

EPISODE 115

[0:00:02.2] SN: The writers that have changed my life are not the ones who have written perfectly crafted, beautiful images of themselves for me to enjoy. They're the ones who have said things with an honesty that shocked me and that made me feel seen and not crazy and not alone. That's my calling, that's my jam, that's my promise to a reader."

[INTRODUDCTION]

[0:00:36.4] AT: Welcome to The Portfolio Life Podcast with Jeff Goins. I'm your host Andy Traub. Jeff believes that every creative should live a portfolio life. A life full of pursuing work that matters, making a difference with your art, and discovering your true voice. Shauna Niequest found success and then found herself empty. In her own words, "The inside of my life was not thriving and growing the way the professional and public part of my life was."

In this episode, she talks about how she overcame the ambition and the responsibility of hustle and learned that safety and security don't come from what we earn. She made the decision that the thing she thought was her calling wasn't her calling. If it was going to take away from the life she wanted to live. Shauna's wisdom runs deep.

Here's Jeff Goins and Shauna Niequest.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:01:33.4] JG: Shauna, welcome to the show, again. Welcome back.

[0:01:36.1] SN: Thank you, thanks for having me.

[0:01:39.2] JG: I just want to jump in here, you've written another amazing book, thank you for that, thank you for your dedication and commitment to the craft. You're one of my favorite writers because I think you're a serious writer in a time of not so serious writers, maybe?

[0:01:54.7] SN: Thank you, that means a lot, my husband teases me that I really am like an old school — like I read old books and it really matters to me and I have extended conversations about sentence structure. So that means a lot to me.

[0:02:06.9] JG: You're somebody that I followed for a long time in part because I'm always fascinated with what you're reading. I remember, in fact, the first interview I did with you which was like some video interview we did a long time ago. I asked you what you're reading and you're like, "I'm reading this book, it's really interesting, it's a novel, it's called *The Help* and it's about," — I'm like, "Oh cool, that sounds interesting," and then like whatever, two years later, whatever the movie came out and that's something that I respect about you is you get the good books before I think everybody else finds them.

[0:02:41.4] SN: Oh, that's a nice thing to say. I am just a totally incorrigible book worm. Things I could not live without, I could not live without books.

[0:02:50.3] JG: Where did you get your reading habit from?

[0:02:53.4] SN: My mom. My mom was and is an avid reader and she taught me to read when I was really little and she read to me a lot and specifically read the classics. So I am old school — we both are re-readers of certain series that we love and my dad's a reader as well and books, since I was a little girl have always been kind of my greatest medicine.

[0:03:17.0] JG: Yeah, I love that. Are you like a library person or do you have to buy books or does it not matter?

[0:03:23.5] SN: I used to be a library person. This is wildly overstating of course, especially in terms of like medical care or whatever, but I may think our greatest technological advancement is the Kindle app because I have always been a person who lived with like an irrational fear of running out of books. If we went on vacation, we go to this like lonely remote places where you're not going to find like a Barnes and Noble.

I would ship boxes of books ahead of time because vacation for me is not vacation if you don't have like a massive amount of books or I would have to like pay extra at the airport because of

all the books in my bag. So now, the fact that I can literally have like every book in the world on my phone, it is a dream scenario for me. It was made for people like me.

[0:04:12.7] JG: how do you like just read one book? That's always my issue is with the kindle or my iPhone, I'm like, "Oh this is good." But I've got 300 other books on here and I'll just go peak into this one.

[0:04:24.3] SN: I read a lot of different books at a time but I do that with hard copies as well. I kind of have like a "current bookshelf" next to my bed. There's probably 30 books in that and there's probably 10 different books on my Kindle app that I'm reading right now. I read different things for different times. There are times when I like an essay format, there's times when I want a narrative and so I skip around a lot.

[0:04:47.8] JG: So do you do this thing and I hear lots of people talk about, which is when they're writing a book, they're not reading any other books because they don't want to steal somebody's style? Did you hear that?

[0:04:57.7] SN: No, I read voraciously especially when I'm writing. But I will say the limit I put on myself when I'm — I think I do the opposite, I read really good writers in the hope that they make me a better writer. I'm a little bit picky when I'm trying to get good writing done. I do find that it reflects a little bit on the page and so if I'm reading what I would say rather low quality writing, I can feel it in my own writing and I would say I am like an old school long format person.

Too many, 250 word posts and my brain starts to feel kind of mushy but if I can get into a long complicated novel, and I'm a book person. The format that I prefer as a writer is definitely the book. I like having enough time to get to know each other a little bit, I like to be able to not have to resolve every conversation really quickly. I like for themes to be able to develop over a couple of hundred pages as opposed to getting everything crisply out there in one post. So the book format, both as a reader and as a writer, is really important to me.

[0:06:02.2] JG: Yeah, I heard somebody say this and I thought this was true that a book is like one idea or story of course, but it's like one deep dive into a single idea whereas a blog or

something, it's sort of a smattering of a bunch of little — like dipping your toe into a bunch of different ideas and I love that idea that a book is a great way to get to know an author.

