

Wynne Leon (00:03) Welcome to the Life of Try, the podcast where innovation, reinvention, personal growth and discovery begin with one simple choice, to try.

Wynne Leon (00:15)

I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode, I'm with author and co-founder of the New York Insight Meditation Center, Joseph Schmidt. We have a great conversation about his book of short stories, *The Torchbearer*, and the art of creating without any of the elbow grease effort that sometimes is associated with trying. Joseph's stories are like quiet gifts. They open the reader up with a quiet sense of insight and seemingly

without trying. He tells us about his writing process, which surprisingly happened without blood, sweat, or tears. Joseph tells us about being a volunteer chaplain and how he was taught by a Zen monk how to engage with patients in the most helpful way. We tie that together with his insight about his meditation practice, which has a similar openness and naturalness. This is a great conversation.

about openness, flow and insight that come from a beautiful book of stories and a willingness to let creation happen. I know you'll love it.

Joseph Schmidt (01:24)

you

Wynne Leon (01:38)

Hi Joseph!

Joseph Schmidt (01:39)

Hello there, how's it going, Wynn?

Wynne Leon (01:41)

great. congratulations on the release of your book of short stories, *The Torchbearer*. Can you give us an elevator pitch for the book?

Joseph Schmidt (01:52)

Yes, It's

It's a book of 21 enchanting stories. The book actually came to me in an interesting way. I was in India. I was in an ashram going through a meditation program. And in between meditations one evening I had some time alone and I felt relaxed. I was not.

distracted and my mind just said, you know, what should I do with my time? And I just out of nowhere said I could write something. And I'd never written a book. never, you know, I'd done essays in college, but the whole experience was quite revealing. And that is I started to write, I put my pen in my hand and I just started to write. And this story, *The Torchbearer* just

moved through me. the longer I wrote, the more it became a very simple process of releasing the words as sentences. I became very intrigued in what was going to happen, because I didn't pre-plan. I was a partner. It wasn't like I was just, you know,

channel. It was like I was there. I was reading it was my thoughts were involved, but it was I wasn't making this this up. It was actually actually happening. the end is quite suspenseful. And I was just like, I felt like I was watching a movie. when the end happened, it was like, I got to see what's going to get and boom, that was it. Wow. So

I should add one more thing. That's the last story I wrote for 50 years. Then in the 90s after I had left certain responsibilities at running a meditation center and my corporate job, I again had a time where I could

let my mind open up and not be distracted in both internally and externally. And I thought, hey, I should try it again. And so that's when 20 more stories came through.

Wynne Leon (04:19)

So that's interesting. So one story in the 1970s and then you waited 20 years and got 20 more.

Joseph Schmidt (04:28)

It's more like 50 years.

Wynne Leon (04:31)

interesting that the same process applies. It was that time.

Joseph Schmidt (04:34)

Yeah,

I can't say it was quite as fluid, but it was, you know, there was a little more thinking involved. I was a little more involved as a partner, but the writing approach worked very well. It was not, I didn't have to struggle to figure out what was next. ~ Things came organically, naturally, intuitively.

and so consequently the, I, I think I felt different about the characters in the story. actually developed a, caring relationship with them. You know, I thought about them, you know, because it's, they were in a sense like meeting a new person that I hadn't really known. So it's like.

Here they are. ~ I should add to the characters in my mind. Again, I can only, I can't say that I intentionally created them this way, but they tend to have a more innocent ~ witnessing approach to what's happening in their story lines. typically, they encounter

Wynne Leon (05:35)

That is

Joseph Schmidt (05:57)

moments that change everything. And that process of having, you know, let's say an innocent character and having something they're confronted with. in a sense, I see a similar process to the writing process I was using happening with them. They allowed their, ~ this change or this answer

this next move in their life to be more of something that they discovered rather than something that they said, okay, I'm gonna ~ decide to make this choice. Which is fine, know, and I'm pro-choice. I'm not saying that isn't the case, but I just see this as another avenue.

Wynne Leon (06:53)

Yeah, and it's interesting both, you know, from that first story, the Torchbearers, you you talk about how the ending revealed itself to you because it is a surprising ending, I thought.

Joseph Schmidt (07:04)

I had to read them a number of times to kind of say, what is this really saying? Because again, wasn't consciously, I didn't have an idea and said, okay, I'm going to put this message out there. Many of the characters, and I think in the transformations that they have can be seen as

models for a reader or a guide. If they're going through, they're not going to have the same situation that is in the story, but something that they're confronted with that could change their lives dramatically and see that, okay, this is being done here.

