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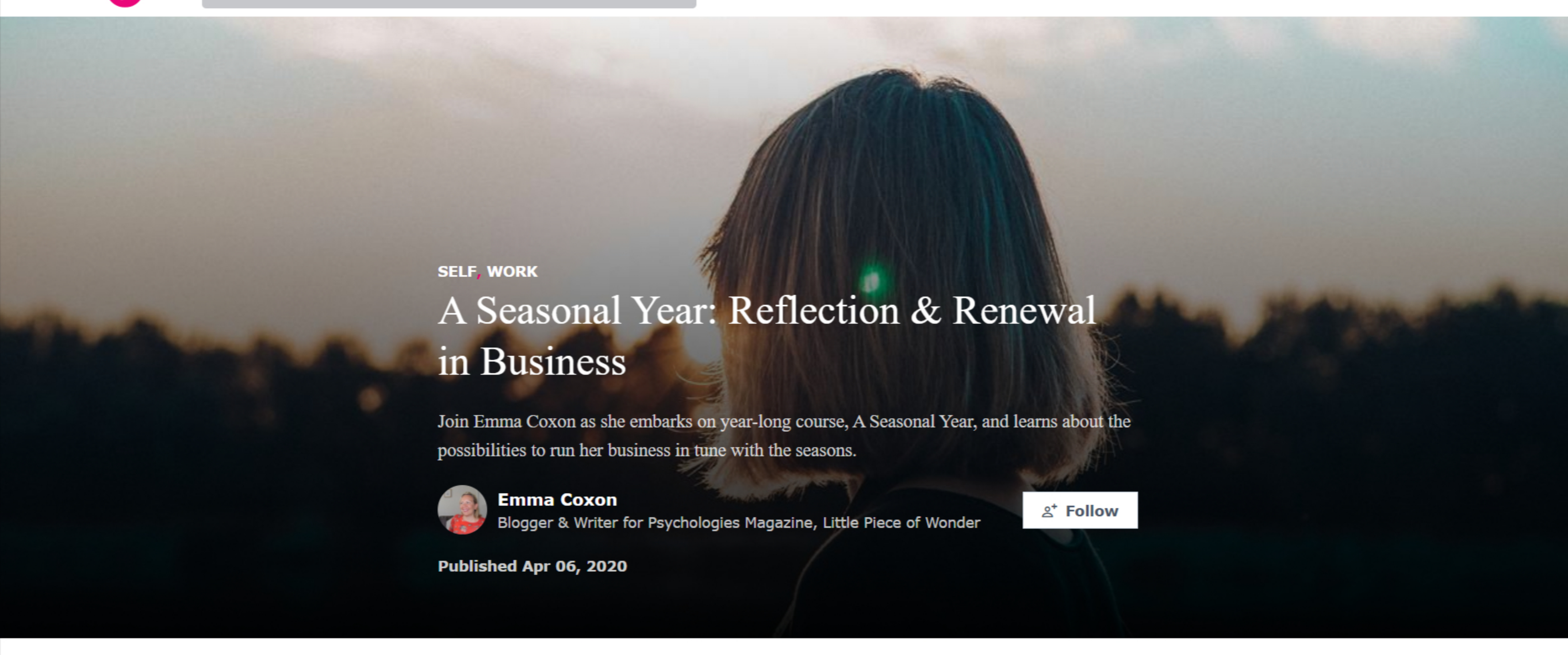

SELF, WORK

A Seasonal Year: Reflection & Renewal in Business

Join Emma Coxon as she embarks on year-long course, A Seasonal Year, and learns about the possibilities to run her business in tune with the seasons.

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"Mother Nature knows exactly what she's doing: it's the same process every year". A Seasonal Year

For many years I have believed that the natural world holds great wisdom. I find comfort in the consistency of the gentle flow of the seasons, the sunrise and sunset. Nature has been my anchor, helping me to feel grounded in challenging times, and regularly brings me a sense of awe, as I marvel at how intelligent the earth is, without human intervention.

Last year, an opportunity arose for me to embark on a 12-month course to help me run my business in alignment with the seasons. I'd never really considered how this would be possible, so I was intrigued. As well as a writer for Psychologies, I also run a freelance PA company, and am developing my blog Little Piece of Wonder.

A Seasonal Year is a transformative course designed for small business owners to help rewild their approach to work, aiming to realign businesses with the ebb and flow of the seasons.

Created by Founders of Folk and Field (a community for 'wildhearted wanderers and seekers of slow and those who long for a simpler life inspired by the natural world'), Maddy Lawson and Eleanor Cheetham. Two friends who share a love of nature and a belief in the magic of connection.

