



The Athena Wellness Podcast
Episode 009 – Finding Meaning By Connecting The Dots
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Welcome to The Athena Wellness Podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that helps you live well and live long, so you can do the things that light you up with the people you love.

Hello, and welcome to Episode Nine. Today's show was inspired by several listener questions that had a similar theme, which was: "Can spending time doing what I love lead to living a meaningful life I love?" It seems the episodes on creating a values-aligned work portfolio and living a mosaic life resonated. But some were unsure if the time investment would turn into tangible life changes that deepened their purpose.

I've wrestled with similar questions throughout my adult life. And especially on the many business trips I took during my time in corporate. There's something about airplanes. Maybe it's the engine hum or being above the clouds gazing at an endless horizon, I don't know.

But on one trip, I came across a transcript of a 2005 Stanford University commencement speech given by Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple. You may be familiar with it, but I'll put a link in the show notes so you can check it out.



Here's the passage that resonated with me. Jobs told the graduates: "You can't connect the dots looking forward, you can only connect them looking backwards. So, you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something, your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down. And it has made all the difference in my life."

Those few sentences helped me reframe the questions I was holding at the time on leading an impactful life. My new question became: "Instead of looking at the blank slate of my future, what if I looked back with the intent to find some meaning and connection in the experiences I already had and use that insight as a way to move forward?"

How might you do the same? How might you connect your own dots?

The themes we'll be exploring today include:

1. The Past: Recognizing themes and patterns
2. The Present: The discipline of discerning focus
3. The future: Trusting what's meaningful to you

So, sit back, take a nice long breath to ground yourself in presence and let's get started.

The Past: Recognizing themes and patterns: I spent more than three decades living a bifurcated life. I was the *air quote* Corporate Professional for most of my waking hours, and the *air quote* Curious Creative when no one was looking. And it was incredibly frustrating to live that way. But looking back to connect the dots, I can see the benefit of life unfolding the way it did. One example was how my corporate experiences helped



me when I started my own business. And here's another, the discipline I needed to be successful as a professional helped me structure my writing life. So, looking back I can definitely see the value.

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As you look back on your past, here are a few questions that might be helpful to consider. First, let's start with: "How have you typically defined success?" Most formal definitions include some combination of money, power or fame, but there are other components.

What's been your main driver and why? It's okay if the answer is a paycheck. Being driven by money is not a sure sign of greed. And it could be the result of not having much in earlier years. The ability to earn a reliable income may bring a feeling of security. So, what you've been striving for and the feeling it brings could be dots to connect.

Here's another: "Where have you spent the bulk of your resources, meaning time and money, in your non-working hours?" What have you been reading, listening to or watching? What topics do you gravitate toward if you're going to watch a TED talk or take a class or a workshop? Have you ever attended retreats or volunteer your time? Are you part of a community that's linked by an interest? What do you binge watch? How do you spend your leisure time? What did you do as a younger person that you'd like to find time to do again? Dust off that old guitar and get the band back together? Maybe chill at the beach, or take a long drive? What these activities are and how they make you feel could be dots to connect.



Here's the last one: "What have you done to keep mundane activities palpable?" In other words, how have you invited a richer life experience when doing things that were required? I love this question because what kept me engaged during my corporate career were big clues. Think about the routine things that you do and what you do to elevate your energy when you do them. For work, you may get a boost with an occasional business trip or getting co-workers involved in a cause that's important to you. Maybe it's mentoring or teaching. In your personal life, perhaps you combine yard work or commuting with listening to your favorite playlist or audiobooks or podcasts, my favorite. All of those little rewards and how they make you feel could be dots to connect.

By now you probably have a sizable list of potential dots and may even be feeling a bit overwhelmed. It may be hard to make sense of these things and even harder to think about how you might prioritize your most precious resource, your time, to reengage in some of them. Also looking back and sometimes bring a little regret. And that's why it's helpful to look back to identify themes and get perspective, but not a place to dwell on.

And that leads us to the next phase, The Present. And we'll take a look at that feeling of overwhelm.

The Present: The discipline of discerning focus. How did I work through overwhelm and distill my list to find what was most meaningful for me? I asked myself one clarifying question: "When do I feel most like myself?"

