

Episode 204: Remember The Mountains And Valleys That Brought You Here - Morgan Harper Nichols

Please note: This transcript has been lightly edited to remove filler words or sounds.

“If you're waking up in the morning and you're breathing and you listened to one song that was encouraging or you just took one glimpse at the sunrise, those small little things, like, that matters. That is a part of your growth, your healing, and your progress just as much as the big things. And there might not be, people might not clap for those moments. They might not support you or they might not say, good job, you're doing so well, but they still matter just as much as the big things.”

LINDSAY KOLSCH: You're listening to the To Write Love on Her Arms podcast, a show about mental health and the things that make us human. Each episode we'll be talking about the things that can often feel hard to talk about, like depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. We'll be sharing stories and exploring big themes like hope, healing, and recovery.

LINDSAY: We hope you'll connect to these episodes in a meaningful way. And maybe by listening, you're going to find it's a little easier for you to talk about your own experience with the people in your life. So maybe you struggle. Or you love someone who is struggling. Maybe you just want to learn more and hear from people who are generously sharing their stories with us. No matter who you are and why you're listening, we want to thank you for being here. You're in good company.

LINDSAY KOLSCH: A few weeks ago, we took a deeper look at depression and you heard from artist and poet Morgan Harper Nichols. We talked about the issue of depression and the experience of it from a few different perspectives which means we didn't really have a chance to dive as deep into Morgan's story as we wanted to.

So we invited her back to dive more into her world. Morgan sat down with TWLOHA founder Jamie Tworkowski and they talked more about her life, her struggles with depression, and how her art has evolved over the years.

And, I'll just say this. if you haven't listened to our episode about depression, listening to this episode is not going to spoil it, but we definitely encourage you to go check it out.

And so, I really loved getting the chance to hear about Morgan's authentic connections with her audience and how she has created a community of hope and support. To me, her words always hits me in these deep and personal places. And if you don't know her work already, we're really excited to introduce you to her on this week's episodes. We are also thrilled to announce that you can catch Morgan in person alongside her sister Jamie Grace who will be speaking at this year's HEAVY AND LIGHT event at the House of Blues in Orlando, FL on September 21. The

night will also feature artists like Jon Foreman from Switchfoot, Anthony Raneri of Bayside, Dessa, SWIMM and poetry by Anis Mojgani.

To learn more and to grab your tickets before it sells out, visit our event calendar on the website twloha.com/events/.

And now let's get into the show:

[music playing]

JAMIE TWORKOWSKI: Hello, this is Jamie Tworkowski and I'm super honored to be sitting here with Morgan Harper Nichols. We are in Florida at the To Write Love on Her Arms office, and Morgan just joined the To Write Love on Her Arms Board of Directors. We'll talk more about that, but thank you so much for coming all the way to Florida.

MORGAN HARPER NICHOLS: Yes. Well thank you for having me in Florida. So yes, it's an honor to be here. It's an honor to be here.

JAMIE: And you said you've been here but not really properly explored.

MORGAN: Yes, yes. I've been here for lots of, lots of shows, you know, back in my playing guitar and singing days every weekend. And, so I've seen a lot of Florida but like none of it at all (laughs). So like I was like wow, I actually got to like see the beach.

JAMIE: You saw the sunrise.

MORGAN: I saw the sunrise. So that was a rare special thing. And like I woke my husband up, it was like 3:00 AM LA time. I'm like, look at the sunrise as if he had never seen whenever before.

JAMIE: That's a good way to start.

MORGAN: Exactly. Now it all feels justified.

JAMIE: So I feel like so many people know your work and more people are finding you every day. But for people who don't know, I wonder if you could introduce yourself.

MORGAN: Yeah. So my name is Morgan Harper Nichols, and I am a writer, illustrator, and within writer I would say poet/songwriter. I essentially, over the past two years I decided to really focus on the connection between visual art and writing and just how the different things that you can say and communicate through that medium. I was just kind of curious about it and I was experiencing a pretty significant career change in my life and I just started kind of writing some of the things that I was going through and experiencing and who knew that other people relate to many of those same things.

MORGAN: So yeah, it's really only been the past two coming up on three years that I've really have been focusing primarily on just writing poetry and prose that just connects to different things that we experience in daily life.

JAMIE: Yeah. So we'll get back to the work you're doing today, but I wonder if you could introduce us to Morgan, the kid. Where did you grow up and what were you like as a kid?

MORGAN: Yes, so I grew up in a little town just outside of Atlanta in Stone Mountain, Georgia, well Stone Mountain and Lithonia; they're right next to each other. And I was a homeschooled preacher's kid. And the way I like to describe my childhood, everything was small. I was a part of like a small church in a small town. I have one sister, like it was just, just a very small environment all the way around.

MORGAN: And I, because of that, like I didn't have a lot of friends. I had a lot of time to be creative. And one of the things I'm the most grateful for my childhood is that I had parents who did really encourage me to be creative. You know, they saw at a young age I was passionate about art and drawing and writing stories, and they would just encourage me to do that. So most of my childhood honestly was spent reading, writing. And if I had it my way, my whole childhood, but just been in my room with my notebooks and the piano, just drawing and creating things. And I'm so grateful that I had that because when I got to, uh, kind of my preteen early, you know, early teen years, my younger sister who's two years younger than me, she was actually diagnosed with Tourette's Syndrome and, um, a lot of people, there's more awareness about it now.

