

[00:00:05.130] - Wynne Leon

Welcome to the sharing the heart of the matter podcast, where we celebrate the why and how of creativity.

[00:00:17.170] - Wynne Leon

I'm Wynne Leon, and in this episode, I'm with my co host, Dr. Vicki Atkinson, and we're talking about writing secrets. Both Vicki and I have published books about family, Vicki about her mom, sue, and me about my dad, Dick. As we've discussed in other podcasts, writing about family is hard, but it's also instructive. We learn so much about ourselves and where we come from. It's a path that we found to be so illuminating because we get to leverage the secrets from those who went before. Vicki talks about one of the secrets she learned, which was not to keep secrets. Is it possible that underlying all or most of Sue's issues was the toxicity of keeping secrets? And what secrets did I learn from my dad? My dad had a formula for doing the next right thing, staying focused on what he was called to do, and then turning over the results to a higher power. The luxury I got was being able to talk to him about that as well as see him live it day in and day out like Vicky was able to do with her dad, Sonny. Sonny had the ten five rule.

[00:01:38.210] - Wynne Leon

Acknowledge people within 10ft and greet them within five. It's a kind of secret that carries itself forward in generational goodness. Vicki and I have a great conversation about these secrets and more. We talk about all the benefits that come from writing about life.

[00:01:59.030] - Wynne Leon

The secrets that we are able to.

[00:02:01.030] - Wynne Leon

Pick up by diving down deep to find pearls of wisdom. It's hard work, but the payoff is huge. Please join us in this episode as we share what we learned.

[00:02:13.200] - Wynne Leon

We know you'll love it. Hi, Vicki.

[00:02:31.810] - Vicki Atkinson

Hi Wynne. How are you?

[00:02:34.070] - Wynne Leon

I'm great. I get to see you twice in a day. That's always a fun day.

[00:02:39.190] - Vicki Atkinson

You know it. You know it. And our listeners have no know. If we got to spend the whole day together every day, we'd be off the rails in total. But this is a treat. It's a treat.

[00:02:51.840] - Wynne Leon

It is. We just did an event where we disclosed some of our secrets we learned writing about our parents and also writing to heal Vicki, I think one of the secrets you learned is not to keep secrets. Can you say more about.

[00:03:12.030] - Vicki Atkinson

You know, once a week or so I do a little bit of writing and I call surviving Sue a peek inside. And one of the things that I've written the most about Sue's sort of self destruct mode, it really, as I look back on her life and having had the time to think about her life my role as her daughter, the pain that I carried, the pain that she carried. I can look back at it now and go, oh, yes. Everything I ever read in grad school or in my professional training about the toxicity of keeping secrets, she actually lived it. And you're never going to have someone do a post mortem on someone's life and say, well, the cause of her depression, her anxiety, the dementia, her paranoia, all of that, the Munchausens and her over involvement with my sister Lisa's medical life, no one would ever pull all those threads and go, it had to do with keeping secrets. But as I looked at her life and examined how it unfolded, she was

compelled to keep the deepest, darkest secret about something she was so ashamed about, related to how my sister was conceived and what the circumstances were.

[00:04:35.900] - Vicki Atkinson

My parents for listeners were married to other people at the time. And Lisa was born very premature and with some significant disabilities that were life know for my parents, but especially for sue, because she stepped into a role of perpetual mothering and found her significance, I think, in being Lisa's parent. But underneath all that, she was keeping secrets. And so when you read things in the literature about what happens when people are doing that, in a lot of families, where there is that secret keeping or that level of toxicity, it can manifest in a bunch of different ways. So some of them families where there are unspoken rules, sort of mores in the house that no one talks about, not talking about imperfections and this inflated sense of self and high egos and sometimes passive aggressive behavior, and also where communication is just really silted. You're never sure. Can I ask this? What will be provocative in some way? And seeing the kids, very often in family situations like that, where a parent is keeping deep secrets and it's disabling them, in some ways, kids become the caregivers over and over again. That seems to be a pattern.

[00:06:02.110] - Vicki Atkinson

And then this idea, the last hallmark about sort of dysfunction and secrets and toxicity is this idea that families seem to feed off of the little bit of chaos and drama. Everyone's sort of aware that there are things you're not supposed to talk about, and there's this heightened sense that is just super destructive. Super destructive.