[0:06:27.4] SN: Yeah, I mean I feel that, I feel a total sense of friendship. When you've spent a couple of hours or a couple of days with someone's words. You feel a connection to them and I totally do that thing where I meet an author that I admire and I'm like, "I think we're best friends." I totally feel that.

[0:06:44.6] JG: Yeah. Who are some contemporary authors that you're looking up to right now?

[0:06:52.7] SN: Oh there's so many, let's see. Well, Glennon Melton has a new book coming out in September that is absolutely unbelievable. Her skill in communication is through the roof. She writes a lot about her, in this book, she writes a lot about her adolescence and kind of the things she perceived about the world as a young adolescent woman and I felt like I've rarely occurred someone articulate what I felt as a young adolescent so well. So I think she is unbelievable.

I think Sarah Bessey is doing some of the best writing out there right now. Again, I think the quality of her language, just it really moves me. Jonathan Martin, his new book, *How To Survive A Shipwreck*, again, he's a poet. So here's the deal: my husband is like 100% content, "Did their ideas expand my brain?" I am a language form, feeling, detail, "Was I moved by the way that they used language?" So those are three I would say that they used language in a way that really moves me.

Then in a different realm, Jenny Rosenstrach who writes the blog, *Dinner: A Love Story* has a cookbook out next month called *How To Celebrate Everything* and that is just so up my alley. I'm so excited about that. Those are a couple that I'm pretty excited about right now.

[0:08:04.9] JG: Yeah that's fun. Like I said, I learned so much just from hearing who you're reading so I love that. You're somebody who has that poetic grasp where you communicate great ideas but you also communicate them really beautifully and so I learned that from you so I love to hear who you're learning from.

[0:08:24.1] SN: Oh thank you.

[0:08:26.5] JG: So your latest book, *Present Over Perfect*, for those who are unfamiliar, I think of you as a memoirist, is that sort of the genre that you feel that you've fallen to as well?

[0:08:37.6] SN: Yeah, I think memoir is sort of a loaded word, people love it, people hate it. I tend to just talk about narrative in that I'm always telling a story and that mine is the only one I know how to tell, you know? So it's not like my life is particularly interesting, and it's not. I'm a writer not because I think my life is interesting or because I think I have something big to say to the world. I just like doing it. I actually just like the craft of figuring out words and sentences and images. I just really enjoy it. So I don't think it's because again, that I need like a megaphone for my truth. I just like the actual typing part.

[0:09:13.0] JG: Yeah, I agree. There's this quote, "I hate writing, I love having written." And I suppose that's true for some people, but like the thing where it's like, "I'm not going to read anything while I write." That doesn't resonate for me. Like you, I am trying to read as much possible. I'm just trying not to steal from any single person but if I steal from enough people then maybe it becomes a little bit more original and sort of cobbling that together and the thing about hating writing but loving having written. I love writing. It's not always easy, it's painful but I do enjoy it. I feel like I better understand what I think about things once I've written them.

[0:09:51.2] SN: Oh absolutely. We sometimes talk about things in terms of good hard and bad hard. Writing for me is good hard. It's challenging and it forces me to be more disciplined than I would normally be, it forces me to spend more time alone than I would normally choose. It forces me into more quiet and to more contemplative spaces but that's all good work for me.

So it's hard but it's good hard and then there are other parts of work life or regular life when you sense like, "I think this is not bringing out the best in me hard. This is grinding away the best of me." But writing has never been that for me. I'll write forever and ever, whether not anybody wants to publish it. It's part of the way I will always live.

[0:10:29.8] JG: Yeah. Last time you were on the show which gosh I guess was a year and a half or two years ago. We were talking about some choices that you had made, just things you

had said no to, right? Like blogging all the time, traveling and speaking all the time. You were just at this point in your life in your career where you were becoming more confident in what your craft was and was not and a lot of that seemed to have to do with family and just the commitments that you'd made to your community, your group of friends, your church and certainly your boys.

So this new book, *Present Over Perfect*, like all of your books is you kind of just telling us what's going on in your life and I love that it's a lot of just normal life stuff but there are these amazing observations about truth and life and lots of wisdom. So what was going on when you were writing this book and why was it maybe different from previous books?

[0:11:32.1] SN: Well it's interesting that you say that. You're right, the book is very much about normal life, it's about playing basketball in the drive way and bedtime and dinner time and really normal, ordinary stuff that I had not had a chance to do enough of over the last couple of years. I am a person who really loves, like I'm a tactile blood and guts, real life, unvarnished person. I think ordinary life is spectacular and interesting and multi-faceted and I don't think every experience we have has to be like sitting at the Eiffel Tower in order for it to be great.

But all of a sudden I find myself, this great lover of kind of quotidian days. I found myself living more and more of my hours and my days in green rooms and at the gate, at the airport and in hotel rooms by myself watching CNN, eating a club sandwich from room service and I realized my life has essentially gotten really boring. It looks maybe exciting on the outside, maybe? But on the inside, every green room is the same and every hotel room is the same and every airport gate is the same and the rich daily ordinary, wonderful life. I wasn't there for very much and I regretted that.