MORGAN: But back then we were growing up. I mean, she was bullied pretty intensely for that and I just kind of took on the role as, like, protective big sister. And so it kind of made both of us outsiders; we were already outsiders, but this just pushed us even further out. And, um, it also made us really close though. She's an artist as well. And I'm so grateful that we had that because it was, it honestly like gave us a way to connect with one another and then even eventually connect with others through the Internet and through playing shows and things like that. So that's kind of a short version of my childhood. And then I went to a small college in Georgia and I was pretty sure that I was not going to do anything creative for a career. I was like, I just, you know, I'll graduate and get a regular job and then I'll just go on with my life.

MORGAN: And I did that, graduated, got a regular job, and then my job moved across the state and I couldn't go with it. So I kind of lost my job and, um, I just started getting creative, honestly. And that's kind of what led me here where I am now. I graduated from college in 2010 and stopped working there around 2012. So yeah, like these past seven years have just been exploring and creating and working a lot of different odd jobs. And now, here I am.

JAMIE: So you graduate 2010.

MORGAN: Yes.

JAMIE: You worked, did you work at the school?

MORGAN: Yeah, I did. I worked as an admissions counselor at the school, so I did that for the two years after I graduated. And yeah.

JAMIE: So in the last seven years, I know you've somehow ended up in California. You have a husband?

MORGAN: Yes.

JAMIE: I know that because I just met him. So I wonder just about what life has looked like in that time, in the last seven years or so.

MORGAN: Yeah. So I met my husband my senior year of college, so he actually came to my school the senior year and, um, I was kind of on the introverted side. I'd never really, I never dated before I was, I was just like, I don't honestly, I was like, I don't know how it works, it just seems like a lot of pressure and he was just the first person who I feel like just kinda got me, you know, with my awkwardness and not really knowing. So we really hit it off. And then we ended up getting married, um, right when I graduated from college. So that was in 2010 and um, he was still in school, so I started working, he was working and in school and then when all that was happening and my job was just getting ready to change, my little sister was starting...

MORGAN: Um, she was really into YouTube. Like she was sharing her story and her songs on Youtube and that ended up leading her to like going on tours and, and getting a record deal. And like she got nominated for a Grammy at, like, 19, like just all this stuff started happening for her. And it was great, but she didn't have, she didn't have a team to travel with her. So we actually, when everything was starting to look a little uncertain about my job, we were like, well, what if we just went on the road with her? So that was honestly how my music career began. I didn't, I didn't really see myself putting out music myself. I mean, I always, I always kinda did maybe in the back of my mind, but it wasn't really anything I was working actively working toward. I was just like, this is an opportunity, you know, it doesn't look like my work is, my job was going to be, you know, there.

MORGAN: So we, we went on the road for, from about 2012 to 2016.

JAMIE: Wow.

MORGAN: So we were traveling and doing music and, and um, you know, for me it started out just kind of being there to playing guitar, to singing, to writing songs. And you know, before I knew it I was living in Nashville and I'm working on an album, and I'm so grateful for that season, but at the same time it was so challenging for me. The thing about the music industry is

like, it's a lot of times from afar it looks like, oh, you've made it, you know, if you're traveling, you're touring, you're doing all these things, but you know, in a lot of ways like it's not, it's not that different from like a lot of other jobs in the sense of like, there's still uncertainty in terms of like finances. There's still like, you don't know, you don't know what tours are going to come next.

MORGAN: You don't know when you're going to be able to make an album, you know, so it's not even when you quote unquote made it and you've gotten the opportunity, there's still all of this uncertainty and yeah, for me on top of that, just being more introverted in the music industry, it's very difficult. I mean it's, you're around people all the time and you're, you're paid to get on stage and bring energy and that's hard when you're like, but this is taking my energy from me. Like it's, it's hard because it's like I want to connect with people. I want to share, I want to tell my story. I want to encourage other people to tell their story. But at the same time I was just every show, I was exhausted, just, just emotionally and mentally drained. I would just get on the tour bus and just lie in my bunk and just stare at the ceiling and I could hear other people talking in the front of the bus hanging out and I'm just staring at the ceiling.

MORGAN: I'm like, I can't even move. Like there's so much. So I was in a tough spot with that because I was like, you know, this is my job. I should be grateful for it. I shouldn't, you know, there's so many people who do anything.

JAMIE: Sure, you're on a tour bus.

MORGAN: Yeah, I'm on a tour bus. Like there's so many people who'd do anything to be able to have this opportunity, like, so I was even struggling to share that with people cause I was like, I don't want to seem ungrateful. You know, I'm like, this is a really cool opportunity. So instead of sharing, I started writing about it and you know, I wouldn't really give nouns or specifics, but I would just kind of write about the general theme of like just being in that uncertain place and just not feeling like you're where you need to be, but you're still grateful for where you are but because you're like, oh, but I'm alive that I can do this and that and just all these inner struggles and I didn't have answers to, I didn't have like, here's what you do about it.

