

[00:00:06.330] - Wynne Leon

Welcome to the Sharing the Heart of The Matter podcast where we celebrate the why and how of creativity.

I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode, I'm with my co host, Dr. Vicki Atkinson. We are talking about six words stories. We know and love our writing, blogging, and podcasting friend Vicki. But of course, dear Vicki has worn a lot of other hats, therapist, professor, college dean, and author.

And one of the places where her incredible experience wearing all these hats comes together is six word stories. On this podcast we get to learn about the history, the benefits, and get some great examples of six word stories from Dr. Victoria Atkinson.

We start with Vicki reading a post she wrote about six word stories as it related to the forgiveness process. With her mom, she gives us the history of these powerful short stories as made popular by writer and publisher Larry Smith. Vicki tells us about the therapeutic value of forcing this brevity to check in and crystallize thoughts. She gives us a powerful reminder of how we can often feel more in control and on top of things when we package them in ways that feel like we can hold them in our hands.

Vicki gives us some wonderful examples of these powerful packages from her own life and those shared by her clients and students. She even circles back to one from our recent conversation with Dr. Gerald Stein. I like to make new mistakes. Another one of my favorites comes from Vicki's book surviving sue and is about her mom. She wore her regret like armor that carries the power of Vicki's example of how crystallizing her thoughts helped her find her way to build empathy and find her way to forgiveness.

This is a great episode that celebrates the clarity that comes when you get quiet, the power that is unlocked when you write it out, and the gateway to growth that is opened when we use tools like six word stories. I know you'll love it.

[00:02:44.090] - Wynne Leon

Hi Vicki.

[00:02:45.700] - Vicki Atkinson

Hey, Wynne how are you?

[00:02:47.840] - Wynne Leon

I'm great. I'm so excited to be kicking off our 2024 podcast with you talking about six word stories. Yeah, I'm wondering if you could start with you wrote a really great post called. It was a peek inside your book surviving sue called six Word style from your blog. Could you read that post for us?

[00:03:19.570] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, I will. And forgiveness in advance for listeners. I'll try to keep it punchy and light, but I feel like when you asked me about doing this because there has been some interest for both of us about the backstory, the behind the scenes, what are the active things we've done to build resiliency. That's really why we're chatting about this today. And so talking about that post as a starting point kind of makes sense. I wrote this back in September, and it really was in response to questions post book launch, launch of the book, people really taking in the story about my life with my mom, sue. And this was one of those first responses. So I wrote. I've continued to compile a list of faqs from readers of surviving sue, my memoir about my mom's complicated life. And one of the recurring queries is about building resilience. I feel like side note to listeners and to you, that is our word of the year, right? Wynn? Yes, yes. Despite my background as a counselor therapist, I'm cautious about highlighting any one specific technique or habit that help guide my healing journey, because the process of making peace and finding emotional high ground is a deeply individual, nuanced process.

[00:04:45.390] - Vicki Atkinson

As a result, I've been skipping this topic. I admit it, and I've shared weekly snippets of insider info about the book, steering around it. But today I figured it was a good time to share one tried and true go to that's helped me for years six word stories, a tool I shared with a client recently as I processed the pain I experienced with my mom sue, living with her, her antagonistic behavior toward me, and her reckless decision making when it came to my disabled sister, Lisa, I needed to find a digestible mantra like morsel to achieve moments of clarity. And because I'm a verbal person, words swim in my head anyhow. And I learned in part through meditation and in part through my own trauma treatment, that capturing the recurrent swirl of feelings by naming them allowed me to cast them out and move on. And then there's a cool Hemingway quote that I included in the post, and I'll explain more about that. If you haven't heard about Larry Smith's work, six word memoirs, it's really worth a peek and note to listeners. Will include links for all these good things in the show notes.

