



Episode 232: Lessons Learned From Finland

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Heather: Hey, welcome to the "Wellness Mama" podcast. This is Heather.

Katie: And I'm Katie. And today we're gonna talk about lessons learned from Finland in a recent trip there, and specifically, go through some of the benefits I think that all of us can take away in our modern life even if we're not gonna be in Finland.

Heather: I'm so excited about this podcast because even though we live close to each other, I basically been following along on Instagram and haven't really gotten yet to hear about your trip. So it's gonna be fun. So...

Katie: Yeah. So I'll kind of basically the background of the trip, if you guys listened to the episode I did with Tero Isokauppila from Four Sigmatic in the summer. I interviewed him. I've interviewed him twice now. Once about his book, "Santa Sold Shrooms" and once in the summer about mushrooms and their many benefits. And it's something I'm super fascinated by. I know that you're also really fascinated by mushrooms and what

they can do for our bodies. And after that interview, I just kept asking him questions and he's like, "Hey, do you wanna go on a trip to Finland and actually see where these come from and learn about them?" And it was the summer. It was super hot here, so I was like, "Oh, yeah, of course, sign me up." And then the details started coming in that it was gonna be in January, which is the coldest time of the year in Finland, and not just Finland, but northern Finland in Lapland and basically the Arctic Circle, like across the line on the Arctic Circle. And at that point, I realized I don't own a single piece of clothing that is appropriate for the Arctic Circle and started researching that. But the details just kept rolling in of what we would be learning and kind of how we would be getting to immerse in the Finnish culture.

So if you're familiar with Four Sigmatic, it's a Finnish-founded company that now is also in California. And their mission is to bring mushrooms to the U.S. and to get the people in the U.S. to consume these healthy medicinal mushrooms on a daily basis. And in Finland, when they first started, they actually did this with teas. So they make combinations of tea mixed with these mushrooms and people loved it. And then they realized when they came to the U.S., nobody was really interested in that. And it's because they realized the perception here is that tea is already healthy. Even though not all teas are healthy at all, but Americans already think of tea as pretty healthy. So they didn't really feel like they needed to upgrade their tea whereas the majority of Americans drink coffee and most of them report wanting to reduce their coffee consumption, but very few people actually wanted to quit coffee.

And so they realized that mushrooms were a great way to help people do that because they can make coffee that was less caffeine, but more energy and they could use mushrooms and adaptogens to get rid of the jitters and some of the acidity that comes with coffee. So that's how they got their start in the U.S. and this trip was a chance to go to Finland and see where different mushrooms like chaga, and reishi, and cordyceps are sourced, and also to just learn about the Finnish culture. And specifically in this Arctic region, there's a population called the Sami, which Tero wrote about a lot in his book, "Santa Sold Shrooms," which is a really funny read, but they are an indigenous tribe that's lived there for thousands of years and survived in this extreme cold, long before electricity and everything we have now and they still have kept a lot of their culture. So that was part of the thing I was most excited to see because we, you know, we always hear in health research about these indigenous tribes and everyone loves to quote these indigenous tribes that supposedly do all of these things. And I wanted to see how they actually like, and do they really live like that? And to just get a feeling for the culture. I know both of us love travel and I think that's one of the priceless gifts of travel is getting to experience another culture and another way of life.

Heather: Absolutely. And it's funny because not on purpose, but I was reading one of Tero's other books whose name I cannot remember right now, but it's about just medicinal mushrooms. It's an introduction to a lot of them and how to use them in food, and then also for like skincare and some pretty cool applications. But just in reading that I was amazed by how much knowledge there is about the uses and almost the specific personalities of each of these mushrooms and how they draw out things from us and they have balancing properties, like help us adapt to different situations. And it's not really surprising when you think about it, that they're adaptogens because adaptogens help our bodies adapt to stress, and I really can't think of anything that is more intense than being in the Arctic Circle, especially in some of the situations that you're going to tell us about, which I'm so excited to hear about. But yeah, I'm really excited to hear what you've learned. So why

don't you just start us with...wherever you want to like what was the first thing that you noticed in your time there?

Katie: Yeah, it was one of those from the beginning, almost just surreal experiences. I think anytime we're out of our comfort zone to a pretty extreme degree, we are in a unique position to learn. So it started off, for me, with over two days straight of travel, and crossing 10 time zones, which is the most I'd ever crossed. And there's a lot we can talk about just on jet lag, and time zones, and adapting to that. And then when we got there, pretty much immediately, we jumped into dog sledding on the first night, which is something I definitely never experienced. And many dogs can go I think like 25 or 30 miles an hour, they can go pretty fast in the snow and then you're still because you're standing or sitting on the sled while the dogs run and how like biting the colds can be. We weren't quite...I don't think any of us who are from like morph regions were prepared for that. Just how much like goes through any amount of clothing that you're wearing, especially when it was in the negative 30s and almost negative 40 at that point.