I began my journey in October, when Autumn was upon us and winter was about to set in. The natural world had already started to retreat, which was the first cue of the course. Reflection. It's so common in our fast-paced society to go full steam ahead in the lead up to Christmas, and it can be the busiest time of the year for some small businesses, particularly if you are selling products. Then January comes and the focus is on goal setting, launching into new projects and making resolutions for the year ahead, which can leave us exhausted. But, stop for a moment and look outside. Nature has turned inward, it's quiet and calm, there is no frenetic activity, and this is where the guidance and wisdom lie. This is the message that we can bring back into our work. This is a time for introspection, for reflection and rest.

For years I've jumped straight into the new year with big plans to change direction in work, to get fit, to eat better, all of which require energy. It feels like quite a leap to change this inbuilt way of looking at my life and work. But, the first section of the course, which runs from October to December, introduces the Celtic Wheel of the Year, an ancient calendar guided by the transition of the sun throughout the seasons, which helps me see how I can plan things more intuitively.

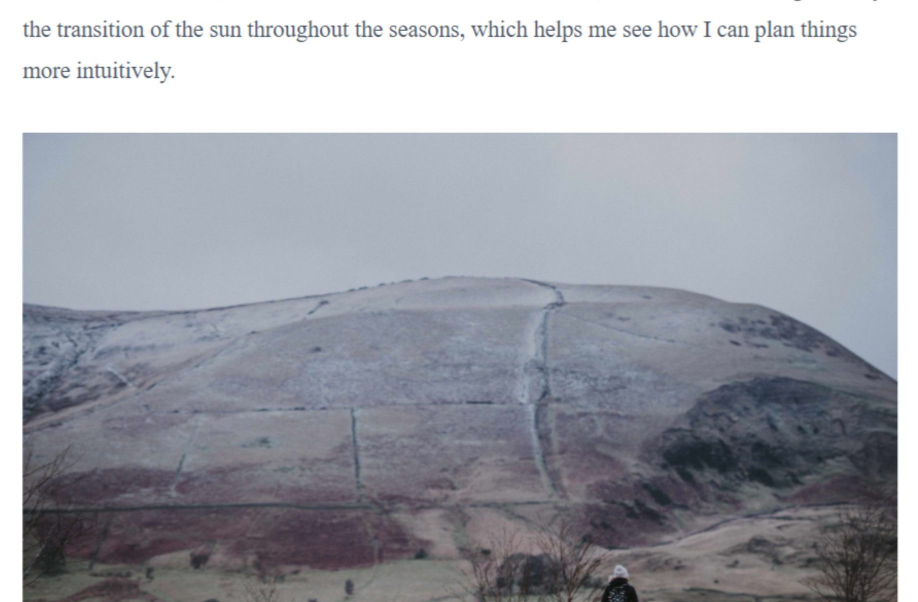

Photo: Annie Spratt

We begin by reflecting on our previous business year, month by month and I realise how little planning I did, noticing that I worked reactively without clear direction. Next, we do the same but for the year ahead, setting out ideas for what we might like to achieve at each stage in the calendar, which I find such a useful exercise as it's starting to make me realise that I can plan my time much more effectively and at a pace that feels more connected and nurturing. Being self-employed, I can decide when I take holidays and when I work on certain projects. This is refreshing to remember.

We then move on to looking at slow working, a counterintuitive idea at first, but that is defined as 'being intentional with your business choices, planning and acting in a sustainable way that makes sense for you as an individual'. We start by looking at habits that feed into our fast-paced culture, for me this includes checking e-mails and messages on my phone as soon as I wake up, scrolling on social media and working constantly with no break or time outdoors.

Next, we are presented with the possibility that we can choose to change these habits; we can decide how we run our businesses, and how we structure our days. I vow to set better boundaries around when I check my phone and my emails, to take a day off a week, to plan in holidays and to get some fresh air every day. Having the realisation that we have *permission* to do these things feels liberating.

With this new perspective, we go on to look at the year that's just passed, from what's worked for us and what hasn't, to the stories that we've told ourselves that have held us back, to where we've gained confidence and which experiences have taught us valuable lessons. Reflecting on these questions and considering how I've felt along the way builds the foundation for mapping out the year ahead with more clarity, in a way that feels more aligned with my values and what would bring me fulfilment. It's given me time to recognise and let go of what hasn't worked for me, and welcome in new ideas. I choose 3 words for the year: Abundance, Grace, Adventure.

