

## REFRAME CULTIVATING EVERYDAY CREATIVITY CONVERSATIONS

### Margaret Soraya interview transcript

Kerry: Margaret Soraya is a photographer who works in nature's quiet places, she is drawn to working alone, capturing the sea and wild landscapes. Margaret is a fine art photographer, and she runs retreats which help her clients to connect with their creativity using mindful photography. Margaret speaks to me from her van while traveling around the remote Hebrides islands off the Northwest coast of Scotland. Hello Margaret, would you like to just start by just telling us a little bit about yourself and your photographic work?

Margaret: Yeah, sure. So, I live and work in the Scottish Highlands and I travel around the Hebrides and the other remote Scottish islands, basically photographing, really wild and remote coastal areas. So, I'm drawn to the sea. So, most of my works based, around water of some sort. So mostly the sea, but because I, I live half of my life, not near the sea. I also photograph the lochs. So, I suppose my, my work is intertwined with my, my love of water. So, I swim a lot and I used to surf as well and not so much these days. ...but basically, I've been water as much as I possibly can. And, I've started to take my comers into the water as well, so pushing it a little bit further. But in terms of, of my working life, I, obviously shot my own, my own work, I, exhibit and sell, I run workshops. I also photograph weddings as well, which has been 17-year business. So, that's how I'm living now, more and more on the landscape now.

Kerry: Speaking to you from the Hebrides, and you mentioned that you have a real love of wild places and nature. Could you just tell us a little bit more about how nature and wild places are integral to your work and, and just how they affect our, our sense of wellbeing, and particularly yours.

Margaret: Yeah, sure. I think, it's really integral to everything that I stand for. I suppose that the places that I go to, although I am as well, we were just talking about, I'm sitting in a carpark at the moment in the Hebrides, because it's any place could find signal. I actually, I travel to these places, places to connect to my wellbeing, but also my creativity. So, it's, it's kind of dual purpose, if you like that, that time where I'm disconnected, almost, from the world, I'm, you know, in these places where there's not much connection digitally, but there's not many people either. It's it gives me, it revitalizes me in terms of having that time to just be by myself and just really connect to me. But that in turn also allows my creativity to open up. So, I think when we give ourselves that time and space, and I think a lot of people find that quite difficult, whereas I do it very, very easily. I'm happy spending, you know, a week on my own solo without talking to people. And I find that that's when I have my best ideas. That's when I create the work that's really powerful. Not when I'm at home and I've got my computer and, you know, you end up getting sucked in a little bit.

Kerry: You can definitely go down the rabbit hole. We've all been there. Absolutely.

Margaret: And I think that now I purposefully, I mark those times in my diary and I go, that's the time for me because I need that for myself. I need to rest. And, I think nature is so powerful in terms of wellbeing. We just forget that nowadays. We're living in a time where people are much more indoors and it's more on screens and connected, so I think that we just forget the simple things like going out for a walk is so, so good for your mental wellbeing. And it doesn't matter where you are, you know, I I'm extreme, but everybody has access to nature.

Kerry: Even if it's in your own neighbourhood, which is, you know, it might just be seeing the local park or some trees down the street, but just being able to walk outside and, and just reconnect and get into that space.

One of the things that I was really interested in chatting to you about while we've got our connection still is particularly, I started out during the pandemic as, as much of the world, we had our, our lockdowns and our times of being sort of somewhat more isolated, just started as my own creative practice, just walking through my neighbourhood, connecting with nature. You know, looking at just my local plants and flowers and taking photographs. And that that's sort of has led me to this real journey of discovery around what this word is of "mindful photography". So, I thought, that's, that's kind of what I'm doing, but I would love to hear from you just a little bit more about what mindful photography is?

Margaret: Yeah, sure. I think, when you touched on the lockdown and, the pandemic, obviously it affected everybody very differently, but it's, it's a time when mindful photography became extremely important, even more so than in our normal world. I saw a lot of people reaching for creativity to help them through this time.

So, for me, just a really brief story. I was very, very ill at the beginning of the whole thing, so I wasn't able to leave my garden basically for months. So I spent a lot of time in this little patch of grass, just literally, very, very, slowly practicing my photography, but in a completely different way than I normally do. It's even more mindful if you like, and I was just photographing grasses and tiny little bugs and things, and it really helped me, helped me through massively. It was the thing that got me through, not being able to go anywhere because actually we weren't locked down for me now and I live in a beautiful place, but I was confined in that sense. So, but I saw other people doing that and asking me, well, how do I, how do I get through this time? And so, this is where mindful photography comes in.

