

Book Journeys Author Interview - Nov 21, 2013

Dr. Angela Lauria with Maura Sweeney, author of *The Art of Happiness*.

“Everyone’s an author now, and that means that ... you need to be able to define, refine and really chisel out your message. What is it about you that differentiates you from everybody else who’s in your category? What is your message?” ~Maura Sweeney

Angela:

Well, hello, everybody, and welcome to Book Journeys Radio. My name is Dr. Angela Lauria, I am the founder of the Author Incubator and creator of the Difference Process: Ten Steps for Writing a Book That Makes a Difference. Every week on Book Journeys Radio, we talk about – we talk to different authors and we talk to them about their journey becoming an author and what that process was like for them. And we have a special treat today. Maura Sweeney is the author of *The Art of Happiness*. She is an inspirer of happiness and authenticity – two things that definitely go hand-in-hand, I don’t think you can have one without the other, and – maybe again, authentic and unhappy, but you definitely can’t be happy without being authentic, so – Maura, thank you so much for being with us!

Maura:

Oh, Angela, thank you for inviting me! I’m so excited to be part of your program!

Angela:

Well, we’re really glad to have you. So, why don’t you tell people about *The Art of Happiness*, I know it’s an e-book series. So, tell them about – what you cover in the series and what the books are.

Maura:

Okay, the series is available on Amazon, they’re all a series of short stories, all involving things we can relate to. My sense has always been, happiness and authenticity cannot be found outside of ourselves, it’s always found from within. The more authentic we are, generally, the happier we are. So, my stories cover things like comfort zones and exiting them. It could be a step away, but it feels like a lifetime getting there. There are things on judgement, I’ve done one on values, I did one on competition, I did one – I could have called it insanity, but it was actually a story about – nonsense, and – they’re just small vignettes on life, each ... had our own encounter with. So, I start everything out with a question to the reader to get them to think about those various elements and time frames within their lives, and then I tell my story, and I’ve always learned that people come up with their own stories as they hear stories told. And then, I invite them to look at their own story, and then I close each e-book with another question, again asking about it. In one case, it would be, lets say, in Book One, about exiting the comfort zone, what is the area in your life that you’ve become, maybe, discomfited in, or no longer comfortable in, because you feel like you’re in a vise. What part of your life have you always looked to explore but gave yourself many excuses not to? So, I would hope that, in every book, in every case, I’m encouraging people to look within

themselves, to really discover their own values system, their own desires, their own talents, and I would say the entire series, Angela, comes from my belief that we are all gems within. We are all unique, and once we have an opportunity to express ourselves, the world becomes a brighter and happier place for all. So, how's that for a little bit of a review, is that good enough?

Angela:

Yeah, it's ... people a great idea. So, why don't we start with this? We talk on the show about how you came to write your book, so why don't you tell us, how did you pick this topic? How did you get this idea?

Maura:

Oh! You know, that's a wonderful question. I wanna say that, probably like many people who are into self-improvement or self development – even people that write memoirs, a lot of it is catharsis – cathartic for themselves, but in my case, I was a mid-life woman who already had had a career – I had been a homeschooling mother, my daughter was very quickly growing up, ready to move fifteen hundred miles away, and I always wanted her to be able to look to me and say, “Okay, that's my future, I always wanna have hope and I always wanna know what's next.” So I started writing my thoughts, and I've always been a public speaker, and I thought, “Well, let me start telling some funny stories,” and believe it or not my first ever blog, which eventually worked its way into ... writing ... at the end, and I wrote a blog, or a small piece on the subject of tombstones. Now, it sounds like it was very serious, mine was actually funny, and it was, “How do you want to be remembered?” And all of my stories, if they don't relate back to me, they will relate somehow to people I've met, whether – locally, it could be family members, but it could be people from the forty countries I've traveled to around the globe, and whenever something strikes a chord as being an authentic answer, or something that would inspire others, it makes it into my writing. So, for whatever reason, I started my writing from the very final chapter, which is, “How Do I Want to Be Remembered?” and then I started working backwards, until all the other little elements of life I know are ...

