



Episode 216: A Look Back: 9 Powerful Lessons I
Learned the Hard Way This Year

Katie: Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays from wherever you are in the world and whatever traditions you celebrate. And welcome to "The Wellness Mama Podcast." This episode will be a pretty short and sweet one because I know that today is usually a day reserved for family and I don't wanna take away from that by any means. I just wanted to check in with you guys and share some tough lessons I learned the hard way this year and also just talk about a few of the traditions that we're doing in our house today.

And as always, I would love to hear from you in the comments about your family and your traditions. And also, if you have two minutes and you'd like to give me a completely free Christmas gift, I would be so grateful if you would go to iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you listen to podcasts and leave a rating and a review because this helps other people find the podcast and I have lined up some really fun guests for next year that I cannot wait to share with you and it would help a lot of other people find the podcast and learn from it and bring new people into the community. So I would be very grateful if you would just take a couple of minutes to do that. There's links to do that as well in the show notes at wellnessmama.fm where you can find the show notes for this podcast and every podcast. And I will also put my notes from this episode there, along with links to posts that I mention or any things, you can find it all.

And I cannot believe it's Christmas Eve and I cannot believe we are a week away from the new year. And I know that just like this year, next year will fly by so fast. So I'm trying to really this week just lean in and enjoy the family time and the kids and just really enjoy those moments together. And since it is Christmas Eve, you may have heard me talk about before, I will be doing our yearly tradition of cooking the Feast of the Seven Fishes tonight. So when I finish this up, I will be jumping in to do that. Basically, this is a Sicilian American tradition and this is one that I married into. So my husband is part Italian and when we got married, this was something that we adopted. His family ironically actually reversed it. They would eat pasta on Christmas Eve and fish on Christmas, but we've reverted to the traditional, which is to have fish on Christmas Eve.

And this goes back to some of the religious roots of eating fish on a day of fasting. And typically the vigil was like a day of fasting in preparation for the feast, which, of course, would be Christmas. So, this is called the Feast of the Seven Fishes. It's from Southern Italy. And as the name suggests, it involves making seven or more types of fish on Christmas Eve. So it's quite the endeavor at our house, especially since we're starting with eight of us, plus grandparents, plus neighbors, plus siblings. So, last year, I believe 40 people came to eat and this year I think it might be about the same.

And there's a lot of debate about the actual origin of this tradition, but it's something we do just simply because it's a tradition in our family. But like I said, it basically traces back to the tradition of abstaining from meat on Fridays as well as specific holy days. The number seven also has a lot of historical meaning and some people serve fewer types of fish. In fact, I've even heard of people serving up to 13 types of fish, but 7 is the most common number because it's just a strong historical and cultural number in many parts of Europe, especially Italy. So I am gearing up to cook a seafood bisque that has, I believe, four kinds of fish in it. Some rainbow trout and some scallops and some baked oyster. So, quite the ordeal going down at our house.

Also this evening, the kids are so excited because every year they get a photo book. And this is something I started when my oldest was little and my job has gotten harder each year because now I have to make six books. But what I do, I use a digital website, like Mixbook or Shutterfly, to create just small eight by eight photo books of all their memories from the past year. And the beauty of this is that all of those photos and memories and captions are then saved online in the cloud so they're backed up and if any of the books ever get messed up, we can reprint them versus doing an actual scrapbook. And my hope is that when they leave home, they'll have a nice little box that has all of their memories from childhood and that I can reprint those books if I missed them once they leave home.

So I've had to start earlier and earlier each year because now this has become quite the ordeal. But if you ever decide to take this tradition into your family, I'll give you a tip. I keep a folder on my computer with each of my kids' names and then I add photos to that all year. And then at the end of the year, when I'm ready to make the book, I just upload the whole folder to the website and have it auto-place them in chronological order. So then all I have to do is reposition and edit and add captions so it goes a lot faster. And our kids will get to open those tonight. Even though it's technically a Christmas gift, that's the one thing we let them open on Christmas Eve. And we really do stick to one gift per year unless it's experience-based. I've written a lot about giving experiences instead of gifts. So pretty much they get to open their Christmas book on Christmas Eve and their one gift on Christmas. And then we just really focus in on family time.

