

# Austin Hill Shaw

How becoming more connected with the world around you can help your creative energy flow

## Speakers:

**Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit**

Austin Hill Shaw

## Expert Interview transcript:

**Nick Skillicorn:** Hello, everyone and welcome to another interview at the Innovation & Creativity Summit 2017. I'm very proud to have on the line today Austin Hill Shaw who is the founder of Creativity Matters and 3 Lights Design.

Austin, it's very good to have you with us.

**Austin Hill Shaw:** Thank you so much, Nick. It's great to be here.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Absolutely. So for people who aren't aware of what you do and what your focus is with creativity, could you give us a brief background as to how you got into creativity?

**Austin Hill Shaw:** Yeah. Essentially, the way that I got into creativity is well, I would say that I've always been considered somewhat artistic most of my life. I do like to make things. I was what's called a boutique artist for ten years. I also have a Masters in architecture and run a design company mostly focusing on residential and a little bit of commercial building projects.

And I found that there were times where I felt very creative and also had the experience of being in creative flow. Early in my 20s, I was a rock climber and I actually lived out of my car for two years selling that boutique clothing in order to kind of be in those flow states even though I wouldn't have described it at that time in that particular way.

But when I was in that sense of flow, that optimal performance state, I felt really happy. And at times when I felt myself either blocked or unable to connect or move a project forward in particular way, it was hard on me. It actually felt not only uncomfortable but really challenging.

And so I think that that polarity between almost the ecstatic state of being and in creative flow and the almost feeling like you're dying state when it's not there caused me to look at the subject in earnest.

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And basically, I was on a 3-month meditation retreat in 2004 and I arrived at the retreat because I realized a lot of what was happening for me was actually happening based on what my mind was doing.

And so, I joined the Buddhist community. They invited me on this retreat. And during that and getting a traditional teaching on something called The Wheel of Life, I just recognized that the way that we get stuck as human being has a lot of waste but the Buddhist were talking about suffering. And that really was the beginning of the process of looking at creativity although it's expanded to things such as business and arts, innovative and technological, scientific, and really, you can see or not see creativity everywhere.

And so wherever you look, even in relationships, of parenting, those have all become points of interest. And really, the world if you start to look at the human condition, people are happier when they are being creative, when they're engaged, when they're connected, when they feel like they're making a difference. And they also feel removed or depressed or less than they could be when they don't invite creativity in their lives. They don't embrace their natural creativity. So that's kind of what led me along.

**Nick Skillicorn:** And how does this fit into the work that you do now with Creativity Matters? What's the focus of that?

**Austin Hill Shaw:** So the main focus of Creativity Matters is helping people to recognize that creativity is a defining trait and everybody, all human beings are creators. And there's some statistics we are talking about earlier about the Adobe study about at least in the United States, less than half the people in the United States believe that they're creative and worldwide, it's about a quarter. I don't know what it equates to in the UK but it's – so realistically, we have a large portion of the population who has not even identifying as creative.

And simply by not identifying as creative, there's a huge loss simply because you don't enter into a situation with a sense that actually you have the ability to come up with new ideas or insights or that you can almost dialogue with the world to start or be curious in a way that it allows you to understand situations in the new lights. So that's one part of it. It's just getting people to embrace their natural creativity.

And then the other part of it is actually helping people to recognize that while even though you may feel creative in one area of your life but you might see other areas that aren't necessarily creative, it's that experience of how can we actually sort of map that across? How can we take that area where you feel a lot of creativity and start to apply the principles to what you're doing in another situation where you may be don't feel like you have power or you don't feel like you have efficacy in that.

And so, those are the two – that’s the big framework and the big push. It’s just helping one, people to see that they are in fact creative. And then for those people who silo creativity to only one area of their life to allow them to expand and do all areas of their lives.

**Nick Skillicorn:** As we say though, a lot of people would respond if you ask them, “Are you creative or not?” That they don’t feel creative. They don’t believe that they are creative for whatever reason it maybe that they don’t know how to paint or they’re not great dancers or they’re not that good at singing.

