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0:00:00 Nicole Antoinette: I'm Nicole Antoinette, and this is Real Talk Radio, a podcast filled with honest conversations about everything. This is a values-led show, grounded in honesty, connection, justice, and joy, and with those values to guide us, Real Talk Radio does things a bit differently. Here, I'll show you. So first, it's a 100% listener-funded show, that means no ads and no sponsors. Also, all of our guests get paid, because I strongly believe in paying people for their time, their energy, their expertise, and everything that they come here to share with us, and higher rates are always paid to our guests of color, as well as our queer and trans guests and others with traditionally marginalized identities. That's just one of the ways that we put our value of justice into action. So the funding to create this show and pay all the guests, as well as me and my sound engineer, Adam Day... Hi, Adam... Comes entirely from our Patreon community, which operates on a shame-free sliding scale that allows each community member to support from within their means. That sliding scale, that's another way that we put our value of justice into action. If you enjoy the show, I bet you'll love the community. We have topic-specific community discussions, share recommendations and resources with each other, and I host live events, like our end-of-month journaling circles and small group Google Hangouts.

0:01:20 NA: If you're the kind of person who's curious about what goes on behind the scenes of a small business like mine. I also create and share a detailed and super transparent, like down to the dollar, monthly business and money report, which also functions as my small biz Q&A, where I answer any and all questions on that topic from folks within the community. Our community also gets access to exclusive bonus episodes, the first chance to sign up for my mastermind groups and live retreats, including our small, end-of-year virtual retreat on December 19th and 20th, and more. And no matter where on our sliding scale your monthly pledge falls, you still get access to all of the same events and bonuses. That's another way that my value of justice comes into play, specifically economic justice. I mean, why should your financial means be the only determining factor in whether or not you can access the products and services you want? It shouldn't, and in our community, it doesn't.

0:02:15 NA: So if you love this show and if you wanna make a real-time vote with your dollars to help keep it going, all while meeting the wonderful, like-minded people who are already in our community, you can come over and join us at patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. That's patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. We'd love to have you. And now, on to the show.

[music]

0:02:39 NA: Alright, friends, here we go. I am joined today by the lovely Laura McKowen, who is here to talk about...

0:02:45 Laura McKowen: Hi.

0:02:46 NA: Yes, hi. Hi, hi, hi. I love that, just jump right in. It's great. I love it.

0:02:49 LM: Sorry. [laughter]

0:02:52 NA: No, I'm serious. That's how I feel, I'm excited. So, yes. Well, hi, Laura.

0:02:57 LM: Hi, so happy to be with you. It's so funny to start a conversation after you've been talking for like 30 minutes. [laughter]

0:03:02 NA: I know, I know. I feel like that's the thing that, before I started making podcasts, just listening to podcasts, that I never thought about, and now I often think about when I'm listening to other shows. I wonder what they were talking about right before they pressed record.

0:03:16 LM: [laughter] Yeah. Totally, yes, agree.

0:03:21 NA: So as a fellow sober lady, I am really grateful that we are gonna have this conversation.

0:03:25 LM: Yeah. Me too.

0:03:27 NA: So to get us started, I would love for you to introduce yourself to anyone maybe who didn't hear our first conversation or who doesn't know your work, who you are, what you do, what you love. Basically, what are a few things that you want us to know about Laura?

0:03:42 LM: Okay, so I am an author of "We Are the Luckiest", which is a memoir that came out this year, seems like 64 years ago.

0:03:53 NA: My God, was that this year?

0:03:55 LM: Yes, it was January. I was flying around doing book tour events and hugging people and yeah, crying with them. First three months before this happened.

0:04:06 NA: Oh my gosh, honestly, if you would have asked me when your book came out, I would have said some time early last year.

0:04:11 LM: Yeah, I know.

0:04:11 NA: That feels... Okay, yeah, we're in like the 900th month of COVID, so.

0:04:15 LM: Yes, yes. [chuckle] So I'm an author. I'm also a teacher, I've developed several courses for online... For personal development, online courses for personal development and sobriety. I had a whole different career before that though, for 15 years. I worked in Marketing and Advertising. I got sober in 2014, quitting that career in 2016 after working towards it for a long time, and then made that leap then, and just started building this new thing that I'm doing. And I have a daughter who's 11, I live on the North Shore of Boston, and I've been sober what now for six years, and yeah, I think those are the... The things I love, I love words and sentences a lot. [chuckle]

0:05:13 LM: I forgot how much I loved music. It's so weird that I'm a music, music person, but certain things that I am... That are just so much a part of who I am and who I love, have dropped off this year, which is strange. Like listening to music, finding the music and reading. I've read so little in 2020, and I've finally remembered that and it's like, Oh, right. I just finished a novel, it was one of the first novels I read this year, and listened to music that I had started listening to in January and February. I was like, "Oh my God, right, there I am." So this year has been a study in all things for me.

0:05:53 NA: Yeah, I feel like reading's pretty much the only thing I've been doing this year. I'm very grateful for it. I don't know what else I have done this year, mostly just read and rewatch things on Netflix that I've already watched. I feel like that has been my soothing of 2020.

0:06:07 LM: Reading is... I don't know about you, but I don't look at it like I do watching Netflix or... I mean, don't get me wrong. I love watching shows, but I have never regretted a single moment of reading. It feels like time perfectly well spent.

0:06:26 NA: Oh yeah, I agree. I feel like that particularly became even more true for me once I started giving myself permission to not finish books that I wasn't loving. There's so many amazing books. The First World problem of my life is that I'm never gonna be able to read all the things that I wanna read. If I'm like 10-15% into something and I'm not really loving it, I'm out.

0:06:46 LM: Yeah, I'm so with you. I arrived at that a few years ago, and it is a good philosophy.

