



The Athena Wellness Podcast  
Episode 007 – Creating a Value-Aligned Work Portfolio with Kristie McLean  
January 31, 2021

**Kathy 0:04**

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 women enhance their well-being and reimagine their current stage of life at a time of transformation and reconnection with themselves.

Welcome to Episode Seven. Have you ever been at a career crossroads and gotten the well-meaning advice to follow your passion (exclamation point)? I don't know about you, but I used to get so disheartened when I heard those words. Because if I knew what my passion was, I would have been doing it.

What I wish I would have known back then is what our guest shares with us today. That is, there is an alternative to finding that one thing. You can create a portfolio of meaningful work that aligns with your values, and in doing so, that unique combination can actually become your differentiator.

Our guest today is Kristie McLean, a beautiful spirit who makes this world a better place through her own value-aligned work portfolio that includes a variety of multimedia projects and advocacy efforts around the globe. Kristie will tell you more about her work during our conversation.



Kristie also provides actionable insight for you, including questions to deepen the conversation with yourself and real-life examples from her own and her clients' experiences. We end with our Dose of Inspiration segment where Kristie shares some of the things that are lighting her up these days. And as always, I'll put links to those items in the show notes.

And now on to the show. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

**Kathy 2:07**

Kristie, welcome to the Athena Wellness podcast.

**Kristie 2:14**

Hi, so great to be here.

**Kathy 2:16**

Could you share a little bit about who you are and what you do?

**Kristie 2:21**

Absolutely. I am the co-founder and executive director of Communities of Belonging, which is a Washington State nonprofit that empowers formerly homeless and incarcerated individuals with holistic re-entry into society. I'm also a circle host and a certified coach and global storyteller.

I do lots of things. I've profiled numerous global issues on six continents. So, a few of those projects: access to clean water in Kenya, child brides and Afghanistan, garment factories in Haiti, tromping around the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos taking pictures of



Unexploded Ordinances, and meeting with women in western Ethiopia suffering from the childbirth injury of obstetric fistula.

**Kathy 3:14**

Okay, great. It's with that varied portfolio, which is exactly why I wanted to have you on – it's an amazing resume. And I know that's only part of it.

In fact, I recall, you and I met at a writers retreat in 2009. And a while later, I remember, I came out to visit. And when I walked into your space, it was covered in poster boards and there's post it notes that were everywhere. It was really my first introduction to what I'm calling, and you may have different words, a value-based work portfolio. So, could you share that experience and that exercise with our listeners?

**Kristie 3:59**

Yes. So, I'm a certified coach. But I also hired a coach because we're always on this path for personal growth and learning. And one of the exercises the gal had me do was to write on colored sticky notes, different passions that I have in my life. And so, you're right, I had this poster board with, I don't know, dozens of colored sticky notes with all of these things.

And the idea of the exercise was really to see – are there themes that run through these different passions? Are there ways that you can connect them in unusual and creative ways so that you don't walk around feeling splintered and fractured, but instead can really make some piece of art or beauty from the mosaic of all of these different things.

So it was a profound exercise. I'm a very, it's very easy for me to brainstorm and come up with lots of ideas. The challenge for me is always: How do you pull some of these things off and see what's remaining?



**Kathy 5:02**

And I think that was also my first introduction to the difference between planning, which is how I always approached my career, and allowing the unfolding.

So can you talk a little bit about how much of your career has been planned versus allowed? And also, you mentioned, I love that idea of themes. Are there common themes? Or is there a connecting thread that you can identify?

**Kristie 5:32**

I love that word unfolding. It makes me feel like there's a point to everything. And I really do feel strongly that I've lived my life in different chapters. So, I would say that there has been very little that was planned directly. But looking back, it's quite easy to see that there were signposts that glinted in the sunlight that caught my attention.

So, for example, I knew when I was growing up I thought that I wanted to be a teacher, a creative writing high school teacher to be specific. But I got as far as my classroom observation during college and realized that I didn't want to be in a traditional public school. But this idea of education and teaching in different ways has been a theme that's threaded all the way through another theme, really the international piece.

After college, I took a three-month backpacking trip through Europe, which really blossomed into this full-fledged love of world travel. I worked for a travel company for a time, including six months on a train going across the US and Canada. And that really opened up the beginning of working for a number of different nonprofits around the world on different social issues.



I really have always cared about people. I worked at various jobs with at risk youth, later profiled kids aging out of the foster care system, I was a volunteer for seven years with the Make-A-Wish Foundation. And now I've founded a nonprofit working with marginalized populations. So that's another example of caring about people.

