

Episode #216 The Space Between

Dr Susanne Evans, David Lee & Me

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[00:00:00] **Susanne:** hello. So I'm here today with my lovely friends and colleagues, Susan and David. And the topic that we're going to be talking about today is liminality. And this is something that we've been talking about the three of us for quite a while, and we decided we need to have a conversation about it.

It's a really interesting concept, and I'm gonna ask each of you, your view of it as a thing. What do we mean by it? But for me, it's that space between, so it's, it's the transition from what was done before to what is being done now, and then there's that bit in the middle, which is the liminal space.

And it's a really amazing space to grow and to learn. But I think often in organizations, it's not something we pay enough attention to or personally. So that's what we're gonna focus on today. So Susan, I'm gonna go to you first. What is your view on this as a topic and a concept, and why is it that you're interested in talking about it?

[00:00:58] **Susan:** I am fascinated by it, and I never thought about it very much until a couple of years ago. I was at a retreat in Scotland and they had this concept MA concept, which is a Japanese concept, which is about allowing a, so rather than packing the agenda full, that there's space between sessions to allow what it is you've been reflecting on or working on to settle and something new to emerge.

So it's not an emptiness or a void, it's actually full of possibility. And once I started to explore it, how they explained it, I guess, or the Japanese concept is about if you listen to music, there's always space between the notes. And then if you apply that to just a book or a page, there's always space between the words.

So that space, that white space for another way of describing it is necessary. And from a philosophical,

perhaps the transition between birth and death is the ultimate transition. And life is the space between. And then everything that flows out of that moment to moment between each breath, between each heartbeat in everything we do, there's a space.

And a lot of us don't like those spaces. We find them uncertain. And that's where I'm interested and in particular in that transitional, because that's what it is, but phase for



people perhaps leaving one job going into another. And getting up to speed with the next one. So that's like quite a lot of transition.

And then organizations, because they know they want to make a change, they want the result, but of course the messy middle, the space between is where the work gets done.

[00:03:13] **Susanne:** Wow. I think an amazing explanation. Thank you. Over to you, David. Anything to ask? Do I have

[00:03:20] **David:** to? Oh my God, that was awesome, Susan. Oh my God.

it was interesting when you talked about, the space between words and you mentioned people feel uncertain in that space. That makes me think of in conversation when people feel the need to fill up the space. And I'm remembering a friend, when I first started hanging out with this guy, his tempo of speech was so slow and I like deep conversation, but even this was like more reflective than I was used to.

I'm like, is he gonna say something more? Is it my turn? You know? So that kind of like, that awkwardness and, to your point about the space, it makes me think of the, the awkwardness and the unknown that, you know, I think is natural for anybody. But, certain personalities have more or less comfort with the unknown and the need to fill that space up.

What, when you ask that question, Suzanne Ann, what first came up for me is that quote that I love, life is not a problem to be solved it's a mystery to be lived. and how oftentimes that liminal space is seen as a problem to be solved. Like, okay, what's the, five step plan to get me into certainty and being comfortable in that place of not knowing.

so that's what comes up for me.

[00:05:05] **Susanne:** It's really interesting because I do think this idea of space is something that brings people discomfort. I think we as humans feel comfortable when we're busy and we can tell other people that we're busy. It's something I see increasingly with people who I know.

you ask someone how they are and their instant response is, oh, I'm so busy, it feels a backward step to me. so I'm wondering, both of you have busy lives, with work and family and everything else that you're doing. How do you create that space for yourself in your life? David, I'll go to you first.

[00:05:42] **David:** Yeah. I, I feel like I'm super conscious of that. super conscious of the importance of self care in order to function in the world. So, you know, at the simplest level,



I'm not one of those people who like get four hours of sleep and then they're like, ah, it doesn't bother me. You know, I crush it. Like I'd be in the, fetal position in the corner.

So I am very conscious of having plenty of alone time and, having that space and actually though I do have to admit, it's been interesting, when smartphones were, invented for years, I avoided having a smartphone and, didn't want to become addicted to it.

And did a really good job until maybe a year or two ago listening to a lot of podcasts, which is great, but fills in some of that space. And then also getting, like addicted to YouTube shorts, goat videos and dog videos and that sort of thing. And here your goat videos.

Oh God, it's so just like noticing how much of what used to be free space I have been filling up with just, scrolling through. And so just starting to dial that back to get more of the free space.

[00:07:21] **Susanne:** I think what you say is a really interesting point about noticing, isn't it? It's about having that consciousness of noticing when you start to fill that space, the space between, and the space that you need with other things.

Is that something that resonates with you, Susan?

[00:07:36] **Susan:** Hmm. And I suppose in a way you could say that we have all the space we need. We choose to fill it, so we think we need to create space, but the space is there already and it's being discerning perhaps about what we fill our space with. And now.

Okay. I know that it's different if you're self-employed or going to work every day, but there's still space between leaving your house. Well, maybe not as much anymore. I think COVID had an impact on that as well, because people weren't commuting. And the commute, I think for a lot of people is that space between.