And what is the basis of your belief that everyone is actually creative though?

**Austin Hill Shaw:** Well, the basis of the belief that everyone is creative is that as you were just saying, typically, people only identify creativity with artistic pursuits or performance arts pursuits. They see that again, if you can’t paint or if you can’t draw or if you can’t sing then you are not a creative person. And that is just a myth right there. All pursuits that have any sort of innovations that come out of it or changes in it are always with people who are applying a different level of awareness and curiosity which I associate with creativity to that pursuit.

Really, when a pursuit stops to be creative, again, it doesn’t have to do with artistic or performance things, it has to do with a person essentially not being curious about the world. I really think that that curiosity is the first thing.

And another thing which I think is a big problem especially for people in the West is that we identify as individuals first and foremost. And even though that’s a good thing and we – our ability to identify as an individual and have a strong sense of self is important. And if we don’t have one of those, we’re technically schizophrenic.

I think that there’s also a lot of pressure to think that we need to do it ourselves. And this is particularly – you can see a lot in men where they’re like, “I have to be self-made. I have to pull myself up my bootstraps.” And really, that’s a very lonely road in my experience and it’s also not actually accurate because in each and every moment of our lives, we’re constantly interacting with the world around us.

Even though we may not give the world credit, we’re constantly getting new ideas, synchronicities are happening, coincidences, we run into people that give us information, our partners are constantly giving us feedbacks in terms of how open we are or not.

And so, when we can start to kind of dialogue with the world in a more traditional or a more Eastern sense and recognize that who we are is constantly in a web of relatedness with the people around us and the situations around us. Then the world starts to become a co-creator within our process. And we get to let go of our sense of like, “I had to do all this myself.” And suddenly, we can be in the place like, “Huh! What do I need to know right now?” Like setting

intentions over and over again and looking around being true as to what situations give us answers.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Yeah. Do you think that the first step then is people being aware of the way that they're currently thinking and assessing problems and the challenges that they might have? Because it sounds like what you're describing, some people may call it quite spiritual in nature but it seems to be very much about understanding your own approach to life and your approach to problems.

**Austin Hill Shaw:** Right. So I think – so exactly. Often, this is couched within the spiritual because the spiritual I think is often the place which is trying to work with the existential or experiential aspects of being a human being, trying to really work with what can be perceived as suffering. And so – but we can sort of again, when we talk about spiritual, it becomes elevated. For some people it's like, "I don't want to have anything to do with that." But we could ratchet it down a notch to basic psychological human needs.

And again, they're sort of the basic needs that we share with our animal brethren and all life. We need food. We need water. And then as human beings, of course, we need shelter, basic resources, and things of that sort.

But beyond that, when we start to look at the basic human needs that we have, I kind of divide them up into three. And one is a passive need, one is an active need, and one is a combination of the two.

And so, the passive need that we all have as human beings is for connection. And connection in the language of creativity is our insights. It's basically those experiences, those aha moments where suddenly we have an awareness of something that wasn't there before. And this actually within my understanding of creativity is the most spiritual because after looking for satisfying definition of an aha moment for years, I found and discovered William James, an early pioneer in psychology who wrote a book called *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. And then the chapters on mysticism and the mystics are basically those who are looking for unitive knowledge and understanding, sort of a communion with an awareness which is larger than themselves.

And really, if you look at the way he described the mystical experience, that is an aha moment. They are typically you get the sense of something that is beyond words. It's accompanied by an absolute truth. It's usually brief and it's passive. It feels like it's being handed to you. So that's the most spiritual side.

And everybody has those where they call it spiritual. It's just those moments of – it's like the aha moment with the light bulb appearing at the top of your head. That's the popular thing. But again, it's like there's an awareness that's shining above your head, not necessarily inside you. OK?

If you go to the other side, that's where we really start to see the scientific aspect of creativity. And that's what I call manifestation. And it's based on our need to make a difference.

First need is connection. The second need is making a difference. And really, all of us have a drive to make the world a better place. And of course, that can be distorted based on the kind of field you're working in. If you're in a mafia, making the world a better place looks a lot different than if you're in the Peace Corps, that sort of thing.