[00:06:27.210] - Wynne Leon

It reminds me, listening to that list of your experience and your reading, it reminds me from a very simple perspective of sort of the wellness hallmark that I try to aim for, which is that my inside voice matches my outside voice or my inside anything. My inside desires match my outside desires. To have that inside to outside parity always feels like that I can be that authentic, which is an overused word, but I'm not trying to continually try to manage it.

[00:07:10.910] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, absolutely. And I think for families where one member or more are deep in secret keeping mode, those that are around them see the behavior as the antithesis of what you just said. It's not authentic. It's a lot of performative stuff. Oh, mom's acting this way when this person's around, but as soon as the door is closed and there's privacy, it's like flipping a switch. But it's that performance stuff about the person who is keeping the secrets and has that level of fear about being discovered. It propels all kinds of behavior that isn't genuine at all. Right, so this can see it.

[00:07:55.070] - Wynne Leon

Yeah. And it's an energy drain.

[00:07:58.670] - Vicki Atkinson

Absolutely. And I think it, in my view, I think where my mom is concerned, I think it was very destructive for her. It propelled some behaviors related to addiction to just self medicate it away. And she did that. And then I think her anxiety about, over time, chicken and egg, what starts what. But when the dementia arrived on the scene, then trying to map your secrets and keep track of all that adds a whole other layer. So I think it's creating this alternate reality. And as you do it, you might be doing it because you're trying to create safety for yourself.

[00:08:40.120] - Wynne Leon

Right.

[00:08:40.880] - Vicki Atkinson

But as you do it, then you have to manage it well.

[00:08:44.490] - Wynne Leon

And it strikes me, back when I was miserable in my marriage, my first marriage, I say first. I've had

multiple, but that's my only marriage anyway, now that I've gone down that rat hole as of today.

[00:08:58.900] - Vicki Atkinson
Right, so far. Right.

[00:09:03.090] - Wynne Leon
But when I was miserable, I would drink a bottle of wine on most nights. And the secret I was trying to keep was from myself.

[00:09:11.730] - Vicki Atkinson
Yeah.

[00:09:15.030] - Wynne Leon
Marriage is not feeding my soul, and it's not where I need to be. And if I recognize that, then I'm going to have to do something about it.

[00:09:25.110] - Vicki Atkinson
Yeah. And it's easier to dismiss it. And we have lots of ways of doing that. And what's beautiful about your story about that, because you've been very candid and have shared that in the past, is that it's a beautiful thing when you find alternative ways of sort of examining the disappointments that occur, the losses that occur, and everyone's response to stress is different. I love, there's a psychologist, an old time psychologist, Hans Selley, who used to write about you stress, the positive stress that motivates us to do other things, Eustress. So not all stress is bad. Some of that awareness. We need that to kind of goose us along to do things that are better. But in the short run, there are a lot of things at our fingertips that do amount to slippery slopes and destructive choices. But it doesn't always seem that way at first blush.

[00:10:28.670] - Wynne Leon
Right.

[00:10:29.650] - Vicki Atkinson
But it can get away from us. It definitely can.

[00:10:34.130] - Wynne Leon
It definitely can.

[00:10:35.740] - Vicki Atkinson
Yeah. But when you have told a story a couple of times about someone, when we think about the storytelling we do, like, what I shared about my mom and the layers and the complexity. When you wrote your book about your dad, there's so much there, and you spent so much time with him. But it's interesting when you become an author and we find ourselves in these positions. Like what I just shared. I feel like I just spewed all these heavy things about my mom, but I'm like, okay, and now on to the next. But you have to kind of get comfortable talking about deep things. But occasionally, people that we're talking to aren't really down to get the detail. And you tell a story that I love so much about. So tell us, because it's such a good story.

[00:11:25.920] - Wynne Leon
Well, yeah. So I went on sort of a blind date about five months after I published the book, and the guy and I were swapping stories about life, and I said that I had written a book about my dad trying to find out his secret sauce for being joyful. And what sparked that twinkle in his eye, and how did he do that all the way to the end of his life? And the guy was super hooked by that question. I mean, who wouldn't want to know what the secret sauce was? So he leaned in, but in his manner, told me he's never going to read the book. He has no interest in reading the book, but he's like, oh, well, so here's the hook of the question, and you've got me hooked. So he leans in and he says, so what's the secret?