And I know so many people who used to love commuting because they were able to process on the way home in particular, to let go of the day. And you very much cross that threshold when you go into your own house, then you're actually going from the world outside over that space between in, into your own home.

one of the things that I've practiced, and mainly from writing the book, was to follow my ultradian rhythm, which is to work for 90 to 120 minutes roughly, and then take a break. And an active break. So not passive, not scrolling on YouTube or Instagram or LinkedIn even. Doing something active, getting out in the garden, going for a walk, whatever it is.

Sometimes it's talking to somebody. Sometimes it's just pausing. And I notice now when I don't take time to pause and that's been a big shift for me 'cause it took a while to get in



because we have to practice these things if we can't just decide that that's how I'm going to do it. There's practice and space.

I've always wanted space. I've always craved spaciousness, and love the outdoors impact of all of that. But what I've begun to understand is that space is here with me all the time and I can drop into the space.

[00:09:56] **Susanne:** Hmm. That is interesting. I, last week I did a commute into London for the first time for quite a long time, and it was really interesting to me to observe people on the train and on the tube and how nobody was just sitting, everyone was pecking away at their phones.

and I decided, I listened to music on the way down on the train and then on the tube I just sat and just looked around and stared at people probably in a creepy way. But, I was the only person doing that. No one else was, was looking up. And that was a conscious choice for me. I just didn't wanna do it.

And also I was, I was just wanting to sit and be and have a bit of a rest. I had a lot of meetings that day and I would, I didn't wanna fill my head with anything else, but I, I think modern life makes it increasingly hard to find space. I think.

[00:10:52] **Susan:** Yeah, I think you're right, Suzanne. There has to be a conscious effort to seek it out.

It's there, the temptation is to fill it, and that's just everything is competing for our attention, isn't it? Everything. Letting the mind wander is so important and that, we all know you go in the shower and you have a, you have a new idea or you go for a walk and something becomes clear.

We, we know this intuitively, but we think we don't have time. It's something I focus on a lot with my coaching clients is creating or allowing that pause. And I, I ask people to start with a minute if you can't find a minute in a day to just do nothing. Stare out the window for a minute. I think once you start to practice the pausing or enjoying the space between, then you begin to crave it.

[00:12:05] **David:** Yeah, man, that is so true. So much of my adult life, I knew meditation was important, but I kept telling myself I couldn't do it. And when I would try, like, this is driving me crazy. and then I started just like you were saying, Susan, with your clients, like, just do it one minute, two minutes, three minutes.

And now there are times where I'm so aware of just craving it and like, ah, you know, this is just what the doctor ordered.



[00:12:39] **Susanne:** I was interested in what you said, Susan, about threshold because I, I don't know whether you know, but the origin of liminality is from the Latin *limen*, which means threshold.

So yes, there's method in the madness. but that's what it is. It's the threshold from one thing to another, isn't it? And you don't realize you're there unless you create the space around it. Exactly. As you said, David, through meditation and through practice and creating the space

[00:13:05] **Susan:** and in Ireland or in.

Might say old Irish tradition the liminal space or the threshold was between this world and the next. And there are certain times of the year where that is very thin. It's a thin veil. it's the liminal space. That threshold is barely noticeable. And in particular for the month of *Son*, November, which is, the end of October, beginning of November.

Then the, the shift from autumn to winter, and again, *Alana* may time again, this shift from spring into summer. So those liminal spaces exist and. Just recently I shared a, an episode with David, about this. It's Irish author who sadly passed away at the age of 55, he had recorded an interview a few weeks earlier and it was very interesting 'cause he was talking about these liminal spaces almost, that he always felt that he lived, somewhere between both worlds.

and that he was always conscious of that. And okay, that's a foray maybe in a slightly different direction, but it's an interesting threshold or liminal space to think about and look up at the moon. there's a whole expanse of worlds and there's a beautiful full moon at the moment. And last night we went for a walk and we went up high and I saw this

phenomenon I would say that I have never, ever seen in my life before where the moon was like that. And then, okay, I'm just showing a circle in the middle. And then a cloud went out around it, which was maybe a shadow or something effect. But from the two sides of this cloud were kind of like rainbow lights.

So there was some effect happening and that felt otherworldly, like that felt like some sort of liminal space or space between or, so I think there's magic. Maybe that's the thing about the Irish and the thresholds. And there's a sense of mysticism. And you talked about living life in mystery, David, and that's, I feel like I've gone off topic slightly when we talk about organizations and everything, but there's something in that unknown.

That allows room for anything to seem possible.



[00:15:43] **David:** Very cool. it's sort of like this image I'm seeing is the liminal space on the horizontal plane and then the liminal space on the vertical plane. And it actually makes me think of, a little LinkedIn interaction, Suzanne, you and I had related to the hero's journey.

Yes. And when I said how, I sometimes like to use the term mythic journey, so it kind of takes away the like ultra masculine, alpha male kind of connotation of hero. But when you were, sharing Susan, it, it made me think of in some ways on a very practical level. What I've found over the years is in those liminal spaces and those liminal times in my life to, you know, actively thin out the veil, if you will, between this world and the bigger cosmic spiritual world really helps navigating this.

Like we're able to see it in a bigger, more mythic, view versus small hunker down. Like, I don't know what to do next, in this dimension.

