Julia Cameron on the Creative Life
by Tami Simon

Tami Simon (on Insights at the Edge) Today, I speak with Julia Cameron. Julia Cameron is an award-winning writer and director. She has created feature films, movies of the week and episodic television, six full-length plays, and hundreds of articles and stories for national publications ranging from Rolling Stone to Vogue to the New York Times. She is the author of the national bestselling book The Artist's Way. With Sounds True, Julia has released Reflections on the Artist's Way, a teaching program on many of the key themes introduced in The Artist's Way, and also, along with writer Natalie Goldberg, a program called The Writing Life, filled with ideas and inspiration for anyone who wants to write.

In this episode of Insights at the Edge, Julia and I spoke about how to break through creative blocks, the Censor, and how her relationship with her own Censor has changed throughout the course of her life. We also talked about why creativity requires that we take risks, and some big, recent risks that Julia has taken in her own life. Here's my conversation with Julia Cameron:

Julia, from the outside, at least, it looks as though you've dedicated your life to both being a creative force and to liberating the creative force in other people. I'm curious to know: Having written The Artist's Way now almost 20 years ago, how, if at all, your ideas about creativity may have changed or evolved over time.

Julia Cameron: Well, that's a good question. I'm happy to say that, when I read The Artist's Way, I still think, "Oh! That's true!" I find that when I teach The Artist's Way, I don't feel like it's outdated. I did do two other books, called Walking in This World and Finding Water, which are continuations of The Artist's Way, and they sort of represent how my thought has evolved.

I think the big thing that I want to mention is that when I did The Artist's Way, there were two basic tools: Morning Pages and Artist Dates. Then, in Week 12, sort of as a P.S., I said, "By the way, it's a good idea to exercise. It helps." Now, 20 years later, I realize that there should be a third tool, and that's walking. When people walk, they integrate the ideas that they received from the other two tools.

TS: You know, it's interesting, because here, as I mentioned, you have created so much in your own life and helped so many people. I mean, these three tools that you're mentioning—Morning Pages, handwriting, longhand, three pages without censoring yourself, morning writing; taking yourself out on an Artist's Date once a week; and now this third tool, going out for a walk and integrating—this is very, very simple, in a sense, Julia. What I'm getting at with my question is, there are so many people who struggle with their creativity in millions of different ways, and complain about it: This is the source of their angst, their confusion, and yet here you are, one of the

leading teachers on what unblocks creativity, and what you're offering is actually quite simple, at least on the surface.

JC: I think that my tools are very simple. I sometimes say to myself, "Julia, it's like they go to school with you, and they come to kindergarten," but I believe that having the tools be so simple is one reason why so many people work with them, Tami. They have a feeling almost of déjà vu when they try the tools and they realize, "Oh! I used to journal!" "I used to go on expeditions!" "I go on long walks when I'm upset!" There's a familiarity about the tools, and the fact that they're simple makes them more useful for people. I really can't stand it when people try to make creativity a very complicated, complex, difficult thing. I don't believe it is.

TS: I think there's definitely an idea in our culture that if it's that simple, it's simplistic or lacking sophistication, or not really going to take you all the way, or something like that. How would you respond to that?

JC: I would say 3 million people have worked with the tools, and that must mean that they're not gullible.

TS: Strong response. Now, one of the metaphors you use, Julia, that I find really interesting—and maybe it's because I've loved the radio my whole life—is the human being as a type of radio that can receive transmissions. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about that, about this metaphor of the radio and what it means to you.

JC: I say that what we're trying to build is a radio kit, and that, with the Morning Pages, you're sending [a message]. You're going, "This is what I like. This is what I don't like. This is what I wish I had more of. This is what I wish I had less of," and you're sending a message out to the universe, "tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap." When you go on your Artist Date, you have flicked the dial over to "receive," and to "nurturing," and to "nourishment," and to "intuition," "hunches," "inspirations." It's as though the radio is now over-receiving. Then, when you go on your walks, you integrate what you've received from both your Morning Pages and from your Artist Dates.

TS: I've also heard you, though, talk about receiving, like a radio can receive messages or transmissions, and I'm curious whether that has meaning for you. In your own writing, do you ever have a sense that you're receiving messages that then come through, and you're fine-tuning a channel?

