

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 0:27

Welcome to the podcast Today. Today our topic is Mental Wellness and Family Caregiving. I can't believe that I've done more than 40 episodes and not had an episode on this topic, which pretty much touches all of our lives. In fact, I had the idea for the Inner Challenge podcast five years ago, but my own family caregiving left me little time to create a podcast. Of course, family caregiving can be seen through many lenses. Often we think of family caregiving as starting with the birth of a child or grandchild, moving to attending to a loved one when they are sick with cancer or have dementia or some other illness. And ends when we care for our elderly parents. These caregiving experiences are more or less expected, have some societal supports for a family, and encompass many trials and many rewards, but in between birth, illness and death, life happens and family members need support. We may not think of it as caregiving, but it is when families step in to help each other when there's divorce, job loss, mental illness, learning differences, autism or addiction. I think sometimes we like to romanticize family caregiving, assuming that love is enough. Sometimes it is, but as the demands of caregiving increase, caregivers can often feel depleted, which of course can impact their mental wellness. My guest today is in the thick of caregiving. I invited her on the podcast because I think she is a wise woman and when it comes to caregiving and mental wellness wisdom is a terrific tool. Thank you so much for being willing to talk with us about this important topic. Let's begin by you sharing with our listeners a little bit about yourself as well as what you're doing in the area of caregiving at this time.

Guest: 2:09

Okay. I'm 78 years old, close to 80. And around my table at dinnertime, I'm serving four generations. My grandson lives with us and my 98 year old mother lives with us. We have been providing support for our family since our grandchildren were born. And then of course, early when our children were born. So caregiving has been part of my life for almost 50 years.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 2:40

If you have four generations, what's the age span?

Guest: 2:43

My mother is the oldest and she's 98, and my grandson is the youngest and he's 27. My son is with us often and he's 50 and we are in our seventies.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 2:57

Wow. How un-American, right? In other countries, this is fairly normal, but in the United States, I don't know how often this happens that there are four generations under one roof.

Guest: 3:08

I think some of it just has to do with longevity and how long my mother has been mobile and active. I think though that early on I was a working mom and I was trying to learn

about how to take care of my children. And I think after many years of working in different areas and some of it in early childhood care, I realized that instead of learning how to take care of people, I should be learning from the people that I'm taking care of. And that changed how I felt about caregiving.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 3:48

Wow, that is so nuanced. When you first spoke, the word I wanted to punctuate was learn. Yes. I think often in caring for one another, we almost think it's just automatic. And what you have just done is frame it in a way that I think is really important that we learn to care for each other. Can you talk a little bit about that shift you made from learning to care for them, and I think you said learning to care from them? Learning from them, learning to care from them. Yeah.

Guest: 4:18

I think being a lifelong learner has always been a value for me. I remember one time when I was with my eight or nine year old son and he was looking at me and I was trying to remember what I knew from books about how to intervene with this child, who I needed to intervene with. And I realized suddenly that if I wasn't present with him, it didn't matter how many books I read. And so I needed to pay attention to him to understand his point of view rather than just what the books say about how to talk to children. That's one example. Another example for me is having my mother grow old in our home and thinking about how I wanna grow old and watching her process and learning from her process so that I can be a better person as I age. Wow.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 5:18

Can you go back to that moment with your son? When you had the insight of I need to be present to him and try to put into words what you did to be present to him.

Guest: 5:30

I turned off my rational mind and turned on my empathetic effort. Instead of thinking about all the things I had read about taking care of children, I thought about him. I thought about who he is and why he's doing what he's doing and how I can give him the support he needs right now.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 5:56

So you began to really see him as separate and his own little individual.

Guest: 6:02

He was separate and my job wasn't to do certain techniques. It was to listen and learn from him.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 6:13

What was the impact of that?

Guest: 6:14

I was never perfect at it at all, and I always thought that I needed to learn more, and I did. But I tried more and more as, as I've grown into being in all kinds of relationships, and I guess I feel like even with my husband, we take care of each other. So always when you're caring for other people especially if they're vulnerable, it's really important to stop thinking about yourself and really focus on listening to that person.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 6:51

It's interesting because we hear all the time that we are wired to take care of each other. We're wired to be compassionate. And what I think you're saying, is you're trying to hack the wiring by not thinking so much. The book says to do this, or my friend tells me to do that. You were present to your son and then did some kind of insights come?