[00:12:14.910] - Vicki Atkinson
Hello?

[00:12:16.670] - Wynne Leon

And I laughed because I didn't have a sound bite answer to it. I think it's so much of what we've talked about keeping the inside and the outside in sync. And my dad had many different ways of doing that, but he also worked very hard to know what his passions were and to work hard at those and then also be authentic about that. So he didn't put effort into things that he wasn't truly passionate, so he sort of knew what his boundaries were. These are the things that I'm going to do the next right thing. I'm going to be passionate about it. And at the end of the day, I'm going to recognize that I'm not alone in this. And for my dad, he turned things over to his higher power and said, that's all I can do today. I'm going to get up and do the same thing tomorrow. Yeah, that was part of his secret. But it's so many things that you can't really say in a sound bite.

[00:13:19.130] - Vicki Atkinson

No, you can't. And I think for people who haven't read your book, the thing that comes across both from reading, but then also listening to you tell stories about your dad is that he had a position of power and privilege. He was a leader. He had a congregation. He was well known even beyond that kind of in places around the world because of his service heart and the traveling that you did as a family and his willingness to receive a call and go and serve. And so many beautiful stories in the book that, gosh, we could never stop talking about. But I think he was always who he was. There weren't different versions of him. You didn't see him switching channels. You tell a story about walking through the hardware store, and everyone's like, oh, it's Pastor Leo, it's Dick. And it was like being in his afterglow. But your whole life with him was like, afterglow. And I would say it's because he was being his true self all the time, and you were just. The glory for you is that you got to be his daughter, and you saw that to be around someone who was just who he was.

[00:14:30.080] - Vicki Atkinson

And the other story that I love is when you talk about when you did the tiling project in your driveway, he was down to do the hands on stuff with you, and it's like, how are we doing this? And what are the possibilities? And I think being joyful and not directing, but happy to be part of every scene in his life, he was in.

[00:14:53.890] - Wynne Leon

Yeah, you've said it so well. I think his secret in many ways was that he loved people. And that starts, to some degree of loving yourself in that genuine way. Loving where you are in life, loving what you're doing. You feel like you're doing the right thing. You've talked about him answering his callings. When you're in the flow, when you're doing the thing that makes you you. Yeah, he was always who he was. He didn't change at home from being at church. I mean, he was authentically Dick Leon all the time, and it was so much fun. I'd say the other secret that he had was he was not a judgmental person. He really loved people, and he was curious about them instead of judgmental. And he would laugh. He'd say, we're all weird, all of us. We all do weird things. And he just had this natural or learned, I don't know which grace about. You don't know what goes on behind the scenes. You don't know why people make the choices that they do. You just love them anyway. And there are very few people, I think, that can authentically walk that path of loving people.

[00:16:18.190] - Wynne Leon

But I would say for him especially, he turned things over to a higher power. So when he didn't like somebody or when somebody was at odds with him, he would say, okay, I've done my part, and now it's up to somebody else.

[00:16:36.420] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah. That learning how to stand know was something that my mom, sue, never knew how to do. She always assumed that people were after her, that she carried so much guilt about decisions that she made that she could never put her weapons down, so to speak. She was always ready to fire back. And you and I have been reading David Brooks latest book, how to know a person, and there's a section there, and I'm sure we'll end up talking about it at some point in podcast land. But what you just said about your dad and being curious and asking questions, and maybe you've answered your bad dates question. Maybe we did. Maybe it's maybe so. Yeah, maybe so.

[00:17:23.970] - Wynne Leon

And maybe it's easier to answer that question than to live the answer to that question.

[00:17:29.250] - Vicki Atkinson

Maybe, actually, maybe there isn't a maybe about that.

[00:17:33.170] - Wynne Leon

That's for sure.

[00:17:34.740] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah.

[00:17:35.910] - Wynne Leon

Loving everybody, just accepting that we're all weird. I don't know.

[00:17:40.420] - Vicki Atkinson

We are so weird. Even before we started recording, you and I exchanged a couple of weird things, right? Our little. Like, I did and you did, and we're like, oh, okay, keep moving.

