

Emily: I'm Emily Kumler and this is Empowered Health.

Sarah: My name is [Sarah McColl](https://www.sarahmccoll.com/)¹ and I'm the author of the memoir, "[Joy Enough](https://www.amazon.com/Joy-Enough-Memoir-Sarah-McColl/dp/1631494708)"². And that's, that's how I tend to introduce myself these days.

Emily: So, I feel like we should mention that we did live together in New York for a period of time.

Sarah: How long was it? It was like just a few months, right?

Emily: Yeah, I think so. I mean, you're definitely my one of my all time favorite writers, but I feel like have you been nominated for any book awards or like any big prizes? Because this book is like phenomenal. It is so good on so many levels. The writing is just like, blows me away.

Sarah: Thank you, Emily. I haven't, that I know of.

Emily: I mean you've gotten huge reviews.

Sarah: Yeah, there were some great, they were [great](https://www.latimes.com/books/la-ca-jc-joy-enough-sarah-mccoll-review-20190119-story.html)³ [reviews](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/01/books/review/how-to-be-loved-art-of-leaving-joy-enough.html)⁴ and you know, the [Belletrist](https://www.instagram.com/belletrist/?hl=en)⁵ book club pick was pretty cool. And you know, just connecting with people honestly has been the funnest part for me because I realized that I think people do really want to talk about meaningful things. You know, we don't necessarily, I mean it's fun talking about jeans and, you know, movies and whatever. But I think people want to figure out how to cut through the bullshit and actually talk about meaningful things with each other. But we don't always know how to get there without being odd or socially strange. And so I found that having written this book, it just gave people permission to talk to me about, you know, their grief or people they've lost or their weird relationships with their parents or their weird love relationships or divorce. And I've just loved that because I don't, you know, I want to get to the real stuff.

Emily: Well, but I also think one of the things that you're underestimating is that your ability to write this opens a door, I think for all kinds of other writers or opportunities for people because the topic I feel like, before the book, felt very cliched, right? Like, oh, my mom died. It was awful. I got a divorce. It was awful. I'm going to write a book about it. Right. Like every mom on the playground could talk that, you know, wants to write that book. You actually did it and you did it in a way that is so connective, right? So I'm not at all surprised that people are- it's like this OBGyn that I've interviewed a hundred

¹ <https://www.sarahmccoll.com/>

² <https://www.amazon.com/Joy-Enough-Memoir-Sarah-McColl/dp/1631494708>

³ <https://www.latimes.com/books/la-ca-jc-joy-enough-sarah-mccoll-review-20190119-story.html>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/01/books/review/how-to-be-loved-art-of-leaving-joy-enough.html>

⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/belletrist/?hl=en>

times who says like every time he goes to the grocery store, people tell them him, their birthing story. Like he can't go anywhere. You also create this, you create connections between things that after they've, after that connection has been made. At least for me, it feels so obvious and I love stuff like that. Where like I hadn't thought of it really before. Right. And obviously the idea of love, intimacy with a sexual partner, marriage, whatever, and your mom, that's not an obvious connection. Right. But losing them both at the same time, the trajectory of those experiences, I feel like you really paralleled in a way where it wasn't- I mean at first when you hear, okay, the book is about, you know, somebody going through a divorce and at the same time losing their mom. That sounds like, oh God, like-

Sarah: I know

Emily: - it's going to be so depressing and it's not, it's not a story that I can't relate to or that just feels like, oh God, there's no happiness here. It's like you interweave this idea, I mean obviously the title gives this away so, this isn't like a spoiler alert, but like just the balance between like how love and relationships, I mean I sort of feel like this idea of like motherhood too, marriage, all of these things are really common. Right. And yet personally, they're all exceptional experiences.

Sarah: Yeah.

Emily: And that's something that I think you do a really good job of, of like sort of bringing home for people is like, this was my very intensely personal experience that was exceptional, but at the same time is something that's so relatable. Right?

Sarah: Yeah, yeah. I think part of what people are responding to is this feeling that, you know there's all this culture and pressure around, you know, being happy. How do you make a happy life? Like how to be happier. And I want to be happy too, but I think what we actually want is not really a feeling of sustained happiness but more a feeling that the things that we're engaged with, all the feelings were engaged with deeply and meaningfully and it's actually the engagement with them that makes them meaningful. So I guess, you know, it's kind of like embracing as equally really, really joyful, really happy moments and then not shying away from deep sadnesses because you kind of need both of them in order to have a full and meaningful range of human emotion, you know?

Emily: Well, and also I think it's the threat of loss, right? Yeah. Like this idea of like sustained happiness, the idea that you're going to lose something that's so important to you, which I feel like is part of motherhood in the sense of like when you have little kids and life is really hard and it's like a day to day struggle to try and, you know, just sort of tolerate. Little kids can be so trying. But there's also this like extreme guilt about feeling like it's gonna fly by. Right. And that like you're not gonna get this time back and everyone's telling you all the time like, oh, it gets so much harder when they get older and their problems get serious. Like these are the good days and you're like it's three o'clock in the afternoon and I've got like four more hours till bedtime. Like how am I gonna do this? But I think your book does a really good job of that too. It sort of like telling the story of life and how there are these sort of fleeting moments that you don't know are going to happen- like you don't know they're

going to happen before they happen- that are really the sort of magical moments in a loving relationship regardless of what that relationship is, you know?

