

Episode 17 | The Sound of Kindness with Amy Ludwig Vanderwater

Ruth Ayres (00:01.656)

Becca, you got back from winter break and we're told that you had to decorate your door.

Becca (00:05.915)

Yeah, I had some feelings about that. And so my strategy in my classroom is like to turn to the kids and be like, all right, guys, we're going to figure this out. And like, God love my little Willow, who walked right over to our classroom library and picked up Amy's book, *The Sound of Kindness*. And she was like, we're going to do this. And I was like, what? And she was like,

Remember when we were thinking of a hundred kind things for the hundredth day of school? We're going to put it on our door. And I was like, okay. And as she started talking, all of the other kids were like, yeah, yeah, we can go. We can do this. We're like the little boy goes on a kindness walk. Like we can go on kindness walks. And that was it. It was decided. And like, I'm really glad that Willow knew how we were going to decorate our door coming back.

from vacation, and off we went. And it was this really beautiful experience. And I watched them as we were, like, I reread them the story, and then we went on a kindness walk, and then they started to document their, the kindnesses that they heard. And as we decorated the door, I snapped a picture of it, and I sent it off to...

the author who is a friend of ours and happens to be here with us today. So Amy Ludwig Vanderwater, we are so glad that you are here with us and to talk to you about your book, *The Sound of Kindness*, and just the work that you do. So that day when I sent you that picture, what were you thinking?

Amy LV (01:49.548)

So I was home alone, as one often is when one is a writer, and you write a book and then it goes out there and sometimes you hear some things and sometimes you don't hear a lot. And then every once in a while, a long time later, you get an email. And so I opened up your email, Becca, and saw the picture of the door with all the sentence strips in the kindergarteners handwriting.

and the cover of the book. And I had the feeling, one has, that whole book was worth it just for these children going on a kindness walk in that school. So it meant a ton to me that you shared it with me. And then when you told me that your student had thought of the idea, it also really made me think a lot about how lucky they are to be in your room, honestly.

Becca (02:41.533)

Thank you.

Ruth Ayres (02:44.458)

Amy, I was thinking about a long, long time ago, many moons, maybe even a decade ago, that my daughter was in third grade and I had written a blog post about just, was having a hard time. And you then in response wrote a poem for the poem farm for Hannah and it had to do with horses, which she loves. And I was just really struck about how you look for ways to show kindness all the time. And so I feel like this book,

is really the heart of who you are. But sometimes I feel embarrassed when I extend an act of kindness. Like I just feel like, so for the top or am I putting my nose in? But like the sound of kindness just normalizes that act. And I would love to hear more of your thoughts about that because you don't seem afraid or embarrassed to show kindness ever. You just are putting so much good into the world.

Amy LV (03:42.414)

So you're that. I'm glad you don't see me 24 hours a day, but but thank you, Ruth. I have to say for a long time and still in my top because now there are many, but Naomi Shihab Nye's poem, Kindness has been a really touchstone poem for me in terms of just living. so and that's it.

when that really is all there is, right? At the end of the day, what else is there? And so this book, I honestly wish I could remember where it came from. Writing is mysterious. It just appears sometimes and you don't know why that those words come. But the book being a journey of a child and an adult taking a walk and just really listening and the whole book.

Many of your readers will remember Chris Raschka's Yo Yes, which is a whole book in speech bubbles, an old favorite. And so this book is like that. And all it is is the adult and the child walking through a city. And what is highlighted are the kind words that people say to each other. And the illustrator, Teresa Martinez, what she did in the book, which I thought was really fascinating, was the

part of the illustration that is the kind place, like the central moment of the kindness is in high detail color. And then the rest of each page that isn't that central moment of kindness kind of fades out. And it's like a spotlight on every page. And I just feel very grateful to her and to Magination. the book is published by Magination Press, which is the American Psychological Association. So with your podcast being Sticky Hope,

your listeners might want to know about that publisher because they have books about all kinds of things that people go through and they're all vetted. Like this book had to go through a team of either psychologists or psychiatrists to make sure that it would be healthy. And so you can rely on their books, which I didn't know that. Like I didn't know that as a source. And so now I go there for, know, sure, I'd like to write for them, but also to think about books that children need.

Ruth Ayres (05:58.432)

I was so glad I went into you to talk about that because when the Sound of Kindness came out, it was the first time that I knew about Magination Press. And me too, like it is such a great resource for teachers and it just opens the door to talk about things that are happening.