I'm also gearing up for stockings because this tradition goes back to my family. We would hang stockings on the mantle each year and then get little trinkets or pieces of chocolate. And my husband's family did this on December 6th for Saint Nicholas Day, so our kids actually get double. They get to leave their boot out on December 6th or the night of December 5th, and then they get their stockings on Christmas Eve. So gearing up for that and then also making big batches of two drinks. One called Glühwein, which is a tradition that comes from Austria. It's a hot mulled red wine, and it was often served after skiing or being in the snow. Obviously, there's not much snow where I live, but it's a Christmas tradition. That one comes from my husband's family. My family always made Wassail, which is like a hot mulled cider. So we will have both in crock pots at our very busy house for Christmas tomorrow.

The other reason I wanted to check in, though, is that I wanted to share some lessons that I have learned the hard way this year. Some the easy way, but most the hard way. Nine of them in particular. And this is something I'm going to be writing a lot more about actually within the next year and I'm working on a third book that I cannot wait to share with you because it took a very long time, but I can now say relatively honestly that I, with six kids and multiple businesses and even an exciting new business on the horizon that I will get to share with you more about soon, I really am almost never stressed. And there's certainly occasional moments where overwhelm sets in for a couple of hours, but I would say 99% of the time I don't feel stressed at all.

And this has definitely not been my default throughout life. It's something I've developed very conscious systems for, both internal mental systems and practical systems in my day to day life and I assumed, actually, that this is something every mom had already figured out and that I was late to the party and had only just now figured out how to stay above water without feeling like I am drowning. And after talking to a lot of

friends, I realized maybe this is not something everybody's figured out and I'm hoping that by sharing it, I'll be able to help a lot of you guys. So I'm working on that as a third book, but I also will be writing quite a bit about that on wellnessmama.com in the next year. And a lot of these lessons are tied into that process for me. So these are lessons I've learned in the past year, but also in the past several years. And like I said, most of them the hard way.

For this year, first, I would say the lesson has been that gratitude is not just for when things are good. In fact, it's even more important when things are not good. For so many years, it was easy to be grateful because even if we financially didn't have much, we had our family, everyone was healthy, and it was just easy to be grateful for that. And this year was wonderful in so many ways, but it also had a few really solid reminders to be grateful even when it's hard. And the most obvious example I can think of with that is the hurricane that hit our area, and especially, the particular moment of uncertainty right before it was about to hit. Because I think in life, often, uncertainty is the biggest struggle and often the fear of the unknown is worse than the unknown itself or the fear of what's going to happen is worse than what actually might happen even if what happens is terrible.

And so it was easy to be grateful and to have gratitude focused, you know, in daily life when the biggest stresses were just making sure I was staying patient with my kids or that there was a mess on the floor. And gratitude is something we work into our daily life. It's something, at dinner with our kids, we always ask, "What are you grateful for today? What hard questions did you ask today? What did you fail at today?" we kind of try to build that into our family culture. But I realized it was a little bit more difficult when we had to evacuate relatively quickly because of the hurricane. We weren't planning to evacuate originally, it was just a category one or category two and everybody in our area was kind of like, "Eh, this happens all the time. hurricanes never hit us. We're going to be fine. We'll just stay here." And then as it started escalating, we're like, "Eh." And then it eventually became a mandatory evacuation, but by that point, we only had about 24 hours notice, actually a little bit less. And the sheriff lives close to us and when he evacuated his family, we realized we needed to get our kiddos out.

And so with very little time, we had to pack up the things that truly are the most important, which ended up not being much. It was some documents from the safe and passports. And that was about it. A little bit of clothing. And we evacuated with a lot of people from our area that we were close to. And we all just got hotel rooms a few hours away, away from the eye of the storm. And the crazy thing about hurricanes, it's wonderful because you know they're coming so you can get away, which is great, unlike tornadoes or even earthquakes or wildfires, but the struggle is then you're sitting there for, like, 24 hours just watching the storm come and realizing that you can do absolutely nothing about it.

And that, for me, was a test of gratitude this year to be sitting in a hallway in a hotel and watching the path of the storm and realizing it was going to make landfall from what it looked like exactly where we lived and that, based on the wind speeds, that we could expect that our houses probably would not be there when we got back. And especially realizing that we had some friends who stayed behind to protect their businesses and their homes and that they were actually in danger. And that moment, trying to choose gratitude in that moment, even realizing everything we owned could be gone, was definitely more difficult. But it was also so

beautiful because it reframed just how little we actually need in life and how the most important things are people we love and how those things were there with us in that hotel.