[00:17:50.120] - Wynne Leon

But this gets back. It reminds me of what we were talking about earlier today, about resilience and how creativity cultivates that. We were talking about that Brene Brown quote, which is unused. Creativity is not benign. It metastasizes. It shows up as grief or rage or sorrow or. And I think about that often because I know when I start feeling judgmental, I now know it's me, it's not the other person, and I just need to turn it off and figure out what's bugging me. Usually I'm hungry or I'm tired, or I'm pushed to the max.

[00:18:38.050] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah. And that is such a great quote. It's something that I forget about sometimes, related to my mom, because later in life she returned to one of her outlets that was very restorative for her in a creative way, and she painted, and sometimes they were horrible, but sometimes they were magnificent. And it was her way to release and get some things out and sort of purify, begin again. But we forget that people around us probably have been exhibiting that level of creative expression for their own personal wellness in ways that we sometimes have just thought, oh, well, she just likes crochet, does she? Or is she doing that because she can listen but then also stay in check with herself as she's doing things? There's a rhythmic quality to it. Yeah, that's a great point.

[00:19:32.480] - Wynne Leon

So your dad had some secrets for living as well. One of them was the ten five rule, and I didn't know what that rule was until you wrote about it on a post recently. Can you say more? Yeah.

[00:19:44.980] - Vicki Atkinson

And I almost didn't write about it because I feel like it's something that maybe because of my dad Sonny's influence that everyone in the world already knows about. But he used to joke that there's nothing new under the sun. And he said that he either borrowed it from Sam Walton of Walmart fame, or he knew some people in the hospitality industry that really followed this rule from a training point of view, top of the organization, all the way down, horizontally, vertically, and the idea basically, and I realized I've lived my life this way because of his very positive influence. And basically, as you're out in the world, and especially now, I think we can safely say in the post pandemic world where we can really see expressions again, that if you're within 10ft of someone, it is entirely appropriate. It is expected. And my dad was a sickler about this. You do not navigate in the world without giving people some kind of regard. If you're passing and if it's about 10ft, eye contact and a nod, something appropriate for the situation in the venue, but if it's closer than that and it's 5ft and you're holding a door open or there's some other kind of social consideration going on, there's some kind of an express nicety that's expected.

[00:21:13.030] - Vicki Atkinson

Oh, hello or hi or good morning. And it was just an expectation. And I realized later in life not everyone got that, and I would look at other people going, have you lost your mind? Did you not see that woman who was the stroller and the kids and the this and the that? And you didn't jog ahead a little bit to grab that door and open it for this woman. Like, what is wrong with you? Because it was such a deeply ingrained idea in me that if you're, and I think it's because of Lisa's disabilities, if you are able, you do more. You do not sit back and wait for someone else to do it. You step in.

[00:21:56.890] - Wynne Leon

Right.

[00:21:57.210] - Vicki Atkinson

But I thought everyone knew about ten five.

[00:21:59.770] - Wynne Leon

No, I didn't know about ten five. It's a wonderful rule. And then applying my dad's curiosity to that rule when people don't do it is a really good exercise. The other day, I asked a fellow dog walker, she had a dog, and I asked if my dog could play with hers, and I didn't understand her response. And I thought it was because she had ear pods in, it was because she was deaf. She said. She mimicked, she mimed. She finally got the point across to me that she couldn't hear, and I was like, okay, I couldn't see it, but it's what was going on for her. And fortunately, I finally figured it out. We get to apply the grace for other people, too. Absolutely.

[00:22:51.630] - Vicki Atkinson

And everything about support for people with disabilities, it's been impressed upon me throughout my life to not assume that every disability is visible. And so in your example about someone who's part of the deaf community, you don't know that woman's story. But I think there's a lot that gets attributed about behavior and personality and not interacting when people sometimes don't have the capacity to do so. But we genuinely don't know, which is also, I think, a reminder, just in general, that we think about this. We don't know what people are carrying around on any given day, but we assume it's some version of a sack of shit. We've all got it right, and it's just we assume that and that smile or the interaction while you're walking a dog, it might be insignificant as you're moving through the day, but it might very well have powerful significance for the person that's feeling so heavy with the weight of things. So when as you think about your dad and all the parts of him that are so beautiful that you carry forward, are there parts of his life and secrets to his joyfulness that you embody in your daily life that you can look at now and go, oh, I'm Dick's daughter.

