

Ep #292: Working Retreat



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Brooke Castillo

Ep #292: Working Retreat

Welcome to *The Life Coach School Podcast*, where it's all about real clients, real problems and real coaching. And now your host, Master Coach Instructor, Brooke Castillo.

Well hello, my friends. I'm going to talk about the weather, Tonya Leigh, because here's what happened to me last night. I'm at home alone because my children are at college, my husband was at a men's retreat. I'm at home alone. All of a sudden, I hear sirens, but weird sounding sirens, like a loud droning siren, which I soon realize is not an ambulance driving by.

And my phone is freaking out and my phone is on silent, but it's making noises. So I go to look at my phone and, my friends, it says, "Tornado warning, take shelter now!" Like, what does that mean? I'm in my house, is that enough shelter?

The only experience that I have with tornadoes is the movie *Twister*. I am concerned. So I look up online where to hide. It says go into a room with no windows and take cover. Like, okay.

So I start imagining what it's going to be like to get whipped up into a tornado with my dogs and how I will be able to hold onto them, and my mind decided that it would just keep repeating that vision in my mind. So, human brain, thank you very much.

And I went online because I thought, this can't be real. And what it said was there's a tornado – and this is important for you all to know, especially if you're from California, we don't know these things – there's a tornado watch. And that means, hey, "Things could turn into a tornado, keep your eye out," which is awesome. But then there's a tornado warning, which is, "Take shelter now!"

We were in the, "Take shelter now!" warning area of the tornado that was on track to hit my house. It did not hit my house. I was fine. It did hit many people's cities and they had power outages and people couldn't drive out of

Ep #292: Working Retreat

their neighborhoods, all sorts of issues. It was my first taste of a tornado warning. I did not enjoy it. I just want you to know.

And the weather was insane. It was like the house was about to blow away, it felt like literally. The sky was very ominous and lots of lightning. So I feel like I'm entitled to talk about the weather when a tornado has come through, Tonya Leigh, but you tell me, is that a – she says talking about the weather is dull. But I wonder if talking about the weather is dull when there's a tornado involved.

Anyway, I will move on. I wanted to do this podcast because so many people asked me about the writers retreat that I did and wanted to know how we set it up and how we did it and if I was going to do another one and if they were going to be able to join.

And the chances of most of these people being able to join me on a writing retreat is really low because I have literally hundreds of people that want to go on a writing retreat and I only take less than 10 at a time. And so I know it sounds crazy, but we're probably going to do like a lottery for the next one because there's just way more people than I want to have.

And I don't want to do – I was going to say I couldn't, but I don't want to do a writing retreat or a working retreat with hundreds of people. It's not my vision for how I want to do it because it ends up being a lot of work for me to put on. So first, I'm going to tell you about the writing retreat, and I'm going to tell you behind the scenes and the front stage of it, so you can kind of get a sneak peek on what we did. But also, so if you want to create your own retreat, you can follow these guidelines and really, it was such an amazing experience and not hard to put together and not hard to run.

So it's something that so many people want, I mean really, the demand for this is beyond anything I've experienced. Everyone is so hungry for this, which I find fascinating because, as the host of it, it's very little work for me as the host. So I delight in doing it. And it's work for my assistant to set up all the details of it, but in terms of once I get there, being kind of in charge of it is actually quite easy.

Ep #292: Working Retreat

So I want to give this to all of you who think you might want to do this. You can run your own and it's not that hard. And it's actually incredibly productive.

If you've ever had the thought, "I just need to get away for a while so I can work," this is the answer. And I'll tell you that sometimes I've gone away on my own and gotten a hotel to work on something and it's not the same. It feels like when you travel by yourself or when you go somewhere all alone to work on something, here's what happens for me. And this is kind of a side note, but it's super interesting to take a look at.

What happens for me is when I'm alone and when I'm with the energy of just myself and my experience of my relationship with myself, everything that needs to be worked on and healed in my relationship with myself comes up. This is a beautiful thing. If I go on a trip to work on myself and to coach myself, that's lovely. But when I'm going on a trip to accomplish something or work on some writing or work on some work and I'm having to coach myself, it interferes with it.

So I think going with other people prevents that need to be doing all that self-coaching work and actually creates momentum. So it's a very different experience versus traveling on your own.

