

The Creative Self Workbook

by Tina Essmaker

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Editor's Letter

When we began planning for the 12th Annual Adobe 99U Conference last year, it was clear we wanted to provide a holistic, engaging experience for attendees. In an effort to provide time, space, and a solid framework for self-exploration and self-reflection, The Creative Self Workbook was born.

Partnering with Tina Essmaker allowed a nice evolution from her 2019 conference workshop and monthly 99U column (<https://adobe99u.co/Tina99U>). Through her coaching practice, she assigns exercises for career clarification, purpose, and self-awareness. Thus, we've created a stand alone, immersive workbook for you.

In this workbook, we invite you to synthesize our conference theme in a fully personal way. What does The Creative Self mean to you? Have you clarified your purpose? Are you in touch with your creative voice? Are you in alignment with your chosen career? How do you connect to the community around you? And where is this all taking you tomorrow, next month, next year?

We've laid out a week's worth of exercises for you to investigate these questions in your own time. We encourage you to set aside 15-30 minutes of quiet, solo time each day. As you dive in, you may want to grab your own sketchbook or notebook to free write or draw.

Most of all, be open to where this takes you. And if you're willing, we'd love for you to share your process and conclusions with us @99U on Twitter or Instagram.

Chrysanthe Tenentes,
Head of Editorial Content, 99U

Introduction

Dear fellow creative,

When was the last time you felt connected to your creative self? Perhaps it was as recently as last week or as long ago as a decade. No matter how long it's been, I'd like to extend an invitation to connect—or reconnect—with that active, imaginative, exploratory part of your being.

The creative self can feel like an enigma. Early on, we wrestle with finding our voice as creators, but once we learn to recognize our voice, we question if we can really trust it. We engage in the creative process as if it were wildly unpredictable, often chalking up any positive outcomes to mystery. Self-doubt and fear that we're not good enough can creep up.

As creatives, we often navigate this path, only to learn later that another path is available to us. The other path is one that opens us up to possibility as we engage with our creative selves. On this path, we commit to nurturing our creativity over a lifetime. We accept that the creative process is messy and imperfect, but not as unpredictable as magic. We understand there can be a rhythm, and even routines, that serve as a foundation to our creative practice. We commit to a purpose that resonates today and adjust course as needed. We learn to recognize and trust our voice as we make decisions about our future. Through failure, success, acceptance, and rejection, we remain on our path and stay engaged in our practice. It is our creative home.

This workbook is an invitation for you to engage with your creative self as a practice that can continue long beyond today. In the pages that follow, you'll begin with discovering, or rediscovering, your voice and purpose. Then you'll think about how you can best nurture the parts of yourself that support your creativity. You'll be encouraged to consider people who are a source of strength to you and communities where you can thrive creatively. Ultimately, you'll be asked to lay the foundation for an ongoing practice that embraces actions and truths to sustain you into the future.

Before you dive into the following pages, I'd like to ask one thing of you: **What promise will you make to your creative self?** Big or small, you're planting a seed for your creative journey, which you'll water over lifetime.

To honoring your creative self,
Tina Essmaker

Creative Promise

What promise will you make to your creative self? Perhaps it's as simple as taking five minutes a day to connect with your creative self or as big as reconnecting with a creative dream you've put on hold. Take a few moments to reflect on your answer and then jot it down below.

I,, promise my creative self:



Day 1. Discover Your Voice

How do I find my voice? The answer is not simple. Instead, it takes time, reflection, and a little detective work. Rather than thinking of it as a destination to reach, consider it an ongoing discovery. It's akin to walking a long, winding path in the forest where you can't see exactly where you're going through the crowded trees—yet you can look back at the path you've traversed.

There are already clues about your voice that you can uncover by reflecting on your path. **So what are you looking for? What is your voice?** While technical skills can be learned

and knowledge acquired, your voice is inherent to you—it's how your experiences and personality come together to shape your perspective and approach. And it's already there, waiting to be discovered.

Are you ready?

Exercise: Defining Your Voice

1. Think of 5 milestones that have shaped your path and write them down in the fields below. They might be personal or professional experiences that you welcomed (or resisted). *Examples: earning a degree, a job offer, a raise or promotion, end of a significant relationship, volunteering, an award or certificate, joining a community or organization.*

2. For each milestone, note at least one insight you had about yourself, and an opportunity that arose, expected or unexpected.