Many people might look at my life and be like, "Yeah, that's like what we do, we just like play basketball with our kids, that's what it's like to be a grown up." But it wasn't for me for a long season. Now I take great delight in really simple things like the routine of bedtime. The different funny little things we do throughout the day because I missed too many of them because I believed that I had to hustle every day for my value on the planet and that I had to be known as a good responsible, capable soldier. It wasn't necessarily even as much about personal

ambition as much as it was about wanting to be loyal and responsible so that I wouldn't disappoint anyone.

[0:13:30.2] JG: By the way, while you're saying that, I had to Google quotidian day. Just keeping it real.

[0:13:36.9] SN: Yeah, never plain talk. Sorry.

[0:13:39.9] JG: No, it's good.

[0:13:39.7] SN: English major.

[0:13:41.6] JG: No, you're making me smarter while feeling dumber. Where did that come from? That pressure to hustle and perform and push yourself beyond where you necessarily needed to go?

[0:13:56.1] SN: Well I think it's a couple of different things, I grew up in an environment of really high capacity people doing really interesting things and I just assumed that if you got those opportunities, you took them, you just did. If you have the chance to help, if you have the opportunity to do something meaningful, if you can be a part of something larger than yourself, you just do.

And I didn't ask a lot of questions about the cost along the way, and I didn't ask a lot of questions about my personal capacity or my preferences or it just felt like if the opportunity is there, you take it. I think, I thought — I had the sense that it was really exciting and that I should love it. Then it took me a couple of years to realize it doesn't matter if other people think it's exciting if you don't actually really enjoy the thing you're doing, it's not very valuable. right?

But I felt guilty saying that because I had so many friends who wanted to do really similar things and it looked good from the outside, but it didn't just not feel me up, it scrubbed away some parts of myself that I really loved and missed and it took me along time to catch up with that.

[0:14:57.6] JG: It's hard, right? Because, I don't know about you, but I feel this sort of conflict when I'm doing this things that everybody's going, "Go you." Like what do they say? Like, "You're killing it and you're a total rock star now," and all this stuff that's sort of puffs up the ego and I look at what other people are doing and if I sort of step back from that, I'm settling or I'm not legit anymore and that's really hard.

[0:15:24.1] SN: Well and I think one thing that's so helpful for me, Glennon Melton always says this, "The thing to keep in mind is that there's no there or there." Whatever person you're watching and you're like, "You know what? When I get to his level or her level, I am going to wake up every morning with such a deep sense of groundedness and gratefulness, a sense of my own value on this planet." It just doesn't come from that outside stuff, that sense of love and safety and security and being valuable on this earth just doesn't come from what we earn.

And I think a lot of people know that, they're like really good first grade teachers and really good paediatricians and really good whatever's. Who never expected their job to do all that stuff for them. But you start getting into like any sort of public work and all of a sudden it is, there is this narrative that it is supposed to — that no matter what it costs, the admiration of people out there will fill up everything all the wounds you acquired along the way. Maybe for some people it does, it just doesn't for me. So this isn't like I'm a hero, I just didn't like it that much.

[0:16:36.6] JG: Yeah right, I can relate to that. Was there a wakeup call for you where you realize the thing that you were striving for wasn't the thing that you actually wanted?

[0:16:45.4] SN: I think there is a wakeup call when I realized yes, I thought that if I said yes enough times to speak at enough events, I would finally be allowed to stop. But the system actually works the opposite way, right?

[0:16:58.2] JG: Right.

[0:16:59.5] SN: If you keep doing it and putting everything you have into it and trying really hard to do a good job to serve the people you're working for, other people will ask you and I was like, "Oh no, no, we're moving the wrong direction." It ended up just for me having to say it's personal, it's psychological, it's theological. One of the things I had to say was, "I don't believe

this is my calling if it takes so much out of my actual life, because I think that's a part of my calling too."

[0:17:27.8] JG: Right.

[0:17:28.8] SN: I think there is this false damaging narrative that if it works for people out there, it doesn't matter what it costs you on the inside. That's not theology, that's market demand. Those are two really different things. So I became very aware that the inside of my life was not thriving and growing the way the professional public side of my life was and that's not okay with me. So we sort of said, "I'm going to get off this moving train, I'm going to regroup and I'm going to find a new train that's better suited to my values and my personality."

[0:18:07.7] JG: Can you describe that train?

[0:18:09.6] SN: The new train?

[0:18:10.3] JG: Yeah, the new train.

[0:18:11.5] SN: Yeah, I would say the new train — so for example, we're going to do this tour in the fall, which sounds kind of crazy right? I just spent 20 minutes telling you how badly I don't ever want to do it again.

[0:18:20.9] JG: Like a book tour.

[0:18:22.6] SN: Right, a 12 city tour. But a woman called me and her name's Amy and she said, "I totally know about you. I know your jam, I know you don't want to travel anymore, I know you don't want to be on a speaking tour but let me tell you what we've built along the way," and she described to me essentially exactly what I had articulated to Aaron like two years go without — you know how you just like sit around and you're like, "This is never going to happen but wouldn't it be cool?"

