

Defining Creativity S1E1: Nicole Johnson interview

Debbi: Hi, everyone. Thank you for joining me for this inaugural episode of Defining Creativity, a podcast that explores where and how creativity is found. I'm your host, Debbi Ponella, a creativity researcher, cultivator, and devotee. On today's episode, we are joined by...

Nicole: I'm Nicole Johnson. I am a storyteller, a ukulele player, and an igniter of social changemakers. But I work primarily these days in dismantling systemic oppression through research.

Debbi: Nicole, it's so exciting to be here talking to you. I'm thrilled to be able to discuss these things on this platform and talk to you more about all you're doing, because you always have so many irons in the fire. And I'm just excited to talk about how creativity is working in your lives these days and how it has in the past. So, can you just give me a little bit more information about what you're doing right now?

Nicole: [1:17] Sure thing. So, I'm currently the lead research director at the Harriet Tubman Effect, which happens to be a full-scale human resource and dismantling systemic oppression research institute that we built in the midst of quarantine. I did not imagine owning another business, to tell you the truth, but I think the societal context, the issues of post-George Floyd and how institutions, American institutions, were trying to navigate diversity, equity, and inclusion work, it really called me into my own art form, which I now tend to call diversity, equity, and inclusion directing. The art form feels very much like a combination of my extemporaneous speaking skills, my creativity, my meditation and wellness practices, and my storytelling work alongside my research that I've always just been so interested when it comes to workplace trauma, but it's just this lovely collaboration between all of my skill sets that allowed me to step into this role. And then the Harriet Tubman Effect is now 50 to maybe 53 employees who are freelancers, who are engaging in different industries under my larger direction as the research director. It's something that I was not expecting to be doing, I think, truthfully. And when I talk about it, it's also very surprising to me because I have had my nonprofit for such a long time and felt that that was the brand that I'd be navigating, but I think 2020 shifted a lot for so many of us. I'm also a doctoral student at NYU studying educational theater, and I consult for a variety of industries—the higher ed industry, K through 12, theater, houses of worship, the penal system, public health systems, and corporate and entrepreneurship spaces. I consult for them around strategy and dismantling systemic oppression. So, a lot going on. But those are the two main things, Harriet Tubman Effect and my doctoral degree.

Debbi: [3:24] Wow. So, there's a lot to unpack there. And you did say you're using your creativity. It's obviously really important what you're doing, but let's take a step back, and you mentioned your nonprofit. Let's talk about how you got here, because I think our creativity is informed and how we use it, how we express it, how we understand it by our experiences. So, let's go back at least to your nonprofit. You were how old when you started it?

Nicole: Yeah. So, I was 15. Oh, wait a second. I think I might have been a little earlier. So, my nonprofit actually started as a for-profit organization early on. There was a shift though when I moved to New York City from the suburbs of Florida. I moved to New York. My brother, who has autism, has always been a very large part of my journey, but more so as I'm thinking about who I have become today, I realized that this shift, moving away from home, going to pursue the entertainment industry, and leaving Grant here, I always had this very... I had a disappointment in myself for leaving the family in the midst of his development, and the shift for M.O.V.E. into the nonprofit space was because of my first M.O.V.E. show in New York, where I was able to help my classmates kind of unpack what autism was for them. We did our first M.O.V.E. for autism show.

Debbi: And go ahead, tell me what M.O.V.E. stands for.

Nicole: [4:57] What is M.O.V.E.? M.O.V.E. is a nonprofit organization that provides young people with the resources to address social issues creatively. It stands for Motivation, Opportunity, Vision, Entertainment, and we activate young people in their social responsibility through artistry. And so, we do that in the form of classes, we do that in the form of public assemblies, or art installments and ways of storytelling, but around a particular social issue that the student is inspired by. So for me, the first M.O.V.E. show was M.O.V.E. for Autism, and it was inspired by my relationship with my brother. And, the shift to becoming a non-profit and working in the way that then we did for 10 to 12 years after that, all the way up until right before quarantine, was this idea that you could think about a social issue connected to a person that's, you know, important and connected to your life, and then tell others about it in hopes that you could shift culture. That's always been the work of M.O.V.E. And, I think the shift to 2022, Nicole as a research director, if anything, my practices have just evolved with my

education and have evolved with the consulting work or the different workplaces as I'm absorbing different experiences. My work has shifted, and sometimes it has a whole new name, but many people can think that, you know, Harriet Tubman Effect is really just like M.O.V.E. 2.0 these days.