Sarah: Yeah, yeah I do. And I think, you know, I'm not a mother but it does seem to me that motherhood puts some kind of extreme lens on exactly what you're talking about. More so than maybe other relationships where it's just- the sense of time passing is more extreme in motherhood than maybe other relationships. You know, you're more attuned to the fact that your kids are growing up cause you're watching it happen than when you find someone who, you know, you want to spend the rest of your life with you because you're kind of in parallel, maybe you're not as attuned to this, this is going to end and one of us is going to die. Well, both of us are going to die, but one of us is going to die first probably. And I think that makes it really hard. And I think exactly what you were talking about before, it seems so like it would be so annoying when you're kind of in the thick of it to have people always saying like, oh no, this is it. Like enjoy it.

Emily: Right, cause you're like this is as good as it gets. Right?

Sarah: Yeah. That seems maddening.

Emily: Right. And then you look back at photographs of them when they're even younger and you're thinking like, oh God, that was really magical and yet I like can completely remember being very depressed and unhappy. It's kind of like there's a whole, I don't know, it's a mind game, but I think that's what time is too, right? It's like the relativity of time is all a mind game cause it's all perspective. And I think you really bring a unique perspective in the loss that you experienced on both fronts at the same time. That I think at least for me really introduces this idea of balance. Right? And I think for me as like a science person, I'm always interested in the idea of like homeostasis and how like nature tries to keep everything in balance and like we as humans go in and think that we can over ride it and it never really works out for us. And I think, you know, in the book, there's a lot of stuff about like, even, you know, your mom's sort of love life course where, you know, I think in some ways it really feels to me like her greatest love was the four kids. And you know, in some ways your dad would provided this incredible of hot, romantic love, but that was almost like sort of an immature love. And then Rick provides this sort of like stable environment, but it's maybe not as passionate.

Sarah: Yeah. And that, you know, at one point it was, it was the night of the book launch. And Melissa Clark came and interviewed me and I said, I hope you don't have any zingers. And she was like, I have one. And she wanted to know, she said something like, what happens to your dad? Like he kind of just disappears. And I said, you know, I think all of the men are kind of background, like all of them kind of do. And I guess in a way that's something that I feel proud of is that, you know, I think yes, in some ways probably my mother's greatest loves were her four children. And I like that there's a kind of mirroring that happens between her and me in the book. And I think, you know what I'm saying on some level is, well, I think she was my greatest love. And we don't always acknowledge these other relationships, like a deep, deep friendship or you know, the relationship with your mother because we kind of have this idea that it can't hold a candle to romantic love. But obviously they serve different purposes and they can be just as powerful in different ways.

Emily: Do you think you knew that your mom was your greatest love your whole life? Or do you think you realized that more as an adult?

Sarah: I think I was always, I think I realized that as an adult, but I think what I've realized kind of in hindsight was how I had an interest in her as a person outside of her role of motherhood. Like who is my mother, what was she like as a teenager? And how can I gain access to the stories of things that I wasn't present for? I think that interest in her was a bit unusual. I've had friends point out to me like, that's no that's weird. You know, or not weird in a judgey way. But um, this friend told a story about how when I went to her house, you know, we're standing in the kitchen and I was meeting her parents for the first time and I said to her parents well, how did you guys meet? And she was just like, oh, gross. Like why are you even asking my parents that question? But I did just have an interest in her and what she was about. And I think as I got to know her as I was an adult and she was an adult, cause I think that's a really cool part between the mother-daughter relationship is when you're finally grown and then your relationship takes on kind of a different flavor. I think that's when I really realized how unique my mom's perspective on things was. And how much I appreciated it and how refreshing it was. I mean, you knew her, Emily, like don't you think she had this ability to kind of make people sort of relax? I don't know how else to say it.

Emily: Yeah, no, I mean I actually, I think of her as being sort of like an enigma because we spent so much time at the farm, like sitting on the back porch in our sundresses drinking cocktails and smoking cigarettes and your mom kind of coming in and like emptying ash trays and like telling us that we were being ridiculous. Right? Or like, really amazingly to the point about stuff. Right. But she also was somebody that, unlike any other parent in my sphere, I think in a couple of other friends spheres certainly, that we confided in. And that I think is something that was really special about her. And that is, I mean, to your point, she made people, I mean, I think there were times she made me feel loved and relaxed and that's why I would confide in her. And then there were also times where I felt like I didn't fully understand her and I was like, it challenged me in a way that like provoked me to open up without meaning to. Do you know what I mean? Like I feel like we should give some sort of example. But like, you know, I think one of the things that I always sort of loved about your mom but was also confused by, because at that time I felt like I was sort of a conflict, right? Like I was pretty and very flirtatious, but also like sort of a die hard feminist and I had been told my whole life, you can't be those things. You can't be both of those things. Right? Those are conflicts. You can't go to a bar and expect the boys to buy you drinks if you're a feminist. And I was like, wait, why? It's like I still want to be cared for. Right? I still want to be spoiled. Well, no, you can't. You can't be both of those things. And your mom was both those things, like she was very feminine and sexual, like sort of seductive, but she was also very, she had a almost like an innocence, right?