0:06:53 NA: So you mentioned being six years sober, congrats on that. Do you celebrate soberversaries? Is that a thing that you really mark that's important to you?

0:07:07 LM: Not a whole... I feel sort of strange around them. I don't know, it's... So no, I celebrate them, I acknowledge them. I know the day, but I don't make a big deal of them in the sense that... I don't know. The everyday stuff, it sounds very cliché, but I'm really grateful every single day that I'm sober. I don't forget that I'm sober. I don't... It's not like a, maybe, an anniversary with a partner or a birthday where you just... Like it comes around, and you're like, "Oh, right." And then you sort of reflect on the year, and then it goes away, it's just so much a part of my daily consciousness and gratitude that I don't really think of it as too big of a deal, but I know how... I know how much time it's been.

0:08:07 NA: Yeah, I was reflecting the other day, 'cause next year will be 10 years for me, which seems like a really wild amount of time.

0:08:14 LM: Wow, Yeah.

0:08:18 NA: Right? Yeah, and I was really reflecting on who I was 10 years ago at that time, and I wrote about this... Well, at the time that this is published, right, it will have been a month or so since. But I recently wrote about this in my blog/newsletter thing about the person that I was the

day that I decided to quit drinking and the day that that stuck and that that happened for me. There was no way that that person was strong enough to stay sober for almost 10 years, and so the reflection that that was true, and I've done it anyway. So that must mean that you learn how to do the thing by doing the thing. And it was like, I know that that's true, but something was really powerful for me in the past couple weeks, that reflecting on the fact that, "Oh yeah, you actually don't have to be strong enough on day one to get to year 10."

0:09:09 LM: You can't be... There's no way... Have you heard the quote, "Let me fall, if I must fall, the one I become will catch me?"

0:09:19 NA: No, but that's lovely.

0:09:22 LM: It's like that, right? That was really the only way I did get sober was that I stopped promising that I would even do it tomorrow. I couldn't... And the idea of forever, let alone a year, filled me with so much despair and anger and frustration, and now I love that reflection 'cause it's my experience also.

0:09:53 NA: It's made me think too... So when I... We go back nine and a half years, almost 10 years, the internet was a really different place. I think just about specifically what you are offering to the sober community, none of that stuff existed or Instagram was in its baby stages, maybe there were alternatives to AA, maybe some of that stuff did exist, but I certainly wasn't aware of it. I didn't have a single sober friend when I quit drinking, it had never been modeled for me, the only narrative that I knew was, you quit drinking, if you "have to," right, in quotes, because of "your problem," also in quotes, right? And I'm interested... I've been thinking about the benefits and then potential shadow side of the popularity that the sober curious movement has gained. I think that would have been really helpful for me when I first quit, at least that it was a thing that was somewhat normalized, at least somewhere. That there were other people that were doing it, but I also think... And I know that you've written about this too, the hashtag sober is sexy, right? Looking at that feed can sometimes make you feel bad because sobriety doesn't always feel sexy, and I'd love for us to sort of start... If you wanna talk about that.

0:11:05 LM: Oh sure, I love this. So... Well, you're right. Ten years ago, I wasn't even... Sobriety wasn't even anywhere near my mind. I never imagined that I would have to get sober, which is hilarious because I was problematically drinking from the beginning. But six years ago when I got sober, there wasn't much. And that's not just like... I know that's true because it's not like... I had been looking around, I would say for a couple of years, and it's not like... I really just think that because my perception... It's not like when you go to buy the Toyota Prius and then you've decided, and then all of a sudden you see Toyota Priuses everywhere, it's not like I really didn't think those things existed until I had it on my mind, it's like, No, that shit really didn't exist because I was looking for it. I didn't know... And I also know that 'cause it was one of the things that occurred to me as like, "This is really messed up, that the only place that I can go to talk about this or see other people who are experiencing this is in an AA meeting," and it's private and anonymous and very hush-hush, right? Or read a memoir.

0:12:27 LM: So that's true. And it has changed significantly. Social media is a big part of that, but I also think there's just been a shift and willingness to talk about things. I think things like Brene Brown, talking about shame, and as a global conversation, and I could go on and on about why, but it's not really what you're asking. I think the upside... I think overall net, it's a positive thing.

0:12:56 NA: Definitely. Yeah I agree.

0:13:00 LM: For sure. But that doesn't mean there aren't some things that are not great. I think anytime something is Instagramized or hashtagged it starts to lose its authenticity in a way. So sobriety used to be only for people who had a problem, right? You didn't really get... Like you said, you didn't get sober, unless you had a problem. There were people who didn't drink, but they didn't talk about that. It was still kind of... They were still kind of socially outcasted in a way, right?

0:13:43 NA: Mm-hmm.

0:13:45 LM: It wasn't cool not to drink. And now there's a large gray area of... A public gray area, there's a public conversation of that gray area between I don't have any substance use disorder, and I have a pretty good one. And the reality is there is a huge gray area. Most people wouldn't qualify as being an alcoholic who couldn't stand to not drink. I think everyone's life gets better if they don't drink. But now there's a conversation for that population, which is awesome. Because it can interrupt people... It's an addictive drug, and it can interrupt people before they get to that place. And I also think... I could go on and on about why it's better for people to not check out with alcohol and not use it as some sort of benign substance, which it's not.

0:14:55 LM: So, that is great. What the difficulty of that is, for people who really like me, it can make sobriety look easy, it can make it look cute, it can make it look like a highlight reel, and it's not. For me, it was the hardest thing I have ever, ever done. It was my hero's journey. It was a years long walk through the dark. So, it can downplay a lot of those things, and again, overall, I think that's not that prolific of a consequence or a negative, I think it's overall, it's grays. Look, if we can even make a dent in the largesse of the mommy wine culture and the booze, Booze is like the duct tape for Life culture, and with that comes some negative side effects. Fine, fine.

