

Today, our guest is [Susannah Conway](#). Susannah is a writer, photographer and teacher who's been sharing her heart online over a decade. Susannah's creative courses have been enjoyed by thousands of people from over 50 countries around the world. Her first book, [This I Know: Notes On Unraveling The Heart](#), hit bookshelves in 2012. Her most recent, [Londontown: A Photographic Tour of the City's Delights](#), was published in 2016. Hi, Susannah. Welcome to the show.

Hi, lovely. Thanks for having me.

**It's great to hear your voice. Susannah, you're a fellow Londoner like me but you're not from London originally.**

No, I grew up in the South Coast. I've been in London on and off since I think 1995, so quite a few years.

**Are you one of those Londoners who loves this city or do you loathe it or are you somewhere in the middle?**

I do love it. There are bits about living in the city that I hate obviously, but you have to roll with them. It's definitely a choice. I'm self-employed so I could work from anywhere but I choose to live here because I just find London endlessly inspiring. I think because my sister lives in the countryside and my mum lives on the South Coast still, I can go and stay with them when I need to get out of the city. I have the best of both worlds. I'm quite happy to be here for now. Not forever possibly, but for the next few years definitely. I love it here.

**What kinds of things inspire you about this city?**

Obviously, I could rattle off the usual things like the history, the beautiful buildings and it's all of that. I just love the energy of the place. I'm quite fond of Londoners. We can be quite a sort of morose bunch. When you're on the Tube and you just say, "Oh God, cheer up a bit." We've got that wartime spirit, I don't think that ever really left. I have the best chats, for example, with London cab drivers. I always have the best chats with them. They always give me little tidbits of information that I never knew. Like there was a giraffe on the Strand. This cab driver was telling me this story that there was a zoo thing happening. I don't even remember but it was amazing and it kept me very entertained for half an hour for our journey. I just love that whoever I talk to here, there's a friendliness that maybe tourists don't always see but I seem to uncover it. Maybe I'm just quite smiley. There's always someone I can talk to and I really love that. I like the Londoners possibly even more than the city itself. I think it's the people that make the city what it is, don't you think?

**I agree. I think that's the case in any place. The people really, really give a strong sense of the city by how they interact with each other and just how they conduct themselves. To me, listening to what you've just said there, it sounds like you're open to possibility, you're open to having conversation and making connections as you move about the city. Is that fair to say?**

Yes, absolutely. I work from home and at the moment I'm trying to work outside of my home a bit more these days. Get out and about and see the sky a bit more often. That means that I'm having more conversations with people, which I actually really like. I'm also introverted but if I'm going out in little pockets of time and chatting to people, I can handle that. I think if I had to be in an office again, working full-time for someone, I don't think that would work so well. Now that I know that my introversion just means that I like a lot of time on my own. I like to recharge in that way. I can set my days in a way that

suits me better. Which means that when I do see people, whether it's friends or strangers – I like talking to strangers - I can handle it better. I'm managing my energy and my time better. I think it's fun to talk to new people. That's how I learn things. There's something about that. The older I get, the more curious I am. I like talking to people.

**Will you tell us about some of the ways in which you create these moments of quiet and stillness? What kinds of practical things do you do, and do you choose not to do, in order to maintain this balance of the outside world and lots of stimulation but then also making sure that you stay centred and well and calm?**

You've just got to avoid the busy places, as a literal thing. If I'm in London, in the city, then I'll always try and go get down the back roads and the side roads. I avoid where I know loads of people are. Sometimes you can't avoid them. In that case, I just centre myself. It's quite hard to describe really. It's not like a meditation but I just feel like I draw all my energy into me and then I move through people, rather than just being all over the place. I just gather myself into myself and then go through the crowd. If I'm in the Tube or in a particularly busy bit of the city then I tend to do that. I try and avoid it. I try not to be travelling at rush hour because I don't need to and everyone else is travelling there. I love to find quieter places. I'll always want to go to the quieter café. I've been hanging out at the British Library recently, but I've got to find the quiet corners. It wasn't as quiet as I thought it would be.