And then we slept in these igloos that we expected to be cold and ironically, they got super hot. So at night, we're here like 85 and during the day we were at negative 30, and our bodies were quite confused. The first day was dog sledding and some of the travel. And then the next day we got to go foraging for chaga mushrooms, and like you mentioned about mushrooms being adaptogens, I was shocked that they still are available to find in the winter. That they, I mean, it makes sense, but they not only survive in the cold, but that's part of what gives them their beneficial properties. And so the majority of the mushrooms that we consider medicinal actually grow on trees. People don't always realize that. They don't grow on the ground. And again, before I say this, I should say I'm not a doctor, or a botanist, or anything else that would be qualified to give this as advice, so don't go eat any mushrooms without checking with all of those people.

But the way Tero explained it, most medicinal mushrooms grow on trees, and very few of the mushrooms that grow on trees are dangerous. I think if I'm remembering only one species that grows on trees is actually dangerous and most of the dangerous ones grow on the ground. He also said that in the U.S. there's relatively few species that are truly dangerous. I think it was maybe 20, of which 4 are common. So in general, mushrooms are mostly safe and I think if we put in the time to learn about them and learn about sourcing them, we could probably actually wild forage even in our own environments here, but there we were looking for chaga specifically which grows on birch trees and you basically like scrape the snow off and you're looking for trees that are starting to die, but haven't fallen yet. And they have these like dark black things like chaga and reishi, and you can find these on the trees.

And so we were like traipsing for several hours traipsing through thigh-deep snow to find these. And at first I was like, "Oh, it'll be like walking through sand." It is not in fact, like, walking through sand. It's really hard, and if you fall you almost can't get up very easily because you're now like under snow and there's nothing to push up against. You have to kind of like fall backwards and squat at the same time to stand up and it was really, really humorous. We all kept like pushing each other down forwards, so it's like dominoes down the line. And one of the guys on the trip is a UFC fighter and it almost like pushed him down from behind. I was like, I was gonna kick out his knee and I was like, maybe not kick the UFC fighter. That's not a good plan.

Heather: No, no, I was just gonna say the thing that makes this so much fun for me is knowing that you and I live near the ocean. And so do most of the people who are on this trip with you. So you guys are totally out of your element, but the chaga mushrooms and the reishi, what I love about this is that what you're describing is these mushrooms that are thriving in an extreme environment and it's so easy to call or slap a super food label on anything, but there is something really special and unique about these plants that can thrive in extreme environments. They develop properties in order to do that that also can convey a lot of benefits to humans.

So I'm pretty impressed that you were able to forage for them and after reading Tero's book I started looking for a local mycological society. Did I say that mycological society? There you go. Because I want to forage not just because I'm sure I could go find them at the local health food store or whatever, or in dried form. I've used them to make tinctures, but this is, I mean, life is about creating these experiences, and appreciating and connecting to where these things come from. So that is on my bucket list now. You're a little ahead of me on this one, but I'm willing to follow up on this and do it also. So I'm excited.

Katie: I love that. Yeah, definitely something we can get our kids involved in as well. I think we can learn so much from our environments, wherever we are. And I think mushrooms grow almost everywhere. That's something Tero talked about is how there's like a mushroom or mycelium mat under, I believe, part of Utah that is like thousands of acres of big underground just actually also how much DNA we share with mushrooms, which is shocking to realize like we're pretty similar to them and they have a lot of things that are beneficial to us because of that. So we foraged for mushrooms and...

Heather: One thing I want to add is that you pointed out how many pharmaceuticals are based on mushroom extracts. Like, they're not just used in like therapeutic or integrate of applications, they are being used to make medicines. So that's pretty interesting.

Katie: And that's a great point too, because like a lot of the mushrooms, we actually got to see where they forage for a lot of these and like the reishi and chaga for instance, I think it was the reishi that comes largely from Siberia and from this Arctic region. So it's wild grown, like wild-found forage mushrooms, which is really rare to find. Also the ones that they grow, they grow in the natural environment using the natural methods because sometimes mushrooms are grown on, I think, like, sawdust, or GMO corn, or all kinds of different growing mediums then are not producing just like if you grew vegetables in a non-optimal soil, you won't get the same nutrient profile, you're not gonna get the same grade of mushroom if you're growing it in a cheaper medium like that or something that's not as nutrient dense. There's just so many layers to this.

And part of going into the trip, I was nervous about a lot of aspects of it. Partially, I didn't know anybody else on the trip really at first other than one person. And some of the experiences were new, but I kind of went into it going, "Okay, if my kids were doing this, I would tell them, you know, jump in with both feet, enjoy every moment, live it up and experience it fully." And so I made that promise to myself going forward into the trip, I was like, I'm just gonna say yes to all the experiences and just do it even if they're slightly terrifying. And

so it was a lot of fun stuff like the dogsleds, or we got to drive snowmobiles and go ice fishing. And ironically, only two of us caught a fish and we were both parents. So we were joking that it was because we had this, like, calming energy that, like, called the fish because we were parents or something, but only two of us caught fish.

