



Episode 3

How to Make Mistakes on Purpose: Laurie Rosenwald on Why a Little Chaos Is Good for You

Announcer:

Fireworks, Viagra, LSD, and champagne. What do all of these things have in common? Well, they were created from unintended accidents: tossing bamboo in fire, treating hypertension, inspecting infected grains, even changing weather. At the time, these events may have been innocuous, even inconvenient. Today, we say these inventions occurred when someone or something made a mistake, but we generally don't like to make mistakes. We might go as far to say that mistakes are failures. Yet we've also heard that the moment you stop making mistakes is a and you stop learning. Our guest today embraces this concept. In fact, she is a professional mistake maker. Laurie Rosenwald is the author of the upcoming book, *Making Mistakes on Purpose*, which launches on November 3rd. Today, we'll discuss her book and find out how she encourages others to cast off pragmatism and make mistakes on purpose.

Polly Carpenter:

Hello and welcome to Change Makers and Their Stories. I'm your host, Polly Carpenter, the founder of Carpenter Group, a New York-based creative agency. Today, we are speaking with Laurie Rosenwald, author of her new book, *How to Make Mistakes on Purpose*, and hopefully we'll make a few mistakes during our discussion. Laurie and I were classmates at Rhode Island School of Design, RISD, and I've been following Laurie's amazing career all these years. I'd identify Laurie as a Renaissance creator. She's a painter, a designer, an illustrator and an educator. Welcome, Laurie.

Laurie Rosenwald:

Hello.

Polly Carpenter:

Congratulations on the launch of your new book.

Laurie Rosenwald:

Thank you.

Polly Carpenter:

This is your fourth book. In your book, you discuss how you facilitate an open, free environment when you lead workshops. How do you get participants to abandon their fears and become open enough to present and innovate without the fear of making a mistake?

Laurie Rosenwald:

Well, I encourage mistakes because the workshops and the book are all about the random. It's not mistakes, per se. I like the sound of "how to make mistakes on purpose," so that's the phrase that I've always used. I've been doing workshops since the early '90s, and now I have a book, but the thing is, it's a collection of stories that I hear about mistakes and then some apocryphal stories and historical well-known things, like Archimedes getting into the bath and the guy that invented Velcro, that he got burrs stuck on his pants and how certain things were invented by accident. But basically, I create chaos in a place. Instead of problem-solving, people come to this workshop and we make a really fun, chaotic environment, and then they make stuff. Then I say, "What could this be?" after they work rather than our normal problem-solving M.O., which is to go from A to B.

Polly Carpenter:

When you say "chaotic," I think you mentioned disco music and really loud?

Laurie Rosenwald:

Yep. I mean, that's what I like. Well, it's not just disco, but I lived in Detroit briefly as a child, so I have a lot of Motown and a lot of funk and things like that and most of it, you can dance to. Well, actually, all of it you can dance to. But anyway, yes, that's part of it, and it's a bit like a party, or in certain moments, it feels like a fun party, but the way parties were in the '80s, when they were really fun.

Polly Carpenter:

Yeah, exactly. What kind of response do you get from the participants?

Laurie Rosenwald:

Well, what's kind of surprising to me still is that even though I've done it at lots of art schools, including RISD, where we were, and most of the other ones that people have heard of, but my favorite things are when people have absolutely nothing to do with design, and I could do it for people that are doing banking or healthcare or branding or just any job because it is not an arty thing, it is not a design-y thing, it is about a way of, instead of problem-solving, everybody has problems to solve in their jobs, and almost everybody uses some kind of digital media these days.

This is something where there's nothing wrong with problem-solving, but if you do that 365 days a year, maybe you could just take one day for a few hours and instead just make stuff the way children draw when they're three years old. They're not trying to do anything, but then when they're five years old... It's just fun to draw when you're three, but then when you're five, somebody says, "Oh, that doesn't look like a dinosaur," and then it becomes like a chore, like something that you have to succeed or fail at. This is beyond success or failure. People realize that right away because there's no crit, there's no... The way that it's structured is so fast and loose that there's no time to worry about anything.