I will say I just spent the weekend by myself. I told you all that my husband was away this weekend at a men's retreat. And we – and when I say we, I mean me and the dogs, so I'm by myself – what I did was coach myself and work on my relationship with myself and work on a lot of things that are coming up for me because kind of this new transition in my life, this new change in my life has brought up all kinds of identity things for me.

Super painful stuff to look at, but also awesome and amazing and exciting. I love self-growth even when it hurts and even when it's uncomfortable and I feel like I came out of this last weekend with all of my coaching, like, having gone in and scrubbed my brain. It's so wild.

Ep #292: Working Retreat

So I kind of wanted to bring that up so you understand the difference between these two things. There's this personal self-coaching experience retreat that you can have and I recommend that you do it, I recommend that you go and spend time alone, travel alone, stay home alone. Don't get lost in doing any of the work that you need to do and only focus on your relationship with yourself.

So I went on lots of long walks, I listened to books that were pertinent to what I'm struggling with right now. I did a lot of journaling, a lot of models. I ran some of my thoughts by other coaches, which is always really fascinating.

I sent this, like, long written out thought download that seemed super logical and I just ran it by one of my colleagues and said, "Hey, am I missing anything here?" And she wrote back, it basically said, "You know this is a thought, right?" just pointed out that this is a thought. She's like, "I'm okay if you want to pretend that it isn't, but I just want to make sure that you know that it is."

And I can't even tell you guys, I was dumbfounded. I was like, what is she even talking about? That's not a thought. That's not true, what is happening? And it was one of those super profound life-shifting acknowledgments. And listen, I've been at this a long time, and what I was writing about is something I've been dealing with my whole life and I just had a huge a-ha shift in my own experience of myself and my brain and my thoughts.

So when people tell me I should be done with all this by now, I laugh because every time I think that, I have to dig into something super, super deep.

So that's a personal retreat. That's taking time. It was, you know, I had all Friday night, Saturday, and Sunday with nothing to do but go on long walks and coach myself through some of the stuff that I'm dealing with. And I'm super appreciative and I feel like I'm super glad that I'm a good coach and I can coach myself, but I also really recognize that I can't say everything in

Ep #292: Working Retreat

my own brain and I needed some perspective and some help to see some of the things that I couldn't see.

So let's talk about – and I'm going to call it a working retreat. It can be a writing retreat or a working retreat. So, some of the people that came to my writing retreat were writing material that they were going to use for their business. They weren't necessarily writing a book.

A lot of them were writing books and that was the perfect place for them to come, but some people were just working really. And so this retreat can be done as a group who just want to get away from it all and just work and work on certain projects that require focused time, uninterrupted focus time to think and to create and to write down, basically.

So I don't want you to get caught up that if you're not a writer that this doesn't apply to you. This applies to everyone who wants to get away and get some work done.

So, let me tell you a little bit about how I designed my writing retreat that we just did. So what I did is I found – and I shouldn't say I found. My assistant Emily who is amazing – found the most gorgeous house in Jackson Hole. And it was a tricky find because it needed to have nine separate bedrooms where everyone could have their own bed and their own space. We didn't want people to have to share rooms.

She found this beautiful place in Jackson Hole and we scheduled it so that we would have a solid three days of work. And I wanted to be able to arrive on one day and kind of get settled, and then the next three days were all workdays and then we left on the last day. So three days of working, a front day and a back day. So it was five days total.

So you can call it a workweek, a writing retreat, whatever. You could do it longer, you could do it shorter. I think this was the perfect amount of time because if you know that you only have three days to get this work done, your writing hours, your working hours are really important and scarce and so I feel like there's an intense level of focus.

Ep #292: Working Retreat

I also think that it's challenging to sustain the level of focus that I required on this retreat for longer than three days. So three days of focused work is what I recommend. So you can't arrive on the first workday. You don't want to be arriving on one of the working days. You want to arrive the night before. And you don't want to leave on one of the workdays because if you're trying to leave on one of the workdays, all you're doing is thinking about, "I've got to go get my flight, I've got to go pack my stuff, I've got to go do this." You want to make sure that those three days, you don't have to worry about any of that stuff. So that's what we did.

The other thing that we did, we hired the house in Jackson Hole and we hired a chef for the entire time to cook all of the meals, do all of the grocery shopping, to handle anything we needed throughout the entire time that we were there food-wise. And that was really awesome.