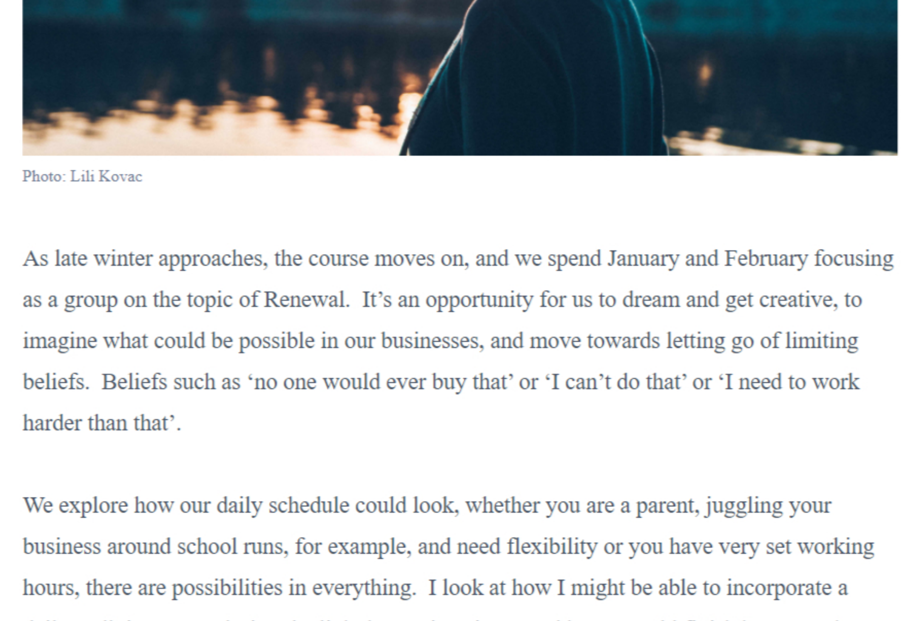

Photo: Lili Kovac

As late winter approaches, the course moves on, and we spend January and February focusing as a group on the topic of Renewal. It's an opportunity for us to dream and get creative, to imagine what could be possible in our businesses, and move towards letting go of limiting beliefs. Beliefs such as 'no one would ever buy that' or 'I can't do that' or 'I need to work harder than that'.

We explore how our daily schedule could look, whether you are a parent, juggling your business around school runs, for example, and need flexibility or you have very set working hours, there are possibilities in everything. I look at how I might be able to incorporate a daily walk in nature, during daylight hours, in Winter, and how I could finish by 4pm when the light begins to fade, and my energy levels wane.

But, my favourite exercise of this section of the course is Ritual and Rhythm, with 'the concept of ritual as "a set of fixed actions and sometimes words performed, especially as part of a ceremony." We are introduced to the various rhythms that exist in nature to consider, life stages, seasons, lunar phases and our circadian rhythm. I find this all so fascinating. For example, how getting light as soon as we can when we awake, in Winter, is so beneficial for our well-being and circadian rhythm. How looking at your laptop or phone after dark can affect us considerably. We look at how a fixed action at work, such as checking e-mails daily, can be made into an enjoyable ritual. Maybe whilst doing this task, we enjoy our favourite hot, comforting drink or put on some soothing music.

"Adding ritual to rhythm brings an extra layer of meaning…the aim is to make time for (small) things that bring you joy, and that help you to live the life you want to lead." I love this!

With all that I've learnt over of the winter months, this stage of the course culminates in bringing our ideas to life. With the help of several printable planning sheets, I set about deciding on what three projects I'd like to focus on in 2020. Breaking down each step to make it achievable, with each ending in the celebration of our successes, something that is so easy to forget. I feel excited, and grateful to have learned so much from this course over the past few months, and that I've been given so many valuable ideas that feel nurturing and life affirming.

Yet, since completing the first part of A Seasonal Year and emerging from the Winter months, the world has dramatically changed. We are now living in unprecedented times. We've all been thrown into uncertainty, creating panic, fear and financial anxiety for many. Business owners across the globe are not sure if their businesses will survive, and certainly they are having to quickly adapt in one way or another to stay afloat. The plans I made for my business for the year ahead, seem somewhat redundant now. I too feel fear when I dwell on the situation for too long. But, as I take my daily walk, which I've now incorporated into my working day, I look to nature. I breath, I observe, I listen, sometimes emotions do rise, and I cry. But, as I watch the birds fly overhead, see the blossom burst forth, the trees turn to green, I remember that nature brings hope.