But still, people are striving within the environments that they've set up for themselves in order to try to make their situation better for themselves and also ultimately for other people. And so, when you look at that, that's sort of the drive behind science. It's this incremental understanding of knowledge that has been accumulated and passed down over thousands of years, just these insights that kind of come from nowhere that they start to be codified and tested so that we have a sense of what works and what doesn't.

If you think for example a personal computer is not any one person's insight. It's an amalgamation of many, many, many, many, many, many insights and people testing those insights and learning to work together over really since the beginning of consciousness.

So that's kind of the most scientific aspect, our willingness to accumulate knowledge over time. Whereas this other aspect, again, connection is all about wisdom which in Buddhism is defined as primordial knowing before thought intervenes, which is another way to describe an aha moment. It's that sense of like, "I sense something here but I have to unpack it over here by using all the tools that I have."

And then the meaning, and then in the middle, is this very human basic need for meaning. We are meaning-making machines. We learn from the stories of others and we've been doing this since we have the capacity for language.

And so, there are basically two types of meaning that I see that we need as human beings, and one is a sense of a narrative that defines our life which is often defined as a vision or a mission which is the conceptual meaning behind our lives.

And then the second level of meaning is really the non-conceptual experience of being alive like when you find yourself in a flow state or you see something that's absolutely beautiful or you watch a performer just blow your mind, it has that sense of wow! Life is meaningful because it's so inherently alive. It's so inherently sensation – there are just so many things that you can experience as a human being.

So again, that connection, making a difference and meaning, equate to spirituality, science, and really art in the middle. When you feel that sense of how to say, that sense of beauty and unity that's applied to anything, science, technology, a good business transaction, an

organization that functions really well where everybody feels expressed and heard, all of those things, that's the artistic aspect of living that again can be applied to anything.

So that is how I attempt to help people understand that again, creativity arises out of those basic needs of connection, making a difference, and meaning.

**Nick Skillicorn:** What I find fascinating is I'm listening to you described where these insight moments, these aha moments come from, and it's in many ways very similar to how many of the ancient civilizations, well, we call them ancient, but like the old Roman and Greek artists who you look at the way they developed mosaics and poetry and philosophy and sculpture and they wouldn't consider themselves to be creative because they have what they called demons and muses. And these were these external forces that were channelling themselves through these artists in creating the work on display.

And I can't remember exactly what sculpture it was, it may have been Michael Angelo, but he would look at a block of granite and he would know that there is a sculpture in there and it's just about me to reveal it. It's not about me actually creating a statue. It's about me unearthing something that's already there.

Is that kind of in line with how you view these insight moments coming about as well?

**Austin Hill Shaw:** Absolutely. And I want to say that I did not begin this way at all. OK? I was very rationally-based. I used kind of cost-benefit analysis in every decision that I used to make. And even when I got into meditation some 15 years ago now, my view on meditation was it wasn't very spiritual and that it would give me a more rational cutting analytical way of viewing the world so that again, my mind, my conceptual mind would become just that much more honed like a tool.

But that all unravelled in going through the process of going deeper and deeper into the meditation process because one of the fundamental tenets of meditation is basically that you don't exist the way you think you do. And so, when we start to recognize that of course, we have all these thoughts that are going through our head all the time but it's really – that's not the most interesting thing. It's the space in between the thoughts because typically, we're recycling our own mental material all the time.

And so, our abilities – we start to notice that there's an awareness that's beneath that which I think that again, in days of old, people kind of honored more. And I don't want to say that that was a perfect situation but I do think for example indigenous cultures, for example, in Oral cultures, people would hang their cosmologies out on the landscape which gave them that sense of connection like that mountain means that, this river means that, because that's how they held their cosmology together. And it was an essential part.

Now, in the information age, we can just send off information in alarmingly rapid rate which is pretty cool. And yet at the same time, we're also coming to the realization that having

more information faster isn't actually making our lives better necessarily. It can help but it's not the core thing.

