



The Athena Wellness Podcast  
Episode 097 – Storytelling as a Wellness Practice with Nicola Davison  
December 12, 2021

00:05

Welcome to the Athena Wellness podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

00:30

Hello and welcome to Episode 97. Thanks so much for joining me.

I'm joined today by Nicola Davison, who is a mum, wife and journalist from New South Wales, Australia, who loves inspiring others to preserve their memories. She's the owner of [ForeverYoungAutobiographies.com](http://ForeverYoungAutobiographies.com), a website dedicated to helping people write their life stories so treasured memories endure for future generations.

After a decade's long career as a print journalist, Nicola now coaches others to plan, write, polish and publish their own life stories, big and small. And practicing what she preaches, Nicola recently helped her 100-year-old grandmother finish her autobiography.

Here's what we cover:

- The difference between memoir and autobiography;
- The elements of good storytelling;
- How writing can heal; and
- How storytelling can become a wellness practice.

We end this episode with our Dose of Inspiration segment where Nicola shares some of the things that are lighting her up these days. And as always, I'll put links in the show notes to those items, as well as Nicola's website, where you can access her blog, podcast and contact information.



And now onto the show. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

01:57 Kathy

Nicola, welcome to The Athena Wellness Podcast. Thanks so much for being here.

02:03 Nicola

Thank you for this opportunity.

02:06 Kathy

So please share a bit about who you are and what you do.

02:10 Nicola

Well, I'm a mum, a wife, a longtime print journalist, and founder of the website [ForeverYoungAutobiographies.com](http://ForeverYoungAutobiographies.com). And this is a place to learn how to write and self-published life stories for family and friends so that unique memories can live on. Basically, it supports a growing community of autobiography, memoir, biography and life story writers.

02:38 Kathy

Tell us a little bit about how and why you started the business.

02:42 Nicola

I've always been interested in stories, life stories. When I was younger, my parents actually moved in with my mum's mum for about nine years. And she was in her 80s at this time. So I had two mums at this stage. And she would share a lot about her life growing up on a farm, during the Great Depression, during wars.

And as I got older, I started hanging out at my dad's doctor's surgery and he had a lot of elderly patients. And they would always be curious about, "Who's this young person?" And they would saddle up to me and start talking about their lives. And there were some amazing stories. People who escaped revolutionary Russia, there's people who spent time as prisoners of war. So, I was getting a lot of these stories early on.



I was also drawn towards journalism. I went to university, got my journalism degree, came out as a print journalist. And for the next couple of decades, I spent my time here in Australia and also in England, working on papers. So shift after shift, I'd leave the newspaper office, hear the presses thundering away. I would be steeped in all of these different people's stories.

And often, the little gems of people's stories didn't always make the newspaper. And this always had me a little bit curious and intrigued about things that were in the background that, you know, might not be newsworthy, but were interesting to a different audience.

04:25

And so as I got older with my own kids, now I have two kids, I started telling them my family stories and it got me really, really involved in this idea. I was talking earlier to you, Kathy, off-air about my grandmother, she's now turned 101. But as my kids are being born, she's in her 90s.

And we live apart, probably about six hours apart by driving here in Australia. And she would be telling me about her births and her child rearing, it was so different. And I'd be ever the journalist on the phone, taking notes serendipitously. And then eventually, it got to the stage where I was like, you know, Grandma, we really should write this down. Because you're telling me everything and I know I've heard it several times before. But honestly, my retention, my baby brain, is not really good.

We were both busy and she had health issues. She wasn't home at that point. I think she was in her mid-90s. But over about 10 weeks, I regularly set a time to catch up with her after she'd had an early lunch and record these sessions. And we worked through her life. And there were a lot of decades to get through, I can tell you.

But we recorded it all. I transcribed it, compiled it with her. And we worked through a couple of drafts. And then actually had a finished book, something she could hold in her hands, her full life story. And we published that for family and friends. And that was in time for her 100th birthday.

And out of that project came this website. Because I had a lot of people coming to me, "Oh, you've done this book or you're recording these stories, how fantastic. How do you do



that? I want to save these memories, too, for my family.” Because once you start down this rabbit hole, there’s a lot that comes up.

So my website now has lots on it to help people learn how to write and self-publish these life stories for their family and friends. And that could be their own life story or, like what I've done with my grandmother, interviewing a loved one and helping them record their life story.

