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Welcome to the Sharing the Heart of the Matter podcast, where we bring new talented creatives who inspire you to reach your next level of personal growth.

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I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode, I'm with my co hosts, Dr. Vicki Atkinson, and writer and author Brian Hannon. Brian is one of our colleagues on the heart of the matter blog. And we love the inspiration he brings forward about writing and creativity on a regular basis. In this case, it was an article on Writer's Digest, by Sierra Godfrey entitled, four ways to write complicated families. Oh, boy, what family isn't complicated. So we get Brian to talk about Sierra's four points, paired the darkness with humor, use character imperfections, leave room for characters to grow, and have empathy.

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The great thing about having good source material, and a great writer to comment on it is that it adds up to a fantastic conversation about how to actually do it.

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Brian talks about writing about family members, whether in personal narratives or in fiction. From a three dimensional viewpoint. We dig into the humor of Vicki's book Surviving Sue, as an example of how to lighten up the load that came with Sue's dysfunction.

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Brian asked me a great question about my book, finding my father's fate. That is based on conversations that I had with my dad. Could we have talked in depth about life, religion and spirituality 10 years earlier than we did?

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Nope. Because as Parker J. Palmer says, inner life of any great thing will be incomprehensible to me until I develop and deepen an inner life of my own. I wouldn't have been able to have those conversations until I was ready.

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Timing is such a key to writing about family and the three of us talk about it. Vicky brings up the readiness factor, that we have to have done enough work in order to be able to follow Sierra Godfreys points to write full characters.

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And through it all, we affirmed all that writing can do for us, especially when dealing with complicated characters and family. Brian borrows from Jerry Maguire. It completes me.

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We get to work through our own stuff. Leave room for our own growth as a character in the story. All the while weaving a story so that others know they aren't alone. This is a great episode about fantastic tips that come with writing about all facets of family. We know you'll love it.

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Hey, Brian,

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hey there, how are you? Good. Vicki and I are so excited to be talking to you on the podcast. We love these sessions when it's the three of us the Three Amigos

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mostly because you bring so much good inspiration to us. And we love it. You are such a curator of great content about writing, whether it's on your blog, or what you bring to us on Heart of the Matter blog. And the latest finds sent in an email to Vicki Knight was an article written by author Siera Godfrey

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entitled four ways to write complicated families. Yeah, and when and I went, whoo.

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Let's read that. That resonated with us right out of the box. Yeah.

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You know what, I think the three of us really resonate with that. But what family isn't complicated? Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

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True, true. True.

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Tell us what sparked your eye about

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it was a piece in the Writer's Digest. And to me that the thing that jumped out and the piece does, as a sort of a caveat upfront, it's really referring to or talking about complicated families from more of a fictional or novel standpoint. But to me, it jumped out because so much of what you know, we write on the blog, in my personal blog, whatever, is, you know, there's complicated family issues, whether it's trying to explain people in

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in full, full view, or from a three dimensional viewpoint, or even just how to even even from a fictional standpoint, how to explain to peep people, you know, not everyone is a villain.

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Everyone has a full life, from their point of view. They're the star of their own movie. And to me there were that just jumped out that whether you're writing fiction, nonfiction, what have you that families are a big part of it? And how do you write about them? Honestly, truthfully,

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and sensitive because

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both from a realistic standpoint, as well as from a caring standpoint, it's a fine line to walk and you guys especially jumped out because it just the, the way they you wrote about your your families? Yeah, I could envision that I could see that I could see that in my head. You know, it was like a light going off. Like, I got to share this with you.

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So glad that you did. Yeah. And I think one of the things that, you know, to kind of

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play off of the source, your Writer's Digest, think about it, like digestible, the article was like super digestible, right? And we love like little nuggets, I think that can provide a little inspiration. And you know, what writer, present company included? doesn't love a list? Right? Or a quick list of chips? Right? We love that. Right? So when you sent this to us, Brian, we were we're really entranced by kind of Godfrey, straightforward, you know, just hitting it with some, you know, pretty direct foundational tips. And just like you said, they're applicable if you're, you know, writing fiction, but you know, what work of fiction isn't spawned a little bit by something that you've seen heard experienced, right? I mean, where does imagination come from? We're wondering if you would kind of walk through what those four tips are for our listeners, because they are kind of digestible. And I think when when and I read the article that you sent us, which we'll link in the show notes, we're like, dang, yeah, that makes sense. It just does. So fill fill our listeners in on Godfreys. Wisdom?

