

EPISODE #023 (Transcript)

Charlie Sandlan (00:02):

One of the things that I have come to really enjoy about this podcast is the opportunities that I have had to be able to talk to interesting artists that I have a great deal of respect for, that I admire, and being able to share that with you.

Charlie Sandlan (00:16):

Today is no different. Jessica Blank who, along with her husband, Erik Jensen, have defined the genre of documentary theater for the last 20 years, she is an actress, a director, a writer, a producer, a teacher. She has devoted her entire working life to the act of creation. We're going to talk today about the creative process, about working through creative injury, plowing through the struggles that keep us from doing the work that we want to do. Now, we're going to find out why she hates the word inspiration and doesn't believe in talent.

Charlie Sandlan (01:06):

Put the phone back in your pocket, Creating Behavior starts now.

Charlie Sandlan (01:38):

Well, hello, my fellow daydreamers. I can officially say that I did my civic duty. I put my ballot in the mail, dropped it in the official voting mailbox at the City Hall in Hoboken, New Jersey. It's all good, it's at least one small act of resistance. Hopefully, you guys are going to do the same. Get your ballot in the mail, if you're going to do that, or make sure you have the third marked off so that you can go to your polling place and do what we need to do, which is get this piece of shit out of our life.

Charlie Sandlan (02:21):

That being said, let's talk about Jessica Blank, I don't know how many of you have had the privilege to see the work that her and her husband have been producing for the last 20 years. It is a body of work that is rooted in the human condition and I know that

Erik has spoken a bit about what has inspired him. One of the people that moved him was the writer, Studs Terkel.

Charlie Sandlan (02:56):

I bring it up here right off the bat because I think it's a writer... he's the writer that you should know and investigate, certainly those of you that are interested in understanding just the lives of ordinary people, the human beings that do the work, that have the life experience. What Studs Terkel did... two books that actually moved me and I refer to quite often just to go back and read on occasion, two books, *The Good War* and another one of his books called *Working*. His whole style was really just recording oral history of men and women. *The Good War*, it was the experiences of the men and women who lived through and fought in World War II.

Charlie Sandlan (03:56):

Working is just a collection of incredible firsthand stories and accounts of just the working class Americans that keep this country going. It's great source material, especially if you're looking for something to inspire you maybe to start to think about your own storytelling.

Charlie Sandlan (04:19):

In that vein, I'll recommend another incredible writer who has been approaching work in the same way. It's a Russian writer and her name is Svetlana Alexievich. She's won a Nobel Prize in literature. Her firsthand accounts and interviews of Russian poor, the Russian working class are extraordinary insights into an entire different country and society.

Charlie Sandlan (04:53):

Add those two writers to your list of people to investigate.

Charlie Sandlan (05:00):

That leads me to the work that Jessica and her husband do, documentary theater. Back in 2002, Jessica and Erik created and produced the play, which is now so incredibly well known called *The Exonerated*. It was based on interviews with over 40

exonerated death row inmates and it ended up running for well over 600 performances off Broadway. It won the Outer Critics Circle Award, the Lucille Lortel Award, the Drama Desk Award. It won awards from Amnesty International, from the American Bar Association. It was made into a movie with Susan Sarandon, Danny Glover, Delroy Lindo, Aidan Quinn. It's been translated in over five different languages and has been produced and shown all over the world. It was an extraordinary documentation of a part of our culture, and our government, and our justice system that is truly, truly horrible and unfortunate. They brought light to it, these innocent men and women who sat in death row, sometimes for decades, and that play really led to a style of storytelling that they are known for. They produced the play, *Aftermath*, in 2008, which was a real peek into the life of Iraqi refugees in Jordan after Iraq War.

Charlie Sandlan (06:49):

One of the reasons why I wanted to talk to her today was her experience with producing and putting up *Coal Country*. Now, *Coal Country* was a theater piece that had to deal with the Upper Big Branch Mine explosion in 2010. This was a labor of love, this was a project that took years to put together. Her and Erik had a long collaboration with the Public Theater in New York City. This show, *Coal Country*, opened in the first week of March. It was caught up in the pandemic and closed eight days later. This labor of love, this project that Jessica will speak about here, poured her heart and her soul into was just canceled because the world was on fire, and that's very much like grieving a death and how do you work through that to be able to start to create again. She talks about that.