06:56 Kathy

And your website is so rich with information. I mean, there’s a wonderful blog that’s published. And the podcast. I mean, I listened to a bunch of those episodes and it was so, so helpful. They’re nice bite-sized pieces. It’s this, like taking what seems like an arduous process apart to make it manageable for somebody. Because it can, as you said, be quite overwhelming.

07:20 Nicola

That’s right. I mean, you don’t know what you don’t know. And I’m used to being a writer, but that doesn’t come naturally to everyone. But I do think it is a skill that you can practice and that people can do.

07:35 Kathy

Yeah, and there’s two things that came out of the story you just told that really struck me. The first was I can picture you as a young girl being in that doctor’s office with these folks coming in. And what a service to just witness the stories that these folks were telling you.

Because I find that especially in later years, that’s really what people are looking for, to have some validation of the life that they’ve lived and to be able to tell that story. And it really warms my heart to think about those folks that had those interactions with you.

And the question that I wanted to ask is: What was your grandmother’s response when you gave her that book when she actually saw it?

08:18 Nicola

Oh, yes. We actually had the final finished product for her on her 100th birthday. So that was back in 2020. So 2020 was a crazy time in the world. She was in a nursing home at



that point. And we had planned a really big party for her involving family and friends, which was a scaled back version to us on one side of the fence and her at the other side of the fence of this nursing home.

But we all turned up for the occasion and we passed the books over the fence. My uncle and aunt were inside the nursing home and they gave her the books. I was lucky. The staff at the nursing home allowed me in. So we had a very, very small amount of family in.

The year and the stress and worry and concern was... And then to be able to have some positivity coming out of it was just so overwhelming. And she was just thrilled to hold this book in her hands. She actually just treasures this book. She takes it in her wheeling walker with her. She doesn't let her leave her side.

And she was honestly in tears. She didn't know how to thank us and it meant the world to her that we were there for her - her kids, her grandkids and now great grandchildren.

I'm just so thankful that she's allowed me to do that. And I feel like we've created an even stronger bond by working through that life story for her.

10:05 Kathy

Ah, that is so beautiful, so beautiful. So for our listeners, let's start a little macro on the subject of storytelling. And let's start with the difference between, you had mentioned memoir and autobiography. What is the difference between those two?

10:22 Nicola

Yes, that's right, it does get a little bit confusing because terms are used interchangeably. But I like to define them simply as: an autobiography, it captures a full life story. So it usually starts at birth, but it includes details, events, feelings, lessons, struggles, and highlights - all about the periods of life. So that's from birth all the way to present and it may include background about parents and grandparents, etc.

Whereas a memoir, it targets one facet of time on the complete life. So this is where you zone down into, say, maybe childhood times, maybe it's when you're serving in war, or travel adventures. Then you get a biography, which is a life account, too, but it's written by



another person. So an autobiography is a full life story written by the person whose life it is. Same with a memoir written by the person whose life it is, but it's just a section.

11:32 Kathy

And can you give us some elements of good storytelling? So regardless of the form that it takes, what are some things that people should take into consideration as they're starting to form their story?

11:45 Nicola

We want to tell a good story, don't we? We want people to pick up our story or project in whatever format that is. We want them to be intrigued and start from that very first sentence and continue all the way through. We don't want them to get bored and turn off.

And I think, at the very, very beginning, before you've written any word, I think the storytelling comes down to knowing who are you writing this for? Having a really clear idea of your audience is absolutely key. So is it family and friends? Is it for wider publication? And it's okay to just write for yourself just to see how that goes. So it can be an audience of one.

Then I think you need to consider why you're writing. It's very hard to tell a good story if you haven't got that clear in your mind. So pause to think about why you want to start this project, and that will help energize your writing and to tell a good story. And you might, for example, want to tell for a number of reasons, that's okay. You might be just conveying basic facts of what went on, like who your ancestors were, when you were born, childhood, all the different stages of life. But it could be that you're writing because you're finding it satisfying. You know, you want to share a lot of stories or it can be healing or some people find it cathartic.

But most people, thirdly, want to write so that they're leaving this lasting legacy. So before memories fade or they're remembering those who've passed away. And it's an investment in the future, you know, you're showing how all lives are tied together. And it becomes this great heirloom as well.

13:33



So those are the key things I would highlight before you put pen to paper to get a good story is your audience and why you're writing.