But the food there too, is very seasonal. So as you might imagine, it's so cold. It does not unfreeze for months and months and not only that, it's dark for months and months because they're so far north. They call it the polar winter, where there's little to no sunlight each day during the winter, so they don't have even greenhouses where you can grow things without light. And they can't really farm things in the winter, even animals, it's too cold for them to produce milk, or it's just a completely different climate. And so their version of eating seasonally is so much different than what we might experience here where...and this was another thing I was like, "I'm gonna say yes to everything when I get into this." And it was reindeer tongue, and reindeer heart, and pretty much reindeer for every meal. And I was like, "Okay." So like reindeer and berries, pickles, potatoes, and trout was pretty much the entirety of our diet while we were there. And it was so neat to get to eat those foods in the place where they originally came from. But it also really drove home like when you don't have access to a grocery store with foods flown in from all over the world, you make do with what you have. And you make these amazing ways that it tastes delicious. And I mean, they literally have to mix up those five foods for pretty much every meal and they did a great job of it. And so it's really cool to see that.

Heather: That's amazing and I feel like there's so much wisdom in that because I know that during the summer they are growing a lot more, and they're foraging a lot more, and they're eating a lot more greens. And it reminds me that although we do have access to a lot of foods year round when we...not that I'm recommending eating forage foods all through winter, but when we...I know that every spring I go through like a two to three-week period where I literally I can eat my weight in salad. Like I just can't get enough and there's something about the switch of seasons signals my body to sort of pull in all of those greens and, you know, at first I thought I really...my husband laugh because like one every month, I think it's like March-ish. He was like, "What is going on with our grocery bill?" And I'm just like, you know, "I don't know." I mean, I eat like a million salads. And, you know, but there's this wisdom to that and so we can incorporate some aspects of that into our life throughout the year and there's benefit to it.

Katie: Yeah, absolutely. I think I'm going through that right now because I think my body so confused after being for like 10 days in darkness almost the entire time. And then our flight back originally landed in California, and it was like all the sunshine, we were all like, "It burns. It burns." Like it was so bright. And now, I'm craving all the green things. I had like two bunches of cilantro and two bunches of parsley as a pesto for dinner last night and I was like, "This is great. This is all I want."

Heather: I'm going through a parsley thing too and my husband is laughing. I literally made a parsley salad. We're talking just parsley, and lemon, and olive oil, a little bit salt and pepper. And he watched me and I ate it and was like, "I'm going to the store and getting more." I don't know why.

Katie: That's awesome. And it speaks too because there's so many micronutrients in plants and especially herbs. And if I'm remembering the stat, isn't it that we used to eat like 200 or more types of plants and now most people eat 15 foods period, not even plants but just foods like corn, wheat, soy beans and potatoes or most of those. Like, we've lost so many micronutrients in our diet. And I know that's something that you've also been researching and that you've always done a pretty good job of implementing is getting micronutrients from a variety of plants. Not just vegetables, but herbs as well. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Heather: Sure. I mean, I remember the first time I stayed in a grocery store, and I really started understanding like, how much diversity our ancestors used to eat. And so I looked around and I was like, well, there's like five types of lettuce and, you know, like there's carrots, but they're just different colors. Not that that's good, like that presents different nutrients. But a lot of what I was seeing was basically like different types of cucumbers, but not huge representative populations of different types of plants. So I started trying to look into ways to incorporate a wider spectrum of plants from all different sources, and the thing that I found the most that's easiest is to make a lot of herbal teas and infusions using all kinds of different herbs. So I have a big cabinet and I have a glass pot and it's like a electric tea kettle and every morning I wake and I just brew whatever sounds good. Sometimes it's, you know, stinging nettle with peppermint or something else. But I'm trying to pull in those micronutrients every single day, even though it doesn't seem like a significant amount.

A lot of times in these cultures, people weren't eating, you know, massive amounts of a particular thing, but they were seeking it out for its nutritive properties in just small amounts. So that is one thing I found really helpful and I try to mix up tea by colors. So sometimes I'm doing a lot of reds. So one that I really like, is Schisandra berry, which I think grows in Siberia and the Arctic Circle. And the reason I know that is because they were hunting, I think reindeer. They used to chew the berries because it actually improves their vision at night. So they went and studied it later and found that it does support vision and it supports stamina. So when you haven't eaten and you're hunting and you haven't succeeded yet, you need something to keep you going and those berries were how they did it. Again, growing in those extreme environments they help us with, you know, perseverance and stamina.

Katie: And speaking of reindeer, that's another experience we got to have. We got to visit this tribe, the Sami people that have lived there for thousands of years that are known as the reindeer herders. And if you've ever seen a National Geographic or online, they're the ones where you may have seen like a little child sitting on a reindeer. It was like this gorgeous fur coat, and like they're beautiful eyes. And they're a lot of like beautiful blue eyes and blond hair because they need more vitamin D, they don't get very much vitamin D up there. So they've adapted to a more fair features to be able to absorb vitamin D more easily. But it's amazing, their interaction with the reindeer and now they're largely what's keeping the reindeer populations up there alive by herding them. And so they were explaining how in the winter they have them on the farms and they are taking care of them. And then in the summer, that reindeer get a vacation and they let them go and then there's these reindeer herding associations that actually, like, round them back up each year. So they're getting like it's a whole new version of free range.