[00:24:18.880] - Vicki Atkinson

I'm Dick's daughter.

[00:24:21.430] - Wynne Leon

What a lovely, know. It's interesting when a parent dies, and then what I found is that instead of having and not just a parent, I'm going to expand that to anyone in our lives when they die. And you can't have the conversation with them where you say, oh, I was thinking this, and they say that, and you have that back and forth. But you know what they would say. You know what their answer is, and so it becomes part of you because you're now answering yourself. There's a deepening of their influence that I found, especially with my dad, and that comes from writing about him. I understand him better. I understand myself better. There's so much magic there in that writing part that heals not only the grief of losing him, but heals the grief of not having enough time with him and wanting to have more time with him. And then I get to do that because I write about him. So I'd say that to begin with, I'd say it. I learned so much about my own joy and whether that was unlocking because I unlocked my own creativity, because I spent the time to write about my dad, because I realized time was short and people sometimes die.

[00:25:43.630] - Wynne Leon

And so then I'm going to spend the time with my kids that I can and really spend it with them in a way that trusts that everything that I set aside for that moment will work out the way that my dad did. That

was a big of one of my dad's habits. And also that authentic playfulness and energy that he had. I embody that as well. The benefit that I get is both in having his example for so long. But I also think that he had a lot of energy, and I have a lot of energy. So we are on that spectrum. I got the advantage of having somebody who really did just naturally have a lot of energy to use and to burn.

[00:26:39.370] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah. One of the things that I see you do that, as you talk about that, that I think parts of it has to be gifts from your dad that continue to resonate in your life, is that you have a lot going on in your world. But when I think about what I know about you as a parent and you with the kids, when you're with them and doing things with them, you are fully focused. And one of the things I love hearing about, and you do it in your weekly posts about this, is, I like to call it the roundup. This is what happened this week. But you're the parent who plays with and engages with and makes time to do that, because all of that is precious. And all the things that you've ever said about your dad, he was very present and very focused. Whatever was happening in the moment, whether it was a person or a situation, or a thing. He had that way of making them feel like they were the most important thing. And we know how hard that is because there's so much running in the background for all of us always.

[00:27:36.470] - Vicki Atkinson

But that idea of being really present.

[00:27:40.550] - Wynne Leon

It's a gift. It is a gift. And I think my dad was ambitious. I think I'm ambitious. I think we both share that particular trait as well. And that sometimes comes at odds for being present, especially with children. My dad was busy a lot. He wasn't home a lot when I was a kid. So I'm super grateful for the time that I had with him as an adult. And that's informed me then, sort of making a huge effort to always, not always be home for my kids, but most nights, most weekends, I am there with my kids. It's precious time.

[00:28:17.010] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, it is. And I'm not sure why. When I think about your dad sometimes and the role that your mom had to have to kind of keep him stable and grounded, I think of your dad as being kind of just the beautiful kite that we want to see flying in the sky. But he was always tethered and anchored, and there was some on the ground guidance, kind of. And so his relationship with your mom, they're very different roles, but your mom had a part to play in allowing him to fly high, do all those things.

[00:28:44.840] - Wynne Leon

Right.

[00:28:45.200] - Vicki Atkinson

That's true.

[00:28:46.090] - Wynne Leon

A beautiful partnership.

[00:28:47.830] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah.

[00:28:48.620] - Wynne Leon

And I think, Vicki, we were talking about what we learn about ourselves as we write these books about our parents. What is one of your favorite secrets about writing to heal?

[00:29:05.250] - Vicki Atkinson

I had to come to terms with this in the past few months.

[00:29:09.970] - Wynne Leon

And.