JC: I'll tell you, I have a book called Prayers to the Great Creator, and it's four prayer books that I've written that have been compiled into one volume. I read it at night, and I find myself saying, "Who wrote this?" It's definitely as though I received the writing, not as if I thought it up, myself.

TS: Yes, I'm curious about that. How much of your writing, in general, would you say, of your 30-some-odd books, have that kind of quality for you? Not just the prayer book, but overall, in general?

JC: I guess I would say that, in reading them over again, they all have a certain found quality to them, where I read it and I think, "Who wrote that?" or "Gee, that's nice writing!" I recently read a wonderful novel by a man named John Bowers, and the novel is called End of Story: A Gay Love Affair. It's just a great novel, and it was so good that I read it twice. Then I thought, "You'll never write as well as John writes." Then I

thought, "Julia, you're on dangerous ground, comparing yourself and trying to compete, so you'd better cut that out! Maybe what you should do is read your own novel that was published two years ago, and just see what you think of it," so I've been re-reading my novel. I'm almost done, and I'm happy to say it holds up.

I don't know about most writers, but [what] I do know about [myself is] that I feel like I have a purer, higher self that writes.

TS: I guess that's what I'm curious about: what you do, personally, in addition to Morning Pages, to clear the decks so that higher self can do the writing?

JC: Well, when you say, "What do you do in addition to Morning Pages," you know I've been doing Morning Pages for 25 years! That's a lot of Morning Pages! I do do Morning Pages, I do go for walks, I do take Artist Dates, and when I am feeling stymied in my writing, I find, if I use the Basic Tools—I may find, "Gee, you haven't been on an Artist Date in a while. You'd better go do that"—when I do that, it flows over into creative writing.

TS: Have you ever had a time in your life where you were blocked for a long time, like six months, or a year, or two years, or something like that?

JC: Well, I wrote The Sound of Paper during a period of drought. It may sound funny to say "I wrote something while I was blocked," but I did!

TS: That does sound funny, I must stay. You wrote something while you were blocked, so you weren't blocked. You were writing!

JC: Except that I was experiencing myself as blocked. It was a struggle, and what I found was that the universe—I was living in Taos, New Mexico, and it was a drought. There were fires. That was just how my creativity felt to me: like there was a drought, and there were fires burning, and I wasn't having a lush and verdant valley.

TS: But you've never gone through a period of your life where you were just not creating at all? You created, but you created through the drought in this case that you're sharing.

JC: I'd say right now. I just finished a book called The Prosperous Heart, and it's going to come out in December. I had a devilish time writing the book. I got the idea clear as a bell, I went to Joel Fotinos, my publisher at Putnam, and said, "I want to write a book about prosperity being a spiritual matter." He said, "Oh, that sounds wonderful!" and he hired me to write the book. Then, when I sat down to write the book, I found that I couldn't write it, and so I spent a year grappling with, "Why is it so difficult for me to write something so simple?" It just was! Finally, I enlisted the help of Emma Lively. Emma has been my collaborator, off and on, for 12 years. I said to Emma, "Do you see the book?" She said, "I do," and so we set to work together, the two of us, on it, and that's what finally yielded us a book.

TS: Yes. It's so interesting, Julia. I'm grateful to you for sharing that story, because I certainly can imagine that some of our listeners might think, "Having that kind of experience—you're all inspired, but then nothing comes out—that doesn't happen to someone like Julia, not at this point in her career, not after 30-plus books being written. She doesn't have that kind of experience!"

JC: I think it's important for people to know that I go through all of the same difficulties that they go through. I'm just more familiar with the difficulties.

TS: And then it's interesting that it was the introduction of another person—a collaborator, a friend, someone who could help you—that's what broke it through for you. Maybe you can say something about that.

JC: Well, I've had very good luck with collaboration in my career. When I was in my 20s, I was married to Martin Scorsese, and we made movies together. I worked on the scripts, and he would direct them, and it would come out wonderful! When I was in my 40s, I collaborated with my ex-husband. I should say I married Marty out of collaborative feelings, and then, in my 40s, I had a second marriage, also born out of collaboration, I think. My muse may be romantic. I'm not sure about most people's muses, but mine usually has a romantic flair.