Debbi: [6:30] So, when I first interacted with you, it was with M.O.V.E. And I was part of the 10th anniversary celebration. And getting back to that, you said you're an igniter. And so, just looking at you working with all these people, how does your creativity or the igniting of their creativity, how does that play out for you?

Nicole: It's a great question. It's a very mystical kind of magical experience, even for myself. I know it begins with my personal self-transformation and my commitment to my creativity and my health. I realized that I am working with people, like you said, and in working with people, it's really based in relationship in regard to our senses, how we interact with one another, how I hear what you're saying, how I feel your touch. There's a lot of sensory work that I do for myself. And if anything, it's like I'm working with my senses, and I'm also working with my intuition to be able to see someone who is navigating a social issue and wanting to pair their creativity with it, and I spend time listening to my intuition, but also asking questions, engaging in active listening so that then I can move us towards some sort of solution or sometimes a bit of an oasis. Because sometimes you're not solving issues when it comes to addressing social issues creatively with your artistry. Sometimes you're just trying to create new culture, a new acceptance of the issue that you're engaging with, a sense of health, right? So sometimes I do imagine that there's a method to my relationship with the people I'm working with, but most of the time, I think the method is in me listening to my intuition about who they are and asking strong questions and spending time trying to connect the dots for people because I think we get lost often in our own thoughts and in our own insecurities. So, my creativity and my skillset tends to be the like, let me put the puzzle pieces together for you. And that's really, if I were going to try and break it down to see like what's the process, I feel like it's that listening to my intuition and then helping people put the puzzle pieces together.

Debbi: [8:57] Yeah, that listening thing, that's a big one. I think it's so important with creativity and just learning to be part of the community, be part of the bigger world. I work a lot with children, young children, just part of discovering their creativity in whatever form they might be expressing. I feel part of the value of that is that they then learn to respect and learn to appreciate other voices and whether or not they agree. And I think that's a big thing about what you're saying is how we are a community and interact with each other. Part of the value of the arts from the beginning, from a young child, is learning to listen and make music or make life together.

Nicole: Yeah.

Debbi: One of the things in my experience with you that I would like to have you address is just the way that you bring people together. And one of the instances I'm thinking of is after the 2016 election, I remember you bringing people into a room who don't necessarily agree. That was such a difficult time for so many reasons. And just that interest of having people with differing viewpoints be in a room together, listen, talk. They don't have to agree, but just to have that discussion. And I think I'm seeing sort of in a lot of the things you're doing, you're bringing people together to talk and to work out some of the issues. How do you go about that? Because I know you're very successful in it.

Nicole: [10:48] Yeah, I mean, it's been a journey of me trying this, let's bring people together and navigate, because it's really facilitated dialogue as theater that I think I'm engaging in, or that I've been coining it as throughout my doctoral studies now, is that I believe in the power of people being able to hear one another's thoughts to help them to understand a perspective that they have chosen not to listen to or that they are entirely unaware of and have not been able to access, and that in hearing the other person's experience, you are able to make stronger decisions that are more inclusive, that are more equitable, because we live in silos and I've always believed in that. I think that's why I loved easily. My first thing bringing people together was through dance to help us to communicate with one another around things that we just didn't understand. Autism was that first thing, and you're right that there is a thread throughout my career where bringing people together is a part of it, but then there's also a facilitation that I do. That's like very grace led. I help other people to listen in the room, so I'm actively listening, but I'm like recontextualizing what's happening in the room where I'll say: heard what Debbi said, I also heard what Stephanie said, let me like, try and bridge the gap, because I'm doing that thing where I'm pulling the puzzle pieces together. I think that my facilitated dialogue work is a theatrical experience similar to how, like, Mr. Rogers got up in front of Congress at that moment advocating for PBS and was sharing a monologue that he had written.