[00:29:10.370] - Vicki Atkinson

I've gotten some beautiful feedback from people who've said, you can't always think about the audience and how people will react to their own stories in response to. But you have to write what's in your heart if you're going to write for healing. And I think maybe one of the things that I've realized, and it's a whole other huge category that we could talk about sometime, but just in general, that category of adverse childhood experiences known as aces. There are things that people carry for a variety of reasons, but underneath all of it, there are different ways in which children experience trauma. And I did. It's the big t word people don't like to talk about. It makes folks uncomfortable. But I think it's also a unifier across a lot of people to varying degrees. And I think the thing that has helped me is to understand that when other people have come forward to say it was hard I didn't know that there was that much pain in your childhood. You seem okay. I kind of chuckle, and I go, yes. That's what children that are survivors of childhood trauma, that's what we do. And so I think one of the secrets that makes sense to me now is just remembering that and sharing this with other people.

[00:30:32.320] - Vicki Atkinson

Like you said in the little sound bite business that we get in sometimes where you just try to really distill things down and it's darn hard to do. I just say to people sometimes trying to be as sweet as I can be and as heartfelt when my stories generated something for them that they give to me and just say, my experience and the power in healing and writing and writing and healing is that I now know trauma never defined me. It was an aspect of who I was. But if I let myself, and this is my story, everyone's got their own journey. But if I let myself, I could write to heal, to put it in its place. It's a part of me that I honor, but it's still just a part. It's not everything. And so I think there are a lot of survivors that have to look at that and really think in terms of, I'm more than what happened to me. I'm more than what my tormentor saw. I am more.

[00:31:38.130] - Wynne Leon

That's a powerful sentence. I now know that trauma never defined me.

[00:31:44.790] - Vicki Atkinson

No, it didn't. I think in some ways it enriched me, which is also a very contentious thing in some circles to say. But I believe that compassion comes from pain. I think our ability to be aware and sensitive of other people's needs, I know what that looks like, and I'm not alone. And you're the same way. We are very empathic people. We're empathetic, very caring, and we can tease out nuances. And some of that is because I had to read rooms as a kid and watch for affect or things that didn't match. And I think what could have been a greater difficulty in my life, I think of it now as a blessing, because I want to be the one that can be the helper.

[00:32:34.890] - Wynne Leon

Right? You have used it for good, that's for sure.

[00:32:40.470] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, but I mean, gosh, it doesn't mean I'm perfect. I get crabby. And today I wrote a blog post about not being able to control my own schedule and being overwhelmed. We goof up and we make mistakes, but at the heart of it, I think that it's a part of my story. It's not my whole story.

[00:33:02.990] - Wynne Leon

Right?

[00:33:03.900] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, but I love talking to you about all this deep stuff because the thing that has happened for you and I over the past few months is that we've realized, even though early on, we're like, oh, my gosh, we shouldn't keep talking about our books. People are going to be bored hearing about our books. But the questions that come about the writer's journey and how we find the space in our hearts to talk about family members when there is substantial grief and loss. What happened with your dad, all the time you've spent with him, having no idea that he was going to be stripped away from you in the way that he was so unexpectedly. It's a beautiful thing to be able to look at all of that now and go, oh, all of that was so precious.

[00:33:53.310] - Wynne Leon

Yeah. It's funny that you talk about the writer's journey because in some ways, that's what we're really highlighting here, is not exactly what the story was, but what we went through to cultivate it, to cultivate that resilience in our life and to use the creativity to do it. That's the power that can be really conveyed and encouraged in other people, whether they publish books or not, to just use that power to start and to write and as you said, write to heal, not to wound, put things down and answer that calling to be creative. Yeah.

[00:34:37.770] - Vicki Atkinson

And I think people find their own way. But when you find like minded souls, when people want to hear all the details and want to go for the depth, that's the other thing that I think we want people that embark on this journey to find. You want to find supportive players in.

[00:34:58.800] - Wynne Leon

Your life that care about the depth.

[00:35:00.890] - Vicki Atkinson

And know that you're going for that. But you need people that can handle depth around you. You don't want the shallow water folks. They can keep on going.

[00:35:09.190] - Wynne Leon

Yeah. Or, yes, there's probably a role for everybody, but just to encourage that conversation is so meaningful. And it starts with being vulnerable ourselves.

[00:35:22.810] - Vicki Atkinson

Well, this was fun.

[00:35:24.250] - Wynne Leon

This was fun. Thank you for being vulnerable with me, as always. It's so fun to be able to share our secrets.

[00:35:32.190] - Vicki Atkinson

Yeah. Always and always more to tell. So thank you, Wynne.

[00:35:42.670] - Wynne Leon

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