Milestone 1:

Milestone 2:

Milestone 3:

Milestone 4:

Milestone 5:

Insight:

Insight:

Insight:

Insight:

Insight:

Opportunity:

Opportunity:

Opportunity:

Opportunity:

Opportunity:

3. Reflect on your path and complete the following: “I feel most connected to myself and my work when...”

4. What themes or patterns are inherent in your insights around each milestone? Along with your perspectives and approach, these elements make up your voice.

Blank space for reflection on connection to self and work.

Blank space for identifying themes and patterns in insights.

Day 2. Define Your Purpose

If your voice represents how you approach your work, then your purpose represents why. We may think of finding our purpose as a one-time discovery that guides the remainder of our careers. However, your purpose doesn't remain the same forever. It will grow and change as you do. Thus it can be helpful to think of your purpose as seasonal. **What is your purpose in this season of your professional life?**

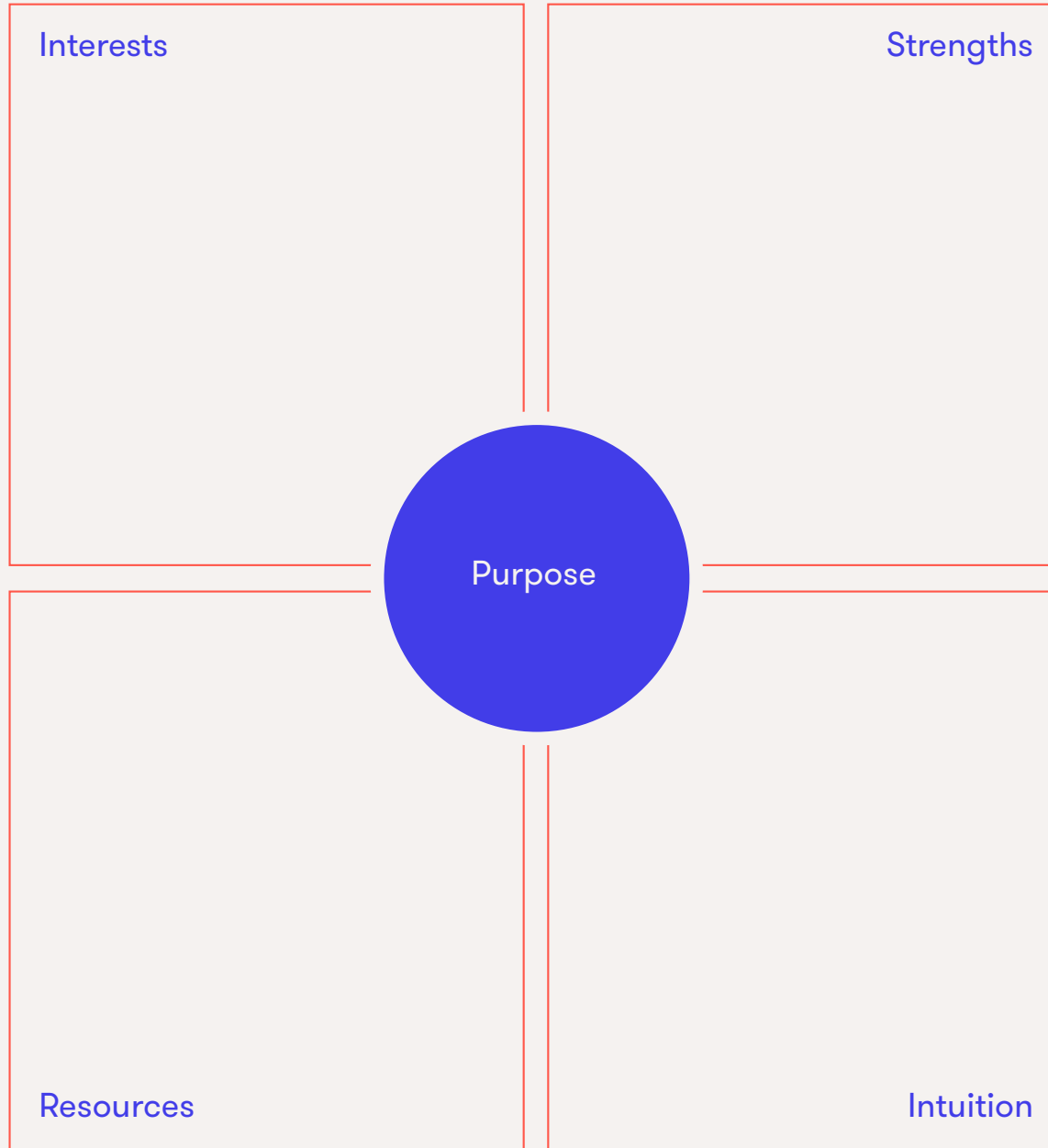
To answer this question, you'll look at several areas that come together to define your purpose: your current interests (including things you're