[00:06:02.560] - Vicki Atkinson

But this technique was really adapted for therapeutic purposes, self help, and originated in education. And Smith described it this way. And this is legend and lore, but we like it. Legend has it that Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write a story in only six words. His response for sale baby shoes never worn. In November 2006, Larry Smith, who was the founder of what was then called Smith magazine, gave the six word novel a personal twist by asking his community to describe their lives in exactly six words, Hemingway style. He called these brief life stories his six word memoirs. So me adopting something that worked for me, I found I had a chock full journal of six word stories related to processing pain with my mom in short order and in a conversation with a client recently, I shared one of them when I was asked about building empathy and finding forgiveness, and immediately this six word story came to mind. It was one I wrote three years or so ago after my mom, sue, passed away. And the six word story is she wore her regret like armor. So as I shared that with my client, I was a little reluctant.

[00:07:25.290] - Vicki Atkinson

But she was finding her way through a season of relationship challenges on her own, both at work and on the home front, and was on a mission to move past a string of disappointments when she pointedly asked, how do you do it, Vicki? I mean, how did you do it? Find your way to forgiveness? I was cautious in my response, but decided it was okay to share my six word story. Sue carried so much of her own pain. My mom carried armor because it protected her in superficial ways, but it also isolated her and made it difficult for her to achieve meaningful connections, especially with me. In addition to her armor, she weaponized words and deeds, alienating me and pushing me away. Not because she hated me. I came to realize that it was her fear. And fear is something I can forgive. Nodding and grateful for the real life example of the applicability of the six word concept, my client said she'd give it a try. She said in order to capture those pesky thoughts that drive me mad, write them down and move on. I think she had the right idea. At least I hope so.

[00:08:36.570] - Vicki Atkinson

So here are my six words for you today. Nothing matters more than peace and love. That was the post I wrote back in September, and as we talk, I can share more about what my clients six words were that helped her.

[00:08:53.630] - Wynne Leon

That's beautiful. Peace and love.

[00:08:57.230] - Vicki Atkinson

Peace and love. Nothing matters more.

[00:09:00.480] - Wynne Leon

Nothing matters more. Well, thank you so much for sharing that wonderful post and this incredible therapeutic tool. I think what stands out for me, many things stand out for me in that your way to building empathy and finding forgiveness. Those are two huge parts of our relationships, any relationship, good, bad, right?

[00:09:25.470] - Vicki Atkinson

Absolutely. Yeah. And navigating all of that is, I think, a challenge for everyone, regardless of what the details are.

[00:09:32.410] - Wynne Leon

Yeah. And you've said that you've used it as a therapeutic tool. You've also used it in the classroom, teaching psychology courses, is that right? And can you say more about coaching people to that brevity?

[00:09:50.910] - Vicki Atkinson

I think one of the things that happens for a lot of us, and I don't know that we discuss it enough, but those paralyzing feelings when too much is happening at once. And I think you and I are both advocates of mindfulness, practicing and recognizing the power of our breath to gain control. And there are lots of different ways of doing that, but I think under stress, the ability to take control where you can, and some of it is thought stopping, but trying to really hone in on hand over the heart, hand on the diaphragm, really thinking about what's happening in the body is a very empowering technique. And I think the clarity comes when you get quiet, which is so often the case. Even if there are a million things that you feel are out of whack and disjoint in some way, that. That clarity from within, it's a beautiful way to take back control and kind of crystallize thoughts that might otherwise become even more burdensome and overwhelming. And in the case of my student, who asked me straight out, but I need to know how. Her gift back to me, which was amazing, was her six word story, which for her was indicative of so much.

[00:11:23.940] - Vicki Atkinson

But I think you and the listeners will understand people that are sometimes afraid and averse to seeking help and assistance when life spins out of control. For her to come back to me and share her six words that were, it's okay to ask for help, it.

[00:11:41.930] - Wynne Leon

Was a gateway, right?

[00:11:43.980] - Vicki Atkinson

A gateway to growth. And I think it's an empowerment, and I think it's mean. It comes from psychology and a therapeutic point of view. But I also love Larry Smith's website and the techniques that are used within elementary school classrooms to help children that know. When you think about your kids and managing emotions and emotional regulation is a thing. It's such a thing, right?

[00:12:15.600] - Wynne Leon

Naming it to tame it, that's for sure. And Larry Smith, who wrote a book called six Word Memoirs, he was a publisher.