0:16:04 NA: Yeah, I completely agree with that. I think the reason that I asked wasn't necessarily 'cause I thought either we weren't on the same page or something like that, but I just think it's a really helpful reminder that doing a hard thing if it's hard for you is hard. And it doesn't mean that it's not worth it, it doesn't mean that you aren't gonna feel better or net positive or any of those things, but I think that sometimes when our only representation of something is what we're being shown online, particularly what we're... Particularly if we're being shown that thing by someone who's trying to sell us a lifestyle, and this extends beyond sobriety, Right? Like, of course.

0:16:43 LM: Yes. Right.

0:16:45 NA: That, for me, I really imagined that it would be this yoga and green juice like white kind of like a femoral fairyland, and it wasn't for me.

0:16:57 LM: [laughter] A what?

0:16:58 NA: And a lot of the times I felt bored or angry or there's... I am enough into it now that I don't bump on this anymore, but I definitely did for years of, "What's wrong with me, that sobriety doesn't feel how I thought that it was gonna feel?" And that was true, and it was still the right choice.

0:17:18 LM: That's right. It's very well said, very well said. And like you said, it extends far beyond sobriety. There are no shortcuts, really, for anything worth having. Anything worth having as far as I'm concerned is difficult, it's gonna be difficult in different ways, and that's what makes it valuable too. I'm so glad it was as much of a struggle as it was for me because it changed me cellularly.

0:17:46 NA: I'm interested in talking a little bit about how you... And maybe this, I'm sure this is different, year one or two of sobriety versus now, but the question of navigating other people in sobriety. Because the overall reason that I wanted to talk to you is this question of how do you stay sober, which I know that we could probably talk for many hours and there's a lot of different facets, and so. But I think that one of the questions, at least I have gotten a lot, so let me just speak to that point, people who are sober curious or are interested. A lot of the questions or fears that I have received come down to, "but what do I do at the work party?" "What about the fact that my significant other or the person that I lived with or whatever, that they're not sober?" or those sort of questions about other people. And so I'm interested, obviously, I can ask you specifics within that, but is there anything that pops to mind? Is there a story that you wanna share or something that's been helpful for you in terms of prioritizing your sobriety when it comes to navigating other people?

0:18:49 LM: Oh gosh, there's so much. It is... Now having worked with thousands of people who are trying to get sober, and going through it myself, it is the number one issue that comes up for people. Whether it's partners, the person you're most intimate with and alcohol being the third party in your relationship, which it often is for a lot of people or just family, friends, co-workers. So, I just wanna acknowledge that. It is the sticky part for most people that either keep them drinking, even if they don't have a... Even if they would never qualify as having a "problem." But they just don't like drinking, they don't like how it feels to them, they don't like what it does to them, but they'll still keep drinking because of that, because it's too uncomfortable socially. And the fear of disconnect from their groups and their relationships is too great, and it's not even imagined a lot of times. It's not like they're just imagining it. There's real pressure, there's real social currency to drinking. So, I just wanna acknowledge that as something that's true.

0:20:19 LM: What comes to mind first to me is alcohol gives us this... Alcohol in relationships, it gives us this false sense of connection. There is some realness to it. I'm not gonna say that bonding over drinks when I was in my 20s with my co-workers wasn't something that actually ended up bringing us closer in a way, right? I'm not gonna pretend that there is no... Because it does lower your inhibitions, it does sort of... For me, it softened my insecurities and did all kinds of things to

allow me to do the things that I didn't have the tools... I didn't think I had the tools for... I actually didn't have the tools for... In terms of making connections. And so that part was very real, but the problem on the other side of that is that you actually don't withstand the awkwardness of growing, [chuckle] and the awkwardness of becoming intimate with people, right? And so your relationships and your connections, it's like their plants that are growing in gravel or something, they can grow for a while and they can be even appear to bloom and be strong and lush, but the ground isn't... It's not sustainable enough to hold what you really want. That's what I have learned.

0:22:30 LM: So this is a long way of saying, what has been helpful, what I encourage people to do, is examine the way... What they think alcohol is really doing for them and for their relationships, and to really question that, because a lot of it is a myth, a lot of it is romanticizing, and I hate to say it, but sometimes alcohol... A lot of times, alcohol allows us to float on the surface of relationships, even very, very important ones. And my experience is that there is a period of re-calibration, a definite period of re-calibration in your relationships once alcohol is eliminated, but that re-calibration, if you go through it, and you go through it with other people, equals the types of intimacy and relationships that I wanted, and I think that everyone really wants... That's what we all really want. So that's the relational aspect of it, and then just sort of on the tactical standpoint, I have learned that people... We think people are thinking about us and what we're doing so much more than they actually are, like, this goes for everything, but especially goes for alcohol.

0:24:05 LM: People don't care as much as we think they do. And that's what I started to notice. I thought that everyone was gonna ask me why I wasn't drinking and that I was annoyed that they weren't, 'cause eventually I wanted to tell them. [chuckle] And they weren't telling... Nobody was asking me. Once in a while, I'll get asked, or I would get asked, and we plan for these situations that are mostly in our minds, because we have ideas about what it means to not drink, right? And that's so much more to do with our own okay-ness with ourself than anything else.

0:24:47 NA: Yeah, I think all of that is really useful and like any aspect of this that we're talking about, there's gonna be nothing... No advice, no story, no point of relatability that applies to everyone because everybody's situations are different. I remember even for me in quitting drinking, there were people in my life that I did lose because they couldn't accept that that was the case. And it's easy now to look back and be like, well, they just weren't the right fit for me. But it was incredibly painful at the time.

0:25:13 LM: Oh, it's brutal.

