A Seasonal Year: Learning to Flourish and Nurture in Business

Join Emma Coxon for the third instalment of her journey on year-long course, A Seasonal Year, as she learns what it really means to flourish in business, and nurture ourselves along the way.

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"Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished." Lao Tzu

August has arrived. The summer solstice is behind us and we move ever closer towards Autumn. Daylight hours begin to wane and nature reaches a point of maturity with some flowers, grasses and vegetables beginning to wither. Lammas day on the 1st August has just passed, falling between the summer solstice and autumn equinox. Lammas or 'loaf mass' is traditionally when people celebrate the first wheat harvest in the UK. Grains that are harvested at this time include wheat, barley, oats, rye as well as plants such as mint, sunflowers and calendula. It dates back to Anglo Saxon times, when the festival was referred to as the 'feast of first fruits'.

It's timely then that as the fields and trees bearing fruit are in harvest, we have reached the stage in the A Seasonal Year course in which we look at what it means to flourish and nurture in our business and in life.

Photo: Gordon Plant

I embarked on the A Seasonal Year course by Folk & Field in November last year, a course which helps small business owners work in alignment with the seasons. Folk and Field founders Eleanor Cheetham and Maddy Lawson are passionate about helping people get back to nature and showing them how to rewild, realign and reconnect. They do this through a programme of courses and a series of gatherings that connect like-minded folk.

From November to January, in the depths of winter when nature slowed, we began the course by turning inwards and reflecting on our businesses and the year just gone. We then considered how to step into renewal for the year ahead. From February to April as spring approached we began to consider how we could emerge and grow in our work and the projects we'd highlighted as a priority. And here we are now, at the beginning of August having just spent some time working on the next stage of the course looking at how we can flourish in business, whilst nurturing ourselves along the way...a theme that is so apt for me right now.

I've really enjoyed these past two modules, and as always with this course, I've found the topics covered resonating with me at a deep level. Maddy and Eleanor, business owners themselves, really understand the challenges that self-employment can bring. I often read the content of the course whilst nodding my head and feeling like I'm not the only one that experiences some of the issues covered. It's a gentle approach, that is heart and nature led which really speaks to me.

So, to flourish! How does this relate in business? To flourish is "to grow or develop in a healthy or vigorous way, especially as part of a congenial environment." The business ideas that we've been working on over the past few months are on their way to maturity, and we are invited to consider how, just as in nature we need the right conditions to flourish and sustain this upward movement in our businesses. Much energy has been spent on plans until this point, and it's time to take stock. In the hot summer months I usually notice my creativity and energy can start to flag, so I need to keep an eye on my physical and mental health and incorporate enough down time to be able to switch off regularly. I have recently been feeling pretty exhausted from all the work I've been doing, specifically looking at ways to launch my online course, along with making plans to incorporate a love of creativity into my business, in the form of art and photography. We've come to a point in the course where it's time to take stock and again begin to look inward, finding our balance and grounding once more.

Niklas Hamann

As many of us know, one of the keys to good health is sleep and in order to regulate our circadian rhythms we need enough light during the day, of which there is an abundance at this time of year. I realise through completing a survey and answering questions included in the 'flourish' module of the course, that I don't get enough light in my life. To rectify this, I commit to ensuring I go out for a daily walk and eat my lunch outside if the weather allows. I also learn, through further reading, that opening the curtains as soon as we wake up, to let the light flood in, can have great benefits. Small changes like these can make a big difference to both our wellbeing and energy levels.

Light can also be viewed in terms of the tasks we carry out in our work. We take a look at those tasks which we perceive to be 'light', and not requiring much energy to those that feel 'heavy' and require more from us. I consider how I may be able to shift things around a little, where deadlines allow and bulk tasks on certain days, or times of the week when I know I'll have more or less energy. It feels refreshing to see the possibilities.

But, what speaks to me most in this module are the topics of perfectionism, courage, confidence and comparison. These are aspects of life that can really affect my energy at work, and if I get sucked into perfectionism and comparison it has a direct affect on my confidence levels and how courageous I feel. As Maddy and Eleanor point out "only by freeing ourselves from the things that hold us back can we truly flourish." I couldn't agree more, but how do we overcome these soul crushing behaviours?

I think I've always been a perfectionist, and it has stopped me from moving forward with many projects in my life and work. One example is the online course that I have recently written. I worked with a business coach to come up with the content, and her encouragement spurred me on, but now that it is ready to launch, I find myself faltering and hesitating, questioning myself. Would anyone be interested and buy the course? Who am I to run an online course? Am I qualified enough to run a course? Classic imposter syndrome rearing it's ugly head and comparison creeping in. 'They' (other writers, bloggers, course creators) are better than me, they have more experience and something of real value to offer the world. And of course, as a result my confidence and courage to put myself out there has come crashing down.

"Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, act perfect, we can minimise or avoid the pain of blame, judgement, and shame...it's a twenty-ton shield that we lug around thinking it will protect us when, in fact, it's the thing that's really preventing us from flight." Wise words from Brené Brown. And as Maddy and Eleanor add "It comes as a result of caring so deeply and having such a strong desire to do or create something truly meaningful. The irony of this is that perfectionism can completely stifle inspiration and innovation, by fuelling self-doubt and causing long delays to the launch of products or ideas."

And there it is, right there, in the above quote...the course content speaking to me as always, describing exactly where I'm at!

So, what to do? Well, we begin by considering imperfection in nature. I spend some contemplative time in our garden, just noticing. I spot our runner bean plant that has borne plenty of flowers but no beans this year. Our herb garden that was perfectly symmetrical when planted, but now looks wild and uneven, but an area my husband and I love with it's heady aromas attracting many bees. There is clearly beauty in imperfection when we look.

Photo: Annie Spratt

As I discovered a few months ago in the previous 'growth' module, success in business doesn't usually follow a straight line or necessarily mean increased earnings, subscribers, followers, likes, comments or website hits. It can also be about the process of nurturing our roots through planning, testing, research and learning. In the context of the 'flourish' module I can also see it as the practice of strengthening our confidence and courage to go forward in a healthy and sustainable way with more energy and vigour. By taking care of ourselves, as we would a plant in nature, we're able to grow and flourish more successfully. So it is with comparison, rather than looking over at our neighbours metaphorical 'garden', admiring what they've achieved, we tend to our own 'garden' and focus on the beauty and wonder there.

By writing down all that I've achieved in my life, and specifically in the past year, I am able to see that I am capable and do have something of value to offer the world. I also make a note of my core values, my fundamental beliefs about life and work; the ideas I would stand up for no matter what. When I see myself slipping back into comparison, I'm learning to take a breath, slow down, take a break from social media and remember my achievements and values, which remind me of how uniquely individual we all are, each with our own talents, and worthy of a place in the world.

With my perfectionist tendencies I'm encouraged to consider how realistic my fears are. What if I just launched the course despite my doubts about myself and my expertise. Maybe I could ask some contacts to test the course and give me their feedback, just to get it out there. Staying in the knowledge of my past achievements and values, can I build my confidence and courage to just do it? I'm working on it.

Photo: Jonas Jacobsson

At this point we move onto the module entitled 'nurture'. "To nurture is to care for and protect something, especially in terms of development, and often growth. As we draw to a close a period of intense growth - both in terms of work and the natural world - it seems inevitable that our support systems may begin to struggle. Strategies and intentions we set in place back in the spring will not necessarily have sustained us through to this point, and so it is essential that we once again pause and take stock to consider how we can care for and protect ourselves, our wellbeing, and our businesses."

It's been a challenging few months for my business. With the global pandemic has come a reduction in income along with the added pressure of no childcare during the working day for my 18 month-old daughter, with her nursery closed. My husband and I have, as much of the nation, been hunkering down and juggling work and childcare between us, but this has meant even less breathing space than usual and little downtime. The plans I'd made for my business in the winter and spring months have been put on hold as I try to navigate our new circumstances. Initially work was intense, my online course launch plans had to be delayed as I took on more projects to fill the gap of income lost. Soon, I realised that this wasn't sustainable, feeling like I was running on empty, and so the extra work had to go. Finances have been tight and stress levels high. At a time when we desperately needed more support, lockdown was in place.

So, this module of the course has come at an ideal time. It's an opportunity for me to step back and reconsider all the elements of my life, which are 'bearing fruit' and which need some extra support. Thinking of the natural world at this point, the idea of support is presented in terms of trees sharing roots underground, canes propping up delicate plants in the garden, colonies of ants or bees working together to get a job done. As is pointed out "to expect to nurture ourselves and our businesses without support is a tall ask." And so we turn to the ever useful imagery of a strong oak tree to represent our lives. The roots being our core values, the trunk our day-to-day activities, the branches our actions in different areas of life and finally the leaves, flowers and fruits are the results of our actions which come about because of the values we have.