Polly Carpenter:

I almost feel that through your workshops, it seems that there's a relationship between creativity, mistakes and innovation. What gems have come out of some of your workshops?

Laurie Rosenwald:

Well, I have a huge collection of all of the drawings that anybody can see anytime on Flickr, which is, you probably know, spelled F-L-I-C-K-R. If you log into Flickr and you look up Mistakes on Purpose, you will see, I think I have like 41,000 images.

Polly Carpenter:

Unbelievable.

Laurie Rosenwald:

Yeah, so you get an idea of what people do in the workshop. But I do hesitate to concentrate on those because even though we do draw, it's not about drawing, and people realize immediately that if they're God's gift to art, it won't matter and they won't be able to show off, and if they never draw and can't draw and hate drawing, it won't matter either because nobody has time to look at anything or see what anybody else is doing. It's like an assembly line. That's my method.

But what comes out of the workshop is really varied because I tailor the workshop according to what kinds of things the people are doing. I did one for Johnson & Johnson that was on Zoom and I was worried because it was the first one I'd done on Zoom, but it was really, really, fun. These were people that are working with drugs and all kinds of things that I know nothing about, but all of these drawings are merely a starting point. I always talk about Velcro. Everybody knows that this guy, his name was George de Mestral, he went walking in the woods in Switzerland and he got burrs, little plants, stuck on his pants. Then he was playing with them and he thought, "Oh, these stick together really well." Then he thought, "What could this be?" and then he invented Velcro. But what he didn't do is sit down in a perfect white laboratory and think, "What this world needs is a new way to stick stuff together and I'm going to invent that," because that's problem-solving. That's what most people, including in the drugs industry.

I have a story about that, too. In big pharma, they have very, very specific jobs to do, and they're trying to refine all kinds of things. I mean, if they had discovered a cure for cancer or AIDS, we'd know it by now, let alone COVID, right? When you think about the way penicillin was invented by accident, Fleming was sloppy and he went on vacation and didn't wash the dishes. Can you imagine? He left dishes in the sink, literally, and when he came back, there was a mold on one of the dishes that repelled some other mold or something and he saw that it could fight infection, so that was penicillin. Can you imagine that happening today?

People are very, very good at their jobs. Really good. When I say, "Oh, I teach a workshop called "How to Make Mistakes on Purpose," I tell you, about 90% of the time people say, "Oh, I'm already good at that," but they're not. They're probably really highly skilled, most of the people that hear about this, and are very good at their jobs and using digital media and they're not mistakes. They're not sloppy and computers don't make mistakes, so this is a way to bring back, that's the whole point of my workshop and the book and everything, is to bring back the possibility of surprise of accidents in a good way.

Polly Carpenter:

Yeah, because in your book you say, to quote you, "When you surprise yourself, you surprise others, and that is priceless in a world where everything seems to have been done." That's really brilliant. Are there ways to increase our own ability to surprise ourselves?

Laurie Rosenwald:

Yeah, but it isn't easy. You have to force the situation. That's why I make sure when I'm working on a illustration job or design job, it's very obvious that it's more of a visual thing, but it works with anything. I was going to say that I always have, let's call it the equivalent of a burr, in the other words, a starting point, where I could look at something and say, "Hey, what could this be?" and those are the magic words. What it means is that you're never alone with nothing. You're never alone with a white piece of paper or your own insecurity and a blank slate. You always have something, a blob, a blur, a burr, a whatever, just to start a process.

I wanted to tell a story. I was asked by someone about people that are not in the design world what they get out of it. They were sort of wondering, "Is this an art school thing or what?" It isn't. It's because I was doing this for... Kurt Anderson had the Studio 360 radio show on PRI or NPR, anyway, public radio, and it was a great show. He was the MC at this event that I did for AIGA, American Institute of Graphic Arts, and he really loved the workshop when he did it, so he asked me to do it for his team.