drawn to and are curious about); your strengths (including what people come to you for and the value you provide); your resources (including elements that can help you achieve your purpose); and your intuition (that which helps you connect the dots and guide you forward).

Exercise: Defining Your Purpose

1.

Starting with the Interests quadrant, set a timer for 2 minutes and list things you're currently interested in and curious about.



2.

Moving to the Strengths quadrant, set a timer for 2 minutes and list your innate talents, learned skills, and acquired training and knowledge.

3.

Moving to the Resources quadrant, set a timer for 2 minutes and list your assets, including tangible items (like materials, equipment, or office/studio space) and intangible items (like time or a large network).

4.

Finally, move to the Intuition quadrant, where you'll reflect on your purpose, for both your work and life. Set a timer for 2 minutes, and tap into your intuition to answer this question: what does your gut say about your purpose?

Day 3. Nurture Your Mind, Body, and Spirit

Your creative self is expressed through your voice and purpose, and you nurture that ability for expression through holistically caring for the various parts that support your creativity: your mind, body, and spirit. Your mind is a well-spring of ingenuity and possibility, your body a physical vessel that provides you with strength and vitality, and your spirit a source of resilience and courage that guides you.

Think of mind, body, and spirit as separate parts of a whole that need to be simultaneously cared for. However, there

does not have to be a complete balance—there may be seasons when you spend more time nurturing one over the other, depending on the context of your work and life. What season are you currently in? How are you investing energy in yourself now? **How might you want to care for your mind, body, and spirit as you move forward?**

Exercise: Nurturing Your Mind

Set a timer for 5 minutes and answer the following questions about how you're investing in and nurturing your mind.

Examples: take a course to learn a new skill, read a book that challenges you intellectually, set aside time to write regularly, engage in conversation with people who will expand your perspective, be open to new experiences, schedule downtime to rest your brain and refresh.

1. How have I invested in my mind over the past year?

2. How do I want to invest in my mind over the next 6-12 months?

3. What routines and rituals am I already doing to care for my mind?

4. What routines and rituals might I want to begin to nurture my mind?

Exercise: Nurturing Your Body

Set a timer for 5 minutes and answer the following questions about how you're investing in and nurturing your body.

Examples: regularly move your body through walking, dance, or exercise, express gratitude for how your body supports you daily, cook a meal you enjoy, create a ritual around sleep to encourage better rest.

1. How have I invested in my body over the past year?

2. How do I want to invest in my body over the next 6-12 months?

3. What routines and rituals am I already doing to care for my body?

4. What routines and rituals might I want to begin to nurture my body?

Exercise: Nurturing Your Spirit

Set a timer for 5 minutes and answer the following questions about how you're investing in and nurturing your spirit.

Examples: commune with nature, volunteer for a cause, meditate, journal, allow yourself to experience periods of no input or boredom, use your imagination, surround yourself with people who uplift you, schedule regular dates with yourself to do something that fulfills you.

1. How have I invested in my spirit over the past year?

2. How do I want to invest in my spirit over the next 6-12 months?

3. What routines and rituals am I already doing to care for my spirit?

4. What routines and rituals might I want to begin to nurture my spirit?

Day 4. Connect to People and Places

We're social beings made to connect with one another. Community is essential for you to thrive, learn, and grow. Your community is made up of the people you know and interact with regularly, in real life or virtually. But it also consists of the places you frequent—the physical or digital spaces where you spend your time, like your coworking space, a listserve, or social media.