Charlie Sandlan (08:05):

What I found really amazing is that suffering that kind of creative injury, which is how she describes it, within a couple of months, her and Erik were putting together what is now, I think, an example, the leading example of what is possible on the Zoom

platform. They put together a piece called The Line, which, hopefully, many of you saw. It was streamed through the Public Theater all through July and August. What they did is, on Zoom, they were able to put together interviews with dozens of frontline workers, doctors, EMTs, nurses. What you got in that production was a real look into what the real heroes of this country have been dealing with and enduring. They did it in a way that put us, as the audience, in the position of the interviewer. It was just an incredible endeavor, it was timely, and it was important. We're going to talk about that and we're going to talk about just the creative life.

Charlie Sandlan (09:29):

The great thing about Jessica is that she's also a teacher. Her life really does start with wanting to help, wanting to help others bring their creative imagination into something concrete, into the actual physical world. She teaches at Juilliard and she has her own 14-module course on how to basically create work based on character. We're talking about character-based story structure. You can go to her website jessicacblank.com to find out everything you want to about her, about how she teaches, about what you can get from her decades of experience creating. She's a wonderful human being and I just had a blast talking to her. Let's just get into this conversation, shall we?

Charlie Sandlan (10:32):

Here's Jessica.

Charlie Sandlan (10:33):

I wanted to dive into something here that you said about suffering a creative injury, which, having Coal Country canceled right there in the first week of March, a labor of love, something you've poured your heart, your soul, everything you've had. You have this fantasy and this vision of what this is going to do. All of a sudden, it closed eight days after you opened, that's a traumatic event, that is a death in many ways. You described it as a creative injury. I'm just wondering what that was like and how you've

navigated yourself on the other side of that to be able to move forward and do something like *The Line*, which is just another great piece of documentary theater.

Jessica Blank (11:18):

I've heard people talk about creative injury before, but I had never really experienced it. I think, in the early years of being out there auditioning as an actor, I struggled like all actors do with the rejection aspect and learning how to process that in a productive way and in a way that turned into fuel rather than blocks. But, generally speaking, my MO has been keep making stuff, right? I've always got multiple projects going, I'm always moving forward. There's always rejection, there's always stuff that happens in this business. Especially if you're developing TV as a writer, it's heartbreak after heartbreak, after heartbreak, right? It's part of the nature of the beast, right? You just keep moving through. *Coal Country* was a really specific thing. It felt very much... I love that play with all of my heart.

Jessica Blank (12:14):

Steve Earle released an album called *Ghosts of West Virginia* that is the music from the play. I walked in actually to the office the other day, and Erik was playing it, and I just burst out into tears just hearing the songs. I really hope, with all of my heart, that we will reopen the play when we have theater again. In many ways, it's my favorite thing I've ever made. It felt very much like the culmination of 20 years of work. When we got that open at the Public Theater and I watched the audience, it was like, "Oh, okay, this is what I've been learning how to do and building towards for 20 years." There was so much momentum and we had just opened. Actually, after we opened, something even more important happened, which was the families, that the play's about, of the miners who were killed in the UBB disaster came to New York to see the play. Thank God that happened before we closed, but it was one of the most profound experiences of my life. It was just this flowering that was happening. In one day, it went from

that to complete shutdown, which I think I'm certainly not the only person who experienced that, right? Many, many of us in the theater experience that. It was really traumatic and I think we were in shock for a couple of weeks, right?

Jessica Blank (13:39):

I couldn't get out of bed, quite honestly. I was still on the phone with the Public everyday trying to figure out what was going to happen and when we could reopen it, but I was doing it from bed. But, I was definitely creatively paralyzed in a way that I have never experienced myself being before. Then, somewhere in the end of March, late March, The 24 Hour Plays approached us because they were doing this great Viral Monologues project and said, "Do you want to do a viral monologue?" We said, "Well, can we do it Erik and Jessica style? Can we do a documentary one?" They were totally open to that and so I put out a call to find a New York City nurse. This was really at the beginning of the peak where the hospitals didn't have PPE. It was a complete panic, disaster, really scary moment. We did an interview with a nurse that was quite profound, moving, and really affected us. We made that into a monologue.