0:25:17 NA: And I think what you said about alcohol being the third person in... Or like the third party in an intimate relationship, that really feels very relevant for me. And that was true of the partner that I had the relationship that I was in... The romantic relationship that I was in when I got sober, and we eventually end up splitting up for many reasons, but that was definitely one of them. And I've been reflecting on what I needed from the people that I was close with at different phases of sobriety, like my partner now does drink, but very, very infrequently, and I mean like a beer with dinner every couple of weeks, right? And that's completely fine with me.

0:25:57 NA: My only boundary around that is that I don't like being kissed or breathed on, but that's been very, very, very easy to navigate. And while that makes me very comfortable, I personally wouldn't be comfortable in that level of partnership with someone who does drink a lot. That would be an issue for me and a point of incompatibility, and I'm interested if you are willing to talk about how that functions in your current partnership.

0:26:27 LM: Yeah. Oh, this is so interesting, because I have dated people in sobriety who drank a lot, and that zero worked for me. I don't imagine a universe work where it would ever work. And it's not because I felt threatened, like my sobriety felt threatened, it was like, I don't want someone who... I don't want all the things that comes with drinking a lot because I know what those things are. And I especially don't want the level of... There's a lack of presence. I want someone full frontal.

0:27:02 LM: I want the full person. I don't even want a shade of them being checked out, it's not just unattractive to me, it's like, there's a level of unease, just unease with that. So the way it functions in my partnership now is really interesting. When I met him, he was a drinker. I have never seen him drink, but he tells me that he had a... Alcohol and even drugs was this pretty regular part of his life, but never... I don't think... I'd never witnessed it, but I don't think he fell into a problematic category in terms of... I don't think he would qualify as an alcoholic, but it was very regular, he's a big music fan, lots of concert, lots of drinking, lots of drugs.

0:27:58 LM: It just was part of his deal, and the friends that he hung out with. When he met me... Before we'd ever been intimate or... We started dating in the time of COVID, so it was this very slow roll into a relationship, which was great. We had lots of talks and walks and stuff like that before we ever spent, like say the night together. And he read my book two weeks into dating, and he read my book and he was like, "I don't know what it's like to not drink or do drugs. I don't think I've gone a period of more than a couple of weeks like that in my adult life," and he's 50. And so he just decided to do it. He didn't even tell me, and a couple... Like 10 days into it, he's like, "I just wanted you to know, I read your book, and it just seems like..." He's like, "I've been waiting... I've been ready to leave this behind as part of my life, and I left it behind and I'm 10 days into it, and I feel like I have a fucking superpower." [chuckle] I was like, "Wow, okay, that's awesome." And he hasn't touched it since, and I keep...

0:29:06 LM: At first, I was a little nervous about that because, for me, it was like, Wait, I don't... This can't be about me, like doing it for me. If you're not ready to do that, like 100%, that... You can't do this for me, because he will resent me eventually. And sure, some of that is projecting my own junk on to him, but he's like, "No, this is nothing but good for me, it's the first time I have felt 100% honest," Is the way he talks about it. "I don't have any messes to clean up, I don't have any confusion about who I am, what I'm doing at all times, I feel clear and I feel like this is exactly right." So my current partnership, there's none of that. I didn't know that it would be that way going in, he's not... He wouldn't call himself sober, right, but he just has chose, this is what I'm choosing from here on out, and it is so... I love it, Nicole. I love that it's not even a thing that enters our house, I love that it's not a thing that I think about, consider, wonder. It's just not there. It's a whole level of noise that's just not in our relationship.

0:30:27 NA: Yeah. That my former spouse also is sober and I can really relate to that, that feeling of like, it just doesn't exist. You don't have to...

0:30:36 LM: It doesn't exist.

0:30:38 NA: Yeah, definitely, yeah. So the last thing I wanna ask about this before we move on to something else is, let's say someone is listening who is maybe flirting with the idea of sobriety, right? Or falls into that sober curious category and has either a romantic partner or even if it's really close friends. There's lots of different types of close relationships, of course, with someone with whom this isn't the case, let's say they do drink and that's not something that they're looking to change. I know that, like you said, you've worked with thousands of people in lots of different situations, do you have anything... I hesitate to use the word advice, but that's sort of what I'm asking, any advice or tips or anything for folks in that situation for potentially how to start navigating that?

0:31:19 LM: Yes, so a lot of times people are not first honest with themselves about what alcohol or drugs, we'll just talk about alcohol, is really sort of... How it's impacting their lives. You kinda know it like, Okay, I'm hung over again, don't really like it, or maybe the consequences are bigger, right? But if you're just sober curious, you're like, I wonder what my life would be like without alcohol, for whatever reason, I really, really recommend... This is a very specific prescription, but I really, really recommend writing down your drinking, your numbing history, starting as far back as you can remember. A lot of people... For me, it was food, long before there was alcohol it was food, and write down how you numbed out and what the consequences were to you, whether physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally, whatever they were, and the age that you were, and do that for your life up until the present. It has a couple of purposes, one, putting things down on paper is very alchemical, it does something, it makes them more real, it also stirs up your subconscious so that things that might be hidden to you reveal themselves. And it can sound like a scary exercise for a lot of people.

0:32:58 LM: I know when I was instructed to do this some time ago, I resisted mightily because I didn't wanna know, but you can do it and it's really important to do it, and it will be helpful for this reason, when you go to your person... What I was gonna say, a lot of people don't do is they don't talk to their partner or a friend or whomever about what this thing is really doing to them. They don't talk about the reality of their internal sort of struggle or how long they've been struggling with it, I had been thinking about my drinking and wondering about my drinking and worried about my drinking since I was 17 years old, it was in every journal.

