

EPISODE 142

“NM: We met with an estate attorney when we had no estate. There's nothing to meet about. There's no money, so who's going to get all the nothing? We did that and it was a way of also talking about, I was pregnant at the time like, what are the worst-case scenarios, not just for you, but for me, for our kid? We had all of those conversations. We had all the medical, power of attorney conversations, all the end-of-life conversations for myself, for him.

Those are things that people in their 30s don't talk about, typically, they don't. You don't know when you will be faced with making a decision for the person that you love. It is better to know. It is better to know. Is it a wonderful conversation to have? No, but I will also say, it isn't one of the most romantic things that you can do for and with one another: to put yourselves in the feet of potential future versions of yourselves and say, “If this horrible thing happens, then what?”

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:01:12] LW: Hello there, friends. Welcome back to the Light Watkins Show, where I interview ordinary folks, just like you and me, who have taken extraordinary leaps of faith in the direction of their path, their purpose, or what they've identified as their mission. In doing so, they've been able to positively impact the lives of many other people who've either heard about their story, or who witnessed them in action, or who have directly benefited from their work.

This week, I'm in conversation with best-selling author and podcast host, Nora McInerny. Nora has written extensively about her experiences with grief and loss, mainly based on the fact that she miscarried a child and she lost both her father and her husband to cancer all within several weeks, back in 2014. Then in an effort to process what she was going through with her husband, she started a blog called My Husband's Tumor, which eventually grew to about a couple 100,000 followers. Then that became the basis of her first book, which is called *It's Okay to Laugh: (Crying Is Cool Too)*. That was written six months after her husband passed away.

Then later, she released other books. *No Happy Endings*, *Bad Moms*, *Hot Young Widows Club*, and most recently, she released *Bad Vibes Only*. Nora is also the host of *Terrible, Thanks for Asking*, which is her uber popular podcast that lets people be honest about the hard things in life. When hearing the titles of her books and her podcast, it sounds like Nora is a bit of a downer, right? But that's the point, too. She has admission to steer these conversations around death and grieving away from the conventional and forced positive spin on everything and towards a more, shall we say, practical ways of dealing with death and loss.

Our readers have really connected to that perspective. What I love about Nora's backstory is it seems like, she got into all of this by happenstance, but when you look really closer, which we of course do in this conversation, it was more intentional than that. She has been a prolific journaler for most of her life. When her late husband, Aaron, was on hospice, they both decided to do something unconventional and have him co-write his obituary with her before he passed away.

Then, get this, after Nora published the obituary, it ended up going viral, because they kept the obituary light and humorous, mainly since that's how Aaron was in real life. He never took himself too seriously. They wanted to reflect that in the obituary and not make it long and drawn out boring, like most obituaries happen to be. Well, the obituary ended up getting reposted all over the place and then book agents read it. Then they started reaching out to Nora to see if she's interested in publishing a book. If not, then when she is interested to let them know.

That's basically how Nora got her first publishing deal for *It's Okay to Laugh* in this really unlikely way. It just goes to show that when you decide to do conventional things in unconventional ways, you never know where it's going to lead. In any case, Nora gleaned a lot of wisdom from her experience moving through grief, eventually getting remarried and then navigating her old life that she in some way had to let go with her new life, and being in a blended family, and it made for very insightful conversation, talking about all of these things, and also how her personal backstory prepared her for much of what she was going to be experiencing later in life, as is mostly the case.

This is a really good conversation and I can't wait for you to hear it in Nora's own words. Without further ado, I want to introduce you to miss Nora McInerney.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:05:38] LW: Nora McInerny. Thank you so much for coming on to my show. I've listened to a ton of your interviews. You're such a great interviewee, as well as an interviewer. I love how much space you give your guests to talk and to really get into their story. I did finish reading *Bad Vibes Only*. I haven't read your other books, but I want to talk to you about your writing process in this interview, so we'll do that a little bit later. You have a very popular podcast, Terrible, Thanks for Asking. I would love to dive into that as well. As always, I like to start my conversations off talking about childhood. First of all, thank you for coming on. Then we'll talk about young Nora.

[0:06:23] NM: Oh, yeah.

[0:06:26] LW: What were you called, anyway, growing up? Did you have a nickname?

[0:06:29] NM: I did not have a nickname. I didn't have a nickname, because it's very hard to nickname Nora, which is now a very popular little girl's name. I go to the playground with my kids and I hear, "Nora." I'm always like, "Oh." But they're yelling at their own children, not at me. Nora is a hard name to nickname, so I didn't really have any nicknames growing up, and I was so envious of that, because my cousin had the best nickname of all time. She is now almost 40. We still call her Fuzz. We still call her Fuzz, because she had no hair growing up. She just had this white cloud of fuzz growing on her head. We still call her that to this day and I was so envious that she had a cool nickname and I was just Nora. No nicknames growing up, sadly.

[0:07:22] LW: You grew up in a family of four kids.

[0:07:24] NM: Four kids.

[0:07:25] LW: I grew up in a family of four kids. Both your parents were around.

[0:07:29] NM: Yeah. What number are you?

[0:07:32] LW: I'm two.

[0:07:32] NM: You're two. Okay. I'm three, so we're both middles.

[0:07:37] LW: Yeah. Both middle child. Yeah, exactly. You wrote about a lot of the vignettes growing up in your book. One thing I found really interesting was how your dad never wanted to travel, because of the whole Vietnam thing. That's interesting. I guess, my first question is, when I think back to my childhood, my dad always talked, about you have to work for yourself and that's just something – He was just on this whole thing about working for yourself. I'm wondering, what were some of the philosophies that your parents would echo to you and your siblings growing up? If you remember anything.

[0:08:10] NM: Nothing about work. Nothing about how to be an adult, whatsoever. Very little guidance, because my dad believed that there was no good time for anything. There was not a right time to get married. There was not a right time to have kids. You cannot prepare for life milestones. You just meet them when they arrive, or you go after them and get them. But he did not tell me how people buy cars, what a mortgage is. Real basic stuff that I think could have been helpful to me. Why you should not to open a credit card in exchange for a free T-shirt, the first day of college. What interest rate was. Things like that.

You always think that however you grow up is the normal way to grow up. Then as an adult, you realize, "Oh, there is no normal way to grow up." Everybody's family is just their family. My parents were around. My parents loved each other. My parents were married, until my dad died. My parents' marriage, I don't think was very typical for the '80s, the '90s, the 2000s. My parents never took a vacation together. They took their vacations separately, because my dad liked to golf and my mom liked to go on adventures. My mom wanted to go to Europe and my dad was never going to sit on another long plane ride, because he had all the traveling he needed when he was 17 and went to Vietnam.

My dad did tell me that marriage is not about romance, that anyone can have a wedding, but not everyone can have a marriage. That the point of life was to find someone to share it with, to find work that supported a life and that everything else was just gravy. I was not taught, oh, you have to be the best at everything and really swing for the fences. It was like, the point of life is to have

your life, the thing that you were talking about before we got started, right? Which is, what is the kind of life that you want to have? You want to prioritize what's actually important to you.

To my dad, he spent most of my childhood working at ad agencies. Really, really, really grueling hours. He's at work before I'm at school. He would get home super late. When he went freelance and became a freelance copywriter and started working on infomercials and things like that, he was home a lot. He was home a lot, but he didn't just sit at his desk and do his work. He procrastinated a lot, like I do. He also started every day by waking up and going to the golf course, when there was no snow in Minnesota. At the months that there were no snow, he was up early and he was doing what he wanted to do first, before he sat down to do what other people wanted him to do.