So I told Aaron, "I can't do this sitting alone in a green room thing anymore. It just, it's not — it feels so outside of my normal life, you know?" I said, "But if I could ever be a part of a group of

women like we already care about each other. We know each other's kids, we know each other's husbands, we've been through hard things together. If we built something together so that every time I leave this little family and home, I'm going to meet an extension of that family and home and we're building something valuable together, like I could do that, I could totally do that," and then we just never talked about it again.

Then Amy called and she said, "I'm putting together this group of women and the reason I'm reaching out to you is because like I think you'll do a decent job but I also know that these are people that love you and that you love and so when we say we're building something together, it isn't just nice to meet you back stage. But that this is actually, there's a fabric of community that unites you." So that changes everything for me.

If we can be a part of something, if the work you're doing doesn't take you totally outside of the world that matters to you but is an extension of it, that feels really healthy to me. So I'll leave on Friday's and I'll come back on Saturday's and while I'm there, I'll be with the women that I talk to throughout the week anyway. I'll be with the women that I text six times a day every time I have a parenting question anyway. That feels really exciting to me.

[0:20:05.7] JG: Yeah. That's cool.

[0:20:06.7] SN: But that's an example of, I wouldn't have done it unless it was built on those values. I finally feel like I have the authority to say no. Which also then gives me the authority to say yes really freely. Nobody twisted my arm into this and I have the time and the space that I needed, I got to ask the questions I wanted to ask, I got to beat the team and five years ago I would have said, "Yes, thank you, what can I bring?" To be able to say, "This is a maybe for me. Let me check this out but it's a no if it doesn't square with the values that I'm living with this days."

[0:20:39.7] JG: So question that I have because this idea of being present is certainly more of a buzz word, there's a lot of cache in our culture about it. We realized that we're moving quickly and people are yearning for simplicity and being fully focused on fewer things, especially relationships. You know, in the age of social media and smart phones, there's lots more distractions.

My question is this: is this something that you can do at any stage in life or is this something that you, being present I mean, something that you have to earn? Because last time we talked, you told me this funny story about being invited to a younger women's conference and somebody was saying like, "Yeah, we need older women to be guides and help us navigate life," and you're like, "Yeah, we do!" And you're like, "Oh, I'm that person."

[0:21:32.8] SN: I'm the older woman! Totally, yeah.

[0:21:35.1] JG: So I'm wondering, as your kids grow up and as you find out what you want to do and what you want to say no to and it does kind of seem to me to be an aspiration of younger adulthood to say yes to everything and do lots of things. So is this a season of life thing or is this something that you can and should cultivate wherever you are in your journey?

[0:21:58.5] SN: So I'm about to be 40, and so I would just say like shamelessly, this is totally like my midlife book. This is my "I've done life one way for a long time and there's some new things I want to leave behind in my 30's and there are some things I want to pick up and carry with me for the next season of my life." So I would say, absolutely.

One hand yeah, this is completely like, "Oh you're a mom in the suburbs with two kids," right? It's that book. But I am that. On the other hand, I do think that social media especially gives us the opportunity to tell a story of perfection that does not exist and that's a very seductive thing. I remember. Remember like a million years ago when only bloggers had blogs and they weren't that many of them?

[0:22:47.2] JG: Yeah, and if you had a blog, that was remarkable.

[0:22:51.2] SN: Yeah, it was like, even before Facebook, it was like there is this weird group of us. Think about like 50 years ago, there is a tiny group of people called writers that told stories about their life to people they didn't know, right? Okay, so writers used to do that. Then bloggers used to do it. Now, every single person with a phone does it.

So it used to be a particular challenge for writers to square their narrative with the reality of their life. Then it became, and remember, the blogging conversation about like, “Oh my gosh, lifestyle bloggers, how do their kitchens all look like that?” Then now, it’s every person everywhere, it’s like my 11 year old baby sitter is telling a story through her Instagram about who she is and what she cares about in her life.

I think it’s great in a lot of ways. I think it’s really fun, it’s a fun way to be connected, it’s a fun way to see different glimpses of the world in other people’s lives. But I think the danger is, there is so much safety and control that you retain when you’re telling the story and you decide to filter and you decide the language. I mean I could post a picture that tells you I’m sitting in front of the Taj Mahal right now, right?

You would believe me because I have a picture of it. But I don’t have to show you that I am struggling with my mental health this summer or that I have been sick a lot or that my table is covered with stuff I should have cleaned up three days ago and it just looks like a bomb went off. So those are things you don’t get to control when you’re actually present with people.

If you were walking into my house, you might notice that I was sick because I’m like taking a handful of supplements or whatever. You will see my ugly table. Real life exposes us to being seen in ways that social media life does not because we control how and when we’re seen and in what context. Especially for those of us who’s jobs or whatever require that we spend a lot of time telling a story either online or in books.

I think we’re the ones that need to double down on being extremely present and extremely intentionally authentic in our real lives. I think we need to make sure that we are standing on a very, very firm foundation of being known and known well and extremely present to a small group of people or the distance between the story you’re telling about yourself and the life you’re actually living grows just a little bit more every day and that’s a dangerous place to be.

[0:25:21.1] JG: Yeah, that’s well said. So this was something that you were living and it seems to me that you tend to live these themes and then write about them and I’m sure you’re probably writing about them while you’re living them. But I remember having this conversation with you a

couple of years ago and now we have this book to prove it and part of that is it takes like two years to write a book.