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No, it's good. I think it's things that you guys have talked about in the past. The first one was, was pairing the darkness with humor. And I'll go through all four, the second was using character imperfections that are just really the imperfections of life. The third is really leaving room for characters to grow. Because again, throughout life, we're all growing and learning. And then the fourth, which is probably my favorite is having empathy. And, and what what she's talking about, with all four of those are going maybe a little bit deeper, is certainly worth pairing the darkness with humor. I mean, this is one that I tried to do in my own writing,

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life,

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especially some of the topics that we may be trying to write about, it can get dark, you're talking about death, you're talking about, you know, challenges, you're talking about sensitive moments. And, you know, for instance, this, this week, I wrote about overcoming my stutter, or my stammer as a kid. And to me, I had to include some humor in that, just because it can be a tough topic, and to try to show just some of the craziness that we all

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see in our lives, I think it's a good way of making, bringing home the point that you're trying to make in a much easier, much, much more understandable or relatable way. It's so much of that with writing to me, frankly, is about finding ways to make this relatable telling a story that cuts across and no matter your background, no matter your you know, economic status, no matter where you are, whatever, just finding a way to relate and connect. So that's a big part of it, I think, using character imperfections. I think that's the vulnerability

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showing to me that the thing that jumped out there is, you know, getting into the heart of how how we're human and there's going to be

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good or bad and that does lead into the

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Third one about growth. So much of life is about learning. And, you know, you don't, I think when I've been turned off by, by my writing, it's where I'm not seeing the growth over time of a character or a story. And to me, that's, it has to be because because we're not as life, you know, we're not at a point in time, we're continuing to learn and grow. And then finally, but the, you know, when we're writing about family, when we're writing about relatives, I think empathy plays so much a part of it whether, you know, you know, being willing to bleed and really dive into what makes the story matter. Or even just checking with family in terms of how

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can I speak to speak about this isn't my story to tell? that empathy is critical and wouldn't no matter whether it's fiction or nonfiction? Yeah. Does that make sense? Have I summed up those points correctly? I think you have, you know, what, what strikes me in thinking about pairing the darkness with humor, I'm thinking about Vicki writing, surviving Sue, where she has Sue, who, you know, has a few flaws.

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And, and she pairs that awareness with the humor of her I Love Lucy episodes.

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Yeah, it Biggie that was important to you to have the humor in there as well. It was because my mom knew and Brian mentioned that, you know, the dimensionality of characters and moving a story along. She wasn't

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anything but multifaceted. You know, she had a lot of different shades and colors. And in the Godfrey article, I highlighted one of those points where she said for the reader, you can lessen the tension on the page for a moment with little breaks to allow the reader to breathe, especially when you're dealing with things that are heavier, intense, and I took that to mean okay, maybe those little segments and surviving Sue where I showcased five literal sitcom crazy things that Sue got away with show that you know, she had a little Jawad Aviv a little, you know, I don't know, a childhood enthusiasm about things that her intent really wasn't to be, you know, a monster in it. Anyway. But, but yeah, I love that part. Yeah, yeah, it reminds me of my dad who use humor a lot in his sermons. Because, yeah, same reason you get, you need to create some space so that people can exhale, and get ready for the next what's going to hit him next.

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I gotta be careful here, because I like these movies, too. But I always poke fun of my wife. She's a big, Hallmark Christmas movie fan. And I always poke fun of the, you know, the one dimension out all the of the characters. But again, I'm a fan too. So I can't put too much fun. But, you know, characters are people in our lives are three dimensional. I mean, your mother, you wrote as well about the imperfections. But you also wrote about the volunteering and being an advocate for special needs, you know, if you hadn't approached it from that standpoint. Yeah. I think, you know, after chapter one, someone would have been like, Okay, why am I reading? Why am I continuing on with the story? I mean, did you think about that when you were writing? I did, because I wanted to one of the other. Great Godfrey points that you talked about Brian is that idea of letting characters grow, you know, Sue had a lot of loss in her life, and she didn't, didn't have a destination in mind where she was going to be hurtful. But as she carried her own pain, she struggled with it and tried to improve and did the best that she could. And when and I you know, kind of talk about what we carry in our baggage sometimes, you know, she wasn't well equipped to deal with some of the things her toolkit was kind of empty, but still, there were moments where she tried to transcend you know, and be better and I think I see that and when story also about her father, you know, because when was risking if we apply this to you know, characters that are growing when risked a lot by having these deep conversations with her dad, which for me, is sort of like a story about winds growth, you know, risking, you know, the relationship potentially. And I love all that. It's so funny that you say that because part of the problem that I had was you

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to Bryan second point using character imperfections, I couldn't find the imperfections in my dad. And that's partially my I revered him, I adored him. And, you know, we were, we were like, but he was partially because he was, you know, when we were having these conversations 7677, whatever imperfections he started out with as a 15 year old that I had no visibility into. So I paired myself in there so that I could showcase my imperfections in my group, because

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he thought through his group, and I couldn't see that. Well, yeah, yeah, no, I see that. And I think, Brian, when you were talking about the empathy piece,

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you know, you like you said, You've written about that recently. And I was, you know, not joking today, when I threw a comment your way about, you know, you were an empathetic worrier, I think, telling those stories about how we get to the other side, and you've done a good bit of that recently, which we love, you know, we need to champion those things, when we see that unfolding, but what does all that mean, for you, as a writer, when you do that personal storytelling?