[00:17:02] **Susanne:** That's interesting. I think, I'm glad you talked about the hero's journey. 'cause I was thinking about that too because Susanna Liller in her writing on it from the female perspective, talks about threshold guardians.

So the things that sort of help you but also stop you from moving forward. And I think it's that. she always describes it as like, you have various times in your life when you reach a crossroads and you can either get help or be hindered as you move forward. And those are the threshold guardians.

So I think it's, it fits well. The other thing I was thinking about when you were talking is this idea of time and how when I did my NLP training a long time ago, we talked about how people see time inwardly. So you can either see time across, like from left to right or from front to back, and different people see time in different ways.

And, and if you ask them to imagine their life story, you can see from their body language, which type of person they are and where they see the time. And I wonder if there's, I, I don't have an answer, it's just a thought that pops in my head, but that, that's almost quite an interesting exercise to do with yourself and with others to see how you see your timeline.

Would it be from left to right or would it be from front to back? Because if it's left to right, you can see it all. Whereas if it's from front to back, you can't, I don't know. I have no answer to that. It was just something that pops into my head.

[00:18:27] **Susan:** And with that though again, there's a line, there's a start and an end, and I think that's it.

you are not rushing to the end. And I think we spend so much of life and work rushing to the end, rushing to the result, and we missed what's in between. And I think that's the, the



beauty of the in-between or the liminal is it allows us, the empty space allows us to notice what is going on around us.

If we're going meeting, to meeting, to meeting, that's it. If we are in a meeting and everybody takes two minutes to gather their thoughts, something new might arise, but. It's back to what you were saying, David, about the person speaking very slowly. I think that would probably drive everyone, you know, you could, I could feel myself even, but that's our problem, isn't it?

because we're listening as well to get our point across as opposed to listening to understand. If we're listening to understand, we're relaxed, we're okay with silence and the pause. We take time to formulate our answers. And I'm sure all of you will know in a coaching session whether you are being coached or the coach.

Those spaces are where change happens, where a worldview changes because suddenly there's a new perspective and it, when we don't allow space for new and different to emerge than we keep doing what we've always been doing.

[00:20:16] **Susanne:** How do we create that in organizations? Because I, I think we know, and I think most people listening to this will know it makes sense to give people time and space, reflection as the superpower, all of that stuff.

How do we persuade people in organizations that this is something that we need to do. Because I had the same conversation earlier today when I was talking about creating human-centered change and about, the pace you do it at, and you give people space to change at their own pace, et cetera, et cetera.

And the person I was speaking to said, well, that's fine, but how do I get that into an organization where they want to do everything yesterday? So I'm really interested in your experiences have you experienced organizations that are able to create that space for people and what did they do? David, I'll ask you first.

[00:21:05] **David:** Huh? Yeah, I would say personally, I can't think of an organization that I've worked with that overtly recommends and supports that it's so much the opposite. Hmm. this is sort of cliché, but I know at least back in the day Google was really big on was like 20% of the employee's time spent on projects and 3M the same sort of thing.

That's where Post-it notes, the idea for that came from. but yeah, it's so the opposite.

[00:21:47] **Susan:** What I've found with one organization I worked with, they wanted to allot time for deep work, and in a way I see that as something similar. But of course their concept was that they could pile everything into that hour and, and it wasn't to just sit back.



And I think it comes back to what we would often talk about, David, it's the polyvagal in the nervous system because when we're used to being in a certain way of being, which is always on pretty much, then anything that shifts us out of that is a signal of danger because if we're going too fast and then we slow down, that's a danger signal automatically to our nervous system.

So it is a, I think like a lot of things that we want to shift ourselves, you, it's starting with baby steps. And what I found is with another organization is just taking them outside and asking them a question and giving them time to wander around a garden, pondering the answer, and then into groups.

And while I told them they had 10 minutes, I knew that they were gonna have a half an hour, whatever, because once they started to allow the space, then new stuff came in. So maybe that's tricking people, I don't know. But it, it's allowing that space between, and certainly when I design facilitating workshops and everything, I always try and allow space

and that will be a resistance often.

But it, I think back to what I said earlier is we intuitively know this, so I think all of us intuitively know that when we have space, relax, even if you say to somebody, take a breath now, everything's okay. There's kind of a feeling of, ah, and once people get into that and if they can also have a new idea or go in a new direction, then they may start to practice it more.

But persuasion. We can't, can we, Suzanne, all we can do is, is. Model it ourselves. I think that's it. it's about how it works for me and it may not work like that for you,

but what would you try to do?

[00:24:31] **Susanne:** Yeah, I think you're right. I think it's one of those things that you have to just do it.

And, and a leader has to decide they're gonna create the space for themselves and for their team to just have a bit more thinking time. And I guess it's also, I'm thinking back to the days when I was in an office environment a bit more, to be less judgmental if someone appears to just be sitting there looking out the window, you know, 'cause they might be having some of their best thinking at that moment.

but back in the day, I and others probably would've thought they were daydreaming. and I think maybe it's, it's allowing that sort of behavior. And encouraging it rather than seeing it as someone being lazy.



