



**The Athena Wellness Podcast**  
**Episode 189 – Reinvention Through Beginner’s Mind with Nancy Napier**  
**March 22, 2023**

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**[00:00:05] Kathy Robinson:** 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's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

**[00:00:30] Kathy:** Today's episode is brought to you by The Athena Wellness Academy, your resource for wholehearted living.

The Academy's featured offering is an online course called, *From 'Type A' to 'Type Be,' How to Mindfully Descend the Corporate Ladder and Invite What's Next*. This course is perfect for you if you're contemplating or navigating a professional transition, and it's available as a self study or with a small cohort of students facilitated by me, Kathy Robinson.

To learn more, I invite you to go to [AthenaWellnessAcademy.teachable.com](https://AthenaWellnessAcademy.teachable.com) or click on the link in the show notes.



**[00:01:21] Kathy:** Hello and welcome. Thanks so much for joining me for this shortened Wellness Wednesday episode, a little midweek boost to help keep your Warrior Vibe high.

Today I'm joined, once again, by Distinguished Professor Emerita at Boise State University, Nancy Napier. During this discussion, Nancy shares her recent journey where she's focusing less on academic pursuits so she can spend more time on a new endeavor, fiction writing.

Nancy shares the joys and challenges of embracing beginner's mind, along with some words of wisdom for listeners navigating their own transitions.

And now onto the show. I hope you find this conversation insightful.

**[00:02:09] Nancy Napier:** Once again, I'm joined by writer, researcher, and professor, Nancy Napier. Welcome back, Nancy.

**[00:02:15] Nancy Napier:** Thank you so much.

**[00:02:16] Kathy:** You have gone through a life transition recently where you're not focusing as much on your academic life, but you are focusing on a new endeavor. Can you share a bit about that transition and how you're finding it?

**[00:02:30] Nancy:** Sure. I've been a writer all my life, and I think about 10 years ago, I took an online class to learn how to write fiction, and I quit, because I said to the group, "I'm sorry, I'm just not a good liar."

[laughter]



One of my classmates said, "Nancy, it's not lying, it's using your imagination." But I think I just got stuck there.

When the pandemic hit, I thought, "Okay, maybe this is time to try it again." I took another class online and opened my eyes up. The instructor just made it so fun and easy. We had people, actually one person from Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, all over the world, and it was actually fun. And I thought, "Well, this is a different way of writing. I've written all my life. Surely I can learn this. It'll be a breeze"

So over the course of the next year and a half or so, I wrote four really bad novels. [laughter] My dear husband said, "That's not a high bar. What are you saying that for?" This way I don't have anything to prove and I can only get better. So it started as a pandemic project and as a challenge to myself to learn something new.

At the same time, maybe six or eight months later, I decided-- I have a family of tennis players. I've always been the cheerleader. I said, "I'll start learning to play tennis." So, something new for the body, something new for the mind.

I still teach. And I thought the best part of this is that it forces me to remember how to be a beginner. So I'm teaching things that I've talked about over the years, but when I'm learning fiction or learning tennis, the instructors are saying to me, "No, you're not hitting it right. You got to follow through better. You got to--" Reminding, reminding.



So it puts me in a beginner's mind in terms of how to interact with very smart executives, but on concepts that are new to them, but not new to me. So that's been a real benefit.

What has been not so wonderful is this writing fiction stuff is a whole lot harder than I realized. I had no idea. I've been a reader all my life, but not really been reading as well as I could have from a fiction standpoint.

And so I've been trying to track this process a little bit. I do a blog for *Psychology Today* and it's on creativity, most of it. But also now on this journey of learning something new, of learning how to write and what all the pieces are that I have to keep in mind. It's like tennis, there are 30 different things at once to keep in mind. So that's been difficult.

The other part in both of these endeavors that has frustrated the daylight out of me, I'm a deadline person. I get projects done on time, on budget, all that. This is taking longer than I thought it would.

So I did the first of these four novels. And I'm sitting here, well, they're bad. They're really bad and I'm trying to turn two of them into not-so-bad. I can't believe how much time it's taking me. I'm having to step back and say, "Be patient. Realize that it's the process of learning, back to being an aggressive learner and curious. Take that. Don't assume there's an end product out there."

Then the other day I thought, well, if I was trying to learn piano and I just practiced on my own, and I never did a recital, people would think that's fine. When you're



writing, when you're playing tennis, they expect you to publish something, to play big matches. Why? It's different.

And so I'm wrestling with that. Can I not enjoy the process of being a learner without feeling like I have to perform for the outside world? I do want to publish a piece of fiction and I-- one of your questions, which is a good one is what do you want to work on next?