And if you've heard other episodes, you know that the story actually turned out great for us and the storm veered at the very last second. Unfortunately, it hit very close to us and it hit areas that already were struggling a little bit in some cases, and there's a very long path of recovery ahead. But seeing that has been the other beautiful lesson in gratitude for me this year because so many of those people went through what we were expecting to go through and they did lose their homes and they lost all of their possessions. And yet, they're still, so many of them are so positive and grateful that they're okay and grateful for the community that's building up to support them and to see that has been a good reminder of we get to choose our reaction to things. And it's also been an amazing reminder that we have so much power to improve the lives of those around us on a daily basis just by being present and in small ways and that there are, around us every day, people who do need help in some way or the other.

And we said in our neighborhood, it's sad to realize that it took a hurricane for us to realize there were people only 30 minutes away who were struggling already and why did we not know that and how were we not helping them? So while the devastation has been horrible, it's been an incredible lesson in gratitude and also just in the importance of loving others. And while it's great to donate money to organizations, and we, I'm sure, are thinking of that this time of year, it really drove home also that it's important to give your time and your love and a hug and to be the actual hands on the ground for people who need it. And we all have those people near us.

So the lesson I learned and that I would encourage you to think of today, especially this time of year, is to maybe find those opportunities in your own area and to find those people to love in your own area. Because certainly, they are there and certainly, they need your help.

The second lesson that I've learned partially this year, although it's been the last several years, has been a lot longer of a process for me. Basically, the lesson that we should question everything all the time and not take anything at face value, not assume anything. So many of us come into life and are taught so many wonderful things by our parents, but often we never then, as adults, question these things or just evaluate them critically. And even though I consider myself definitely someone who's always asked, "why," and my mom makes a point of reminding me that, especially when I was a kid, I feel like there were things in my life that I had never truly questioned or that I was willing to defend and die on that hill without ever looking at critically.

So in the last few years, what I've done is create a Google Doc that had a list of everything that I thought I believed wholeheartedly. And when I started out, this was a pretty long list because I went, line by line, every area of life, whether it be like mental, spiritual, physical, all those aspects of life. And then each thing I believed, I would read books or articles or listen to podcasts with viewpoints from across the board, not just the ones that I thought that I agreed with, because I think too often, and at least I can say for me, for so many years, I would look for things that confirmed what I already believed. And I think that's an easy trap to fall into. But, I realized that there were, I think, some holes in what I believed and what I thought and that if I

questioned those, if I was already right, if anything, I would only strengthen my viewpoint because I would find information that agreed with that. And also I would be reading things that disagreed with that so that I could have better empathy and understanding for those who I disagreed with and hopefully, better love.

But instead what I realized is that there were many sides to many arguments that I had not considered. I think this has hopefully made me a much more balanced person. It's also really shortened the list of things I think I believe because I realized if I thought I was willing to die on a hill, I should make sure it's a hill worth dying on. And so now I have a very short list of things I believe.

And one of the things at the top of the list, kind of a little bit to touch on the first point again, is that I think our highest calling, whether that comes from, you know, for you, whether that's from religion, from the universe, whatever you wanna call that, I think one of the best things we can do on this earth is to be kind and loving to other people. And to me, that's a non-negotiable and something that has been confirmed by everything I've read and questioned in the last few years.

But I would say that's also been a very difficult exercise because it's not easy to challenge things. It's easy to just accept what we believe and to find things that agree with us and not to step outside of those boxes, but it's been truly one of the most worthwhile things I've done in hindsight, so that's a fun exercise if you wanna try it is just to make a list of things you believe and then go through those things because if anything, you only learn about people who have differing opinions and why they hold those opinions and you might actually learn something new that you didn't expect to learn.