[00:25:14] **David:** That actually reminds me of, like pen Andy, you know, black and white cartoon from maybe the New Yorker, you know, great cartoons where there's this, executive, you know, with the suit.

This was like many years ago, suit and tie staring out the window. And this other guy who I guess is his boss is saying to somebody how do I know if Smith is actually thinking about soap? Like it was a soap company, you know, like Proctor and Gamble or something and not whatever else kind of thing.

It's like you're hoping that the person is, ideating in, in productive ways. Anyway, it just flashed onto that.

[00:26:02] **Susanne:** That is funny. Yeah. I mean, you don't do you right. You just have to be okay with the fact that they might be, well, they might not, but they still might have a really good idea.

[00:26:10] **David:** Yeah. And even if, like, one of the things I'll say sometimes in, seminars is even, if the person is just taking a break back to the ultradian rhythm Susan, that you're talking about, that's a good thing.

Their brain is resetting. So Yeah, not a problem.

[00:26:33] **Susan:** I know we have this kind of idea, don't we, that if we work hard and stick at it, that we'll get the answer that's required and, I'm sure we've all done it. I can certainly say I've done it and I still do it at times and. There's something so powerful about even just stepping away from the desk, even having that break of just moving, changing what you're looking at in your environment.

All of it starts different neural pathways firing and you just never know when that space you created will result in the answer that you were looking for. And I think the thing about this is, you know, that phrase, slow down to,

[00:27:17] **David:** I was just gonna say that it's slow is smooth and smooth is fast, is another version of that.

The special forces. Yeah.

[00:27:25] **Susan:** And I think that slowing down, it's not about slowing down in the outside world even. It's about slowing down what's happening inside. You know, the thinking and the. The focus. and we can only do that, I believe, when our minds are rested and we feel restored. It's very hard to direct your attention fully to something when you're undersleep or you're hungry or all of those, very basic things that we have as humans.



And that's why we even have like mealtimes. There's space between, aren't they? Mm-hmm. all of this is, is space for us, and yet we decide, oh no, I'm gonna work through and eat at my desk.

[00:28:11] **Susanne:** Al Deco eating Al Deco.

[00:28:13] **David:** Very bad. No, it's fine. I've never heard that. That's great. You know it as you saying that, Suzanne, what popped into my mind was, some of the cool work, I, I don't remember the author's name, but the book is, I think Open Focused Mind.

I think that's the title. And this, Guy has some sort of like health center where they compared brain function with either a very like ultra focus, meditative, like your breathing, a mantra, et cetera, versus a more diffuse focus. So kind of like unfocused, where you're aware of the space between the top of your head and your belly button, you know?

So it's very Diffuse and then all sorts of physical. And, mental health benefits from that. what he talked about, which makes total sense when you think about the brain is when we do a more diffuse level of consciousness, so we're no longer furrowed brow trying to come up with the answer, but it's just like enjoying the beautiful scenery in that more,web-like holistic right brain gestalt way of thinking.

Yeah. Then we've got the divergent thinking, the connecting the dots, the creativity. So, yeah, just the creative value of not grinding it out.

[00:29:49] **Susanne:** Yeah, very true. Very, very true. And I think you've both talked about being outside, and I think that's a key part of it, isn't it, is changing the environment. And I wondered whether you felt there was something about the seasons here as well, because Susan, you've already alluded to the different spaces.

but I was reading about Lamos, which is, the, the field when it, when the field's been harvested. This was a traditional festival on like the 1st of August. and it was the kind of midpoint between summer solstice and the autumn equinox. And it was the space between the light and the darkness where they would celebrate the gathering of the harvest and what they've been accomplished, but also look forward to the future.

And I, I wonder when I read that, I didn't know any of that till I, I read it, it popped up on something I was reading a couple of months ago. We've come disconnected from that cycle. And, and it got me thinking from what you were saying too, whether that's something we as individuals need to reconnect with, but also in organizations, other opportunities for organizations to reconnect with that cycle.



So as well as people's own rhythm, it's the rhythm of the year. I don't know, I've never experienced that in an organization, but it'd be interesting to know if any, any, do connect in that way.

[00:31:07] **David:** You know, what comes to mind and might be, for both of you, really fun guests for your podcast is Kevin Hancock's work.

So he, was the CEO of Hancock Lumber or maybe still is the CEO. No, he's the chairman of the board. I think he's the fifth or sixth generation in the family of this lumber company in Maine. And a bunch of years ago, right during one of the big, I think it was the 2008, 2009 explosion, implosion, whatever of all the markets and economies.

and so the building industry obviously collapsed right when that was happening. So that huge challenge in his company, he ended up having, was it spasmodic? Something? Dysphonia? It's what Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Has. Okay. So he, he, he, he, when he first got it, he couldn't even talk. And so he had to.

Delegate because he couldn't say anything. And then he went on to, he went on, a bunch of pilgrimages to various Native American reservations and, you know, was mentored by various Native American elders. And his book, the Seventh Power tells that story. It's unbelievable. Oh, wow. and the term Seventh Power is based on American indigenous peoples, their, spiritual model.