When I did this exercise years ago, I had lots of disparate items I liked to do on my list and no time to do them. But out of all of them, when did I truly feel like myself? When was I that Curious Creative when no one was looking that I mentioned earlier? The answer was when I was writing. And what do writers do? They write. So, the real question



I had to answer was: How do I create a meaningful writing practice? And that's where I started over a decade ago.

Here's how you can apply this. As you review all the activities you listed when you looked back on The Past and ask yourself this: When did I feel most like myself? And begin there.

Sounds simple enough: Recognize your gift and work toward broader contribution. What's interesting though, is as you identify the things that make you feel most like yourself and begin to do them, you may sense an uncomfortable feeling of tension surfacing. It's the result of seeing the distance of where you currently are to where you want to be.

Let's get a little more specific. Where you currently are includes how you're living today, which is the result of your past choices. And then there's the distance to where you want to be. And that can include how you want to feel or who you want to spend time with, your physical location, your occupation, or the things that you want to have or to do. And that distance is the source of the overwhelm.

Going back to my writing example, it wasn't just about picking up a pen and writing each morning. As I began writing, I realized I really wanted to create a writer's life. And many of the elements of a writer's life are not conducive to the corporate executive's life that I was living at the time. And it hit hard. I felt most like myself when I was deeply involved in a writing project. But I was spending most of my time and energy in a very different space. Hence the tension. Which, by the way, can show up as resistance and stop new practices before you even get started.



Enter discernment. For me, discernment is an internal process that helps me to filter out noise and helps me focus on what matters most, what's meaningful for me.

Discernment helps me sort through all my options.

And filtering out the noise isn't just external noise, it's internal too. That means for this one activity, writing, internal judgment and external opinions shouldn't influence what I do or how I do it. Writing practice is purely for me to feel like my writer self. And it's a bonus when my output is helpful to others. The practice can deepen and broaden to other parts of life. And over time, I've experimented and learned how to live and love from that place and how to bring the essence of my writer self into the rest of my life. That's when my whole world opened up. That's when all of these different parts began to integrate.

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Now, think back to your list. When you're able to separate all possibilities from that one thing that's most meaningful for you, it takes less effort to make decisions that feel right and true for you. And as your practice deepens, it will become easier to recognize what distracts you and why, and then how to refocus on your meaningful activity. This becomes critical when you feel pulled away by personal or professional expectations and responsibilities or sidetracked by habitual time diverting activities. And here's the bonus - when you really hit your groove, you begin to feel what your next step should be because you're in tune with where your energy feels most aligned. There's a tipping point where you feel time open up. You'll stop spending time with people and on activities that aren't supportive. And you'll find new ways and additional time to practice because your discerning choices begin to pay off from investing your time wisely.



Here's a simple mantra to remind you to stay on track with what matters most to you. It comes from author Derek Severs, who has said: "If you're not saying *Hell Yeah* about something, say *No*."

The Future: Trusting what's meaningful to you. Derek Severs also has said that he lives his present life in service to his future self. That's similar to a saying I have in my office which reads: "Do something today your future self will thank you for."

Why is this important? Those sayings are guideposts for the journey that I mentioned earlier. The one that takes you from where you currently are to where you want to be. Using my example of creating a writing life, I had to examine how I was spending my time and if it was taking me closer to my envisioned way of living.

But a word of caution. When you're starting out, it's like entering into an unfamiliar limbo that's neither here (the familiar) nor there (the envisioned). The remind you to do something today that your future self will thank you for is about having the courage to take a step forward toward a new way of living. And new lives are built one step at a time. It's hard to do when you're in the daily flow of present life. It takes time, it takes commitment. And it takes tenacity to keep going because it's easy to slip back into the way things were, which might not be what you desire, but it may be more comfortable than trying something new. There may even be times when you doubt the whole thing, it's too hard. But hopefully, the tension between your old life and your new life will act as fuel and pull you forward.

What's interesting is that as we continue down the path toward the future, a paradox becomes evident that the journey is not about searching for meaning or happiness. The



journey is about becoming more aligned with yourself. And the byproduct of that integration is more meaning and happiness.