Angela:

And why – how did this fit into – what else you're dealing? Are you – do you work with people on this – did it fit into your career, was it just something you were personally passionate about?

Maura:

You know what? My background is, I'm from New Jersey, don't hold it against me, 'cause I really did like New Jersey, but ...

Angela:

I'm from Connecticut, so – I hear ya, I live in Washington, D. C., but – the tri-state area, powered by the tri-state area.

Maura:

Well, I'd – I – I did – I love the Jersey shore, I like the warm weather in Jersey, but I just was not into winter weather. So, here I was growing up, I was always formed, and – let's say groomed to become a New Jersey lawyer. And I'd gone to school up in Boston, and I – after I finished college, I – ended up back in New Jersey attending ... law school, and driving up and down every day to downtown Newark. My problem was that I did not want to live in New Jersey, and I did not want to spend the rest of my life being a lawyer. And I was so des – unhappy – this is probably the genesis of the entire book! Here I was, twenty-three years old, getting into debt for a career I didn't want –

Angela:

Mm-hm.

Maura:

– in a state I didn't want to live in. And that was many years ago, before other people realized that you could have a degree in law and you could do other things. Back then, if you didn't practice law with a law degree, you'd look like a flunky. So, I ended up being in a point in my life so unhappy, and the – the real big factor for me was that I was at a juncture and I thought, "I feel like I'm living a fake life" –

Angela:

Mmm.

Maura:

– and I felt like it was so heavy, so my personal journey became, "Ah, now, what do I do?" I'm gonna leave law school midstream, but it was all I had ever been groomed for, so what do I like, what am I about, and how am I going to take myself from – a life that was very different from who I felt I was within, and how was I going to broaden myself to find those things that were meaningful to me? So when I write, Angela, I write from that position of –

Angela:

Mmm. Wow.

Maura:

– "I'm so what it's like to feel so desperate," that you're unhappy being somebody other than who you are. So, I've had – I'd – I'm an older woman, I'm fifty-five, I've spent –

Angela:

Oh, no, fifty-five is older? Uh-oh, I didn't get the memo.

Maura:

... But anyway, it – it gives you an idea that I've done a lot of things, I've had a career behind me – in the telecom industry, lots of – management, I was a homeschooling mom, I think I

might have mentioned that, I helped my husband build a company, but at middle age my husband and I both decided, we wanna do something as we grow older. We don't wanna just become old people, we really wanna find out what we're about, and we really wanted to create a future that would combine a love of what we – what we're about, and a lifestyle of travel and something creative, so we both went into our own arenas of impacting culture in a positive way, and we basically took the things we liked, and the experiences we've had, and we used everything available to us in digital media to step out. And – I don't know if that fully answers your question, but I will tell you, I worked for the third time in my entire life with my same husband, and I am also an entrepreneur with him. He developed an animated sports brand, a little microphone who reports on sports. He's animated and we've created about thirty sports comic books, so it's an entirely new genre –

Angela:

Wow! Amazing!

Maura:

I know ... interview! You may wanna interview him on this show, because he's got a fantastic story, very creative, but he took what he loved, which was sports and writing, and he's still – he's middle-aged, like I am, but he's a masters' basketball athlete who plays even international at his age, so we're both taking what we love and exporting it and hopefully entertaining, inspiring and encouraging others along the way, which makes us both very happy. ...

Angela:

When did – when did this journey start for you? How long a go did this journey start for you?

Maura:

I – I could tell you, we were at it all our lives. We both met at nineteen at Boston College, but – do you know how life is really a journey, and one thing leads you to another, and then to another?

Angela:

I sure do!

Maura:

Yeah, and – and I can't even tell you when is the end point, I don't know, I think it's all part of the journey ...

Angela:

When did – when did the book start? When did you get the idea for the book?