TS: There's a quote here that I thought might be interesting to have you comment on. It has to do with difficult periods in an artist's life. Here's the quote from you: "All artists get discouraged. All artists have deep inner wells of self-pity, into which we periodically dive. All artists specialize in self-doubt. It is how we hone the creative imagination." I was curious about that. That's one of the ways that we hone our creative imagination?

JC: I think that when we go through periods of self-pity, we catch ourselves up short, and say, "Oh, look what you're doing." When we say, "This is what I'm doing," then we say, "I'm going to stop doing it!" That's where the honing comes in. I think that if I have anything to offer as a teacher, it's compassion for the struggles that artists go through.

TS: I think, when I read that quote from you, I had the thought, "I hope there's a different way! Isn't there a different way? I'd love to hone my creative imagination without having to do that, go through deep inner wells of self-pity, specializing in self-doubt." That was the thought I had. I'm curious what you think about that.

JC: Well, I'm wishing you the best with that!

TS: Thank you, Julia! [Laughs]

JC: But I do feel that people who set out to be creative tend to have wells of doubt. That's what I teach them to cope with. People come to me, and they maybe want [me to teach them] to be fearless. That's what you're talking about, I think. I find myself saying, "No, you're going to stay fearful, but you're going to learn to work around the fear."

TS: Work around the fear? Work through the fear? How would you explain that?

JC: I would say, "You're going to feel the fear, and you're going to need to go forward anyway." This is something that I think Morning Pages are very useful for. They miniaturize your Censor. You start to write, and your Censor says, "Oh, you're so petty!" You say to your Censor, "Thank you for sharing," and you keep right on writing. You [are], in effect, training your Censor to stand to one side while you create.

TS: I know you've actually named your Censor. At least there's one name:

Nigel. I'm curious how that came to be? What was happening in your life that this name was given to your Censor, and also how that works for you, if it's useful to have a name, and why?

JC: I think it's a good idea to name your Censor, because it begins to make your Censor into a cartoon character, somebody that you can grapple with, instead of the voice of doom from on high that's condemning you. Your Censor becomes somewhat humorous. Nigel—I don't remember how I got the name, Nigel. I think it just sort of came to me...

TS: Is there only one face of the Censor for you? Meaning, do you have other names for other ways the Censor sometimes manifests?

JC: No, I just have Nigel. Nigel is plenty!

TS: [Laughs] In thinking about Nigel, it triggers for me something that I've heard you speak about, in terms of helping people with their perfectionism. I have a quote here from you: "Whatever is worth doing is worth doing badly." That's kind of a humorous quote, where you're telling people that their idea of perfectionism is actually one of the things that's getting in their way. I wonder if you can speak to that some, and how you help people who defend, somehow, their perfectionism as their high standards.

JC: I think when people come to study with me, very often they are perfectionists who are unable to let themselves move forward. They have what they think of as high standards, and they are going to hang on to them or be damned. But by the time they get to week eight out of twelve, they have been dismantling their perfectionist with Morning Pages, because there's no wrong way to do Morning Pages. The perfectionist says, "You're moody," and you say, "All right. I'm moody." There begins to be a degree of self-acceptance, and when there's enough self-acceptance, there begins to be permission to do something, even if it's flawed.

TS: What about the person who has a block about doing Morning Pages? They do it one time, they do it three times, four times, they're on a roll, and then suddenly, some part of them—I don't know if you would call this "the Censor" or what you would call it—steps in and is just like, "Forget it! You've got dishes to do, you've got to take the kids, you've got a hundred million other things you need to do. Forget it!"

JC: Well, I guess I want to say that my tools are for people who want them. If somebody has a block against using a tool, I just let them be. I don't try to persuade them to use the tool.

TS: Interesting. What part do you think that is in somebody that surfaces like that—they have a longing, they want to use the tool, but some other part of them is obstructionistic?

JC: You know, it's their perfectionist acting up, for one thing, and it's a basic lie that they think that the Morning Pages are going to "take time." They do. They take about 45 minutes, but what happens is the Morning Pages win you windows of time all through your day, so you actually end up having more time for having made the committed 45 minutes. I can tell people that, but I can't make them do Morning Pages.

