# On making space for self-reflection

## Poet and educator Jacqueline Suskin discusses the difficulty of transitions, building a personal toolkit, and using the cycles of nature as guidance in your creative practice.

April 3, 2024 -

As told to Grashina Gabelmann, 2672 words.

Tags: Poetry, Education, Process, Inspiration, Time management.

**I'm a freelancer and I am so bad at having a consistent schedule. I've come to accept as it is just who I am, but it can be quite frustrating so I really appreciate your latest book *A Year In Practice* that looks at the cycles of nature as guidance for creative practices.**

Well, I like that you're starting with that kind of admission because I think a lot of people have a really hard time finding their rhythm for discipline. A lot of what inspired me to make this book was actual conversations I had with other artists who were searching for something that would help them. And I myself have searched for that in my practice many times, and at some point I was like, "Well, I don't need to reinvent the wheel. Rhythms of the earth exist and those are what guide me in so many other areas. I wonder how they guide my creative practice?" Instead of feeling bad for needing naps in the winter I can think: I'm actually fully in sync with the planet and that's what I'm made of, so it makes sense that I don't have a lot of energy right now.

I think that's what a lot of art is for me, is someone will write something and I see it and I'm like, "That's exactly how I feel." Now I know I'm not alone. I'm not off the mark. I'm in sync with other people who are maybe tapping into similar things and that feels like community or connection.

**What's your approach of finding a balance between pulling away from outside pressures but not completely desynchronizing from the rest of the world?**

The more nuanced point of the book is this idea that we can tap into seasonal energies and utilize them whenever we can. And that's the practice part: How do you get to know what it feels like for you to be nourished in whichever season you're in? And it's very specific to each person. It's this personalized sort of relationship that you have to learn and recognize. And then once you do that and continuously get to know it and approach it, then you can turn it on whenever you need to.

So I see it more of a really applicable kind of accessible thing that you learn and then a hat you put on or something where you're like, "Oh, I have 10 minutes right now. I'm going to practice being in stillness because that's actually what this season really wants from me." Even though all the other hours of the day I'm rushing around, I at least remember now that I can practice this winter sensation.

**I like that approach, that it can be a practice rather than reworking your entire lifestyle. Being in the Northern Hemisphere during its winter we will be more tired and then it's nice to not feel lazy but instead feel in sync with the environment.**

Yeah, and you have a choice in it. And because you are an earthling, you are a being on planet earth, you are guided by the earth. There's so many things that we don't notice or name in our practice, or during our day, or during our creative output, that are really in sync with what the earth is doing. And I actually think that noticing those things and practicing that noticing can kind of uncover a lot of other things that maybe give that sense of affirmation that you belong to something larger than yourself, which I think can fuel artistry.

Then that sense of being connected to the earth can help open up a bunch of other doors of exploration, because it does kind of turn on this little cosmic sense of, "Oh, I'm part of this wider story and my artwork is, too." And then it kind of gives you that lift of, even if you're not creating something in the name of output, you're kind of following the footsteps or the guidance of this bigger planetary rhythm. And I think that can be really fortifying for practice in the future.

**Do you work with people who do not consider creating art their full time pursuit?**

Yeah, I work and interact both with people who see art as their job and people who do not.

I am interested in the bridge between because being a full time artist myself I want to stay connected and rooted to reality. People who aren't artists for a living, they're my audience, they're my community, and I don't want to be separate from them.

I think a lot of artists who I love are full-on just in their zone creating and pulling things from their own perception all the time. And then there's another way of being, which is being in conversation. And I really appreciate that because I love art that can almost reach anyone. And I love weird, esoteric art also, believe me, and I respect it deeply, and I think there's a lot of space for it and we need it. But my artwork has always been rooted in this kind of understanding of accessibility and what am I trying to make accessible to my fellow humans, whether they're artists or not. And part of that is me helping them to turn on their own artistry and observe that. How does that apply to their day-to-day life, even if they aren't making a living off of being artists? I just think that all of that is really complex and nuanced, and I'm totally fascinated by how it works.

**I relate to what you are saying. I give creative workshops for teenagers and the elderly and I like stepping out of the "professional" art scene. I learn a lot from it.**

Yeah. How does it expand? That's what I'm always interested in. Because I think that the root of everything…the universe and everything in it is constantly trying to expand, and that's what we're doing in our work, too. And I think turning on the light of everyone else's artistry kind of gives space for that expansion. And also it's like an experiment. This whole thing is just this grand experiment of being alive, this weird, chaotic experiment in the cosmos. And I'm like, what's going to happen when this person who works their day job practices having the mindset of a poet? They'll start observing more. I think all artistry is this big through line of self-reflection, and that's a very healing and transformative space to be in.

So what happens when we build these toolkits and share them with each other so that each person can expand in their own way? I'm like, "That's how the world is made." So that's what I'm most interested in, is I want to see all these people's visions and ideas come into fruition in some ways, even if they're just little ways during the day in their own private life, but that'll affect someone around them. And I'm fascinated by that.

Photos of Jacqueline and books by Cody Sells

**Since the two of us are based in the Northern Hemisphere in cold cities I thought it would be nice for you to elaborate on a winter prompt. How about journal reviewing? That spoke to me.**

Yeah, I love talking about that. I work with a lot of people one-on-one who are trying to either get a book written or figure out what it looks like to have a writing practice at all. And a lot of that work starts with them saying, "I have all of these journals that I've written in for however many years and I don't know what to do with them."