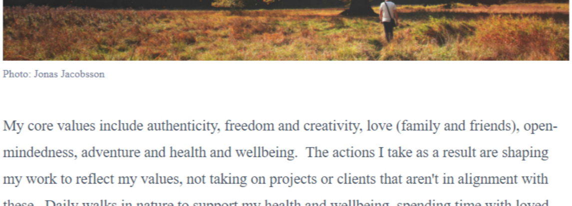

Photo: Jonas Jacobsson

My core values include authenticity, freedom and creativity, love (family and friends), open-mindedness, adventure and health and wellbeing. The actions I take as a result are shaping my work to reflect my values, not taking on projects or clients that aren't in alignment with these. Daily walks in nature to support my health and wellbeing, spending time with loved ones, particularly now that lockdown has eased. I'm trying to carve out time to draw and paint and develop my creativity, which includes a photography course next month. Planning trips away, even for the day or a weekend to get a sense of adventure and to explore new places. This leads onto the branches of my 'tree', the most important areas of my life. Parenthood, marriage, business, health, connection, relaxation, travel/adventure, creativity, community, prosperity/ finances. I don't include many leaves or fruits on my tree, which saddens me, as I can clearly see that so many areas need nurturing. But, it helps me get a clearer picture of where my attention needs to go.

This allows me to identify the kind of support that would benefit me going forward. I look at it from an 'ideal' perspective, if finances allowed, and write a list including hiring a social media manager, a marketing expert, a designer to set up a newsletter template so that I can begin building a mailing list for my online course and artwork as part of my blog Little Piece of Wonder. As a starting point we are guided to consider who is already in our network that could offer support and vice versa; colleagues and competitors. It gets me thinking about ways I could connect with these people more regularly and in terms of competitors, how collaboration may be a viable option in future. It's amazing the networks we already have if we take the time to look. The concept of ecocentric (nature-centred) rather than egocentric (human-centred) support is also touched upon in this regard. "This is a useful approach in relation to the concept of support, as it allows us to think in a more outward-facing way rather than fixating solely on what's best for us as individuals. By positioning ourselves as part of an interconnected and inclusive web or circle rather than at the top of the self-focused pyramid, we can create a symbiotic approach to support that benefits everyone in our network." I love this idea and it opens my mind to what collaborations may be possible in time, bringing mine and others skills together to offer something of use to the world.

I have sought support in other areas recently from a couple of creative coaches, who have helped me identify ways of getting my artwork and online course out into the world. It's great to have 'cheerleaders' beside you as a business owner, as working alone can be challenging and lonely at times.

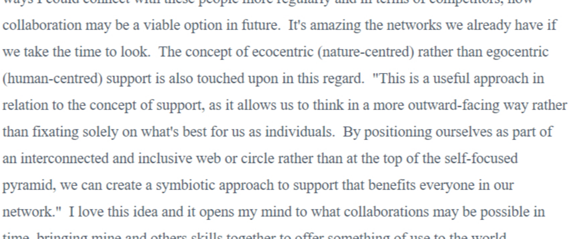

Photo: Rosalind Chang

The final lesson in this module focuses on 'guilt, flexibility and the myth of work/life balance.' Having been self-employed for 10 years, I've often wondered what the secret is to a work/life balance. We hear about it in the press, business owners who seem to 'have it all' and seemingly juggle their lives with ease, but it has always eluded me and I have often fallen into bad habits of not setting clear boundaries around work and life. But, over the years I've come to see that the business I've been creating and continue to do, is simply a reflection of my values and passions, blurring the line between life and work. I know I'm not alone in trying to manage every aspect of my life, every day, and anything less is a failure, accompanied by a great deal of guilt.

But, instead of carrying this guilt, what if we let go of this ideal and instead introduced some flexibility and learnt to 'tilt'. Brooke McAlary, author of *'Slow'* states: "If you look at balance as something you need to achieve every day - keeping the scales evenly weighted between your partner, your kids, your family, friends, yourself, your spirituality, health, keeping the home, your work - you simply won't be able to do it. Because each day brings different challenges, different tasks and different needs from your life...Tilting allows you to focus on what is important in the moment." Amen to that!

I'm seeing this more and more in my life and work, you plan for one thing and a curve ball is thrown into the mix and you have to adapt in that moment. A project overruns, having a knock on effect in other areas of your work, an urgent piece of work comes in, so you have to shift other commitments, whatever it is this approach takes the pressure off.

Photo: Jon Flobrant

What I've come to realise, from my own experience working through the A Seasonal Year course, is that there is no rush to the finish line. There is no pressure to have achieved a certain goal by a set date. Instead I'm growing slowly and steadily, most importantly from the inside out. New ways of thinking, different perspectives have been presented, and I've had space this year to experiment, try some new ways of working that build a foundation for better business in the future. I've felt like I'm laying the ground work, brick by brick and

rather than pushing to accomplish, achieve or succeed I'm tilting and adapting, just like the natural world around me.

A Seasonal Year is now open for registrations for November 2020. To find out more and to sign up, click here.

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