Connecting to the people and places that help us thrive can open up opportunities, build a sense of belonging, and encourage us to grow. As we grow,

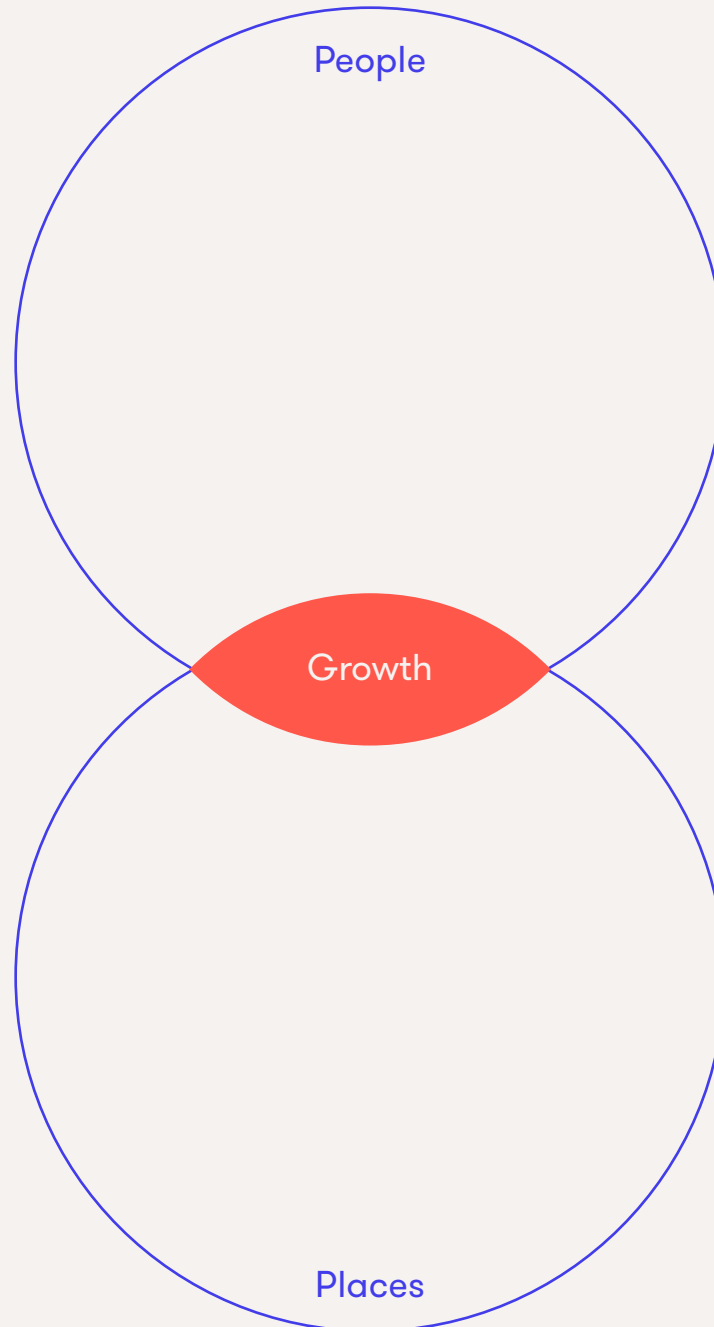
the people and places we connect with might look different. There is a seasonality that may bring people into our lives for a period of time or invite us to be part of a community for a stage.

Which people and places in your life are helping you grow? Which connections would you like to establish or deepen as a foundation for support?

Exercise: Connecting to People and Places

People

1. Inside the top circle, spend 2 minutes listing names of people who have supported your growth as a creative, either now or in the past (e.g. family, teachers, bosses, mentors, friends).
2. Inside the top shaded box, spend 2 minutes brainstorming people who could be a possible source of support as you grow. These can be people you know, people with whom you have a mutual contact, people you've thought about reaching out to, or strangers you admire.
3. Looking at both lists, pick 3 people to reach out to for support and circle their names. Decide what your ask will be: ongoing mentorship, a one-time virtual coffee, or feedback on a particular project. Reach out with your request. Some relationships might develop into an ongoing connection; others might be limited, one-time exchanges.



