**(Job 96139) S01 E09**

(V: Voiceover N: Nicole J: Jasper)

V: Before we begin, we’d like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land that we’re recording on, the Wurundjeri-willam clan and Taungurung people, and give our respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging. We encourage everyone listening to consider the traditional owners of the land that they’re living and thriving on, and consider the benefits that may come from a treaty with the First Peoples. This is, was and always will be Aboriginal land.

[music]

N: Jasper Peach is a trans, non-binary and disabled writer, speaker editor and parent. Their work is driven by a deep commitment to equity, access and inclusion, with a focus on storytelling as a powerful tool for dismantling shame. Their debut book, ‘You’ll be a Wonderful Parent: advice and encouragement for rainbow families of all kinds’, was released in March 2023.

Jasper’s background spans civil celebrancy, Auslan interpreting and community broadcasting, and their writing explores themes of identity, disability, queerness and family. They’re also the host of Unmasked, a talk show that centres neurodivergent voices and lived experience. Hi, Jasper!

J: Hi, Nic. Thanks for having me, mate.

N: Thanks for joining me. You have a unique position in this podcast, in that you are the first person that I’ve had on so far that I’ve never met before. So it’s nice to meet you.

J: Yeah, great to meet you, too.

N: What would be something that I simply must know about you? I’ve been following you for a while and seen that you have an amazing love of plants and craft as well.

J: Yes, I get really obsessed with some sort of craft, like the latest one was cross-stitch, and I did it so much that I injured myself. [laughter] Because I get a bit intense about things, with my hyperfixations, so I was in goblin mode, crouched over and doing these little stabby stitches. So I’ve had to put it away for a bit.

And plants. I love geraniums the most at the moment. They’re really easy to grow from cuttings. There’s so many different kinds. I love the smell of rose geraniums, especially. And I’m really excited because my Mum’s just moved a lot closer to me, she used to be about 3 hours drive away and now is just 45 minutes. The last time I visited her, I’d mentioned how much I love geraniums and I’ve got some growing outside my office, and she sent me home with about six different cuttings.

So that’s my main stuff that I’m excited about at the moment. Yeah.

N: How do you go with keeping them alive, though? Because I just recently got a beautiful new garden done, and then looked out at it recently and it’s all overgrown and only half-alive.

J: You’ve got to be practical and [laughs] I’m not practical, so I don’t know why I just said that! But I attempt to be practical, and go, okay, some of these things might not make it, and I’m really aware that my capacity is not of someone who will be diligently checking my garden every single day. So I try and fill my garden spaces with pretty tough stuff, or things that it's okay if it kind of falls by the wayside. And I've learned that the hard way many times. I’ve planted about four mulberry trees that didn’t make it, and I think I need to accept that mulberries are not in my life. [laughs]

N: Acceptance is part of the process.

J: Yeah! [laughs]

N: You’ve made reference a few times already to that you have a bit of neurodivergent brain. In what ways do you think that that helps you as a creative?

J: I’ve always been creative and I’ve always been neurodivergent, but I didn’t know about the different names that we can give to the way brains work, until recently. By that I mean the last couple of years. So I’m autistic, I have ADHD, I have complex PTSD, anxiety, depression. I’ve got a whole box of chocolates going on.

And, like any disability or any divergence, we are creative. We are creative in the way that we get through each day in a world that’s not necessarily friendly or designed with us in mind. Leaning into creativity, in terms of writing, craft that never has to be any good, it’s just for my joy, gardening, the way I look at the world, it’s allowing myself to really inhabit a creative life, and that gives me a lot of pleasure, and it helps me understand things in ways that feel not hostile, I guess, is the way I’d like to describe it.

N: With your writing, at least that I’ve seen, a lot of it is self-reflective and memoir-like.

J: Yeah.

N: Does that become more difficult when you have more to navigate in terms of diagnoses?

J: Mm, does it become more difficult? Do you know, I’ve been working on a big book, on a memoir. I call it my big boy book. For about 4 years now, and it’s finally starting to take its final form. And I know, with my writing, I never take the most direct route from A to B. I’ll give you an example instead of talking in hypotheticals.

So I had an idea for a pitch about really having a hard time in school with sport and PE, but finding exercise and weightlifting something that I really loved in my forties. And I sent the email off to ‘The Guardian’ with the pitch, and then I sat at my desk for the whole day and I wrote 5,000 words. Now, a ‘Guardian’ piece is only going to be 600-800 words max. But I feel like I needed to process all of my thoughts, and I do that by getting them out of my body and putting them on the page.

So when they wrote back and said, “Yes, I accept your pitch. Can you write it around this angle?” the angle had nothing to do with anything I had written! But it’s not a bad thing. If we’re looking at it from a neurotypical perspective, there might be a bit of, “Oh, what a waste of time,” or, “It was not productive.” But the way my brain works, it was productive, because I got to go down all the garden paths that naturally pop up of interest to me, and explore all the things, and figure out what I think about it.