**No, it's busy. It's always busy there.**

Yeah, there were loads of people. I'm like, "What is this? Like a nightclub?" I went into the reading room where it's silent and that was really lovely. Anywhere where it's a little bit quieter, or even just walking from say Bond Street Tube towards Oxford Circus Tube, I will always go the back roads if I can. It's interesting because people would never seem to think to do that. They're always in the main bit and maybe it's because London is just so jam-packed full of visitors that they don't realise that. It's great for someone who's full-time, lives here all the time. You can go around the secret side bits and it's like being in another world. I really like going the Barbican at the weekend because there are not many people around or even main bits of the City, like the financial district or even over on Canary Wharf. There's no one around in the weekend. It's lovely. It just suddenly feels so much more spacious.

The other side of that, I live in Hampstead so obviously, I can just step out my door and go to the Heath. That feels like a little bit of the countryside in the middle of the city. That has saved my sanity so many times in the year that I've been living here. It's just been fantastic. I can sit in the trees and I still hear the planes going over. I can still hear the traffic. But I can just step outside of that and commune with the trees. It's lovely. I think that keeps me sane. I think if I was living in Elephant and Castle or somewhere like that, I could go a bit nuts. You have to choose where you live and you have to be quite mindful about that. I think that makes a difference definitely.

**Speaking of mindfulness, do you have any particular mindfulness practice that you would like to share with us?**

I am currently meditating every morning, which is going really well. My history with meditation has always been pretty up and down. I'm highly sensitive, which generally means that I feel a lot of feelings all the time. It's not always this, "Everything is so beautiful." It doesn't always feel like that. I'm usually just a little bit anxious or overwhelmed. I find it quite hard to power down when I've got a lot going on.

My mind gets really overwhelmed, which is why I'm making quite a conscious effort at the moment to meditate in the morning and that's really helping. I think if you can start off your day doing something mindfully. You might not have time to do twenty minutes of meditation or if you got kids running around or you've got to get to work. Even five minutes in the shower thoughtfully can make such a difference. It's finding these little tiny pockets of bringing your attention back to the present moment rather than being stuck in the past or thinking about what's going to happen tomorrow, but actually bringing yourself back to what's happening right now. That's helped me so many times especially in this season of dating I'm currently moving through.

If I get carried away, my thoughts are rushing and I'm thinking about, "What if?" I bring myself back to right now? How am I right now? Generally, the answer is, "I'm okay, right now." That helps me so much. My mindfulness looks like bringing my attention back to the right now as much as I possibly can. Obviously, I don't do it that well but when I remember, it really helps. Meditation in the morning, game changer. Mindfulness back into the moment whenever I can. I live on my own so my evenings are pretty quiet. I read a lot. I watch Netflix. I just chill as much as I can. I much rather do that. I'm not a pub person. I've never really been like that actually. I like to relax as much as possible and power down as much as possible because that can be challenging sometimes. I can get too over-stimulated. As much powering down as I can, that really helps: music, books, journaling every single day.

### **What does journaling look like to you?**

It looks like breathing. That's what it looks like. I've been journaling in some form or other since I was 11 years old. It's always having a notebook near me. Essentially, I started when my guinea pig died when I was 11. One of my first entries was about, "That guinea pig wasn't very well," and in the next entry, "The guinea pig had died." That's how I started writing. I'd always written little notes and was always making little notebooks. The actual diary writing, that's what I called it, began then. It's interesting that that was the same year that my parents broke up and my dad moved away. Obviously, I needed a little outlet to record my thoughts. It just never stopped. At the moment, I currently write in Moleskines. I have for the last twelve years. I always use a large, lined Moleskine. I like the uniformity in size. I like them all being the same size. I use a Parker ballpoint pen, which I find writes really well on the paper. I just write wherever I need to write. I don't chronicle my days. I did for a while years ago but I don't really bother with that now. It's not a memoir writing. It's much more functional and much more active, if you like.