Guest: 7:16

It deescalated the situation right away because when he felt listened to, he didn't feel like he needed to get all my attention. Maybe that's what happened. I just have found not so much that everything gets all better, but that I am more relaxed and more able to feel positive about the caregiving experience.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 7:42

So it moved into connection. Yeah. Yeah. Versus he's stressed about something. You're thinking in your head, What technique should I do? And that makes him feel like he's not listened to. That's a pattern that I see in my office all the time. That parents are very deeply committed to doing what's best for their children. They want to be really good parents, but because we have so much information that often they're thinking versus being present. What helped you remember to be present in the caregiving process, be it with your son, your mother?

Guest: 8:16

At that moment I knew because books and techniques and theory are all really important to me and I sometimes can get over interested in that. I think I was self-aware enough to know, that wasn't working right now. It's not that I shouldn't do it, but I needed to develop more skills in the empathy area. That was a long time ago, and it's a moment I remember, and I think the reason I remember it is because, when I'm being self-aware, I go back to that moment and I say to myself, are you listening? Are you paying attention? Are you focused? Because it's easy for me to do things in my mind that separate me from people.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 8:59

Yes. And one of the parts of caregiving that really leans into our natural wiring is connection and spirit. I often say to people in my office what's the spirit of that moment for you? Was it connecting? Was it disconnecting? Because we live in a culture that's fairly rushed, which is not really the speed of childhood that often parents find themselves telling their children. And that doesn't feel connecting for children. No. I was just in

someone's house where they were telling the child to eat the applesauce that had medicine in it. And of course, being a child, he wasn't gonna do that. I sat down with him and I just rubbed his back. Then I picked up the spoon and I fed him. Yeah. And he did it. And of course I have lots of experience in this, so I knew that what literally took 25 seconds. Was gonna save everybody a lot of time, but it is that decision to be present to the child or to be present to whoever we're caregiving instead of present to our own agenda. That's not easy.

Guest: 10:02

I don't know that it's naturally wired. I always think of it as culturally constructed and we're really built by our culture to be productive and successful and busy. And even with caregiving, we wanna be successful caregivers instead of attentive caregivers.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 10:25

When I was caregiving my mother, she was, in her late eighties, my father had died. She moved into a retirement community and I was saying to her, this is great. You can go to Bridge, you can do this, you can do that. And she said to me, I didn't move here to recreate myself and I always remembered that she really has her own plan for her life. She doesn't want her daughter to be her life coach. No. And that is hard. Yeah. Because I wanted her to be more active than she wanted herself to be.

Guest: 11:00

And I do think that for me, with my own mother, it's not always easy. Mother-daughter relationships are fraught in many ways. But I have worked to pay attention to what she wants, not what I think she needs or should do. And she has sometimes has trouble telling me what she wants because she's the kind of a person who wants to please people. So she tries to say what she thinks I want her to say. Then I, we end up in a kind of a guessing game, which isn't all that useful. But my goal is always if she wants to cook her own lunch, but she really can't do it fully. But we've figured out ways for her to have the ingredients she needs to do what she wants to do on her own. It wouldn't be any harder for me to cook lunch and give it to her as it is for me to make sure that she has what she needs. But that's a much better way to do it.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 11:59

In that, you're really honoring what she can do when it comes to independence?

Guest: 12:04

Yes. And what she wants to do. I think it's a lot about desire. There are things she doesn't wanna do, and I think. Fine. Then we'll do that for you. You're 98. You should do pretty much what you wanna do now.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 12:16

Yeah,the rules are over,mom,but even at98,which is extremely old.Yeah,extremely old.She still has her own desire,her own will.To do what she wants to do.

Guest: 12:30

That's right.And I think that's what makes her life worth living.It's not probably what keeps her alive,but it makes it more worth living.I do think that.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 12:42

At98,does she have pretty good mental functioning?

Guest: 12:45

Yes.She worries a lot about it.she uses her computer.She reads novels on her Kindle.She remembers most things,we do a crossword puzzle every day.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 12:57

Wow,that's wonderful.I think there's a lot of people listening who probably feel a bit of jealousy because so often when people age,they aren't as healthy as your mom is in mind and body and spirit.And at98to still have a sense of her spirit is a beautiful thing.

