fully absorbed in the process itself because you already preconceived what the end point is going to be, you're not allowing the emergence that comes from this iteration and the process. Just talk about your career, you might be thinking, "If I'm more creative, I'm going to get that promotion." But once you go through the process, this might sound too "new agey" but once you go through the process, you might realize you're in the wrong career or you might meet somebody at a different company that has a better job for you.

Being open to all sorts of different possibilities that will lead you to more successfully go through that creative process. Being too focused on the outcome. That blocks the process. And a second thing is this body of research on motivation. What you're talking about in terms of being successful or having an advantage, that's what psychologist call, extrinsic motivation, things you're aiming for that are external rewards.

Tons of research is showing that what's associated with creativity is intrinsic motivation. You're driven to do it because you love doing it. That gets you fully engaged in the process, that intrinsic motivation and we know from tons of research, thinking about that external motivation, it

really kills the internal motivation and it just blocks you going through that process successfully. So I would caution anyone from thinking too much about what they're going to get out of being more creative because that's going to block the creativity.

[0:49:28.2] JG: Yeah, it's like the thing that you want to do if you try to do that, it's not going to get you there and it's going to kill the process and yeah that's really interesting. The point is the process, very Zen idea.

[0:49:40.7] KS: It is Zen like and I would say more likely than not, if you gaze in the process, you will end up being more successful. But, again, this might sound unlike your definition of success, like change. I'm not saying in some morph of sense but what success looks like to you, like I said, it might be a different company , it might be a different unit in your organization, it's not like you're dropping out and moving to India right? But it's that being open to a different halves to the process.

[0:50:12.6] JG: I love that. That's so interesting. Okay, last question Keith. What is the one thing you wish more people understood about creativity?

[0:50:22.9] KS: I'd say the one thing is to understand that it's not a brilliant flash of insight that comes to gifted individuals but it is a process of deliberate creativity that everyone can engage in, that consistently leads to creative outcomes.

[0:50:41.0] JG: Love that. Thanks so much for your time.

[0:50:42.3] KS: Thanks you, it's been a pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:50:44.8] AT: So are you guilty of trying to be creative alone? Who could help you be creative? How could you use social networks and digital collaboration to increase your creativity? To leave your thoughts on this episode or the answers to those questions, you can go to Goinswriter.com/108.

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