Every entry, I write down the date. At the moment, I write down what day of my cycle I'm on, my menstrual cycle, because that's really helpful to look back and trace the pattern of mood changes and how I feel. I write those two things down and then whatever I need to write. It could be a general prompt that I'm answering. It could be some thoughts. It could be a tarot card reading I want to record. It could be five pages of stream of consciousness. It's whatever I need. It's always there. Some days, I write every day and some days, I don't. I was actually looking at some old diaries this morning, some old journals. I noticed that in 2015, I filled one Moleskine and that was it. It wasn't even all the way to the end. Yet already in this year, 2017, I've already filled three and we've only just started July. I'm like, "What was happening in 2015 that I didn't want to record?"

It's things like that is so interesting to look at and see the patterns and how my brain changes and what's important and what's not important. I've been looking through all these old journals because I just like to keep on top of my progress, I suppose. I find it quite fascinating. I've always note down

general prompts or exercises or coaching tools and stuff like that. It's quite nice to go through them and find the dog-eared pages that I've turned down to refer back to and stuff like that.

It's not just useful in the moment, it's also a resource. I can flick through and see the bits that I've underlined or I've written in red, bits that stood out, stuff that I've written after a meditation, reading it back, I'm like, "Where did that come from? That didn't come from me." There are clues in there and breadcrumbs that I can follow backwards. It's amazing how some of the things I've written down, I'm reading it now and thinking, "I was thinking about it two years ago and look at what I've manifested, it's happened." I love having that accountability and proof, I suppose. It feels like proof. Journaling is how I stay alive. That's how important it is. It's my number one.

### **For someone who's never been a journaler, what would be a good entry point for a newbie?**

Buy a notebook that you don't feel too precious about. That would be my number one. Stationery porn, I'm all over that. I love me some leather-bound notebooks, don't get me wrong. But I never write in them because they're too perfect and too beautiful. It's like, "I must write poetry," and of course I don't. I use a Moleskine, which is the pricier end of the notebook scale but I use them because I know I can just buy another one and I can just buy another one and I can just buy another one. I'm not precious about them. You don't have to buy a ten quid Moleskine, obviously. Just any old notebook will do. You could always collage on the cover or somewhere further down the line. You can do whatever you want but don't be precious about it. If you feel like you have to write perfect things, you're never going to write it. Just get any old notebook, a good place to start. Get a pen you enjoy writing with, that's nice. There's nothing worse than a pen that's a bit scratchy and drags on the paper. That's really annoying. Get a pen that feels good, a paper that feels good. Write down the date on the first page and just write something.

What I tell my students to do is you could write down a quote that might be good or a passage from a book that you're reading or a quote that someone said that you've just read in an interview. It could be a poem that you really love or anything you like. You could stick a picture on there. Just fill the first page with something so then it feels like the book is started. That's really helpful because I think the fear of the blank page can be quite overwhelming. If you're not sure, "What the heck am I going to write?" Then at least something is down on there.

Another thing I suggest they do is just try to tear up a bit of the page and mess it up a bit because then it immediately takes the preciousness out of it. Not everyone wants to do that but I quite like the idea. Just mess it up and then it's already messed up. It doesn't matter. Turn the page and write about how you feel today. That's a good place to start. What's the weather doing? Is it sunny? Is it cloudy? Does it feel warm? Do you want to put a cardigan on? How do you feel? What were you thinking about this morning? Just write some stuff down like that. Just notice where you are today. Are you at home? Are you at work? Do you need to take the kids to the school? Are you in a rush? Does the dog want to go out? Just notice your environment, notice what's on your mind and jot it down. That could be your first little entry.

Then see how you feel the next day, do it again. Keep going in that way and just see if you can notice what's around you and have that be enough for now. I often find that if I don't know what to write, but one good prompt is just to right down, "I don't really know what to say." On the next line, "I don't really know what to write about," and then on the next line, "This is pointless, why am I doing this?" Keep going until you bore yourself with that and then you're like, "Actually," and then you keep writing.

Forget about perfect sentences, forget about grammar, forget about spelling. No one else is going to read this. It's just for you. Just keep moving your pen. "I'm not really sure what I'm going to write about. Actually." You will be amazed at how the stuff you could jot down will just come to you. You're not writing something that's going to be graded. No one else is going to see it. You're just jotting down, "What are the thoughts in my head right now? What am I thinking about? What I could have for dinner?" You'll be amazed. It will just start spilling out. Just start in these small ways. Just observations, that's all you need to start with. That's more than enough to begin with.