Emily: Like I feel like there were things like, her laugh was sort of like a contagious, silly, almost girl-like laugh. Do you know what I mean?

Sarah: Yeah, absolutely.

Emily: And yet she was a powerful woman with strong ideas about things. And I kind of, I feel like I, when I spent time with her, that was like part of the joy of it was like, here's a grownup who is both, you know, sort of comfortable with her

sexuality and with all of ours. Right. I mean like in college is certainly in a time where we were all trying to figure that stuff out. And she had judgments about people. Right. But it never was standoffish. Right. So like if she said something about like, well, this is how men are, which I feel like she had a lot of those and I said, that's ridiculous. Like that's cultural, like we could have a conversation about it. Right. Whereas with another parent, I might have, you know, that might've been obnoxious for me to challenge their ideas about something rather than just sort of accepting that we didn't agree. And I feel like that was really special. You know what I mean? Like she encouraged those kinds of conversations which I think is why we always wanted to go hang out there.

Sarah: Yeah. She wanted to engage. I think she was really good at creating an environment, you know, like we felt free, I think I was probably, you know, 16 or something and I'm outside smoking cigarettes and drinking with you guys, and she, you know, kind of knew but turned a blind eye a bit. But she was really good at creating environments where I think people could hear each other and then she was excited to also be part of the conversation, you know? And I think she was actually- in that situation, I think she was good about making herself pretty scarce, but then kind of dropping in with like some nugget of wisdom or something.

Emily: 100 percent, yeah. And I feel like you do a really good job representing that in the book. Like I loved the time where you talk to her about like somebody you're dating and she's like, next. Like, you know, like I feel like if my mom said that to me, I would be like, screw you. Like you don't respect my feelings. You know what I mean? It would have turned into some very loaded kind of situation. And with her it was like she had the permission to do that with you.

Sarah: Yeah. And it was annoying, but I guess I knew on some level she was right. She was really incisive. I mean, I still think about this time when a friend drove me out to the farm. I think it was actually that summer that I was- I write about this in the book where I went home and I was kind of caring for my mom, but a friend drove me out from Brooklyn and she just had a baby and you know, she was feeling kind of, she was upset about the disconnect with her and her husband. But this friend of mine was very, she was not communicating these things verbally. I think she might've said something like, I just had a baby. Things are hard. Or something very opaque, you know. And my mom, after, you know, she's hung out with this woman maybe two or three times. Never met her husband I don't think. She said, well you and your husband's way of connecting is through sex and right now you can't do that. So, you know, that's going to be a challenge. But he'll come back, you know, you'll come back together and it'll all work out. And I just thought it was, I mean, of course that's true of every couple on some level. But this friend, she is a very, she's not a verbal person, you know, not totally. She's more about connecting physically. She's an athlete and my mom was right. Like she and her husband weren't going to have like long heart to hearts with each other. Like they just needed to have sex.

Emily: But that's what I mean, it's like the ability to say that like have the permission to say that and have it be- nobody thinks you're being like judgy or obnoxious, you know what I mean? Or like digging at the person like when they're already down. You know what I mean? There was a sense of wisdom.

Sarah: Yeah. I think it's absolutely right. So yeah, I think all of that stuff I came in time to realize was really unique and that I just didn't want to, I didn't want it to go away.

Emily: Did you ever talk to her about her kinds of like the choices that she made and things that you were replicating or not?

Sarah: Yeah, like you know, so she had all of these papers and I sort of, I knew of them, like a box of, you know, there were kind of graduate school papers, but they seemed pretty creative for what was probably supposed to be an assignment about Freud or something. And people always talked about my mom as being such a great writer. So I do remember at one point asking her, you know, do you wish that you had, do you ever wish you'd pursued writing or that you'd written a book? And she really was not someone with a lot of regrets as far as I could tell. You know. She said no. I don't remember it being like a complicated answer. I think children were so creative for her, you know. I think that was, that's another thing, you know, to touch back on the motherhood thing. I think that's another thing about her that was really special and that we're seeing in the culture more now, but she thought motherhood was really important and really artful and really creative and really fun and that mattered. And I mean, you know, there's a part in the book where I found in her journal that she said, you know, I think I'm shaping civilization. That's the level of import that she felt that job has. And I just think that's a really beautiful model of not only womanhood but the job that she, that she had, you know.

Emily: Well and I think that goes to the idea that she didn't have regrets. Right. If you really feel like what you're doing is important then the other opportunities that you didn't take advantage of don't matter.

Sarah: Exactly.

Emily: And I think so much of today is about no matter what the job is, it's sort of about being validated, right?

Sarah: Yeah.