MORGAN: So I was just like, let me just kind of ride it out. And that just became... On my, on my iPhone in the notes app like that, that just became the place that I went to at least get all of these thoughts out. And in 2016 I think I just kind of hit a breaking point with all of that, where I was just like, this is just too much. I'm like, am I really gonna spend the rest of my life like just feeling so conflicted all the time and feeling so drained and exhausted, but at the same time feeling like I'm not allowed to feel that way because it's like, you're a grown up, you got to have a job, you got to do this and all that. And I was like, I just don't even know how I'm going to go on past this.

MORGAN: And um, for the first time in years, it was one night in November and our touring was starting to slow down a little bit and we had lived in Nashville and, and we moved out of

Nashville and now we were living in Dallas, Texas. It was just a random move; me and my husband were like, "Let's move to Dallas!" And I was actually at home alone that night and I was just sitting there and just all those things I just shared, I just felt all of it just falling on me and I was like, I just don't even know what to do with these thoughts. And I opened my journal and I started trying to write a poem and I hadn't written a poem in years. And the poem starts with *'when you start to feel like things should have been better this year, remember the mountains and valleys that brought you here.'*

MORGAN: And I just wrote about feeling like, you know, just it's, it's not in vain. Like everything you did is not in vain. Like yes, things you wish you wish they could have gone differently. But that doesn't mean you're no longer on the journey. That doesn't mean that there's not more ahead and essentially saying things that I needed to hear. And, and I guess it just came down in written form and I hadn't written anything like that in years. And I sat there and I looked at it and I was like, this is pretty personal and, but at the same time I kind of feel like I should share it. So I took a picture of it and I got ready to share it on Instagram and I uploaded it and added a filter and everything. And then I got ready to press publish and I was like, no, this is too personal.

MORGAN: I was like, this is not, I can't share this. So it was like, people are gonna think you know, this or that. And I was like, I can't share this. I was like, but I just couldn't get it. I was like, I feel like I need to share it, but I don't want to share it. So I was like, I'm going to share it on Pinterest because there's not that many people that follow me over there. I was like, I'm just going to put it up there and say, okay, yeah, I did it. You know, it's out there in the world, just release it and move on. So I uploaded it to Pinterest and this is in November of 2016 and then in January of the next year, 2017 um, I got a message on Instagram from someone that said, "Hey, did you see this reality star?"

MORGAN: She posted your poem and it's like your name on it on her page." And I was like, yeah, that's mine. But I don't know how she found that. I was like, thank you, thank you for sharing that. But I don't know, I don't know where that came from. A few days later someone's like, "Hey, you should see this athlete. They posted like a poem on their page with your name on it." And I was like, this is just getting weird. I was like, I don't know where this is coming from. So I went back and looked at the Pinterest pin that I posted and it had been repinned over 100,000 times and to this day I have no idea how it spread that way; it got shared all over the place between November and then, and I don't how that happened.

JAMIE: Were you sharing other poems in that time or not yet?

MORGAN: I think I may have written a few things and I may have, I may have shared more. I don't think so.

JAMIE: But it wasn't like the confidence of like I now post poems—

MORGAN: No, not at all. It was just like this is like a one-time thing that came from, like, a low place and I don't even know how it got there. I don't know if I'd ever get back to that place. So I was like wow, that's, that was unexpected. And I was still kind of resistant to it cause I was just like, I dunno, maybe this is just like a fluke, you know, one-time thing, things just kind of happen, you know. Let me just keep going. And, you know, move on. And I started getting DMs on Instagram with people saying things like "I went through this this year, last year and this really helped me because of this..."

MORGAN: And I dealt with this and I was like, these people's stories are so vastly different than mine and the fact that they could relate to something that was so deeply personal that I was scared to even share it. I was like, I think there's something there. I'm like, I don't understand what's going on here, but I'm like, I have nothing in common with these people; I don't know them. And yet they're connecting with this on such a personal level. And people were asking like, do you have more on this topic? And I was like, no, I don't like I, that was kind of all I had. But at the same time when I'm getting these stories, it's something about when you start to hear other people's stories, it just makes it real. You know? It's like, all this time I thought all these things were just in my head that I was dealing with.

MORGAN: And here I am, messaging back and forth with someone across the world whose life is totally different than mine, went through something completely different than what I went through. And yet we're connecting around the same word. It's like we're still hoping for the same things. So I spent that whole year, honestly just trying to write and create. And I started doing visual art again, something I had totally given up since childhood. I hadn't done anything like that in years. And I started painting and drawing and, and really just tried to scratch at the surface really. Now when I look back on it. I was like, I was trying to get to the core of like the same things that I was feeling, but because I was essentially just documenting that process, other people were connecting with it too. So in the end of 2017 was when I posted on my Instagram.