0:33:45 LM: But I couldn't have admitted that to myself, and I would have never admitted it to another person until I had to, right? Having the courage to have that conversation does a couple of things, one, it lets another person in on... And by the way, when you do this, it doesn't have to be with... It doesn't have to be with the intent that you're gonna stop drinking. It can just be a courageous conversation that you need to have. You could think about it as like, if you were worried about being sick or you were having trouble in your relationship or whatever it is, you would bring

it to a friend. Hopefully this is that type of conversation, and it doesn't have to be... For any reason other than I need to have a witness to this right now, and I'm not asking you for anything that I know of, I'm not making any proclamations, I'm not making... This isn't some sort of line in the sand. It's just I need someone to know the truth about how I feel about this.

0:35:00 LM: And that alone is a huge step and it will open doors for further conversations because so much of this is that we're afraid to have the conversation because it's like if we say, "I might have a problem with this thing," we think that it means, "Oh, my God, I'm gonna have to get sober and I'm never gonna drink again, and no one's ever gonna love me, and lalalala..." We go like 6,000 steps down the line. It doesn't mean that you're allowed to explore sobriety, you're allowed to see what that looks like without saying you're gonna do it forever. And if people are listening to this and they're like, I don't think there's one person I can have that conversation with. That's okay. Write it down on paper, do the first step, right? And ask for that person to show up in your life.

0:35:53 LM: They might already exist and you just don't know it, it's probably a matter of fear... It's probably a matter of fear. That might sound like a huge step to some, it may not sound like a horrible step to others, but that's my big advice... Is normalize this conversation by having it... And entering it. And then it can be something that you talk about like you would talk about other things. It's so fascinating to me that this is one of those conversations that we are very afraid to have. So yeah, that's what I would say.

0:36:34 NA: I love that. I love the tangible nature of that. Yeah, when you first said the "making the numbing history," I felt a lot of resistance, so it's funny that right afterwards you name that that's how you felt, but I appreciate all of the context that you gave on that. Because yeah, any conversation that can be normalized... It at least takes some of the power away from it, or it takes some of the fear away from it, and I think a lot, not just in sobriety, but in general about sort of what you said about the fear of "If I admit what's true," then X, Y, Z, catastrophizing, going really far into the future, and one of the things that's part of my ongoing, I call it personal growth, I guess, or development, is trying to open up, even if it's like an inch, like an inch more space in between being able to admit what's true, let what's true be true and having to do anything about it. And that I feel like has really saved me because for so long I didn't... I wasn't willing to admit the truth to myself about any number of different things, because I'm like, "Oh fuck, now I'm gonna have to do all of these uncomfortable things." And I remember when I started experimenting with like, Can I just admit that that's true and then go back to my day? Right?

0:37:46 LM: Yes!

0:37:47 NA: It was wild. Eventually, I did wind up doing things about it because in my experience...

0:37:52 LM: Well, it takes on its own life.

0:37:55 NA: Exactly. And you get the point where it becomes less scary 'cause you've named it, and then for me, the point when the pain of the thing outweighs the fear of not doing the thing or

whatever that is. That's when change happens, but being able to just open up some more space of... It doesn't have to be binary, it's not like I do this, and that means I have to do this forever, giving ourselves just more of an emotional playground.

0:38:17 LM: That's such a brilliant concept, and I'm glad you brought that up. You don't have to do anything about it just because you face it. And look, you kind of said this, I've kind of said this, it doesn't go away... Nothing goes away because we decide we don't wanna talk about it and we pay for secrets mightily, we pay for them. If there's anything I know at this point in my life is that we don't get away with anything. The truth lives in us, and there is a price for holding on... For not speaking it. There's a price for speaking it, for sure. And there's a price for not speaking it. Both acts are a leap of faith. You just have to decide which one you're gonna take. For me, I got to a crisis point where I was gonna die really if I didn't tell the truth, but it doesn't have to be that dire, right? You can tell the truth and not do anything about it.

0:39:19 NA: Yeah. One of the reasons that I love having this conversation with you, particularly singularly with you, is because our sobriety stories are quite different, and yet there's a lot of emotional parallels in there. Even hearing you say that you were gonna die if you didn't make this choice, that wasn't my story, and yet so much of what you're saying... Or I guess that wasn't my story yet, you know what I mean? But something that I think about a lot, and I talked about this a lot around the time period of getting divorced, is this narrative of having to wait until things are whatever we would consider to be rock bottom or until things are like so bad. And sometimes that's just how it works out, right? Like it gets as bad as it gets, but something that I think about a lot is that I actually... Misery, like unsustainable misery, doesn't have to be the currency of change. And that being willing to walk away from something that's good but not great or harmful, but not killing me, those are all viable paths...

0:40:26 LM: Yes. They're not only viable. So one of the things that I've said, that's in my book, and I... I've said it many times, is that this sort of normal question, "Is this bad enough that I have to change?"... Whatever, the relationship, the habit... Is this bad enough that I have to change and if it's not bad enough then maybe not? And the question that we should be asking, ideally, is, "is this good enough to stay the same?" And then underneath all of that is this question, "am I free?" And for me, it was such an eye-opening thing to realize how owned I was by drinking. It decided where I went, who I hung out with, all my plans, what was on my calendar, what wasn't on my calendar, how I spent my days because I was either thinking about drinking or planning my next time drinking, even if it was four days from now, or recovering from drinking and so there was... I had no autonomy, I had given up all my power, right? Freedom is gonna mean something different to every person, but I think we all understand the concept of not being free, so it's a more accessible question and a deeper question to say, "Am I free in this behavior?" "Am I free having this thing in my life?" So that's something else to consider too because it doesn't have to look like despair.

0:42:16 LM: You said, "I wasn't at the point where I was gonna die if I didn't tell the truth and start facing this thing," but I'm guessing you have been at that point for other reasons, not like you're physically going to die, but spiritual death maybe, or unsustainable, emotional pain. It's the same thing. Alcohol just happened to be the sort of invitation I had, but we all... It's not unique. Right? It's

not unique.