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Empathy is

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it's multifaceted, because it's thinking about the people that know, especially if it's not nonfiction, you know, the people that know that have their side of the story to

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being understanding that this is my understanding, and I'm gonna write about it, I need to write about it, but also being respectful.

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You know, there are certainly things about my kids, that, that I have not written about, I would love to, but you know, what it's, it's, it means too much to the, it's crucial or part important to them. So I backed off. But then I also think it's empathetic in terms of even how we write about people how we write about characters, mentioned you, Vicki about your mother, like you painted a true picture. But you didn't go to the other side, or even when with your father, like he comes across as real. And, and to me, that's

empathy that's being able to put yourself in that position and tell a story in a way that matters to readers. But then also isn't far fetched isn't

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isn't make believe, you know, something I learned.

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And I think I've said it on a previous podcast, was about the idea of everyone is a star of their own their own show there.

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I go back to that a lot. Because, you know, we think in our minds, you know, were you we're not trying to be Robin to Batman's Batman, we're, we're the star of our own show. And to have empathy to understand where people are coming from, is, is important. And I think one final comment.

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For me, what has helped me with my writing in terms of outlining and thinking about what point I'm trying to make, I do think of, like, you know, I've written about some things with my father, like, I, I've come to see him as, as a as a human, not as a dad, like, when you were talking about your father, they're, like, I've come to see that okay. Here are some things where my father maybe wasn't as great on but you know, what? He was dealing with what he knew at that point in time. Yeah, he did clearly have maybe some of the tools that that I have now. But but he was doing the best that he could. And so that's that's helped me with my writing that's also helped me It helped me mentally to deal better with his memory and if he were allowed to deal better with with him as well, then that's sort of what Empathy means to me.

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Love that. And I think, you know, when I think about wins, dad and the example of your dad, Brian, you know, people doing the best they can, you know, with what they have. I think when I read about wins Father, I'm struck by his humility. Yeah.

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You know, because he was so accomplished, but I think you brought some of that forward when you write about your father as well but there's there's so many endearing qualities about his life, how he



struggled and trying to see past the behavior sometimes. Yeah, yeah. With him I try and see the, the the wisdom that might need

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I've been a parent.

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But and forget about sometimes the way things were told. I do think when of your your father, his big 10.

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I love that example. And to me, that's that conversation. I'm interested in how that that conversation came about. Because, again, with with my dad, he had some of that same kind of wisdom. But I had to dig a little bit for it. It wasn't, it wasn't there, right away, it wasn't necessarily saying, is that the way it was for your father? Or do you have to dig dig? I, you know, I did have to dig for that. I would say, you know, I have transcribed all of our conversations that I recorded. That's awesome. And if I had to go in, chronologically, to the big tent party, it was at the end. I mean, it was after uncovering everything else. And here's what I've discovered, I think over time is he said, he did believe that everybody, it's a big tent, and everybody comes in their own doors. Yep. But he also believed it was very important to believe in something bigger than yourself. That there is,

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you know, he called it the vertical relationship that helps with all the horizontal relationships. And I think he was, to some degree, trying to dig into what it was that I believed in that was bigger than myself. And so we had a lot of those conversations. And of course, those were the scary ones for me, because it's not that I didn't believe what he believed, but I just sort of, I got very interested in the theology in I just am not

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just doesn't have to bait me the way it captivated him. But in the end, after we have those conversations, he's like, Oh, well, it's all a big 10. Anyway.

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Do you think you're not as interested? Because you grew up with it? Maybe I think, you know, there are some people that write biblical stories differently. You know, they'll tell it from a different point of view,

they will, they'll rewrite it in modern terms. There's a female pastor from Denver, that is a beautiful writer, Nadia, bolts, Weber, beautiful writer, and she

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tends to have a congregation that's pretty

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on the margins of society. And she's rewritten a lot of the Bible in stories into that context. Right? In the Bible, she's just, you know, translated, translated, and it is brilliant. And when I read a story, that way, I can finally get it. It's like, I've heard all these things too many times. And I, you know, kind of interpreted it almost from too young of an age so that I need to sort of hear it a little bit differently. So maybe it is because I heard it a lot growing up. Yeah. And not put you on the spot. But if you had that conversation with your father, 10 years prior, it would have been been a conversation.