I can learn from that. can explore ways that I can get through.

Wynne Leon (07:53)

Yeah, I see that too. And you know, have such a fascinating background. You have a master's in psychology. ~ You have led the New York Insight Meditation Center as a founding member, executive director, and now sit on the board. Also as a volunteer chaplain. Obviously, that's the experience that came in between the 50 years, right? Right. Do you think that those experiences of

life, you know, informed your, your stories as you saw those options and choices and shifts.

Joseph Schmidt (08:32)

Definitely. ~ What I see is...

I feel that life is moving along and you are within life and things are happening so that they're, I'm just gonna throw this, this may or not be accurate, but like 50 % of the momentum and the things that happen to you in life just come at you because life brings them.

Each one of these kind of opened up new, new doors for me to.

see life and also to learn, which I think can be difficult to appreciate life, almost like go in first with appreciation rather than going in with, don't know if this is going to hurt me, have, you know, gain some level of trust so at least you can get in the door and maybe some good things will happen.

Wynne Leon (09:32)

Yeah.

Joseph Schmidt (09:35)

Probably, I mean, obviously psychology opened me up to just think about the way the mind works and the way my upbringing with my family, how that set me up on a certain path. ~ But I feel that ~ becoming a hospital chaplain probably...

showed me a way of being with myself and also with others that was fairly, it's not like it's a secret at all. It's something that in meditation, people are told to do this, but in somehow in the hospital chaplaincy, it really made an impact and allowed me to do a good job there and not burn out.

you know, people oftentimes do a decent job, but it's so stressful or they tend to burn out.

Wynne Leon (10:33)

And we're talking about going in with that open attitude.

Joseph Schmidt (10:36)

Well, I'll tell you a little story. As I started my internship, it was a program in New York called the Zen Center for Contemplative Care. And it was training hospital chaplains. Two-year program.

I had been running the center, the meditation center, and these two Zen monks would come in and every now and then we'd have them teach. So I knew them and so I thought, you know, when I'm ready after my 12 years doing this, I was okay, I've kind of done all I can do here.

So I went to the Zen guy that runs the program and interviewed with him. And he said, well, tell me why you'd like to be a hospital chaplain. And I just thought that was, mean,

naturally I just kind of wanted to be, but I had to say something. So I said, well, I'd like to help.

Wynne Leon (11:47)

I'm

Joseph Schmidt (11:49)

And he, his head was going back and forth. He says, no, ~ no. He said, that'll never last. That won't last. ~

Wynne Leon (12:00)

~ no.

~

Joseph Schmidt (12:04)

~ and I was going, gosh, I really blew this. But what he said then was so, helpful and perfect that it's, it's in a sense, it's something I still apply in my life. He said, when you go into a hospital room, you've never met this person.

Wynne Leon (12:08)

You

Joseph Schmidt (12:24)

He started off first saying, when you go in, you stop, you drop everything from your mind. You go in empty, no preconceptions, no trying to help, no ~ ideas that, ~ if I do this, it will help or that will be set. Because when you go in that person who doesn't know you,

how they will respond to you is if they see you with an agenda, they see you as a person coming in trying to proselytize or trying to make them feel good, all that stuff, it's not gonna be effective. They might just ask you to leave or they might just go along with it. ~ But.

if you can go in there and connect with them and let them be your guide. In fact, show that you were there to walk with them, not that you are coming in with a package of goods. ~ That worked, every time that it could work. There were other times where a patient just,

didn't want to see anybody, so I didn't stay. Some patients just love to talk about what they believe in religious life, so I'd listen to them. But those that were in that innocent state of being

could allow themselves to open up. I came in with, know, as innocently as I could, know, I'm sure unconsciously there are things popping up around, but to extent you can. And when they, people recognize that there's an immediate, almost immediate connection.

Wynne Leon (14:20)

Hmm. That's, that's amazing because it, it ties back to that openness. Yes. So many of your stories, evoke, but also the openness that you had when you wrote that first story and when you, when you wrote, because you just have to empty yourself is according to what you said. Yeah. And then things can happen from there.

Joseph Schmidt (14:45)

Right? Exactly.