0:42:51 NA: Yeah, yeah, and that series of questions that, "Is this bad enough for me to change" versus "Is it good enough to stay the same?" "Am I free?" I cannot tell you the extent to which I have returned to those questions of yours over the years, also I feel like I underlined your entire book, I also realized when you were talking that... 'cause I read an early copy of it, and that's maybe why I think that it was longer ago than it was, but...

0:43:16 LM: [laughter] Right, no, that's true. You probably read it like a good nine months before anyone else did.

0:43:21 NA: But... And I say this... And I'm gonna do a giveaway of three copies of the book on Instagram and all of that, which I'm really excited about. But I say this not to blow sunshine up your skirt or whatever... It's like legitimately one of the best, most helpful, most honest books I've ever read. It was so good.

0:43:39 LM: Thank you.

0:43:40 NA: I feel like I underlined all of it, basically, so...

0:43:43 LM: Thank you so much, that means a lot. It really does.

0:43:47 NA: Yeah, so anyone out there who hasn't read it, I will be doing a giveaway, but if not go read Laura's book. It's phenomenal.

0:43:50 LM: Thank you.

0:43:50 NA: So when you mentioned that idea of holding on to a secret or not facing the truth and sort of what that does in the body, that makes me wanna pivot a bit and ask something else that I know you're interested in talking about. That part of your sobriety process has been working with the body and learning about how we store trauma and emotion in the body, and I'd love for you to tell me a bit about that and sort of how that has intersected with helping you stay sober.

0:44:17 LM: That's great. Yeah, so... Where is the entry point for this one? [chuckle] So I became a yoga teacher long before I got sober, but before I became a yoga teacher I've always been very physical. Either an athlete or just someone who... I have used my body as a way to regulate my emotional state for sure, but also I knew that there was something to... There was something incomplete about the recovery modalities that were available, because none of them really included the body. And over the years, I've sort of learned what that really is beyond just a suspicion of mine or something. We store trauma in the body, we store every... We don't just store trauma in the body, we store every experience we've ever had, every emotion we've ever felt, every conversation we've ever had, every place we've ever been, every relationship we've ever been in, everything gets stored and imprinted in the body. And specifically, we're made up of energy, very simply speaking, and emotions especially get stored in the body and stuck, so to speak, when we don't feel them fully all

the way through.

0:46:05 LM: So a classic example is if like an animal, say a deer gets scared in the wild, say it gets starts to get chased by a lion and the deer will either fight, flight, freeze, or one of those things, and say The Lion somehow moves on, the deer, say it froze just to become small or to become not moving once the lion moved on and the fear was... Had run its course and done its job, the deer would shake. It would literally shake off the emotion as part of completing the experience of having the energy of fear run through the body. We don't, as humans, generally speaking, complete that process, whether we feel afraid, angry, shameful, jealous, whatever it is, we don't complete that process, generally speaking, we're not taught to, we don't know that we need to... Certain emotions are demonized, there are many reasons why we don't. But what happens in the body, when we do that, and this is not even talking about trauma, which is a whole other thing.

0:47:29 LM: What happens in the body, when we do that is we get sorta stuck, this energy gets stuck in our tissue, and it creates, over years of repression or stuffing or numbing... 'cause alcohol interrupts that process for sure, that's why the sort of folklore is not really folklore that when we start drinking, we stop maturing, or we start doing drugs we stop maturing. It's because we actually do because we aren't completing this emotional process. And that creates disease, it creates physical problems, but it also creates emotional issues. If you imagine that you just continually stuff things into a bag, there's only so much it can contain before there are problems. The bag gets holes in it, or the things come out sideways through holes in the bag or rips in the bag, or it just becomes blocked. So that's a very rudimentary description of what happens, but it's very real, and trauma just very quickly, changes the way that we process things, and so it almost creates the scar tissue that prevents that process from... That emotional process from happening and distorts our reality.

0:49:02 LM: That's another very blunt, brief way of putting it. But all of that leads to someone who cannot properly regulate their emotions, and that's not just a sort of mild issue. That's an extraordinary issue that affects every area of your life. It affects your relationships, it affects your work, it affects... Literally, there's not an area of your life that doesn't get touched by that, which can lead to a lot of stress and problems and pain, and it's this snowball effect. So when we engage the body... Sobriety is one thing, 'cause it'll stop that numbing process, and then all of a sudden people start feeling feelings and all that, but what it also does is when we engage the body is there's a somatic release that starts to happen. And I don't believe that you can really heal fully until you incorporate the body, and that can be done in all kinds of ways, but the healing is incomplete without that. I see that with my own eyes. You can do a bazillion hours of talk therapy, it can be very useful, but it only goes so deep.

0:50:31 LM: And what we know too, about now, about say... I don't know if you're familiar with EMDR, but there are certain things that you just can't access because they are so subconscious with just talk therapy, you have to do somatic work to get that done. And so that is sort of the... My experience has been... Has just proven that over and over and over again.

0:50:57 NA: Yeah, can you give an example of what that somatic healing has looked like for you personally?

0:51:04 LM: Sure. Yoga was sorta my way in and it was long before I became sober. I knew that there was something to it. And the reason yoga works the way it does, maybe more effective than other exercises is because it does the mind-body connection and breathing, breathing is so effective for so much of this, so in regulating the nervous system. So yoga, but also just physical movement. Any physical movement is beautiful. I mean we are animals. I know you get this, and I would say probably hiking has been one... I would imagine, I'm not the hiker that you are, but I would imagine a large component of your healing has been the movement aspect of hiking.

0:52:00 NA: Yeah, I agree with that.