So I think it could be seen as more difficult, but it’s just the way I work. It’s not fast. It’s not neat and tidy. But it’s how my process is. And again, I’ve come to accept that.

N: So you’ve made reference to the fact that you’re working on a memoir for a while now. Can you tell me a bit more about that? You might be at the point where you can’t disclose much, but just as much as you can.

J: Oh, I’m happy to. The working title is ‘A Thousand Spinning Plates on Fire’. It’s relatable, right? Like we hear that and think, oh, yeah, that's how it feels. That's how it feels to have a disabled body, to have a neurodivergent mind, to be trying to keep all these things safe and good and spinning, without wreckage. [laughs]

N: It’s a really good image. Again, visualise it straight away.

J: It’s very tactile, very visual. It explores all the intersections of my existence. I always feel a bit funny talking about it like, oh God, what a wanker, but [laughs], like any memoirist, I’m not writing for selfish purposes. I’m writing because I know that my experiences are deeply relatable.

But many people who relate might not have the words. That’s the main sort of feedback I get on anything I put out, is, “Oh, I’m so relieved to have the words for that.” And as a reader, I experience that a lot, too. And I always send authors a message, “I’m so glad you wrote that, because I never understood and now I do.”

So it’s all the intersections, like undiagnosed all my brain stuff, invisible physical disabilities, activism, having a fat body, being a parent, being queer, being trans, and being hopeful, I think, as well. Always having had, at the core of everything, deep hope for better times, which have come to pass, but it’s not like a neat and tidy, full-circle happy ending thing. It’s not a rom-com! It’s more realistic than that.

N: I think that’s one of the beautiful things that I get from your writing, is just wanting to hold onto joy, and believe in the power of joy.

J: Yeah.

N: And I was wondering how you do that.

J: Like how to believe in joy, do you mean?

N: It feels like a conscious effort on your part to see the joy in everything.

J: Yeah, thank you! It’s really lovely that you’ve identified that and you can see that, because that’s the core values that I hold. Joy is literally my middle name! So my Mum gave me the same middle name as her, which I really love. And even when I changed my name, I kept that middle name.

I had a lot of sadness as a child, but there was always a part of me that was hopeful and thought that I’d have really nice friends and I’d have a beautiful family and I’d have a community that I belonged in, that I felt positive about myself while being in. And I guess having that hope meant that I had things to look forward to, no matter what was going on. Sometimes they fade out a bit, but it’s always there, in the periphery.

And it is a conscious effort. I never wanted to give up. And that’s kind of a fraught thing, because a lot of the messaging that I received, and I guess a lot of children of the ‘80s received was, if you try hard enough, if you work hard enough, if you buy into the capitalist ideals of productivity and work yourself into the ground and damage yourself in the process, you can have or be whatever you want.

I mean, that’s a load of horse poo. [laughs] Everyone has different circumstances. Equity is very hard to come by, and there are forces and systems at play that make that not possible for most people, unless you are a cis-gendered, able-bodied, mentally well white man.

So learning those very real barriers to this fairytale was so helpful, because I felt the discrepancy of just being fed this line, if you work hard enough you can have and be what you want, and then I’d see it not be true, and go, oh, hang on, it’s not like I want to bag out the people who gave me that messaging, because they were doing their best with what they had, but understanding why it couldn’t happen, it was enormously helpful to me. And then you can reassess and readjust what your goals actually are.

N: Change the goalposts.

J: Yes, bigtime, bigtime. And make it realistic and not something that’s going to harm you in the process of trying to reach it.

N: In the world at the moment, it almost feels like a form of rebellion to hold onto hope when everything that’s coming at you tells you that it’s going to be sad and bleak and everything. So I really appreciate your take on that. That’s beautiful.

J: Oh, thank you. I just want to respond to that as well, because that’s a really important point, that there is a lot of bleak sadness and hopelessness and horror that is happening on a daily basis, that we’re seeing unfold more and more. And I know that a lot of us feel more and more helpless in that. There’s often a cry of, “What can I do to stem this or reduce it or stop it?”

And I guess what I’ve learned, through trial and error more than anything else, is that little actions matter more than you might think. There’s a lot of really amazing, big, loud actions that everyone knows about, and then there are little ones that one individual might know about but does make a difference. Those ripples can get bigger and bigger, the more little actions there are. And there’s joy in that. There’s joy in knowing what your capacity is, working within it, challenging yourself, sure, but not actually harming yourself in the process to the point where you can no longer contribute to that battle for the light.

It feels like there is so much darkness, despair, violence and discrepancies in power, but if we can shine a light and find the light and make that bigger, that helps to expose what the root problem is, and that makes it easier to find and change.

N: I just want to carry you around in my pocket, because I feel like I need your energy more in my life.

J: [laughs] Maybe we should get a wheelbarrow. That could be cute.

N: [laughs] Yeah! I wanted to ask you, because it seems like I read in the introduction to you, that you’ve had quite a background, like you’ve been a civil celebrant, you’ve done Auslan interpreting, all that sort of thing. And now it seems like you’re more of a writer and more of a disability advocate. Were you advocating and writing throughout your life, or did there come a point where you were like, this is what I can do more full-time now?