Emily: This idea of like appreciation and I think it's important to mention that like your mom really was alone for a lot of this. Like it wasn't like she had somebody who was saying like, you're such a great mom and like you know what I mean? I mean like four kids on her own, you know, making a new life for herself. I mean, I think that, you know, you talk about this in the book, but my own information having known you guys for a long time, like the juxtaposition between the sort of luxurious life in Texas to like really starting from scratch in western Massachusetts is stark. I mean like that's hard, right? Like that would be hard for anyone, let alone somebody who has four children and you know, she seems to do it with such grace and it's like, you know, the only times that in the book you really see her kind of losing it is like when she's fighting with your dad. And then after that it sort of seems like, you know, she's kind of, she's getting through it all and she's okay and like she's finding these moments of joy that are really beautiful for her. We're going to have you read some passages from the book. Okay. You know what? Why don't we do 149

Speaker 3: There were days when I thought my mother had given me a great gift by dying. Later, I was grateful for certain logistical conveniences like one less household to negotiate at holidays or the freedom to move far away, but I do not mean that. Here is the woman who fills her one small life, not with milestones- birthdays, graduations, weddings- she wasn't particularly good at. In fact, it wasn't until college when people fussed over one another's birthdays with hand drawn cards, a proffer donut, little treasures left like bird's nests, outside dorm room doors that I came to know the importance of celebrating those special days too. For her, the anniversary was in the hour hand, branches of bittersweet in the snow, the copper kettle on to boil. Beauty is the tick tock and feeling it the pulse. There is no reward in the end, my mother said parenting, the only reward ever is ongoing.

Speaker 3: It must be the day itself. Would I like it? She would ask of a movie, a restaurant. She is out for her own enjoyment and yours. Go ahead wink with a stranger at the cash register. This is how to make the drone of a day come alive. You want something done? Ask a busy person, they say. You want to know joy, ask a woman who swims against her own sadness. Opposites are most striking when held at once. Bloom and rot, reverie and boredom, grief and joy. You are just like your mother, people say, and finally, I know.

Emily: I mean this is so naive and ridiculous of me to say, but like, when I read the book, there was a part of me that thought about your dad reading the book and thought like, I wonder if this is going to make all the regrets that he probably has had feel very public or feel very like palpable. I would kind of think that his response would be like, gosh, I really blew that one.

Sarah: Yeah, no he didn't. He might've thought that. He didn't say that. I think he's just so, I think it must've been a very strange experience for him to read the book because I don't, I think he must have, I don't think he thought, wow, I really blew it. Or what an amazing woman. I think he must've just been totally confused. Like, who is this about?

Emily: Wow. That's so interesting.

Sarah: Yeah. That's more what I suspect his response was.

Emily: And then in terms of that relationship, like how do you feel like that informed your decision to marry the man you married?

Sarah: People used to say a lot that my ex-husband was like my dad. Which I liked at the time. I mean, I thought- I don't know why I liked that. I mean, I guess I liked it because for all my dad's flaws and mistakes, you know, he's very successful and handsome and charming. And this is all a very young idea, right? About who's the kind of person I want to be with? They're sort of like ego driven and outward things to look for. But I remember asking my mom at one point, I said, you know, do you think this guy is like dad? And she said, you know, the greatest... what we're doing in our adult relationships is that we are seeking out people who are like our parents but different enough to heal certain wounds.

Sarah: And her point was that, yes, you know, this guy was handsome and successful and really driven. But he also had this deep sense of duty and loyalty towards me and commitment and relationship. Meaning I felt like he would never leave

me. And so that was kind of like a healing. My mom's point was this is a very healing relationship because yes, he does speak to your memories and your imprints of your father very directly, but in very specific ways is very different. So I think that made a lot of sense to me at the time, and it still does. And I think I was really young and I think I was making, oh my God, we just make not the smartest decisions.

Emily: Well no but I think such a good way of thinking of it though. It's like the idea- I feel like, you know, I've always thought that when people are replicating patterns, which we all do, right, whether it's from one friendship to the next or it's from our parents to our partners. It's like you're trying to correct the record.

Sarah: Right.

Emily: And so you have to do that with like kind of a similar data set.

Sarah: Yeah, exactly.

Emily: And so I think your mom's explanation of it, it's great. It's like you're just, you're changing one variable, but you're trying to keep it as similar as possible so that you have a different outcome.

Sarah: Yes, exactly. Yeah. A, and I think it's a good and sound explanation. I like that you call it a data set.

Emily: I mean it's like no two people are going to be the same, but there's something similar which is familiar. I mean, I think one of the other things you do in the book that's really powerful is the, you know, sort of comparison between you and your mom indirectly and then very directly, right? So like her friends all say that they see her in you and then you towards the end of the book feel like you see yourself in Violet, Katie's daughter, so your niece.

Emily: And you know, I think that's a powerful undertone or theme in the book is this idea of like, what do we identify with at different stages of our lives and how does that sense of similarity or identity become something that is very intimate, right? Because it's like you're ultimately looking at yourself.

Sarah: Yeah. Yeah, I got kind of choked up when you said that about Violet. I don't know why, but I've always, I've always felt such a strong identification with Violet. I dunno, I just think it's really interesting. Well, I guess, let me take a step back and say on some, on some level, I think there's this idea of inherited identity where it's like people say things about you, you know, like Emily's ambitious, Emily is competitive and you start to, you define yourself by these terms that are said about you, you know? And then there's kind of an individuation process I think, where you start to realize, well, maybe I'm not shy or maybe I'm not insecure or, or whatever the things are that kind of have been said about you and you're looking for, I don't know, almost like more cellular identifications. That's how I feel with Violet. I've just always, there's something so visceral about her emotional life to me that I identify with. I realize we're talking about a person that no one knows.