**Next question for you is around walking. I'm a huge believer in the power of walking to boost our creativity, to help us feel well, to help us notice things. We were walking down the street last week and I was really amused because you did what I always do, which is to look up. That's the photographer in you that's trained to really look and see what others do not see. Will you tell us a little bit about your experience of creating [Londontown](#)?**

When I knew I was moving back to the city, I spoke to my editor and I said, "How cool would it be if we did a book about London?" It was chronicle books and I knew they did art books. I published a book with them about Polaroid photography. I was quite excited. My underlying, my secret reason for wanting to do it was because I knew it would get me out of the house. It would give me a reason and a purpose to go out into the city and explore. I really wanted to do that. But I knew, lazy, introverted, working-from-home me wouldn't get out of the house. I really needed a reason and I needed a deadline and I needed that pressure.

I talked to Bridget and she loved the idea. She said, "Make up a proposal and I will show it to everyone and let's see what they say." I did that and they said yes. I gave myself four or five months in the end to shoot the book. I knew I wanted it to be quite a sunny book. We get a lot of rain here but I wanted to shoot part of the book on Polaroid film, which meant that I really didn't want to be shooting in the rain and not with my lovely vintage camera in the rain. That just wasn't an option. I ended up mainly going out on sunny days and I shot it over spring and summer. Inevitably, London looks way sunnier than it actually is. I wanted it to be bright. I wanted it to be vibrant. Also, I was out on the streets. I just really didn't want to shoot the book under an umbrella. That just would be rubbish.

It became this mission that I'd say 75% of it was enjoyable and the rest of it was a bit crap because it was very tiring. This is the real thing. You see these books and you're like, "Wow, that must have been amazing." I was like, "Yes, it was but also it's very tiring." Any sort of crazy project, you want to put all of yourself into it, which is what I did. Of course, at the end of it I was really tired. But it was so amazing to have a reason to go into the city. I went to places that I've been before but I also made a point of going to places I haven't been. I spoke to lots of people. A lot of my London lovers feeling came from that because there were so many people I talked to because I was carrying this massive Polaroid camera. Everyone would stop, "Can you still get film for that?" They were just fascinated by this camera I had hanging around my neck, so I had loads of conversations.

It was just such a lovely way to befriend the city again and fall in love with it again and to go to places that I'd known before and see how they've changed. That was really interesting. Just walk, look up, look down. Don't always just point your camera from the same position. It's always we hold it up to our eyes and then we shoot. No. What's happening above you? What's happening below you? Go down that road that no one goes. Look at that. What's that crappy bird over there? That could be really interesting. It was such a nice challenge.

Because part of the book was shot on digital or most of it in the end, I was shooting thousands of pictures because I just wanted to record as much as possible. I wanted to get a feel for the place. I didn't intentionally shoot any portraits, but inevitably the book is filled with people because London is filled with people. As I was shooting, it felt like they were playing out. It was almost like they were on a stage or I was in the theatre and I was just observing them playing out these little scenes in front of me. There were so many lovely moments when I caught a picture and I just thought, "I couldn't have staged that any better." These people just walk by and it just looked right. That was really enjoyable.

The next part of it was obviously going through the images, editing them down. I think in the end I had to give my editor 300 pictures, which is ridiculous, it's a tiny amount. Edit down and come up with a final selection. Then they laid it out, and then that came back to me and I swapped out images and reordered things. I'm pleased with how it turned out. It looks like a slice of London. It's my slice of London. There are millions of people here and everyone has their own slice of it. It's not the definitive, "This is London," because there are eight million, "This is London," for eight million people that live here. Whenever anyone said to me, "I'm coming to London, where should I go?" I can now go, "Have a look at my book." Because those are all the places I will tell you to go to and I love that. It was a joy to do. It was tiring but it was really worth it.