Amy LV (06:13.45)

It is. it's, it sounds like imagination, but there's no I at the beginning. It's just Magination just so you know. But it also, I have another book with them that I wrote after my parents got divorced. And it's not a poem book and it doesn't rhyme. And it's the story of a girl handling that divorce and then learning to write in notebook. And it doesn't solve the fact she misses her mom when she said her dad's and she misses her dad when she said her mom's, but it's something one can do, right? You can write when...

you're sad and it doesn't make the sadness go away, but it lets you think about it and heal a little bit. so, yeah, it is... The older I get, the more I realize how much children go through and how much it matters, the ways they're given to process what they're handling at any given time.

Becca (07:04.721)

Yeah, the power of a story is power that has helped us power through. Ruth and I have lived with kids who have lived a lot of things. my kids are still well, they're not allowed here on podcast recording days, but they're still here. And they love stories. And the sound of kindness is loved in my home, but but also in my classroom. And what I've noticed

And part of what I loved about this project that wasn't planned is that I watched it kind of create this kindness momentum. We came back from break, know, like, behaviors can be tricky when you come back from break. You do a lot of reminding of around, OK, remember, like, you can't just tell me every thought that pops into your brain. Like, we have to raise our hands. And then they're, like, really focused on tattling on each other. Like, she didn't raise her hand.

He just caught me, you know, like all of that happens. And this immediately reading this and paying attention to kindnesses immediately gave us focus on kindness and it changed what we were paying attention to. And so Ruth and I talk a lot about paying attention to what you pay attention to. And while I wasn't like planning to shift what they were paying attention to, it's exactly what happened. And it kind of created this like momentum of encouraging them.

to find kindness. And then because they're looking for kindness, they're also acting in kindnesses. And it just propelled us in this really beautiful and and like way easier and healthier way than it typically would have after break. Like it was way easier to get them back into routines because they were motivated by these kindness acts.

Amy LV (08:54.754)

that when you said paying attention to what you pay attention to, Becca. I think I first really understood that when I married Mark, who's a bird watcher, and I never knew any birds, right? And then he would say, that's blue jay. that's a kingfisher. And then I realized, wow, some people pay attention to birds. That's weird. But then, of course, you start to pay attention to what the people you admire pay attention to, right? When I went and worked at the writing project, and everybody was carrying a writer's notebook.

saying, if you write things down, then you pay attention to them more, and then you notice more because you're paying attention more. And that's so true. And so as a teacher, as a parent, that idea of paying attention to kindness, like you as the leader, even if you're in a bad mood, like you pay attention to kindness, you in that way, you make it sticky. Like you kind of are the one that's putting the super glue on the back of the things you want.

everybody to hold on to, right? And when you said that about stories, I did just want to mention a book that I'm reading for the third time right now. That's it's an adult book, but I mean, it's not an adult book, but it's a book for grownups by Bruce Filer, F-E-I-L-E-R. And it's called Life is in the Transitions, Mastering Change at Any Age. And the thing about that book is he got an unusual pediatric cancer in his 40s and his father was

very suicidal at that time. And so he then had to figure out how do I get my life back on track? And he went and just interviewed hundreds and hundreds of people about the transitions that they've gone through in their lives. And he pulls from all the stories. He said, whenever I had a problem, I always turned to narrative. And so I did that again. And the book goes through all these different, he calls them lifequakes that people go through and ways that all these hundreds of people across the whole United States dealt with them and how they came through the other side. And I think it matches

I read it the first time during COVID after my dad died and then again during COVID and now, now, and I just feel like it's narrative is important and it's everything and it's how we make sense of what we go through, right? Because we all go, he says, we all go through these bad things. Everybody does, but it's what the story you make from it is what it is at the end of the day. And so making stories and telling stories I think is...

Amy LV (11:16.802)

so important that you're doing here and teaching your children class.

Ruth Ayres (11:22.062)

Story matters, it just matters. And Amy, you have such this kind of rich and just a diverse kind of career path, not linear, right? Like you are very playful, but you, I've seen you in working with kids, I've seen you working with teachers, you are an author. And I just would like...

you to share if people want to get in touch with you like can they or you like in this fortress and you can't get into you into your world like how would people find you

Amy LV (11:58.44)

no, I'm not in any kind of fortress. thank you. I have a website. That's just my name, Amy Ludwig Vanderwater. But really the, and I have two blogs, one which I haven't posted on in a long time, but I'd let remain because it has a lot of information about writers notebooks that is called Sharing Our Notebooks. And really the place where I live the most online is the Poem Farm, which is a blog of, golly, I don't know, thousand something poems, probably at this point and many lessons that

in next week, it will be 15 years old. And I started it just to do a month of poems in 2010. And then that movie was out, Julie and Julia, where the woman cooked a Julia Child French dish every day for a year. And so at end of that month, I thought, I'm gonna do a poem every day for a year. So I did that. And then I went back to Just Fridays and Every Day in April. it's written to children. The voice of the blog is to students.