J: I think the COVID pandemic put a bit of a spanner in my life works, and I wouldn’t say it’s really good that that happened, but it did divert my direction to a really beautiful place. I loved working with couples on their weddings, or with people naming their babies in secular ceremonies, and funerals every now and then, when I felt up to the task. I loved that work!

And then it became dangerous, because you can probably hear my lungs are pretty shonky. So I’m a lot more isolated now than I used to be. But with that isolation has come a great deal of connection with a global community who are in the same boat as me, or who have an understanding of that boat and how much energy it takes to keep yourself afloat.

Being connected to other people means listening to them and really connecting with what they need, and that leads to advocacy and activism, I think. I have these skills from the work that I’ve done in the written word, in public speaking, in community-building, world-building, empathy, being able to identify the questions to ask to help people find what it is they’re hoping to understand, and to sit in the comfortable silence with them while they are pondering these big things.

I’ve always written. I didn’t feel like I was allowed to say I was a writer until a couple of years ago. I was talking to my friend [Navot] [0:16:27.8] the other day, actually. Writers Victoria are running an online group once a week, it’s free of charge to attend, for neurodivergent writers, and it’s literally just a space to come and connect, do some writing, do some reflection at the end, and it’s just a safe space, you know, to set that time aside for yourself, which is often hard to prioritise. And I shared that to a few friends, and [Navot] wrote back and said, “Oh, this sounds great.”

And I said, “Do you know that in one of the lockdowns you ran a workshop like this for queer people, and I signed up?” I was really afraid. I remember I was shaking in the lead-up to this Zoom starting. And oh, who do I think I am, thinking I could call myself a writer? But everything had been an opportunity for writing. Emails, Facebook status updates, wedding scripts, everything that I was working on was about written communication and spoken communication.

And I remember it was such a warm, welcoming space. There was nothing expected of anyone that they weren’t comfortable to share or bring or be, and it was very transformative. And by the end of that, it was a 2-hour session, I was like, oh, I think there’s something here. I think I could do something with this.

Yeah, the pandemic really led me to a writer’s life. And for a long time, I was still ghostwriting wedding ceremonies for other, busy celebrants, because I’d been doing it for 17 years, I could do that with my eyes closed.

But recently I haven’t needed to do that, because I’ve got enough work just writing op-eds and even my Substack. People will very generously sign up for a paid version, which is not necessary, you can read it all for free, but those little bits of money that come in, they buy our groceries. When we run out of fruit in the middle of the week, because we’ve got little kids, I’m like, oh, good, I’ve got a Substack payment, I can get some more bananas and oranges and milk. That keeps us going. And, like everything, it’s an energy exchange.

Speaking in front of large groups of people, like conducting a wedding or running a workshop or doing some public speaking, it’s all energy exchange. If I was disconnected from the audience, it wouldn’t work. No-one’s going to feel good in that. But if I can connect with each person and how everyone’s feeling, and adjust my manner so that more people can feel welcome and included and open to the themes we’re discussing, that’s a really day at work. That’s when I know I’ve done a good job.

N: So did something switch for you, where for example, I guess the kids these days would call it go viral. But did something switch for you, where you had a successful piece or something, and you thought I can do this more regularly? Or are you still in the phase of trying to work all that out?

J: Oh, it’s very rollercoastery. So sometimes I feel really driven to pitch a lot. Other times I’m like, urgh, I’m sick of pitching. And when I get into that urgh space, inevitably I get an email commissioning a piece. I’m like, oh, okay, all right.

I mean, living in a body that has pain, that reacts to weather and air pressure and stress and sleep and food and mood and everything, my life is creative, it’s emotional, there’s big ups and big downs, and funny bits in the middle, but I’m always working on something. There’s never a shortage of projects. There’s always juggling.

I think that’s by design. I have set my life up, probably subconsciously, to be that way so it holds my interest, and so I’m not in a rut of just doing the same thing over and over again. That doesn’t work for my brain.

I remember writing a piece for ‘The Guardian’ about the loss of access for people who were sheltering at home from COVID with arts and live performances. That was really big. That went a bit gangbusters, and they got me to come into the ABC and talk about it on the radio, and that was a bit like, whoa, okay.

It’s about tapping into, is it the zeitgeist? Is that the word? It’s tapping into what a lot of people are feeling but haven’t necessarily overted [sic] to themselves. Yeah. It’s being connected to others and reading the room, I guess.

N: I’ve done a little bit of memoir writing, and I find it somewhat exhausting, because I find that I’m mining my life for content. How do you feel about that? Does it ever seem like I’ve got nothing to write about? Or does having young kids take care of that for you?

J: I never have nothing to write about. I have So. Many. Things. And it’s not like there’s a central list, although that would make a lot of sense and save me a lot of time! [laughs]

I’ll often, if I’m going for a walk, a thousand things will pop into my head, and I send myself a little email or a voice memo or try and channel that into a list or a pitch. But often there’s just something burning inside of me that I need to get out of my body, that is more what it is.