But just to see the beauty of these people, like you mentioned hunting like for them, if they didn't hunt, they didn't eat. It was like very much survival and how they were so amazing, how they used everything. So they would use every part of an animal in making clothing or staying warm, or for food. And they would like a tradition I brought back from them that I love so much. They make these cups called kuksa, which are like a wooden cup, and they're carved out of one piece of solid wood from a curly birch tree. And I think it takes a year, they said, to make them from start to finish, because there's...if I'm remembering it, 16 steps that they have to go through. Like the sanding, and the soaking in coffee, and soaking in something else. It's like this whole long process and then when you get one of these cups, they say that you don't actually own it. You're just borrowing it from your grandchildren because they last so long and the more you use it from just the oils in your hands that outside gets this stronger sheen and patina, and it literally just gets better with age. And from using it for tea and coffee, the inside gets this like shine and they had one that was almost 100 years old. And it was like almost like marble. It was so beautiful. And to think of all those hundreds of people, or whoever had touched it that many times, and just the beauty of how they use everything, and they're so like conscientious about how they interact with the environment, and with the resources that they have.

We met this girl named Essy, who's part of the tribe and she makes boots out of reindeer fur, and even the bottom is fur. You only wear them in snow. And it takes her five days to make one pair of boots. And that's like her purpose in this tribe, and that's what she does is to make boots and these special wool shawls that they have. But they still largely make these traditional Sami outfits that are beautiful. They have like reds, and yellows, and blues, and then elements of reindeer and leather. It's so beautiful to see that culture and how they've tried to really like hold on to and also re-awaken that culture in modern times. Because it's so easy for these indigenous societies to lose part of that as the modern world comes in and they've really worked hard to keep the beauty of their culture. And it was amazing to see that.

Heather: I saw those cups as soon as I walked in and they are stunning, like they're so beautiful. I don't know that this is the right word, but they feel almost alive. Like there's the shape of them, they have like a movement to them and they're just beautiful, captivating. Were they called kuksi?

Katie: Kuksa.

Heather: Kuksa. Okay, that sounds better.

Katie And that was the one thing I brought back as souvenir. I actually donated a couple pieces of clothes so that I'd have room in my suitcase to bring back one of these cups for each of my kids to make a family tradition. I know we've talked many times on this podcast about experiences instead of just gifts. And to me, that was something of the culture that I could bring back that was a reminder of being a good steward of our resources and making time for things that take time and slow time together with family. And so that's one of our family rituals now is we'll drink either in the morning tea out of it, like mushroom tea from Four Sigmatic or hot chocolate at night or whatever it is out of those cups, and then hang them back on these little hooks on the wall. And it's just a fun family bonding activity.

Heather: That's awesome. Speaking of kids, I know that Finland does some things differently when it comes to culture with kids. So can you tell us what you observed while you were there?

Katie: For sure. I wish I could have teleported some people from here to there to see it because I have gotten scolded by elderly people where we live for letting my kids play outside barefoot when it's cold, and by cold I mean 55 degrees. And these kids are out playing not barefoot, but in negative 20 negative 30 degree temperatures for hours and they were loving it. And you hear the stories from different parts of the world how it might be Denmark and Sweden, or Finland maybe where they put the babies in these like little bassinet strollers wrapped up in a blanket, warm and then they leave them outside while the moms go in the coffee shop and drink coffee or tea or whatever. And the babies get all this extra amazing brown fat and it's great for their brain development and their immune system are super strong. I think we're just maybe like afraid of extremes, like anything that seems hard we're afraid to let our kids experience. But the beauty of what I saw in the Finnish education system, and I kept asking the people who were there from Finland questions about their education system and how they teach kids. And it was so fascinating to see that so many...and also to note before I start talking about it, Finland does really well on standardized testing is a source like looking at worldwide education levels, like they test really well compared to other countries. And they're also happy. So that's a really important distinction is you have happy kids who are also smart, who are also fully functioning adults, who have careers that make them happy and are successful. So those are all metrics we want for our kids.

So it's asking a lot of questions of how they foster that in their education system and in their families. And what was really interesting is they do less school, less homework, more play and they're better at it, like, all of the things they're better at. So whereas in the U.S. kids might have to be at school at 7:30 or 8:00 in the morning, they don't usually start till 9:00 or 9:45 and they finish by 2:00 or 2:45. During that time, they might only have a few classes even at the higher grades, but they'll have a couple of two, or three, or four recesses or times outside. And we went for a walk when we first landed in Helsinki before we took the little flight up North, and we saw multiple classes, including preschoolers playing outside, sledding downhill for hours. And us, it's like Americans were used to the sun, we were like, "Oh my gosh, it's so cold, those poor kids." They didn't look cold at all. They were just loving the snow, getting so much exercise literally running in a dead sprint up this steep hill so they could slide back down it again. And just like blissfully happy and it made me realize like I feel like kids have that session and innate need for play and so do adults and we've lost that. That was actually another one of the lessons personally for me on the trip was remembering what it's like to play. One of the people in trip is a competitor in "American Ninja Warrior." But his mission is that he wants to remind people that humans, even as adults, we need play. And so it was the first time I had really, like, thought about that as an adult, like, we exercise or we work and we do all these things, but we don't do things because they're fun as much anymore.