But he would be somebody who, since he is so tapped into indigenous communities and wisdom, it'd be interesting what he would have to say about that.

[00:33:00] **Susanne:** Yeah, it's not something that I'm familiar with really, other than reading a bit of folklore and things like that. But it is fascinating and I feel like we've lost something as a, a species that we've become more apart from that way of living.

[00:33:15] **Susan:** I think of it in the financial aspect where we have often, we work towards a quarterly plan, we do annual budgeting. So I think the concept of seasonality as such is there. However, it's just got become part of the working environment as opposed to what it was really for maybe originally.

takes some time to sit down and think about the plans for next year. Now it's just like last year's plans plus 2% or whatever, you know. So there was that. And then review every quarter how we've gotten on what's going ahead, taking holidays. I think things were much more in line with the seasons, but the industrial revolution and time being, time carded and all of these things got rid of a lot of that as well.

Perhaps.



[00:34:18] **Susan:** I.

From a people perspective still, I think you have

August in this part of the world and certainly in Europe where everything shuts down more or less. And again, December to January, you know, it's hard to get people. they're away. They're taking time off. they're their families. A lot of people talk about the beginning of September as being like the beginning of a year as well.

So I do think the ideas are there with people and organizations probably have some of that energy. It's not perhaps consciously part of their design though,

[00:34:58] **Susanne:** I'm wondering, David, is it the same in the us? Is, is August like a, a quiet month or less so?

[00:35:05] **David:** Very much so. And where I live, it's very much a vacation destination, so it's very, playtime oriented.

also in terms of, what do we do with this understanding of seasonality? That, one of the things that's been really helpful for me, learned years ago from a mentor who's very, steeped in indigenous, traditions, et cetera, is, and it's again, it's kind of a, extension to the following your ultradian rhythm is instead of fighting the seasonal shifts and energy and focus, like be more aligned with nature.

And so like in the winter, do that, pulling inward, et cetera. and, and then. You know when spring comes and you feel that surge of energy, like ride that horse, as long as you can,

[00:36:09] **Susanne:** I think it, you know, most of us definitely the winter is like hibernation, isn't it?

You know, in the evenings you don't wanna do so much 'cause it's dark. Whereas in the summer you finish work and naturally you feel like going out for a walk or whatever 'cause it's lighter. So I think it is, it's good for us to tune into that and how that impacts on our own rhythm of living. The other thing that struck me about this view, like the seasons, is around endings and beginnings.

And I think that's something that I come back to over and over again with my own work in change that so many organizations are focusing on beginnings all the time that they don't do enough about ending. So if you are asking people to do something different, a newy, a new piece of technology or a new way of working, you have to give them space to process what's gone and what's been lost.



And I think it's a concept that organizations struggle with sometimes because there's that constant forward momentum. But I see that as part of this too, that you have to have a well managed ending. Then you can go into like the liminal space and then you can move forward with something else. But you have to have an ending before you can do that with energy.

The willing bridges is, is the model of change that I really like. And he always talks about once you have a well-managed ending, you can move forward with energy. And I think that's quite a nice way of putting it.

[00:37:33] **Susan:** And I, I, I feel that's very important when somebody hands in their notice. Suzanne and that period between handing in their notice and actually walking out the door, which can be anything from a couple of weeks to six months, and it can be detrimental to everyone involved.

And I've rarely come across an organization that has managed or individuals within an organization really that can manage that transition that. Spending the tendency is to forget about the person and move on and almost blame them for leaving and badmouth them and do whatever. And then, oh, what, you're still here?

What are you doing? Still here, but not letting them go either. And I see that as being very poorly managed, and it what you said, Suzanne, about the energy. Can you imagine if you, 'cause you bring someone in and you're like, oh, welcome, so glad you joined us. And again, then you often let them falter like you do everything to recruit them and then you let them go.

But can you imagine if you manage those transitions, support people to start well, but also to end well that would reverberate through an organization and celebrating the person what they did while they were there. Of course you had to get rid of them and it's a whole different,

[00:39:07] **David:** yeah. It's funny when you said if you had to, 'cause when you say the transition between putting the notice and they leave, sometimes it's 15 minutes, go get your stuff in your box and leave

[00:39:20] **Susan:** and mean even that can be handled with grace.

[00:39:23] **David:** Yeah,

[00:39:26] **Susanne:** yeah. Yeah. I remember when I went off on maternity leave that, it was like the biggest let down ever because I was going off to do, one of the greatest changes of my life. And I remember, I got some presents and they did a kind of, you know, little speech



and then everyone went back to work and I was just like sitting at my desk thinking, alright, what shall I do now?

I didn't have any work to do, of course, because I wasn't gonna be there for a year. So I remember I just walked out of the office and went home and, and it was, I was devastated. 'cause for me it was a huge deal. But of course for everyone else it was just like, oh, well she's gone. Off we go. And, and then when I went back, I had a year off.

I walked back in and it was like, I'd never been away. and the whole thing just felt really disappointing.

[00:40:14] **David:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

[00:40:17] **Susan:** The human experience these are the things that we think we don't give air to and we don't give space to. Yes. But they're so important and they make such a difference to the energy within an organization.