In terms of mining my life, it feels a little bit different for me. I feel like I’ll notice things that I’m thinking or talking about with other people and go, ooh, there’s something there. I should follow that. It’s just like following leprechauns down garden paths and hoping to find the gold. And if I don’t find gold, I’ll probably find a few plant cuttings, and that’s good too! [laughs]

N: I loved that visual.

Can we talk about ‘You’ll be a Wonderful Parent’? I desperately want to be a parent. I feel like it’s my calling, if you want to call it that. So I know that our journeys and our backgrounds and our identities are a bit different, but I feel like any story that’s talking about one that differs from the norm, a family that differs from the norm, is helpful. Can you tell me how that came about, or how the book came about, whatever you’re comfortable to talk about?

J: Firstly, I want to acknowledge I really know that feeling that you’re describing. I felt that very, very deeply for a number of years, and at times it felt like it was going to kill me, the depth of wanting I had to parent. So yeah, I just want to acknowledge it. I know that’s a really big thing to be walking around in the world with. Or rolling around in the world with.

In terms of the book, yeah, that was interesting. So my wife and I had our first child, and a lot of the medical spaces and birthing spaces were quite hostile in terms of microaggressions. I’ll give the example of it’s kind of like when a venue boasts how accessible they are, and their version of access is pretty shit, and not encompassing of many different people’s needs, but they give themselves a big pat on the back for having a wheelchair sticker on their door.

N: I feel like it’s getting worse. I will call up restaurants and they’ll say, “Yeah, we’re accessible,” and then I get there and there’s a step. And they say, “Oh, yeah, but our staff are happy to help you.” That’s not the same thing! Anyway, continue.

J: Oh! Cool story, dude on the phone! It’s really not. And this is a bit of a garden path meander, but I feel like the meaning of words is something we do not talk about enough. Like you’re calling with a lived, deep experience of what accessibility is, and you’re talking to dipshit on the phone, and like, “Yeah, man, we’re totes accessible.” But he doesn’t know what that word means, and it should not be your labour to check, to educate and to check again, because even if he says he’s done the right thing, he probably hasn’t.

In terms of birthing, medical spaces, IVF, all that kind of stuff, it’s a really heightened, sensitive time, and everything feels big because it is! It’s life and death. It’s a person that could potentially be a part of your family, that you will love in a way you have never loved before. Not more or less but just in a different way. And so microaggressions feel like a punch in the face, but particularly to sensitive people who are sensitive and have beautiful sensitivity due to being divergent from the majority.

And what that means is that people are a marginalised minority. So these spaces, they’re not doing it well enough and they’re not curious enough. They don’t enact change at all, or fast enough. There’s a lot of tokenistic box-ticking that doesn’t flow through the entire organisation. It should be as important as everyone’s leave entitlements and where to park your car, but it’s not viewed as such.

So I noticed a lot of that, and I noticed how I felt in it, and I was really surprised to leave a birthing class in tears because the midwife-educator said things like, “The birth should mirror the conception, just the two of you, romantic, candlelight, quiet.” And I put my hand up, and I was like, “The conception took place in an IVF clinic. Should I get the scientist to come to the birth?” It was that times five hundred things, you know?

And I left, and I felt like, should I be, am I allowed to do this? Am I allowed to be a parent? Like this whole thing’s set up for people who are not like me. And is that okay for our kid, and is our kid going to be missing out, and am I even going to be good enough to be a parent? That’s what it leads to. That’s what it led to for me, but I know that has been what it’s led to for so many other people as well.

So, I ended up writing some feedback to the hospital, and it was very kindly delivered. “Hey, I just wanted to let you know this was my experience. I hope that you can take these comments on board, because if it’s impacting me, it’s definitely impacting other people.” And they wrote back and they were really beautiful, and they requested that I come and educate their staff. And I was like, “No, I’m about to have a baby. Are you serious?” But they were very persuasive, so I ended up doing it for 6 months. And the materials that I came up with for that, they were just all in my head, and then …

I know this is kind of a long, meandering story, but …

But a friend of mind asked me, “Hey, would you do a sensitivity read on my manuscript?” And I said sure. And then I googled what’s a sensitivity read. [laughter] Oh, I say yes and then figure it out later.

So if you don’t know, a sensitivity read is when you read someone’s manuscript from your specific perspective, your lived experience, to make sure that language used isn’t going to be othering or offensive for members of your community. Or if there’s anything missing, or just to give key advice to that author.

So I read the manuscript. It was beautiful. It was by Ailsa Wild, and the book is, ‘You’ll be a Wonderful Dad’. She’d written a letter to her dear friend who was about to become a father for the first time. The book was going to be illustrated, very accessible.

So I read this manuscript and then had a meeting with Ailsa over Zoom, and I said, “Look, this is gorgeous. It sounds like you. It’s all heart. The advice is really practical. It’s really great. There’s nothing here for me or my community. [laughs] It’s like our experiences are poles apart, and it’s not that you’ve done anything wrong, it’s just that it’s yet another book for heterosexual people. There’s no books for us.”