People ▼

Light blue rectangular box for listing people.

Places ▼

Light blue rectangular box for listing places.

Places

1. Inside the bottom circle, list places you've spent time that have supported your growth as a creative (i.e. college, professional organizations or groups, peer circles, meetups, online communities, social media, etc.).
2. Inside the bottom shaded box, brainstorm places that could be a support for you in the future. Perhaps there's a club, organization, or event you've been interested in, or a digital space that might nurture your creativity.
3. Looking at both lists, pick 3 places that would make you feel supported and connected in your creative journey and circle them. Write down what you'd like to receive and what you can give to each place/community.

Day 5. Cultivate a Practice

Cultivating a creative practice takes time, repetition, and patience. The point isn't the outcome—instead, the goal is to gain experience as you immerse yourself in a process that encourages growth, learning, and proficiency of skills. Your practice will be particular to who you are and what you want to discover about your creativity. As you develop your practice, you will feel more deeply connected with your voice and purpose.

Think of your creative practice like an iceberg made up of two parts:

- 1) What you can see (your behaviors and actions)
- 2) What you can't see (lessons, insights, and what you know to be true through learned experience)

Both are essential as you grow and evolve, which means it's key to take action in your practice, but also to set aside time to reflect on the unseen parts of your practice that shape your creative self.

Exercise: Cultivating a Practice

Seen Practice

Unseen Practice

1

2

3

Present

Past

Future

Your Seen Practice

Take five minutes to identify at least 3 actions you will take as part of your creative practice in the top of the iceberg. These can include rituals, routines, and habits. Be as specific as possible for each action and include:

- a) What you will do
- b) When you will do it
- c) The amount of time you will set aside for it

You might commit to 30 minutes of drawing in your sketchbook every Saturday morning, or 5 minutes of writing ideas in your notebook every morning before work.

Feel free to use a separate piece of paper for your notes.

Tip: It can be helpful to plug your actions into your calendar as recurring events. You could also write out your actions on a notecard to post by your desk.

Your Unseen Practice

Spend 5 minutes reflecting on your creative practice up to this point, writing out lessons and beliefs around your practice in the past, present, and future.

Past: What lessons and insights might you glean from past experiences?

Present: What do you currently know to be true about your creative practice?

Future: How do you hope to grow in the future of your practice?

Closing: Envision Your Future

Hello again fellow creative,

As we send you back into the world, you can use insights from this workbook to enrich your creative practice. The seeds you've planted by completing the exercises will grow as you regularly spend time nurturing their promise.

When observing rhythms and routines, remember even small changes can have consequential impact. The smaller the changes, the more sustainable. Imagine incremental steps to bring you closer to where you want to be.

This reminds me of a prompt by the poet and writer David Whyte:

“How can you become the ancestor of your own future happiness? What conversation could you begin? What promise could you make? What promise, even, could you break, that would make you the ancestor of your future happiness, that you could come back to yourself and thank yourself for having stepped out on that path into a future which has made both a better world for yourself and the world in which you have given your gifts?”

Your everyday practice plants seeds for your future by developing your creative identity and capabilities. Use daily moments to know your creative self better—trust your voice, lean into purpose, surround yourself with supportive people, engaged in the practice of your craft and nurturing your whole self.

We often think big or look to outside influences while determining our creative path. But when connected to your true creative self, you have the opportunity to write your own definitions for happiness and success.

We encourage you to write your future self a letter on the next page of this workbook to further solidify the work you've done. Consider the thought you've put into the previous exercises. Trust your voice, listen to your purpose, and commit to actions honoring your creative self, and pave the way for your creative practice to thrive through future happiness and success.

To honoring your creative self,
Tina Essmaker

Letter to Your Future Creative Self

Dear,

Directions: Set aside 15 minutes without distraction and write a letter to your future creative self. In your letter, include:

1. The promises you are making today that will help you realize the creative future you want.
2. Practices you are going to continue or begin to nurture your creative self.
3. Your vision for your creative practice in five years and ten years.

Keep the letter and revisit it again in a few weeks, a few months, or even this time next year. As your creative self evolves, I invite you to write a new letter or update this one as your vision grows.

To honoring my creative self,

.....