For me, all of the issues and the work was tied together by a sense of curiosity, and a desire for kindness and connection, even in unexpected places, like inside prison, or in trains or in mud huts.

What's so interesting to me is it really is the same work.

So, with the coaching, which I still do, and I did corporate coaching for a few years, but whether it's corporate coaching or being in western Ethiopia with women suffering from the childbirth injury of obstetric fistula, or working with men inside of prison, it's about creating a safe container. It's about opening up space for authentic story, working for self-reliant solutions, and creating community partnerships, especially those that decrease social stigma and fear, which is in lots of places in our world.

So, I've been really struck, both with the fistula work with women, you know, bringing folks together with these healing circles and having them share about their lives and how they've been really thrown out by families and communities. And then working with men now coming out of prison and experiencing a lot of the same stigma and shame and fear of folks and isolation. So even just from the social things, it's the same work.

But I found that to be true in the corporate landscape, too. When I was working as a coach for folks at some really large organizations, I heard regularly, because I was outside of their systems, people would be really vulnerable. And say, you know, I feel out



of my depth. I'm worried people will know I don't have all of the answers, like how do I do this?

And I remember there was one gentleman from Europe, when he was interviewing different coaches, he said, "I'm not hiring you to help me do my job. I'm good at my job. I'm hiring you because you're a storyteller. You're a documentary photographer and you represent a kind of passion that I used to have in my life that I've lost somehow, and I'm hoping you can help me get that back."

So, it does feel just congruent all the way through when we show up with authenticity and heart.

**Kathy 9:42**

Mm hmm. Yeah. You know, I would love if we can talk a bit about how frustrating that standard advice of "Follow your passion" and "Do what you love" can be when you're on the corporate treadmill, much like that gentleman was.

So you used the words before, that feeling of being splintered or fractured if you're not using or utilizing or acknowledging your passions, and I was going through a number of boxes, you know, the kind of boxes that you just move from move to move, they just seem to follow you? These were boxes of old books. And I was struck with the dozens upon dozens of books that I had on passion and mission, from the 80s on, you know, books like "Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow," and all of these things.

It wasn't for a lack of effort in trying to find something that I wanted to do for a living. So, it really struck me that I had this good life, I had a good job, partnership, family, but yet there's this feeling of a low-grade fever that just kind of burns in the background of something that's not there.



So, for the listeners who are in a traditional job, but are intrigued by your story, what are some first steps toward building a value-aligned work portfolio? Are there some things that they can begin to explore?

**Kristie 11:21**

Sure. So, there's a few really easy, quick ones.

One is you can go online and download a list of values. So often, if you start with a list of 100 or so and you'll get out a colored highlighter, and you just go down and you whittle it down, you know, drop down to 10, drop down to five, come up with your top three.

And if you think about values, it can be like burners on a stove. Of course, we may have values of respect and accountability and vision, connection, all kinds of things. But if you think, "What are the two or three or four burners in this chapter of my life going forward, that I really want to focus on?" So, that can be a place to start.

I know for myself that I always knew that I was curious about travel. There was a particular book that I read called "The Practical Nomad, How to Travel Around the World," by Edward Hasbrouck. And reading that book completely changed my life. You know, it, it absolutely shifted my orientation that maybe I could go on a trip someplace and that would be an exciting experience. But he dumped that on its head, like, how do you really move in and out in the world? How do you, you know, take it that one step further? How do you, with an internet connection, go and create a life somewhere else? That wasn't so much the focus of his book, but it really led me to thinking about those questions.



Small daily practices. Julia Cameron, who wrote “The Artist’s Way,” has the practices of taking yourself on an artist date. So, spending an afternoon walking through a gallery or doing something that you love, doing some daily journaling, even the practice of spending five minutes per day envisioning your ideal life as if it’s already happening.

So, follow the energy and do small things that bring joy and curiosity. Because in my experience, doing that leads to other joyful things and opportunities of alignment if you pay attention.

**Kathy 13:46**

As you were listing those things, I could actually find the times in my life that I was using them. And you’re right, it did start with values. I can remember maybe 10 years ago, going through a similar exercise, and those values still hold today. They haven’t shifted.

I just wanted a follow up. And based on personal experience, and if this isn’t relevant for you, maybe some of your clients over the years – I felt a big shift at midlife. Going from all of that effort, something really happened in the year or two leading up to my 50th birthday. But I’m wondering if you see that with your clients that at some point, there’s this emergence of this sense of freedom, or maybe its urgency, as there was a little bit of that mixed in as well. Like if I don’t do this now, then, when will I? So, I was wondering if you can just speak to that a bit.