I mean, there’s a couple, but they’re really long, and I can’t read them because the text is too dense, or it’s just not accessible to my brain, how it works. And then I said, “You know what? There should be one for us, and it should be like this, and I should effing write it, and you should tell your editor.”

So she spoke to her publisher. They contacted me, asked me for a writing sample. I banged out 5,000 words in a day, as I do, sent it off, and I had a contract for a book, and then wrote the book. Which is a really weird way to get into being an author. Really weird. But that’s just kind of how my life goes. I just say yes to stuff, hope I do a good job. Often I have no idea what I’m doing until it’s done, and then just put it out there and people can make of it what they will.

But it did succeed. I know that book succeeded, because I’m still getting messages from readers, from all over the world, who are sending me these beautiful, emotional, vulnerable messages, going, “I’m so relieved to have read your book. I felt like I was nothing, and I wasn’t allowed to do this, and then I read your book, and within the first two pages I was sobbing, because I knew that it was possible.”

So that, to me, is a success. I have no idea how many books it sold or anything like that, but yay.

N: It doesn’t really matter. Only if you get one message like that, you must feel amazing.

J: Yeah, it’s deeply, deeply satisfying. Yeah.

N: Yeah. I’ve talked before on this podcast about a sort of phenomenon I’ve seen that you just touched on, where, as disabled creatives, we find a gap or something that’s not built for us, and we are the ones that have to change that. So, for example, you were like there’s no book for me, so I’ll write it. But with that comes labour. So how do you feel about that? It sounds like it was a positive experience to write the book, but how did you feel about the labour of having to deal with that gap?

J: That is such a great question, and such a good point. So, to answer that question, firstly I’m going to talk about my friend, Michelle, who does an amazing Instagram project called ‘Up and Dressed’. So Michelle Roger, michelle\_roger.

I went and saw a talk that she did in Bendigo a few weeks ago, about her project, ‘Up and Dressed’. Michelle has various disabilities that appeared in her 30s, and she’s mostly in bed, sometimes in a power chair, and went from I guess being a high-powered, fancy science psychologist, I can’t remember the words, but she was real fancy, and now she’s fancy in a different way. So as often as she can, she will take a beautiful photograph of herself dressed in something gorgeous, and this might involve stapling a doona cover behind her so it looks like an incredible gown. She’s often holding a chicken. She's got one of her great Danes in the shot. She's just so cool.

So she did a talk because, across the road, the Frida Kahlo exhibition was showing in the Bendigo Art Gallery. And she did this talk about the realities of living with really complex, painful, exhausting disability, and seeing a gap in her life for joy, and making something joyful happen with the tiny amount of energy she has every day. Like using that time. It is so finite. But she was like, no this is important to me, and it gives me something, even though the crash is massive afterwards, it gives me something.

And it’s created this community, online, right? She’s travelled from Gippsland to Bendigo to give a talk that goes for an hour. Like, can you imagine the spoons that takes? The preparation, the fallout, and how low it will be. She’s still recovering, a few weeks later. I know that, because we’ve talked about it.

And when it came for question time, I was amazed. I was just like, what? Like I was amazed because someone in the audience said, “You should make a book!” [laughs] And just demanding more from her. You know? Like she’s done this thing that is so, so specific, it’s precise, it’s exactly within her parameters of possibility. And they’d listened to her describing what her life is, and demanded more. Or asked for more, requested more. And I get that it was, we love what you’re doing, we want something we can hold in our hands. And then her response was really beautiful. She’s like, “Well, it’s on Instagram and you can see it all there. It’s all available.” [laughs] And the other person’s like, “But we want a book.”

And so I was like, okay. Okay, guys. I just spoke up. I said something like, “It’s really great how everyone is so excited about this project and loved to see what Michelle’s making for the world and for herself. I wonder if, instead of saying, “Do this,” we could say, “I know a funding body who can equip you with people and resources and time and backing to create an additional resource that will not harm you in the making of it or decrease your quality of life.” That is what I’d love to hear in these questions.

I’ll come back to your question to me, through that little side quest. [laughs]

Yeah, sometimes the labour element shits me, and other times I … and when it does shit me, I know it’s not a project I should work on. And if I know someone who would do it really well, and who might have access to funding or a way to get funding, I’ll go, “Hey, been thinking about how this doesn’t exist. Just put that in your little creative maybe list, and let me know if I can help you in any way to get that off the ground.”