Jessica Blank (14:51):

Because I was talking to the Public all the time about what was going to happen with Coal Country, I just said to the Public, I was like, "Look, what do you think about some kind of rapid response online documentary play based on interviews with New York City medical first responders?" I think, at that point, they were still really figuring out what they were going to do. But, a few weeks later, they called us back and they were like, "Let's do it." I am so incredibly grateful for that because I don't know how we would have started making work again if we hadn't had the structure that that gave us. It was a commission. We had the whole staff of the Public work... because we were trying to do it so fast, almost like journalism, we had an army of transcribers. The whole admin staff of the Public was all involved. It was really this huge team effort

and to be able to have that infrastructure midwifed us back into being able to make work again. Since we made *The Line*, now, we're on deadline and working on our screenplays that we should've been working on before, and developing television, and doing things in a more self-directed way. But, I don't think I could've made it out of that paralysis and figured out how to start making work again without the support of our creative community. I'm really, really grateful for that.

Jessica Blank (16:16):

I cried a lot.

Jessica Blank (16:18):

I was just in shock and cried a lot. But, usually, my MO is like, "I'll cry and then I'll make something," you know what I mean, or I'll channel it immediately into something. I think there was just this moment where we didn't know how. The only thing in my creative life, creative career that I can compare it to is there was actually a moment right after 9/11 that was somewhat similar. When 9/11 happened, we had, in late 2000, just put up the first early readings of what would become *The Exonerated*.

Jessica Blank (17:00):

The whole community just stopped and was like, "Well, is anybody ever going to make anything ever again? Are we ever going to be able to do theater at all? Is this even a thing?" Right? That's what it felt like also in March, right? I think, in a certain way, it still feels like that to much of the industry, although people are continuing to move forward, but I'm not a doomsday person about... theater people are going to be theater people. We are going to make it happen, right? We're going to open when theaters open again, we're all going to make amazing work because that's what we do. I think, in terms of the theater industry as a whole, in terms of how we all approach our own practice creatively, all of that, there is an opportunity here to look at, "Okay, how do we do what we do? How can we innovate new

ways of doing it? What parts of the old model worked and what parts need to be reinvented?"

Charlie Sandlan (17:59):

When it first happened and I closed my studio that same week, the 12th, the 13th, right? I was like, "Fuck this. I'm not doing this online. We're going to wait." I was just holding space for everybody. We were reading plays, and watching films, and talking about it. Everybody was upset, and depressed, and felt that it was unfair [inaudible 00:18:18]. Then, you realize, "Oh, you've got to move forward." You know this, I'm sure, because you've put work on this platform. You can absolutely live through an experience, you can listen, you can work off another human being. You can be open, and available, and there to be done to by another person. I've seen extraordinary things online.

Jessica Blank (18:43):

Yeah, that was another thing that really gave me life about doing The Line because I think we were one of the... there was the Richard Nelson play. He wrote a Zoom play that was part of the Apple plays and then I think we were the second thing that happened during-

Charlie Sandlan (19:04):

It laid an example, a real example of what's possible.

Jessica Blank (19:08):

Right, I'm so grateful that it was that because, at the beginning, we were like, "I don't know, I don't know if this is going to work, I don't know if I'm going to be able to..." I didn't know if the actors would be able to listen and respond to each other. I was like, "We'll try it, but I have no idea if it's even possible to do this kind of work in this medium." But, it was part of what enabled me to come back alive as an artist again was to see how tenacious the thing is in us that we work from, right? The thing that we make theater from, that connecting, that listening and responding, and that ineffable energy that exists between us of like, "Sure, it's not the same if we're not in a room. We can't get a coffee on the

break and shoot the shit about our life," right? There are some things that feel different. But, when you actually get to the work, the thing that is the energy, that is the essence of the work is still there, and that was so amazing for me to see and have that confirmed.