Further Exploration & Resources: Days 1-3

Discover Your Voice (Day 1)

1. Watch Christine Sun Kim's 99U talk, "Your Work Is a Product of Your Experience."

<https://adobe99u.co/CSunKim>

2. Listen to Shantell Martin + Ivan Cash on the art of human connection and being you on Working Not Working's Overshare podcast.

<https://adobe99u.co/Overshare>

3. Read the book *How to Find Your Artistic Voice* by Lisa Congdon.

<https://adobe99u.co/ArtisticVoice>

Define Your Purpose (Day 2)

1. Watch Ashley C. Ford's 99U talk, "Imagination Is a Creative Superpower."

<https://adobe99u.co/AshleyCFord>

2. Listen to "It Doesn't Matter What You Do, It's Who's Doing It" on the podcast *Hurry Slowly* with Jocelyn K. Gleib.

<https://adobe99u.co/HurrySlowly>

3. Read Elle Luna's book, *The Crossroads of Should and Must: Find and Follow Your Passion*.

<https://adobe99u.co/ElleLuna>

4. Read Dr. Susan David's book, *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life*.

<https://adobe99u.co/GetUnstuck>

Nurture Your Mind, Body, and Spirit (Day 3)

1. Listen to Krista Tippett's *On Being* podcast episode with Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast "How to Be Grateful in Every Moment (But Not for Everything)."

<https://adobe99u.co/OnBeing>

2. Use the Six Dimensions of Wellness Model developed by Dr. Bill Hettler to think about the areas you want to invest in, including mind, body, and spirit.

<https://adobe99u.co/6dimensions>

3. Explore guided meditation and mindfulness with the Headspace app.

<https://adobe99u.co/Headspace>

4. Read the book *Draw Stronger: Self Care for Cartoonists and Visual Artists* by Kriota Willberg.

<https://adobe99u.co/DrawStronger>

5. Read "How Millennials Became The Burnout Generation" by Anne Helen Petersen on BuzzFeed News.

<https://adobe99u.co/burnout>

Further Exploration & Resources: Days 4-5

Connect to People and Places (Day 4)

1. Read Priya Parker's book, *The Art of Gathering*, for insights on how to transform time together.
<https://adobe99u.co/Gathering>
2. Watch Carla Harris' TED Talk, "How to Find the Person Who Can Help You Get Ahead at Work."
<https://adobe99u.co/CarlaHarris>
3. Read Yancey Strickler's book, *This Could Be Our Future: A Manifesto for a More Generous World*.
<https://adobe99u.co/YStrickler>
4. Read A.J. Jacobs' book, *Thanks A Thousand: A Gratitude Journey*.
<https://adobe99u.co/AJJacobs>

Cultivate a Practice (Day 5)

1. Listen to the "How to Get More Grit in Your Life" episode of the *Freakonomics* podcast to encourage your practice.
<https://adobe99u.co/Freakonomics>
2. Listen to Anna Sale's interview with renowned choreographer Twyla Tharp on the *Death, Sex & Money from WNYC Studios* podcast to hear how she developed a robust practice over the years.
<https://adobe99u.co/AnnaSale>
3. Read Twyla Tharp's book, *The Creative Habit*, as you are forming your own practice.
<https://adobe99u.co/CreativeHabit>
4. Read John S. Couch's book, *The Art of Creative Rebellion*, for an in-person account and insights on how to navigate the practice of being creative and the business of creating.
<https://adobe99u.co/Rebellion>
5. Watch Adam J. Kurtz's 99U talk, "Perfect Isn't Better," to let go of the pressure for creative perfection.
<https://adobe99u.co/AdamJKurtz>

About the Author

Tina Essmaker is a coach and writer who helps creative professionals navigate transition and thrive on the other side. With a Bachelor's of Social Work and professional coach training, Tina's approach is warm and practical, meeting clients where they are and guiding them forward.

An expert in the creative community, Tina interviewed 250+ creators as former Editor in Chief of *The Great Discontent* magazine. She has spoken and taught at events and companies around the world and writes for numerous outlets serving creatives. Although the creative world is her specialty, her work is open to all who are navigating ambiguity, change, and transition and desire to thrive on the other side.

For more and to connect, see tinaessmaker.com.

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