The third lesson from this year, somewhat related, is to run my life like I run my business. And this is one of the things I will be writing a lot about in the next year because it's been a complete game changer for me. This is also not a process I've entirely completed in just the past year. It's actually taken me several years. And it started because there was a point several years ago where I was trying to run the blog, and at that point, trying to do everything myself before I had a team to help, which I have now and they're amazing and you can see them on the "About" page of wellnessmama.com. We have Shelly, and Carrie, and Liv as our core team and then other people beyond that. But before I had them, I was trying to do everything myself. I had systems, though. So the business side was pretty well handled and it was busy, but I was able to do it. But I was also trying to manage my life with six kids and a household and travel and all of the things that go with being a mom or just a person in today's world.

And I got to a point where I was so stressed all the time and so overwhelmed all of the time that I actually considered deleting the blog because I realized obviously, I wasn't gonna sacrifice my family, my kids, and time with them. And I just did not have enough time. So the blog was the thing that had to go. Thankfully, my husband talked me down from that, but it made me realize I needed to create some big changes. And it also made me realize because I took a step back and said, "How is it that I am able to run a business so well and get that all done in, you know, the hours I have per day for that, and it functions even though I feel like I worked pretty hard on that, but at home, I'm just stressed all the time and I feel like I'm juggling things all the time?"

And then I realized maybe it's because of the business, I am slightly neurotic about systems and I have checklists and systems and processes for everything. And at home, I'm always just trying to manage that in my head. I have systems for some things like meal planning, but I didn't have systems for everything. And it also made me realize that there was a thing in both business and in day to day life that I was missing, which was being able to bring in a big team and be part of a team versus trying to do everything myself. So in business, that meant I had team members that came on that have now become very much part of the mission and the values of Wellness Mama that have absolutely changed my life for the better.

And with my kids, that meant that we all are part of this team of running the household and they don't help me. We're all in this together. So we all have responsibilities. And I don't do anything for them that they are capable of doing themselves other than times when it's for bonding or just for fun. Like I'll fix my girls' hair even though they're capable of doing it just because it's fun. But in general, if they're capable of cleaning up their dishes, I don't do it. If they're capable of doing their own laundry, I don't do it because we all have our own task in this house. And it's very important to me to raise adults who are fully functioning and can take care of themselves.

And so those subtle shifts of running my life like a business and just having a time and a place for everything, having systems for everything and involving the rest of the team, i.e., my family, have been completely life-changing. And I know that these are easy things to say and difficult things to do. And so I'm gonna be writing more about how I actually created this system is because I kind of used the Tim Ferriss idea of 80/20 to figure out how to best optimize daily life. So I picked the 20% of things that have 80% of the outcomes and I figured out how to optimize those things first, and then I saw big changes right away that I was able to go through the rest of the tasks slowly and figure out how to optimize them as well.

And the beauty of this now is that our home runs like a well-oiled machine. So when I have to travel for work or when anything changes in the schedule, it's easy for anyone else to step in and do my part of the system or vice versa. If my husband's gone, it's easy to do his part of the system. There's just a lot more order and organization and it also means that I don't have to worry about those tasks or things when they're not happening because I know that everything has a time and a place. So again, more about that on the blog soon, but that was a huge and hard lesson that I've learned over the last couple of years.

Number four. This has been an emotionally tough one this year, which is not to take anyone or anything for granted because I think so often it is easy, when life is going well and we have so much to be grateful for, just to take for granted our friends and family members and those that we love. And I've lost a couple of people close to me in the last couple of years and had a health scare with a close friend this year and just realized how delicate life can be and how truly people can be gone in an instant. And so this year, one of my, not resolutions because I don't really do that. One of my goals for next year is to find more tangible ways to let people know just how much I love them and not to take them for granted throughout the year, not just at Christmas when we give gifts, and not just on their birthdays, but how to incorporate those things all the time.

So one of the things I've asked for for Christmas is stationery so that I can make a point to write actual handwritten notes to people to let them know or just to send little gifts to people or just even to give verbal reminders how much I love people and those that I'm close to. So that's another easy lesson to say but one that's hard to remember sometimes, is just that truly, like, nothing is guaranteed until tomorrow, and realizing that there was a chance that I could have lost a couple of more people who are really close to me this year has been a really good reminder of that.