[12:39] But, like you understand it as a monologue, you understand it as a piece of theater, where everyone else in the room is unaware of what's going to happen, but they will react and it is televised, right? And, that

extemporaneous or spontaneous theatrical moment where the person on the stand is all like, thank you, Mr. Rogers. None of us were really expecting that today, but like he's got to respond to this piece, this monologue that was put in the middle of you know this moment that has all these eyes on it, where anyone in the room could stand up and say something. So I think I just happen these days now to be able to do that on the regular in lots of institutions, where I am placing a monologue in the middle of the room and then asking people to respond to it, because people are actually willing and interested in it now. And, it's becoming, I'm able to monetize it so that I can put funding towards things that are actually gonna shift systems and culture, which I'm really happy about, because normally I'm like everyone: let's get in a room and let's talk, and I was like experimenting and now I'm like, no, we're gonna get in a room and talk and then we're gonna shift systems and we're gonna find funding and reallocate wealth and support black and brown leaders who have been disenfranchised for such a long time and heal bloodlines through these conversations, like it's a different ballgame now. I'm really excited about it.

Debbi: [14:00] You know, you mentioned Mr. Rogers and one of the things I think he did so well was make it so that children could be comfortable, could be okay with their feelings. You know, it's okay to be mad, it's okay to be sad, it's okay to be vulnerable, and I think that vulnerability is such a key part to being able to be creative, to be able to be in touch with yourself, and to share that with others. It's a scary thing in a way, and you've got to practice like any other muscle, right?

My experience with you is that it might seem from an outsider that it's easy for you to be vulnerable and put yourself out there. It seems like, it's Nicole, she's amazing. She can do this. This is so natural for her. But I know for myself that, working with you, you made it be okay for me to be vulnerable. And I say that in the context of things that we've done, where, as a cellist who never improvised, you've had me in situations where I've improvised and I've just been able to put myself out there. You've had me as a part of conversations where I could really feel passionate but not be afraid to be who I am just because you know I was twice the age of anyone else in the room, or from the Midwest, but we were out in New York. You make it okay for me to be vulnerable. How do you do that? Is it easy for you? Talk about vulnerability a little bit for me.

Nicole: That's a great question. I'm just trying to think about if it's vulnerability that's my superpower, or if it's my ability to help others feel vulnerable. There is this personal transformation that I am consistently doing. I think, you know what? My superpower is more so of this, like, self-improvement, always wanting to find the best version of me. I remember I used to pray about that consistently, and I think that in praying for it, it manifests in me this idea that, like, I can always be better. I want to work on, not just, like, competition better, but, like, how can I get to my highest self? And I love practice. I love practicing getting to my higher self. The idea of, like, my meditation practices and Tai Chi, and, like, engaging in wellness practices, but then also, like, intense learning and research, and then, like, trying things that are hard for me. And I think in doing that, I've transformed myself as an individual, because I'm practicing, you know, you practice something for long enough, like an athlete practices tennis for forever, and they will become, you know, the world's greatest. And I think that in practicing with these self-transformation tools, I've done something that many people might feel shows up as, like, vulnerability and a sense of being able to ignite, right? But I think at the core of it, it's me showing up into rooms in my best self, and that then inspires other people, right? Because I can't say that I'm, like, actively being, like, let me help someone be vulnerable. I'm just, like, really being my full self in a space.

Most of the time, people get the idea that I'm helping you to become your best self, but then there are these small occasions where people will try to become me. They feel that it's, like, that's the goal, right? And it's often because we're really afraid to be ourselves. And in those moments, I realize what my role, like, the downsides, and not the downsides and the, like, oh, I hate doing this, but, like, the downsides and the, like, sometimes people can misunderstand what I'm doing in helping them to navigate their vulnerability, because we're so sometimes conditioned to feel like we can't be ourselves. So, I have seen moments where people try and adopt everything that I am, try and copy it, when I'm all like, no, I want to activate the things that make you special, that your design, your uniqueness. And it's painful sometimes when people realize that it's not me trying to create little Nicole's, you know. It's like, no... I want you to be you.

Debbi: [18:21] As amazing as you are, and you know, I adore you and just so respect you, to have a Nicole world where we have only Nicole Johnson's walking around, you know, that might get old someday. Plus, there is only one you.

Nicole: Yeah, more like not even old. This is like, that's just too much energy. I need people, I need people to balance. I'm always thinking too much. We don't need any more of me. Do you know what I mean?