Maura:

Mine or my husband's? Mine or –

Angela:
Yours.

Maura:
I had done, within the past year – and they actually started out as individual blogs, and from there they developed, and I'll tell you, my next step is to make an actual, physical book, full-size, that people can buy when I go out and do my public speaking.

Angela:
Love that.

Maura:
Because, right now, this is one of those issues, if you're talking to different authors, or people that are interested in writing books – I love what's been able to do through digital e-books, but not everyone buys that way. There are people at conferences and people ...

Angela:
Well, but even people who buy that way, there's something about having a tangible – a tangible book –

Maura:
Yeah.

Angela:
– especially when you're speaking, you can't – I guess you can sell any book at the back of the room, but that's pretty challenging, so –

Maura:
Yeah, right, and people –

Angela:
So, let's talk about – let's talk about what you wish you knew before you sat down to write your book. What have you learned that you wish that you knew before you started?

Maura:
Oh, I wish somebody gave me a blueprint. (laughs)

Angela:
(laughs)

Maura:

I would have been done so much sooner! Oh, my gosh. You know what, I would say that I am developing a brand, and so brands, even though we might have them in our head, they still take time to chisel out, and probably the best thing I could say is that I had to do it and refine it. I had to ask people around for feedback – I would say ...

Angela:

So, you're saying you're building a brand, but if I'm an author, and – and most of my clients that come to me, they're thinking about writing. They're like, "I wanna write a book." They're not like, "I wanna build a brand," so wha – why – why do you think having a brand is important if you are writing a book?

Maura:

I'd say it's extremely important. Unlike the past, when all we had were books that were in paper, and also, the only thing we knew of, years ago, were the traditional publishing houses, it was a very closed industry. And then we moved into the digital age. It works both ways, because, now, everyone can be an author, but the flip side of it is, everyone's an author now, and that means that, even though you might be out there, you need to be able to define, refine and really chisel out your message. What is it about you that differentiates you from everybody else who's in your category? What is your message? And that, probably, for me – I know I've had to play around with a couple of tag lines like – "Finding happiness from within," and you think, "Well – sounds like so-so, but it doesn't sound great." I would say, now more than ever, because so many people are out in the digital space, and so many people are in a position where they can promote their message, they can promote their book, they really do need to know their brand.

Angela:

Mmm.

Maura:

And because, the more they know it, the more identifiable they are in the marketplace.

Angela:

Yeah, absolutely. So, did you envision this book completed before you started? Did you have the idea it would be a series when you started blogging? Did you know it would be a book, or ... assuming it was just a blog.

Maura:

I could make you laugh. I could make you laugh, that's an excellent question. I originally wrote – maybe there were twenty-five chapters, and each chapter dealt with common things in life, even things like – early childhood memories, why do we partner up, why do we get married,

why do we choose careers, what do we find that worked that defines us, what's our value system – all these little things. What I found is that I kept writing and rewriting and going back and changing things. Finally, I thought, "I –" I think it was my husband who said to me, "Maura, you will never get this book out if you keep on changing every single chapter," and I kept joking, think – nobody's reading it at my funeral. So, I took the original concept, which was an entire book, and broke it down into small pieces, and I'll tell you, from the developmental standpoint, I'm so glad I did, because people were able to get with ... e-books – a feel for what I was about, and develop – an appetite for my writing, for my humor, for my thought process. And it really did help me develop the brand, and it also positioned me, I believe, which will be more of the full-scale, heavy duty, two hundred fifty page book, or two hundred thirty page book.

Angela:

Mmm. I love that. I – I absolutely love that. I think we can make – we can make things more complex very easily, but to make things simpler is – ten times the talent, and you really managed to make it a simpler project to grow your platform as you're releasing your book, and in the end you can still have that multi-chapter print book that you're talking about.

Maura:

Right!

Angela:

It's not an either/or, it's a both/and –

Maura:

...

Angela:

– and I think anytime we can find a both/and, we got a win.