0:52:01 LM: And it's hard to explain, but our body is... There's this beautiful Nietzsche quote, "Your body holds more wisdom than your deepest philosophy." Our bodies, we are animals, we live in these beautiful animals that are so wise, and if we start to become attuned to them, they tell us really what we need to know. So to answer your question, what has it been like for me, yoga has been a big part of that. I do a little less yoga now, but that was really critical for me. I think at many points it sort of saved me, but I'm a runner, I also, I play beach volleyball now, I... Paddle board is my new... It's like going to church for me here, I swear, it's so fucking awesome.

0:52:53 LM: And anything that... The other thing about the body stuff is it forces you to be present and it gives you a break from your mind, which can drive you absolutely batty. Because if you start to over-identify with it, it's like this isn't a great place to live a lot of times for me, so there's that, and it's also... There's a very real scientific truth to what the endorphins that get produced when you are physically active and how that works is a stronger antidepressant than anything that can be manufactured, so that's what it looks like for me. Physical movement is an absolute non-negotiable for me, and I understand that different bodies have different capacities for that and abilities for that. Breathing alone is an excellent and the most effective way that we can do this bodywork, believe it or not. And that's what yoga is in and of itself is breathing, learning to breathe. So anyone can do that.

0:54:00 NA: Yeah, yeah. I love that. So I guess sticking with this more tangible, I guess track, I know... Well, I shouldn't assume, but for me, being able to stay... Feeling like thriving in sobriety, it's not just one thing, the answer to how to stay sober, for me, it's this intersection of a bunch of different things. And I imagine that the same is true for you obviously, you just talked about the body-based side of it. Will you name what you think some of the other... You used the word non-negotiable, right? What are some of the other things that if you had to attribute your strength and sobriety to? And maybe that those things are different now than they were in year one, right?

0:54:45 LM: Sure, they are.

0:54:45 NA: And potentially, I'd be interested in like a, "Here's what look it looked like year one, here's what it looks like now." But really those more tangible tactile things.

0:54:54 LM: Yes, yes. It does look different a bit than it did in year one. In year one, I was just

trying to literally not drink. And there might be some people listening who need the permission to just go... Like, I wasn't meditating and doing yoga, and... I couldn't, I had no capacity for that. For me, it was, drink a lot of water, get eight hours of sleep, and I did try to move my body a good amount, and community, like recovery community, wherever you find it. Those were my non-negotiables, that's how I got sober, stayed sober. Now, it looks different. I'm not... The threat of drinking every day, I don't even think about drinking anymore, but sobriety is so much more than not drinking. Not drinking is not a replacement for drinking, because eventually we get to the stuff underneath that caused us to want to numb or, you know, our stuff underneath. And so now for me, the non-negotiables, I still have those... I still drink a lot of water. Sleep is religious to me, I don't mess with my sleep, but I don't have to try for those things anymore, right? I take them very seriously, but I don't have to make an effort for them, so the non-negotiables are something more like, I still move my body, that's very non-negotiable for me most days. But creativity is very important to me in whatever form. Play is very important to me, that's one of the things that I've had to work really hard actually to cultivate. But play, just for the sake of play.

0:56:39 LM: And... What was the other one I was gonna mention? Oh, mental health. I am in therapy, I take that very seriously, and I stay very connected to recovery community still. So mental health is very huge for me, that has been something that I needed and have needed throughout was help with that, but my capacity for that has grown over time.

0:57:19 NA: Yeah, I appreciate the distinction that you made at the beginning, like the only goal was not to drink, right? And whatever made that possible...

0:57:28 LM: And that was enough. Yes, it took that. I want people... I really wanna be clear about that because even if you wouldn't qualify as, say, an alcoholic or something, it still takes a lot. It's a significant change, right? It might be very easy for you not to drink, like I know for you, it wasn't that... The not drinking was like, Okay, I'm just... But there were the ripples in your life... Those were challenging. So it's enough to just not drink... For me, it was like, for two years, that's what I was trying to do. Anything to not drink.

0:58:12 NA: Yeah, and the reason that I really appreciate you reiterating that is it's similar to what you were taking about at the beginning of the conversation of what... You get better at the thing by doing the thing, you learn how to do the thing, your capacity expands, as your capacity expands, there can be room for more thriving when maybe it was more survival mode before and the fact that it is a process, and I think it can be really overwhelming to stand on what feels like the starting line or the threshold of a change, and to look at someone who's six years, 10 years, 20 years down it, or however many steps ahead, I feel the same is true with starting a business with any of these things, it was like "Oh, God... " That means I'm gonna have to have...

0:58:50 LM: Totally. Writing a book.

0:58:51 NA: Right, Right. Or like, I'm gonna start a business, I need the business, I need a podcast, I need a newsletter, I need social media, whatever the things that... That was just off the top of my head... But that it's really easy to blow the thing out of proportion or to look at what the thing looks

like after many, many years of building and forget that that's not the first step, and that it doesn't have to include any of the things other than whatever it is that you need to do, what is the most important thing for you, and if that's not drinking and then like... I don't know if what somebody needs is still like, watch Netflix all night long, right? Or what... I think about some of things that I have done at periods of time that were hard, it was essentially replacing this... This is what running was for me, I quit drinking and became a runner on the same day, and it was a complete transfer of... Let's say obsession, right?

0:59:35 LM: Yes.

0:59:36 NA: And I don't really run like that anymore, and I don't need it the same way.

0:59:44 LM: That's right. That's right.

0:59:46 NA: But I had to. That was my way out of the hole.

0:59:47 LM: Absolutely, and that's the way change happens, right? People... It is the best way to stop yourself is to think that you should be further down the line than you are, and also it steals the joy out of every single step. 'Cause the steps along the way can be extraordinarily joyful, like I'm making it sound... Because it was, very difficult, very, very difficult. But when I let myself be at point A, I was able to find joy in that place, right? I was able to find joy in every step.