Guest: 13:16

Yes.I do think that's right.She has a sister who's99.And her sister is helpless and lying in a bed.Her mind is still good,but she needs total care all the time,physical care.So bodies and minds fail at different rates,and I think that caregiving is partly a response to what's going on,and partly a way of easing the transition from one stage to another.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 13:47

Absolutely.I'm interested in your motivation because I'm a therapist,so I see a lot and I see families who are very committed to caregiving,and I see other families that are very hesitant,resistant.What is your drive?What is your motivation because you have four generations in your house?

Guest: 14:07

It definitely has a spiritual component to it and my mother herself took care of my father who had serious dementia for the last seven years of his life.He never lived anywhere but in our home.And she took care of her mother until she died when she was a hundred,and they were both in her home at one time.So I saw that as a model.Recently I read Henry Nouwen's book about his care for Adam.And I realized from reading that I could really connect with that because for Henry Nowan it was about a spiritual experience and Adam was a connection for him to Christ.And I think for me,I don't know that I would use those words,but I feel for me,that caretaking is a spiritual experience.I could play golf,I could go on trips,but this is way more deeply meaningful to me.I don't know how else to say it.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 15:11

Sometimes people say to me,it's hard for me to care because it scares me.And I wonder if you could address that.

Guest: 15:19

That's interesting because I think often about my own way of thinking of caregiving and knowing I know myself and I know I'm a very controlling person.When you feel like you have to control everything.It's scary cuz do you have to keep them alive?What if you can't?In Henry Nouwen's story,he tells about being afraid.I think when you're controlling,it's easier to be afraid because you take all that on.So part of my process has been to try to let go of control,to not see my caregiving as a way of controlling situations.It's really more of a way of responding.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 15:59

What's helped you do that?

Guest: 16:02

Meditation,deep breathing when I feel like I need to,Make sure everything works properly.I need10or15minutes of meditation.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 16:15

What is different after you meditate?

Guest: 16:18

I'm more relaxed.I can pay attention rather than shaping circumstances.I can just listen to them better.I feel.Like I am learning every day how to do that better.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 16:35

What I think is beautiful with what you're saying is you're really helping us see this as a process that we learn.And that we have to desire.There has to be a desire to be in relationship with this other person,and I actually want to be in relationship with this other person where they seen where they feel seen and heard and cared for on their terms,not.My terms.

Guest: 17:01

That's right.And I'm not saying that's easy,but this I comes from my heart.It is meaningful to me.It makes my spirit joyful.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 17:15

Wow.Why do you think it makes your spirit joyful?Where another person,they may see Hey,this older person in my life is getting in the way.

Guest: 17:25

It has to be so many things. The things that are important to me, the virtues that I believe in. It makes me feel more like the person I wanna be.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 17:38

A person that is what?

Guest: 17:40

That can make a nurturing environment a person that has the capacity to make an environment for others that is nurturing. I wanna be that kind of person.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 17:51

Yes. And I think one thing I like to say to parents, younger parents, is there's a lot of competing values in our culture now. And so it's really important that parents speak their values very clearly to children and not assume that the value of family, the value of caring for another, the value of caring for the Earth is going to seep into their children. Because the values of the culture are more about competition, about gaining wealth and power, and those are actually oppositional to caregiving.

Guest: 18:28

Yeah, I think so. I call it winning. It's the competition in our culture. You wanna win, you wanna be the best. It's a counter to the value of nurturing and creating a safe space and all the things that it takes to be a caregiver. You're right, being clear about your values. I think even in, in our marriage at one point, probably when we were doing some sort of marriage counseling work, we spent time determining what the values of our home would be. And what things were important to us and welcoming others into our home was always one of our values. And the caregiving is another that my husband and I share, and I'm not sure I could possibly do this if it weren't the two of us together. You need to be cared for even while you're caring for other people.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 19:23

That was gonna be a question I asked, how do you care for yourself?

Guest: 19:28

That's one way I think having someone that, that unconditionally or as much as possible loves me and understands that we share this value, that, we got into this together, we made the decision together to do what we do. Having that is really a great support. The other thing is just having the sense of being in touch with myself enough to know that this is what I wanna do.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 19:58

Yes. That this is a deep value. That's right. So you've also brought in your grandson and been very influential and I think one of the things we all probably know is that at this moment in time, Grandparents are very involved and probably heroically involved in

shepherding the next generation.And I wonder if you could talk about your experience in that.