[00:12:24.490] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, he was a publisher. And on know, he kind of started this initiative and now it has blossomed. And I think listeners will really enjoy kind of checking out his website. The tagline for it is one life and six words,

what's yours? So it's very invitational kind of nature, and I think the examples that come through when you read it's so inspiring. So I make a point every couple of days, if I haven't hit the website to look, there's always something inspirational to me. And I think for people who aspire to be poets, there's a beautiful way to think in terms of six word stories and couple some together. When your feelings feel kind of out of control or overwhelming, then link some things together. Or what I've often done is adopt it as a journaling practice. Not that I'm writing pages or paragraphs, but trying to bring the thoughts into the cleanest, truest reflection of what I'm feeling.

[00:13:38.010] - Wynne Leon

Right. And that because you have to do the work to get it to be so brief, you've done so much processing in coming up with the right six words. Am I putting that?

[00:13:53.540] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, you've got it right. And so it's sort of like putting punctuation to the end of a sentence. Know, is a runaway train.

[00:14:02.850] - Wynne Leon

Well, it reminds me of the Mark Twain quote. I was going to write you a short letter, but I didn't have time, so I wrote you a long one.

[00:14:10.130] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, it's perfect.

[00:14:12.260] - Wynne Leon

Right? Because it's a lot of work to do that, but it's that processing work that gets us as a gateway to growth, as you've said so well, about your student.

[00:14:29.030] - Speaker 2

Yes.

[00:14:29.450] - Vicki Atkinson

And you know, because I've written about it also that I'm a big fan of a couple of writers that have focused on this. And one is Dr. James Pennebaker, who wrote a book called opening up by writing it down. So you and I often chuckle, know there really is nothing new under the. So, you know, as we talk about six word stories today, is there something like unique and novel about that? No. That core expression of self tapping. If it's a creative heart that you don't know that you have, define words and let them flow. There is

a restorative aspect to that. That is a time honored tradition. And I should also say, too, that when we think about cultures, there's a time honored oral tradition of passing down stories. And sometimes they get condensed into these briefer nuggets that become memorable across the generations. And so this isn't anything new, but it's powerful.

[00:15:31.210] - Wynne Leon

It is. It feels to me, almost like a suitcase that you can put a feeling or statement or a phase of life in and put it up on the.

[00:15:45.650] - Vicki Atkinson

And I think, you know, I'm not a big diary or journaling person, but when you and I talked about having this conversation and the questions that I've received from readers about surviving sue, and I know questions that you've received, too, about the sometimes painful process of talking about who you were as a writer and a daughter, writing about your dad and the loss and the grief and all of that, it's difficult to try and explain where we find the courage to move through all of that. But I'm also a big fan, and I think you are, too, of looking at writing as a tool for healing over time, because then we have taken something that was just within us and we've created a tangible artifact. And I think from a healing point of view, it's a very powerful thing to write for healing, but then remember to go back and read what came from your own heart.

[00:16:48.340] - Wynne Leon

Right.

[00:16:49.030] - Vicki Atkinson

And so I'm showing when now listeners a few snippets that I pulled out regarding my mom and some of the six word stories. Did you want me to share a couple of them?

[00:16:59.900] - Wynne Leon

Some of the others, yes.

[00:17:02.030] - Vicki Atkinson

So this one was from 1998. And for anyone who's read my book, there are lots of reasons why I am grateful that I have my dad's dna within me. I write often about kind of the twin stories that you and I have about daughter father love and our gratitude about being our father's daughters. But in 1998, not too long after my dad passed away, I wrote, after a lot of reflection and challenges, I am equal parts Sonny's daughter. And, man, I got to tell you, that one gave me lift on days when I needed.

[00:17:44.970] - Wynne Leon

Right, right.

[00:17:46.730] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah. Sue was still know for many years and made my life very difficult.

[00:17:55.690] - Wynne Leon

Well, and that one captures not only the power that you got from him and the grace that you got from him, but also the responsibility because you were taking care of sue in a way that your dad would have been very proud of.