Right now, I have a class of about 20 people, and I would say 17 out of them are doing seven out of seven on Morning Pages, and then I've got somebody who is doing six, somebody who's doing five, somebody who's doing four. The people who are

doing the lesser number of Morning Pages are tending to get less out of the course, but it's better than not doing them at all.

TS: I want to circle back for a moment, because you were describing Nigel, and I asked if you had other faces or names, and you said, "Nigel is enough!" I'm curious how your relationship with Nigel has changed and evolved over your years of relating to him as the Censor.

JC: I wish I could tell you that I had Nigel tamed, but what happens is, as you get smarter and do more work, your Censor gets smarter and does more work. If you have one book, the Censor says, "Well, you're a one-book wonder," and then, if you try to create a second book, your Censor says, "Well, you're repeating yourself." If you have three books, the Censor says, "Well, aren't you a has-been?" The Censor gets smarter as you go along.

I recently did a book called The Creative Life, which is essentially a creative diary of my life when I lived in New York. As I was writing it, Nigel kept saying, "These sentences are too short and stubby." "This is too intimate." "Nobody's going to be interested by this." I found myself listening to Nigel and believing Nigel, and I went so far as I took the whole book and I went down to visit Joel Fotinos, my publisher, and I said, "Joel, I'm writing the most terrible book for you!"

He said, "Well, let me hear a little bit of it," so I started reading it and, mysteriously, as I was reading it, it started to sound pretty good! Then I realized that Nigel was out to sabotage me! After all these years, I'd still believed him. He'd caught me off guard. I'd thought, "This book is not any good." The truth is that the book turned out fine.

TS: It's interesting that, as you have grown in your own creative, liberated force, Nigel has gotten stronger and stronger. It almost sounds like a computer program that keeps adapting.

JC: I think of Nigel as being like Voldemort from Harry Potter.

TS: Yes! In listening to you, I can feel how this works inside. I'm curious: Do you have a kind of psychological explanation for it, or is that not important to you?

JC: A psychological explanation for Nigel?

TS: Yes, like how this Censor is working with this part of us that has our own best interests at heart, versus this [other] part of us that's trying to take us down, how it is we're built like this.

JC: Well, I think it's enough to just tell people, "Name your Censor." People don't say, "What?" They immediately know, "Oh! My Censor!" It's an experience that's common and negative, so you start telling people, "Name your Censor. Cartoon your Censor! Give your Censor a run for his money by saying simply, 'Thank you for sharing.'"

TS: Does that work, to say, "Thank you for sharing"? Does Nigel then retreat?

JC: It actually does work, because you've trained your Censor to stand to one side by denying it rights during your Morning Pages, and that allows you to go forward, stepping

onto a stage, putting your thoughts onto a blank page, stepping up to the easel.

I think everyone has a Nigel, and I have some experience with this. When we talk about creativity, we often talk about it in terms that are sort of mythic. For example, Steven Spielberg: We hear his name, and we think, "Steven got his first movie camera at age eight." We hear this sort of mythic story, and yet I was once in a hotel room with Steven Spielberg and Brian De Palma... We were sitting in this hotel room, and Steven Spielberg says to Brian De Palma, "I've been trying to make a movie about extraterrestrials, and I can't get anybody interested in it, and I really think I should just give up."

Brian said, "Steven, I've been listening to you for years, and when you talk about extraterrestrials, you sort of light up. I don't think you should give up." Of course, he didn't give up, and he made Close Encounters of the Third Kind and E.T.

The thing is, we don't often hear the story, "Steven Spielberg was tempted to give up. Steven Spielberg had a dark night of the soul. Steven Spielberg had doubt." Instead, we hear stories that tell us that there's such a thing as "real artists," and they are people who we are told are fearless in pursuit of their art. There's really no such thing.

TS: I'm thinking of something now that I read, in preparing for this conversation, on your new website, JuliaCameronLive.com. Is that the right website?

JC: JuliaCameronLive.com. That's right.

TS: I read there that just because it might take us a long time to start a project doesn't mean that that project isn't going to be wildly successful. Sometimes we have an idea, [and if we think] "I haven't done it yet! I haven't done it yet!" that it means that it's never going to happen, never going to work. But that's not really the case, necessarily.