Guest: 20:23

Yes.Our son's wife died in childbirth and she was very sick.Our grandson,had a very traumatic birth and our son brought him home and they together stayed with us and we as a family helped to raise him until he was in high school.It's funny because I don't feel like it was ever a question that's what we would do.I was working full-time,and there was a time when he was about six that I really decided that the full-time job was more than I wanted to do partly because of his care.I never saw it as something that I wished I didn't have to do.I don't know how else to say that.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 21:08

Yeah,it was just your natural response to really a very tragic event.

Guest: 21:12

Yeah.It was very tragic.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 21:14

Yes.I'm so sorry.That just is heartbreaking all these years later,but still,nonetheless,

Guest: 21:19

I think traumatic for our grandson,still knowing that his mother died at his birth.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 21:24

Yes.It's a terrible burden to carry it through one's life and try to make sense of Yeah.And transcend.Yeah.Yeah.So what was it like to be done with parenting and then all of a sudden to be grandparenting full time?

Guest: 21:39

Let's try to think back.I had a lot of interest and I always have.That's the other thing I will say.Even now with the caregiving that I'm doing,I'm actively involved in community initiatives.I'm the chair of a board that takes a fair amount of time,and I did that even when I was raising him.I continued to work in some way or another until after I was 75.It's never that I've given up my life for doing it.But it has always been very important.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 22:15

Not either or,but both and.Yes,I will help raise him and I will continue my own life.Yes.Which is really wise.Yeah.It's really wise.And I think that can be hard for some people that I've worked with in my clinical practice to figure that balance out.

Guest: 22:30

Actually my husband and I have talked about this just recently. Women have a little bit more permission to choose their professional involvement, that can balance. But I think everybody needs to figure that out at some point because we need people who can balance their lives, especially in a culture that's so busy as ours. I'm not saying that it was always easy, but I felt like I was able to choose to do things that fit with the things that I was doing at home. I worked with early childhood education while I was taken care of all of our children.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 23:10

Then it was an extension. Sure. They integrated well. Yeah. Yeah. But one of the things that I have a lot of concern for is that women in the workplace today don't have the flexibility that we had.

Guest: 23:22

In my mind what that means is that we need to have more supports for people who are providing care for vulnerable people. We can't just leave people behind.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 23:36

We have to help one another and encourage one another to ask in the workplace for what we need. I have had quite a few clients taking care of family members that were sick or elderly parents and it's a very wearing experience. What often happens is sleep gets disrupted. They're good workers. They need the income. They've maybe used FMLA but it's not a complete solution. I've really encouraged them to let their bosses or their managers understand their home situation. And most of the time they've come up with solutions, whether it's, why don't you start at 10 if you know you can sleep? From four until nine. Come in at 10, go home at six, don't take a lunch. It's always been really impressive to me when information is given. The workplace is flexible, but people are often very fearful.

Guest: 24:29

The other thing is that probably people who are more privileged, who have more education and more skills can negotiate things better. It's so important to think about the children. They're our future. We all need to care what happens to children, but anybody who's vulnerable and left behind, we need support.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 24:53

One of the most stressful parts of caregiving is often people are doing it at a distance. I actually looked up the difference between care and caregiving for this episode. Care taking is you're professional, you're getting paid for it. Caregiving is, you're doing it as you're doing it, which I. I Googled it. I don't know if someone did a dissertation and I'm wrong. I have a lot of empathy. My husband's in this position where he is half a country away from his two elderly parents, and it's very stressful. Yeah. Because even though they're in assisted living, his mother requires an enormous amount of medical help and

it's subpar.It's a tension that people live with that I think is very difficult and there's really no solution.

Guest: 25:39

No and I guess one of the things that I would say about my personal situation is that I almost feel,I don't wanna say guilty,but I feel like I've been so privileged to be able to make the decisions I've made about how to do the things I believe I wanna do.It's just not easy for everybody.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 25:59

No,it's not.And.I do think that people are born with more privilege than others.Yes,we know that there might be a few who disagree,but I think it's a really healthy thing to be able to recognize that.But at the same time,you've made some pretty hard decisions around this value of yours.

Guest: 26:17

It's interesting because the other thing about me that I haven't said is that in,in my younger years,my husband and I lived in Africa for six years.We traveled whenever we wanted to.So I've had all the things I've wanted to do.I don't really feel at all that I'm giving anything up,and that,again,it's a matter of privilege really.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 26:42

And mindset.Yes.And a mind that says,these are my values.Yes.I want family.Yes.And caring for them to be central to how I live my life.Some people,it might be golf.Other people,it might be how they take care of their lawns or their dogs or whatever.But for you,it's really,this is what's central to who I am.