Charlie Sandlan (20:14):

It's reaffirming, it gives you hope, it gives you hope for what comes next because we're not going back to pre-March, right? It's going to be a new dynamic, a new world, a new way that we relate to each other, hopefully a new government. Well, what did this play help you understand about the pandemic that you didn't understand before you started talking to these real life heroes that are just going through unbelievable stress, anxiety, grief, anger? They're extraordinary human beings.

Jessica Blank (20:51):

Absolutely extraordinary human beings. We definitely got a much bigger, clearer picture of the pandemic and what it felt like inside the hospitals because that was something that wasn't being covered in the press.

Jessica Blank (21:05):

Most people weren't allowed to talk. The people we spoke to spoke to us anonymously. I think I had an intellectual understanding before doing the interviews for The Line of the extraordinary disparities in outcomes and the impact of the pandemic across racial lines, the racism that exists in the healthcare system and how profoundly disproportionate the impact that this had on communities of color, and working class communities, and poor communities was.

Jessica Blank (21:41):

I understood that intellectually but hearing the actual descriptions of how that played out was like, "Oh, this is really..." then, George Floyd was murdered just as we finished the interviews. We went back and did a couple re-interviews with people to just incorporate a little bit of that moment because it was part of the moment. I

think the country was waking up, in a lot of ways, in that moment and, alongside that, just getting a really close look at how systemic racism plays out not only in the places where we expect it to play out like policing but in the healthcare system, and in access to medical care, and in exposure to the pandemic, and protection from it, and the whole thing about who could work remotely and who couldn't, that was really, really clear with everyone we spoke to. Then, I think, with all of our documentary work, we talked to ordinary people who have lived through extraordinary circumstances and thus become extraordinary themselves or were already extraordinary but just nobody every asked them before, right? This was just another iteration of that, of like, "Oh, my God."

Jessica Blank (23:05):

You sit with anyone for four hours and ask them to really tell their story, you're probably going to hear something that blows your mind and inspires you, just people who we walk by on the street are living things everyday that are just absolutely mind-blowing. Every single one of us is capable, human beings are capable of everything. We can do the most evil things and the most extraordinary, beautiful, transcendent healing things, right? We all have all of these capacities inside of us and that's why every moment is a choice of which of those capacities are we going to live out.

Charlie Sandlan (23:48):

It's a very permissive art form, acting, writing, storytelling, because, you do, you get to live out all parts of the human experience. Why do you like to teach? You've got a full creative life. But, yet, the key aspect is you teaching, and helping, and wanting to help, and wanting to help people put their stories into some sort of active form so it goes beyond just something rattling around in their mind. Why do you... what do you love about teaching?

Jessica Blank (24:13):

Oh, my God. I love so much about teaching, so I started just by coaching actors. Then, gradually, again, organically, I started getting a lot of actors coming to me who are interested in making their own work, who wanted to learn how to write. I'm a professional writer and I know how to write, but I came to it through being an actor first, right? My methodology and the way I teach writers, whether they're actors first or not, is grounded very, very deeply in character and in an actor's understanding of character, right? To me, plot comes out of character. It's character first. That started developing organically, that I started working with actors to teach them how to write and all on a one-on-one kind of coaching basis and just intuitively.

Jessica Blank (25:07):

I discovered that I'm a creative midwife, right? I love that work and it's similar to the experience I have when I direct something also, right? It's so beautiful when it's somebody else's work. It's this magical thing of like, "I can see what's there and I can see the highest potentiality of what's there." I work with writers of all levels. I work with network show runners and studio screen writers, but I also work with total first-time writers who have a project that they want to do but don't know how to do it, and everything in between. But, I can look at an idea and see what wants to come through. That process of listening, and holding space for what wants to come through, and then pulling it out, and helping somebody discover how to pull it out of themselves, it's so gratifying to see. It's amazing. Anytime you do something that's new, your inner critic is going to show up to try to protect you, right?

Jessica Blank (26:18):

I do think that's... we all struggle with that and I definitely help all of my clients navigate that part of the process. The creative process is full of I don't know at every stage all the time and we get so scared of that. We're so socialized to think that, in order to do something that we want to do, we have to know how to do it

already, and that stops so many people... everything that I've done, I had no idea how the fuck to do it when I started doing it. I learned how to do it by doing it and by getting really comfortable in that space of I don't know, comfortable enough that I could specifically identify what I didn't know that I wanted to learn and seek out the people that knew those things, and that's how you learn. But, if you think you're already supposed to know, then you're not even in an open enough space to figure it out.