[00:40:35] **Susanne:** I think on, on projects it's really important as well. I see it all the time on change projects where there's no space to unpick what's been gone before. So I worked on a technology implementation earlier this year and I dunno whether I've told you this story before, but it's quite funny. I was going out speaking to different stakeholders and they kept talking about the last time they'd implemented this piece of technology.

And it was about 10 years before. People kept talking about this project, project Pearl and it was terrible. It was the worst thing that ever happened to us. So I started asking questions and then my client kept pulling me to one side and going, Suzanne, stop asking about that. You are just raking things up from the past.

And I said, we need to know because this is clearly something that wasn't finished off properly for people and they're still carrying it with them into this project, and it's making them be cynical and fatigued and, oh, here we go again. we've got to get this out. And anyway, I persuaded them to let me do a workshop where I just said to people, just come and tell me everything that happened on Project Pearl and we'll learn lessons from it this time.

And people just came and vented at me for about two hours and I took notes and everything and at the end people said, oh, I feel so much better. I feel like I can put that aside. And then we were able to say all these things you told us. About that project and what went wrong. We are building that into how we're doing this project.

And it was a classic case of no one had ever finished that off. It was just still running and running and running, and then carried forward into this new project, which for people who



were working on, it felt the same, because, oh, it's the same technology, but of course it wasn't. you have to end stuff, otherwise it never, it never finishes.

[00:42:16] **David:** just one quick comment related to that. one of the things that, I remember hearing somebody say in a workshop when, I don't know what the, the exercise was just, let's say do's and don'ts of a leader. And one of the things this person said, how that we never paused to celebrate when we finish a project.

It's just, all right, let's move on. Yep.

[00:42:39] **Susanne:** Onwards.

[00:42:40] **David:** Onwards. Tell who, So another part of the like slow down enough to savor like, hey, we did this kind of thing. when, Suzanne, you're, you're talking about the underwhelming response to your leaving and then coming, it made me think again about, another facet of slowing down and pausing is that's also where thoughtfulness and empathy can spring forth.

If we're always, hyper-focused on our goals and everything, we're not pausing to think about Suzanne going off in this amazing thing and isn't it great to see her back and wanna make sure she feels welcomed, et cetera. So another reason for doing the pausing,

[00:43:34] **Susan:** I remember. To the project thing.

I remember implementing a new finance system in an organization I was working in, and various countries were rolling it out at different times. And I was in the Kenya office at the time and they were running the old system and the new system in parallel for months, but not telling anyone because they didn't know how to let it go.

They were afraid the new one wouldn't work. just that kind of risk averseness. And I remember the financial controller telling me like it was yesterday, that the old system was on life support. And, it was just on life support in the background. And I was like, right, well, I'm here to pull the plug.

[00:44:26] **David:** No heroic measures.

[00:44:30] **Susan:** We're ready to let go. You know? But there was that sense of an ending. And if I hadn't asked, perhaps they might have run those two systems forever, that safety again, that we crave that certainty. what came to mind when you spoke Suzanne and when you spoke to David, it was never ending story.



That we can get caught in a never ending story without knowing it, unless there's an ending. And that's the beauty of a story. When we were always told in school, it is a beginning, a middle, and an end.

[00:45:07] **Susanne:** Yeah. And the problem is and you will have seen this too, if no one ever breaks that. That process through allowing people to talk about it and taking a bit of a break.

These stories just carry on and on and on. and I've worked in a lot of organizations, as I'm sure you have, where people are telling stories about things that happen when they weren't even there, because they've heard about it. And it becomes part of the law, the mythology of the organization.

And often those stories are not particularly helpful. it's, it doesn't support the culture now, it doesn't support the organization now, but it becomes part of it 'cause no one's ever challenged it or asked a question or created a process where that can finish and people can move forward with energy.

And I think. Organizations are so bad at doing this because there's that constant forward momentum, dysfunctional momentum often, in that it's moving in the wrong direction. I think it's about celebrating, like you said, David, what's been achieved and then closing it and then moving forward. And I think we all need to get better at doing that.

[00:46:08] **Susan:** Yeah. Yeah. 'cause we look to blame as well, don't we? And we look at the negatives always, rather than what did we learn from this? Even if it was a disaster, we still learned something from it. Let's start from there.

[00:46:26] **David:** I think also, a common thread with, let's not, open Pandora's box and allow them to be talking about how much they hated Pro Project Pearl. as well as. I want to get out of this liminal state, ASAP, so I'm just gonna take the first job, or, whatever the, create some certainty is.

I love how, James Hollis, the Jungian analyst, talks about anxiety management systems. And so you think about in the workplace, most people have not the greatest, emotional management skills. And so like, if I'm a manager, I'm a senior leader, like I don't know how to deal with all this vitriol, so just like, shut it down.

and then I'll feel better 'cause I don't have to deal with it. Or again, if I'm in this liminal place, that feels super anxious, so let's just come up with a solution and be done with it. It's like the research on, premature cognitive commitment. It's the more anxious a person is, the more likely they are to jump to a conclusion.



So Interesting. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:47:49] **Susan:** It makes sense.