**Kristie 14:48**

Yeah, that last part really resonates. I think there is a sense of urgency and right now, especially with COVID, with political upheaval. I think people more than ever are really coming to that place of, “If not now, when?”





One of the things that I remember from years ago, you know, I've traveled a lot and I'm a documentary photographer. And coming back, I've given lots of slideshows of my trips and different kinds of social commentary on different issues.

And I was always struck by the number of women that would come up to me, often in their 50s or midlife of some kind, with tears on their faces, saying, "I really wish I would have done what you're doing, I wish I would have been out in the world, been independent. I chose the traditional path, whether that was a corporate job that I focused on, or being married and having children. And it feels like my life is slipping on by."

And my response was always the same, which is, "It's not too late. You know, the time is now."

And I've used a couple of questions as compass points. Those questions are: What do I feel uniquely equipped to do; and the second is, What am I passionate about that other people don't seem to notice? And sometimes, I think we don't know some of these things until we are in midlife, because we've had the opportunity then to do many different things, or to do a deep dive on something with credibility, and purpose.

But I am especially intrigued with this: "What am I passionate about that other people don't seem to notice?" And we can come at that from all different angles. For me, I really notice when there's suffering in other people. So that's led me into prison, that's led me into many odd places around the world that people don't typically travel.

And for me, it's that noticing of the human condition. But for you or the next person, it's something else entirely. So, paying attention to what's uniquely yours. And, also being aware that the clock is ticking. And those two are a powerful combination.



It's really interesting, I think we spend, often the first chunk of our life, putting a lot of energy into fitting in. And perhaps at midlife, there is a bit of a tip of the fulcrum, where we have more confidence in allowing ourselves to stand out in different ways to really celebrate what makes us different and not being afraid of that. But in fact, to see it as a gift.

I remember years ago when I was doing corporate coaching and you had to submit a short bio. I mean, I tried so hard to fit into that world with my degree in writing and my poet's hearts. And I didn't want to mention that I was a photographer and these things because I thought it was irrelevant. And I thought people would perceive me as being scattered or not credible. And it was only some years later, when I put a single sentence into my bio that I was a documentary photographer and to these other things, that I started realizing that people were running towards that as a differentiator. And that was a really striking moment. Because I'd work so hard to fit in. And in fact, standing up proudly and claiming things that had been a passion, to your point, for a really long time. Like I finally got the memo.

**Kathy 18:41**

And that is exactly it. That was beautifully said, you know, it comes to a point where it's like, "I am what I am. So, let's do this. Let's do this!" And then I think once you get a taste of that, it's hard to go back, like your insides change. When this revelation, this... I go back to the word unfolding, stuff starts to happen. It's like, it's not just external. It's not just the job you do – you fundamentally change. And once you start doing things a different way, it's very hard to put that genie back in the bottle.

**Kristie 19:22**

Yes.



**Kathy 19:24**

I'd like to circle back to the poster board. Assuming that all of your current work and financial responsibilities were covered for the foreseeable future and you had no worries, what would you add to the portfolio and why?

**Kristie 19:42**

Hmm, I have a couple of those. And the first one might make you laugh, but I would love to arrange flowers. I have always loved flowers, the being around the color, the texture, the scent, just fills me with joy. And I would love to create specialty arrangements for a few special clients.

So, I would fold in some of what I do with my coaching work and be, I don't know even what you would call it, a flower coach. But talking with people about what matters to them, what are the significant milestones and special dates in their years, you know, both the ones of celebration and commemoration or mourning, perhaps when they lost a child or when they had a special anniversary of some kind. And then to create these one-of-a-kind, unique masterpieces just for them, some of their favorite colors and textures and items tucked in for art. So that's one.

And another is I would love to expand. I lead women's circles and I've done some retreats, but I would really love to lead retreats in special locations around the world. So, in really unique, lovely properties, in individual homes in special places, so not in hotels, but for themed transformational experiences for small groups. You know, I know of



some lovely places and I have contacts in different places. And it just seems like upping the ante in some of those opportunities.

**Kathy 21:35**

I love that. When you were talking about the flower arranging, I was just thinking that you're really trying to capture the essence that you're trying to capture with your clients when you do your coaching. It's a visual representation of that. I think that is amazing.

You know, speaking of inspiration and amazing, I like to wrap up the show with something that I call a Dose of Inspiration. I like to say that well-being is about feeling good so that you can do things that light you up with people that you love. And the Athena Wellness tribe is a curious one - always looking for new things to explore.

So, with that as a backdrop, here's a quick Q&A. First question, what's your favorite wellness practice? Or is there a recent wellness win you'd like to share?