Tell me, because I just think it's so fascinating to hear about how other writers take these ideas and this is your life or a piece of your life and a lesson that you've learned and turned it into a book. What does that look like for you? I'm just curious. Tell me about the translation process from "I'm living this thing" because you talked about good hard and bad hard. You write about hard things.

You've written about some beautiful things like cooking cobbler or something, baking cobbler but then you've written about miscarriage and really challenging stuff in life. This sounds like some of the hard stuff, being present. So how do you go from living something that can be hard and challenging to writing about it?

[0:26:24.0] SN: I guess I just believe so deeply in the relationship between the reader and the writer and the ways that that has healed me as a reader. So I made a set of decisions when I first decided to become a writer and it was essentially the writers that have changed my life are not the ones who have written perfectly crafted beautiful images of themselves for me to enjoy.

They're the ones who have said things with an honesty that shocked me and that made me feel seen and not crazy and not alone. So that's my calling, that's my jam, that's my promise to a reader. It would be much easier to just not do it, right? You don't really get that much, it's only valuable to me if it actually makes people feel less crazy and less alone.

So that's the conversation I'm always having. I will tell you anything about my journey if it helps you on your journey. That's what this is about. It's about the relationship, kind of that sacred thing that happens between a writer and a reader.

[0:27:28.0] JG: That was a hard question, so you did a good job with that. What's an example? You said, you've experienced this, your favorite writers are people who didn't portray themselves as perfect, what's an example of somebody you've read that's done that for you?

[0:27:45.7] SN: I think the first two that come to mind are Anne Lamott and Lauren Winner.

Anne Lamott, when she first started writing or when I first started reading her writing on faith, it's literally like someone put a window where there just was a wall before. I hadn't heard someone talk about faith in such a vulnerable, beautiful, fragile, challenging way.

I feel like Lauren Winner does that really well. She writes about faith in a complicated way. It's not all easy, it's not all light. It's light and dark and complicated and smart and those two especially have really inspired me to work harder and harder to present that and it always feel like there's a whole vein of Christian books that if they work for you, wonderful, I love it. More power to you.

I didn't grow up connecting with those books. I wanted the old books, the weird books, the dark books, the shockingly honest books and I want to create something a little more in that vein because of how much it benefited me along my journey.

[0:28:56.5] JG: Tell me what it means for you to not fixate on being a perfect writer?

[0:29:00.8] SN: Oh that's hilarious. I am so far from being a perfect writer.

[0:29:06.4] JG: But you're a good writer, you're really good writer and you take your craft really seriously. So I appreciate the humility but I am fascinated like when is something good enough for you and when you make the decision to make it better and better and better? Because you write this beautiful essays and string them together in a wonderful way into a book, and I know that takes time and effort, and so how do you deal with that? How do you ship, and at the same time how do you not put something out there that is contributing to a lot of the noise out there? Because there's a lot.

[0:29:40.6] SN: That's an interesting set of questions. I think part of it is, I think perfection is a word that is just not even super applicable when it comes to writing because of how subjective it is and because how, the extent to which, unless someone pulled it out of your fingers, you can just keep tinkering with it forever, right? There's no empirical, "this is finished". It's not like a stake right? Where there's actually like a group of people probably in France who could tell you, empirically, "This is done perfectly, right?"

[0:30:12.3] JG: They're totally in France.

[0:30:13.4] SN: They're totally in France. Writing isn't like that. And a lot of art isn't like that. It just is a more wiggly subjective thing and I would say, some of what really helps me in that process is that I have a team and deadlines that we are always cutting close or I would never give it up ever. I never get to the point where I'm like, "You know what? I do feel like every single one of these essays has reached my personal extremely stringent standard. This is a work of great elegance and beauty, why don't I read through it five more times and then hand it off."

At the end, it's like how before you have a baby, you picture like, "And then, when my contraction starts, I'll clean my house and write the baby a letter to read when they're five and embroider something and then we'll have like a spiritual whatever." Then you end up like speeding and crying and getting in a fight and then you have a baby and then you're a parent and that's how that happened, and I feel like that's how publication is, right? I think the good thing that I know now, I have done this enough to know that it never goes the way you think it's going to and that two or three things along the way are going to make you genuinely hysterical and you're just going to have to keep going.

So this time, it was that we had a little mix-up about when I needed to have the final order of the essays done. I had in mind some date, let's say three weeks into the future and all of a sudden within like two days' notice, they needed it right then. It happened — but now I know, it happens every time. There's something about the timeline that's going to be truly crazy making. So we had this totally nutty day where I have the benefit of like one million editors, which is kind of how I like to work. I love editors, they're like my favorite.

So I had an editor in Eugene and one in Pasadena and one in Charlotte and my dad was on a sabbatical and he was reading along for the first time and it was very sweet and moving. The five of us were in an all day long phone and text and email conversation where I just stood in my kitchen and based on their feedback kept rearranging things like every 10 minutes. "Oh Angela, from Pasadena thinks this goes here. Well wait, let me tell Lauren in Charlotte because she might think this," you know?