[00:47:50] **David:** Hmm. Yeah. The

[00:47:51] **Susan:** brain is just like, yeah, it's in, gone into tunnel vision, isn't it? Probably.

[00:47:56] **David:** and, just think of people's general personalities. The more self-efficacy a person has, the more confident, the more they are able to embrace not knowing. But the more insecure a person is, they always have to be right.

Always have to have an answer. Yeah.

[00:48:16] **Susan:** I was at a, on a course and this author, Steven Desa, I mean I think he's a management consultant as well but he talked about, for him the, he always wanted to know, you know, to the certainty and everything. And there was something about a house move happening and it was just all up in the air.

And the estate agent said to him, can you be with not knowing? And he's written a book since called Not Knowing as well as other books. But in that talk that he did, he talked about keeps the poet and this concept of negative capability, ability, and. It's like letting go of the need for a logical explanation.

our rational one, and that's where we get caught up a lot of the time. We want the explanation or we want to show that we know because saying, I don't know, is back to being in this liminal space, isn't it? But the power of saying, I don't know, is it takes us into the liminal space where the knowing can emerge.

And so many of us spend our lives pretending to know, or or, or making it up on the spot so that we don't seem like we don't know, but we live in a world where it's complex and complexity requires

dancing with the unknown or in the unknown.

[00:50:04] **Susanne:** Yeah, I wish leaders were more comfortable with being in that space because I think it creates so many problems in organizations for moving forward with stuff that doesn't make sense, but also an unwillingness to stand up on stage and be honest about the fact that they don't know they haven't got all the answers.

I remember someone telling me a story once about a leader that we were talking about, the most effective leader that they'd ever worked with. And they worked for a big public sector



organization in the uk and they'd had a whole series of very kind of heroic leaders who, knew everything and, and were, full of charisma and all that sort of thing.

And somebody new joined and they did a, a town hall meeting, where they invited questions. And this was new because previously all the questions had to be agreed in advance so the person could know the answer. I know you one, but this new person said, just ask me anything you want. And the story that this guy told me was someone asked this new leader a question and the leader said, I don't know.

I've only been here a week. I dunno the answer to that, but leave it with me and I'll get back to you. And he took the person's name and within a couple of days, he'd contacted the question asker personally and said, right, I looked into this for you and this is the answer. And this person I was speaking to told me this story as the greatest example of leadership they've ever seen.

[00:51:26] **David:** I love that because it was

[00:51:27] **Susanne:** different.

[00:51:28] **Susan:** It's so simple.

[00:51:29] **David:** Yeah. It makes me think of, this cool story that Peter Bregman tells. So, written a couple books, executive coach, and one of the things he said I loved was, it's so interesting to him how all the qualities that the typical leader thinks makes them look strong are the ones that make them look weak and vice versa.

And then he shared his version of your person's story where he was working with a leadership team and they were dealing with some really thorny problem and the, CEO of the firm is in front of the group and she looks out at them and, and she almost throws something in frustration but not at them.

And says something like, I don't have the answer. Like, I don't know what we should do. I need you to, to help me figure this out. And it was cool because Peter said, when she said that, he said like, I didn't feel like, oh my God, we're screwed. Like she has no clue. It was like, sweet, we really matter.

Let's roll up our sleeves and, figure this out. And if only more leaders would realize that I.

[00:52:51] **Susanne:** Yeah, I think the, the model of leadership, and it's, it's back to what we were saying, David, about the hero's journey is why that is so problematic for people, because it does present the leader as hero.



And actually that's not what we need. We don't need heroic leaders. We need the leaders who are prepared to lean into the unknown and the unknowable. So I, I really liked when you were saying about the mythical story. For me, that's a far better way of describing it, and I shall call it that from now on forever.

[00:53:20] **David:** and actually you're saying, before that, and thank you. Like in the mythic journey, I'm just flashing on to, this book. God, I think it came out in the seventies by Dr. Ellen Langer, the Harvard psychologist called Mindfulness. And this was way before mindfulness was like a big thing in Western, society.

and she shared a, a study which showed that managers who got the most, I think it was creative ideas and maybe engagement too.

And this is before engagement was a term, were the ones who had confident uncertainty and so they didn't pretend to have the answers. They were very straightforward in saying, I don't know the answer, and they were confident that they and the team would find it. So confident uncertainty.

[00:54:21] **Susanne:** I love that.

[00:54:21] **David:** Isn't that cool? Yeah. I love

[00:54:25] **Susanne:** that. I wish more leaders had that. We need to be encouraging this in our leadership teams that we work with.

[00:54:31] **David:** Yeah.

[00:54:34] **Susan:** I think the thing I find often with the leaders that I coach is the control. People want to feel in control and to feel into control they then believe they need to know everything.

And of course when they kind of realize you can't ever know everything and they know that at a certain level there's a relaxing into that, but there is that, everybody's looking to me. I have to know everything and therefore I have to control everything because if something creeps in that I'm not in control of, then I might not know it.

that's a like a whirlpool, isn't it? That keeps you in.