I think, I observed that as a kid, but I didn't realize that that was a choice that he was making. Honestly, it made me really nervous. I was like, "Oh, my God. Why isn't my dad – It's a Wednesday. Why is my dad at the golf course? He's got to sit down and do his work." When he quit his job, I truly thought, "Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no. Now my dad doesn't have a job." I did not understand what it meant to be freelance, what it meant to form an LLC and work for yourself.

My parents didn't talk to me about what that would mean, what that meant financially. I do try to talk about that with my kids. I really do. I do try to say, they don't need to know numbers. They don't need to be burdened with any stuff like that, but I want them to know what I'm doing, what the priorities are and how we have this house, how we have money for them to buy their friends birthday presents, or to go to dinner a couple times a month.

[0:12:30] LW: Was your household more of a traditional household? Does your dad call most of the shots and your mom was more of a homemaker, or how did that dynamic worked?

[0:12:38] NM: No, my mom worked so much. My mom was also freelance, but I didn't understand that she was, because she was always going to an office. She was always going to an office, or a studio. For a long time, she laid out catalogs. She would be supervising the photoshoots and literally making the catalogs that would arrive in our mailboxes and that people would peruse through. God, I miss a catalog. Oh, I miss a catalog so much.

[0:13:03] LW: Which catalog did she worked on?

[0:13:05] NM: She worked on this thing called Midwest Imports, which was tchotchkes. Like department 56 things and seasonal home decor. It would be July and she would be driving to a photo studio to shoot Christmas decorations. She'd get to bring some extras home. I had my own little box of decorations in my room. My mom worked as much as my dad, if not more. She told me this year, which I don't remember, which she's like, "Oh, yeah. I worked like a dog." Said, "I could take four or six weeks off in the summer and we could all hang out." I was like, "Oh, I didn't even realize that. I didn't even realize that you were home in the summer." I didn't even notice that. Yeah, you were home in the summer.

I was still going up to the park for whatever park board camp there was. My dad was the heavy in the family. He definitely had never been to therapy. He came home from a very unpopular war, too. I found one of his journals recently to, an unfeeling country, an unfeeling country. He learned to put that away. Put away the depth of the trauma and the loss he had experienced. A lot of it came out sideways. A lot of it came out at us. It was like living with a storm cloud, where you didn't know if it was going to rain. When it parted, and he was in a good mood, you were just so excited.

It's not like he was in a bad mood all the time, but I do think we're predisposed, especially as kids to remember the things that scared us. My dad's moods scared me and they scared my siblings, too. My mom was the person who made most of our decisions, honestly. I would ask my mom if I could go to a friend's house. I never asked my dad if I could go to a friend's house. I do not remember my mom ever yelling at us, ever. Even when we were being a stereotypical group of children and we literally broke her lamp. Even then, she wouldn't yell at us. She might be bummed out, she might be sad, but she wouldn't yell at us the way if I tipped over a bottle of nail polish remover, as I did once, as a five-year-old, my dad would really – you would feel how mad he was about that.

[0:15:36] LW: You also wrote about some of your body image issues, to put a name to it. Growing up, you were tall. There was a WeightWatchers period at some point in there, and you were just hoping someone would see you as attractive. Did that play a role in any mental stuff? Were you experiencing any anxiety, or depression, or anything like that?

[0:15:57] NM: Yeah. I was the most anxious child. I can see that in some of my own kids. There's something about seeing your kids struggle with the things you struggled with, that one, make you have so much more tenderness for yourself and also, for my parents. It's not as if in the '90s, we were talking about mental health. It's not as if in the '90s, we were talking about kids having mental health. Are you kidding me? If you took a time machine back to 1992 and asked my parents about their mental health, they would be like, "What is wrong with you, you hippie? Get off my steps. What are you talking about?" Have you checked in with your kids about their feelings? What? Like, huh?

No. I was so anxious. I was so worried about everything. I have a lot of compassion for my parents, because when you have four kids, you have four people who are complicated beings who need you, it's a lot. I grew up. I was very, very skinny. My sister was, if you look at photos, a normal sized person, a normal sized child, she's eight-years-older than me. I grew up with people in my life, saying about my sister, when I could hear that my sister was so beautiful, if only she could lose weight. I grew up with people commenting on how skinny I was. They didn't say, "Oh, isn't that wonderful?" But you can tell, right? You can tell, "Oh, isn't it wonderful?" Look at, "Oh, I can feel all of your little ribs. Oh, look. I can put my fingers all the way around your bicep."

I had internalized that message. I also grew up. It came of age in the late '90s, in the millennium, Heroine Sheiks and then Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton and all the other girls who are scary skinny, the Olsen twins pushing bracelets all the way up past their elbow. All these sorts of messages converged. Yeah, by the time I was in college and I weighed a perfectly normal amount for a woman of 6 feet tall, I was at a WeightWatchers meeting. I was at a WeightWatchers meeting, trying to figure out how to be thinner.

[0:18:24] LW: What was your idea of success at that time going to college?

[0:18:29] NM: I was so directionless going to college, Light. I want a life like my parents, in so many ways. They had a nice little tidy house in a cute little neighborhood. I'd never gone on vacations as a kid. We weren't rich. I do think to take a vacation in the '90s, you were rich. I did not know anyone who was going to Disneyland. I knew nobody who went to Disneyland. One of

my friends went to Mexico with her family. When she came back and came to school with a tan after Christmas break, we were all like, "Whoa. That is nuts. That's absolutely crazy."

I wanted to be married. I wanted to have kids. I wanted to have a house. I wanted to have, like my dad had mentioned, work that was meaningful to me, or that helped me lead a meaningful life. I did not know what that was. I always wanted to be a writer. I always wanted to be a writer. I did not know how people became writers. I thought, there must have been some secret way of doing it. I didn't go to a fancy college known for a writing program. I didn't know if it was realistic to think that I could be a writer. I remember telling my mom when I was in high school, reading David Sedaris, telling her, I can never be a writer, because nothing's happened to me. Like, "Oh, no. You guys gave me a nice, boring life and now I'll never be able to be a writer." That's so silly now that I think about it. Also, like, did I jinx myself, perhaps?

I wanted to be a writer. I always wrote. I had my first paid writing job when I was in middle school. I wrote for our neighborhood paper. Not our city paper, but our neighborhood paper. I wrote for our college newspaper, and I also just suffered from this extreme lack of self-esteem, of confidence, of believing that I could take any risk. I was so risk averse, Light. I tell any 21, 22, 25, 30, anyone. I'm like, if you have no children, if you have no mortgage, if you have no significant amount of debt, don't do whatever you want. Go work on a sheep farm, for the love of God. Go take a train trip. Go work at a bookstore, and then spend your days writing, or doing whatever you want. There is no rush.

I felt this rush to have some kind of career. I was in a group of friends where people were graduating with business degrees and were going on job interviews and little lady suits, and they were going to go work at insurance companies, or at Lockheed Martin. I didn't even know what that was. I was like, "Should I go interview at Boeing? Should I go work at GE? I thought they made light bulbs. I don't even know what they did." I just was in this rush to get to adulthood, thinking that if I got there to a certain age, to some imaginary milestone, it would make sense. It would click and I would get it and it would all make sense. That just didn't happen.

[0:22:00] LW: You end up in advertising though, like your dad.

[0:22:02] NM: Yeah. Just like my dad.

[0:22:05] LW: How did that happen?

[0:22:05] NM: Yeah. Just like my dad. Nepotism is how it happened. Nepotism, nepotism. That's what happened. The first job I got out of college I found on monster.com. I don't know if that still exists. Maybe rest in peace. It was like, I graduated in 2005, there was this new way of applying for jobs on the internet. Most of the time, when you apply to a job, you then discover it was a call center, or an MLM, or something. It was a scam in some way. You go to interviews and be like, "Wait. What? I'm a door-to-door salesman. What happened?"