So we had him come the night that we arrived and make us all dinner. And we just had him do it buffet style so people arriving at different times could eat when they wanted. And then he did three meals a day for the three workdays, and he did breakfast on the day that we left. So that was the perfect amount of meals and time for him to be there. And it was great because we didn't have to think about anything.

Those meals were preplanned. We checked with everyone to find out what their dietary requirements were and we just cooked and ate together at the meals, which I think is optional. You don't have to eat together at all of the meals. We always all ate together at dinner. Breakfast and lunch were kind of optional. Some people would rather go walking during lunch. Some people don't eat breakfast. That was fine. But we all ate dinner together, which was really lovely.

We were all staying at the house, so nobody needed to leave and come back and there wasn't any of that kind of coordination that needed to happen. Everyone could just like go to bed and wake up and be there. So I think that's important too.

Ep #292: Working Retreat

Now, we had eight people at the retreat and then we had me, which made nine. So I think that it was a perfect number. I think we could have done maybe one more and it would have been fine.

This was perfect because one of the things that I think is super important is that you have a place to gather where everyone can be in a circle together. So if you think about most houses, having everyone in a circle together is challenging. You can do it at a table where there's 10 people around a table, if there's a table for 10, you can absolutely do it at a table. But for me, I prefer that everyone be on couches and comfy chairs and Indian style and kind of kicking their shoes off comfort and having nothing between us as we're sitting in the circle. That's what I prefer, but it certainly could be done at a table for 10 if you have 10 people.

So what we did is we had everyone arrive. That night we had dinner, we chatted with each other, relaxed, got to know each other, talked about some of the writing work that was to come. Everyone was coming at different times. It was just kind of a really casual get settled, go to bed early – although every night for me is go to bed early – kind of night, which was lovely.

Then the next morning, we woke up and we were starting to work at nine sharp. So breakfast was ready at eight. Some people got up and worked out. Some people got up and went on walks. Some people got up and just had coffee on the porch together. This place we were at was gorgeous, so it was kind of like there was that milling energy around.

And then at nine o'clock, we all got together in the seating room and it's time to start the working retreat. And what we did is I talked to everyone briefly. And there needs to be someone in charge. That was me, calling on everybody and kind of directing the whole group.

And what I did is I gave them an assignment and I basically said, okay, this is the first hour, like Monday, hour one. This is the like work retreat hour one. What you need to do is look at what are the things that you want to accomplish while you're here.

Ep #292: Working Retreat

So what is your project that you're working on? And what are the parts of your project that you want to complete while you're here? So a full outline if you're doing a book, a full outline of your project if you're doing a project. It's really important to, like, all the steps that need to happen and what pieces you're going to work.

Now, we knew that we would have three full days to work on these projects. And so we basically said, for each of us, we chose, this is what we're going to accomplish in the next three days. We chose what that was. And then I had to break it down into hourly chunks, so they could actually choose what they were going to work on first, second, third, they could plan it, they could schedule it, they knew that if they stayed focused on this schedule that they had planned, that at the end of the retreat, they would have this amount of work done.

I gave them an hour to do this, and I want to tell you, I think it's important that you give yourself an hour to do this. People want to skip this part because they're like, "I just want to get to writing. I don't want to plan when I'm going to write. I don't want to plan what I'm going to write." Really important that you sit down and you plan what you're going to do for the next three days, what are you going to be working on? What are you going to be writing? When are you going to be writing it? How long are you giving yourself to complete it?

Because if you sit down to go write something and you have an open-ended amount of time to complete it, you'll give yourself the whole time just working on that one thing. You want to limit that amount of time you can work on each thing so you can actually get it done.

So as soon as I told them, these are the things that you need to plan, this is the schedule that you need to do, come back in an hour and we're going to discuss. At that point, when I send everybody off, I give them the exact time that they need to come back.

Ep #292: Working Retreat

So for this, we started at nine, it took about a half hour to talk to everyone about it, I told them that they had to be back at 10:30. So I gave them from 9:30 to 10:30 sharp.

What I said is you can all sit in this area, you can go privately to your room if you would rather work quietly by yourself. You can go – there was a bunch of other rooms they could write in. Most of us ended up staying together in the same room. There was the big room we were all in, and then there was a dining room kind of off of that room, and then another, like, kitchen table.

And so everyone kind of stayed in eyesight of each other. And I want to say, I think there was something super powerful about doing it that way because we could feel each other's energy, we could see everybody working.