MORGAN: "I said, if you would like for me to write something for your story, send me a message, send me your story, and I'll make art for you." And I kinda did that just out of feeling like, you know, I, I feel like I'm scratching at something. I don't really know what this is, but I do know it involves other people. I do know that if I'm going to keep doing this, like it was literally strangers on the Internet who encouraged me to do this. So I was like, there's something to this. So, um, I figured, you know, maybe the people who followed me a few, you know, few dozen people or whoever who followed me, like they would respond. Um, but one thing I didn't anticipate was people started telling their friends, like, people who didn't follow me about this project. So it just created this wave of people who are more strangers, people I didn't know, sending me stories like, "Hey, I hear you're writing for people's stories." And, and so I got to a point where I wasn't able to get to everyone anymore. And I just, now I just randomly select people and I thought that I would maybe do it for a week or two or a month or two. But now, you know, it's 2019 and, and it's become a huge part of my work and what I do and what I'm passionate about.

JAMIE: That's amazing. I wonder, you know, in the context of To Write Love and this podcast, the phrase or the term mental health, like when did that end up on your radar and maybe how did you begin to think about that personally and then also I wonder how did you start to think about that, not just for yourself, but for other people?

MORGAN: I think it came on my radar when I was in, I was around 14 or 15 years old and that was when I was dealing with, I didn't know that's what it was at the time, but I was dealing with depression and it was just, it came on the heels of like, just a lot of a loss in my family, um just unexpected young people passing away in my family and then health issues in my family as well. And just feeling the toll of that and feeling the toll of being an outsider. When I was younger, it didn't bother me as much, but you know, when I got to high school it was definitely a lot heavier. And um, my family, you know, my parents started to kind of notice some changes in me and I went to a counselor.

MORGAN: But we were only able to afford to go once, but in that one time I was like, oh, this is something that like people work through. Like this isn't just something that's in my head that I'm, that I just deal with on my own. Like this is something you talk about, you work through. So I think that may have been like the first time I kind of understood that... I still don't know if I would have used mental health that, you know, that term—or depression even. But I was becoming aware that like, okay, this is not something I keep in my head and it's something that could be worked through. And it's not bad to work through. And then when I got to college, it was psych 101. Psychology 101. Um, that class, like I was like, oh, it was like, it was like putting the pieces together, of what I kind of had been experiencing in high school.

MORGAN: I was like, wow. There are names for what I'm feeling, what other people are feeling. And the professor, she was a counselor and just hearing just some of the story she would share and I became very intrigued and, and it just helped me have a lot of compassion. Just for anything related to mental health. I really do believe it was that class.

JAMIE: Wow.

MORGAN: Just your regular, typical class you have to take in college. But it was something about it that just really opened my eyes and help, helped me feel less alone in that and then just realize how, how much it affected others as well. So, yeah.

JAMIE: So you mentioned as a teenager when you did get to go to counseling, but only got to go once. I wonder, is that something you've been able to circle back to as you've gotten older?

MORGAN: Yes, yes. So as I've gotten older, I do go to counseling now and I'm so grateful for it. So grateful for it. And it has been a little hard because we've moved quite a bit to, you know, kind of get in a rhythm and find someone that I can see regularly. But I'm seeing someone regularly now and it has just been. You know, I'm in a season of transition now in my life. I'm

about to have a baby in a month and um, it's just when I think back on times, other seasons in my life when I didn't have that, I'm like, wow, it's so good to just be able to sit in a room with someone with no judgment and they're not involved in the stories they're hearing. Sometimes you just need to get it out. So I'm, I'm so grateful that I have that now.

JAMIE: That's so good. I wonder, I know you've transitioned into this work really being your full-time focus. Is that accurate?

MORGAN: Yes. Yes.

JAMIE: And then in addition, I know you're coming up on half a million people who follow you on Instagram alone and you write about, I think, what it means to be human and vulnerable things. And I can imagine that people share heavy personal things in response. And so with that, I would imagine there's some pressure that you feel. And so I wonder how do you navigate that pressure and maybe how do you navigate trying to be healthy in the midst of this unique work?

MORGAN: Yeah, so that is, uh, that is a daily thing that I, that I worked through and I'm currently working through. So the way it works now is I have where people can submit their story via my website because Instagram DMs, they were just getting really hard to keep up with and I was losing, like they only show you so many DMs at a time. So what I do is I will open, I have an email that they all come to and I'll open up that email and I'll just randomly click on a name. I'll just scroll through pages and just click on a name. And I never know what's going to be on the other side of that subject line, honestly. And there are some times, um, and sadly the bigger the project gets, the more this happens where I get stories that just, they just break me and I just have to just give space for that person honestly.

MORGAN: And just, I don't try to write back immediately. I just back away. And there's some people that I still, I mean it's taking me weeks and months to write back to them because it's just, I just want to hold space for that person because I'm like, wow, if, if me hearing that affects me, like imagine what that feels like for them carrying that every day. I've, I've also recently realized that I'm a lot more sensitive than I, than I thought I was in my life. Which is not always a bad thing, you know. But it's something that I, it's new to me. I didn't really realize that. So I do have to be aware of that when I'm reading and I'm working through these stories because it's heavy what a lot of people are going through and what a lot of young people are going through?

MORGAN: The one thing that encourages me to just keep writing even if, even if, cause sometimes when I, when I write something back, I'm like, was that deep enough? You know, was that helpful enough? But one thing that encourages me to just keep going, it's like, you know what? I have to remember the times in my life where a simple — you're going to be okay — would have meant the world to me. I have to remember the times where if someone had just said, just breathe like you've, you've worked so hard to be here and that matters. Like that would have just given me so much hope. Just the simplest phrases. So I just try to hold on to that. And

then also when I'm reading people's stories, just there's such a diverse range of stories, but there's still a connectedness to it all.