Jessica Blank (27:21):

A lot of people come to me, whether it's like, "I've been making television for 20 years, but I don't know how to write this one show idea because it's not commercial in the way that my other work is. It's a departure," or, "I don't know... I'm an actor, but I have a solo show inside of me. I don't know to make the thing that I can envision in my head a thing on the page," or, "I'm a novelist, but I have a feature film idea. I don't know how I would possibly conceptualize externalizing all of the action of my story into something that I could actually shoot or that somebody could actually shoot." I get a lot of people who are in that I don't know space but have been comfortable enough with it to identify that they need to seek out some specific answers. They find their way to me.

Charlie Sandlan (28:25):

They come to you and you're able to get them past the I don't know?

Jessica Blank (28:29):

Yeah, or through it, or work with it and ask more... I ask a lot of questions when I start working with somebody, right? A lot of it is like they'll... some people will show up and be like, "Well, I don't really have an idea, I only have this little piece of it." Then, they'll tell me 10 minutes of... I'll be like, "You have an idea." Then, I'll just ask them questions, so many questions about the idea. Then, they start talking and then they discover things. It's like, that's how you build, that's how you make something from nothing.

Jessica Blank (29:04):

I don't believe in talent and it's a lazy concept, right? I think it's something... when somebody does something amazing but we don't understand how they're doing it, we say, "Oh, they're talented." No, they're doing something, right? They're doing something specific and I think we understand... I talk a lot about sacred geometry in storytelling because I think we understand when it comes to music or when it comes to visual art, that there is a sacred geometry to those forms. There's a set of underlying principles or mathematical structures that are preexisting that a musician is working with, right? A musician is working with scales. They're working with chord structures, they're working with music... there's a language or mathematics that they're learning. They become skilled in working with those structures and then their individual voice illuminates those structures, and that's artistry. To me, that's the relationship between craft and art.

Jessica Blank (30:14):

Craft is about understanding what the structures are, and having technique, and being able to move within them and work with them skillfully. Then, when you do that, if you bring courage to it, I believe the art shows up. Your individual voice shows up, right? We understand that with music, we understand it with visual art. There's compositional geometry and color theory. But, with story, culturally, we don't have a vocabulary for understanding what that is. If somebody takes us on a ride, as an actor, or as a writer, or as a director, and we're like, "Oh, they're talented because they're moving me in this amazing way and I don't understand how they're doing it. It must be because of their individual specialness." No, there are a set of craft principles underlying story structure that are just as concrete as music theory. We're just not trained in them in the same way.

Jessica Blank (31:12):

A lot of what I'm training people in also are those craft principles and about how story is actually structured and how it actually

works. What's amazing about working with actors who are starting to make their own work is actors who are trained understand those principles intuitively from the inside. We know when something'sactable, when a scene isactable and when it's not. We know how it feels, right?

Jessica Blank (31:40):

A lot of my work with actors who are starting to write is to take what they actually already know on a feeling level, on a somatic level, on a playability of the scene level and be like, "Look, here's what that writer's doing that makes that playable. You already have a barometer for whether it's working or not, you just have to shift your perspective a little bit to start implementing it.

Charlie Sandlan (32:05):

I have a number of things here that you have said that I, personally, have just found very interesting. I just want to quote them back to you and just have you-

Jessica Blank (32:16):

Cool.

Charlie Sandlan (32:17):

... and you just talk about it. Here's the first one that I thought, "Oh, this is great,"..... I hate the word inspiration.

Jessica Blank (32:23):

Uh-huh, yeah. Inspiration to me is... that's like talent, that's another one of those bullshit words that keeps artists paralyzed and stops them from making their work because we mystify it. We romanticize it and we think of it as a prerequisite, right? It's like, "I can only work if I feel inspired." It's not that there's no such thing as feeling inspired. We've all felt that feeling. It's equivalent to being in the zone. But, for some reason, we mystify, romanticize, whatever that feeling, and put it on a pedestal, and think that we need to feel that way in order to make good work.