And I will tell you, for me, that was really powerful because I would look over, I would start feeling tired or I'd start feeling like I want to take a break or something like that, and I would look over and someone else was working away, it was super motivating to me.

And one of the things I told them is, like, go to the bathroom, get your drink, get ready before you sit down and work and try not to get up to get a drink or go to the bathroom or do any of that until that section of work time is done. Try to just keep working. And so that's what we did.

So we went away for an hour and we planned the retreat, what we were going to work on in our specific area, when we were going to do it. Then we came back and we kind of shared our plan with each other just briefly. It's kind of like an accountability thing, "Hey, this is what I've committed to getting done, this is what I'm going to work on," nothing in too much detail off anyone's projects.

I knew what everyone was working on, I knew what everyone was writing. But my job was there to just understand what was going on but also push

Ep #292: Working Retreat

them to be specific in their own work so they could get their own work done.

Then we went into two hours of pure writing time, or working time. And there were rules. And the rules were, no talking to each other for any reason, no speaking, no interrupting anyone while they're working, no clarifying questions to me; silence for two hours.

So the first hour was planning everything that was going to happen for the next three days personally in your work and then two solid hours of writing. And we got after it.

So everyone sat down, they got their computers out. Some people wrote by hand. Most people typed. I type actually quite loudly. Someone thought it was soothing, someone didn't like it, they moved further away. You have to kind of get your space just to see, like, okay what can I do? And we worked for two solid hours.

Now, I will say that I'm used to doing this. I'm used to working this way because this is how I plan my week. I don't think everyone was used to sitting down and just working solidly for two hours without messing around with all the other things, you know, "I've got to get my phone cord and I've got to make sure no one texts me," and all the notifications were supposed to be turned off on your computer, your phone was supposed to be in airplane mode, everything completely inaccessible except for the work you're doing at the time; really powerful.

Then we broke for lunch after the two hours of that. We broke for lunch and talked about it. We talked about what our experience was like to write, what we wrote about, what was challenging. We kind of just had this very casual relaxing lunch and it took us, I don't know, a half hour to eat because the food was already ready, and then we had like an hour break to kind of do whatever we wanted.

Ep #292: Working Retreat

I went on a walk. Most people would go on a walk, get some fresh air, shake it all off, kind of have conversations with each other, chat, relax, lunchtime.

Then we came back and we went right back into another hour and a half of writing. So we'd already had two hours. This was the first day. We went into another hour and a half.

And it was amazing, just two hours, an hour and a half break, and then another hour and a half of writing, we could have done another two hours but I cut it short to another hour and a half because I wanted to check in with everyone to see how that was working. Another hour and a half of writing, solid writing, and then we came back and had a discussion.

And we started talking about what we were struggling with in our writing, what we were writing about. I gave people feedback on some of their writing. I had them just tell me a little bit about it or read a little bit about it and I gave them feedback.

One of the participants sent me an email afterwards and just said, "I cannot believe how you were able to give feedback to everyone on their writing without reading their manuscripts." She goes, "It was just so amazing to watch how powerful it is for me," as their coach, as their facilitator, to just understand the Model.

And writing is all about our mind, so the struggles that we come up against are all about we're not good enough to be writing this, I don't know what to write, this is confusing, that sort of thing. So helping them clean up their mind so they could free themselves from that burden and just keep writing was a huge piece of it. So we did a lot of communicating and talking back and forth, questions, discussion, we did some coaching and then we broke for free time and for dinner.

So what I want to say is that that first day was kind of like getting acquainted and giving the schedule out and getting some good solid work done and then discussing our challenges and getting coaching on this

Ep #292: Working Retreat

challenges; really important, I think, to do the coaching on that first day because all of your writing blocks and all of the things that are going to prevent you from being productive the rest of the time will come up after your first day of writing.

So although we could have done more writing on the first day, I felt like it was much more important to kind of clean out the cobwebs and clean out the issues that were coming up for people as they were writing; this isn't good enough, I'm not good enough, this is too complicated, no one's going to like it, it's not going to be as good as the other person's.

And then to have people read pieces of their writing and see what came up, "Oh their writing's better than mine, they got more done than me. So we did all that coaching to clean that all up. Then we had some free time in the evening and dinner and discussion and that was really lovely and fun.

The next day, we did the same thing. So we woke up, we did breakfast again, we just had the mingling around, enjoying our time. And then we got right into writing. So one of the things that – I shouldn't say we got right into writing. We got right into thinking.