Emily: No, but I think what's important is that it's almost like this idea of, and I hate how everybody's using the word narrative now. It's like one of my big- and I'm

like, I don't like it. But you know, it's like a personal narrative. It's like your story, right? And like in your story, who are the other characters that you identify most with? And in the book, I think it's really powerful that you go from being a little girl who is looking up to your mom, to a woman who really sees, you know, your mom as a friend. I mean, like I feel like you guys develop a friendship that is like, you know, I mean your greatest love, best friend, whatever you want to say. Like there's nothing it seems like you wouldn't talk to her about. And I think even as an adult, like there's a lot of things that like, I don't feel like I would talk to my mom about, you know what I mean? And so I think that is pretty special. And then to sort of turn and then see a child who, you know, kind of has similar facial expressions, right. Or like has, there's some part of her approach to the world, right? Or her sensibilities that you're like, ah, I know what that's all about.

Sarah: Yeah. Yeah. I mean just, I can't even imagine, I feel it so powerfully with this person who's my niece. I can't even imagine what that would have been like for my mother or, you know, with me or what it's like with you and your children. I mean, it must just be crazy. And yet at the same time I will say, you know, when you, when you see kids and they're already so fully themselves in ways that have like nothing to do with you, right? Like their little personalities are already there from the beginning and there is some inherited stuff and there is, you know, learned stuff, but they're also just so fully formed and different in this way that I just think is fascinating.

Emily: Yeah, no, definitely. I mean, I think there is obviously some sort of evolutionary thing there, right. Where we want to protect and look out for those that we identify with.

Sarah: Yeah.

Emily: And yeah, but you know, I also think from the perspective of writing a book about it, and that's also really hard to explain because that's so cliched, right? And I feel like you kind of, you do that in a way by like showing, you know, sort of like show, don't tell. Like another wonderful cliché.

Sarah: It's so true though.

Emily: I mean it's much more powerful that way. And I think, you know, when your mom's friends, I think it's like at the funeral or around that time kind of say that to you. Like, you know, I've read that passage like several times and I just cry and cry and cry. Because there's also a legacy component to it. Right? So it's like in the here and now you want to protect the child who reminds you of you, but also after somebody's gone, they live on in the other person in a really beautiful way because you are reminding people of your mom and that makes her kind of a little less dead.

Sarah: Yeah. And like the book itself too, I mean, it's probably as close to, you know, bringing back someone from the dead as I'll ever get, is the fact that she does live in that book. And you know, when people say to me, oh, I wish he were my mom, or she seems so cool. That is just the best compliment to me because, you know, you're not always sure when you're writing what's coming alive or what's resonating. You know, she's alive to me, but there's this leap of faith. Oh God, I hope people who've never known her, I think she seems alive. So the fact that she does seem alive is just, that's really like the magic of writing that, you

know, I want to take credit for it, but in a way I don't know how that happens. You know, you just kind of put the details down in the memories as vividly as you remember them.

Emily: But it's the emotion I think that really seals the deal. Right.

Sarah: I think that's right.

Emily: Because I mean, most of the books that people are writing today are about, you know, famous people, right? Or somebody who's notable for, I don't know, like, you know, doing something sort of differently. And I feel like one of the things that makes this book so beautiful is that like, she wasn't actually trying to be notable, right? Like she wasn't trying to be famous. She like didn't really think, you know, it wasn't like she lived her life, so somebody would write a book about her, but you've given her that position because of the way she lived her life on a day to day basis.

Sarah: Yeah. Yeah. And like I just can weep about it every time I think about it. But you know, the fact that this crockpot using mother of four, loved to shop at Talbots woman, was called an extraordinary figure in the New York Times book review just like kills me everytime. Because I'm like, you know, I think we want- there's such a desire for people to be commended, I think for the extraordinary acts of just every day and the soldiering on and, and doing so with grace and humor. And you know, something to your point about emotion. I think that's another thing that was pretty unique about my mother in her approach and in her mothering, she thought of emotional life was important. She thought emotional life was interesting. And it's not until this book came out and has been in the world that I've realized, oh my God, I have such a higher degree of comfort and interest in emotional life than most people. I didn't know, Emily.

Emily: So tell me how you realized that, that's really interesting.

Sarah: I think, you know, some of the responses, maybe some of the more negative responses have been like about... I guess it's just the way that certain people have talked about the book to me. You know, one is that like, oh, it's so deeply personal or so brave or, you know, that it's so depressing or these kinds of things. It's like, you know, I actually, for me, this is why I don't feel overexposed by writing a book about, you know, my life and the people in it and, and I hope to God they don't either, is that I actually think emotional life is so universal that I'm not explaining an experience that no one else has had. I'm actually talking about an experience that most people will have had. So I don't feel like I'm hanging out there alone, like flapping naked in the breeze. But I guess other people read it and that is a little bit their experience of it. Like, whoa, you went there, you really put it all out on the page. That is so not my- it actually makes me feel like I'm living in an alternate reality. It's so strange. But that is not my experience of it at all.

Emily: Well and I think one of the things, and you know, I'm not sure I'm gonna articulate this properly, but I'm going to try. I think that one of the things that strikes me about those kinds of responses is that you also did something else. You highlight, as we sort of started off talking, you highlight the negative things not being so negative. Does that make sense? Like the hardships are also where the joy comes from. Yeah. And I feel like it was the first friend of mine who

went through a divorce was a really eye-opening experience for me, sort of second hand because it was an awful divorce. And there were little kids involved and there was substance abuse and it was terrible. And what it really taught me was we do all this celebrating about these sort of milestones, like graduating from college or grad school or getting married and like those are happy times and that's great.