And it was bonkers and it was too fast and it was a lot of voices and a lot of chaos and I think we got there and I think that's just how it always works. I feel like now when I watch movies, you know how sometimes you watch a movie and you're like, "Why didn't not someone not catch this? Why did someone not catch that this plot isn't," — now I look at it and I'm like, "Because they're human people, because someone probably got in a fight with their neighbor that day and wasn't paying attention to that part of the editing process because probably they were four weeks late on production because somebody made a mistake with the permit."

I see the humanity in the things that we've created. So I look at this book and I'm like, "Is it in the perfect order? Probably not. But a bunch of smart people spent a day on it, so it will probably be okay." I can see, like it's when you look — like something that someone's embroidered and then you flip it over and there's just like knots everywhere, it's so ugly. I see that in these books, I see it in all of them. Like, "Oh, should have done another paragraph. Well why do you repeat yourself so much? Why do you use that word all the time?"

But books are created by humans, they're super just massively imperfect from the start and so at a certain point, if nothing ever had to go to print, I would keep tinkering forever but thank god someone forces me to hand it over, you know?

[0:33:43.3] JG: Tell me about those editors and the people that you work with. So when you're working on something, are you like — you're just writing essays and then just sticking those in a drawer somewhere or do you work with your agents, sell the book to the publisher and say, "Okay, I'm working on this thing," and then at what point do you invite other people into the process? That's a few questions, I know.

[0:34:05.4] SN: No, that's fine. Every single time I finish a book, and I said it this time. Every single time I finish a book I say, "Mark my words, next time I'm writing an outline and I am following it," and I never do. Not ever, not one time. So I decide that the theme of this book, the title of this book is *Present Over Perfect* and then for like two and a half years, I just, every couple of days, open up my laptop and vaguely write something vaguely related to that. Really, for real.

[0:34:35.2] JG: That's great.

[0:34:35.8] SN: I don't think about order or sections or what's the end or what's the beginning. I just keep writing, just like so much writing. Then as things gets closer, I share more and more pieces with my main editor and then I shape it into sort of big chunks that I then send to the developmental editor and we sort of inch our way from there. But it is a very loose, very disorganized process and I would not recommend it to anyone. I just can't do the other way. So that's just how my brain works.

[00:35:08.1] JG: And then tell me about deadlines, like if you're not going to hit the deadline which I don't know what it was like for you Shauna but when I first got a publishing contract, I was like, "Oh my God, I've got a deadline. I've got to do this," and then I found out that not everybody necessarily cares about this as much as...

[00:35:24.4] SN: Isn't that amazing?

[00:35:26.3] JG: Yeah, so what's your relationship with deadlines?

[00:35:28.1] SN: So I think it was probably on *Bread & Wine*, so three books in. I'm good about deadlines because again, I'm deeply invested in people thinking that I'm a responsible and capable human. So it can be chaos behind the scenes but I would never inconvenience an editor by not respecting their deadline, which is a good quality. But I do remember sending in, it was one set of edits and it wasn't a particularly important set.

It was just like it wasn't the first time it's getting edited, it wasn't the last, it was one of the many middle times and I sent an e-mail to my editor and I was like, "Hey, I just want to let you know I'm going to be late on this. I'm not going to make your deadline but I will have it for you in 24 hours and that's a promise," and I get an e-mail right back from her. She's like, "We are howling with laughter right now. This is the sweetest, it's like a girl scout just came in and did an Irish dance. This is the sweetest, most ridiculous thing we've ever seen, because we literally wait years. We get on airplanes and go find the authors, oddly."

Like, "Oh you need 24 hours, and you made a promise? You're darling." But this is the thing though, so for some books like for Savor, we had no hard pub date that had any consequences

to it. I think it came out let's say April 2nd, it could have been May 2nd, it could have been March 2nd, it didn't matter. We didn't have big launch events. For this one, we really wanted it out for the leadership summit at our church and then the next week, the tour starts.

So we need books in hand on that date and so at a certain point, the deadlines become very, very serious to me because it's all fine and good to say like, "Hey, I need six more months." Well yeah but they can't wrinkle time in the printing process and so once you sign yourself up for a hard street date associated with an event, then you are responsible to shore up the difference, and I did a lot of that in this one. Had I been able to take more time, I would have and at a certain point we just had to really push to make our deadlines and we did. There are physical copies in existence and so we're there.

[00:37:32.6] JG: Those are actual books that you made?

[00:37:34.9] SN: Actual book, yes.

[00:37:36.1] JG: Which is always better than the one that you're thinking about making?

[00:37:38.5] SN: That's absolutely true and again, there's never — show me an author that writes the perfect book or that thinks it's the perfect book. My deal with myself, my commitment to the reader is that every time I have a new book, they will read the book and my goal is that they will find that I am a better human than I was the last time around and a better writer. That's my job, is to always become with every book a better human and a better writer.

[00:38:04.5] JG: You said you make a commitment to yourself after every book. After every book that I write I tell myself, "I'm just going to give myself more time so that I can just do it."

[00:38:12.4] SN: I know, every time.