Heather: Yeah, we turned our play back into work somehow, you know, like, we're supposed to get out, run around, and have a good time. But instead, we figured out a way to like, mechanize it and make it not as fun. But I mean, not to say that I don't love working out or that there aren't times when that's helpful, because sometimes you just fit it into your routine when you know you can and those endorphins do make you feel

better. But I get what you're saying because, you know, I used to equate play as like I had to sit on the ground every day and play Legos with my kids. And for me, that's not actually a thing that I really enjoy. I'm just gonna say that very honestly. So rediscovering what play looks like as an adult is just not the easiest thing. Like, you don't just know what makes you happy, because it's definitely not playing Legos, even if that was what made you happy when you're a kid. But it's worth it trying to find out, and I'm sort of in that path too of trying to figure that out.

Katie: Yeah, I think for me, that was a unique thing. Because I had made that thing I'm gonna say yes to anything that comes up. And also seeing people like Travis on the trip, who was the...that's what he does is teaches people to play. And everywhere he went, he's like, "Oh, I bet I could do a hand stand on that." And that's as an adult, something I've never thought to myself. Like, I've never looked at like a four-foot tower and be like, "Oh, I bet I could do a hand stand on that." I would never think about at all, but to see how much fun that was, and it became this like running joke on the trip of like, could he do a handstand on a moving sled? Could he do a handstand on a reindeer? Could he do a handstand on top of me? And he did like all of these things. He really could do a handstand on top of anything, but he had so much fun. Or it was could he backflip off the bridge? Which he did. Or could he backflip off of, you know, this huge pile of snow? Which he did, or the snowmobile.

But just to see, like adults can actually find their thing and have fun. So since then we're gonna put in a sort of "American Ninja Warrior" themed tree house in our backyard. So stay tuned for the plans for that on the blog eventually. But just because I want my kids to not lose that. Like, it's something I am now, it's okay if I could do a handstand is in fact harder than it looks. But I was like, I'm gonna learn how to do that. I don't want my kids to lose that. So it was a good reminder to keep playing for our kids.

Heather: I totally agree. And I think the more we learn about the vestibular system and how it's connected to both our emotional and our intellectual processing abilities. I think there's value there and one of the sad things is often we remove things without realizing that we're taking away a functional aspect of who we are. So we often...like we put play in a category as not important when in fact it totally is. It's a lot like community in that the effects compound over time. So like you don't spend one day with your friend and then you're like, you know what, I made this healthy choice and I'm good for life. You know, but those who do spend consistent time and they form those ties and they have longer, healthier lives. And I think people as I'm learning to come more physically active and like, I like to swim, and dive, and, you know, there's other things that can develop vestibular.

I actually daily balance on one foot and close my eyes because that really challenges your vestibular system if you're like me, and you haven't activated it for many years. So that's what I do. I switch sides and close my eyes. Because if you can balance on your foot with your eyes open. That's awesome. And I can too and then I close my eyes and then I'm like hopping all over my floor. My children, like, stand and watch and laugh, but I can do it for quite a while. It was only minimal hopping and sometimes, but yeah, I just think that we sometimes take things away before realizing that they have these functional benefits that we just haven't identified yet.

Katie: Yeah, I think you put that so well. And so that was one of the big lessons I definitely took with me was to find ways to play. And it's been fun to kind of relearn that as a grown up and find what those things are. Because like you said, I'm not the Lego playing on the floor person either, but it's fun to, like, go outside and play, or to find things that are playful and fun for you as an adult, which is gonna be totally different than when you're a kid.

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Katie: Also within their school system, so they don't do standardized tests. So they're not teaching kids for a test and they're very focused on individualized education. And even from a young age, they would identify learning styles or strengths in kids and then nurture those in more individualized ways. And they would have smaller class sizes and they would stay with teachers longer so the teacher could like really focus on the development with the kids. And also I found out from them that teachers are so prized in Finland. So in the U.S., I feel like we underpay teachers, we undervalue teachers and they work so hard, and like we'll pay

doctors so much money which they also do wonderful things a lot of times, but the people who are literally forming our children's brains, we underpay and overwork.

And in Finland, it's so different to be a teacher, there is like a highly respected position. And I think...what they said is like only 10% of people who apply get accepted as teachers. And most of them have master's degrees or more. And they're so passionate about what they do and they're so respected in society, because they realize they're doing such important work. So it's just a completely different paradigm there compared to like, you're going to sit in a desk all day and learn these facts, it's much more we're going to find a way with your individual learning style and what you need to nurture you into the best person that we can for our country. And it's just it's amazing to see the businesses that are coming out of Finland and how much they're really like showing up on a global arena. And I think a lot of it probably goes back to the education system. We can learn a lot from that.

Heather: That's amazing and definitely food for thought. I know there are a couple of maybe books out along those lines or maybe some research I would love to learn more about what they're doing specifically and how they're identifying that in children because that is really cool. I cannot let you get away from this podcast without talking about saunas though, because we're obsessed with saunas. We're not in a sauna, today, we're actually hanging out in your closet. But, you know, most of the time we do record in the sauna, and I want to know what it was like in, like, one of the traditional saunas that they have there.