Maura:

I agree, because, then, you're able to reach out to a variety of readers, and reader style, and

–

Angela:

Mmm.

Maura:

I wanna e – can I have one more thing –

Angela:

Sure!

Maura:

– when you asked about branding, why is it important?

Angela:

Yeah.

Maura:

It's title, my books, *The Art of Happiness*. Now, I would say not to be – confused with the Dalai Lama, we look nothing alike, but –

Angela:

(chuckles)

Maura:

(laughs) The thing about me, I told you, I was supposed to be this New Jersey lawyer, and I was an academically inclined person, but I'm also a little off-beat and a little artistic. *The Art of Happiness* helped my branding, because if ever you look at my books, I have everything framed in art frame – h – let me see. I would say “photo frames” that I designed myself. And I'm a little bit vintage, I'm extremely modern, I'm a little whimsical, and I just love artwork. I'm not this great – not this great artist, but I like doodling, and I've done it all my life. So, when I say “the art of happiness,” which was really – it's an art form within your own mind, I'm able to take some of my little artwork, which I've employed into the covers of my books, I've included inside the books, I use even when I do some of my blogging so people get familiar with, “Oh, that's her artwork!” “Oh, I recognize her!” My picture is actually in a frame I created. And ...

Angela:

I'm gonna stop you right here so that people know. Go to – go to [maura4u](http://maura4u.com), m-a-u-r-a-the number 4-the letter u.com and you'll see what she means with these frames, they are really cute!

Maura:

Well, the thing about them is that they're me.

Angela:

Mmm.

Maura:

The Art of Happiness, it takes my thoughts and exports them publicly, but the idea of art, it picks up on my personality, and it picks up on – what – let's say it's my little spice, or what differentiates me from how many – tens of thousands of people are there out there that are telling you how you could live better. And I'm really not a “how to,” I'm more of an inspirer from within, but it's – that's my way of taking – let's say, two elements about me. One is, I have a passion, and I kid you not – I have a passion – in the belief that everyone is a gem from

within, and if they just explore and live life authentically, it will be happy, so – those are my writings. But the other piece of it is, I'm a little bit artistic, so I took two things that are part of who I am and put them together, and used those elements to create a brand. Now, for your other authors, or wannabe authors – that are all listening, that may be something for them to think about today. What is it about them that really defines who they are?

Angela:

Mmm.

Maura:

And let them play with some ideas and then discuss it with others and get some feedback. Those are the kinds of things that will help bring them from being part of the pack to stepping above the pack.

Angela:

Mmm.

Maura:

And it's – I wish I could say it's so easy, but – you deal with authors all the time. It's a process, but it is worth it.

Angela:

So, what were some of the things that blocked you in writing your book? What were some of the challenges you faced, getting it done, getting it out?

Maura:

I – I can't speak for everyone, because I told you that I am also helping my husband and – with all of these sports comic books – my case was, I was taking private thoughts and publicizing them. I was taking my private life, and I had issue – not – when I say "issues" – I would say, if you were to know me, I'm extremely diplomatic, I'm extremely gracious and I knew – and I learned this through writers' groups, that when I first started writing, people said to me, "Maura, you're very funny, but you're hiding and you're not being fully honest." And so, my biggest challenge in doing the *More for You: Art of Happiness* series was, how do I share things in my background that maintain everyone's privacy – it's not like I was writing terrible things – but how can I be honest enough and still tell a story and keep things generic enough so that I am not taking my own life and delving into the lot – the personal lives of other people, too. That was really a big challenge for me. But then, you might say that there are other people out there who love writing and they could spill out everything that ever happened in their life, but for me, that was my challenge. It was the idea of taking my personal life –

Angela:

Mmm.

Maura:

– my stories, my experiences, and making them applicable to the public and making it – transparent enough for everyone to relate to without being – I don't want to say “tell all” or “court commonplace,” if that makes sense.

Angela:

Yeah, so, how did you solve that? That's a problem a lot of authors have.

