

# Audio file

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## Transcript

Wynne Leon

Welcome to the sharing the heart of the Matter podcast, where we honor the Storyteller in us all. I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode I'm with my co-host Vicki Atkinson, and we are talking about identity in the unemployment office. One of the fascinating positions that Vicki has held is as a career counselor at the unemployment office. She gives us a glimpse into how the jobs we do. Become our identity by telling us the stories of some of the people who she coached. We talk about. How being a helper or a boss manifest even when someone is no longer doing that job? I love Vicki's powers of observation and ability to draw thru lines. Talents that show up when she writes tell stories and in the many professional roles she has played. So I know you'll enjoy the scenic and beautiful places we go when we share the power of story. We know you'll love it.

Vicki Atkinson

Hi, Vicky. Hi, Wynn. How are you? Good. What's up with you? You know, every week I look forward to our chats. We kind of like play ping pong where we trade, you know, this is what's happening or this is what's on my mind. And I've got something for you this week are.

Wynne Leon

Right. You ready? I'm ready.

Vicki Atkinson

OK, well, I think a lot of people know like in my other life, I I was. I am a counselor, but for a long time my groove was really doing career counseling and I loved it. Oh my gosh, was so much fun. But this week I was thinking about a couple of people that I worked with in my career counseling and the unemployment office days. Yeah, which? You know you can work in an academic environment. It's pretty calm.

Speaker

MMM.

Vicki Atkinson

Pretty predictable, yeah. But anyone who has ever had the, you know, the unfortunate misfortune, you know, needing to work through the unemployment process in office, it's it's kind of like going to the DMV. It's there's there are lots of hurdles and lots of things to do and this week.

Wynne Leon

Right.

Vicki Atkinson

You know, I'll share. I had a conversation with a former. The league that I worked with there and we started thinking about clients that we really enjoyed.

Wynne Leon

MHM.

Vicki Atkinson

And we're we're sometimes challenged by, but the the connecting thread for all of this with my friend is about how challenging it is. To continue to evolve in life with your various identities. Because our work identities are so often, you know, tied to who we are and and what we do. And then when instability strikes.

Speaker

Hmm.

Wynne Leon

MHM. MHM.

Vicki Atkinson

You know, obviously it's it's terrible for people, the financial challenges, but then also kind of the psychological threads about who am I.

Speaker

MHM.

Vicki Atkinson

Right, right. And the ego, I would imagine is is, you know, screaming for attention at that moment. Absolutely. And I think, you know, a lot of it in some ways parallels like grief process, where there is this compulsion to do some blame laying. And I would say.

Speaker

MHM.

Wynne Leon

MHM.

Vicki Atkinson

That you know, when people's heads are in that space. I mean, you can see it when they're in a place like an unemployment office because the they're fragile, they they can be aggressive at the

same time. But the the thing that I was talking with my my friend about is how easy it was at times to kind of see.

Wynne Leon

Yeah.

Vicki Atkinson

Even though we were in offices and working with individuals and small group. You get to know the regulars a little bit that are coming through and their their personalities sometimes are revealed in what they do in just a waiting room. There was one woman that we loved and I'm not gonna use any names here because I don't get anyone in trouble. But she compulsively rearranged the furniture. You know, she in the waiting area.

Speaker

Really.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, if she was moving things, she would like, tweak the alignment for flow. She would adjust the artwork if it was a little off in some way, you know? And and really it wasn't artwork at the unemployment office. It was, you know, crazy motivational, tacky posters mostly.

Wynne Leon

Hey.

Vicki Atkinson

But she she did it and and kind of couldn't help herself. And so we could make a game out of this. Do you wanna guess what her career? There was.

Wynne Leon

Will will. Was she an interior designer?

Vicki Atkinson

Ding, Ding, Ding. Yes, she was.

Wynne Leon

OK, that was easy. You just set me up with Vera.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, she was an industrial interior designer. So her her speciality was working in large office buildings.

Wynne Leon

Yes.

Speaker

MHM.

Vicki Atkinson

She knew a lot about flow, you know, and kind of good service. And, but you know, she would walk in. And while she was waiting, that's what she would do. So it's, you know, it was a preoccupation from her occupation. She couldn't separate. Yeah. So it's so obvious. And then there was a gentleman. She go ahead.

Wynne Leon

Well, I appreciate you giving me the soft pitch on that because that was a pretty easy one to hit.

Vicki Atkinson

Well, the next one I won't ask you because it's it's part of the story, but it it pulls at the heartstrings because there was a a sweet man who brought his laptop every day. Not unusual, you know, had his headphones and we got to know him and learn that he was riff.

Wynne Leon

OK. Hi. Hmm.