Katie: Absolutely. In fact, I'm gonna get probably pretty vulnerable with this part. I did a little bit on Instagram, but for us, this was the last full day at the very end of the full day that we were gonna do the sauna. And we had the schedule from the beginning. So I knew when it was going to happen, and I knew it was coming. And it was probably the thing I was the most scared about. I made this whole "I'm gonna say yes, and I'm gonna do it." And we have a cold tub at our house, and we have a sauna at our house. So it's not like I hadn't sort of trained for these things before, but because of that, I also knew like our cold plunge, the coldest it gets was 36 degrees. And that's pretty brutal. And it's still water.

In this cold plunge was essentially an Arctic water that was moving. There's like a river that's connected to the Arctic Ocean, they cut a hole in it so that you can get in it. And it's still moving pretty quickly. And it's like 20 degrees. And the only reason it's not frozen is because it's moving. And the air outside is negative 25 degrees. So you don't even get to get warm when you get out until you get to the sauna. And so it's a traditional smoke sauna, the one that we went in. Fun fact about Finland, they have over half as many saunas as people. So pretty much everywhere you go, you have access to a sauna, which I totally get, because when your bones are literally chilled to the bone all the time, that's like the only place you can really get warm and also probably is amazing for their immune systems, just the hot cold and the adaptability. So they have two types you can...they do actually have infrared saunas now there as well, but they had these traditional saunas that were like electrically heated which is similar to the barrel sauna we have. And then they also had smoke saunas.

And the best I can describe this, it was like a log cabin that was two stories, it was pretty big and on the bottom floor is like the biggest woodstove I'd ever seen, like at least probably five times as big like a stove

oven that you would see in the U.S., but all wood burning for the smoke. And then on top of it, we're all of these rocks. So kind of how you would see rocks in a sauna, but just huge, like much bigger scale. And it was vented outside with the chimneys, you're not inhaling the smoke. And then, of course, because heat rises, you can't just sit on the ground floor. There's a second story to this cabin, where you go up there, and you're like, sandwich between all these people. And for us, it was like a bunch of really sweet, older Finnish guys, and a bunch of Japanese women who were visiting. And it was just a really fun dynamic in the sauna.

And so we started there, and I knew the cold was coming, and I was like, dreading it. I was like, "I wonder how hot it can get." And I just kept sitting there, and sitting there, and sitting there, until my heart rate got really, really high. And I was like, "Dang, I'm gonna have to get in the cold water." And so once you get out of the sauna, you have to then walk...I don't even know how far it was like probably 30, 40 feet to the cold, then you have to walk into the cold. And then afterward, you have to walk back. But you're now cold. So the railing you touch, it's like licking a fire pole. Like you stick to it, your feet start freezing to the ground. And then there's like kind of a stampede of people who want to get back in the sauna. So I knew it was coming.

And as I talked about a little bit on Instagram, for me, the toughest part was also so many people on this trip, like I mentioned were like in the fitness world, or UFC fighters or whoever, that are very much like in the fitness world. So they kind of like look like models. Like they had eight or 12 packs, or however they count those I don't know. But I was like, my stomach has had six kids and has C-sections scars and stretch marks, and I do not look like that. And I definitely was being really hard on myself and like judging myself in anticipation of how I thought I was gonna be judged by others. And that was actually ironically the part that I was the most scared about. Like, in hindsight, it was really, like, enlightening to look and be like I was more scared about walking in a swimsuit in front of people, 30 feet that I was about getting in 20 degree water. Like, that's messed up. But that's what women do, that's what we do to ourselves, we judge ourselves so harshly. And so I had committed that I was gonna do this. And they said, it's good if you can do it at least three times, and it's best to finish with the cold. So that way, your lymphatic system, everything just stays ramped up. So I was like, okay, I'm gonna say yes to doing it three times. I don't know how long I'm gonna make it, but I'm gonna get in the water at least three times.

The first time I went in with a couple of the other girls and I was like, "Oh, heck, no, no, no, no." And I got right back out. And then went back in the sauna. And then the second time I was like, "Okay, I think I can do this little longer." And I sat, probably like 20 or 25 seconds. And then back in the sauna, the girls had mostly gone back into change, so it was just the guys left. And I see even some of the guys only last like 10 seconds and my competitiveness kind of kicked in because I was like, "Okay, that was bad, but that was not labor bad." And I have had labor a lot and I did that for like 24 hours. I can do this for a little longer than 20 seconds. And so one of the guys and I stayed in for a minute and that was a big victory for me not just that I lasted as long as the guys in that cold, but also that I...

Heather: Wait. What did you just say? How long did you stay in?

Katie: A minute on the last time.

Heather: Oh my gosh.

Katie: And I mean it was...when I got out my skin was hot pink because of like the hot, cold, hot, cold and I don't think I've ever shivered quite so hard, but then they are so right when they talk about the contrast therapy and what it does for your brain. It was like someone had turned on a light switch in my head and I was just like whoa, hello brain cells I haven't seen in a while like so much mental focus and so much clarity.

Heather: Does it increase BDNF? I know that sauna does, but does the alternating also?

Katie: Yeah, it said too. And I think...

Heather: Sorry, that was nerd speak for a brain-derived neurotrophic. I can't say it neurotrophic factor, and it makes you smart.