Debbi: [18:47] So, going back to, again, with this igniter thing, I just briefly want to touch on the “-er” thing. I remember I was doing, I think, Edify with you. I know that for me, mine is an “-or”, but you helped me come to the understanding of myself that I'm a cultivator. And in that, briefly, my cultivation is of creativity for myself, always looking to find new ways to, again, broaden my horizons and expand possibilities and understanding. But also, that's what I want to do with others as well, is help them cultivate their creativity. So, tell me a little bit about that “-er”/”-or” thing and Edify.

Nicole: Yeah, so Edify surely was another iteration of M.O.V.E. As I grew in my education, my codifying of the work that I was doing became much more, it became clearer, but it's also become a bit more academic. So, Edify is a five-step dismantling systemic oppression program. It's a workbook and it comes with a partnering phone app that helps people to approach their modern-day lunch counter as if we all have a place to sit in like they did in the 60s. I felt that we needed some guidance around how to navigate the process by which we will stand up against injustices. And I developed the workbook, and it has these five steps of identity, imagination, impact, influence, and initiative. And, in the first step in identity, I asked people to go ahead and call out an “-er” or an “-or” verb. I got that from acting. I got that from my acting teacher, Greg Prenti, who would always be like, well, you know what, I don't know if I think I might have spun it a bit, but like, we would always be talking about what's your “-er”, what are you doing in this moment? Right? Or your “-ing”, are you instigating? Are you crafting? Like we were always trying to describe what you were doing. And I realized that people, when it came to this DEI work, diversity, equity, and inclusion, people were a bit like stuck. It was like no one could do anything. Everyone was just like, I'm learning, I'm taking it in. I was like, I need you to have an “-er” verb. And I took that from Greg Prenti. So, the “-er” and the “-or” verbs came, and they're really like nouns, because it's like I'm an igniter of social changemaker.

[21:25] There are facilitators, there are healers, there are teachers, cheerleaders, cultivators, like you said. And it just gives people a place to like practice, because remember I said I'm always practicing becoming my best self. When you put that label on yourself, you're like, oh, if I'm going to be an igniter of change makers, let me go ahead and start defining the word ignite and then figuring out who I'm igniting and what I'm igniting with, right? Otherwise, you're just stuck in your head. A lot of the work I'm doing is cognitive based therapy in that I'm asking people to reflect on their thoughts and then allow them to get to rework certain neural pathways or neural networks in your brain through the practice of engaging in a different kind of behavior than you have before in patterns, right? In like repetition, you have to do that work over and over again for it to manifest in your body.

Debbi: I'm probably going to steal that. I probably already have, but just from you as well, because it's such an interesting way into understanding the perspective someone is coming from, how they see themselves. It really informs any conversation like this one.

Nicole: Exactly.

Debbi: [22:36] So, as you're working with all sorts of different people, your background is in the arts, but obviously you expand far beyond that. One of the things I find when I talk to people about creativity is, yes, there's this group of people who think business, innovation, creativity, it's really important, but they think of that as not the same creativity, as something different that artists do, that art is separate. And one of the things I try to get to is that we're all creative and it just is expressed in different ways and can be used in different ways. So, how do you find it working with people from different walks of life and trying to find that commonality of creativity and an understanding? Do you hit that wall ever with people thinking that the arts are a separate pocket over here? How do we bring that into broader sense?

Nicole: Yeah, I think what's wonderful about creativity and artistry for me is that I kind of think of it like water. I don't think of it as like a separate, like cool niched thing that separates me. I think of it as like something that's foundational to life. And so, I come into a room communicating it like it's water for us. You know what I mean? I come into a room where I'm not like, so, you know, you know me as an artist. I'm like, nope, this is the stuff of life. You know what I mean?

And it is, because creativity is in my head and in my like faith practice. The foundation of, like, mobilized life for things to continue going. It's that we create; that we have been created. And so, I don't understand even my artistry as anything but creativity. It can be the same kind of creativity in every single one of my industries because I'm utilizing the same muscles that I do to create a song that I am to build a document for consulting. And I know that that's weird for people because you might think it's totally different, but that's also why I think my spaces are so unique because some of my songwriting falls over into my consulting space and it creates this

very interesting shock for people who are, who have never experienced artistry. If anything, it's kind of like I've been to like in my mind, lots of different countries of creativity. Right?