Number five. This is one also that's been a process several years in the learning. And that is to take responsibility for every single thing in our life. This was something that I don't feel like was really super well modeled for me throughout my life, and it's something I had to learn on my own. Basically, the idea that, well, everything that happens to us is not our fault. Certainly, we can take responsibility for that. And that gives us a tremendous amount of power. And this is really well laid out if you wanna read it in a book called, "The Subtle Art of Not Giving a..." You can probably figure out the other word. I will link to it in the show notes. But this has been something I've slowly unpacked over years. And there's a quote from Steve Maraboli that says, "The victim mindset dilutes the human potential. By not accepting personal responsibility for our circumstances, we greatly reduce our power to change them."

And so I, through the last couple of years and through reading that book, have learned that, you know, you often hear that, "With great power comes great responsibility." But in our family, we now have a quote up that is the opposite that "With great responsibility comes great power". And that's something I'm really excited to teach my kids as they start to get into the teenage years, is that if they want to have more power and freedom in life that through taking great responsibility of their own actions and of their environment, they're able to earn that.

And so another good quote from that book that I mentioned that will be in the show notes, he said, "Fault is past tense. Responsibility is present tense. Fault results from choices that have already been made. Responsibility results from the choices you're currently making every second of the day. You are choosing to read or, in this case, listen, to this. You are choosing to think about the concepts. You are choosing to either accept or reject the concepts. It might be my fault that you think my ideas are lame, but you're responsible for coming to your own conclusions. It's not your fault that I chose to write this sentence, but you are still responsible for choosing whether to read it or not."

And like many life lessons, this is an easy thing in like small matters of life and a much more difficult one when truly, truly bad things happen to us. And again, it's something I faced when I thought that we might lose our home or I thought that I might lose a friend. And just to realize that while we certainly can't control everything that happens to us, we absolutely can control our reaction to it and our response to it and that there's a tremendous power there.

And also from the book, he said, "There's a difference between blaming someone else for your situation and them being responsible for your situation. Nobody else is responsible for your situation but you. Many people may be to blame for your unhappiness, but nobody is ever responsible for your unhappiness but you. This is

because you always get to choose how you see things and how you react to things. You always get to choose which metric with which to measure your experiences with."

And to me, there was just tremendous freedom in removing the mindset entirely of even worrying about finding blame or fault for anything and just taking full responsibility and moving forward. And when you step back and look at it, this is something that so many of the great leaders throughout history have done, is just not even worry about the fault or the blame and just worry about responsibility and moving forward.

Lesson number six. Working hard and working smart are completely different things. So this is one that, as a Type A, has been difficult to learn. But I've really been focused on optimizing for efficiency. And I touched on this a little bit in the previous one about running life like a business, but this is something I think can be really hard to hone in on in daily mom life. In work environments, this is something they're pretty good about trying to optimize for because there's money on the line and they wanna get the most for their money, but to optimize for efficiency at a home situation or for moms, those of us who are juggling so much, is a lot more difficult.

And I realized for a long time I was working very hard. I was very good at working a lot of hours per day, being very busy, never sitting down, never taking a mental break, but I wasn't being the most efficient I could be.

So this goes back to that third point, which is about kind of the 80/20 rule and how to be the most efficient in day to day life. So again, I'll be writing a lot more about that soon.

Lesson number seven. Being willing to say, "I don't know." I think this is one of the most truthful things that we can say, and also sometimes one of the hardest. And as I'm about to have teenagers in my house soon, it's something I've been trying to get better about saying because I say this to my kids a lot, but usually followed by the words, "Let's try to figure it out together." Because I think, at least my hope, again, I have not been through the teenage years and I know many of you have. I would love to hear your advice if you have, please leave comments. But I think there's a beauty in that because in an environment, if we're raised with the idea that whoever's teaching us absolutely does have all the answers, it can be hard to question that or to realize that we sometimes don't have all the answers or to not feel like a failure when we don't know.

So for me, this was a thing in school. It was very difficult. I came from an academic family. And so I was just expected to be good at academics and to have those answers all the time, but I think in life and in the tough questions of life, this can be even more difficult. So, again, I haven't been to the teenage years yet, but my hope is with my kids at least, by saying, "I don't know," sometimes, when I truly don't know, when they come to me with the hard questions that it'll open up a dialogue and let them feel like they can always come to me because I don't actually have all the answers and we can figure it out together and they don't have to worry about whether they have all the answers already figured out or whether they've done everything perfectly.