This felt like that. It was in New York City. I was so excited. I went to the little interview. I went through two rounds of interviews with the manager and with HR. I left the interview with an offer. I had no idea what they did. I had no idea what the company was. I went to the website. You cannot tell but it did. What they did, Light, was write in place, help wanted ads in print newspapers. Our clients were HR people for call centers. Maybe one of them was a big national bank, and they needed call center employees in Poughkeepsie.

I would get a little brief about what they needed and then I would come up with a headline, like bank on a better future with so and so, and I have to put all the details. The interviews are this date, this date, this date. Then I would call the newspaper and negotiate the ad space. Then I would meet with somebody who could lay out the ad and I would send the ad. A robot could do it and probably does at this point. That was my first job. I got that one on my own.

I was losing my mind. It was like, everybody who works at this company is, it was so odd. I just never worked anywhere, but I knew it wasn't good that a girl my age was having an affair with a married guy 15 years older than us. No one had to tell me that was wrong. No one had to tell me that wasn't a good, healthy work environment. I wanted out. The agency where my dad had worked before had opened up an office in New York City. It was very small. There were six people there. He gave me an email address and was like, "Email this guy. Tell him what you're looking for. Tell him you're my daughter. Tell him you're available. Make sure you write a good letter." He's like, "Write a good letter." The letter is not, I need a job. The letter is, what can I do

for your company? This is what I can bring to your company. I did that. I got an interview and I got a little assistant job.

Then I was just a little job jumper. Every 18 months, every 12 months, I would just meet someone and just jump to a new company and jump to a new company and jump to a new company and get paid a little bit more to do almost the same thing. I lived that whole, I think, decade of my life just with absolute dread and anxiety, seeping through every part of my being constantly all the time, every day. Woke up with it, went to bed with it. It was just there always.

[0:25:34] LW: What was your writing outlet at the time? Were you keeping a journal?

[0:25:37] NM: Yeah. I always kept journals. I loved the Internet right away, Light. I was starting live journals. I was forgetting the password and just starting another one. I was making whatever blog I could make, at the era where there were so few blogs that you could go to this – you could register your blog for the city you were in. I registered mine in New York City and could see all the other New York City blogs and they were all in one page. They were all on one page in 2006. I treated it like a public diary. I had a little hit counter. I was getting tens of hits from my mom.

[0:26:22] LW: Tens of hits.

[0:26:26] NM: And from my college friends. From no one else, and I just loved it. I just loved having a place to write and share my feelings and my observations. I never ever, ever thought, “Oh, someone at work shouldn't know about this.” No one at work cared, because no one at work cared about me.

[0:26:50] LW: What were you writing about? You saw something that day that was interesting, or –

[0:26:53] NM: Yea. I would write about I was so young and I moved in with my first boyfriend. We lived in a little studio apartment with huge cockroaches. We lived in this cute little neighborhood, where as long as I didn't bring my boyfriend into the pizzeria, I could get two free slices of pizza a week. I could go in, offer to buy one slice, but I'd walk out with two free slices

and that would be our dinner. I just wrote about everything I did, or thought. Missing my parents, books I liked. There was never any theme. There are so many blogs at the time, where this one that I loved, that I absolutely loved was this woman, who I think about still to this day, a Jessica Quirk, who shared a photo every day of the outfit that she wore. It felt like what I wore. I just loved her. I loved love, love that. I was like, I don't have a theme, because I don't have a thing, and I don't care what I wear. I don't care about what I eat. I don't have a fancy life.

This woman, Nadine Jolie, or Jolie Nadine, who had this really fancy life and PR and was going to fancy parties. I wasn't doing anything fancy. I was just existing and liking it. In some ways, I think like, "Oh, God. Maybe I was really happy in that era." What I remember so much is waking up, feeling this sense of dread, feeling this sense of dread as the train got closer and closer to work, walking to work as though my shoes were filled with lead and just feeling constantly like, I was not doing a good job. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't want to do it at all. I wanted to do other things, but I didn't know what those things were.

I remember being 25, being three years out of college, Light, and saying, "I wish I could switch careers, but I've just put so much time into this." What? I was like, yeah, because 25 is almost 30. 30 is almost 40. 40 is almost 50. 50 is somewhat like, to 25 is basically 70, so I can't switch careers and so silly to me. It's so silly. I had no real responsibilities, other than paying my rent, which I did not have enough confidence to believe that I could have worked at Starbucks and figured it out. I did not. I did not. I had absolutely no risk tolerance, whatsoever. Now, I have all the risk tolerance in the world.

[0:29:39] LW: When you met Aaron, you had been working primarily as a tweeter, someone who was just tweeting for –

[0:29:45] NM: Yeah. I was a social media – There wasn't even a job title for what I did, because social media was just starting to be branded, okay. When we're making Facebook pages for our clients, they hadn't even started making pages. You were just making a Facebook profile For Papa John's, or whatever brand you were working on. I did not work on Papa John's. I worked on another pizza company. I was putting together social media strategies and creative ideas. I loved being on the Internet. I remember working with this other girl, right out of college to present to the ad agency that we worked with about why they should care about this. In talking

about MySpace and talking about – All these people being like, “No one cares about MySpace. No one cares about Facebook.” We're talking about banner ads, baby. We're talking about billboards. We're talking about TV commercials. We were like, “Okay. Yeah, sorry. We're dumb.”

I was working in social media at an agency across – I'd move back to the Midwest. I lived in Minneapolis at this point. I worked at a rival agency to the one that Aaron worked at. He was a designer. He was a graphic designer, later a creative director. He was so not stressed out by work at all. I would get emails that were like emergency, and the emergency was that we needed to rewrite a tweet that the brand hadn't approved. I'd be like, “Oh, my God.”

[0:31:30] LW: All hands on deck. Skip this –

[0:31:32] NM: Yeah. I'd just be like, immediate, just panic, panic, panic. I made a mistake. They found a typo. I'm going to die. He was like, “Just do it tomorrow.” I was like, “No, I should do it right now. I should do it right now.” Just losing my mind. Or like, “Oh, the client didn't like my ideas. I'm such a piece of shit.” He'd be like, “Okay.” He was like, “I don't think it's that serious.” It just wasn't that serious to him. It wasn't that serious. He was so mentally healthy. He was so mentally healthy. I, at this point in time, had not been to therapy. Would have been nice to know that I had ADHD. That's why I would get to work at 7AM, hoping that I could focus on something before other people came in, and I got pulled into meetings.

Then I would literally just mess around, waste time, procrastinate for eight hours, and then stay three hours later to do the work I should have done during the day. That would have been helpful to know. Would have been helpful to have cognitive behavioral therapy and just talk about my feelings to a person. Instead, I was like, “Let's hold them in. Let's hold them in.” Yeah, I met Aaron, and I was in my late 20s. I think I was 27 when we met. Maybe 26.

[0:32:43] LW: How did you meet? What's the cute meet story?

[0:32:46] NM: I don't remember meeting him, Light. I don't remember the first time I met him. I knew that –

[0:32:50] LW: Because you talked about going to the bar and all that, but I wasn't sure what happened before then.

[0:32:54] NM: We did. Yeah, we did. We were already Facebook friends. I remember seeing him on my list, I'm being like, "I don't know this guy." Deleting him and him re-requesting me. When I still lived in New York and being like, "Well, I guess I know him. He wants to be friends with me this bad." Really, he had met me, because he worked with my mom. I was home visiting my mom. Obviously, I stopped into her work to say hello. She had been walking me around the office, introducing me to the single men in her office, very appropriate. He was not on the list. She did not want me to meet him. She wanted me to meet the cute guy he shared a cubicle with. I don't remember that at all.