Maura:

(grunts in frustration) I wa – I wish I could tell you it was easy, I would say I sweat through it, but, I will say this, over the course of time, I've had people say, “Wow, Maura, your writings have become so much more compelling.” I would say it just comes from practice. And sometimes – we take little baby steps and we just move, and we do get feedback – but I would say that it's one of those things that comes by doing. But I would – I would contrast that with someone out there who's writing, and let's say they're writing about a topic that's not so personal. I think if I were writing that kind of narrative, if you asked me to write you something else, I could write you so much material so rapidly, but it was a personal element that, to me, was – it was just a little bit more delicate. And ...

Angela:

And one of your goals is authenticity, so how –

Maura:

Correct!

Angela:

– how do you rectify those two things, authenticity, and then – telling your stories, but they include other people, so ho – how do you bring those things together?

Maura:

It's a great, great question. I would just say that I am a work – I'm my own work in progress in that, here I am, encouraging everyone to be their own authentic self, and in the process I need to open up my coat jacket and say, “Here are some of the things I've done!” And, “These are some of the things, the challenges, I've had in life,” so, I would say – but it all actually works to my advantage. When people read my books, and when they follow along with me, because I do keep a regular blog, and I've probably done two hundred – I think two hundred maura4u videos, where I've been anywhere and everywhere, asking questions of people. I would say that it was one step after another, and as people – as I'm writing about being authentic, and in coming into your own happy place, I literally become my own living message. So, as much as I'm learning along the way, I'm bringing others with me, but I also embody the message of hope that, no matter how old you are, no matter what your background is, no matter what limitations, maybe, you've felt you've had in life, you can do it. And when I share my stories, I'm literally sharing that message within me. So, it's not like I'm

– I’m standing out there, saying, “Let me show you the ten great ways to live your life,” I am literally living it as I’m writing about it, and there seems to be something in that, that people enjoy because they feel more like they’re part of the process rather than being spoken to from – from a high and mighty place from a person that wears wings and flies in the sky.

Angela:

Yeah, absolutely. So, for you, give me a – give me a “before and after.” How was life before you had a book and after? What are some of the new things you’ve been able to experience as an author?

Maura:

Okay, I – I’m gonna answer this – I don’t know if it’s the type of an answer you’re looking for. When I and my husband – decided we were going to close down our – computer firm that we had, that was quite – it was a very good – well-producing firm, and do something to impact society, I would say that my life before was a private life, even though I was always helping other people and doing things. Right now, I am enjoying the sense that, with all the work and the time and the elements I’ve put into my writings – I am now enjoying, in increasing measure, the very thing I hoped, at the very beginning of this process, to achieve, and that was being in a place of influence, where I could be a positive influence in the culture to other people who were looking to find their bigger self. I love where I am right now, and I didn’t realize, when we were starting with this process, that I’d find myself middle-aged at a time when a lot of people in America, whether they’re young people just coming out of school, middle-aged women who already brought up their kids, maybe are divorced – maybe lost their – maybe couples, or men that had lost their home in the housing bubble, people that lost their jobs, and they’re saying to themselves, “Wait a minute, who am I? All the things I used to hold on to and think ‘This is who I am,’ they’re gone!”

Angela:

Mmm.

Maura:

“And how can I figure out who I am?” I almost feel like I am arising – as a voice in the culture at the very time when my message and my messaging is quite – I would almost say, “needed” in the culture.

Angela:

Yeah.

Maura:

People have to revisit what’s important, what are their values, and if the old – if the old paradigm of who we were and how we measured our success – whether it’s by age, by era, by occupation, by marital status – it could be any one of those things, and if those things go away, there’s a lot of people that says, “... do now?” And if I could just add one more thing,

you get a lot of young people who are brought up by parents, and they were saying – “If you go to school and you’d get multiple degrees, you could get out there and get a job in Corporate America.” Well, yes, maybe, and yes, maybe not. So, even young people today have to say, “Wait a minute! If the old order of things are not working, and if the old stereotypes and the old standbys are no longer with us, then I need to look within myself and figure out what’s important to me, what do I like, what do I have a passion about, and what kind of things do I wanna do that I would do if I never made a dime at because I love it so much, and how can I take that and turn it into a career and a lifestyle?” So, ...