I found this to be true in my own life. I searched for meaning and purpose and happiness for as long as I can remember. And it made me feel like I was missing something, that there was something I yearned for that I didn't have. But, of course, I had it all along. I just needed to pick up a pen and write with intention. That alignment gave me the ability to spend more of my time immersed in beauty and creative energy and only then did the pieces slowly click into place. And since then, it's been a lifelong evolution.

There was an interesting study published in *the BMC Geriatrics Journal*, and I'll put a link in the show notes to it. Researchers interviewed nursing home residents on how they perceive meaning and purpose in life. The researcher's intent was to understand what could add to the quality of life in long-term care arrangements.

The results were quite interesting: "Four key experiences were found to promote meaning and purpose in life. 1. physical and mental well-being; 2. belonging and recognition; 3. personally treasured activities, and 4. spiritual closeness and connectedness."

The study's conclusions are as follows: "In supporting meaning and purpose in life of nursing home residents, the resident's everyday well-being should be a central focus of care and facilitate personally treasured activities. Focused attention should also be given to the meaning making power of experiencing belonging, recognition and spiritual connectedness."



So how might the results of this study help us? If we set aside physical and mental well-being for a moment, we have three themes: 1. Where do I belong? 2. Who am I? And 3. How can I be fulfilled? Holding those themes, let's revisit the first question I asked when we discussed The Past, which was, "How have you traditionally defined success?" I've found that looking deeper to redefine success for my envisioned life became another useful guideposts for my journey.

You can ask yourself: "How can I define success beyond money, power and fame?" Perhaps it's adding value and creating community, the "where do I belong" theme. Perhaps it's connecting with something greater than yourself, the "who am I" theme? Or maybe it's having a positive impact, the "how can I be fulfilled" theme.

It may take a while to work through it. This is probably new territory. And a helpful tool that I've used to unpack this has been something called "mind mapping." It's the exercise where you write a word in the middle of your journal page, in this case it would be *success* and you draw a circle around it. Then you brainstorm anything that comes to mind - words or phrases. You jot them down using arrows and circles, kind of branching out into themes. And it may be interesting to try that - set the timer for 10 minutes and give that a try.

So, once you have a good sense of what this new definition of success is for you and you already know what makes you feel most like yourself, then you can think about how to best nurture yourself, which is the physical and mental well-being aspect I asked you to set aside a few minutes ago. Odds are you'll need to find new ways to care for yourself in that space.



For example, even though I'm an introvert by nature, I was a social person during my corporate career. I had to repeatedly rise to the occasion because it was part of my job. Since leaving that world, I've come to learn my writer self craves periods of solitude. My love of long walks, runs and hikes in nature grew over the last year. And I don't think it's a coincidence that the frequency and length of my writing sessions expanded because I was consistently filling my creative tank. To be clear, I don't live monk-like existence. In fact, my personal and professional contacts have expanded during this time through the work that I now do. But I can schedule social time in ways that work with my creative cadence. And as a bonus, I've found wonderful creative communities that give me a sense of belonging.

Lastly, here's the secret of creating your future by looking back to connect the dots. Here's the Steve Jobs quote once again: "You can't connect the dots looking forward, you can only connect them looking backwards. So, you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in the future. You have to trust in something, your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down and it has made all the difference in my life." We've talked a lot about connecting the dots, but what about this important component of trust?

It's been my experience that by identifying when I've felt the most like myself and honoring that writer self, that place is actually my true self or my true nature. This is my center point. Or as I like to call it, my still point, a place of calm and wisdom. It's a place that thrives in relationship. And like any meaningful long-term relationship, it takes time to develop. But it's become a place I've learned to trust completely. And the more I trust it, I find I'm more willing to surrender to it and to let go. Think of a swan dive into the unknown. The more I let go of who I was and all the stories that accompany that old persona, the more I can make room to welcome who I'm becoming and what life has in



store for me. It's a daily practice, and sometimes fear can creep in. But when I stand in presence as my writer self, I know, I'll take the right next step for me.

Letting go is the ultimate form of trust. Trust that you've done all you can to prepare and honor your future self. You know you're close when you feel motivated and can sense a new direction.

What's your next step?

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Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

And I'd like to thank listeners who have subscribed and left a rating or review. Not only does that ensure you'll never miss an episode, but it also helps others find their way to our circle.

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Until next time, be well!