**On that note then, is there a secret hidden location or hidden gem that didn't make it into the book for whatever reason in the final edit that you could recommend to us to check out when we're next in a particular part of London?**

Yeah, there was one actually. I don't know if it's even worth going to but it's good to know that it's there. There's a windmill in Brixton which I found out about. I obviously didn't know it was there. I made a special trip to the Brixton Windmill. The community was renovated and made new and made beautiful. There's the big main road in Brixton. It's off that main road but it's got a pub by it. It's bonkers, you would never think there's a bloody windmill in Brixton. It's so cool. I wouldn't send tourists from out-of-town to go and see it. It's not that big a deal. But knowing it's there and if you ever find yourself in the area, it's worth a look because it's so Instagramable. It's a bloody windmill, how cool?

I think on the end pages in the book, they did a collage of lots of the pictures that didn't make it in. I think if you look carefully, you might find the windmill might be on there. It made it into the book but right at the end. It's not on the main page. That was my favourite discovery I think out of all the places I went to. Also, because I spent a whole day getting there and I made a point of finding it. It felt important to find the windmill and I did. I thought it was really actually cool. It's not Big Ben obviously, it's not the Tate, but it's a little secret place that I think is pretty cool.

**I've never heard about that. The next time I'm in Brixton, I should go and hunt it down. What kind of day do you most enjoy in London and why? I understand that that might vary depending on the season also.**

A day where I don't have to be anywhere in particular helps. I've always loved Portobello Road, that's why I used to live there. I like walking down there not on the weekend because that's when all the tourists are there. On a Wednesday afternoon, it's really nice little walk and get some veggies and get a coffee. I've always enjoyed that. When I first moved to London, I was living in the East End and I'd make my pilgrimage every Saturday morning to go to the market on the Flyover on Portobello. That holds

special memories so I like walking there. I always love wandering in Soho just because it's Soho. Again, it has memories from when I first moved there, my first move to the city, so I like that.

I like wandering around the Heath, I do really love that. Primrose Hill is lovely. There's a bookshop in Cecil Court just off Charing Cross Road called Watkins Books. They have loads of tarot cards and spiritual books. I always like making bit of a pilgrimage there and treating myself to something. I like a wander. I do love a wander and if I can find myself a present, I always appreciate that. Not like high street but just a deck of cards or a book from somewhere. I like hanging out in Foyles. Although the new Foyles is a bit groovy but it's not quite the same. I'll hide in a bookshop for a couple of hours, that always floats my boat. I like doing that.

I love going to the Natural History Museum. I hate that it's always so filled with people. I like to go and see the whale in the mammal section because every time I see it, even now, I look at it and just say, "Oh, my god. It's so big." That's always a thrill. Last year, my nephew came to London for the first time ever. I said, "We are going to the Natural History Museum." I took him to see the whale. He was like, "Wow," and then was gone. He spent all of two seconds looking at it and then just ran off. I was like, "Oh man." He didn't quite get how cool it was. I like to be able to show him even if it was just a two-second thing. We checked that off the list.

I think the theme there is going to places that remind me of things. I love exploring. I loved going to Maltby Street Market, I discovered when I was shooting the book because everyone always goes to Borough Market but I see Maltby Street is way cooler. I like going there. Finding new places like that or new to me places was nice. Inevitably, where I wander is going to be because it's got memories and you're walking through all these memories. I like that and I like going to bits of the city that I'm really familiar with because it feels like your town and I love that. I love that feeling of being a Londoner. There's something about it. I'm not visiting, I live here. I've always loved that feeling. That's never gone away in all these years. It's never gone. Sad but true.

**It's true, there's nothing sad about it. What you've just said really resonates with me, very much so. What I would love to ask you about is the relationship that you have between memory and place and senses. For instance, I know that you're a big fan of scent and that's really important to you. For me, the whiff of a perfume or the particular tang of rain on a summer's day or the whoosh of wind and the aroma of it that you get when you're on the Underground here in London can transport me to a particular moment and time and place in my past in a split second. That's really comforting, sometimes it could be startling. I'm just curious about your relationship with the senses as you move about the city and how that comes into play with those memories also.**

I think being highly sensitive means that it's sometimes on maximum volume, which could be quite overwhelming. Yeah, I know exactly what you mean because I feel the same. The smell of London is a very particular smell. It smells different to New York, for example. I can think of the smell of New York right now and I can think of the smell of London and they're different. In Soho, it's probably the most concentrated smell of London to me. It's something about the rubbish in the street, the smell of the pavement, there will be a coffee smell or a food smell or a whiff of cigarette. It's really evocative of city, that city smell. Whereas somewhere like Bristol smells different to me because you've got the docks there and you can smell the water. Each place has a different smell.