If I can continue a little bit, I would say storytelling really does come down to putting the truth first. So make sure you have that really clear. Because readers will sense when we're offering up a sanitized, "Oh, it's rainbows and unicorns" version of what happened.

So, for a good story, you want to be as truthful as you can. Put truth first as much as you are comfortable with. And that can change over time as you go through drafts. But truth implies honesty, integrity and using evidence. So you're verifying facts, you're asking others, you might be deducting what happened and you've got to be a bit of a journalist, you gotta be persistent to find out those facts, too. So truth is very important.

And I mean, I could go on but just to keep it brief, also have some guiding theme or themes. And some people go, "Oh, that's a bit scary, you know, I'm not a writer, I don't need themes." And really a theme is just the message that you want to convey to your reader.

And believe it or not, all life stories have themes, and these are sometimes apparent when you're starting to write, but often you don't find them until you start writing. They come to the fore as you go along the process. And that's completely fine. It's basically themes, sort of like guiding signposts for a message. And it's like an anchor for your story. It helps you tune in the editing phase, what anecdotes stay in, what shorter stories you're going to keep, and what you're going to leave out. It helps you stay on track.

And we all know themes, like we're reading books and we're watching blockbusters and they all harken back to those themes. Most notably, we all know love stories, that's an amazingly big theme. I think probably the biggest theme. There's also ones like redemption, resurrection, the prodigal son or daughter, transformations, innocence, justice, friendships, fate, sacrifice. There's many, many different themes.

And I think that's really at the heart of good storytelling is having themes and letting them shine in your writing.

16:10 Kathy



Mmmmm. You know, as you mentioned, it can be very healing, but there's also a discovery process. So is there a favorite story that you have of a client who maybe thought that what they were writing was one thing or one theme, and they were either surprised or healed in some way by what they discovered just through the process of writing?

16:35 Nicola

Yes, and this is common. I recently talked to a memoir writer. He was an English man, actually, Joe Morris, and he's put out a book called *No Joe Bloggs*. But he fell into his writing projects through seeking care. So he was going to a facility and they encouraged him to write a short story, which he did. And then he got so involved in this project and sort of telling about his family and his childhood growing up in England, London, it really did evolve.

And he had been diagnosed with autism. But this certainly did not hold him back. He's a great writer. And his book allowed him to not only just affectionately look at his childhood memories growing up in Ilford in Essex and tales of London life, but his family were survivors of the Holocaust.

And it allowed him to work through those feelings, those suppose it would be trauma, and then pass that on to his children. So it really helped his understanding of it - it's quite emotional, it was very difficult for him. But he found a very powerful way of understanding his past.

18:04 Kathy

Wow, that's a beautiful story. And, you know, it also brings us to this idea of personal storytelling then becoming connected to the universal, right? Where others can find benefit, not just for family and friends, but it can go beyond that. So do you see that happening at times as well?

18:25 Nicola

Yes, it harks back to that idea of storytelling. And so I was lucky enough to have DNA to tell stories and recognize what would be trivial things to you or to others. But it's the way that you tell it and the way that you convey it. And I think we all do this inherently without knowing. Like, we will talk to people when we go down the street, when we're grabbing a coffee, when we're at a barbecue or bumping into people we haven't seen for a while, we





naturally tell things in a conversational style, in a storytelling style. And we relate those experiences, these personal experiences, universally. And it does come back to what I was talking about earlier about themes and these run through our lives. And I think that's what makes personal stories able to be connected to on a universal level.

19:23 Kathy

I also think that's why podcasts are so popular these days. I think of this podcast as gathering around a virtual fire because as you mentioned, I agree with you that storytelling is encoded in some way, you know, in our DNA.

The question that I have for you is have you seen the need, or more need, now that we've gone through this pandemic period where we've been in the sense of lockdown, this feeling of isolation? Do you see or have you seen in your business that there's more demand now to get these stories down, whether people are feeling isolated or they see how life can be fleeting and are trying to get their history down? Have you noticed any trends there?

20:09 Nicola

Oh yes, absolutely. I mean, the pandemic at its very nature, it has been, you know, this once in a lifetime event, you know, every 100 years, I think they estimate a pandemic. So you are in the thick of this historic moment. And the stories are coming from everywhere about how people, I mean, are surviving this pandemic, firstly, but how we're dealing with restrictions and lockdowns and day-to-day and the way that our normal has shifted and morphed into a new normal of how we go about our lives.