So, one of the things that I had them do during this writing segment is take the 20 minutes before we started to think about what they were going to write and to think about their project and to think about what they wanted to say and what their ideas were and all of those things. So I just said, "20 minutes before this, I just want you to think."

Now, 20 minutes for some of the people in the group was excruciatingly long. And for others of us who are used to kind of accessing our own ideas and thinking through things, that was a very short amount of time. So you can always adjust the amount of time based on the group of people that you're with. But 20 minutes was really great before we went into that writing segment to just get ideas down, clean up anything that didn't maybe feel clear in my mind, write down all my ideas, get any thoughts out of the way, that sort of thing. So that's thinking time.

Ep #292: Working Retreat

And the direction that I gave them there was just make sure that you don't get your brain off topic. Don't let your brain daydream. Don't start thinking about other things that you want to do, don't start obsessing over negative things. Keep your brain focused on writing down ideas for what you're about to do. And when you think you're out of ideas, just keep writing them down. Just keep thinking and writing them down.

Now, we went from that right into a two-hour writing session in the morning, which for most people, in the morning, they're pretty fresh and they feel pretty good. We didn't have a lot of mopey tired people, so there was a lot of energy. So that was really profound.

And we had a discussion after that two-hour writing. We talked about the writing and we also talked about the thinking that happened before the writing. And most of the feedback was like, "Wow, that was super powerful, super helpful, I didn't know how many ideas I had, that was really great for me to get those out on paper first before I started writing."

And that is something I really recommend that you try. Maybe if you've never tried it before, start with five minutes. You can build up to 20. Sometimes, I give myself an hour of thinking time before I write or dive into a project.

Then we took a break and we had a wonderful time for lunch and free time and walking around, all those things. Then we came back and did a solid writing session. And I think, for me, that was a grind.

I felt like, I don't know, usually I don't have that much time in one day with that focused writing, but I have to tell you, I got so much done in those two hours with all of the people in the room kind of pulling me along and encouraging me along by them just doing their work, by them just going and getting after it. It was, like, super powerful for me.

And I remember asking them, "Hey, are you guys up for this? Are you guys up for another two hours of work?" And everyone was all in because I was like, "Shall we do a one-hour?" Nope, everyone was like, "I'll aim for the two

Ep #292: Working Retreat

hours.” And I’m so glad they were because I was able to get so much more done than I would have. I would have negotiated that time down probably if I didn’t have anyone holding me accountable in that moment. I feel like that really stretched me and I loved it, loved it, loved it.

Same thing, then we had the next day – then we had dinner and discussion and relaxation. And then the next day, we started the day with reading and sharing discussion. We had an hour in the morning after breakfast where we talked about what we had accomplished the day before, what we had been writing, anything that was coming up for us that we needed help on. Some people read a little bit of their work. Some people asked for my opinion. I shared some of my writing with them. It was really fun.

Then we went into another two hours of writing and then we took a two-and-a-half-hour lunch, which was lovely. And people said, “Oh that was such a nice break.” So remember, we’re working hard. These are long stretches where we’re really focused on writing, or working.

And so we took that long lunch. Some people took a nap. I went into town. Some people – I had to go return something in town so I drove into town to get some space. Some people went walking. Lots of time to eat lunch, relax, reflect, talk to each other.

Then we went into two more writing sessions, and instead of doing them back to back, we broke them up. So we did an hour, then we took a break, and then we took another hour. There is no specific rhyme or reason to how you have to set up the writing times, and you may want to adjust them as you go.

But I do want to say that I think it’s pretty powerful to say this is how many total hours we are going to do focused work over the next three days and then plan them together as you will. This is the first time I had done this, so I wanted to experiment with chunks of two hours versus one hour with a break and then one hour with a break.

Ep #292: Working Retreat

What I've found was a good solid two hours was more challenging but more effective. Once you're in writing mode, once you're writing something, once you kind of have the content flowing and you know that you have a full two hours to do it, I think, for a lot of people, that was the most powerful way to write versus doing an hour and then breaking it up. But try it out for yourself, test it out for yourself.

After we were done writing, then we just spent dinner in the evening just relaxing with each other and kind of sealing up the deal, being done with all the work, turning it off. Nobody was still writing into the night, nobody's like, "I still have to get this done." There was no energy like that around it. It was just very enjoyable and we go to sit around and just talk and enjoy each other.