And so for me going back to that core component of connection, when we start to let go of our sense of a solid, defined being that's separate from the rest of the world and we start to open up to the possibility that OK, in each and every moment, I'm breathing air into me and expelling – I mean an exchange there. Every time I eat something that there's a 3 to 5-pound mass of microorganisms that's not even my own DNA helping me to digest my food.

We can start to recognize that we actually are – there's an awareness that's sort of centered here and yet it is dependent on everything around me, everything that we do, the fact that we're having this conversation, we are dependent on tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people that we will never know that allowed us to sit down together in two different parts of the world and have a conversation.

And so, that sense of appreciation, that sense of reverence, that sense of there's a popular saying, "I'm only standing on the shoulders of giants." If I've seen any further, I'm standing on the shoulders of giants, it's that idea that everything that we do is based on people before us and the world will continue to base on people after us.

That sort of reverence and appreciation for that we are just part of the river of life and when we can engage in and recognize that our lives are statistical in possibilities then suddenly there's a new level of levity that can come in our lives which I actually is associated with a more creative way of being in the world simply because again, we're not making ourselves into almost like little fiefdoms, little castles that are trying to keep the world out. We're saying, "I'm going to start actively engaging in in a really good way."

So yeah, I think for a lot of us, the main thing that we need to do is stop and accumulating information and just try to move in that space of being and connection like what is it like to sit down with a meal and actually taste the food you're eating? So many of the things that we do are pretty robotic, which bring us dissatisfied over time.

**Nick Skillicorn:** And I think that's one of the things that a lot of people struggle with. They have this desire that, "Oh, in a perfect world, I want to be creative. But I am just so busy and I'm stressed and it's just – it's not something I can allow myself to do or experience."

And I know one of the other things that you're well-known for is that you help run a retreat somewhere in – is it in a rainforest somewhere for people to get back to their own ability to express themselves creatively? Could you tell us, why do people need something like that?

**Austin Hill Shaw:** Well – so, what I think – you kind of just hit on it, Nick, that the fact that people are so busy and that busyness in and of itself is a bit of an addiction because busyness verifies, it gives us a sense that we're actually alive. It gives us a sense of I exist because I'm doing so much. But of course, it's a trap.

So the retreat that my wife and I run, it's called The Healing and Self-Expression Retreat. And it takes place in the Sacred Valley in Machu Picchu in Peru. And there are many reasons for this that we've decided to do this here.

First reason is that for most of the people that come with us, it's far away from home. And part of basically getting insights about new ways of living just comes from leaving home.

Second thing is that it's actually not – it's not taking in a place called the rainforest. It's actually taking in a place – the Sacred Valley is taking place in a spot that's halfway between the rainforest and the glaciers. So it has this really interesting thing of fire and ice. So it's a place where the Incas live, it's near Cusco which is the Inca capital in South America at the time, and it has a real power and resonance to it surrounded by big mountains. It's about 9,000 feet.

And so, there's a connection not only with the natural landscape but all around. And there's also a history of people again, relating to their environment in a more traditional way where they don't see the world outside them as being something that is inanimate but something that's always already helping them even if it's just a so-called mountain. That mountain itself has its own sense of consciousness. It's there.

And so, the other reason that we go down there is that they have traditional plant medicines that they work with that have been proven time and time again to help people in short periods of time to really go into those areas that are blocking their natural creativity and allow those things to be what we might call transmuted, seeing and then viewed on a new life and then almost like an Aikido move moved into becoming allies for your own creative awareness.

And again, it was just the retreat itself, those can be problematic because they can be experiences that they're like, "Wow! That was such a big life-changing exotic experience. I have no idea how to integrate that into my life." And so, we have a whole system by which we pre-integrate the people by understanding specifically what's going on in their life now, looking at aspects of their personal lives and their professional lives.

And then also, talk about what they can anticipate. We put them on a specific diet as we start to get them ready for the retreat. And then again, we close and seal the retreat with our intentions as a group of individually and collectively and then go on to the experience. And then we have integration afterwards as well so we can start to bring people back into their lives in a way where these insights that they're having these insights into who they are can start to be integrated into all aspects of their lives.