JC: Yes. I think that we need to look at the issue of procrastination. We tend to call procrastination "laziness," and it's actually usually a fear. When we face the fear directly and say, "I want to do this, but I'm terrified to do this," then we begin to be able to have the fear and move into the steps necessary on the project. We have the fear, it doesn't go away, and we work with it.

TS: Let's talk more about how that works, meaning I identify that I have a fear. Maybe I'm afraid that it's not going to be well-received, or I'm afraid it's not going to be as good as I feel into it. I think it could be, but the actual execution is not going to be. What do I do next? Now I've identified the fear: "Okay. That's the reason I'm procrastinating. I'm afraid. That's the truth."

JC: Well, I have a tool that's in The Artist's Way. It's called "Blasting Through Blocks," and what it asks you to do is to get a sheet of paper, and to write down specifically all of the fears and all of the angers you have in relationship to a project you're stalled on. You put them on the page, and then you pick a Believing Mirror, someone who has your best interests at heart, and you explain to them, "I want to read you this list." Then you share your fears and your angers with another person. Normally what that does is detoxifies them. You're debriefing yourself, and you then turn back to the project, and normally you find that you can now take a step. "Blasting Through Blocks" is a very simple tool, like all of my tools, Tami.

TS: You know, simple very often works.

Julia, there's something I'm curious about. I'm often curious about this when it comes to people who have really dedicated their lives to a certain path, and in this case, I would say that you've dedicated your life to the path of the creative force. First of all, is that true, what I'm saying? Have you dedicated your life to the path of creativity, to the creative force? Would you say that? Or how would you put it?

JC: Yes, I think so. I think, when I'm creating, I'm pretty happy, and when I'm not creating, I'm pretty unhappy, so I tend to steer myself toward creativity.

TS: Then the thing I'm curious about is, after having made this the focus of your life now for many, many decades, do you ever have the sense that, "Maybe I would be more fulfilled if I had done this or had done that," or, "I really missed out on this other thing"?

JC: Oh, I have a good one on this! I directed a feature film called God's Will, and it had its sound stolen, so I had to loop the entire film. I looped the entire film, and it got into festivals in Europe and was very well-received, but I was so discouraged by its not doing well in America, where, of course, it couldn't, because we don't like looped films! I just buried the film. I took my loss, and said, "Oh, it's too bad," and I found myself discouraged. What happened was that, simultaneous to the failure, if you will, of God's Will came the success of The Artist's Way, so I was steered into writing books instead of directing movies. I still think, "Gee, I would have had more fun if I had stuck to the movie path."

There's a woman named Nora Ephron who has directed a number of films. When I go see Nora's films, I'm jealous. I think, "Oh, boy! I really wish I were doing that!" I've dedicated my life to creativity, and people would say toward helping other people with their creativity, but I still have that niggling thought of, "Gee, I wish I were still directing."

TS: And when you have that thought, that becomes the theme of your Morning Pages, and you work with it in some way?

JC: Yes, it becomes the theme of my Morning Pages. It becomes the theme of my Evening Pages. I just find myself thinking, "Oh, good for Nora. Too bad for me."

TS: Then, as you've mentioned, when you're creating, you're at your happiest. Your compass is such that you move towards creating more, creating more, creating more in the path you're on?

JC: That's right. If I, for example, find myself wanting to write fiction and wanting to write romantic comedies, I'm putting in book form maybe something that Nora would have put on the screen.

TS: This, I think, is related, in a certain sense: In the final chapter of The Artist's Way, you talk about "recovering a sense of faith," and the relationship between creativity and faith. I was curious to hear about this, and specifically, what is your faith? What do you have faith in?

JC: First of all, any act of creativity is an act of faith. If you want to write, you have to have faith when you put something on a page. If you're going to step onto a stage, you

have to have faith enough to step onto that stage. Creativity is always an act of faith, and as you strengthen your faith—which I do by reading Ernest Holmes—it strengthens your ability to create.

TS: Now that's interesting. You said you strengthen your faith by reading Ernest Holmes. Can you tell me about that?