[00:18:11.250] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah. And I think around that time, I received some feedback from one of my dear cousins who my dad was no longer here to kind of share that, but opening ourselves up by being in touch with our own feelings makes it easier to receive support from others. Does that make sense?

[00:18:30.810] - Wynne Leon

Say more about that.

[00:18:33.750] - Vicki Atkinson

I knew because I had written that, that if I really wanted to find every resource that I had at my disposal to navigate, to try and protect my sister, but still manage my mom's kind of maniacal behavior, that I really needed to tap everything that I could. And remembering how powerful my dad was and what a positive influence was wonderful. And then when someone in my extended family reached out and said, I miss him, too, I miss and shared some of those qualities, then I think one of the worst things is being alone when you're struggling. And so I think when you share what's come out in your six word story, there is potential for that to be the meeting in the middle with someone else. If you want to share, that's up to you.

[00:19:22.490] - Wynne Leon

Right?

[00:19:23.370] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah.

[00:19:23.880] - Wynne Leon

Do you have another example of a six word story? Yeah.

[00:19:27.880] - Vicki Atkinson

Let's see. A lot of people have asked about how I can forgive sue for all that she's done. She did. But not long after she passed away in 2015, I wrote, healing herself was beyond her grasp. And so I think you and I also often talk about empathy and trying to find our way without carrying a lot of pain, without carrying a lot of unresolved angst. So I think that one, I think, was powerful for me because I think there wasn't a lot of malice. She did a lot of damage. But I think a lot of the things that she did in life, really, she was unaware she was very ill.

[00:20:16.490] - Wynne Leon

And so as you talk about, one of the other things that is so poignant for me is what you say often, that fear is something that you can forgive. So understanding that undercurrent for her, for sue of fear, it makes it more manageable for you to access and to touch on. Right, right.

[00:20:45.160] - Vicki Atkinson

But even as we're talking about this, the thing that I'm always really careful about is to not try and evangelize any particular technique. And I think it's interesting that people have come to you and I and asked the how? How did you do it? Tell me more. And you and I are working on that a little bit, but there's an extra layer of vulnerability when you share what works for yourself, especially in my role with my professional background, because there are a million things that people can do in their recovery and resiliency journeys. The trick is to find the one or the two.

[00:21:24.030] - Wynne Leon

Yes.

[00:21:24.940] - Vicki Atkinson

This may not work for a lot of people, but I think the interconnectedness between mindfulness and meditation and the practice of breath, the importance of pausing and slowing and not reacting, there's great potential here, but it also aligns nicely with who you and I are as writers, and we are on a mission to help empower other people to kind of find their voice, no matter what life has thrown at each of us.

[00:21:55.740] - Wynne Leon

Yes. And I'd say this, too. I think the how we do it is so important, because until you do that, people who have worked through it, like you have with your mom, how you've worked through and found your way to forgiveness, it seems almost unbelievable. It's like, how can she. And I know you've gotten these

comments, how can't she treat her mom with such equanimity? How can she have forgiven her? Some of the hateful things that your mom said to you were so hurtful that unless we expose how you healed.

[00:22:37.600] - Speaker 2

Those wounds.

[00:22:41.110] - Wynne Leon

It seems like perhaps you're just putting a patina of. I want to just glass this over.

[00:22:48.250] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah. And I think for me, that was maybe one of the most unexpected and difficult things because people who read what I've written don't know me. And I think that air of suspicion or wonder about what's real and true versus what was just an exercise. And recently I wrote that surviving sue kind of came out of me in three months. I talked about that in a post recently, and I guess I hadn't really talked about that in any way, but the writing was easy when I was ready.

[00:23:21.460] - Wynne Leon

Right.

[00:23:21.880] - Vicki Atkinson

It's everything that happened for the years prior where I had to put the pieces together. So I think one day, you and I will talk about writing timelines, about personal narratives and the difficulty of it, because I think there is an important story to be told about that as well. As you often say about readiness.

[00:23:40.910] - Wynne Leon

Yes.

[00:23:41.800] - Vicki Atkinson

You don't start with writing.