Then we'd been flirting on Twitter, later when I moved back to Minneapolis. He was like, "Oh, yeah. I tweeted at you a couple years ago and you never replied." I was like, "Well, yeah. You were stranger. Why would I reply to you?" The night that we met, the night that I remember, there was an art opening in Northeast Minneapolis. It was at this big old warehouse space where my uncle had used to have a photo studio for 40 years he had been working. Maybe 30. Who cares? He had been working in this space forever. He had just decided to retire, give it up, give it over to the next generation of creatives. Somebody had turned it into a gallery.

My cousins and I were like, "We have to go to this place where we used to have birthday parties and funerals and Thanksgiving. We have to go, see what it is now." Aaron knew I was going, because of course, I put it on Twitter. Why wouldn't you put your personal whereabouts on Twitter for strangers to see? He said, he would be there and we've been talking online about Taylor Swift, who we both liked. This is 2010. People are not liking Taylor Swift openly, okay. It's a joke, or you like country music. She hasn't yet put out a real pop album and Matthew is like – oh, that's my current husband. Just kidding. Editor.

Aaron is like, "She's going to be the greatest songwriter of our generation. People are going to mention her in the same breath as Paul McCartney." I said, "I absolutely agree." I had the new, tell me if this is boring, and I can move on, but I had the issue of People Magazine where she was on the cover. It's a Taylor tells all who all of her songs are about. I'd swiped it from the

office. He was like, "Bring me that magazine." I put it in my purse and was like, "There's no way this guy is going to show up." He totally showed up.

I was standing in a group with my cousins. He was like, well, he just walked right up to me. He just walked right up to me into this group of a close circle of my family members and was like, "You're Nora McInerney." My full name. No one says your full name, right? No one says your full name. I was like, "Yeah. Oh, my God." He was so much cuter in person than he was in the tiny photo on Twitter. I gave him the magazine.

[0:35:50] LW: Were you taller than him?

[0:35:51] NM: No. He was 6'4". I was wearing heels. I was wearing these big heeled cowboy boots that I wore all the time at that point in time. I was looking up at him. I was like, "Damn, he's tall." He's skinny, which is what I like. I like a guy who looks weak. That's my type. Kind of like, sickly, sort of. He was just so funny. He was so funny. He was so funny.

[0:36:21] LW: Was there anything else about his physical appearance that really caught your eye? Was he wearing anything jewelry-wise, or –

[0:36:27] NM: Yea. He was really dressed really nicely. He always dressed nicely. He was wearing a button-down shirt, always, almost always and a cardigan. When he wasn't wearing a button-down and a cardigan, he was wearing a T-shirt that he had thrifted himself 10 years earlier and a cardigan. He always wore a belt. He always wore – his jeans were always nice. He just had the best smile. His teeth were a little bit crooked. The front two were pushed out a little in front, but they also folded in on each other a little bit. He had really big teeth and he had a great smile.

What I liked about him was just this energy, where he was interested in me. It didn't feel overtly flirtatious. It didn't feel gross, which is how it often felt when you meet a guy, especially where there's alcohol involved. He met all my cousins. He met the friend I was there with. He remembered all of their names. When we went to a bar afterwards, he went up to the bar, I only had one customer remaining at that point, and he got us each a Coors Light. It was a different time. I made eye contact with him at the bar and he did this funny little dance. He ran across the

dance floor, slid on his knees and held them up to my cousin and I. I just laughed. It was just so funny. He was so funny.

I truly couldn't tell. Even if you're a first date where he shook my hand, I was like, "Maybe this guy is just going to be my best friend now." I don't know. It was so great to be around him. I didn't feel that nervous like, "Oh, does he like me?" I was like, "Well, he likes me. I just don't know how he likes me."

[0:38:23] LW: You guys were G-Chatting all day long. Then you secretly moved in with one another?

[0:38:30] NM: Yeah. We dated for a year. Maybe at 11 months, my lease was up. I lived in a fancy, crappy, high-rise, new build apartment. They're everywhere. Now. They're in every city. There was just one in Minneapolis at the time. The kind where on the outside, you're like, "Wow, this building is luxury." Then you walk in, you're like, "I could punch through every wall in this place." There's not a stud to be found. This place is being held together by duct tape. He had a house. He owned a house. We use that word loosely, because it was very shack-like. It was very – feel every freezing breeze through the windows. Very cold little shack. He had a dog. He had a responsibility.

Even when we were hanging out, he's like, "Well, I got to go. Got to go take care of my dog," which I loved. I love that. I love that in a person, too. Really caring about someone besides yourself and outside of just a romantic relationship. Yeah, I moved in with him. I moved in with him. That was not something that I knew my parents would like, and so we just didn't tell them. I just didn't tell them. I just didn't tell them. I was like, "I'm 27. No one needs to know, okay. No one needs to know that my lease is up. They're not paying my rent. Why do they care?" I just didn't tell them. I didn't tell them until I had to.

[0:39:58] LW: Did he get headaches, or did he seem relatively healthy for that period of time that you guys were checking out together?

[0:40:03] NM: No. The craziest thing is that the symptoms that so many people have with brain tumors, or with glioblastoma, they could be anything. The really specific ones are so scary and

he didn't have those. One of my friends found her husband's brain tumor, because he got mean, and his whole personality changed and he was confused. She walked in, and I'm reading the newspaper upside down. Some people have blinding headaches. He had the same amount of headaches I did. We spent all day staring at a computer, of course, we had headaches. He had a hard time falling asleep, but that's because he'd always been a night owl. He would go to bed with me and let me fall asleep, then he would put on his headphones and play whatever video game people are playing. Whatever video game guys in their 20s, or he was 30 at the time, so whatever video game guys were playing, he would play that silently on the TV after I'd fallen asleep.

There were no real symptoms. The symptom that presented itself was the one that's the most obvious, which is a grand mal, horrifying seizure. That happened at work. That's how we knew. That's how we knew.

[0:41:20] LW: Okay, so give us a little montage of how the next part played out in your life.

[0:41:26] NM: Yeah, I go to see him at the hospital. We both think it's a joke. We truly walk into the ER thinking, it's Halloween, we're going to be home passing out candy tonight. Because we just moved in together and what feels more grown up than passing out candy to neighborhood kids on Halloween. He does not go home that night. They do a CAT scan, they do an MRI, he's got a mass in his head. They know it's a brain tumor. They've got to take it out. He's scheduled for surgery four days later, so they can do all the kinds of tests to figure out what part of your brain is this going to affect? What are the effects going to be?

I proposed to him that night, the night that we find the brain tumor, and he's like, "You can't marry me. You can't marry me. I'm going to be sick. I'm going to die." I was like, "No one tells me what to do. I am going to marry you. We're going to get married. We're going to get married as soon as you're out of the hospital."

[0:42:22] LW: Were you in denial? Or, where was that coming from, when you think back on it now?

[0:42:25] NM: I think, it's just ignorance. You know what I mean? Ignorance. I had one moment, right when I found out he had a brain tumor, where I went to the bathroom in the hospital. I literally just saw it. I saw the funeral. I saw him dying. I saw how lonely and sad and horrifying it would be. I just saw it all, the same way that when I was an anxious kid, when my parents went out, I would imagine them getting in a horrible car wreck and my siblings and I being orphans and having to go live with our respective godparents and never seeing each other again.

I remember being in the bathroom and literally, slapping myself out of it and being like, "No, no, no. No, you're not going to do that. You're not going to do that. You have no idea what the future is. You are going to stay in the present. In the present, the guy you love, the guy that you are obsessed with, the guy who has made every day of the past year feel so fun, so wonderful." Every single day was just so great. I don't know how to explain it. It was like, your most annoying friend being – I wasn't even looking and I found him. That was it. I was like, "You're going to go out there and you're going to be with him. You're going to just take it as it comes."