MORGAN: Like there's still so many of us are going through the same things. Like if you take the nouns away, if you take the specifics away, when you really go beneath the layers, like many of us are wondering and struggling and dealing with the same thing. So I just think I'm like, you know what, if I could say something to this one person, you know, it's, it's probably something I need to hear too. And it's probably something that somebody beyond just the two of us could hear as well. So that's, these are just daily conversations that I have to have. I definitely, you know, haven't figured it out. And you know, sometimes it is challenging because you're not, I'm not like a counselor, therapist, or a pastor, or a spiritual leader or anything. Like I don't have any credentials. Like I'm not, and I people, I'm like, I'm not here to give advice.

MORGAN: Like I can't do that. Um, so sometimes that is hard because you, you see, you're like, oh, like I haven't, I don't know how to help this. I wish I did. I really, really wish I did. And you know, I try my best to direct people as much as I can to the best resources out there for them. But yeah, it is hard. It's hard. Um, and it also, you know, it's hard, but it really does, it keeps me so humble and grounded and you know, just when I have moments where I start thinking about, you know, success or all of that, it's just like that that is not what matters. You know, it's like there's, there are people out there who does need to know that someone hears them. I'm like, this is so much more important.

JAMIE: What common threads have emerged or what has stood out as now you probably sit here having read hundreds, maybe thousands, I would imagine thousands of stories and interactions. And I wonder just what stands out when you think about all of that?

MORGAN: One thing that I've, I've noticed in quite a bit of stories, and one thing I do is I never ever share details of the stories, but one thing I've noticed is that a lot of people, myself included, um, but a lot of times I read themes about just not feeling like you have someone to talk to about this. Um, I've read a lot of messages that end with: *I'm not sure if you're ever going to see this, but I just need to get it out.* And I think that's huge. I'm like, we hold so much in and just to think there are people don't know or don't feel like they have spaces or don't have spaces where they can just let it out. And I've, I've just noticed that a lot of these people, when they're saying that, they're like, look, I'm not, I'm not expecting advice.

MORGAN: I'm not expecting free words, even though that's what you're offering, but just thank you for allowing me and I, and I say on the thing, I'm like, I don't like on the description on the forum or like it could be, it could be the length of a novel or two sentences. It's like it doesn't matter. There's no rules. Um, and just the amount of messages that end with that, like it just felt good to get it out. That just, I don't know why that stands out to me.

JAMIE: And you said you, you relate to that, right?

MORGAN: Yeah. Yeah. And I think that was something I was doing when I was back on the road. I didn't feel like I could talk to my peers about it because I was like, I'm going to sound ungrateful. You know, I'm going to sound ungrateful for this job if I say I'm struggling with this. So the only place I could get it out was to myself on my phone, you know? So I think it's just, when I think about that now, I'm like, wow, there's so many times I'm still doing that now where, you know, cause this, this project is very taxing. And even then I sometimes struggle talking about it cause I'm like, I don't want to sound like I'm ungrateful. I don't want to sound like I'm, you know, like, oh is she taking on too much? Or you know, just all these things I think about. And those things can force me to kind of like go inward and not want to share.

JAMIE: What about the pressure as you are about to post and you know now that whatever you post is going to go out to this extraordinary amount of people, do you wrestle with insecurity or is this good enough? Is it beautiful enough? I wonder what that side of it is like?

MORGAN: Hmm. Yes. I deal with that all the time. I oftentimes when I'm getting ready to post something, I have doubts. I questioned myself. I'm like, is this too much? Is this not enough? Like are people going to get this? And one thing though, that writing for someone individually has helped me do is that by the time I'm posting on social media, I've already shared it with the person I wrote for. So I just have to remind myself, the person this was for has already received it, whatever they decide to do with it, however they decide to receive it, you know, that's up to them. But it's already served its purpose. You know, everything on social media, it's just the aftermath. This is just—

JAMIE: A bonus.

MORGAN: Yes, it's the bonus. It's essentially see cc-ing everybody, copying everybody on what's already happened. So that's the thing that keeps me posting. But it's still, some days are stronger than others, you know, some days that some days I will think about it and overthink it and way too much. And some days I'm like, hmm, this could be terrible, but oh well, I'll post it anyway. So, yeah, yeah, that's definitely something I, I think about quite a bit.

[music playing]

LINDSAY: In honor of World Suicide Prevention Day, which is September 10, we're working to share the universal message that so many people need to hear: You make today better. The goal of this You Make Today Better campaign is to educate people about suicide, the ways we can prevent it, and give you tools to create conversations surrounding mental health in your community with people you love and know. Tools that will help you be honest and open. And we'll also be raising money for our Treatment & Recovery Scholarship Fund. The funds raised will sponsor more than 3,000 counseling sessions this year. Our 2019 campaign is now live and we need your help to share its message: You make today better. You can raise awareness in your community by purchasing a WSPD pack in our Online Store. In this pack you're going to find a shirt you can wear on World Suicide Prevention Day, again it's September 10, as well as ways to get involved and be active in your community with merchandise that helps make this

campaign visible online and in person. Because we appreciate your support of this podcast, we're going to be giving you and all of our awesome podcast listeners a special discount code. When you order a WSPD pack, enter the code WSPD19 and you'll receive 20% off your order. If you want to learn more about the campaign, visit youmaketodaybetter.com.