Right before I was going to do it, I spoke to his producer and the producer says that question, like, "What do regular people get out of this with normal jobs?" and I said, "Well, let's say you're a radio producer," and he goes, "Okay, I'm listening," and I say, "Well, part of your job is to ask Laurie how this thing is going to play out, so you could ask me all the questions that are problem-solving that are perfectly good questions that you might ask me, like, 'How'd you come up with the idea for the workshop?' or 'How long have you been doing this?' or whatever. But for one question, you could pick up something on your desk and let that be the question." Then I said to him, "I'm going to do that now," so I picked up a book that was on my desk, just opened it to any random page, and the first words on the top left were "gold bullion," like bars of gold, so I said, "Laurie, are you raking in the big bucks with this workshop doing corporate off-sites for big corporations, or is this like an art school thing? Are you making a lot of money?"

Now, that might not be a good question or a great question, but it is probably a question he would not have asked me, don't you think? That is, I think, pure gold. That is important to ask the question that you wouldn't normally ask and that works in any kind of job. I'm not saying that if you're a surgeon that instead of a scalpel, you pick up a piece of asparagus. I don't want people to be imbeciles and do stupid things. What I want them to do is to think about things in a way that lets them... I want them to bring in the random. Polly, maybe you could do that for the next question. Pick up something near you.

Polly Carpenter:

I'm picking up a water bottle.

Laurie Rosenwald:

Okay. You have all the time in the world. Think about what could that suggest to you as a question to me now..

Polly Carpenter:

Well, maybe fluidity. I wonder, when you have a group of people all working on this project or this mistake workshop together, how do they influence one another? Are they excited by what they see from other people, or how does that ownership thing work in a group of people creating things?

Laurie Rosenwald:

That is a fantastic question and I bet you you wouldn't have asked it.

Polly Carpenter:

Nope.

Laurie Rosenwald:

Okay, so the first part is about people reacting or acting with each other. There's a really great school in Reykjavik, of all places, that I taught for 10 years, but just one week every year the first week of school, so the students were always brand new. They were the first freshman class and they were in all the departments together and took my workshop and they didn't know each other at all, okay, except for the fact that everyone in Iceland knows each other and is related, but that's another story. Anyway, so we had

so much fun and they got to know each other and I did the workshop over four days, which is not the way I usually do it. I usually do a workshop in like two or three hours, but I had these young students with me for almost a week and they became so close and had so much fun with each other and some of them I'm still friends with and they're still friends with each other.

It just created a really fun atmosphere to be in a situation with the music and it's just very lighthearted and sort of crazy because when I say "assembly line," it really does feel like that. I have people like runners running around and taking the drawings away to a corner and photographing them so then you have a digital record of them and then you can throw them away if you want, so it really is like they're all working in some kind of Willy Wonka factory.

Fluidity, as far as the way they influence each other, I would say it's more a question of mood than looking at the drawings because there's no time to look, not even at your own drawings, and when you come back to the drawings later, you don't use your own drawings. You use anything. You have a thousand zillion drawings in front of you and you have a picture of a cow, all right, and then you have to make... Maybe in their case because they were designers, they would make a website and they would go, "Well, I have a picture of a cow. What kind of website might need a picture of a cow?" so they have a dairy website or they have an animal rights website or whatever it is, so the drawings suggest what they do. I never tell them what to do. I never tell them, "Make a this," or, "Create a that." That goes for everybody.

Polly Carpenter:

Yeah. How do you wrap up a workshop? They've created this massive amount of stuff. They've started with nothing and they have now this wealth of visual material. What happens? What happens at the end of the workshop?