[00:55:13] **Susanne:** And I think going back to our earlier conversations about technology. I think we are now operating in a world where you can know things. I always tell, my daughter about, what it used to be like when you had to do some homework and you had to go to the library to look it up in an encyclopedia?



And I remember when I was at primary school, like, in Victorian times, when I was at primary school, we were given 10 things we had to find out every week. And as our homework, it was great homework, but you had to have an encyclopedia or go to the library and look it up. And if you couldn't find it, then you just didn't know.

And you had to be okay with not knowing because there was no way of finding out. And she finds this concept really weird that, we just had to be okay with that. We just had to go, oh, I don't know. And I'm never going to know because there's no one I can ask. And of course now with Google and, and AI and everything else, we do know everything.

We can find out everything. I wonder if that's made a harder for us and, and leaders to admit that they don't know because some problems are really thorny and don't have an easy answer.

[00:56:23] **Susan:** And we can't know the future. No ai, no matter how good it is, it is not telling us the future. The future is unknown, always.

Don't matter the budget we set or the plans we have, it's unknown. And perhaps that's the place to start with people because they can't know what's going to happen next. I suppose for most of us, when we. Plan a seed of doubt like that into our beliefs. It opens up the space between what we thought we knew and oh, what we're now going to know.

And that's what I would always tend to look at is the future is not known. Even if you set a plan in place, a perfect plan to out date

the minute it's done, it was a plan.

Yeah.

[00:57:24] **Susanne:** I think that's the perfect place to finish our conversation, that we've had a very wide ranging conversation as ever. And let's finish on the unknown, but I'm interested before we finish, in both of your thoughts on what's been interesting for you from this conversation and what would you like the listener to take away from it?

So Susan, over to you first.

[00:57:47] **Susan:** We normally do book recommendations. I know. And, but I have a book to recommend. Hey. it's a children's book called The in-Between Book. And funnily enough, I went to get off my shelf. Dr. Seuss says, oh, the places you'll go, because the waiting room that he talks about for me is the liminal space,



and of course this was on the shelf beside it, and I thought, this is the perfect book. So. What I got from this conversation. I loved this conversation. I think that might be obvious, because I've been leaning into the screen even and what I love is making connections with things that I hadn't necessarily thought about before.

So both of you, I've made some notes. Both of you brought points in that I, I maybe hadn't thought about like that before. And maybe what I would like the listener, the challenge to the listener is rather than thinking how do I create space between, it's looking at the things that I don't need in the space and not filling them.

Then take them away. Don't fill them. There's your space between, because not everything we do every day is necessary. The space is there. You don't need to like go and try and, 'cause that creates stress in itself. Really jig things or look at what you're doing already and get rid of the ones that aren't going to make a difference.

[00:59:28] **Susanne:** Very nice. Thank you. And thank you for the book recommendation. Always like a children's book recommendation. There's a lot of wisdom in those books, that's for sure. David, what about you?

[00:59:38] **David:** I guess what comes up to me and I just, called it up on the screen, speaking of Google, I guess I couldn't remember the whole quote is the, real key quote, and I'll read the beginning and the ending of it.

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart, and try to love the questions themselves. Live the questions. Now, perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it live along some distant day into the answer. So learning to love the question and not just the answer.

[01:00:16] **Susanne:** Fabulous. Thank you David, and what a great way to end our conversation as ever.

It's been brilliant talking to both of you. There's lots here for all of us to think about, but for the listen as well. So thank you both very much.

[01:00:30] **Susan:** And you, Suzanne,

[01:00:31] **Susanne:** did you have a final thought?

I have a thing. so it's not a book, it's a thing. so it's my, my tending to endings cards, which I know I've spoken to you about before, but this is, it's a deck of 12 cards, which has been designed to, enrich our relationship with life's endings. So I was asked to be part of the beta testing team for this particular product, so I'm not sure it's there, in the market yet.



These are prototypes. but they're wonderful. So we are talking about, nature, They all have kind of themes around, nature. So you've got fallow, you've got mulching, you've got compost, and it's, they're designed to stimulate thinking around.

So how we can do endings better. And I, I love them. They're so beautiful. But also I think they do stimulate that thinking. So here, for example, following is the one I'm looking at now. So it's described as a way of giving the earth time to recuperate when demands on productivity become too high, following offers a pause and a chance to restore vitality.

And then the quotes that they have on this one is I create a deliberate pause to ensure long-term vitality. So these are my things. I love them and I've been using them a lot in my facilitation and coaching.

I was very lucky to be invited to test them. I've also been invited to test, a type of executive fidget toy, which I'm very excited about, because anyone who knows me will know I have an obsession with pressing buttons and switches.

So, it's, a wooden thing with loads of different types of buttons and switches. So maybe we can have a further conversation when that arrives for me to test and I can test it with you.

[01:02:16] **David:** Brilliant. That's awesome.

[01:02:17] **Susanne:** I can't be trusted on around machinery with buttons and switches 'cause I just want to press them and if it says do not touch it makes me more likely to want to touch it.

I, I can't explain it. It's a weird thing of my brain. Anyway, thank you again for a stimulating discussion as usual. and as ever, it's been a joy to share a bit of time with you.

[01:02:41] **David:** Likewise.