Of course, it's worth writing about because this will become something people will look back on in, say, 100 years, "Oh, that's how it was." So we definitely have something to share and record about that as an historical event.

But this time has also been incredibly stressful from an emotional and mental health perspective for a lot of people. I mean, Sydneysiders have been in lockdown, now I'm pretty sure it's up there as the longest lockdown in history of this current pandemic, so months and months. And they, you know, had such a long stretch of being isolated, just with the people in their household, no one else.



And so I think writing can help through these tough times. It does help us escape negativity. It helps you forget, just for a moment, what's going on in the world out there. And it gives you that chance to redirect your energy into something positive and lasting, transporting yourself to happier, more joyful times.

And the fact that you're writing a life story means that yes, you're going to probably have to call other relatives and ask them to fill in some blanks or double check facts and events. So you're going to reconnect with loved ones. And you're going to maybe make this a weekly event, like I did with my grandmother. So you're checking in with them and talking about these things and looking forward to connecting you in these troubled times. There's quite a bit to come out of the pandemic with writing and then connecting and sharing stories.

22:32 Kathy

Yeah, and that's storytelling as a wellness practice - as a connecting wellness practice. I love that. That's a beautiful way of thinking about it.

As you mentioned before, this can seem like a very big and daunting project. But if you've got your why, which is the clarity that you mentioned, first. And now you've got, it almost gives you an excuse to call some folks that maybe you know, it falls down the to do list, and to actually connect in some meaningful conversations, which is just like you did with your grandmother.

What is your writing practice like these days? Sometimes when this is our business, it's hard for us to do it. But now that your grandmother's book has been published, are there other projects that you're excited about?

23:19 Nicola

Oh, yes, I do have a long list of family that, you know, I'm keen to get writing with. Some are, not quite ready for that yet or they're doing it on their own, and that's fine. I like that.

My writing, of course, I've got my day job. But I'm also, with the website, heavily involved in writing for this. I have a weekly article about different topics. So that can be case studies with people who've written their life stories. We also do book reviews about award winning



life stories. Then there's some classes and I have some free video teachings on there as well. So that keeps me very busy.

I have learned as a journalist to write anywhere. I survived a Category Five cyclone when I lived in Queensland. And a Category Five is the top of the scale, I'm not sure how...

24:19 Kathy

Yeah, oh, yeah. Oh, that translates.

24:24 Nicola

So yeah, we had no power. And you know, my neighbor, who's quite ingenious, rigged up my laptop to a solar panel on the front lawn. And I was able to type up a first hand account for the daily newspaper at the time I was working for. And, you know, you can learn to write anywhere. But these days a lot settles. I have young kids, so I get up probably about six and I actually do some Tai Chi, a little bit of meditation, and then I sit down and I do a writing session. I have a bit of a stretch until I get interrupted by little feet.

25:12 Kathy

Well, I have to tell you, I feel like a little bit of a wimp because we had a Category One, which was Superstorm Sandy, that took New York out of commission for weeks. And I was not thinking of writing through that. And you went through a Category Five. (laughs) So I have to reassess my writing priorities here. Wow, that's impressive, Nicola.

25:33 Nicola

Oh, no, yeah, it was a crazy time, I can tell you. Yes. I don't need to repeat in a hurry, I can tell you.

25:44 Kathy

Yeah, yeah, exactly. All right, well we always wrap up these sessions with something I call a Dose of Inspiration, which is a quick Q&A to have the listeners get to know our guests a little bit better.

So let's start with, you mentioned some, I think I know what you're going to say, but let's toss it out there - what's a favorite wellness practice or recent wellness win?



26:07 Nicola

Well, living here in Australia, we have some fantastic coastline. And I have been brought up surfing from a very young age. So the ocean is my wellness. I think when I first came home from hospital, my dad, crazy as he is, took me down to the beach and put me in it. So I feel like this is part of my identity.

So I love going to the beach, specifically surfboard riding. And I have some great headlands near where I live, so I can hear the surf and it often beckons me down each day to go for a surf, go for a swim, go for a walk. And when there's whales and whale babies swimming past, I mean, who doesn't want to go and look at that?

26:51 Kathy

Exactly. That's a wonderful wellness practice. That's perfect. I love it. I love it. What have you read or listened to lately that you enjoyed?