[00:23:43.650] - Wynne Leon

No. What strikes me about six weeks word stories as a tool, when I was talking to my kids, who are four years old and eight years old the other day about some disappointments that they'd had in their day, Miss O said that nobody had wanted to play with her at recess, and Mr. D said Amelia told him that he was a copycat or something. Like I said, you know, do the inside hurts or the outside hurts? Which ones are

worse? And they both thought about it for a minute and they came up with the answer that come up with a plan to heal the outside hurts, but not for the inside hurts.

[00:24:31.030] - Speaker 2

And it seems to me, as we.

[00:24:33.230] - Wynne Leon

Talk about six week stories, that that is one of the plans that we can use for those inside hurts. Yeah.

[00:24:41.600] - Vicki Atkinson

And I think it's the naming it to tame it and all of those things. But I think your point is so important because one of the applications for six word stories really is, like I said in elementary school, and you've said this before, about your kids and the focus on sort of emotional regulation, kind of dealing with emotions, emotional intelligence. It's a real thing. And I think on the six word, I think this is where I pulled it from a website recently, there was a six word story from a young student. I can't remember how old Alex G. Was, but his six word story is dreaming is my escape from reality.

[00:25:25.830] - Speaker 2

And.

[00:25:26.260] - Vicki Atkinson

And so it's hard to know what the traumas are like, but kids can be really difficult with one another and challenging about home life and so many other things, but that sort of taking the temperature, which is becoming, I think, a more common thing to do with educators of young children.

[00:25:46.080] - Wynne Leon

Right.

[00:25:46.900] - Vicki Atkinson

I love that. I didn't have that. It was sit down and get your rulers out. Explain what a ruler is.

[00:25:54.470] - Wynne Leon

What is that?

[00:25:55.780] - Vicki Atkinson

Oh, yeah.

[00:25:56.460] - Wynne Leon

No. It is a tool that we didn't have growing up. And it's funny, we have a whole class of stories at my family, in my family, about what 70s parenting was like. That's when you drove up to the school and honk the horn to get your kids. You didn't sign them out, you didn't check in with them. Specific to our experience. Nobody did that.

[00:26:23.230] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah. And I think it's a good thing. There's so much to worry about in the world right now, but that attention to the importance of feelings. I think we're creating good humans for the future. And isn't that a good thing?

[00:26:37.090] - Wynne Leon

Yeah. Right. And building that empathy from the inside out.

[00:26:41.780] - Vicki Atkinson

Yes.

[00:26:42.320] - Wynne Leon

It's hard to have empathy for others when we're wounded ourselves. Absolutely.

[00:26:46.940] - Vicki Atkinson

And on that point, I wanted to make sure that we included this today. Sometimes our brilliance in six word form comes out of us and we don't even know it. But that's sort of focusing on what the message is. Recently, when you and I spent some time with Dr. Stein, he shared some of his really beautiful thoughts about being your own best friend. And one of his that he offered was to give yourself release and space because things will happen. And he wrote, this was, I think, from one of his friends. I like to make new mistakes. I don't repeat the old stuff, but I like to make new mistakes. And he didn't present it as a six word story. But darn it all my radar is up when I see something like that. That's a beautiful nugget. I go, oh, hey there.

[00:27:36.580] - Wynne Leon

Right? Because it is mantra like, and then that helps us forgive ourselves for making the new mistakes. It's like, oh, yeah, wait, I remember now. I like to do this because that means I'm pushing my envelope.

[00:27:53.370] - Vicki Atkinson

So it's one technique. It may work for people. We can share resources and other things for folks to dive into. But that expressive writing, it's a good tool.

[00:28:04.750] - Wynne Leon

It is a really good tool. It gets to those inside hurts, helps us package them up, band aid them up a little bit, and so that we can move on and do the work that you did with sue, which was finding your way to forgiveness. Yeah.

[00:28:21.480] - Vicki Atkinson

So it's such a treat to talk to you about it today. And I think we're excited that some folks have said they've had experience with six word stories. So we hope, as listeners kind of tune in, that they'll come back to the blog post about it and share their experiences, too.