A lot of it was ignorance. A lot of it was probably denial. A lot of it was just magical thinking, right? Which is like, well, someone's got to survive it statistically. Why wouldn't it be you? Why wouldn't it? Why wouldn't it be you? Until they take the tumor out, you don't even know if it's cancer. Until they tell you it's cancer, it's not cancer. Until you're dying, you're not dying. That's just how it goes.

Aaron was just naturally a buoyant person in general. It's not like he was like, "Yeah, I'm going to beat this, and I'm going to be the best cancer person ever." We were also young. We had jobs. We had things to do. He was like, "Well, I got to get back to work." I have a house. We're going to get married, I got work. I could have a job. It was pretty clear early on that we were not going to be cancer people. He was never going to go to a support group. I was never going to go on the forums and find women whose husbands were going through the same thing. I was never going to do my own research about treatments. I was never going to try to uproot our lives and move him somewhere to do a clinical trial. We wanted to have a real life, you know what I mean? Our real life was Minneapolis. Our real life was the people we already knew. Our real life was going to work and watching *Game of Thrones* and walking our stupid talk.

[0:45:05] LW: You all even requested to the doctor, "Don't even tell me how long I have left."

[0:45:08] NM: Don't tell me. Yeah.

[0:45:09] LW: Did you tell your friends, or your parents at this point, or how did that play out?

[0:45:13] NM: Yeah. Tell them the same thing, or tell them about the –

[0:45:17] LW: No, about the cancer.

[0:45:19] NM: He was so popular. When he ended up in the hospital, that same day, it was just like a party. It was like, there were so many people there. There were so many people there and I had gone back to our house to get pajamas, a toothbrush. He was like, "I don't want to wear this." He's like, "I don't want to wear a hospital gown. Will you get me this, this, this, this, this? My face wash? I want the things." I'm packing a bag and they came and told him about the tumor and I wasn't there. The room was filled with people when I got there and he told me.

I don't know who told my mom. Maybe it was me. I remember, there was an email chain. There were text threads. I tried to have an email chain that would update everybody. Pretty soon after, just started a blog. I started a blog and that was the best way to update people and also to set the tone that Aaron and I had agreed on, which is like, it's not a cancer story. This is a life story. This is a love story. There's going to be some cancer, but I really don't want to talk about what is treatment options are, because he doesn't care.

The treatment options are for glioblastoma, the same as they were in the 80s and the same as they were in the 70s. They haven't changed. It's chemo, it's radiation and it's MRIs every four to six weeks to see if the tumor grows back. That's it. That's it. What are you going to do in the meantime? What are you going to do in the meantime? You're just going to live your life, if you're lucky.

[0:46:52] LW: All this blogging that you had been doing prepared you for – You didn't have to go out and figure out how to start a blog. You already had a Tumblr page.

[0:46:59] NM: Yeah, I already had that stuff. I was still writing. I always have a notebook. I had a notebook with me in the hospital. I was writing down scenes. I was writing down thoughts. I was just describing things. I was reading them to him. He was like, “Oh, that happened. Oh, when did that –” It was pretty collaborative. I never posted anything without Aaron seeing it first, ever.

[0:47:24] LW: When you wrote in your journal, I'm always curious about this, you can write just random abstract thoughts, or you can tell stories that will help you recall this experience. Or you could write with the anticipation that maybe one day, somebody's going to go back and read this and you want to get context to everything. What was your motivation? Or how are you approaching journaling?

[0:47:48] NM: I think, it was just always a way to get things out of my head. As a kid, I was obsessed with *The Diary of Anne Frank*, I was obsessed with Laura Ingalls Wilder, I was obsessed with *Little Women*. I literally did write my journal entries with the expected audience of a future historian. I would explain things for someone who wasn't alive in the '90s. I'd be like, my cousin and I watched this movie starring this person and this person and this person. Describe the plot of the movie, describe how my cousin was related to me. Her mom is Rita, my mom's sister. Just insane.

[0:48:25] LW: That's how, you know that movie, *12 Years a Slave*? Remember that movie, *12 Years a Slave*? That's based on a book that was written by the guy who got abducted and put in slavery for 12 years. He was living in New York beforehand. He read the book, which you can read online for free. It's just like that. He's like, “You guys wouldn't believe this shit.” It's like, “ain't got whips and I'm over here, I'm going to get all these cottons.” It feels like, somebody in modern times writing it, try to describe everything. This is the craziest, most bizarre thing that I've experienced.

[0:48:56] NM: Yeah. Writing for future generations who will be like, “What the fuck?” Instead, I'm like, “Okay, so here's a day in the life of an eight-year-old white girl in Minneapolis. I've been ice skating at Pearl Park. Pearl Park is located at –” It's bizarre. As I got older, it was definitely just – it's not consistent for me. I always have a journal. I always have a notebook. Sometimes it's a bullet point list. Sometimes it's something somebody said that I want to remember. Sometimes it is just a little scene.

When I've tried to be a discipline journaler, like there's so many people, "Oh, you have to have a journaling practice, or you have to do the same thing, or da, da, da." That's never going to be me. I will almost never do the same thing. I was talking to a friend about this recently, just like, your calendar is a form of journal, you know what I mean? If I look back, there are certain things even that in that year in 2011, I set and I didn't realize it was a recurring. I set Aaron's brain surgery as a recurring invite on my calendar. I set his chemo and radiation schedule as a recurring invite. Every year, I see it again, which is so interesting to me.

I could change it. It's like, I can look back at 2012, or 2013 in my Google calendar and see what I was doing and where I was spending my time. I think that's so interesting, too. Whenever someone is overwhelmed by the idea of, oh, having a journal, you already have one.

[0:50:31] LW: Well, nowadays, it's also the camera roll. That's a bit of a journal as well. You watched your husband decline and eventually succumbed to cancer. Thinking back now, many, many years later, what are some of the things that you felt like you did right? What were some things that hold up and you think, "Wow, I'm glad I took that approach, where I said something, or I didn't say something, or I did something, or didn't do something"?

[0:50:59] NM: Yeah. I feel like, we did it as well as we could have. I am glad that we didn't make it our whole life. I'm glad we didn't make it our whole life, because it would have been futile anyways. All we would have done is rob ourselves of the time that we had, which was not a lot. I am so glad I didn't do that. I am so glad that I didn't spend my time researching something that I had no business researching, because I was an English major, okay. I can barely understand what the doctors were saying half the time. They being, "Do you understand?" I was like, "Absolutely not. But don't bother repeating it, because we don't care." We just don't care.

I really think we did a good job. I really think we did a good job. I'm glad we talked about everything. We met with a estate attorney, when we had no estate. There's nothing to meet about. There's no money. Who's going to get all the nothing? We did that. It was a way of also, talking about, I was pregnant at the time, like what are the worst-case scenarios, not just for you, but for me, for our kid? We had all of those conversations. We had all the medical, power of

attorney conversations, all the end-of-life conversations for myself, for him. Those are things that people in their 30s don't talk about. Typically, they don't.

You don't know when you will be faced with making a decision for the person that you love. It is better to know. It is better to know. Is it a wonderful conversation to have? No. But I will also say, it is one of the most romantic things that you can do for and with one another, and to put yourselves in the feet of a potential future versions of yourselves and say, if this horrible thing happens, then what? Then what? I'm glad we did all of that. I'm glad we did all of that. I wish, I wouldn't have worked as much, but I did not have a choice.