Emily: But guess what, that requires very little work. I mean like grad school find, maybe you worked really hard, college, maybe you worked hard, but like most people do that. So like that's not really exceptional. What is exceptional is when you go through something that's really hard and really painful and you make it through. Right like you don't kill yourself. You don't like decide that you're never gonna smile again. Do you know what I mean?

Sarah: I do.

Emily: That we should celebrate that is that is the human spirit being triumphant. Yeah. And we don't recognize those. We like, you know, especially this whole modern stoic thing, which drives me crazy. Which I don't know if you're privy to.

Sarah: I'm not, it sounds awful.

Emily: It's like there's this whole- and I'm going to get it wrong and I'm going to get in trouble and I'll probably get death threats on Twitter. But like there's this whole, it seems like a white male phenomenon where everybody's like trying to be more stoic. And I would like to remind everybody, if you haven't read the original stoics, most of them kill themselves. Like this is not a philosophy that I would like to choose as my personal way of being. I think it's in sort of conjunction with this whole like be positive. Like instead of saying I have to say I get to. Right, I also hate that. So like, yeah, my husband recently was trying to get me to say, I get to take care of the kids when I should be working or going out with friends or whatever. And I was like, yeah, and you get to do the dishes. How wonderful for you. You know, it's like life is hard. And I think, you know, it's so interesting, like I feel like when you talk to people who have gone through traumatic events and they talk about the need to talk about them, right? . When you talk about these things, you can start to heal. And this idea of like pushing everything under and acting like everything's fine is not helpful. I don't think. Now maybe there are people out there who feel like talking about it is too hard. But I think what you've done and is probably, you know, maybe disturbing to some cohort is you've basically said look like this is life is actually a series of really tough experiences. But that doesn't mean it's bad. That doesn't mean that like, you know there is no happiness. It means you've got to find the happiness in the hard stuff because a lot of life is hard.

Sarah: Yeah. And I also, I guess I feel like the trying and the difficult experiences they kind of stretch you out or like build your lung capacity. Your heart capacity basically to experience wonderful things more fully. I mean I just, I see that you need both. Like how can you really feel the joy of something if you've never been really gutted by the pain of some thing? It's like, you know, yin yang like it's exactly, you need both.

Speaker 3: Good morning. There was coffee on the night table for me, a forehead kiss. My husband carried a plastic bag from the gift shop across the street, filled with

floral purchases, a blue polyester Hawaiian shirt for him, a rust colored one size fits all dress for me. It was sweet. I could see that. But the color of the dress made me sad. It looked funereal like late season chrysanthemums. Do you like it? He asked. I do. Thank you. I got up from the bed to brush my teeth and pull the cotton sun dress for my suitcase. Oh, where are your new dress? He said holding it up to me, limp in his hands. I'll my shirt too, he urged. We walked the bright sidewalks of Kalakaua Avenue, looking like employees on our lunch break and amusement park issued costumes. A camera dangled from my husband's shoulder and he stopped in front of a kiosk with a paper sign handwritten in black marker, "Waikiki's oldest lei stand 1928." The first owner's name was Kapela, somehow mangled into Auntie Bella. She had strung the garlands of fresh, fragile orchids by hand. Then her daughter took over, then a granddaughter. Such [?] seemed expensive to me, but he insisted. He selected a pale lei of flowers whose essence crashed and contained comprise my favorite perfume. He draped the ring of plumeria, tuberose and gardenia across my bare shoulders and we kissed there on the groomed sidewalk of the Royal Hawaiian Center. A Japanese tourist took our picture. In it, my husband needs a haircut and I need sunglasses. I am squinting at the camera.

Emily: The scene with you and your ex-husband in Hawaii is like such a blend of coming to terms of the relationship ending as well as sort of humor and then this like insane awkwardness. Which is awkward in the sense of like two people who know each other really well, who'd probably shouldn't have anything that's awkward between them, but like the dress, that scene where he gives you the dress and you don't actually, I don't think you say you don't like it, but it's very clear, you don't like it. Right. And yet you feel like an obligation to wear it because you're trying to be you're trying to be nice and you're trying to make things work and so is he, and it's not working.

Sarah: Yeah. For me, that is the section of the book that I really struggled with the most I think. Because it's really, yeah, here are two people who their ideas of just what is fun and what they want to do are so at odds with each other. And to see two people trying and not connecting and it's sort of pitiful. I remember I had someone read it and he said, the level of onwee in this is just disgusting. I was like, well, I guess that's effective. And I think that is an experience that people have probably also had. You know, where you're sort of sitting in a restaurant and you're across the table from each other and not talking and there's physical intimacy and just this vacuum of actual intimacy and yeah, that's awkward. I hadn't thought about it as being awkward, but I think that's exactly the right word.

Emily: It's like the intent is the opposite of what is happening.

Sarah: Hmm.