Vicki Atkinson

You know, a reduction in force is a music education teacher and so bless his sweetheart. He would sit there and and what he was doing, you know, we think was sort of self comforting, working on his music. He was doing compositions.

Wynne Leon

Hmm.

Vicki Atkinson

He had aspirations of, you know, doing a soundtrack for a movie he wanted to do ad jingles, you know, for Chicago ad agencies. So times sometimes we'd see him in the corner and he'd be kind of singing. You know. These perky little songs kind of working things out. But if we hadn't known. On what he'd done, you know for. A living right. It wouldn't have been hard to figure it out, right?

Wynne Leon

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Vicki Atkinson

But again, that that really close line between you know who you are and what you do. And then the other. So this brings home my friend's dilemma that she's currently dealing with. There was another woman who was was clearly. She had a position of power and influence, and every time she came in she was she had eyes on kind of evaluating employees and their performance just from what she could see from a distance. And she was focused on not the flow and the arrangement, like the

industrial interior designer. But she was focused on. And employee performance so it it doesn't take much to guess that, you know she was an HR trainer focused on customer service, but she would come in and people would just go, Oh no. Right. But these are the things that people did during their idle time. You know, when they had to just wait and it was scary. I think, you know, to be in that space. And so.

Wynne Leon

MHM. You're going to sort of differentiate yourself, but and and also it's again you're working out your, your. Current situation at the same time, right?

Vicki Atkinson

Right. And and I think you know there is there's a lot of judgment that goes on about not wanting to be one of those people you know and and for people that have gone through you know, recurrent kind of chronic job loss, it's it is a less you know a frequent thing you know but it happens.

Wynne Leon

Mm-hmm.

Vicki Atkinson

But I think it. It. Was an intention to try and self soothe but still reflect you know who, who these people were that they couldn't really separate.

Speaker

Mm-hmm.

Vicki Atkinson

So all of that was on my mind because I had a conversation with a friend who. Also, did you know career counseling? Once Upon a time with me. And she has. Since. You know, retired and she's living in this, you know, lovely new community with a woman who clearly was as a CEO in another life. She goes around telling people this. Right and. You know who she was and what she did in her prior life is still something that she's trying to make meaning out of. And so that loss of identity for her, she is very aggressive. She's trying to commandeer the canasta club, the dining out club. She's instituting rules and regulations.

Speaker

MHM.

Vicki Atkinson

And so my friend, you know who's the, you know, the former counselor is in a terrible position because if she were in her professional. Goal is she's reading, you know, the other participants that are stress.

Wynne Leon

Mm-hmm.

Vicki Atkinson

Fearful about this woman who's, you know, very antagonistic.

Wynne Leon

Mm-hmm.

Vicki Atkinson

She's reading all of this and taking it in, but has no role to play. She's just a member of the group. She's not the mediator. She's not the person that's trying to right make it right for others. And so I. Think. When I was talking with her recently, we joked about some of the people we once worked with and how difficult it can be. In your second life and your retired life, people that go through job transitions that.

Speaker

Yes.

Vicki Atkinson

That sense of loss. But this woman who's literally carrying around, you know, her former distinguished life of power, right. You know, in her purse is causing significant stress and heartache for a lot of other people.

Wynne Leon

Frank. Because nobody's paid to work for, right. Ohh, that's so fascinating. I mean, it's sort of almost it makes me think about the chicken and the egg, you know, did these people. People were there, these, you know, strained so strong within that they. That's how they found those professions, especially like the music teacher, composer. Obviously, he was working his passion.

Speaker

MM.

Vicki Atkinson

MHM.

Wynne Leon

And then the other you know, on the other side is it, you know that the CEO, she's, you know used to leading and her mode was power over people as opposed to power with people and.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah.

Wynne Leon

She got her validation that way. I mean, it's just fascinating to think. Hmm. Then your friend who's then, you know, has her job, her help, her role, that she, you know, also did as a career trying to sort it all out. I mean, as you said, that's just terrible position for her to be able to. PNC.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah. Yeah, but I think you said that so beautifully because people devote a lot of time and who they are, that development of self when they're in the working world. And the man who wanted to be in his head composing, he was thinking about things and music and you know, the creation and the abstract, the woman who wanted to move the furniture around was thinking about the physical world.

Speaker

Mm-hmm.

Vicki Atkinson

And what she could manipulate. And then the woman who was your armchair quarterbacking, you know, the customer service. She's looking at the people and their performance. You you can't help but see some of those like traits or preferences that people have about how they want to contribute. But there is that line that gets crossed where you're no longer valued for that skill.

Wynne Leon

Hmm. Right.

Vicki Atkinson

Right. And and when do you shut it down? Yeah.