That's the economic reality of most people in America, right? It's like, the things that don't kill you might destroy you financially. We did exactly what we needed to do. I'm glad that as he got as normal as possible, last three years of his life. He did still get to go into work. He liked work. He liked his co-workers. He liked going to the office and that wasn't taken from him. If we would have just sat at home, I really think we both would have lost it. I really do.

[0:53:45] LW: Something else that you did that in hindsight, turned out to be very serendipitous for you, was you invited him to collaborate on his own obituary.

[0:53:56] NM: Yes. I'm glad we did that. I'm glad we did that. I know it's so weird. I remember asking him and just feeling like, oh, we still said, right? We don't want to know. We don't want to know how much time he has left. It had been almost three years at this point. My dad had just died. I just lost our second pregnancy. Things were bad. You don't need to be told by a doctor when things are getting worse. With brain cancer, he lost the left side of his body. His face was drooping. He couldn't use his left arm. His left foot was dragging. It was clear. It was clear. It was clear. It was clear. It was clear.

After my dad died and I wrote my dad's obituary with my siblings, which was interesting to do. Four people being like, "No, no, no, no, no. No, wait, wait, wait. Say this. Say this instead." I knew the night that he entered hospice and by entering hospice, it makes it sound like you're really crossing a threshold. You're going home to DIY your own death, really. They're going to drop off some supplies. They might drop off some morphine, and they're like, "Call us if it gets

worse.” That's it. All they're saying is there's no more we can do to fight the disease. Now, you are going to do comfort care. You'll just be made comfortable.

At first, I had to ask him to do something really uncomfortable. I had seen the way Aaron's diagnosis, Aaron's sickness, and that's just there with anybody, right? When something hard happens and horrible happens, something bad happens or whatever, someone's going through something and it becomes a story, it can really be very dehumanizing. Pity is really dehumanizing. Pity is really dehumanizing. I didn't want to be the person to try to sum up what Aaron's life meant without him.

He had told me long before what he wanted out of a funeral, how we wanted the funeral to go. I remember asking him like, “Will you make a playlist?” He was like, “Way ahead of you. I already made a playlist. I would never let you pick the music for my funeral, ever.” I am not offended by that. It would have been just the worst. It would have been the worst. He made his own play list. He knew what he wanted. I asked him to write the obituary with me and we did. It was so funny and we laughed so hard and we cried so hard. I saved it to my Google Drive. I titled it, ‘Just in Case’. ‘Just in case’. We used it two weeks later.

[0:56:40] LW: It goes viral.

[0:56:41] NM: Yeah, 2014 viral. This is a simpler time. Simpler time. Try to imagine 2014, where there's just one algorithm for all of us. There's not like, your Facebook, my Facebook, your Instagram feed, my Instagram feed. There's no TikTok. It's just, everything is everywhere. It's all in the same place and it was on – It went viral, because we did reveal his identity. We said that he had died of complications due to a radioactive spider bite, and years of fighting a nefarious criminal named cancer, who has plagued our society for far too long.

We revealed his identity as Spider Man. I did not know they would publish it. I was like, “Oh, God. We'll see.” They'll publish literally anything. You're paying for it. Okay, it's an ad for your funeral. They will publish it. I thought, it would go into your local paper, the Star Tribune and it would be what it was supposed to be, which is an inside joke, right? Aaron made everyone feel like they were invited to the party. They were a part of the joke. There was no inside joke. We

were all on the inside of it. It did that, right? People saw it and they laughed at it, but then it just yeah, literally went viral, went everywhere. It was everywhere. It was everywhere.

[0:57:57] LW: You saying you just wanted to write, right? You start getting these calls from editors?

[0:58:04] NM: Yeah, I was still writing. I was still writing. I wrote my way through those two weeks of hospice. I wrote my way through the funeral and everything that came after. A lot of people found that obituary. When they found the obituary, they found the blog I had and they found my little Instagram account, where I was journaling in captions. I got calls from agents and editors. People asked, “Do you want to write a book?” I was like, “I would love to write a book. Not about this. I want to write *The Devil Wears Prada*. I can’t believe that book is already been written. I want to write that book. I don’t know that if I want to write about this.”

I also did want to write about this. There are certain stories inside of you that you have to write. I was already doing that. I was doing that for an audience of zero. I was doing it for an audience of a 100. I was doing it for an audience of a 1,000. I was doing it for an audience of thousands at that point, and not with any end in mind. I didn’t start my blog thinking like, “Oh, someday this will be a great book.” I was just like, this is the only way that I know how to deal with this and survive it. This is the only way. This is the only way I can do it.

[0:59:17] LW: Yeah. Because you were feeling guilty, you’re telling everyone who would listen about – Talk about that. Talk about the initial stages of mourning for you, in relationship to how we expect people to mourn and what were some of the learnings that you –

[0:59:36] NM: I mean, the first stages of mourning for me were just straight up denial and avoidance. Just like, am I denial. It’s not like, “Oh, I think my husband’s alive.” It’s just, I’m good. I’m good. I knew this was going to happen. We’re okay. We’re good. We’re good. We’re good. We’re good. I was not good. We were not okay. I had a almost two-year-old child, who had been born into this traumatic situation, who was just eating inside of me and probably just taking a cortisol bath every single day. Just feeling my stress, hearing my stress constantly. I was not okay. I was not doing well. In a lot of ways, when I was writing was the only time I could be honest. That I could not bear to look in the eyes of a single person I knew and tell them the

truth. Even then, people loved me and cared about me if they came over, I was good. I was good. Can I get you a coffee? I just made a brunch just for you, just this show, this performance of being okay.

I had signed up for a half marathon that was going to happen four months later. I ran it, okay. I ran it. I just wanted so badly to earn my spot. Aaron was better than me and he died. I had to make sure that I earned my spot on this earth. That grief is really chaotic. I think, people don't understand the chaos of grief, right? You can understand if someone's crying. You can't understand if someone is up all night, pulling everything out of their pantry, rearranging their living room, researching different states to move to, not going back to work, by the way. I just didn't go back. I just didn't go back. I just didn't go back.

Being angry. Being incredibly angry about things that are probably pretty small and forgivable. Grief is really ugly. It's not always a sympathetic way to be. It's not always sympathetic. I did want to write something that represented that chaos. I was given a lot of books after Aaron died. I read a lot of books when he was sick and when he was diagnosed, and books that I loved, books that I love, but that were written from this comfortable distance. 10 years later, 20 years later, we can give something a meaning and it doesn't hurt the same way. You can write about it from a little bit of a remove. It's called perspective, right? That's called perspective. This is also a perspective. That's where I was. I couldn't even see where I was, or how I was. That's the first book I wrote was written with my face to the wall.

[1:02:29] LW: There are a few things that, again, seem to be serendipitous. The emails that you were writing turned into your podcast. The guilt that you're feeling turned into this support group, and your book that happened as a result of the obituary. Did you feel like there was any divinity happening at that time? I know you have a strong opinion about it, but I'm just curious. Or did you just feel like, you were just Kramering your way into all of these different things?

[1:02:58] NM: I was Kramering it. Also, there was no plan. There was no plan. There was no expectation for anything, either. If there was a thing that I could do, or I thought I could do, I would try it. I think that's the risk tolerance that I had, was not from comfort. Now, I didn't have a job. Now I didn't have a husband. He hadn't had a life insurance policy that was going to help

me survive. We had to crowdfund our way out of that medical debt that we had. What was the worst thing that could happen? It already happened.

My dad was dead. My husband was dead. I lost that pregnancy. I'd never have another baby, because also, my husband was dead. I just thought, I don't know. What else? What else can happen? What else can happen?

[1:03:53] LW: There's a freedom that you felt.