Oh, sometimes, like I get DMs a lot that are similar to that question in Michelle’s talk. They’re kind of demanding. There’s an entitlement to my energy [laughs] that I’m just mystified by, because so much of my writing is about how limited my energy is, how finite, how precious, and how carefully it needs to be managed. And to those people, I often just don’t reply, because I don’t even know where to begin. But I kind of want to say, “If there’s something missing, there’s nothing stopping you from thinking about how you could create it. And if there is something stopping you, think about what that is, and if you care enough about the thing, do work around it or overcome it.” You know? [laughs]

N: It feels like society rewards busyness, and it doesn’t matter what you’re busy doing, as long as you’re …

J: Yeah. As long as you’re stressed, yeah. [laughs]

N: Yeah! It feels like a rebellion, almost, to rest, and to be okay in the resting. So that’s one of the things that I appreciate following you on Instagram, is that you just say, “It’s a crash day,” or “It’s a rest day,” and that’s okay.

J: Yeah. I know that it’s part of my rhythm. I know that, when I’m in a frenzy and excited to be working on a project, I won’t be resting as much as my body needs me to, but I’m going to ride that wave and then endure the crash, because that’s a pattern that works for me in terms of flow. Well, I mean the crashing isn’t a nice flow, but doing the work in these bursts, I can get deeper, but into the core of something, when I have the luxury of time.

And that comes at a cost. It comes at a very significant cost, and I need to manage how that plays out in terms of my children, in terms of my marriage, my household. It’s not always possible to follow that exciting project thing way down into the core of it, because I’ve got to get dinner on. That washing needs to go through the machine for a third time because it’s stinky again, because I forgot about it. [laughs]

N: Yeah.

J: Yeah. I mean, a few weeks ago, I had the exquisite luxury of 3.5 days away to write and to work on my book. And oh, I’ve never got into such a deep flow before! It was astonishing what could be accomplished, and I still have momentum from that. So I’m just coming out of the crash part.

Yesterday I foolishly took part in, what do I even call it? The NDIA have employed some people to do some research about kids getting booted off the scheme during their reassessment in their thousands. Our child was one of those children. And I thought, oh, I’ll do an interview so they can understand how to do this better. But it ended up just being really awful and very triggering. So I spent many hours in the bath, just trying to regulate and feel safe again. And then I got up and I came and sat down and I worked on my book, and that really helped me to come back into a space where I felt in control of what was happening.

Sometimes rest looks like all sorts of things. It was restful for me to sit and work on my book, because it was a rest from feeling like I’d failed my kid. It was a rest from being hurt, like just shot in a cannon back to medical trauma that felt like it was happening now, but wasn’t. And I felt much better by the time I came back inside. Then it was time for dinner, baths, bedtime stories, and I was good to go. I was good to do that.

But if I hadn’t taken that time to regulate and come back to feeling safe again, it would have been a write-off, and then my wife gets all the labour.

So yeah, it’s complex, right? Our lives are complex, and the ways we manage are complex.

N: Earlier you were talking about the microaggressions that happened in the birthing suites and hospitals and things like that. Do you find that they’re getting better with your family, the way it is now?

J: I’ll tell you a funny one. God, it just makes me laugh how ridiculous it is. So everyone in my family goes to the same dentist, here in Castlemaine, and they’re fantastic. They’re really, really great with all of us who are quite nervous about the dentist. And when I legally changed my name as part of my transition, I let different things, places, know, “This is my new legal name, could you please update your system.”

So the last time I went in, I called ahead and I said, “Hey, I’ve legally changed my name. It’s on my Medicare card. It’s on my health insurance. Could you please update your system so that my old name is no longer used. Please use this name.”

So I did that, but they didn’t do it right, and the dentist said my old name about eighty thousand times. [laughs] And by the time I left, I was just a shimmering wreck. And when you’re in that situation, it feels really scary to correct someone, because then you might wear their disapproval or they might roll their eyes, and that feels really, really scary to do, because it’s a vulnerable position you’re in. They’ve got their fingers in your mouth. It’s weird. [laughs]

So, on the way out, I just said to the receptionist, “Hey, I don’t know what happened, but I called ahead, but this, blah blah blah …”

And she was lovely. She said, “Oh, my God, Jasper. I’m so sorry. I will fix that up for you right now. That will not happen again. Please accept our apologies.”

I said, “It’s totally fine. I know it’s hard with the systems and everything.”

Anyway, [laughs] I got a text the other day. “Hello, formerly known as [deadname].” Because I took my daughter to the dentist earlier this week, and I’d said, “Hey, I got this text,” and the receptionist was just like, “Oh my God! Why does this keep happening?” So I felt a bit more secure this time to say something. It gets easier, the tougher the skin gets, the more bad things happen, the easier I find it. Which is not good. But also the more good things happen.

So there were some points I was a little bit worried, like a mechanic. I was like, ugh, how is this going to go? And it was fine. It’s no big deal. And so when that’s no big deal, that helps me to do the next one, and go, okay, that was no big deal, this might be no big deal. But the one you assume will be no big deal because you’ve taken care of it, and then it goes wrong twice, I have to laugh because it’s so ridiculous.

N: And you have to weigh up whether or not you have the spoons to have a conversation, and yeah.

J: It’s the conversation, and it’s the lead-up to the conversation, where I’m thinking, will I do it today? What am I going to say? Okay, do I have the text in front of me, and what words will I say? Plan it in my head while I’m sitting there, and I’m levitating, because I’m just like worried about what might go wrong.