Charlie Sandlan (33:07):

You have to show up for the work no matter how you feel, that's what makes you an artist.

Jessica Blank (33:11):

Absolutely, it's a practice. It's a practice. There's a quote, I think it's from a Marge Piercy poem, "The real writer is the one who really writes." If you're doing it, you are the thing. There is no career milestone that's going to make you the thing. Are you making the work? Great, you're doing the thing.

Charlie Sandlan (33:38):

Focus not on process, not result.

Jessica Blank (33:39):

Yeah, that's also huge. It's funny, all of these things that you're picking out are... to me, they're all ideas that are about getting rid of the blocks to making work, removing the ways in which people stop themselves, right?

Jessica Blank (34:01):

Focusing on the result is another way that artists, I think, unconsciously stop ourselves because we don't have control over the results. The results, you can hold it as a vision, which is wonderful, but the how, and what it's going to look like, and what... when I start writing a new script, I have no idea what that script is going to be. It's going to be itself and I'm going to discover what that is through the process of making it. If you focus on result at the beginning of the process of making something, you're never going to get there.

Jessica Blank (34:33):

If booking the job is the result, then you're setting yourself up because I can say, from sitting on the other side of the table as a director all of the time, there are so many things that go into casting, so many factors beyond whether the actor shows up, and is alive in the scene, and does beautiful work. There are so many breathtaking actors who have done extraordinary work in the audition room with me who I have not been able to cast because they're not right for the role in some ephemeral way or there are some... there are so many different things.

Jessica Blank (35:03):

It's about show up, play the hell out of the specificity and the truth of that scene, use all your craft tools to work with the math of the scene, show up fully in it, and bravely, and spontaneously, and go over the craft tools enough to really show up in the moment, which is the art part, and just keep doing that over, and over, and over again. If you just keep doing it over, and over, and over again, the roles that are yours will be yours. Then, the flip side of it, because we all do... many of us really do have a strong creative drive, and want to work, and get restless if we're not working often enough or whatever, that's the make your own work part. In order to enable yourself to surrender within the audition process that way, it can be incredibly helpful to have another area where you have complete agency, and you are in charge, and you know you know how to make your own shit.

Jessica Blank (36:07):

Actually, even if you look at A list stars who get to do all of the things and they get to play whatever roles they want, the vast majority of the ones that are playing the roles they want are playing those roles because they have production companies. They hire writers and they have ideas. They actually create those roles for themselves.

Charlie Sandlan (36:32):

I agree. Here's something else you said, action comes first, then the feelings.

Jessica Blank (36:33):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Totally, that's the same thing with the inspiration thing, right? It's like, there's so... we all do it, right? I do it all the time, "I don't want to, I don't feel like it so I'm not going to do it," but that's the discipline of being an artist or doing anything really, is you do it regardless of how you feel as a practice, as a chop wood, carry water, right? You just show up regardless of how you're feeling on any given day and you create the conditions for the work to come forth, that's about inspiration and the zone, too, right? Occasionally, I will feel inspired before I write. But, it's

much more common that I sit down and write when I totally don't feel like it, or I kind of feel like it, or whatever... and I'm just doing it because it's in my day and I have a deadline, or whatever. Then, inspiration shows up.

Charlie Sandlan (37:29):

It's the habit of creativity, it's got to do with work ethic. It's got to do with some sort of discipline and structure that you set for yourself.

Jessica Blank (37:37):

Yeah, and I think it's really important because we hear these words of discipline and structure, and that's another place where the inner critic can get triggered for people like, "Oh, I'm not disciplined enough." It's so easy to turn it into a good student kind of thing of like, "I should be working harder, I should be sitting down at my desk for two hours every day, I should be doing this." I think it's like we want to have a light touch with that, too. It's not about you should, it's just about... it's how it works, right? It's like, if you like doing this, if you want to do it, here's how the process works, you sit down and you do it. You incrementally increase your capacity to do that, even if it's by five minutes a day.

Charlie Sandlan (38:25):

You said most of our problems can be traced back to a lack of empathy.