[00:28:37.980] - Wynne Leon

Right. We love all those examples, because it really does help capture who you are in the moment or what you're feeling and really convey something that's so tangible to other people, isn't it?

[00:28:52.640] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah.

[00:28:53.120] - Wynne Leon

So one of your clients said her six word story is okay to ask for help. Do you have any other six word story examples that you want to leave us with?

[00:29:03.730] - Vicki Atkinson

There are a couple that I pulled and one that I loved. And again, I would never share the backstory, but you and listeners can kind of fill in the blanks, learn to breathe before I react. And so that was one that a student that I was working with that helped him get through some really tough moments where his natural response was to lead with anger. I think that one was really great and then one that I can't claim, but I love that comes from also the Larry Smith website as an example of, I think, empowerment. Again, brave birds still fly through fog.

[00:29:54.770] - Wynne Leon

Oh, wow.

[00:29:58.050] - Vicki Atkinson

There is a definite link to poetry in all of this. I think once you get in a groove of doing it, and I'll have students that will respond years later. I had a student a couple of weeks ago who reached out for a letter of recommendation and was talking about how helpful it was to think about capturing feelings and nuggets. And he didn't say it this way, but I knew what he was talking about. The practice of trying to think in terms of concise brevity, bringing the feelings in so that they're pocket size and I can handle things that I can hold in my hand. I can handle that. And I remember that was something that he had said to me. You're allowing me to pull it all in so that I can put it in my hand and I can deal with that. So there's some good imagery associated with six word stories, too, and an activity that I've used with students and clients for years about a life graph. When you're not sure what hurts or what ails you, going back and kind of examining your life at peak and low moments may help to articulate what was the feeling at that particular time.

[00:31:16.970] - Vicki Atkinson

But sometimes you've got to rewind a little bit because you and I like to talk about the baggage that we carry. It could be crapola. We've been hanging on to for a really long time.

[00:31:28.560] - Wynne Leon

Yes. And we don't even know we're carrying it.

[00:31:32.530] - Vicki Atkinson

Exactly.

[00:31:33.360] - Wynne Leon

I have a funny story about that because I have a fake Christmas tree that I've used for at least 15 years. And I know it's at least 15 years because I had it when I was married to my ex husband. And I've always so proud that when Christmas season comes and Thanksgiving rolls around, I have the tree ready to go. Well, this year, at the end of the season, it was tangled. Most of the built in lights didn't work. And I was like, well, it's time for me to let this go. And I took it to the dump and you wouldn't believe how fun it was to throw it out of the car. And I realized that this tree that's been in my storage space, I don't think that I'm carrying anything about my ex husband. I think that I'm totally past this. I never have noticed anything about the tree, but as I started throwing the pieces of it into the dump, I was like, woohoo. And it's that baggage that you don't even know you're carrying.

[00:32:37.350] - Vicki Atkinson

Absolutely. And what a perfect example about the release.

[00:32:41.920] - Wynne Leon

Yeah, right.

[00:32:42.630] - Vicki Atkinson

So you can take something that's a six word story and go, okay, well, maybe I don't want to write it, but what's the action that you could take that might give you the same benefit? And we love this time of year because people tend to naturally think about cleaning out closets and the decluttering and all of that. Declutter your head and heart a little bit, let loose of some of those things that maybe we've been dragging that don't serve us well.

[00:33:07.950] - Wynne Leon

Throw away your six foot tree.

[00:33:11.970] - Vicki Atkinson

See, I was sitting here as you were talking, going, okay, the tree is going to have a story. Yeah. And you could put some expletives in that, too. You could do the Hemingway and do some unique punctuation. You could cheat a little, but yeah, that's a perfect example. And I think what's better to talk about in January, our first podcast of the new year, than opportunities for release and renewal to build resilience.

[00:33:43.570] - Wynne Leon

Right. Release, renewal to build resilience. I love it. Well, I am grateful for your time.

[00:33:52.830] - Vicki Atkinson

Always fun. Thanks. Always so fun. Thank you.

[00:34:01.870] - Wynne Leon

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