I also think that it's important for us just individually to be able to say, "I don't know," because, just like going back to taking responsibility for things, when you don't know the answer, you have the ability to learn. And when you think you have all the answers, you've blocked your mind to considering other possibilities. And whether this be dietary principles or nutrition, whether this be health principles, these are things I've had to learn to question, based on just my own research and things I thought I believed and then new information has come up that changed that. So just being willing to admit that we don't know things.

Number eight. Finding a way to find balance. And I've been meaning to write about this for a really long time and I'm still working on a post about this because I think finding balance has been one of my own toughest lessons in life. They say that balance is a moving target and it certainly is, but I've also realized in the last couple of years that I think it's something that we may not even be able to achieve at all times, nor is it something that we should because I don't think balance is something that can be figured out on a day to day level. I don't think it's possible, at least in my own life, to be perfectly balanced every day. I think it's something that's achieved as an average over time. So there's some days we may be all in on something and let others go and vice versa, but over time, we accomplish all of those things and are able to find balance.

This is also something I'm gonna be writing about more because I finally realized that in order for things to be balanced, they actually have to be opposed. You can't balance something that they're all on the same side. And especially for women, there's so much talk about work-life balance. And I realized I kind of started to resent that term a little bit because, like I said, in order for things to be balanced, they have to be opposed. And for women, we don't get the luxury of just having these separate silos. We are always all in when it comes to our kids and we're always all in when it's things we're responsible for. So I've realized that, for me at least, the answer was much more like work-life integration and like this applies to all aspects of life. And so I stopped trying to balance things and removed that mindset that things had to be opposed and instead just looked for ways to be integrated of all of those so that I could be fully present in whatever I was doing at the time.

And lesson number nine. This is one I'm sure you heard many times, it's been one of the harder ones to learn for me. And that is that forgiveness is a gift that we give ourselves. There have been times that I've been pretty badly hurt both physically and emotionally throughout my life. And again, back to taking responsibility for everything not my fault, some of those cases, some were, but I'm absolutely responsible for moving on and for figuring out how to integrate those and move past them.

And I realized that this was an area that I had, as a very Type A person, just tried to ignore or just tried to power through, which worked pretty well for a long time until it didn't. And so the last year, I've really had to go deep on forgiveness and learning how to let go of things. And I feel like anger is a harm that we do to ourselves, and that was something I had to learn the hard way.

There's so many sayings about this, like the quote that, "Holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else, but you're the one who gets burned." And on the flip side, that, "Forgiveness is when you set a prisoner free and realized that the prisoner was yourself." And I think this is so

true and I think it does go back to that point about responsibility because our sense of justice can be so strong when it's something that wasn't our fault and that shouldn't have happened and that absolutely was unfair in life, but we can't change the past and responsibility is future-focused. And so I had to finally realize that I wasn't changing the outcome of those things by not forgiving them. And I was only hurting myself and I was putting up walls that made it harder to be effective in my life now.

Again, like all of these, it's so much easier to say than to actually do. And I'm still a work in progress when it comes to forgiveness, but when all of the unrest and just disagreement in the world right now and everyone in opposing camps and just the anger that I see, even on social media about things that are not even life or death or not even traumatic events from the past, but just small differences of opinion, I think that forgiveness is something we could all continually, our whole lives, be working on. And back to that initial point of just that one of our truest and deepest things we can do as humans is to just love and be kind to others.

So that said, those are the things that have really stuck out for me in the past year and I truly would love to hear yours. So please, leave me a comment or drop me an email or leave a review to this podcast and let me know what lessons you've learned this year or what pieces of advice that you can share that would hopefully help others.

And again, just a tremendous thank you to all of you for being part of this Wellness Mama community and for listening or for reading. I feel I have always believed and I believe even more so now that women and moms especially have the power to change the world, not just because we're raising the next generation and not just because we control so much of the purchasing power and the voting dollars in our given respective states and countries, but because we are immensely powerful and we're often so busy in the day to day and a little bit overwhelmed and drowning in our tasks that we forget that.

So just a reminder to you just how amazing and powerful you are and how grateful I am for you. And Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays in whatever tradition you celebrate or if you don't celebrate any, just happy day. I hope you've had a wonderful one and I appreciate you, as always, sharing your most valuable asset of your time with me on this podcast and in any way that you interact with Wellness Mama. And I hope that you will continue to do so. Thanks for listening.