[1:03:55] NM: Yeah. Because also like, who cares, right? If it hadn't worked, who cares? No one cares. No one cares. I remember a friend losing their business around the same time that Aaron died and they lost it, in part because they just had not had, I didn't want to say humility, but the comfort of saying like, this isn't working and I don't know how to fix it. They were so ashamed of that. They were so ashamed of the way that it fell apart. I remember telling them like, "No one cares," you know what I mean? No one thinks less of you. You did a thing that most of us will never do. It worked for five years. That's great. Now it doesn't and now you don't have it. No one's looking at you thinking like, "Wow, what a loser." You're thinking that. None of us are thinking it.

Yeah, I did have this sense of freedom like, who cares? I was just doing things. I was just doing things. A part of it, all those things that I was doing were also me distracting myself from dealing with my sorrow, dealing with my loss, dealing with my grief. A part of them were this frenetic energy that I can sense in other people who are experiencing loss like, I have to do something to show the world how much this person meant to me, right? I have to do this thing, because this person can't anymore. I always tell people, you don't have to. You don't have to. Loving them when they were here, that counts. Being with them while they were here, that counts, that matters just as much. I don't know if all the stuff that I did was good for me. I don't. I don't.

I liked my life. I like where I am. I don't think at all – I don't think Aaron died, so I could have a podcast. No, that's not what you're saying. You know what I mean? I don't think that was a part of a bigger plan. Also, I can look back at the time of my life and know that I was held, I was supported by people. I do think that people really do want to do that for each other. We are really wired to want to catch somebody when they're in free fall. We do want to lay out that thing

from cartoons, that little – you know what I'm talking about? Like from old timey cartoons, where someone needs to jump out of a burning building and they – It's like a bunch of people holding a trampoline, which doesn't seem safe. I think that's what people want to do for each other. That's still what I want to do for other people.

[1:06:27] LW: You were doing a lot of things. I think people looking at that, or at least hearing about your story from the outside in, they'd say, "Oh, you know. Nora looks like she's been able to convert her grief into some purpose. She's helping people. That's a wonderful, wonderful thing." Yet, you're feeling overwhelmed, burnout, like you created a cage for yourself and trying to be available to everyone else. Let's just flash forward a little bit, to now you're with Matthew a year later. you guys have a child together. How did you –

[1:07:00] NM: Yeah. He had me a year later.

[1:07:02] LW: Tell us about that. Working up to that moment where you realized, "Okay, I got to change. This is not sustainable."

[1:07:09] NM: Yea. Oh, I didn't realize that for years. I didn't realize it for years and years and years and years and years. I met Matthew a year after Aaron died, and I was never going to get married again. I didn't even want to fall in love with anyone again. It would be fine if they fell in love with me. That's their fault. I can't prevent that, obviously. But they're never going to live with me. They're never going to meet my kid. They're never going to share my life. They can come over and kill centipedes, mow my lawn, have sex with me, end of list. End of list.

You can take me out to dinner. God bless the men in my life, who if you ever have somebody who is widowed, who is even freshly divorced, or broken up with, or starting over something in their life and you have the ability to take them out for a platonic dinner, but treat them like it's a date, pick them up, buy them dinner, order a dessert course. Three men in my life did that for me and it meant so much to me. It meant so much to me. It really got me through. I didn't want that. I just didn't want a romantic relationship.

A widow friend of mine, Mo, who's one of my best friends, both our husbands died in the fall. The physical feeling of fall in the Midwest just brings it back. It was my first deathaversary. I was

feeling it in my body. I literally couldn't even turn my head. My shoulders were so locked. I was so stressed out. I went to Mo's backyard to burn some things, to burn some explanation and benefits from the health insurance company that I had in a garbage bag, and to just hang out. She had invited this guy and I didn't know that she was going to do that. He just listened to the two of us talk for hours, hours, hours. I assumed, maybe his wife was dead or something. A few hours into it I was like, "What's your deal? Who are you?"

I don't know. I thought, well, here's a guy that could take me out to dinner and have sex with me. That's what I thought. That's what I thought. Here's a guy. Here's a guy. He seems safe and kind and he had kids. He was only available a few nights a week, which is ideal. I was never going to be the center of his world. He had his own life. He knew himself. I think, once you meet a person who knows themselves, you can see them coming a mile away. This guy was not – he did not need someone to complete him. He did not need me. He didn't need anyone, which meant he could genuinely be interested in someone, in me, because he didn't need me. He didn't need me.

Unfortunately, I did fall in love with him. We had a baby and we got married and we have this blended family, but I didn't have any of the realizations that you're talking about that I'm like, doing too much that I'm harming myself that I'm actually not even being that helpful to – I didn't have any of the realizations that you're talking about, about how burned out I was, about the motivations behind this output, which from the outside, like you mentioned, looks like, it looks so good. Parts of it are so good, right? They're so good. I never thought I would be able to write a book. I never thought I'd be able to write five books. I didn't think when I started my podcast, "Oh, this will be a full-time job someday." I literally thought, "Well, this will be a fun little silly thing to do. This will be a cute little thing. That'll be fun. I'll do that." I didn't realize that. I didn't realize that for years. I didn't realize that probably till 2021, 2020. Even now it's 2023. It just feels the extended cut of 2020. I'm just were forever in 2020 to me.

[1:11:01] LW: You guys had that family hike that one day.

[1:11:05] NM: Yeah. That's a wake-up call. That was a wake-up point. That was a wake-up point. There's a lot there. I didn't realize how much of things I thought were my personality. The procrastination, the constant distraction, the extreme sensitivity about criticism, our ADHD. I'm

doing a lot at this point. I'm doing all of these things. I've got this peer support group for widows that I started. I have this non-profit that also grew into a B Corp arm. I've got this podcast. I'm writing books. We have these four kids. I have four other jobs that I couldn't even list for you, because I will say yes to anything.

Our friends were visiting from Minnesota, and we went on one of our favorite hikes. They have five kids. We have four kids. Our littlest one was four, I think. We have to take two cars to the hike. On the way back, everyone's switching seats. Everyone wants to drive with different parents and we pull up to our house. It's just like the scene from *Home Alone* when they're leaving for the airport, only reverse. Everyone's getting home. Everyone got out of the car. I got the stuff I needed out of the trunk and I congratulated myself. You got the stuff out of the trunk that you thought you would forget. You didn't forget. You didn't forget the stuff in the trunk. Good for you. We forgot, I forgot our youngest in the car, in the back of the car. He did not know yet how to undo his seatbelts, or open a door. He is waiting for us to come back for him –

[1:12:46] LW: For an hour.

[1:12:47] NM: Yeah, probably an hour. Yeah, an hour, an hour. Kids die that way. Kids die that way. It was winter here. If it would have been 5 degrees warmer, 10 degrees warmer, you'd be dead. You'd be dead. You'd be dead. You'd be dead. I went outside with my friend to show her a tree in our neighborhood. Beautiful tree. It looks like the tree from *Go, Dog, Go*, that book. It's a great tree. I looked over. We're in Arizona, so the windows and our cars are tinted very, very dark. I thought, "Oh, my God." He's playing in the car. He shouldn't be playing in the car. I opened the door and he'd been crying and he was sweating. He looked at me like I was his savior and not the woman who had left him there. He said, "Can I get out now?"

My friend and I looked at each other like, "Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck." Then my husband looked at me like, "Ooh, yeah." That is what is the danger. That is the danger of being so distracted, so disconnected from the where you are, from where you are. Who knows? Who knows what I was doing, like what I was doing, where my mind was? My mind was not in the backseat of the car where our youngest child was trapped. It's the biggest shame of my life. It's the narrowest miss of my life. Yeah.

[1:14:34] LW: But it inspired some change. You started changing some things after that.