Guest: 27:01

That's right.I don't mean to be cavalier about it.It's not easy,but part of the ease of it is that it's what I wanna do,

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 27:10

One of the things I wanna stress is,this is something you've really thought through.That I want people to think about,that most of us will be in a position where we will have to care whether it's for a child,whether it's for a parent,whether it's for an adult child going through a divorce or who has a mental illness,and that sometimes I think we get our lives so packed,we haven't allowed any buffer.So when those unexpected things happen and they will happen in everyone's life,there's no room for them.And it sounds to me like,I don't know if you intentionally thought of that,but along the way,you were willing to change things up.So when your six year old grandson really needed you to have more flexibility,you were willing to flex your own life and so you could do that.

Guest: 28:01

Yeah.I was thinking about,my husband's mother was99when she died a year ago,and about five years ago she was living with her daughter and her daughter just couldn't do it anymore.She couldn't care for her.It was interfering with her life and the rest of her family.Initially she,they made the effort to put her mother in a nursing home.Now,her mother was part of a,an old order church,and that church came forward and said we would like to take care of her,and they took her to the home of a young family,and she lived there until she died.And so there were,there was a community support when the daughter couldn't do it and maybe there's would be more of that kind of thing.I don't know.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 28:52

Yeah.I have a dear friend who,her mother who's86or87and her two years ago took in a homeless boy and it has been a beautiful thing.Very stressful,but.They have really figured it out.They've gone to counseling,they've given him opportunities.He started at a fourth grade reading level.He graduated from high school.This really did come out of a real spiritual place.I really admired them and I thought how few people would be willing to go through,and there was,there's no movie of the week here.This has been Taxing and deeply rewarding.

Guest: 29:31

In my opinion,that's mostly the way life is the challenges are generally generate the most satisfaction.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 29:43

Yes.And I always think we're born selfish.Yeah.And,We can die selfish.It's very easy to have happen in this culture unless we get a little bit lucky.Yeah.Selfishness has no income,race,educational level,but if people have as a value,I don't want to be selfish.Mm-hmm.The best antidote for that is I'm gonna care for other people.

Guest: 30:10

My husband and I,one of the things we do that helps is we have a small glass of wine and a chocolate every night before we go to sleep.And the chocolates have little sayings in them.And one of the saying came up that comes up fairly often is don't stop until you're proud.I said to him,no.What it needs to say is don't stop until you're humble.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 30:31

Yes.

Guest: 30:33

If you wanna be unselfish,then you have to stop striving to prove yourself.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 30:39

Yes.Because the fuel of humility is learning.That's right.Because once we That's right.Say I'm always learning.The other side of that is I don't always know.It's funny cuz I helped

with both of my parents. My father had cancer, my mother died just basically of old age. This had gone on for 10 years, I didn't realize that I had done this right out of college in a service program and on my application I said I was willing to work with anybody but the elderly. Because they scared me. I was just starting my life. I didn't want to hang out with 85 year olds. And of course I got with the elderly and they taught me so much and they really, without intending to rearrange my values. None of them talked about their jobs. They only talked about their family, they talked about their interests, whether it was flowers or soap making. But they also talked about the importance of nurturing relationships. That would sustain you till the end. Some of them had no relationships and some of them did. Mm-hmm. Their message was the same. And that was an amazing realization. What's the biggest challenge for you at this point? Caregiving as you are?

Guest: 31:48

My biggest challenge has been my outside involvements. I just resigned from two boards. I'm cutting back on a lot partly for myself because I don't have as much energy as I had when I was younger. So I'm having to cut back on outside things that matter to me to do the family work. I told the woman who's in charge that I just couldn't do it anymore, and she wept and I felt bad. So That's hard.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 32:20

Yes. But you have a lot of self-awareness knowing this is the time I can't do it. Yeah. The Spirit of there's a season for everything.

Guest: 32:28

That's right. That's the other thing. I think that instead of thinking of life as slowly going downhill, it's going into different phases. That's what it is. And this phase is different.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 32:39

What have you learned from your mother about aging?

Guest: 32:43

She tends to be negative. Her way of thinking about things is that she's losing so much. She's losing her sight. She's losing her hearing. She doesn't emphasize in herself the growth that she's had. She was an editor and a reader and a writer. And she still has that. What I learned from watching her is I wanna be more grateful than she is.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 33:09

How about what did you learn from your grandson and your son?