1:00:29 NA: Yeah. I also think that there's a difference between what is actually hard about something and then the ways that I make it harder with whatever the stories are that I'm telling myself. Like one of my favorite questions that I come back to all the time is, "What if this were easy? Or can I let this be easy?"

1:00:48 LM: I know.

1:00:48 NA: And sometimes, the answer's no. Like you said, sometimes it is hard, but if it is a level 10, why do I have to bring it up to a level 12 by comparing myself to where I think I should be or whatever the story is, like looking for... I don't know, looking for an easier path or creating pockets of ease within the hard thing.

1:01:07 LM: Yes, that's such a beautiful way to put it. I learned this really fascinating neuroscience thing recently that I'll just drop here because to me it was so helpful and I think you'll like it too. Andrew Huberman is this... He's been on a few big shows in past months, Joe Rogan and Rich Roll and some others. He's a neuroscientist at Stanford, and he talks specifically about why stress, certain types of stress on the brain are actually good. And the part that I keyed into was he talks about neuroplasticity, which is your brain's ability to learn and change and grow new tracks or make new tracks. It happens very naturally when you're a child, it's like... You don't have... You watch kids and you get that, right? They just soak things up like a sponge and they don't have to work hard at learning new things, their brains are still forming. As adults, that's not how it works. Neuroplasticity requires a lot more stress and agitation. And the stress and agitation is a prerequisite

for learning something new and changing your state or your brain, and so many people stop at the agitation stress phase because it feels terrible, right?

1:02:30 LM: And so even your process of making something harder is probably the thing that you go through before you are able to ask yourself the question, "Could this just... Could I find pockets of ease here?" So for me, that was like, "Oh, okay, okay." That allowed me, still allows me, to experience discomfort of change and growth in a different way that makes it feel possible, and it just is, you know? It's not that I'm stupid or I don't get it, or just... I'm struggling more. It's like that is the prerequisite for change. So to me that... Maybe that's obvious to people. But it wasn't for me. It was very helpful.

1:03:28 NA: Yeah, no, I love that. So I think that's a good place to start to wrap up, unless there's anything that hasn't come up so far that you really wanted to make sure that we touched on.

1:03:37 LM: I don't think so. All this stuff is... I love... I mean, I could talk about this for so long, but no. This is great.

1:03:43 NA: Will you just quickly share a little bit about The Luckiest Club and what you offer?

1:03:48 LM: Yes, so The Luckiest Club is a sobriety support community for anyone who is interested in exploring, seeking sobriety. And I started it as a result of the pandemic, so it's relatively new, but which is so fascinating too, 'cause it feels like this full-blown adolescent. [chuckle] We offer 22 meetings a week now. Multiple meetings a day, and a private member forum where people can talk to each other and get support and share and laugh and all those things. The meetings are non-denominational in recovery, we accept all paths to recovery. We have people in AA, we have people who've never been to a meeting in their life, we have people who have no idea what a sobriety group would even look like or sound like, and the meetings are all held online on Zoom. The member forum is off Facebook. We also have a thing called TLC Academy that offers learning, so all subjects, like things that we're talking about today, like neuroscience of addiction and personal development stuff. We host a couple of master classes a month and a group coaching call with me. So it's very simple. Love it. People love it, it's... To me, it was like what I was looking for when I went to get sober. And it didn't exist, so... Yeah, that's the deal, it's \$14 a month for TLC, that's the community. And then \$40 a month for the academy, so with all those meetings every week, it's equal something like 13 cents a meeting, which is pretty cool, and you could...

1:05:41 NA: Yeah. I love that you created the thing that you wanted, that you were craving and one of the things I've heard you say, I think in relation to The Luckiest Club is that the opposite of addiction isn't sobriety, it's connection. And I love that, that idea of finding your people, finding your place, something that we talked about when you were on the show the first time of finding a place where the truth is told, and so... Yeah, I love that. I'll put a link to that in the show notes for sure. If you could leave folks with one small call to action based on our conversation, what do you think would be? Maybe a question to ask themselves or a small action to take?

1:06:20 LM: I think that question of, "Am I free?" In just your life. "Where can I be a little freer?"

is a really beautiful question to think about, maybe write about when you wake up or if you are a meditator, to meditate on, or if you're going for a run, "Where could I be a little more free?" is one of my favorite questions.

1:06:47 NA: Yeah, it's such a good question. So what's the best place for people to find you and say hi? Do you have a particular favorite way to connect with new folks right now?

1:06:58 LM: I am on Instagram, that's my favorite place, and The Luckiest Club is linked from my bio there, so that's the best spot. My website is lauramckowen.com, but Instagram is my favorite sort of social media spot.

1:07:11 NA: Okay, and yeah, I will put that in the show notes also, and then on my Instagram, I will be doing the book giveaway when this episode comes out, so yes, people who are interested in winning a copy of the book can go there. Laura, thank you so much.

[music]

1:07:22 LM: Thank you, honey.

1:07:30 NA: And that's our show for today. Our music is by Adam Day, who also handles our sound editing. Thanks, Adam, you're the best. And huge thanks as well to every single member of our Patreon community for making this honest conversation, this entire podcast, and so much of my other work, like my twice weekly personal essay newsletter called Good Question, possible. Your monthly funding allows me to keep creating resources and gatherings for folks who crave honest conversations, both with themselves and others, and I fully believe that these conversations can change our lives, our relationships and our world. To join us, just come on over to patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. Our community operates on a shame-free sliding scale, so you can feel good about supporting this work from within your own means. So I'll see you over in the Patreon community, yeah? And until next time, I want you to know three things, first, that you are enough, second that you are not alone and third, that I'm totally rooting for you.

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