Katie: Oh yeah. We probably should define these terms, or we start throwing around random acronyms and no one would know what we're talking about. It does. And I think there's like when we look at the research, there's separate benefits of the cold, and also of the heat, and then separate benefits when you combine them. So I think if you're making this part of a daily practice, it's good to sometimes just get cold, sometimes just get hot, and sometimes go back and forth. And that's what we've kind of done in our house. But now, after Finland, I'm like, "Oh man, our cold plunge only gets down to 36 degrees. It's not really that cold." Although our sauna gets pretty hot, so I guess that's pretty comparable.

But that was...it was, like, a surprising victory for me. And to get even a little bit more vulnerable. So they, if you read the book, "Santa Sold Shrooms" that Tero wrote, it's basically about how a lot of the traditions that we associate with Santa Claus go back pre St. Nicholas to the Sami people. And they're kind of like medicine man, how he would dress like that, he would come down the chimney because that was the only way to get into the hut once there's 12-feet of snow, how they would hang these red and white mushrooms on trees to dry them. And it was like ornaments. It just all these cool tie-ins and...

Heather: And the trees were inside the house because they needed it for vitamin C, right? Is that what I'm remembering you told me?

Katie: Yeah, they would bring the tree, like they would bring a whole evergreen tree into the house with these mushrooms hanging on it. And these mushrooms are also technically considered psychedelic, but not in the same sense that I guess like certain psychedelics would just be considered fun. Like the medicine and they had a lot of respect for these and they would use them as part of their like ceremonial rights and different things

because they felt, like, you could learn a lot about yourself or about human nature or whatever, through the use of these in a very respected way. And just like other aspects of their culture, I felt like they didn't..... Whereas in America sometimes I think people get into these things for party, this was not at all what it was for them. It was very much a plant that they respected, but were cautious of.

Heather: Isn't that kind of too like how we see different traditions like in certain Blue Zones, there's a lot of respect for...people drink wine, which does alter your mental status. But we're talking about in respectful, small doses. Nobody's going crazy. They're not throwing giant parties, if that makes sense. It's a totally different vibe than way over consuming something which would be harmful.

Katie: Yeah, absolutely. And so the irony of the whole experience was that night. So these mushrooms the Amanita muscaria, what they're called. The Santa Claus mushrooms. If you've seen the mushroom emoji, it's like the red with white spots mushroom, that's what it is, or like on Mario, that's exactly where it comes from. And they're technically psychedelic and they're found there. This is definitely one, as a caveat, you should never try to harvest yourself no matter what because there's one that looks just like it that will kill you instantly. But I knew that that night we would also get the chance to try those in a very small dose if we wanted to, but he had explained like the reason that these are legal here is because no one does them for fun. Like, they're not a party thing, like you're not gonna have like a fun, happy experience, it's like you'll face all of your inner demons, you might face the idea of death, like it's gonna be hard, and awful, and terrible, and whatever. And I was more scared about walking in a swimsuit for 30 feet than I was about, like, facing death. Like literally in my head I was like, "Okay, I just have to get through this cold water and swimsuit thing so I can face death."

Like it really, really made me realize wow, like women we're so...at least for me, I'm so hard on myself. And maybe I should just start respecting my body for what it can do, and not what it does or does not look like. And that was just really enlightening for me, and it was also interesting just to be able to try something like that in a small dose. We didn't feel any psychedelic effect whatsoever. But just to try that in a place where it originated and where there's such a respect for it. And it was a good lesson in how plants can have a profound impact on people and how they should be respected and how small amounts just like we were talking about with the herbs can have a really profound impact on our body. That's something that I thought about a lot there as well. I feel like so often we underestimate the power of herbs or adaptogens, or these like non-psychedelic, any mushroom in small amounts to affect our psyche or affect our body in a positive way. But yet, we don't underestimate how a Motrin could take away our headache. And it's so tiny, is an equally small amount. And we give all this credit to pharmaceuticals for what they can do. And we trust that they're gonna have an effect and we ignore that maybe it's such a small amount of an herb or plant could also have a really beneficial effect on the body as well.

Heather: Yeah, and I think too, it's interesting because we talked earlier about how there's so many mushroom derivatives in pharmaceuticals. So there's definitely a precedent there, and not to get too far off track, but I know that the concept of psychedelics is really, like for me, this is not a conversation I ever expected to be having. But I have read some really amazing research in the last couple of years coming out about other types of mushrooms that are being used in clinical settings in the U.S. for studying effects on

things like PTSD, that are not responding to any other treatments. And we're talking about tiny doses that have therapeutic and life changing effects for people, and we're not talking about like, they need to have these medicines like daily, we're talking about one or two doses that can have a life changing impact on people who are suffering from PTSD. So, you know, but there is something to that.

Katie: Yeah, I agree. I think this is a conversation that will become more prominent in the next few years. I know even Denver has put one of those types of mushrooms on the ballot to decriminalize, but it really struck me seeing a culture that has been traditionally using plants both for food, for medicine, and for like this kind of like way to improve yourself for so many years. And that has such a respect for it, and they just looked at it so differently and then to come to the U.S. where certain plants are actually illegal, but then there are drugs that literally can kill you that are considered safer than those plants. It was just really striking that we would put trust in something so man made, but also at the same time, ignore that something like parsley, or whatever it may be, you could have such a profound effect on the body.