[00:38:13.4] JG: Yeah and every time I do it, I double the time and it's still I'm down to the wire and going, "This is junk."

[00:38:19.3] SN: Well but that's the other part about it is with your first book, you don't have a lot of the responsibilities that you have with subsequent books. Even if I'm not writing, I still have a full time job doing all the other things associated with being a writer and so I think it means you have to be even more careful with your time as you develop your career.

[00:38:40.7] JG: We were talking about reading at the beginning, I'd like to come back to that. What were you reading when you were writing *Present Over Perfect*?

[00:38:47.2] SN: It's actually fascinating, I had a conversation with someone. She's like, "I made a list, I think I can name all the books you were reading while you're writing this book."

[00:38:54.3] JG: Oh that's fun.

[00:38:55.1] SN: I go, "Really?" So she definitely said Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly*, Marie Kondo *Tidying Up*, which I did read and liked. I read a lot of old stuff on this one. I read a lot of old books about prayer. I always re-read Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*.

[00:39:09.6] JG: He's great.

[00:39:10.6] SN: He's great.

[00:39:11.3] JG: What about Buechner, do you like Buechner?

[00:39:13.5] SN: I do like Buechner. I don't think I read any of his during this little stretch but I do, absolutely.

[00:39:17.9] JG: He's a great writer.

[00:39:19.0] SN: I read a lot of Marilynne Robinson, she's amazing and I like her tone. Oh, I read a lot of Barbara Brown Taylor, who I'm crazy about. So a fair amount of — I read N.T. Wright's book about heaven and I really enjoyed that, *Surprised By Hope*. I'm just looking through. Oh have you read Paul Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air*?

[00:39:41.9] JG: I haven't read that but I've heard of it, yeah.

[00:39:45.0] SN: It's truly unbelievable. I would like to bump that to the top of the list. It's so beautiful. I loved Christian Wiman's, *My Bright Abyss*, I thought that was fantastic. I re-read a lot of Mary Karr, *LIT*, *Cherry*, *Liars' Club* and then her book about writing, which I thought was fantastic. Those were some of the biggest ones.

[00:40:03.9] JG: Yeah cool. So one of the things that I wanted to talk to you about because on this show, we talk about the different aspects of the creative life and something that you have and it's not just one thing, you're not just a writer. Last time on the show I think we talked a lot about family and we talked about hustle and we talked about some of that here and how you mentioned earlier, how your calling isn't just to be a writer.

Your calling is to be a writer and to be also a mom and a wife and a member of your neighborhood and your community and one of the things that you have talked about for as long as I've followed you, for as long as you have been writing is your relationship with health and food and just your love of all things edible, which I share. But one of the things that you have been recently sharing about, you talked about it here is struggles with mental health, physical health.

I want to talk about this briefly because this to me, at least for writers and creatives, seems to be something that we can neglect or not pay attention to, and I am speaking about myself in many ways. And there is this interesting myth that sometimes comes true about sort of this starving suffering artist, a person who is suffering for their art. And because you've been so open about some health struggles and stuff that you've been having, I wonder if you're willing to share what that journey has been like for you, particularly as it relates to your craft and the art that you make?

[00:41:32.6] SN: Well, okay. So I go through this whole *Present Over Perfect* writing process and one of the things that I learned along the way was that for years and years, I had not been paying attention to my body. So I was traveling so much, I would get sick over and over and not get better. I wasn't sleeping well. I had all these nagging, this nagging sense of not being well and I thought, "This is just one more evidence that I had not been taking good care of myself."

So slowed way down, changed so many things, learned things about new spiritual practices and started sleeping and bought new pajamas and then, once I felt like, “Oh I am totally new and improved *Present Over Perfect* self who no longer throws up when she’s stressed out, I’ve got my fancy area in the Huffington approved pajamas on like I’m nailing this.

[00:42:24.0] JG: Where does one get these pajamas? Is this something?

[00:42:26.5] SN: They get them at J. Crew, a little known fact. But I felt so good. I felt so grounded and whole and connected and emotionally present and proud of the work that I had done and then around Christmas, I got sick and couldn’t get un-sick and one of the most frustrating parts of it, and I think you’ll understand this as a writer, was I could not shape a narrative to explain it, right?

I was like, “Wait a minute, I’m doing all the things. I’m a new, wonderful, rested, whole, healthy, non-stressed out person. So I believe in the body-mind connection but we must have a bad line because I’m so happy, how can I possibly be sick?” And it was a really frustrating thing because I wanted a super healthy mind and body to be part of the reward of this process and it just wasn’t and I think I made it a lot harder on myself by saying what I had in my mind for this season was a lot of dreamy walks on the beach where I am grounded and present in my Chuck Taylor’s being awesome and slow instead of in bed a lot. And I’m going to doctors a lot and it didn’t fit with what I wanted this season to be, does that make sense?

[00:43:41.6] JG: Yeah, well I mean, it would be frustrating I would think because you said no to all the things that would make you sick and here you are still sick.