And actually, when you think about it, if you're, so imagine you're going for a walk and you live in as, you know, a street, but there's some trees, so you're going to go on you, you get your camera. I think right. You going to photograph these leaves, but you take it slowly. You don't just kind of snap, snap, and then run off, you take it slow. You look at your camera settings, you consider the light. You're starting to think, well, you're watching for the beauty, just in that tree, you know, it can be really, really simple, and then you're thinking, considering all the things like should speed, ectara. And in those say five minutes when you're taking that image, if you then think at the end of that, have you thought in those five minutes of your worries or the shopping lists, or the electricity bill, and you'll find that you haven't, and so photography is actually quite a natural way of being mindful, if you approach it in that manner.

So, all you need to do with photography is simply to, to let go of the preconceptions of thinking, I've got to get this award-winning shot that everybody else will like, and to you that you're missing out on something else you know that you could be photographing, so it's, it's becoming content and enjoying the process. Does that make sense?

Kerry: Absolutely. I think that's sort of get getting out of the head space of trying to make the perfect shot or overthinking all of those, you know, I guess it's sort of those external voices that might be coming in and just get getting into the mode of just being there and then capturing what comes to you sort of naturally what you're enjoying about that tree or those leaves or the rock face that you happen to be at.

You were mentioning some ways of just starting that process. That was one of the things I'd love to be able to share with people. If they want to just start out. If I just haven't got any photographic experience, I've just got my mobile phone cam. No equipment, and no particular photographic skills. What would some of the tips you might have for people who want to just get started in a mindful photography for themselves?

Margaret: Well, it's funny, you mentioned that actually, because I think that it's easier in some ways or better, not better, but easier to connect through your mobile phone, actually, I'm a big advocate of mobile phone photography because it sort of releases you from the some of the things that people get tangled up in when they, they can't quite get exposures or they're fiddling with the equipment, and they're a bit too focused on that. And they get a lot of stressed by it. Mobile phone photography is incredible for simple photography, which is accessible to everybody. So, you can do the same things that you can do on your camera with a lot of a new mobile phones anyway. So, but very simply. And actually, I use my iPhone a lot. I film everything on my iPhone because it's simple, and because it takes away that stress of having to carry lots of kit as well, which not everybody likes. So, definitely, if you have any smartphone now obviously the more advanced you get, the better they get and you can actually do like long exposures on, on the new iPhone now, which is crazy but fun.

And I think also that's the other thing, it's this idea of enjoyment and fun photography. You should be enjoying it, you know? So, that then becomes more mindful as well when you're enjoying it, you're releasing those stresses aren't you. So, you can just play with it. And also, I think that when you're using a mobile phone, you not necessarily thinking that you're going to win a competition, although you might, but you're not thinking in that vein of this is going to be a masterpiece etcetera. You're doing it for yourself. So simply taking your phone out, the simple things like portrait mode on the iPhone are absolutely fantastic and great to play with. You can do little time-lapses, little videos, all sorts of things now with the phones. And, so yeah, I, I'm a big advocate and I think it's a great way to be, to be mindful as well.

Kerry: Thank you, for those tips. How could we just use what's at hand to be creative and really sort of exploring our creativity in different ways without necessarily having to create. In a masterpiece and the phone takes away. Some of those barriers we might have, whether it's technology, like I don't really actually know how to use all those functions on my camera. Whereas, I do know how to use my mobile phone and getting familiar maybe with some of the other settings on the phone as well. So, you know, just so you know, how, how do I use portrait mode? Just play around, how do I use the long exposure if I've got it and things like that. So, without having to be overly stressed about it you get that sort of a fresh approach and a sense of play to, to what you're doing. So great tips. Thank you.

And you mentioned on your website that you are inspired to help people connect with their own innate curiosity and creativity. And when we've touched on this a little bit already, but just how you use photography as a starting point for that journey, that personal journey, to connecting with your creativity?

Margaret: Yes. That was an interesting one, actually. So, I think one of the things that I want to do is when I'm teaching is to help people open up to their natural intuition and that creativity and we all have it, we've just lost it a little bit as we've gotten, as we've got older. And I think the more we go through life, the harder it is to find that again. And that's one of the biggest questions that I get is people asking me, how do I find what I love? You know, I say, shoot, what you love. And they say, I don't know what I love.