Heather: And not to switch too many gears, but I wanted to go back to one thing I learned while you're away, felt relevant, is that even in Finland, they prioritize these saunas so much for health and for wellbeing, that they're literally everywhere, including in prisons. Like, it's part of their culture that is ingrained that much. I just thought that was so interesting.

Katie: And even community saunas. Part of the group...I wasn't there for this part, but the first night they got and they had a layover and they wanted to find a sauna. And there are like, huge group saunas where you can go that are really nice, but there's also like community saunas just like we would have a park, like a community park and there was apparently, like, two saunas outside kind of like by a construction site in the middle of nowhere, people could just go and use these saunas. They're just there for anyone because it's such an important part of their culture. And it was so striking for Americans to get to see that and they're like literally people just like stand out there like you undress, get in the sauna and then you just like get back dressed in the snow and go on your way.

Heather: So for people who wanna have their own many Finnish experience here where we live, I'm thinking that it would just be fun to mention a couple of things. One is that there are a lot of places now where you can find a sauna like you can just go to. They are sometimes in gyms, but then they're actually having...they have studios now that offer sauna therapy. So take a friend and go, and another thing is if you want to I mean, I can't offer you ice...what is it? Polar ice water, Arctic ice water. Sure. But they have cryotherapy, and a lot of the bigger cities now have that, where you can go and stand it's like negative 20. We've done that before. It's nothing compared to like getting in the water. Don't tell me that. Let me live with my victory, okay? But yeah, like there's some ways that we could have a mini Finnish experience there. Is there anything else you would recommend from a communal aspect of someone who wanted to plan like a mini Finnish day and that they could do just with a friend that would sort of replicate some of your favorite takeaways?

Katie: Yeah, that's a great point. I think you could do the hot cold even though it was like just ice in your bathtub and a sauna or like you said, there's community saunas or more and more. Even in the U.S., people

are putting saunas in their homes, whether it be portable sauna, or even just like built in sauna, like you and I both have saunas because that was a priority for our family. And I think that like the mushroom aspect of...and Four Sigmatic has all of those, but you can also get mushrooms through the grocery store. But I think that's a big part of their culture. And my favorites are like reishi and chaga are two of my hands down favorite. Chaga is super high in antioxidants. It's actually the most antioxidant rich substance on the planet gram for gram. And it makes really delicious elixir tea when you just mix it with water, same with reishi, really helps with sleep.

And another interesting aspect I forgot to touch on earlier too is that light aspect. So you and I have both written about the importance of light for circadian rhythm and why it's good to like go outside in the morning and get sunshine to like signal to your body that it's morning to keep your cortisol rhythm correct. Well, Finland has an interesting challenge with this, especially the northern regions because in the summer they have like a lot of sun like 20 plus hours of sun and in the winter, they have little to no sunlight at all. And so when we were there, it was called the polar winter and it was basically like an hour of sunrise and then an hour of sunset and that was it. And so they've had to get creative in the way that they adapt to that. So most of us are lucky we can just get sunshine daily. Even in the winter, we can get sunlight and get our eyes exposed to sunlight. They are really good about using things like blackout curtains they talked about in the summer.

In order to sleep, they would have to use blackout curtains in their rooms. And they kind of I think, like, pioneered places where it's requirement like Alaska and Finland, etc. They've had to do these things. Whereas for us, it's great to do, but for them, that's a necessity. And then similarly in the winter, they would have to get light exposure somehow. So in a lot of the community places where there was a sauna, we would also see what they call the solarium, which was like a vitamin D lamp, basically. So it was light and vitamin D, or they...out of Finland, came the company, the Human Charger, which basically shines light in your ears, which is another signaling method that it's daylight. And so they really understand and have figured out how to tune into the importance of light for your circadian rhythm and even how to adapt to that in a place where you're not gonna get it from the sun. I think that's another thing we could take from Finland is to get enough daylight, to make that a priority in our mornings maybe drink some mushroom tea or coffee outside instead of inside. They said it even just exposure on a cloudy day is so many thousands of times brighter than the bulbs inside just different spectrums of light. Or use one of those 10,000 lux plus lights in the morning just to signal your body that it's actually daytime. And that was another cool lesson they were much better about than we are.

Heather: Awesome. I'm so glad we got to catch up. And now, I want to go look at those mugs again.

Katie: Absolutely. And all the things we mentioned will link to the saunas and then mushroom tea and all that. If you guys wanna recreate Finland and also just a huge shout out and thank you to Four Sigmatic for really shining light on the culture and letting us learn lessons from that. And that's such a core value I know for both of our families, I feel like you can learn something from every experience and every person, but especially from every culture and it was so beautiful and life changing to get to see that one.

And as always, thanks to all of you guys for listening and for joining us and sharing your time with us. We don't take that lightly. We're very grateful and honored that you chose to spend time with us and I hope that you'll join me again on the next episode of the "Wellness Mama" podcast.

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