So we’ll see if it sticks this time! [laughs] If it doesn’t, I might back them a cake that says, “My name is Jasper,” on it. Maybe this cake will sweeten the deal and help you update your system!

N: A cake is ironic for a dentist.

J: [laughs]

N: Can we talk about ‘Unmasked’? Now, am I right in thinking that that got picked up by Channel 31?

J: Yes, six episodes that we did with Powerd Media, and it’s a TV chat show that lives on the internet. You can listen to it as a podcast. You can watch it as a video thingy.

And each episode has a different focus. So one is parents, another is writers, visual artists, performance artists, academics and musicians. Each show has two guests, and my dog is there for five out of six episodes. The one that she’s not there for, one of the people is allergic to dogs, so she went and sat in the green room instead. The dog, not the person. [laughter]

And it was so much fun to make, so beautiful. Some of the most astonishingly generative conversations of my life, I think, took place across those six episodes. And I guess I wanted to make something that we could see, and by we I mean neurodivergent people, that we could see ourselves in, that we were the norm, the majority, that we were running things the way that worked for us.

I don’t know if many people have seen it, but it was really fun to make. I’m really proud of it. I loved showcasing these astoundingly talented, astute people’s creative offerings to the world, and I include parenting in that, because parenting is a very creative thing to do, particularly when you’re neurodivergent and/or your kids are.

N: How did it come about? Did you just pitch it to Powerd Media, or …?

J: No. [laughs] No, it’s another weird thing! So I make audio packages for a local community radio station that is funded by the Community Broadcasting Foundation, and I interviewed a couple of people who made a really great show with Powerd called ‘Stamp’. Ashley Apap is a comedian, and she had a little talk show. It was so funny, so silly. She’d have guests on. I interviewed Ash, Emma Sharp, the Managing Director of Humdinger, who are the tech people who do the recording and stuff, and have the studio. And the producer of the show as well. So I interviewed all those guys and made a little package for Able Radio on Main FM.

Then Powerd approached me and said, “Do you want to do a show?” and I was like, “What? What do you mean?” And usually when something really lovely like that happens, I just laugh in a really strange, prolonged way, because I’m so delighted that life can still surprise me.

I was astounded that someone like me could be on the telly. Like I am a big, trans weirdo with pink hair. I need to read off paper. I can’t remember scripts. You know. I was like, “What do you mean? What are you even talking about?”

But that was really fun. And I think, again, it had a lot of my skillset wrapped up into that project, ready to go, that I wasn’t aware of. I think my greatest superpower that’s developed over many years, through ever career I’ve ever had, is about putting people at ease in potentially scary situations, like their wedding day, or going on the radio, or being filmed for the internet telly, and talking about really personal stuff. And it’s always such a privilege to have the trust of people that I’m interviewing. It is never taken for granted. And that’s when we can create really affirming resources, resources that reflect reality that most people won’t see.

N: It definitely is a talent, because as we were talking about before, we’ve never met before, and I instantly feel like I want to be your best friend. Like I just want to hang out with you. So you’ve definitely got an aura about you.

J: Oh, thanks, Nic! [laughs]

N: I wanted to talk to you, because when I was coming up and wanting to be a writer, I wanted to be given the five-point plan about what do you do to be successful, particularly when you're disabled, neurodivergent, whatever it may be. Even if there was a creative process that could guarantee success, which obviously there isn’t, even if there was one, we have to find ways to do things in different ways, so we can’t always sit at a desk for eight hours in a workday or something. Have you been able to develop a creative process at all?

J: Mm. The thing that jumped out most from what you just said was the word ‘success’, and I think the first thing anyone needs to do, if you’re wanting to be a creative success, is to think about what that word means to you. It’s not what it means to other people. What does it mean to you? How will you know that you’ve reached the goals that you have for yourself? And how will you know when to change those goals, when to adjust them, when to accept that one goal created in good faith might not be serving you?

So yes, success is a big one, because like we were talking about before, about the meaning of words, meaning something different to every single person, through the ways that we’ve lived.

Really important not to pit yourself against an invisible challenger, who doesn’t exist. Yeah. It’s essential to feed your own soul, before thinking about other people and what they might be demanding or expecting or assuming about you. That’s when you can create something that is meaningful. It’s not driven by anyone else. It’s driven by you and what you believe and what you know.

N: I love that. Was there something that caused you … It might not be one big event, but was there something that, a book that you read, or something that someone said, that reminded you of the power of words and how much meaning words can have?

J: For me, the power of words and identity are very wrapped up together. The pandemic lockdown times were very introspective for a lot of people, because all of a sudden we couldn’t distract ourselves with everyone else’s story. And for me, that’s when I understood my gender for the first time, and I had designed my life like that, so i wouldn’t be able to get and burrow down into the core of who I was, because it was too scary, it was too much, possibility of rejection, and my tender heart couldn’t handle it. So it took a pandemic for me to really understand that about myself.