Wynne Leon

Yeah. And how do you shut it down? Yeah, I think that might be the the bigger of the questions. You know, I've I heard a. Full quote and I think it's from Maya Shankar, who's a a neuroscientist, but she talks about change. Any change being a loss of identity, even if you're moving towards something that you want to be, which is retired, let's say or you know, loss that you don't want to be, which is unemployed.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah.

Speaker

Mm-hmm.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah.

Speaker

Mm-hmm.

Wynne Leon

That change comes with loss of identity because you're. You're having to. Switch out of how you've faced the world, how you've interfaced, and if you're not moving towards something, I think change is hard that way.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah. Yeah. And I think, you know, people are are intent whether they they focus on it or not of keeping the joy, whatever that is, that satisfaction that they get.

Wynne Leon

Mm-hmm.

Vicki Atkinson

And so much of the working world is about that external validation. I want to be relevant. I want to be seen. I want to contribute. So. You know and and how do you do that when your world starts to shift around you and and invariably you begin to feed on yourself if you're not careful. And it it, I think my opinion it makes people kind of act out in ways that might be out of the ordinary for them. Right. Right. But you know what? One of the things that strikes me as we talk about this is that.

Wynne Leon

MHM. MHM. Those of us who have multiple identities or or, you know, have fulfillment writing or being an author, you know, the one of the great things that I think I I receive is just the ability to observe, not necessarily play a role, but just watch how things play out and.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah.

Wynne Leon

Ah. How it lands and that curiosity, I think serves well as you change roles and change situations.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, yeah, definitely. And I was thinking when I was talking with my friend about one of my clients, of all my my clients and the, you know, career counseling days in the unemployment office, there's a a gentleman that I wrote about maybe 18 months ago named Carl, who chronically got fired for singing on the job. He was a night time janitor. You know? But he got fired for a dereliction of Judy, you know? Insubordination. But my favorite was unauthorized singing on the job. Yeah, but in another life, I think he could have been on Broadway. But you know his differences.

Wynne Leon

Right.

Vicki Atkinson



You know, in his joy and trying to be who he was, I think it's hard for people to keep looking for the right fit. Where will I be, where I can be respected for the things that I do. And I might be a little different. Yeah. Yeah. But when is different? Good. Yeah.

Wynne Leon

Yep.

Vicki Atkinson

You know, and even the crazy lady and the canasta playing right to to try and. Step back and go. She's not doing that just to be vindictive. There's something more there, and it's that power of observation that you're talking about.

Wynne Leon

MHM. Well, and it just you know, why can't you if you're a night janitor? Why can't you sing?

Vicki Atkinson

Well, the problem with Carl is that he didn't do any of his other stuff. I mean, he would go into this like, you know, fantasy place, right. And, you know, he'd be singing. Oklahoma was his favorite. And he would get, you know, the props out. And, you know, he's having fun. But he didn't empty the trash.

Speaker

Ohh. Hmm.

Wynne Leon

You know. Alright. Yeah, send it.

Vicki Atkinson

OK, you know? Ohh. See if he's done. All of that making more sense. Yeah. Ohh, Carl, I know. But he was. He was so delightful. And and I think also, you know, knowing what I know about my sister Lisa and working with others with, you know, developmental and intellectual disabilities. I think he had differences that weren't well understood. Maybe never tested.

Wynne Leon

It's.

Vicki Atkinson

Maybe not. You know, I don't think he ever received proper medical care and his family back story was real.

Wynne Leon

OK.

Vicki Atkinson

Challenging, I think so. My my heart ached for him, right, you know, and and I wonder about him. But as I think about all of that, those the three clients, my friend who's struggling with this woman who you know, wants to be the.

Wynne Leon

Mm-hmm.

Vicki Atkinson

Queen Bee of Canasta or whatever, and thinking about Carl, all of that brings me and you. And I love it when we trade quotes, but my all time and you'll have to, like check me on this my all time favorite quote.

Speaker

MHM.

Vicki Atkinson

Is that thought from Ram Das?

Wynne Leon

Hmm.

Vicki Atkinson

That that really we're we're, we're all just walking each other home, right. And so being gracious about the differences even when we get antagonized and trying to see people's back stories and react less but love more.

Wynne Leon

MHM, MHM. Mm-hmm. Right. Oh, that's beautiful. I love the way that you. Close that out all your incredible observations and then. Bringing it all to full circle with. We're walking each other home. Let's enjoy each other's back stories and and and try to maybe have a little bit of humor about our own.

Vicki Atkinson

Absolutely. And it's a far better way to wrap up than save the key than to save a key shared tales from the unemployment office. Right. Well, good stories and and and funny to think about. Yes. So thanks for letting me share.

Wynne Leon

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