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No, I don't think so. Yeah, but on both ends, probably. Yeah. Maybe, yes. Maybe on both ends, I can, I can only say for sure. On my end, because I was leaning away, I was thinking that I had to look this particular way

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to be successful, that I had to, you know, have, you know, this marker and this checklist? And if I could just fake it. Yeah, then that's what successful met. Yeah, we're all just, we're all just doing our best and living this life and, and where integrity comes from isn't

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a particular word that you say, or it is living consistently

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doing the hard things and that means leaning in. And that means leading in when you fail, as well as when you succeed.

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Oh my gosh, I'm taking your podcast off in a wild in different direction. I love it.

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But you've written often about being having children later in life. And I think the thing that really hits me is that if I were to have my my kids now, how what you just said matters more to me now. And that would have been much better, less like kids and when I was in my whatever, 30s 40s being a parent, that that that being being wiser as a hey, run your own race kind of lesson.

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I wish I would have been able to convey that.

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More tomorrow. Well, let's just say this though you recently wrote in a post that your wife did field hockey or street hockey with one of your kids. And you before I'm not doing that with my kids, that's what you get for having your kids and you're 30 you're throwing up them up in the air, you were carrying them up. I'm not doing that.

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Big shout out to calf go cat.

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When I'm doing is sitting back and I just the words of wisdom. Well, all the other parents carry their kids around on their shoulders. Okay, we know that's not true. But yeah, nice try. We know that's not true. But what I love about what you're you're both saying listening to you is that part of writing about complicated families is also like a little bit of a waiting game, picking and choosing when is it the right moment? Because we is as we grow older, and your question about, you know, when and this big conversation she had with her father, Brian, when didn't trip over this aha about her leaning away, you know, from the faith community as it existed in her household. You carry that for a while, but you pick and choose your moments about when When can I start to peel back the truth, to share because we all want authenticity. And I'm thinking about why I wrote because, you know, our daughter said, I need to know I'm ready for the truth. Right? And that storytelling about things, but Good golly, that takes some courage, right? But and I'm gonna throw you Brian's question at you, Vicki, which is if you had written the book 10 years before? What would it look like? 10 years before you started writing? Yes, it would have had flames and smoke coming out of it.

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I was so angry at my mom for things that I didn't yet understand. I mean, I needed the time to let some things get off, you know, the front burner, so that I could really think about her life in total. And the the merits, not just the demerits, you know, and the transgressions. But yeah, if I had done it sooner, it would have, it wouldn't have been an accurate account of what happened because it would have had so many changes of emotionality. And we often say, you know, don't write, because you're trying to settle a score, you know, when something is difficult, and I guess if I were to add one more point, you know, to Godfreys, four points, I would say, make sure that you're ready to do it, because this isn't, you know, a payback thing. But I yeah, I think it would have been a very dissatisfying thing, and I don't think anyone would have wanted to read it. Yeah, yeah. Great question, though. And maybe the the takeaway from that is, it takes time to develop that empathy? Yeah. Yeah. And I think, you know, as parents, we see things, you know, Brian, you've talked about, you know, your children and your father, we, we see, you know, even when our parents have left us, we see the residual goodness, you know, and those moments that you've written about some of them, Brian, where you can close your eyes and picture you know, your father with one of your children.

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And that's, that's magical, you know, when you have to imagine that and bring your dad forward, because your kids don't have, you know, those sorts of physical memories. But I think, you know, when we can do that, it helps us to see

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the goodness, right. Yep. The third thing that jumps out to me to run the empathy question is, is getting ourselves in the mood to write? What I mean by that is, I feel it right now. Like right now, even for just blog, blogging purposes I've been, I've been pretty busy at work or what have you. And, and I've been just keeping up with each day's posts. And I'm actually anxious, because I'm taking some time tomorrow to, you know, later in the day, I'm gonna take an hour and I'm just gonna, I'm just gonna brainstorm some ideas. And, you know, I know there's a lot of things that are floating around in my head. But, you know, being able to take that sort of silence or that that just spending time with myself, to try to pull some of those things that are that are working around in my head, and try and make, make those connections, because there are a lot of stories, but they, how do they connect to other things? I haven't had time to do that. And I think that's important. I think that's important to our blog posts or even or fiction, is to make sure that we're at

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It's not wasteful time, it's, you know, it's getting out of the day to day and instead trying to plan and map out where, what I want to write about. Now it's not a factory, you need the time back to, you know, wins point about creativity, you need the inspiration moments. And when you're constantly in process mode, you're pushing all of that to the side, because you're just thinking I need to grind it out. Right? Yeah. And I actually I've stolen this from from you guys, both of you. Look, I've started to pull some, some past past

posts that I've done that maybe I want to bring back to try to give myself a little more time. So you know, I'm meeting some, you know, at least in my own head, some some goals are trying to meet meet meet the constant, you know, flywheel pushing out a piece, but at the same time giving myself time to think and to be in silence and to figure out what what is it I want to say, I know, I have something to say. But what exactly is yeah, sometimes events are too poignant to write about right away. Yes. That you need to let

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