Laurie Rosenwald:

Well, it depends on if it's a short workshop or a long workshop, but for a normal short workshop, and let's say it's at some kind of conference and it's at a hotel or whatever, it's very important that there's a place where everybody can find the drawings later and use them as starting points. Almost all the time, I have that resource that anybody can take whatever they want from, including people listening to this. You don't have to have taken the workshop. You can go to Flickr and look up How to Make Mistakes on Purpose and you'll find a zillion drawings and you can use them copyright-free, I don't care. I think that just the process of using a doodle, basically, there are a lot of really great doodles, a lot, helping your mind go to the magic words, "What could this be?" while you're looking around will help you get to a new place, no matter what kind of problem that you have to solve in your job.

It doesn't have to be a visual thing. It could be a question for an interview and it could be a dessert and it could be anything. But all it is, it's a very simple, very practical method of getting to someplace new using, in this case, doodles, the random. They always have access to all those things. Then usually, I make them swear *omertà*, which is the mafia code of silence, because first of all, I think it's fun to have a secret, and second of all, it's mostly people that take this workshop, they never draw, so if they think it's about drawing, they might not want to do it. My favorite scenario is that people show up for a workshop called How to Make Mistakes on Purpose that they've heard it could be fun, period, and they have no idea what's going to happen. That's the best.

Polly Carpenter:

You talk about originality in your book. What does it mean to be original in today's world? Do you believe true originality exists?

Laurie Rosenwald:

Oh, yes, and not only that, I think that people really want it and it's not enough of it around. I mean, when you look at the kind of products and services that are available now, it's just mind-boggling. There's so many and so many of them are exactly alike. This mania about branding. There's a million kinds of food delivery services and places that sell cosmetics online, or apps for dating, or you name it, but there's a million of each, right?

Polly Carpenter:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Laurie Rosenwald:

Well, maybe not a million, but it's staggering. How many of those things will survive? I think that that's the result of people working on the same problems that aren't really a problem instead of, in a sense, going back to nature, like the guy with the burr. We have to get back to some kind of feeling, and it is a feeling that you really don't know what you're doing and you don't know what's going to have happen and you're not trying to do anything or get anywhere, but you let something new happen to you and you allow yourself into a situation where...

I'll give another example. When I was doing a children's book, I had to draw a canary. I mean, I'm a professional illustrator, I'm pretty good at drawing. But like everybody else, because it was there, I went to the Internet and I went to Google Images and I typed in "canary" and I got, presto, a thousand zillion canaries, all of them perfectly good reference material, right? I think that's what 99% of people might do if they wanted to see what a canary looked like.

But then I thought, "Wait a minute. That's not the way I do things," so I said, "Never mind that," and I got some black paper and I ripped it to smithereens and then I took one of the little rips and then I, in Photoshop, colored it yellow and I stuck some legs on it and a beak on it and some eyeballs on it, and then very importantly, I put the word "canary" in like 900-point Akzidenz and you'd better believe it's a canary, that if you do things the way everybody else is doing them, you'll come up with one more, very slight...

Polly Carpenter:

Same as.

Laurie Rosenwald:

... Yeah, yeah, and that's why things are so samey. It's very easy. We forget how easy it is to push a button and get whatever we want.

Polly Carpenter:

Well, I can say bravo to you and your work shows how brilliant you are. Laurie, what's next for you?.

Laurie Rosenwald:

Well, I'm very excited about this book, but as I may have mentioned, Hachette was going to publish this other book and that book I've been working on for 30 years and it's really a memoir, but I called it *Memwah*, which is spelled M-E-M-W-A-H, and like this book, it's hyper-illustrated. It's very, very colorful and every page has illustrations and it's a really fun book, but it's more challenging maybe to publish because

who wants to read the memoir of a person that's not famous? But I'm going to try to get that happening and keep doing workshops. I mean, my favorite thing's to do workshops for big, big corporations.

Polly Carpenter:

That's a great point to wrap up this podcast today. Thank you for joining us.

Announcer:

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