[25:03] And then I come into a room and someone's like, oh, you're using Eastern practices and you're also using European practices and African practices. And they're like, oh, it's like this mesh of, and I'm like, yeah, I've just been to every kind of country of creativity is what I, it's what I bring into rooms. And I think that that's what ends up being so unique for people. But I've also always been so susceptible. My mom always talked about how you put me in a room and I'm like a sponge. You put me on like a TV set and I'm going to take in everything, and I just like keep it in stored in parts of my body. And then one day I'm in a room doing some sort of work in consulting and some of that that I sponged up from a different space comes out into the space, into the, into this new environment that I've placed myself in. It's a really cool thing that I feel like I've been blessed with more recently. I'm realizing that it was, I would like to think that it was an acquired skill, but I think it's actually, it's just more of a blessing that I am really thankful for, but it's helping me a lot in my work, in my career.

Debbi: [26:06] I love that that there's all that overlap. It's not a silo here. Is my hobby of this, or even different, you know, like I'm a dancer over here, and then it all informs who you are and what you bring to everything. How do we get people to do that? How do we get people to embrace those other parts and bring it to the conversation, whether it's at a dinner or in a business meeting?

Nicole: Yeah.

Debbi: Do you have the magic answer there?

Nicole: I know, right. I mean I always do refer to this stuff as magic because I do think it's a bit magical and I like the mystery of those things and not knowing exactly how it works but getting a chance to see it. I think you know, because creativity is rooted in my faith. There are parts of this work that I try not to solve. So there are parts of this work that I'm like I love the mystery that God gives us around creativity, like how do you say let it be, or let there be light, and like I'm not trying to figure out the equation to how it happened. You know what I mean? But I think that's also the glory of it too- is that, if I give that part and I leave that part mysterious and I and I say that's the God factor of it, then it gives glory to that amazing creative being that you know. You call it the universe, you call goddess, God, whatever you'd like, but I think that I like giving that credit and I owe that credit first off, but I also like love giving that credit to the like it happens with the magic of God, but then also this sense of practice, because you do have to do things like you have to in, or you have to like go and travel to a different country of creativity.

[27:52] You do have to have a moment, but I think I love being the person that can bring those people into a room, bring all those different, you know parts into the room for people to experience, and then the lovely God factor does that magical stuff. But yeah, I have to give that credit there. I could act like I know the process and I'm I, you know, I could take a pass at it one day, being like: well, I think it's when we all decide to like lower our guard, to open up, I can tell people that equation and they can try it. But honestly, I think it's the magical, mystical part of it that actually makes it happen.

[Underscore of *Gethsemane*]

Debbi: [28:29] In August of 2020, I got to collaborate with Nicole on her original song titled *Gethsemane*, one of many projects she spearheaded during the Covid pandemic. This brief excerpt features Nicole on vocals, Tony Ponella on keyboard, and myself on cello.

Debbi: [29:07] So, Covid. Covid was a thing, is still a thing. It has affected people in all different ways, and one of I was looking here to see, I know, at one point, a title, A job that you had was mental health engagement specialist for New York City mayor's office. Is that? Am I correct in that?

Nicole: Yeah. I was on something called thrive NYC, so I was a coordinator, a community coordinator, focusing on mental health resources throughout the city. So, I wasn't practicing with people, but I was offering resources from the city.

Debbi: I want to tap into some of your expertise, what you've seen, what you've experienced, just to ask you about how you see people are healing at this point. I know that throughout Covid, you were instrumental in getting groups together via zoom, doing talks and doing different things to try and help people, but just where people are, as we're sort of hopefully coming out on the other side of this, where do you see creativity playing a part in healing?