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JAMIE: And I know now in terms of it becoming something sustainable and having to probably learn and think about the business side, I wonder what that journey has been like. I know there's an app.

MORGAN: Yeah.

JAMIE: Book, right? I wonder if you could talk some about those things.

MORGAN: Yeah. So, when I started sharing more visual art, I would get requests where people would say, do you do like commission work? Like for my business? And I was like, I can try. So that was actually how that started. I was like, wow. Like maybe, you know, it's, that kind of happens like when you put your work out there, you know, other people will get inspired by it and they get ideas and they might want to collaborate. So that's what happened there. And then, um, again, it was, it was readers asked me, do you have a book? And I was like, no, I'm terrified of the idea of putting out a book. Um, but the question kept coming, do you have a book? Do you have a book? So I just self published a really small book. It's a hundred poems. And I put it on Amazon and I was overwhelmed by the response.

MORGAN: It just, it surprised me.

JAMIE: When was that?

MORGAN: This was the end of 2017 when I published it. So yeah. And that was, uh, the only thing I've published to date, and I put it out there and it went to number one in its category within hours of putting it out there. I was like, oh, like didn't expect that. And I got like the first royalty statement and I mean, I'm not like a millionaire because of this, but it was like, oh, this, this could pay a couple of bills. Like this is really encouraging. Um, so that's how that began. And then last year I was approached by a team of developers who, just create apps, like devotional encouraging apps. And they were like, would you like to do an app with us? And I was like, that is so beyond my knowledge, but I can try, let's give it a shot.

MORGAN: So that part became a part of my income and what I do. And, it's like a subscription app where people can pay and they receive like exclusive content within the app about, you know, kind of more in-depth messages than what I share on social media. But, and yeah. And then other than that, I do a lot of freelance work, so I've collaborated with some really cool brands recently and they've commissioned me to write custom poems or do custom artwork.

And so it's, it's a hybrid. It's a mixture of a lot of things. But I'm grateful to be able to look and say, wow. Like it's, it's something that I can, I can say this is my job and I really enjoy it. I really, I really do.

JAMIE: Do you hear from a lot of people who want to do something similar who may be, are starting out? Obviously social media is an amazing place because we all have, or anyone can have a platform, not necessarily an audience or not necessarily, you know, what we imagine A like a giant audience. But I wondered, do you get a lot of those questions of people saying, how did you do it? And maybe how could I do it?

MORGAN: Yes, I do. I do. And I feel like I'm, I'm receiving more of those questions and I love answering them. Cause I feel like I didn't really, uh, and this, this is nothing like against any person in particular, but the few times that I did reach out to people who I was like looking up to this certain things, like I didn't really get a lot of response. I didn't get it. I didn't have, I couldn't find any resources. So I get so excited when I get to, to help people in that way. And one thing that I always encourage people, two things, on the creative side, I always encourage people to start in your journal, start in the places that you're already creating something, even if it's just, even if it's just to you, it just seems so ordinary. Um, even like your text messages, look for little things that you say that no one else says.

MORGAN: It's just different things. You're like, wow, like look back in journals from like five years ago. And I'm like, wow, I've been saying that ever since then. Like I personally feel like that's your voice. Like I feel like we talk a lot about like finding your voice. I think your voice is already there. It's just a matter of like digging to find it or digging to get back to it. So the creative side, because that's what happened for me, like my look on the front end. Like I created this new thing of art and words. But when I go back and look at my journal when I was five years old, that's literally what I was doing. It's the same thing. It's the same thing. I would draw pictures on one side and I'll write words on the other. Um, I used to make stationary and then I would write a little note encouraging note on the stationary and like sell it at our local flea market.

MORGAN: Like not a lot has changed. I'm still doing the same things I was doing when I was little. So just go back, like it might not be exactly the same but there are clues there like there are things that have always been in you that are waiting to be nurtured and to come to life more. And then on the business side of it, I recommend freelance, like freelance is just, if you know how to work Photoshop, like use it. Like there are a lot of people who don't know how to work Photoshop and need someone to, to create a poster and you know, do different things like that. And I, and I did a lot of that. Even when I was doing music, I had started kind of messing around a little bit with Photoshop and Illustrator and learning how to design different things and it helps you figure out what you do want to do and also what you don't want to do. You're like, wow, like you might be like, I really do not enjoy like mixing audio, but I love designing business cards. Like, you know, so just explore and learn different skills and see how you can offer them to other people. Then it will give you a lot of insight as to where you might land.

JAMIE: Career aside, influence aside, I wonder what you now think about creating, writing, art, even music as it relates to mental health and even maybe specifically to healing and recovery.