So I think that what I learned from this first one is how important it is for me to be in a beautiful location where I can write, being able to go outside and get fresh air in a beautiful location, look out the window, have it be beautiful, be in this big beautiful house that we could all connect was very inspiring. And I think that really helped with the writing.

I think that having meals taken care of was super powerful. I think having free time built in where there was no activities – it's not like, oh this is free time and now this is what we're all going to do together. I had originally planned on, "Hey, let's all take walks together, I'm going to have my dogs with me." But we ended up not doing that as like a group activity. We ended up just everyone gets to go their own way.

I think for me especially, I need alone time. Like, when I'm working with a group of people, I love that energy, I really fed off of their energy, but then I needed to go be alone for a minute and then come back to that momentous energy which was really fun.

And then discussion time is optional. You don't have to actually schedule it. I did because so many of the people that came to my writing retreat wanted me to give them feedback on their writing. And so I wanted to be able to coach them. I wanted to be able to give them feedback on their writing. I

Ep #292: Working Retreat

wanted to be able to help them with their projects and anything that was kind of an obstacle in their way.

You'll need to decide, if you plan your own, if it's all just a bunch of peers, you want to make sure someone's in charge of the time. And for example, if you do the silence, you require the silence, when somebody's talking or you hear anyone whispering, you have to shut it down immediately. It's really important.

If you're lax with that sort of thing, you miss the whole point. So I was really strict. We started right on time and finished right on time. So hey, we're starting to work now, go, we're done working, put it away, period, done. And during writing time, it is silent. There's not a bunch of moving around. There's not bunch of people trying to figure things out or talk to each other. It's silent sitting working, that is the goal.

We didn't have any music playing. They were all making fun of me because I don't like music, I like silence. Some people put on headphones because they like music, but I recommended, especially during thinking time, that there be no music, that it just be complete silence so you can hear your brain.

And that's especially – when you're working, if there are lyrics to music that is going on, your brain is distracted even though you may not be singing out loud. Your brain is interpreting what is being said in the music, and so that will affect your ability to focus.

I was really impressed with this group. Most people have a hard time focusing for two solid hours. Everyone in this group was able to do it. Some of the people in your group may have a harder time in the beginning, so you may want to do shorter amounts of time and build up to it. But two solid hours of work is pretty powerful. I think we could have done three, but I think I prefer two hours break, two hours, versus three. So I think a two-hour section of time is really powerful.

Ep #292: Working Retreat

And I think having the meals and everything together was really fun, being able to bond and talk about stuff that was totally unrelated to our writing and just enjoy each other's company. For me it was super fun. I don't get to hang out with my clients like that anymore. My business has gotten so big that it's mostly me coaching and me onstage. And if any of you have ever seen me onstage, I come out onstage, I teach everything, and then I disappear backstage because, for me, as an introvert, if I start engaging one on one when there's that many people in the room, I get depleted so fast.

And I had this one situation where I was onstage and somebody came up and asked me a question while I was standing onstage. And so I had bent down to talk to them, squatted down to talk to them, and I looked up and all of a sudden there was this huge line behind them of people that wanted to talk to me.

And my friend Corinne, who you guys know, Corinne Crabtree, she's a total extrovert, she loves that sort of thing. She loves hanging out and talking to everyone and she gets energized from it. And then she does like a dance party with her crew, with all the people that are with her.

I go home after being with that many people and I need to go sleeping time. But a small group of 10 is very lovely for me. And even though I still need to go and be alone, it doesn't deplete my energy to be around that many people for the three days. It was actually really lovely and I really had a wonderful time.

So yes, I will be doing another one. But if you don't get in, I want to recommend that you plan your own writing retreat. Hopefully, some of what I've shared here will be helpful in you planning your own. I did not provide any writing utensils or journals or anything like that. I told everyone to bring their own thing. I didn't plan any teaching.

The only thing I really taught was about planning your time and thinking time. Most of it was just what we did together. And so I highly recommend that you do it if you're a coach and you have a bunch of clients that would

Ep #292: Working Retreat

love to work kind of alongside each other. I think it's one of the most powerful things I've done. I'd really, really recommend it.

So, there you go, my friends. Hopefully that's a great one. A little bit different than our normal episode, but I'm hoping that's something you will do, so that's why I'm sharing it with you. Have an amazing awesome week and I'll talk to you next week. Take care, bye-bye.

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