And I do an audio recording every week and read a poem and give a little tip and write a poem. in April this year, I'm going to be Little Red, in April I do a project and I will be Little Red Riding Hood writing a poem in the voice of Little Red Riding Hood every day and encouraging children to write a daily poem from the point of view of somebody else. So there are contact me buttons on those and my social media, all I am on, all you can find me on nowadays is Blue Sky.

Becca (13:16.317)

Amy LV (13:25.403)

And there I am Amy L. V. Poem Farm.

Ruth Ayres (13:29.198)

And do you go to schools? Do you do virtual visits? Do you do visits?

Amy LV (13:31.266)

I do go to schools. Yes, I visit schools. I do large assemblies for grade levels about poetry and writing and sort of finding interest in the world. And then I also do writing workshops. So I'll do writing workshops on a variety of topics, but usually they are poetry workshops.

Ruth Ayres (13:52.288)

Amy, I am so glad that you're here with us. Do you have any like just last words that you want to share about hope or kindness or teaching?

Amy LV (14:04.684)

I think it's, I love the name of this podcast, I have to say. I just think sticky hope when I learned that this was the name of your new podcast together. First of all, it fits the two of you perfectly. And second of all, it's so of the moment. all for, know, with everything that's always is happening in the world, all of us at every age need to have hope to hang on to. And I think, I guess all I'd really offer is

Becca (14:12.189)

Thank

Becca (14:19.741)

Thanks.

Amy LV (14:31.32)

For different people, this is different. It might be a walk in nature. It might be listening for kind words. For me, it is reading poetry and it might be making something with your hands. It might be baking cookies for your neighbor or whatever that is. But I think this idea of sticky hope with our students and our own children and trying to be a light, I think, I guess I would just offer that I would recommend people do what they can to keep their own light alive.

because it is hard to be that for somebody else when you're not feeling so sticky yourself.

Ruth Ayres (00:02.284)

I feel so warm inside after talking to Amy. She just is really reminds me that the sound of kindness is so sweet.

Becca (00:13.046)

Yeah, it was beautiful to have her on here with us and like such a treat. And it feels perfect that she was our first guest on here, really talking about, you know, this project that my kids did and and the importance of focusing on kindness and story. And, and this project turned into a beautiful story itself, because as I snapped a picture of the start of the door decoration, and sent it to her, her immediate response was,

I need to write back to them. I need to write to your kids. And she wrote them this beautiful letter that just like lit up their faces when I read it to them. And she called them kindness detectives, which just was like the perfect way to capture a kindergarten audience. then like, and they fully took on the identity of kindness detectives. And I here we are like a month later, and I'm still like,

hearing them talking about being kindness detectives, can say like, make sure you're being a kindness detective. And it switches them from going to like tattling on someone or notice the wrong thing to really focusing on like, right, like I'm going to go find a kindness. And it's just this really beautiful gift that she gave us in not only like this letter and calling them kindness detectives, but to

to acknowledge the work that they're doing and show them that at five and six years old, their work is meaningful. It has an impact outside of the work that we were doing in our classroom. Like here she is states away writing back and showing the importance. And that's just really who Amy is, like this beautiful light. And she sent it all the way to Maine in her letter.

Ruth Ayres (02:04.138)

It's true. I think it's easy to hear like a podcast guest on, you know, to hear her and think, there's no way that I could reach out to her. And I just want everybody to know it is well worth your time to go to her website, amyludwigvanderwater.com to poke around, to reach out to her. We are in April right now. It's poetry month. She is releasing these incredible...

daily poems as she has her puppet, right? Like her wolf puppet, she has her little red riding hood, and like it's minutes, right? So anybody can access this. You are gonna find so much joy

and light in just a few minutes that you can definitely share with your students. We also have included a recording of the Sound of Kindness in the Sticky Hope Kit.

So if you haven't downloaded the Sticky Hope Kit yet, it's a care package for you. And it's good for your soul. And it's also things that you can do in your classroom. It's things that you're wanting to do in your classroom. So there's a video of the Sound of Kindness in that Sticky Hope Kit. And you will be able to reach all those places, all the resources that Amy was sharing. Those are all in the links in the show notes.

Becca (02:59.236)

Yes.