27:03 Nicola

Ah, yes. Each year I get a short list of books that I'd like to read, obviously life stories. And I picked some award winners to share with my readers on my website. And I've just finished, yesterday actually - it's an American book, it's *The Dead Are Arising*. It's the life of Malcolm X, by Les Payne and Tamara Payne. And it was the winner of the National Book Awards 2020 for nonfiction. Really powerful work.

And I must admit. being Australian, I hadn't heard a lot about Malcolm X. So, I mean, we hear about other leaders over there around that time, but hadn't really dove into his life at all. And it was really, really fascinating.

27:58 Kathy

Yeah, absolutely. I'll link that up in the show notes. What new thing or experience are you looking forward to trying?

28:07 Nicola

Ah, yes, I have a bit of travel in my genes, as well as the whole ocean, love of the ocean. And my husband too. We like to get out and about. Obviously with the pandemic, even locally, we've had new restrictions.



So we are really looking forward to getting out and about on a road trip with our kids. I have two kids, a boy and a girl, and we'd like to take them to show them other parts of Australia. So I'm really looking forward to opening up, more freedoms, being able to travel and do things as a family.

28:43 Kathy

Hmm, beautiful. Let me ask you, if we took money, time and the pandemic out of the equation and you could road trip anywhere with your family, where would you go and what would you do?

28:55 Nicola

Ah, yes. I'd like to do a hot lap of Australia, that's what we call the ride around the edge. And I have family in Tasmania, so definitely pop down there. But going further afield, I would definitely like to take the kids to see some of the big waves, big wave surfing, we've got some great ones here in the Pacific. And my husband, he loves his barbecued meat, so I think we would be heading over to America to have a bit of a taste down south there, making me hungry already.

29:35 Kathy

(laughs) That's good and you haven't even had breakfast yet, so that's awesome. What has you feeling inspired these days, what's lighting you up?

29:44 Nicola

I think definitely family. The fact that we're coming out in the pandemic, that is so, that's a great feeling, isn't it, to be hopefully on the other side of that - that's really inspiring.

And, of course, writing. I love hearing people's stories. That really lights me up. And I'm just so happy to help people record them for themselves, for their family or for a wider audience.

30:13 Kathy

Excellent. And then lastly, as you look toward the future, what has you feeling optimistic?

30:20 Nicola



Ah, look, I like to think there's a feeling of change. That things, things are moving faster all the time. And I think that I'm hopeful that moving faster will be directed towards our environment.

Like I said, I'm surrounded by the water and by bush and we have a lot of natural disasters here in Australia. Like, I'm not sure if there was coverage, but we've had crazy, crazy bush fires and floods, and we've had a real run of it. And each summer you kind of, you almost feel cringey. What pending disasters are we going to have this year?

And I think I'm really optimistic. I'm like that glass is half full person. I'm optimistic in our youth, in innovation and technology. That, yeah, we're gonna get on top of this environment issue. We're going to help our poor Mother Earth, we need to reestablish that balance. And so I'm hopeful that we have these bright people, these younger generations and older generations. I hope that we can have incredibly smart people who I work with every day to make and create and ensure a brighter future for all of us.

31:39 Kathy

Hear, hear. Wonderful. So I'm sure we've got listeners that are probably listening in the car as they're taking a drive and saying, "You know, I've been wanting to do this, write my story, for a long, long time." How might they be able to get in touch with you, Nicola, and learn more about you and the services that you offer?

31:57 Nicola

Well, a great place to start if you're in a car is to look up my podcast. It's a podcast, Forever Young Autobiographies. It's on all your podcast players. And it's short snippets, bite-sized about things I talked about, whether that's a short class, or it's about a book or someone else's journey of writing and completing their life story. So I encourage you to listen to the podcast. And if you're keen, then head over to the website [ForeverYoungAutobiographies.com](http://ForeverYoungAutobiographies.com).

32:32 Kathy

And I'll link all of that up and I can attest that the podcast really is wonderful, highly recommended. Such a wonderful conversation. Thanks so much for joining me, Nicola, much, much appreciated.



32:43 Nicola

Thank you for having me.

32:47

Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.

If you'd like to access the show notes, have a question you'd like addressed on a future episode, or would like a transcript of this episode, visit [www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast](http://www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast).

Until next time, be well!