I'm thinking just because of the time involved, maybe I should try short stories just to say, can I write 20,000 words instead of 80,000 words? I'm having a hard time keeping all of this going and the novel piece of it on whatever draft I am now. But I think that's what's going on, that I'm trying, I'm being a learner, I'm being curious.

One of my initial reasons for fiction was it would give me an excuse to learn about some new topics. One of the novels I'm working on is about art crime in Vietnam. I had no idea art crime is such a big business around the world. I thought this is a way to learn about something new and then put it into a story. All of that is fascinating. On a good day, I feel like I do today. But oh my goodness, is it a challenge.

**[00:07:29] Kathy:** Yeah, it's funny, you mentioned in the last conversation that we had that part of your strength was being able to have those one-on-one conversations and seeing where the opportunity is. I don't know of any other fiction book that is about art crime in Vietnam. Maybe there is one and I missed it. It was not on my radar screen.



**[00:07:48] Nancy:** No, there's none, there's none.

**[00:07:50] Kathy:** I love the approach and it feels like there's definitely energy there for you. You're excited about that.

One thing that came to mind is that you might want to try, even 20,000 words is a whole lot for a beginner. I know you're not a beginner writer. You've been writing your whole life. I understand that. There is something called micro-fiction as well, where you might be able to take these vignettes and that might be more enjoyable, and then find a way to connect them. And so, for what that's worth. Yes, it's called flash fiction.

**[00:08:24] Nancy:** Okay, thank you.

**[00:08:26] Kathy:** I can give you a book suggestion once we're done.

**[00:08:29] Nancy:** Certainly, that would be great. Well, I do on these blogs and newspaper columns, which are 3 to 4 to 500 words. They are incidents. And what I've learned over time is the smaller the better that people can relate to something.

I wrote one about finding a secret bookstore in Hanoi recently and they've republished it in Vietnam somewhere. So writing me saying, "I want to go to the bookstore. Where is it?" That's another thing I'm learning is the focus is so important. I know that, but I just have to relearn it. So the idea of something small like that, ooh, I'd love it. Thank you.



**[00:09:04] Kathy:** Yeah, yeah, wonderful. And so the last thing before I let you go. For a listener who's navigating their own life transition and wants to try something new, what would be a word of wisdom or a few words of wisdom that you would share with them to help them on their way?

**[00:09:20] Nancy:** Your suggestion, it really ties into what I've been thinking about. Try it. Try something. How many decisions in life can we not undo? We can move, we can change jobs, we can change spouses. So try it. You can always stop.

I guess now I would say give yourself some sort of a time limit. I'm telling myself, I'll give it maybe this year to see how this fiction goes and if I just can't crack it, then I'll find something else. But try it, but maybe give yourself-- Really focus on it, but give yourself some kind of a time limit.

Then when I go through these slumps, I need something that keeps me balanced. I took a course in geology and a course in astronomy and whenever things get really bad I look down, I look up, and I say I'm really not much of anything, I'm so tiny in all of this.

I love what's been happening. I've been thinking a lot about how can we bring people together because we're not. And people got so excited about the James Webb Telescope and the photos that went out. That's pulled us together in a way that it didn't feel like we had.

Now we're learning that there's a solid core to the earth and it's 4,000 miles deep and I thought 4,000 miles really isn't that far if you think about it. So science and



some of the research and medical research, I wonder if those are things - they keep me balanced and make me realize I'm just a tiny, tiny person in all of this.

And then I just yesterday listened to the Hidden Brain Podcast about awe.

**[00:10:55] Kathy:** Mmmmm.

**[00:10:56] Nancy:** And research. You've probably watched it out of Berkeley on awe. And that when something big, mysterious, we can't really understand it happens, that's also a way to bring people together.

How excited do we get about the northern lights, right? And so I think I'm going to start looking for places, events, activities, people that can pull us together across ages, make bridges, across ages. I don't know if it'll cross politics but awe - it does. The telescope photos - it does.

And so that's my latest, thank you very much for posing those questions, my latest thinking is that I'm going to look for things in life that can help pull us together rather than split us up.

**[00:11:49] Kathy:** Beautiful. Bridges to Awe. I love it.

**[00:11:51] Nancy:** Bridges to Awe. Oh, aren't you great!

**[00:11:55] Kathy:** Wonderful.

**[00:11:57] Nancy:** So nice.





**[00:11:57] Kathy:** Nancy, thank you so much. I will link all of this up and I really, really appreciate your time. It was such a pleasure.

**[00:12:03] Nancy:** Oh, I really learned a lot. That's the other thing - if it's stimulating and enlightening and you can learn, what better conversation can you have?

**[00:12:10] Kathy:** There you go. Beautiful. Thank you.

**[00:12:12] Nancy:** Thank you.

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**[00:12:16] Kathy:** 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.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.

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Until next time, be well!

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**[00:13:18] [END OF AUDIO]**