[1:14:38] NM: Yeah. I wrote about that in the book. I tell that story now, because when I did tell people, I told people gingerly, right? There are people who will hear this and who will be like, “I hate this woman. I hate this woman. This woman’s a horrible mother. This woman’s a horrible mother.” There will be someone who hears this who thinks like, “Okay, it is not just me. This stuff happens. This stuff happens, right?” There’s no amount of hating myself that would change it. There’s no amount of self-flagellation that will somehow make that situation any different.

I don't know who says it. I'm sure I could Google it. The real apology is changed behavior. I did have to change. I had to change so much. I had to change so much and what I changed was just a giant call of what I do, of what I do and what I am available to do and where I am, which is the most important place that I can be is here, and not even just physically with my kids. I wasn't traveling a ton in that era, right? That was the still pretty much a good lockdown era. I wasn't doing traveling and doing speaking events. I wasn't doing live podcast shows. I was here. I was not here. I was not here. Because I had made myself the central hub to a bunch of spinning wheels that did not need to keep spinning.

Until I stopped doing our peer support group. I handed it over to a group of capable people, who had the bandwidth to do it and wanted to do it and were in a mental place where they could handle it. I never once in all those years asked like, “Am I okay to do this? Should I still be doing this?” I just thought, if someone asked me to do it, the answer is yes. The answer is yes. I stopped doing that. The business closed. All I was doing was two full-time jobs now. That was enough. That was enough. That was enough. I stepped away from a lot of things that really had started to feel like they were central to my identity. It's so hard, because I never want to sound like – having a purpose isn't important. Of course not. Of course, I don't believe that, right?

There has to be some line between your doing and your being. Because if the only value that you have on this earth is so closely tethered to what you are doing for other people, the approval, or the appreciation that you can get from other people, like you are just setting yourself up for misery. I know, I'm not the only person out there who from a young age learned that of course, it feels good to be told you're doing a good job, right? It does. It did. I loved doing all of those things, until I didn't.

I had no connection to myself mentally, to realize I really can't do this stuff anymore. I can't do all of this stuff anymore. It didn't matter how many times my therapist literally told me, it sounds like you're overwhelmed. It sounds like, maybe you've connected these activities, these titles, these unpaying jobs so closely to your identity that you feel stuck inside of them. I was like, "No, I don't know if that's it."

[1:18:28] LW: How are you thinking about success these days?

[1:18:31] NM: Yeah. I have it written on a board that I can see right now, that no one else can see. Unless, they walk into this office, I guess. I'm like, "You already did it." I did it. I have everything I need. I have everything I need. It is enough. If I write no more books, if the podcast ends tomorrow, if the only thing that I do is, and by the way, I'm a person who also and I just always want to be clear about this, too, because there can be such a gap between appearance and reality. I'm a person who needs to work. I'm no longer living paycheck-to-paycheck, but I'm a person like, I need a job. I need a job.

I'm always skeptical of when you hear interviews with people who are like, "Yeah, this doesn't matter. You're good, because you're a millionaire." That's why it doesn't matter. You know what I mean? But if tomorrow, I could no longer do any of the things that I do, that I really like, that I really love, I love my jobs. I love my jobs. If I could no longer do them, if I worked at an office doing an office job, name a business job, but I literally could not to save my life. If I did, I would be fine, you know what I mean? I would be fine. Because that is not where I get all of my value anymore.

[1:19:54] LW: Final question, for I know your kids are coming back any minute now. You have a tour coming up. What are you most looking forward to about this tour?

[1:20:03] NM: Oh, God. Light. Do you feel this way, too? It's like, you make this thing, and goes off into the world and you can see it. You can see, right? You have a concept of numbers, right? You're like, okay. It's that many people. That's a lot of people. The difference between that and then seeing a person who read something you wrote, responded to, listen to something. It's so

different. It's the only thing that makes the job feel real, I have to say. It really is. When you need a person, you're like, "You? Really? You?"

I remember telling someone at a meet and greet like, "Oh, man. I just love knowing it's you. I love knowing that it's you here in Seattle, walking your dog, listening. That is so cool to me." I love live events. We do our podcast shows. They're really good. Our podcast shows are really good. We're doing eight cities this spring, but we're going to do it more regularly. Probably every other month, we'll hit up some different cities. We're going to be in eight this spring, which I'm really excited about. There's always more places to go. Yeah, I just love, love, love seeing the people who make my job possible. It's so cool. It's so cool.

[1:21:19] LW: Beautiful. We'll definitely put some information about that in the show notes. I just wanted to thank you.

[1:21:25] NM: Thank you. I hope any of that was coherent. I'm so sorry if you're –

[1:21:28] LW: No, it was great. The thing is, I could go on easily for another hour or two hours, because there's so much we didn't talk about, about your story that I took all these notes on, because I'm so fascinated by just how these things dovetail into one another. Yeah, they just have to read your books. It's all in your books.

[1:21:46] NM: You're just going to have to read them. You're just going to have to read the books.

[1:21:48] LW: And your podcast. I think, we left the listener wanting more and that's a good thing. That's a good problem to have. Thank you very much for coming on and sharing your story and baring your soul, yet again –

[1:22:02] NM: Thank you, Light. You're so lovely.

[1:22:02] LW: - and yet another podcast. I look forward to hopefully, crossing paths in person one day.

[1:22:08] NM: Oh, my God. Of course. Of course, of course. Yes. I have your email, so I will email you. I'm going to go get 10 steps. That's going to be my goal. I'm going to get a 1,000 steps today. I'm going to stand up. You have inspired me. I'm like, "Why am I doing this? I can get up. I can literally get up. There's no one in the cubicle next to me. No one's watching to see how long I sit in this computer. God."

[1:22:30] LW: I'm actually going out to walk in the sun, literally, shortly after this.

[1:22:34] NM: And the sun just came out. Yeah. I'm so excited.

[1:22:37] LW: All right.

[1:22:38] NM: Yeah.

[1:22:39] LW: Awesome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[1:22:41] LW: Thank you so much for listening to my interview with Nora McInerney. For more inspiration, to make sure to find Nora on social media @NoraBorealis. Of course, I'll drop links to everything that we discussed in the show notes on my website, which is lightwatkins.com/show.

If this is your first time listening to the Light Watkins Show, we've got an incredible archive of interviews with other past guests, who share how they found their path and their purpose. You can search the interviews by subject matter. If you only want to hear stories about people who've taken leaps of faith, people who've overcome health challenges, people who've overcome financial struggles and all of those various topics, you can get that list at lightwatkins.com/show.

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that on The Happiness Insiders online community, which is my online community based around cultivating happiness from the inside out. Not only will you be able to hear all of the unedited versions of my podcast, if you like hearing the chit chat in the beginning and the false starts and the mistakes, but you'll also get access to my 108-day meditation challenge, my 30-day mindfulness triathlon and a bunch of other challenges and masterclasses for becoming the best version of you.

Then finally, to help me bring you the best guests possible, it would go a really long way if you could take 10 seconds to rate this podcast. All you do is glance down at your screen, click the name of the podcast, scroll down past those first handful of episodes, you'll see five blank stars. If you found these conversations inspiring, tap the star all the way on the right and you have left a five-star rating. If you want to go the extra mile, which of course I encourage everyone to do, leave a review with one episode that you recommend a new listener should consider starting with as an introduction to this podcast. It could be the episode that had the biggest impact on you personally.

Thank you in advance for that. I look forward to hopefully seeing you back here next week with another story, about someone just like me and you, taking a leap of faith in the direction of their purpose. Until then, keep trusting your intuition, keep following your heart, keep taking those leaps of faith. If no one's told you recently that they believe in you, I believe in you. Thank you and have a great day.

[END]