Jessica Blank (38:29):

I think, absolutely, and that one is really deep, that's true on an artistic level. It's true on a societal level, it's true on a political level, right? I think, look, as human beings, if you look at the neuroscience and how our brains work, we have some competing impulses or competing drives in our brains, right? We have very deep, very old wiring that is deeply tribal and that is wired where... there are parts of us that are wired to be afraid of the unknown, or to be afraid of the unfamiliar, or to be afraid of the stranger that are back from when there were way less human beings on the Earth.

Jessica Blank (39:12):

We lived very far apart from each other and so somebody or something unknown might actually be a threat because where were they coming from, a hundred miles away suddenly, so that is a real thing in our brains. But, also, a real thing in our brains is a tendency towards empathy. Our response to story is wired into our brains and neuroscience now understands this. They can watch, on an MRI, somebody watch a movie, or read a novel, or hear a story and look at what happens in our brains and the set of processes that happen automatically, whether it's a good story or not, as long as it's well-crafted according to story structure, right? There is a structure that our brains responds to in a specific way. What happens is so profound and it all has to do with our mirror neuron network and the brain regions that are associated with mentalization or theory of mind, which is the ability to imagine somebody else's inner life, that happens automatically when we hear a story.

Jessica Blank (40:21):

To me, what that says is that story is a technology for triggering empathy and that is incredibly powerful. We have this incredibly powerful tool at our fingertips and we can use story to just reinforce our empathy with people who are already like us and to reinforce that tribalism or the politically problematic cop shows of like, "Oh, the cops are the good guys and the..." all of the old racist tropes of that, right? We can use it to reinforce hegemony in that way or we can actually use it to ask our audiences to empathize with people who are different from us and who we might think of as having nothing in common, right? Actors do this all the time when we play a role of somebody who's really different than us, right? We have to find the part of ourselves that is that person and the part of that person that is us. I believe that that is a radical act, that reaching across that difference, and widening our circles of empathy, and being able to put ourselves in other people's shoes is inherently radical, particularly when you

couple it with an analysis of power, which I think is a... that's another conversation, but it's equally important.

Charlie Sandlan (41:46):

Well, why do you use the word radical? It's a strong word.

Jessica Blank (41:50):

Because, I think it's transformative. I think that most of the things that happen in our society, maybe in any society but certainly in America, that are fucked up, that are violent, that are oppressive wouldn't be able to happen if we were actually empathizing with the people who are on the other end. Jeff Bezos wouldn't be able to have, to stockpile the unethically large number of billions of dollars he has without using that money to feed people, and stop climate change, and ensure medical care for people who don't have it, et cetera, et cetera if he was actually empathically connected with the people on the other side of that equation. If you look at the sociopathic brain or the clinical malignant narcissist brain, the regions of the brain that are about empathy don't work. It is actually a brain disease in which those... that those regions... and that's the problem. When somebody whose empathic ability is actually medically inhibited, which is a thing, has an enormous amount of power, then what comes out of that is an abusive relationship. We are all, right now, in an abusive relationship with our government.

Charlie Sandlan (43:23):

I've never heard it phrased that way. It is so true. We are in an abusive relationship and we don't know how to get out of it. It's just awful.

Jessica Blank (43:33):

Yeah. Well, hopefully, we're about to get out of it. Fingers crossed, we will collectively... enough of us will figure out how to band together collectively and leave our abuser, which we actually do have the power to do. Something new can come in and we can have some space to breathe again.

Charlie Sandlan (43:58):

Wouldn't that be lovely? My fellow daydreamers, thank you for sticking around and keeping your phone in your pocket. If you are interested in finding out more about Jessica, about what she does, about her 14-module video class on character-based story structure, go to her website jessicacblank.com. Please subscribe to this show, follow it wherever you get your podcasts, review it on iTunes, that would be fantastic. You can follow me on IG, @creatingbehavior. You can go to my website <https://www.creatingbehaviorpodcast.com> for all of the content and links to all of these shows. You could also leave me a message through SpeakPipe on my website. Lawrence Trailer, thank you for the music. My friends, we all have ideas. We all have the capacity for creativity, but you got to get it out into the world. Work hard, bust your ass, and don't ever settle for your second best. I'm Charlie Sandlan. Peace.