A big part of my personal practice has been to develop this system with my journals that has helped me review everything I've written and sort out the stuff that I want to use and utilize. I created just a little very rudimentary symbol method where I kind of write these symbols next to things that I'm writing in real time because it helps me go back later and be like, "Okay, so this is a poem. I want to get this draft into the computer and edit it." Or, "This is just an idea for something, a piece of writing, a poem, maybe an essay," maybe it's just one line that I like, I don't know. And so there's a little symbol.

And then there's also something that I really want to flesh out and add to a longer form project. So I think doing it in the winter is a nice time to approach that type of project because maybe you have a little bit more space, or maybe there's a little bit more silence around you, or maybe you're a less inclined to be social so you have more space to be emotional and private with these things in your journal as you do this process of collecting for future projects or figuring out what you've left yourself. Because usually if you've been writing in a journal for a consistent amount of time, you've left yourself some golden nuggets, some bits of beauty that you can weave into the current moment.

So I think that that practice is crucial for every artist, no matter what your medium is. It doesn't matter if you're a writer or whatever you make, your journals are probably full of great subject matter, but if you don't give yourself the time or create a system to move through it all, then it'll just be sitting there on the shelf and you won't know what it is. And maybe that's what would help you move forward or get you unstuck or deliver something new into your practice. It will be you from the past, but you have to have that uninterrupted time to do it. And so to me, winter is just a nice time of year to maybe appreciate that you could say, "Hey, it's snowing, or it's really gray and cold out. I'm not going to go do anything anyway, so maybe I'll sit with myself and what I've created for myself."

**Now I'm really in the mood to do that. You write about creating the space to navigate your core. Could you elaborate on that?**

I think making any type of artwork or calling in any kind of creative selfhood or self-expression revolves a lot around knowing yourself and knowing what you really need, what you really want, what you really think about things. And I mean, another word for that is your imagination and what's happening in your imagination. And I think of that as the core of myself, the deep down experience of what it is to be myself in the world. But I don't think that we get the chance to just explore that in everyday moments. I think you actually have to intentionally look in there and take the time to really go into the depths of yourself. And that takes, first of all, a lot of practice and a lot of care, and there's a lot of methodologies that can help you do that. So there's a lot of studying. And that's kind of part of practicing to me, is studying something.

But then I think in winter, I'm so connected to the stillness that's happening in the planet that I'm able to access that stillness in myself a little more, and then that core conversation can kind of come out with ease. As opposed to maybe in the frantic energy of spring, I might not be able to hear myself as much because I'm excited or because I'm getting ready to communicate with other people and I'm hearing them more. So I think knowing that there's this time of year where things get a little bit more quiet, I look forward to that as the time of year where then I can maybe have a little more introspection. But again, thinking of that as more of an energetic thing and not like a regimented prescriptive concept, but you can call on the energy of winter whenever you need to.

**I get so nervous when winter is about to end. I can be quite introverted and I need a lot of solo time to recharge so spring approaching can kind of freak me out.**

That's the worst one for me. It's hard. I really learned that when I wrote this book that, well, first of all, transitions for me in general in all of life are very hard. Like coming home from a trip or getting ready to leave for a trip. But witnessing the shift from winter to spring, I think naturally we would assume that that's an incredibly exciting period. There's going to be flowers everywhere. There's going to be beauty everywhere. And for me and my little system, I'm just like, "Oh my gosh, I don't know if I'm ready. It's so intense." And I really think that that was probably the most surprising information I received from writing the book, was how really difficult spring is for me when it first begins. When it finally takes hold and we're out and everything is thawed, it's okay. But that shift from inner to outer in general, I think is really hard for me.

**I can super relate to that. And what are some things that have maybe made that shift easier for you? Or is it just hard and that's okay?**

Remembering that it's hard I think is so important. Remembering that it's difficult, so then I'm a little bit slower and kinder to myself, and maybe I'm a little bit more in tune with my internal monologue, and I'm not as sharp with myself for having a harder time. What does it look like now for this other part of my life to be a little bit slower?" And I think that's what my mindset turns to when I'm transitioning from winter to spring is like, take a breath, take a beat. Don't start too soon. Really try to be in touch with the way it feels in your body to slow down. And that's not an easy thing to do, but I think it's something that has felt really worthwhile for me to practice.

**Yeah, that's helpful. Also, it'll be different in every region. In Berlin there isn't a linear trajectory of winter moving into spring. Tulips can blossom in February and April can be snowy. So, learning from your book, I**

**think it’s important to notice nature and learn from it.**

Yeah. It’s a good reminder that it’s just not simply linear.

There are little steps and you step a little bit forward and you step a little bit backward. And that’s actually how all of life works.

I do think we’re conditioned to think that everything should just be this step-by-step procedure. And when it’s not, then that means we’ve done something wrong. But the truth is we’re doing exactly what the earth is doing. And in that transition, things are really frantic and so we might feel really frantic. And instead of me being like, “Oh, I’m going to shame myself for being in this frantic state and not maybe being as dedicated to my routine,” I just instead say, “Well, that’s what the earth is up to.” There’s all these little planetary prompts in the book that are like, “You’re doing the same thing that earth is doing, and noticing that might help you feel a little bit better about it.”

**Jacqueline Suskin Recommends**:

Read: *Black Nature*

Listen: Neu Blume

Support: InsideOut

Watch: *All That Breathes*

Witness: The Nap Ministry

Name
Jacqueline Suskin

Vocation
poet and educator

Cody Sells