For many people, the time we are spending at home has enforced a period of introspection, reflection and planning. A time when we may ordinarily be starting to think about launching new products or services, which have had to be put on pause, becomes a time to reassess, and to start again in some cases. Yet, no matter what time of year it is, nature is gentle, it never rushes, it changes constantly and teaches us about resilience, through all weathers and storms.

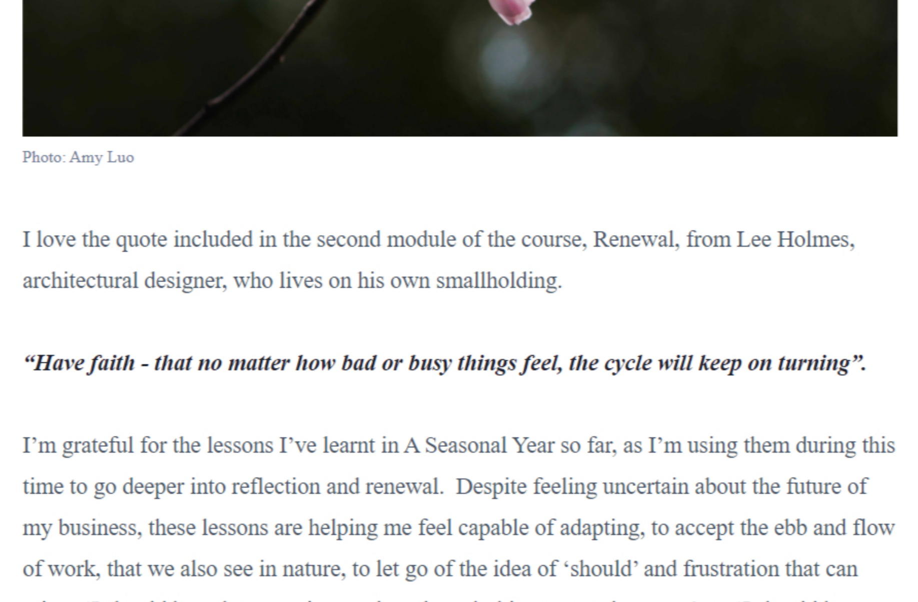

Photo: Amy Luo

I love the quote included in the second module of the course, Renewal, from Lee Holmes, architectural designer, who lives on his own smallholding.

"Have faith - that no matter how bad or busy things feel, the cycle will keep on turning".

I'm grateful for the lessons I've learnt in A Seasonal Year so far, as I'm using them during this time to go deeper into reflection and renewal. Despite feeling uncertain about the future of my business, these lessons are helping me feel capable of adapting, to accept the ebb and flow of work, that we also see in nature, to let go of the idea of 'should' and frustration that can arise. 'I should have been getting ready to launch this new product now', or 'I should have been starting to bring my projects to life'. Rather than seeing these things as setbacks, I'm leaning into the possibilities, to embrace this extended period of reflection and slowing down. The very act of slowing down in fact, makes me feel more in tune with the natural world, and believe me, that is not easy for me, as I have a very fast mind with lots of ideas. I'm seeing just how important connection is, however we go about that right now; connection to our loved ones, to nature, to movement, to our basic needs, to the food we eat, to daily routine and ritual, to our emotions and to what we value most.

With work, I am being called to start drawing again, a big passion of mine, to get back into photography that I so enjoy. To look at how I can connect with more people through my Little Piece of Wonder blog, things I felt I didn't have enough time for before.

With this new reality, nothing maybe growing in my business right now, but I can plant the seeds for coming months.

To me, it feels like we're being 'called home', to what matters most in our life and work.

Here's some great advice from the first stage of A Seasonal Year course, which is helping me right now:

- Remove the pressure of setting things in stone.
- Dream creatively, removing all expectations.
- Reconnect yourself with your work and explore what may be possible, what you wish *could* be possible.
- Create positive habits for both your life and your work.
- Strip everything away, get back to basics and return to a consistent rhythm that nourishes your mind and body, and grounds you to the earth.
- We are all creative; this doesn't only mean things like drawing or painting, but being innovative, different and thoughtful about the way we work.

To find out more about A Seasonal Year, and to register your interest for the next enrolment, click here. You can also follow Folk and Field on Instagram here and Facebook here.

Check back here in May when I'll be sharing more about the course, as we move into Spring.

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Emma is a freelance writer and Psychologies magazine's Food & Living Editor. She also writes a blog, Little Piece of Wonder focusing on her passion for nature, seasonal and mindful living. She lives in the Wiltshire countryside with her husband and daughter.
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