JC: Well, Ernest Holmes founded a religion called the "Science of Mind." He wrote a book called Science of Mind, which I find almost incomprehensible, but he wrote many simpler books, among them a book called Creative Ideas ([which] is sort of the bedrock of my belief system) and another book called This Thing Called You. At night, when I'm in bed, I read two or three prayers from the prayer book that I wrote, then I read two or three prayers from Ernest Holmes, and I find myself feeling buoyed up and optimistic.

TS: When you say that Ernest Holmes and his exposition of ideas is the core of your faith or belief system, can you tell me what that is, what those principles are?

JC: The principle is that there's one mind, one creative power, that we are all in it and of it. When we want to extend ourselves creatively, that's actually the force of the Divine Mind wanting to extend itself, so it's an answer. You know, a lot of times, people say, "I want to write a novel, but I'm afraid it's just my ego." Ernest Holmes would say, "If you want to write a novel, that's Divine Mind yearning to express itself." It takes away that whole issue of, "It's just my ego."

TS: Beautiful. Now, there's one other quote that I read of yours that I'd love for you to comment on. Here it goes: "In order to grow as artists, we must be willing to risk. We cannot continue indefinitely to replicate the successes of our past. Great careers are characterized by great risks." I'm curious to know what, if any, are the risks that you might currently be taking in your life, [that] you identify [as], "Oh, that's a risk I'm taking."

JC: Aha. Right now, I'm in a reading period. As I've said, I'm reading Mozart's Ghost, I'm reading John Bower's book, End of Story, I'm reading Tim Farrington's book, The Monk Upstairs. What I'm out to do is to entertain myself right now, so that I'm not just staring at the walls, going, "Why can't I think of something to write?" Instead, I'm looking for things that are delicious. I'm casting about for what I want to do next. I have three musicals that need some work, and I'm hoping that I can lure Emma back to work on them a little bit with me. I have just gotten my piano tuned, which means that I am committing to music again.

TS: It makes sense to me to be in period of delicious reading. I'm curious, though, when you think of this idea of taking risks, even if you look back over the last several years, what is something that you would identify as something where you'd say, "Well, that was risky!"

JC: I wrote a memoir.

TS: That sounds risky!

JC: It was risky. In the memoir, I talked about the difficulties that I have had. I have had three nervous breakdowns and been hospitalized. The memoir talks about that. What I found, when I published the memoir, was that the world is divided between those people

who thought it was great that I was talking about everything, and those people who just didn't want to know. The book was very unevenly reviewed. Half of the people were offended that I had stepped down off the pedestal, and half of the people were delighted that I had.

TS: Well, I want to acknowledge you, Julia, and I'm clearly one of the people who applaud your willingness to be transparent and open about your life. I think it's so useful for people not to have their projections, but to know the real truth about people they admire. I think it's helpful. It humanizes all of us. I want to applaud you!

JC: I hope it's helpful.

TS: In the memoir—I haven't read it, and it's likely many of our listeners haven't—what is it that you came to when you described these nervous breakdowns, in terms of how it brought understanding or insight into your life? What was your context for those experiences, looking back at them?

JC: I think the thing that comes through in the memoir is that I kept on working. I didn't have a nervous breakdown and say, "Well, that's it!" I had a nervous breakdown, and I wrote about a nervous breakdown. A friend of mine [who'd just read the memoir] said to me that he thought I was like an Energizer Bunny, that I just kept on going. I think there's some truth to that, and I think that is perhaps inspirational for people, to read that I didn't stop creating.

TS: It is inspirational! I think it's very, very meaningful for people to hear that.

Well, Julia, as we come to the end of our conversation, this is a little bit of an unusual request, but I'm curious if you would be willing to leave our listeners with some kind of blessing related to their creative lives.

JC: There's a song that I sing, which goes, [Sings] "Time is like a river. We wash our bones like stones. Time is like a river. We wash our bones like stones. Time is not the answer. Time is not the quest. Time is where we journey while we learn the rest. Washing in the river of the self."

When I teach, I have my class sing that song, and it seems to get people grounded and willing to go forward with taking risks.

TS: Wonderful! Thank you so much, Julia. Thanks for your honesty, your heart, your courage, and your transparency. I really appreciate it.

JC: You're very welcome! It's wonderful to get a chance to talk to you again.