MORGAN: I think one of my, my biggest thoughts, and as you may be able to tell now, I love to look back. I love to think back. I just think there's so much about, we can learn about our former selves in a lot of way and um, when I think about the, some of the hardest times for me when I was in high school dealing with depression and I just, I couldn't bring myself to do anything. Even things that I loved. It's so fascinating to me how art and music found its way into my life and how design found its way into my life. Like one specific moment I had was my freshman year of college. I was feeling really alone. I was happy to be there. I didn't feel as alone as I was in high school, but it was still there that just that feeling of otherness, of just being different, being an outsider. And I was walking on campus and a guy walked by me with a shirt on that said To Write Love on Her Arms. And I was like, wow, what is that?

MORGAN: I was like, I like that. And I love the design and I like wanted to ask him, but I was like, oh, I don't know. I was kind of scared to. I didn't really know him. And then I, I remembered it though and I looked it up and I found it on Myspace. And even before I read the description, before I read what it was about and how much it was about what, like, something that actually related to me, I was so captivated by the art and the design and I just, I was just kind of mindlessly drawn to it, you know? And I just think that that's so, that's what's so wonderful about art is that we're not always looking for it, but we're not always looking for the deeper meaning. But the mean deeper meaning finds us, you know, once we, once we see it or we see beauty in something.

MORGAN: So yeah, that's, that's one example I can think of and, and I try to think about that a lot when I'm, when I'm making what I make now because I think about how on social media, a lot of people, myself included, like where we, we get on social media, we're just kind of mindlessly scrolling and clicking through. Like we're not, we're kind of looking at things are kind of not, it's just like a habit. And I think about that with color and that's why I use a lot of color in my work. I'm like, there are times where people are probably scrolling through my Instagram story and then they're just not in the mood to read. You know? It's like maybe they've had a terrible day, but they're exhausted and they just don't feel like reading. But I was like, there's, but there's still something to, to color.

MORGAN: There's still something to seeing. You know, blue is a calming color. I love to use the blue for that reason. There's something to that in the same way with, with music it gets, sometimes you're not really mindfully listening to music, but it's playing in the background and it's encouraging you and it's soothing you, you might not even realize it. So I'm really fascinated by that and that's why I think it's so important that, that we, that we have beauty in the world and that if you're the kind of person who, who can even just paint a wall blue, like you don't have to be an artist to do that. If you're just painting a wall blue in your house, like just to, just to show like, yes, you are worthy of seeing something prettier or calm, you know, in the state.

JAMIE: I don't know if it's something new. I believe it is, but you've been creating, a sort of fill-in-the-blank things that where people can respond, they can, you're kind of creating these beautiful platforms for people to share parts of who they are and things they love. And uh, I know those exist in the world and online and have for a while. But it's been neat to see that from you. I think for me, thinking about To Write Love, it's one of my favorite parts of what we do when we do various campaigns throughout the year. I feel like each one doubles as a way to invite people to be vulnerable and to share parts of their story. And so I wonder what has that been like for you? And, and not only to create those, but to see the responses.

MORGAN: Yes. So I have always journaled. Like, my whole life, I've loved to journal ever since I was like eight years old. And I'm so grateful to have like all these logs essentially like where I've documented so much of my life story I can go back and read. And when I started talking to people about creativity and journaling, like I noticed a lot of people were saying like, I just don't have time. I don't know what to say. And then I found out about guided journaling and now it's kind of taken a form. I found out about guided journaling and you know, I knew about it for years and then I saw an Instagram where people were creating these Instagram story templates where it's like, what's your favorite food? Or you know, what's your favorite city to visit? And I was like, this is kind of like guided journaling in a way.

MORGAN: I was like, I wonder if there's a way to sort of bring, bring something else to it. Like a little bit more, you know, like on reflecting on your day and just like having gratitude for little things. So I was like, I wonder if people would, would take the time to do that. Cause a lot of times people don't feel like they have what it takes to sit down and feel if you journal, it can be intimidating. So I was like, but Instagram, people are already doing this. I wonder if people would be open to it. So I created one, I forget what the first one was called, but it was just focused on filling in the blanks essentially and like having gratitude for little things in your life. And a lot of people responded and I was just amazed. It was so encouraging because it was like, you know, I think, I think sometimes like, I'm an artist, I feel like I can say this.

MORGAN: Like I think sometimes artists can kind of make like making art or journaling look a little intimidating. I think sometimes people who maybe aren't doing it full time or maybe aren't artists at all, they might feel like, oh, I'm not on that level. But it was just cool to see people who were engineers or nursing students or just, you know, something not related to art at all. Like be creative on their Instagram story with us. So, I love making those because I just feel like it's, I feel like in just in a way the world could just use a little bit more of everybody just being a little bit more open and... Like, yes, we might have a template, but just creating something and showing your uniqueness, I think we, we could all benefit from that.

JAMIE: Yeah. And I think too it, it speaks to that desire we all have to be known. And so I think you're giving people a template for that. And so to me, I feel like that's part of why we all love sharing those things and then hopefully engaging and reading other people's responses. But to me that, I think it probably goes back to people even choosing to share stories with you is just

that desire that we have to be known. And so I feel like it's cool that that's another way that you're creating opportunities for people.