Emily: And so it's like you're both intending to be making up or to be getting along or to see like, you know, if you're compatible, but what's actually playing out is like very clearly incompatibility. And you do that really well in the scene too, where you talk about how like he liked the big things and you liked the little things and like, it's sort of feels like it's a dig on you when he's like, well yeah, you like the little things and I liked the big things and you're like, what do you mean? And he's like, well, like it is what it is. Or like, well, you know, whatever. You're like, that's the whole problem. Right.

Sarah: Right, right.

Emily: And I feel like in those little micro kind of interactions, it tells the whole story.

Sarah: I feel like, you know, I guess on some level, I don't know how to say this in a intelligent way, but on some level I've always been interested in day to day life. You know, that Annie Dillard quote that I'm gonna mess up. But it's like the way we live our days is the way we live our lives. And so I've always been interested in that. And I think on some level, I didn't understand until after I was divorced that a huge part of compatibility is the way you like to live your days. You know, you can have a shared vision for what you want to create in the future. But in terms of, you know, time being this, we never get there, we never arrive in the future. We're only ever making our lives today. So there was a disconnect there for us.

Sarah: And I guess what sort of becomes apparent in the book is that I really liked my mom's approach to daily life and she was very much about the little things. And I think I got a real sense of that because of the time that you were talking about in western Massachusetts, you know, when she was divorced mother of four. We had so little money that the focus became on how can we create these little comforts? You know, the geraniums in the window sill became a big deal. And like the ritual of making a cup of tea but came those a big deal because we just didn't have access to the big things anymore. We couldn't go to the circus. We couldn't go to the zoo.

Emily: And you had been able to do all that stuff too, so it's not you never had it. It's like all been taken away.

Sarah: It became, yeah, it became a loss. And, and so, you know, I think as my mom was dying, I just had an increased and a heightened sense of what I wanted to do in the day because who knew how many days there were and then to be married to someone who has kind of a real disregard for the day, who thinks the day is for, you know, suffering so that there will be a payoff in the future. It just suddenly became an impossible to ignore incompatibility. The funeral home asked me to return with a bag of clothes for her, aware the forever outfit. I chose the pink crocheted dress she wore to both my brothers' and sister's weddings. Crocheted, she had called it, imitating the saleswoman. Pompoms hung from the sleeves and the hem of the skirt and she would shimmy whenever she wore it, shake her hips to show how the pink pompoms could bounce and bop. This span of time is liminal and uncanny. A person is dead that their body is present and so we relate to it in the ways we always have. My stepfather said pack a pair of underwear for her to wear too. But she never wears underwear with hose, I said. And he said, pack them anyway. It seemed like the right thing to do. When I told my sister what I done, she must have also thought of our mother's body as if it were alive. The comfort we still wanted to give it. How she would go into the ground wearing underwear she never would have worn in this life. Poor girl, my sister said. I packed shoes too, leopard flats with pink trim. She left no instructions. Just the snippets of things she'd mentioned in passing. I remembered the plain pine box and the honey suckle bush. All the other choices were for us, not her, that I wanted her to wear a swipe of her favorite lipstick and to spray her with Ralph Lauren Safari one more time. That Rick wanted her to wear underwear. And when I was upset about the embalming, which she didn't, Jenny reminded me what my mother

would have said in her high pitch sing-song. After that, every decision got easier. Sarah, I don't care, I'm dead.

Emily: Do you think that there was something about your mom's illness that informed your sort of need to live now?

Sarah: Oh yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Because you know, I'm always very curious, I'd be interested to know what you think about this, Emily. You know, the common advice is, you know, when something big is happening in your life, if you're going through like a big life change, you shouldn't make other big changes. Like if you're getting divorced, you shouldn't quit your job. And if you're losing your job, you shouldn't also move. And I did all that stuff. Like my mom died, I got divorced, I quit my job, I went to graduate school, I stayed in my apartment because I realized that was the one thing I wouldn't change. But yeah, I think about it now and I think when else are you going to make big life changes? But when the energy is that complete disrepair and in a period of rebuilding, like you know when you lose everything or everything starts to fall apart, you can do anything. It's very freeing. I never understood that advice about, well, don't change everything because it's like, well, what are you going to do when everything is in a period of stasis? Are you going to somehow overcome all of that and start to change everything?

Emily: Yeah. No, I think that's one of those like throwaway advice pieces. I mean, I think people say that because they, they don't want somebody to make irrational decisions. Right? That's based on some sort of idea that you have control over rational decision making. But to your point, I feel like when things are in flux, then it's sort of like, there's no rules. Like you just gotta do what you gotta do and get through it because you're kind of in survival mode. And I think when you're there you're going to make different decisions. But I also think that doesn't mean that they're wrong. It might mean that you actually have an impetus to do something about something that you didn't think you could ever change because now everything's up for grabs.

Sarah: Exactly. Yeah, I think survival mode is very clarifying and I think someone dying can be very clarifying. And for me I thought, well gosh, I hate my job. I didn't hate my job, but I had gotten into my job because I love writing and I wanted to write, but the more I went along the less it had anything to do with writing. So it kinda just, my mom dying absolutely made me feel that there was no time to lose. If there are things you want to do, why take the shortest path between knowledge of the thing you want to do and the thing you want.