So, there's a bigger question here. The question is, how can we strip back all these things that have been put into your life, these criticisms, these opinions of other people. When you strip that away, then you find your natural being and your natural intuition, and it will be there somewhere. It just takes a little bit of time to find it. So, I think when I'm teaching, that's really what I'm trying to do. I think anybody can learn F-stops and, you know, shutter speed. Anybody can teach that, and anybody can learn that through, you know, various materials, but there's not many people that are actually offering the ideas and concepts that I'm teaching. And that is - what is it that you like to

photograph? Let's try and let's try and find out what it is that's in you that you're passionate about. So, for me, just as an example, for me my passion for the sea goes way back to my childhood and I never realised that, until I was 40, which is ridiculous because I took me a long time, a lot of process of refinding myself and becoming self-aware and understanding what I needed and then understanding what, what I loved. And so, these, the places of, being solitary, it's not for everybody. It is for me. And often people think I'm a bit strange, but I don't care anymore. So, when you get to that place of what I'm trying to say is when you get to that contentment with yourself, you can, then you then naturally become more creative. So that's quite in-depth isn't it. But basically. The concepts behind my teaching, all revolve around that. So, we were trying to actually just reconnect to ourselves and then you, then you find your creativity.

Kerry: Yes. Beautiful. And it really resonates with me as well. I'm sort of on that journey as well of having trained as a creative moved away, had done all of my practice of being someone who isn't necessarily doing their own creative work and tried to come back to it. Sort of working out what, what is it? That is the part of me that really resonates. And also, you need to calibrate it for where you are in your life at a certain time. Like what worked for you when you were in your twenties, thirties, you know, we change as we go along. And the teaching that you do is it's giving people that opportunity to really, to reflect within and without like, what, what is it that I'm enjoying? And so sort of play around until you find the thing that. Is where you want to head in your creativity and head off and explore that more.

Margaret: That's right. And I don't have the answers for you. I can't tell them what they love. You can only give them the ideas and the space to explore that, I suppose so that's what I'm really trying to do. It's not easy, but it's very, it's very rewarding. When you, when somebody comes to you and says that was, it was actually, somebody came on a swim retreat in August, just as a test and outdoor swimming, it was completely different. So other swimming and mobile phone photography, actually, I was just testing it for next year and a lady emailed me after and she said, Margaret, you've changed my life, I'm stopping doing this work that I was, I was, you know, killing myself over and all those admin I'm just stopping in December and I'm just going to do the creative work that I really want to do. And she, you know, she said it changed everything for her. And that's what makes me happy if I can help somebody. Particularly women, because I feel very much like that's just my thing, I want to help women because I've had, what's do we call it? A rocky, a difficult life. That's, and I see other people going through the same things and I understand them. So, when you, I'm going off track here a little bit, but when you, when you find your passion as to what you want to do in life, when you want to help people through the things that you've been through, does that make sense? So, and the things that I've been through is like losing myself and being a caregiver and losing my creativity to drudgery and family. You know, I gave up photography for a long time. I gave it swimming for a long time. When I was looking after the kids, I was in a not fantastic marriage. So, I've been through that and I understand that coming out, the other end, I've now reconnected to that. And it's wonderful. So, if I can help other people to do that in some way, I'm just finding the ways of doing that. Again, that's, that's really what I want to be doing.

Kerry: That's your real passion. You know, there's a lot of women where we get to a certain place in our lives and we realize that everything else has taken priority, or even if you're still in it. And you know, you're looking after young children or you're just juggling so many balls thinking about something for yourself, like, what do I want to do? It's even hard to even think about what that might be. So just chatting a small path, something like, you know, going out and just enjoying a walk around your neighbourhood and taking some photographs is just that, bringing it back to that really simple place, to start with something that's for you.

Is there a way that people can connect with any of your programs online? If we can't make it to Scotland or the Hebrides, which I would really love to do one day, but yeah. Can people find you. Your work in the online virtual world.

Margaret: So I run, during COVID actually, I started up an online membership called Creative Haven, and it was really find a place for people to be inspired to everything we've talked about, but to be inspired in a very low level kind of everyday way so that you're living your, your ordinary life, and popping in giving, we do look different themes every month, and we have get togethers and ups, and I do a little bit of coaching for people, hopefully just inspiring people to, to maybe just go out that day with their phone and then share the images after. So that's an ideal way I've got, I think, I've got a couple of Australians and some of them from Canada, but mostly they're from the UK and it's just a lovely kind of supportive group. I suppose. It's akin to a camera club hub, but a very different, nice sort community feelings. So that's, that's the thing that I'm running at the moment, my online programs are just on pause because we are back to running workshops, physical workshops. So, life has got a bit crazy. And so, the online workshops are off, but the membership is a lovely way. So, it's Creative Haven anyway.

Kerry: Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for that. It's been an absolute pleasure, a delight to speak to you from your, your van there in the Hebrides. I'll let you move on with your morning. I can see there's a bit of movement out of the car carpark. The birds are passing the sun's coming in. So, thank you so much, it's been a wonderful, really wonderful chat.