Guest: 33:13

From my grandson I've seen him be courageous and wise beyond his years. I think that's comes out of his trauma. And our son, I just marvel at how he holds so strong to the value of making his relationship with his partner work.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 33:34

Though he grew up in a home. That gave him that value.

Guest: 33:37

He wants to have a life like ours.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 33:39

So when you think about this topic, family caregiving, is there anything you wanna say that you haven't said?

Guest: 33:45

The only thing I would say is that I see this as bigger than a family, and I see this commitment to creating nurturing environments as crucial to the health of our world. And I wish that more people would value that because I think it could save our planet and save our culture.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 34:13

I think it's what people deeply want. Yeah. But it's really easy to not think that is what we want cuz there's so many visually interesting things out there whether to do, to buy, to watch. And they do give us a lot of instantaneous pleasure. I remember when my mom died and it wasn't all roses and easy, but I remember having a deep sense of satisfaction of my brothers and sisters and I cared for her. Wasn't perfect, but wow. We ushered her out and I remember this deep sense of that's what my dad wanted and we were able to do that good enough.

Guest: 34:57

Even now, people my age often talk about all the things they're doing now that they're not working. Now we can do this and we can do that. And it's so easy to start to feel like competing with that. It's not the same to talk about I'm taking care of my mother that sounds self-righteous. But it is a sense of satisfaction to do it.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 35:20

Yes. I always encourage people to think 10 years down the road, what is it you really want? And work for that. Yeah. Instead of what is pulling you today. Thank you so much for being on the podcast. I think, a really important topic, just as you said, not for just the people in our immediate lives, but for our communities and our world.

35:40

Here are my Inner Challenge insights: insight number one: Is it caregiving or caretaking? What we call it probably does not matter nearly as much as the spirit in which we offer care. I loved our guest's nuanced learning. When she said that, making the shift from learning how to take care of others to learning from the people she was taking care of, is what made her journey of caring, deeply satisfying. Insight number two: My guest blew my mind when she shared with me, her view that caregiving was more of a

component of one's cultural upbringing than one's biological wiring. I hear the latter all the time. We're wired for compassion. We're wired for caring. But I wonder if our culture that is so committed to individualism, success and stuff is rewiring us without us realizing it. Insight number three: Run your own experiment. Choose a person you really care about and sit and listen to them today. Set yourself up for success. Leave your phone in the car and make sure you have enough time. Be really present and curious about what this person is telling you. Maybe it's one of your children or grandchildren, and they'll talk about bugs or Legos. Maybe it's a family member who wants to share a blow by blow story of their workday. Track how long your mind can stay focused on your loved one without thinking about something else, like yourself or the Cubs. Now you decide, are we wired for caring? Or have we been rewired? Insight number four: If your experiment was a success, that is awesome! And I bet you have pretty good mental health. After sleep, relationships are the second most powerful driver of our mental wellness. If you didn't do so well, don't despair. Consider an upgrade. Today's guest demonstrates without even trying, the power of intentionality. She wants to be connected. Throughout her life home and hospitality has been a very deep value. At one point in our conversation, she said it was easy for her mind to separate herself from the people around her. You know what she means. You're having dinner with a family and your kids are talking and you're just not listening. Or maybe it's movie night. And you're with everyone, but you're on your phone. She watches for this and knows how to bring herself and her mind, back to being present with others. So start small. Commit to being present to one person a day for 10 minutes. Where you are fully listening to them. Build on this by keeping your experiment going and you too can be like our guest. A person with fully developed individual interests and a person who can fully connect with others. Keep running the experiment and you'll see that listening to others with curiosity changes everything. It's a learned skill. And it really is great for mental wellness. Insight number five: How do I know this is a learned skill? I certainly wasn't born with it. Nor, wasn't modeled too much for me in my childhood. But therapy, school and 44,000 hours of therapy sessions, some of them my own, have taught me the value of really being present to others. I'm not always great at it, but like today's guest, I can observe when I fail, own it and make adjustments. Because caring for others is a deep value of mine. Caring means we are present. We listen. We learn. Not only what others think but what they need. Insight number six: Most of us will get old. We don't go to school to learn how to do this, but if we are wise and observant, like today's guest, we care for the elders in our life and allow them to teach us how to be a better person as we age. That does not mean that all of them are good teachers. But as my dad used to say, We learn as much from bad teachers as we do from good ones. Thanks for listening. As you move through your week, be present. Not just to yourself. But to others, this is your Inner Challenge.