[00:43:50.6] SN: Yeah, totally and so I felt like again, did I say no to all those things in the hope that it would make me better and it didn’t actually make me better? Or are there other things making me sick? Or is there no mind-body connection and I’m just like sick? I don’t know. So I would say I’m not through it yet. I’m not very articulate about it. It’s nothing scary, I’ve been to one million different doctors and basically all it is, is I’m nauseous a lot of the time and I get really bad headaches and I’m really, really tired and it comes and goes in ways that I can’t totally figure out.

And so, I've been to one million doctors and one million specialist and they'd had me on and off different meds and sometimes you get caught in that circle a little bit where you're like, "What if the thing that I'm taking to address this is actually causing this? Well then I need to get off this to get on this," and you're like, "Oh my gosh, I just need a reset button for the whole thing." And so it's not anything like super exciting or super scary. It's just something I haven't figured out yet.

So my latest thing is I am going to a natural health doctor and I think she's really smart and I am trying to do what she says but also, she has recommended that I avoid 30 different foods, which confuses me about how then to live in the world because it's all the things. It's literary all the things. Like I looked at the list and I was like, "So now I eat paper? Is that the thing?" I'm in a loss and I think part of me posting about it, to be perfectly honest, was a couple of people had said something about like, "Well your life in Instagram is just so perfect."

And I thought, "Number one, not wild about that, as just a general characterization and number two, I think I must be doing it wrong. If I am really struggling under some anxiety and sadness and pain and a lot of doctors appointments and you're not seeing that. I want to square those things together a little bit because both are true."

Because I love life at the lake and I have learned a lot about slowing down and I love being with our kids and I do host people in our house and cook a lot and also I go to the doctor all the time and I take handfuls and handfuls of these terrible supplements and both are true. And it's easier, I find, to tell that story or that kind of story in a book because we have enough time together to build a relationship and for there to be some nuance and some framing and some context.

It's a little bit hard on social media to just give people glimpses and somehow hope that all the glimpses add up and you know some of the funny part about it is I get e-mails from people who have a definite diagnosis of what's definitely wrong with me and conveniently enough, they sell the medicine, you know? So it's a lot of that, a lot of people want to sell me medicine. They've heard two sentences of what I'm experiencing there like, "I totally — my sister had that. Let me come over."

That sounds super fun! But the funny thing about social media is we're all trying to figure it out together, right? Nobody knows. There's no generation ahead of us to tell a writer, "These are the things that you share and the things you don't. This is the way you frame the truth as it's happening and this is the way you don't." So I just know that whenever someone says something about my life being perfect, that's a red flag for me because it isn't.

It's great. I'm so thankful for my life. I'm profoundly surprised that this is how my life ended up and at the same time, perfect is not a word that connects with me about almost anything but certainly not about my life. So that's a long way to answer that and I guess the last thing would be one thing I realized as I started posting about this was how many people said, "Me too."

[00:47:33.1] JG: Yeah, right.

[00:47:34.2] SN: Whatever it was for them, whether it was depression or anxiety or chronic illness or recovering from surgery, I got a lot of messages via social media. I also got a lot of texts and e-mails even from people that I know quite well who said, "Hey, I'm watching you and I am struggling in the same way." I thought, "Oh, well then let's talk about this around the table," right?

Let's make sure that we're making space in all of our conversations. To really tell the truth about the good things and the hard things that we're carrying so that I'm not just finding out about them from my friends' social media accounts. So I think we're all just trying to figure that out together.

[00:48:13.9] JG: Yeah, well I said, "Me too." I've on and off dealt with these gut health issues that lead to all kinds of just weird symptoms; exhaustion, and for me, I was like you don't feel normal going through something like that and yet it kind of becomes normal and you're like, "Oh yeah, I guess it's just normal to have this headaches all the time and not feel well."

What I appreciate, what I learned from watching you share that as you continue to share it is just that. Not to be too on the nose but you were being present to everything that was going on in your life and being really honest about it without necessarily doing that thing that was sometimes do on social media, which is like over a share and say, "Here's this thing in your

face.” No, but I thought it’s one of the things that I really appreciate about you is your ability to tactfully and beautifully share your story in a way that invites us into it where we can make more sense of our own story. So I’m grateful for that about you.

[0:49:12.3]SN: Thank you.

[0:49:13.7] JG: Well, Shauna, we’re at time. Thanks so much for your time, it’s been a blast catching up with you and love this book and I do think you have been true to your promise, which is that you are once again a better writer, I think it’s your best work yet and I’m excited for people to check it out.

[0:49:31.9] SN: Oh thank you. That means the world. Thank you very, very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:49:42.9] AT: There is a lot of value and wisdom in that conversation and we want to know the one thing you took away from Jeff’s conversation with Shauna that could apply to your life. To leave that thought on this episode or to easily share the episode with a friend, you can go to goinswriter.com/115. We appreciate the time you take to listen to our show. I’m Andy Traub and on behalf of Jeff Goins, thanks for spending some time with us today.

Now, go build your portfolio.

“[0:50:27.0] SN: Whatever person you’re watching and you’re like, “You know what? When I get to his level or her level, I am going to wake up every morning with such a deep sense of groundedness and gratefulness, a sense of my own value on this planet. It just doesn’t come from that outside stuff, that sense of love and safety and security and being valuable on this Earth just doesn’t come from what we earn.”

[END]