Emily: Yeah. I mean I feel like one of the things about your mom dying that it did for me was I remember hearing, and I like attribute this to hearing this from her, but I may have heard it from Katie. Because I know I saw her at Katie's baby shower and I feel like, I think she had been rediagnosed at that point. Right?

Sarah: Yeah. Yeah.

Emily: But I just remember her saying to me or through Katie to me, this idea of like being really pissed off that she was going to die. And that she wanted to spend her like later years going to flea markets and antique stores and like traveling around and now she wasn't going to get to do all those things that she had put off because she wasn't going to have the time. And that has haunted me in a way. And I say haunted and not necessarily a bad way, but like in a kind of

regular reminder of like, no, you really do have to do those things now because you really don't know how much time you have left and the idea that she who had done such an incredible job mothering the four of you. And I mean I feel like one of the things we haven't talked about but it's really remarkable to me is how different you guys are and how like you guys are pursuing mostly careers that are very hard to make your way in and you're all successful, right? That is like statistically such an anomaly and yet I think a lot of it had to do with the way that she just loved and encouraged you guys to be yourselves and to fulfill your dreams, whatever they may be and like kind of live that life now, right? Like if you want to write, start writing, right? You want to be an actor, like start acting. And the idea that like there would be some part of her life that she didn't get to do feels so unfair. Like, on a really deep level for me. That there was something about hearing that that felt unjust and like it still makes me angry. But that has certainly informed my own, I don't know if it's impulsiveness, but it is sort of like, hey, if you want to go do this thing, like just go do it. Like don't say in five years we're going to go to China. Like figure out a way to go to China this year.

Sarah: Yeah. And you know, I think that was always in her, like that was always, I guess to your point about the way she mothered. She had that do it now, kind of kind of vibe about her. And then it became heightened I think when she knew she was dying. And yeah, I love that she was angry and I love that she was just talking about, you know, here she is at a baby shower and just being like, I'm pissed off. And that's another, that's another perfect example of her being like, oh no, she didn't feel like she needed to hide that away for a more appropriate time. She was just like, Emily, I'm dying and I'm pissed off because we're not going to flea markets. But you know, Katie and I have talked about the, the mothering thing and the children in impractical careers and we both remember her saying, you know, people would say to her, or like, how can you let your kids pursue these like outlandish, impractical and difficult careers? And she would say, well, I don't have to say no. You know, the world will say no, and I love that. Like that she didn't need to preemptively say because of her own fear and her own concern, oh, being a writer's not really you know the best choice. Maybe you could go into the newspapers or even that is like, you know, become an accountant or whatever. She was just like, well, do it, you know, and the world will pass it's judgment whether or not it'll work. And I love that.

Emily: Yeah. And I think that it's sort of like this grit thing again. It's like, yeah, we're all supposed to be hard on our kids. And I feel like I grew up in a household where my parents were really hard on me. And so with my kids I definitely am like, no, my job is to love you like crazy. And I mean I can't help but be critical of them because I feel like that's how I was raised. Right. And that like this idea of like, well you have to be honest. Right? And so like the child comes home and they're like, oh well like this is, you know, my teacher said this is the best poem anybody's ever written and they're in first grade. My instinct is like, ah, you really think it's the best poem? But like I have to curtail that because that wasn't helpful for me. Do you know what I mean? And I think your mom's point is absolutely right. The world does a really good job beating people up.

Sarah: Yeah.

Emily: You don't need to do that as a parent. Right? Like your job is to basically say like, go out there, give it a shot. And then when they fall on their faces, you

could say, come on, come home, I'll make you some tea, I'll give you a hug. And then you got to go back out and try again.

Sarah: Yeah. It shows such confidence in not only her ability as a mother, but in her children to just have grit, persevere or whatever, you know, word you want to use, but there's just such a confidence to it that I think is really lovely

Emily: And she shows it. I mean, like her own life experiences embodied a lot of that. She faced a lot of hard times and she got through it. So I feel like she probably was modeling that all her life, you know, for all of you in a way where she didn't need to like beat you over the head with it because you saw it every day, but it was just part of life.

Sarah: Yeah, that's right.

Emily: So my dear, I feel like we've talked for a lot longer than I thought we were going to, which is ridiculous cause I could, we could talk for hours and hours and hours. But I just want to thank you for sharing the story because even as somebody who knew your mom, there's so much in this story that I feel like, you know, resonated with me and made me think about being a mom and you know, being a wife, being a friend, being a person, navigating all of these different things in a really wonderful way where in the process of writing it I felt like I need to really just take a deep breath and like be a little more, I don't know, grateful is again, like one of these words I don't like cause I feel like it's overused but it is like sort of just like take a second, slow it down a little bit and like look around and feel and give the love that is really what this is all about. So thank you.

Sarah: Yeah, you said that absolutely beautifully. I mean, I think my- I just want to remember to stay more present because it's all happening right now. You know and that can be hard to remember.

Emily: Well, congratulations. I feel like it's so exciting.

Sarah: Oh, thank you. Emily. Thank you so much for all your praise and for having me on.

Emily: I'm Emily Kumler and that was Empowered Health. Thanks for joining us. Don't forget to check out our website www.empoweredhealthshow.com for all the show notes, links to everything that was mentioned in the episode as well as a chance to sign up for our newsletter and get some extra fun tidbits. See you next week.