Angela:

Mmm. And have you had examples that it’s working?

Maura:

Yes. Yeah.

Angela:

Have you had opportunities after having your book, so tell us some of those – specific.

Maura:

Okay. Well, I’ll tell you one really exciting thing for me. This summer, my husband and I were traveling overseas in about four different countries, which is – what we wanted to work ourselves into, how can we have a career that enables us to travel, whatever. By the time I got back, I got a notice from the – the editors at Huffington Post. And they – and I looked at it, and I thought, “Wait a minute, they’re not just asking for one blog.” They actually are giving me *carte blanche*, no matter what I – what I submit to them, I have my own post site. And I thought, “This is amazing, Huffington Post has a place for people who are searching for happiness!” And I really have to tell you, most of what I’ve read – through – most of what is written, if you look at tabloids, if you look at what people look at, they always want to find out what’s awful in life. And I’m busy writing about what’s good about life and how do we find what’s good, and I was so excited to know that a site like Huffington Post would have found me and decided that what I have to say is worth posting.

Angela:

Mmm.

Maura:

That was exciting for me. And, in addition to that – just earlier today – I came back from a – delivering a workshop to – an entire group of directors of non-profit volunteer organizations. So, I’ve had numerous opportunities to do public speaking – to speak at national conferences – ...

Angela:

So, before you had your book, were you a different person? Was there something you that knew before you had your book that you – that y – that you didn't know, that you know now?

Maura:

Well, I would say, on the sum total of lots of learning and many, many life experiences, whether it's – ...

Angela:

So, why do you think it's easier to get those – opportunities for you now?

Maura:

Hm. You know, I –

Angela:

What is it about having a book?

Maura:

Oh, I was this – perfect question. A book gives a person credibility.

Angela:

Mm.

Maura:

And my long-term plan is – not that I'm looking to be a talking head on TV or whatever – on a routine basis. I want my books to be my calling card, so that, whether it's local ... TV, or in some – it could be, let's say, Kathy Lee and Hoda, that for some reason, they're discussing things that are going on with peoples' lives, and they decide they want me on. I'd love to be on, and I would love to be someone who can comment on life, and what is it that makes us happy. I'd love to be ... anthropologist.

Angela:

Yeah. Well, I – I think that's – I think that's a great – I think that's a great point, there is something about having a book that gives people who wanna work with you a way to sell it in their organization, a way to justify it, that – whether it's right or wrong, I – I would argue that you have a lot of the knowledge – most of the same knowledge, before and after writing your book, but the opportunity to share that knowledge changes when you have a book.

Maura:

Yes.

Angela:

So, I guess in our final – few minutes, is there any advice you would give to somebody who wants to write a book, but they haven't done it yet, and they're stuck in some way. What advice would you give them?

Maura:

I would tell them, look for a writers' group and join it. Secondly, become proficient – in the digital space, and constantly – when you're writing a book, make sure you are passionate about it, because you will be the driving force that causes other people to look for your book.

Angela:

Yeah.

Maura:

Don't expect to just be the content creator and let it sit there on a shelf. You really need to be the combine engine behind it. I would hope that people love doing it, because I've had – I've so enjoyed what I've been doing.

Angela:

Yeah, we can't tell you're having any fun. I'm sorry, Maura, you seem bored. (chuckles) So, Maura, that was the bored Maura Sweeney, her book is *The Art of Happiness*, it's a book series you can find on Amazon, or go to maura, number four, and the letter u.com, Maura, thank you so much for being our guest today, this was a blast.

Maura:

Well, thank you so much for inviting me, I have so enjoyed it!

Angela:

And we will be back next week, changing the world one book at a time.