I'm walking around and sometimes my senses feel a bit assaulted, like there's so much, especially on a hot day. Your skin's hot and you can smell the food. Like in the Brick Lane, that's just a massive assault on my body. Sometimes it can be pleasurable and sometimes I find it really overwhelming because the wrong smell and I'm like, "I can't get pass that. I can't un-smell it." People jostling against you, sometimes it's just too much. My favourite scent memories would be getting off the Heathrow Express at Paddington and just stepping out into the station and going to get a cab. Just the smell of London wafting in there and just feeling like, "I'm home." It smells like home and I love that. That's a lovely way when you can smell this over metropolitan dirt. The smell of dirt, isn't it? But it's comforting.

It's like when I go to my mum's and I go to the sea and that's the smell of my childhood; that salty, sticky smell.

London is the smell of pavement for me and it's powerful and evocative and sometimes yuck.

### **Where would you live if you didn't live in London?**

I would live in Gloucestershire. I'd want to live near my nephews. Or I'd live in New York. If I didn't have any family ties here, I'd live in New York, which would probably be even more intense than living in London. London is bigger geographically. I'd love to live in New York for a while. I'd love to live somewhere like Sydney, a city near the ocean. How cool would that be? If London was on the sea front, it would be perfect. I'd love that. I think Gloucestershire, I'd love to be closer to the boys. That would be pretty amazing. Maybe one day I'll make that happen.

### **For anyone listening who is not familiar with Gloucestershire, would you tell us a little bit about that place as a contrast to what London is like?**

Gloucestershire, it's about an hour and a half from London. It's a county. There are different towns and villages there. Where my sister lives, there are a lot of fields, a lot of greenery, your quintessential English countryside. That's where she lives. I'd love to buy some land to build a house, have lots of space, have dogs running around and meditating to the sun rising without hearing my neighbour coughing as he makes his coffee. How amazing to have that space? There are lots of really quaint little villages. It's very pretty, it's very green, it's very lovely. I'm sure it has all the problems that everywhere does but I love the spaciousness. I could live anywhere in England, obviously, it's all very leafy and green and lovely. But Gloucestershire is a county where my family is. To be close to them would mean everything. I'm only an hour and half away on the train but I love the idea of the daily-ness of the boys coming around after school. Maybe one day, we'll make that happen.

### **Susannah, the final question is, what are you curious about right now and why?**

I am curious about men because I am, as I said earlier, I'm dating. I'm figuring things out and I'm very interested in men. I've been in very long relationships and I've loved and I've lost and I've lived my life. I'm coming back at it with this curiosity about, obviously, I'm heterosexual, I'm looking for a partner and it would be a man. I'm curious about men again. I've been on my own for a really long time and my curiosity has been piqued. I don't think I'll ever understand them just as they'll probably never understand me. I'm interested and fascinated by our differences and how that could work in a relationship again. This person that would be a match for me and who I'd be a match for and how we'll get to know each other and how the sexes can interact and support each other. I'm very interested in the divine feminine but also the divine masculine and how we carry these masculine and feminine traits.



We have both of them in us. I've been exploring how my own inner masculine...what that looks like because I'm very in touch with my feminine side. What about my sense of masculinity and how can that be reflected back at me in a relationship?

I've got all these questions and I'm doing a lot of journaling. I'm very curious about men at the moment. I'm finding it endlessly fascinating. I always love a good personal development project to get my teeth into. That's what this is turning into and it's fascinating to me. I'm learning so much even now even more. There's always so much to learn. I'm game on, I'm into it, I'm doing it.

**Susannah, where can people find out more about your work?**

Just go to my website [SusannahConway.com](http://SusannahConway.com) and I've got links to all my [social media](#) there and my [courses](#) and my [books](#). It's all there in one place on the internet.

**It's been such a treat to have you on the Urban Curiosity podcast today. Thanks so much, Susannah.**

Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

[Susannah Conway](#)

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