And so again, the reason that it's a retreat is because those are places that sort of the – kind of the metaphor of the person going to the mountaintops so they could see more clearly. It's sort of like that. It's that ability to step outside the gears and the cogs of your life and start to

engage in things very differently and so that you can start to really have that felt experience of what it's like to be a creator living in a creative universe. And I would also say a benevolent universe that has always been here to help you.

And so, those are all big parts of what we offer with that retreat. And it's quite special.

**Nick Skillicorn:** I mean it sounds like something a lot of people could benefit from if they are feeling this frustration and blockage. And I know a lot of people who either work in the creative fields, they experience this blockage as writer's block or if they work in business, they might want to be more creative but still feel blocked.

And on that line, we're unfortunately coming down to the end of the interview, I'm sure we could keep going for hours and hours but what I like to ask all the experts is if you have one tip or one thing that people can try out either this afternoon or later this week to become more creative and to overcome these creative blocks, what would you recommend they try out?

**Austin Hill Shaw:** Well, it's coming to mind in just this moment in time is to take a different route to work. Again, there are so many ways in which we get habituated to what we're doing that we don't – we fail to see the environments that we're actually even in.

So my tip for today was if you're going to work or if you're coming home from work, either try a slightly different route or try a slightly different means of going there. Maybe walk or ride your bike or take public transportation or if you take public transportation, maybe hop in someone's car.

When you start to just switch things in your environment on the things that you're doing on a daily basis, and I don't mean doing like life-changing kind of say, "I'm going to jot this in my career and do something different." When you just start to try new things incrementally in your life, it gives you perspective on the things that you're already doing.

Whereas on one end of the spectrum like we have this retreat where we're going in entirely different place where most people in culture working with things that they've never probably worked before, the thing that we can do, the baby step that actually starts to bring that sense of curiosity and awareness in our life, is just the switching up one small aspect of our routine and see how that changes our lives and be curious. Just see what arises from that.

And that would be my tip for today. It doesn't have to be big. It can just be these little incremental things that we do over time.

**Nick Skillicorn:** That's absolutely perfect. And we're going to have links to all of your resources on screen as well. Why don't you just quickly tell us where those resources are going to take people?

**Austin Hill Shaw:** Sure. So the first one is [www.AustinHillShaw.com](http://www.AustinHillShaw.com), and that's just a link to Creativity Matter and that has all sorts of resources on creativity and innovation, looking at across a variety of expressions, arts, science, and religion, and business and they're really organized by those different categories there. So, lots of things that you can see there.

We have certain things such as – I have a book called *The Shoreline of Wonder*, which was on being creative which was an 8-year project and going along with this theme of kind of getting out of your head and the busyness, the title came from a minister who once said, "The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder." So the idea that really the more that we think we can know, there's actually – there's more that we're not going to know. And actually being in that space of wonder I think is actually better way to live.

And then I also have the Creativity Matters Medicine Retreat. And you can kind of see the URL at the bottom. It's just [www.CreativityMattersMedicineRetreat.com](http://www.CreativityMattersMedicineRetreat.com). And this is – it takes place down in the Sacred Valley in Machu Picchu in Peru and the beautiful Andes Mountains.

And finally, for people that are interested in the architectural design work, I have a website, 3 Lights Design. And we have a really unique way of going about designing where we really try to understand people's beliefs and values and involve them as co-creators in the process, not just going and say, "Hey, we're the experts. We know what to do. Here's what we think you should do." We really want to activate people's creativity through listening and really understand the joy of whoever they are.

We had a conversation earlier before this began, just so that we can know one another. That's an important thing that facilitates creativity and really that desire for us to feel connected on a really heart-centered level.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Perfect. Austin, it has been wonderful speaking with you. And I look forward to speaking again with you soon.

**Austin Hill Shaw:** Yes, thank you so much. Best of luck with the summit. I'm so grateful for you to doing all your work and bringing more creativity and innovation in the world and empowering people to really take that on. So I'm really grateful for you taking the time to bring us all together to learn from one another. Thank you so much.