**Kristie 22:32**

I love the candlelight bath with bubbles. And I would say a cold glass of OJ. Very specific that it needs to be in a glass, nothing plastic. You know, I'm a specialty cocktail girl, but when I'm in a bath, orange juice is the way to go.

**Kathy 22:48**

Right? Perfect. What's been a struggle? Or where are you focusing your wellness efforts now?

**Kristie 22:56**



It's interesting, this year of 2021. I'm really trying to drop a habit that I've had the last chunk of years, which is getting down on myself for the things that I didn't manage to get to in a day. So, I really want to shift that paradigm and be really grateful for all of the things I do accomplish. And you know, tomorrow's a fresh day, I can pick up and keep going.

**Kathy 23:21**

I love it. Love it. What have you read or listened to lately that you enjoyed?

**Kristie 23:28**

I read this incredible story a few days ago that was a post on Facebook. I'm sure it's in other places. But it was a story by David Goldstein about being on a bus in New York City in 1948, sitting next to a sad looking man beside him who was reading a Hungarian newspaper, which is a language that he himself could speak. So, the two of them started speaking and eventually, the protagonist was able to reconnect the man with his wife, both of whom thought the other had died in Auschwitz. It was really incredible. Just it was such a reminder of the luminous things that are around us every moment, if we listen and we pay attention.

**Kathy 24:20**

I love it. And I'll try to find that and put a link in the show notes.  
What new thing or experience are you looking forward to trying?

**Kristie 24:31**

I want to get back to writing and submitting regularly different kinds of writing as well as poetry. So different creative offerings and really want to put a manuscript together and find a publisher.



**Kathy 24:42**

Love it. Great. So, envision your perfect road trip. Where do you go? What do you do?

**Kristie 24:52**

There's always a little bit of tension of do you go back to places that you know that you've loved? Or do you try somewhere new? So I have loved traveling in Croatia. I've rented a car a couple of times and traveled throughout the country and through the islands. So that's a very easy thing, post COVID, I would love to do that. And I also have never driven around Vancouver Island in British Columbia, which is much closer to home. I'm in Seattle. So that's something else on the horizon.

**Kathy 25:25**

Wonderful. What has you feeling inspired these days? What's lighting you up?

**Kristie 25:31**

So, I mentioned that I'm a co-founder and Executive Director of Communities of Belonging. And I would say all the members of that community, folks that have come out of years and decades of incarceration, who come out of the gate with fear, and really a lack of knowing how the world works now. And what are smartphones? And how does this system work? And how can I find housing and get a job with a criminal history?

But to see some of those folks moving through that scare and to be able to succeed and learning new skills of connection and healthy ways of being and getting a driver's license and doing all of the steps of coming into adulthood for perhaps the first time or in a new way, so inspiring. And that profound sense of gratitude. Much more than folks who have lived their whole lives on the outside just a deep, deep appreciation for



elemental things like food, and a safe place to sleep, and the opportunity to have a friend – they really touch me every single day.

**Kathy 26:55**

That's beautiful.

What has you optimistic about the future?

**Kristie 27:01**

A fresh year! I just, I get really psyched about a new year. It feels like a blank slate, feels like a fresh canvas to create and recreate. And I also have a friend who recommits to New Year's resolutions monthly. And I've always felt really encouraged and reassured by that. Because sometimes I think it's easy to think, "Oh, it's mid-February and I never did my list. Or I haven't done the thing I said I would do."

And so, opening it up to grace and saying, "Okay, I'm going to start again, I'm going to recommit, I'm going to step through, I'm going to send out a poem into the world. You know, I'm going to put on my sneakers and walk up the hill," whatever those things are – continual freshness.

**Kathy 27:48**

I love it. I love it.

Well, Kristie, I cannot thank you enough. You have been such an inspiration to me over the years, just watching how you live your life and just how you are in the world. It's really an honor to have you on.

Tell me, how can our listeners get in touch with you?

**Kristie 28:09**



A couple different ways. You can reach out to me through my personal website, which is [kristiemclean.com](http://kristiemclean.com). You're also welcome to go to [communitiesofbelonging.org](http://communitiesofbelonging.org) if you would like to know more about that work.

**Kathy 28:23**

Amazing. Thank you so much, my friend, I really appreciate it. And I hope you'll come back someday and we'll have another chat

**Kristie**

I would love it.

**Kathy**

Thanks so much.

**Kathy 28:34**

I hope this episode gave you some ideas and new insights to consider as you reflect on your own work experience, especially for those who are in some sort of professional transition.

I've come late to the understanding that you don't have to have all the answers – just curiosity and the willingness to take one small step forward. And another. And then another. It's been my experience that if you listen deeply, you'll always know the way forward.

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.





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Until next time, be well!