Nicole: [30:12] I will say, unfortunately, I do not feel that we are healing. At this moment, I feel like we are continuing in things like sense of urgency and quantity over quality. We're doing these things that are pushing us to be unhealthy. It's like we jumped right back into work and some of us decided that we were like no, we're gonna commit to healthier life, and then a lot of us just went back to work and I think our bodies are not used to this level of work over two years of the quarantine and Covid and it's causing more harm. So, I think I have this plan personally for myself that I'm gonna do my best to touch as many people with the stories of healing and choosing a different kind of world to be a part of. I know that I'm gonna commit, almost like an athlete would, to my storytelling, my story, my ukulele playing, and my igniting of social change makers. I'm gonna commit to that like an athlete in the coming months where I really work on training myself to be sustainable in the practice of my work in dismantling systemic oppression, but I'm going to do it in a way where it's effective, where I can touch as many people as possible, because really it's in the storytelling of like no, you can try a new world. We don't have to go back to what happened before. And in my storytelling, I'm sure there's gonna be so much creativity. I'm gonna have to be creatively thinking about how to get information to lots of different people, how to be still intentional and quality- like I have quality control over how the information gets to people. And the creativity of like- is it in a play, is it in a screenplay, is it in a movie, is it in a TV series, is it in a coloring book? Is it in a dinner party? Is it through culinary arts? You know? I'm excited to tell stories in lots of different ways and the story of like, grace, of wellness, of choosing a different kind of world to be a part of, that resists things like sense of urgency, perfectionism...

Debbi: [32:30] Where do you see yourself going from here. What will be different going forward?

Nicole: Yeah well, I'm, like I said, so thrilled that I've been inspired to look at my work as if training to be a bit of an athlete in storytelling, because I know that there's so many people who can be inspired by my self-transformation and commitment to a new world of thought, of like wellness, of commitment to work and things like that, and I'm excited that it's clicked, because it wasn't clicking before. I think it was... I was in a very weird... a lack of sustainability in the work and I think I was just doing it in ways that I don't think were. I was doing the work and I was feeling fine in my presentations, in my storytelling, but it always felt like I wasn't going to be able to accomplish what I, what I was hoping for... right, and I have a very high expectation of what could happen- but like it was feeling very much like I was all like I don't know if this is gonna work and something shifted when I was all like: how do athletes do this work, do their work right? It's almost like you see people in the Olympics and you're like, how are they doing that? It's because they just train and they take care of their bodies and they believe in themselves, and so I'm excited to take on my work of storytelling, of igniting social change makers like it's a sport. And I think it's gonna be wonderful to celebrate it like a sport in like four years, when I'm all like what happened, how'd you like, how'd you train for it, you know. So that's the thing that's changing for me. It's coming specifically from this week. Harriet Tubman Effect is dark this week. We're just taking a week of rest and I'm just happy that I get to like rest with that thought that when I get back, I know that I'm stepping into my igniter or social change makers like an Olympian. Let's see what happens.

Debbi: [34:33] That's amazing. Is there anything that I haven't asked or specifically that you would want to share regarding creativity?

Nicole: No, you had some great questions. I love this. It's really refreshing to think through creativity and my practice as creativity, because sometimes my practice is singularly diversity, equity and inclusion, and it feels like that's what it is, but my practice is so much creativity, and so I appreciate you illuminating that and allowing me to talk through it all right.

Debbi: Well then, the last thing that I will ask you is regarding this podcast we are looking at, creativity is defined for different people and in their lives and applied. So, I would just ask you, how do you define creativity?

Nicole: Hmm, I think the first thing that comes to mind... I define creativity as a practice that leaves space for magic and catalytic moments. So, a little vague there, but honestly, I really do think that's my definition. I define creativity as a practice that leaves space for magic and catalyzing moments.

Debbi: [35:51] That's beautiful. Nicole, I cannot thank you enough for doing this and for spending the time with me today.

Nicole: My pleasure. Thank you so much for the questions. I can't wait to hear it. Congratulations on the podcast. It's great.

Debbi: Well, thank you. This is inspired by you three years ago in my kitchen telling me I should do a podcast. So, it took me a little bit, but I'm taking your advice and here we go. Thank you, oh my goodness.

Nicole: Thank you, Debbi. Great job.

Debbi: 00:36:17 That's a wrap for episode 1, my discussion with the incomparable and inspirational Nicole Johnson. I'm so grateful for her support and for you, the audience, for tuning in. Additional thanks to August Fackler, who composed and performed the music. Join me next time as I talk creativity with one of the greatest musicians of our time, André Watts. Meanwhile, be open to possibilities, make connections and embrace your creativity, however it manifests itself in you.