And I remember, I accidentally downloaded an audiobook that I thought was another audiobook. [laughs] A friend had posted, “Oh, my friend’s written a book and it’s really cool and I’m so proud of them,” and I couldn’t remember what it was called, but I saw a cover on the library app, and I thought, oh yeah, I’ll download that. That’s nice. That’s Conrad’s friend. And it was a completely different book, and it’s called ‘As Beautiful as Any Other’ by Kaya Wilson.

And that book was everything to me. This was a memoir about transition, trauma, travel, climate science, tsunamis, life-changing medical events, and written so beautifully. Every sentence was something to savour. And read by the author as well. So I really treasured that time spent together with this person I’d never met, who was sharing their secrets with me. That was a big one.

Yves Rees’ memoir, ‘All About Yves’, as well. That was a really big one for me, during my own transition. And Eloise Grills’ graphic novel, ‘Big Beautiful Female Theory’ as well. Gorgeous! Absolutely gorgeous. So I’ve forced all these people to become my friends now. [laughs]

N: I think that’s really good for people to hear, because I think there’s a myth that, if something’s going to change your life or have a really profound effect on you, it has to happen when you’re really, really young. Life can take you in a variety of ways, and it’s not linear, and I think that’s really important.

J: And processing time as well, it’s different for all people. It takes me a long time to process things and understand them. So having these books in my early 40s has been really transformative.

Thinking back, I loved all the ‘Babysitters’ Club’ books when I was a kid. I loved the formula of them, how there was always a bit about what everyone was wearing, that there was different handwriting that each person would have. They all had a different role, a different persona, a different sort of space that they occupied in their world. And it was very comforting to have this pattern, like I’d get a new book, oh, but it’s familiar, because it has this kind of formula. And I didn’t have those words at the time, but patterns have always been really yummy for me!

N: You wouldn’t believe that this is only the ninth episode of this podcast, but that is the third time that the ‘Babysitters’ Club’ has been brought up. So it lives on!

J: Yeah, totally. [laughs]

N: Just as one of the final questions, because I’m very aware of how much energy and time you’ve spent with me, if people fall in love with you as I have during this time and want to support you, what’s the best way they can support you? I know we were talking before about Substack, but are there other ways?

J: Oh, that’s so lovely, thank you! Yeah, I mean, I’ve got a Ko-fi thing, Substack you can subscribe to.

Do you know a really easy way to support me that doesn’t cost any money, or much energy at all, is to borrow my book from the library, because authors get a little bit of money every time their book is borrowed from the library, so I don’t know if it’s like one cent or two cents but it all adds up, and once a year we get a little deposit, which is always really helpful. Yes, so borrowing from the library is good.

I’m also aware that accessibility to books is hard sometimes. For me, audiobooks are the best way to connect with literature, and there is a free audiobook available for ‘You’ll be a Wonderful Parent’. It’s not on the traditional audiobook hosting things because they didn’t want it, but it’s on my SoundCloud. So everyone’s very welcome to listen to that, if that’s an easier way to access the book.

N: I feel like everyone should go and listen to it, and make the traditional platforms regret their decision not to take it!

J: [laughs] Yeah, publishing’s a really strange landscape that I’m still trying to get to know and understand. I make it very clear when I’m working with a publisher that I require the rights to make an audiobook if it’s not hosted in the traditional manner, for accessibility purposes.

I’ve got a children’s book coming out next year, called ‘My Body is my Home’. That’s being illustrated by Beci Orpin, which I’m really, really excited about. And that was all made possible through a grant from Creative Victoria.

I know you asked me ways to support me, but I guess just engaging with the work is a beautiful way to support, because it’s an energy exchange, right? I might feel really good one day, and I imagine, on a random day, and part of me thinks, “Oh, maybe someone’s reading my book right now and feeling good,” and then I feel a bit good too. [laughs]

N: I, as a reader, get nervous sometimes to approach the authors, but hearing what you said before about how much it means to you to get that feedback.

J: Oh, my gosh, yeah.

N: If people read your book, [are you] giving them permission to let you know they’ve read?

J: Of course! Yeah, it’s always lovely to get those messages. And just to know that, because it is a lot, it’s big work, it’s big work making books, and there are so many people involved and so many steps. It’s a very large machine that we’re part of, as creatives, working with a lot of wonderful people who’ve put a lot of energy into it. So it’s good for me to know that the work is connecting, but it’s also good for everyone who worked on it, too.

N: Thank you so much for talking to me today. I am very aware that it takes energy to tell your story, so thank you so much for spending some time with me.

J: It’s been such a pleasure, and it does take energy, but also gives energy. I feel this is really affirming for me, to be able to have the opportunity to put these thoughts and concepts into words. So thank you, thanks for having me, and for making this awesome podcast!

N: And I’m going to force you to be friends with me now.

J: [laughs] Let’s do it. Sounds good.

N: Thanks so much, Jasper.

[music]

N: Thank you so much to Jasper. Create and Amplify is assisted by the Australian Government, through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body. Until next time.

[music]

[end of recording]