MORGAN: Yes, well, To Write Love on Her Arms has been very special in my life. Like I mentioned before, I still remember the exact moment I discovered what it was and ever since then I, you know, I can tend to be a little bit of a, a silent follower so I was a silent follower definitely in those early years, but I was so supportive of the mission and I just felt like a lot of things were being said that weren't being said at other places and it was just encouraging to read. And, it just continued. Like when I met you for the first time, I randomly had a Whole Foods parking lot in LA. It was just like, wow, like he is so genuine. It's like that's what I, that's what I would hope. And he is. And ever since then I was like, this is a genuine and, and it's so, and I was like, I feel the same way that I felt when I discovered it back in, I guess 2006 that would've been.

JAMIE: Yeah, the very beginning.

MORGAN: Yeah. It was 2006 and I was just so encouraged by that. So encouraged because you know, so much changes over the years and I was like, wow, this is... so obviously the organization has grown so much, I was like, this has been constant. That hope is still there, that encouraging genuine message is still there. And um, you know, when this invitation came, I just, I was just like, yes, absolutely. This is something that I believe in. I've believed in it for a very long time. And so that it just felt like it was meant to be. And then coming down here, same thing. And Florida's even hotter the California.

JAMIE: It's a big trip.

MORGAN: But I'm like, I'm coming, I'm coming. I was just like, freshman-in-college me finding out about this like yes, you are going. So I mean even up to like a few days ago I was asking my doctor, I'm like, are you sure I'm good, I'm good to go. It's like, yeah, you're good to go. So, um, yeah, it's, it's a huge, it's a huge honor. It really is.

JAMIE: That's so cool. We're so honored that, that you're here that you said yes, that you want to be a part of it. And I wonder, you mentioned that freshman in college and there are a couple of questions that we love to ask each guest and you can really pick the age. It could be your freshman-in-college self, it could be younger. But I wonder what would you say to that younger version of you?

MORGAN: I would say I'm thinking about a freshman-in-college Morgan. Um, you're not as alone as you think you are. And one of the biggest reasons why you might feel like you're alone is because there are a lot of other people here who are holding things in just like you're holding things in. And there's no easy answer for everybody to be vulnerable and share but just know that there are a lot of layers to the people you're around and there are a lot of layers to yourself,

so just have grace for yourself and you'll see in time that you're going to open up more and other people are going to open up more as well.

JAMIE: That's so good. I know you hear from people who are struggling and we've talked about that, you get those messages every day, but I wonder to someone listening right now who's in a dark place, who may be dealing with depression, anxiety, addiction, what might you say to someone in that place?

MORGAN: I think I would say that small improvements, small little things matter more than, you know, there might be a lot of pressure on you to recover at a certain pace or to, to get better because other people, and they may mean well, but sometimes we can put a lot of pressure on people to do things that they're just not able to do yet. But if you're waking up in the morning and you're breathing and you listened to one song that was encouraging or you just took one glimpse at the sunrise, like those small little things, like, that matters. That is a part of your growth, your healing and your progress just as much as the big things. And there might not be, people might not clap for those moments. They might not support you or they might not say, good job, you're doing so well, but they still matter just as much as the big things.

JAMIE: Last question. And it's a, it's a variation on what we usually ask because I'm sitting with you, I wonder to someone who's listening and they wonder, could my voice ever make a difference? You know, could I create things that matter? I wonder what you might say to that person who, who dreams of making an impact, but it feels almost impossible.

MORGAN: I would say focus on reaching one person at a time. It can seem like social media or the Internet is the only place to do it, but honestly it could be your grandma and then it could be your uncle. It can be your aunt, your cousin, and just make things for people one by one. And if you want, just copy the rest of the world on it, you know, document the journey of doing that. And you'll find that, like, you have the opportunity to connect with more people than you imagined when you focus on connecting one-on-one instead of trying to connect with a large number or audience.

JAMIE: Thank you so much for being here, for coming all the way to Florida. I am proud to know you, to be able to call you a friend. You are a friend to the organization and you are just a force for good, and you touch and inspire so many people every day. And so we're honored that you're a part of this family now, this community.

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LINDSAY: Thanks again to Jamie for this awesome conversation with our guest Morgan Harper Nichols. And a huge thanks to Morgan, who continues to move us and so many with her words and artwork. We encourage you to go check out her work at www.morganharpernichols.com, and we hope you'll follow her online. You can find her on Instagram at [@morganharpernichols](https://www.instagram.com/morganharpernichols) and on Twitter at [@morganhnichols](https://twitter.com/morganhnichols).

And finally, we hope you'll join us and see Morgan on stage at HEAVY & LIGHT this year. We'll be at the House of Blues in Orlando, FL on September 21. To learn more visit our calendar at twloha.com/events and click on HEAVY & LIGHT for tickets.

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LINDSAY: We hope each episode is a reminder that your story is important, you matter, and you're not alone. We understand that so many of you listening might be struggling or know someone who is struggling with the issues we've been talking about. We believe that help exists. Part of our mission is to connect people to the help they need and deserve. You can find local mental health resources on our website: twloha.com. That's t w l o h a dot com. Click the FIND HELP at the top of the page. Or if you need to talk to someone right now, you can always connect with our friends at Crisis Text Line. You simply text the word TWLOHA — that's t w l o h a — to 741741 and you'll be connected to a trained crisis counselor. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7.

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