Wynne Leon (14:46)

Yeah. mean, one of the things, there's so much depth in your writing and I was really captured by how you captured those moments of transformation, know, whether it's being stepping up or seeing things differently or even dying. mean, there's just a quiet to those moments as you write them.

And that seems to tie into just what we were talking about, which is that it doesn't come in with an agenda. It comes in with a quiet. Can you say more about writing those scenes or is that just part of, do you think that came from your approach?

Joseph Schmidt (15:28)

Well, number one, I really appreciate that you recognize that because when I read them and I still read them, you know, not every day, of course, but, know, every couple of times a year, I'll bring it out and I'll say, and every time I read it, it'll be interesting to me. And what you say about it being quiet.

is exactly the way I feel. I just hadn't thought of it that way. And when ~ my publicist sent me some of the prompts that you were thinking of, I thought, wow, yes, they do have a quietness, which is what I wanted.

Instead of struggling with the story or storyline, they actually are innocently moving with the life of that storyline. I didn't introduce a lot of the inner

decision-making ~ that the person was having internally, I would more or less describe what was happening and the character, what was happening as they went through that. So in a sense, the peacefulness that I felt could also be reflected in that the character was feeling that quietness or that

peacefulness as these changes were going on, or rather as these opportunities for transformation were happening. You helped clarify something, which is something also I

just wanted to comment on. I find going on ~ a podcast like this, I'll learn more about the book from other folks because.

But this quietness, I thought that's exactly the tone I was hoping to have.

Wynne Leon (17:33)

Well, congratulations, because you really did it. And isn't it interesting to hear, well, first of all, to have to talk about your work is an interesting reflection, but also to have your words reflected back to you. ~ You get to find out a little bit more about how it lands for other people, right? And we're such unique creatures that that's fascinating, isn't it? Yeah.

Joseph Schmidt (17:47)

Yes.

Wynne Leon (18:01)

One of the transformations that I thought was interesting is in the short story, The Minister. And he was going again with the flow. mean, he just, you know, he's in Grand Central Terminal and he just decides to step onto the clock. if I could just read, although uncertain of his purpose, he was overcome with conviction.

Joseph Schmidt (18:25)

Yes.

Wynne Leon (18:26)

His

usual speech impediment was nowhere evident as powerful words erupted from the depths of his soul, words that had always been there, waiting for the proper moment were set free. that's such an interesting, again, going with the flow, opening up, trusting the moment. And it sounds like that sort of mirrors your writing process in some ways. Yeah. Yeah.

Joseph Schmidt (18:37)

Yeah.

Yeah.

I, I'm very happy you mentioned that story of all the stories. I would kind of put that one at the top for me in terms of what it meant to me. Coming from.

family with a father that was a minister and

when it came to me that this first act of going, know, he felt this presence and it was like, it became conviction to him to do it. one of the things I like to do is have a person in a normal course of events and then they do something.

unusual and that moment is what, you know, it changes their lives. So that he takes that extra step.

Wynne Leon (19:42)

Yeah. Well, it's interesting since both you and I share that that background of having fathers that were ministers. Yeah. And maybe that's why the story resonated with me as well, especially. it was a good image coming from men of such conviction when when you find your own conviction. Right. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Joseph Schmidt (19:55)

Right.

Yes.

Wynne Leon (20:05)

What do you think about meditation and writing or meditation and trying new things? How do you think those complement each other as you go through this process of publishing these stories?

Joseph Schmidt (20:18)

My meditative life hasn't been generally involved in creating my art or being my art, but it has definitely as an underlying practice has influenced what I do.

New York Insight is a mindfulness center. it's a common practice. It's become very, yeah, I don't know if you practice

Wynne Leon (20:42)

Yeah,

I do and like Sharon Salzberg is Yeah, and I've heard it mostly from Dan Harris on his podcast

Joseph Schmidt (20:46)

Yes, Sharon is one of our...

Yeah,

yeah, Dan is sure. Sharon teaches with us from the very start. We're now twenty seven years in the making.

There's, and there's different ways, mindfulness has been described, I think, very well.

years ago, I was just feeling kind of stale with the practice, which does happen. Everybody will have that I was reading other things in science about reality and the universe. And then I read other meditation centers and I just found a

very subtle shift in how I sat and meditated. And the way I see it, brings a more energetic focus.

time is always moving. Nobody knows what's gonna happen next, which is actually a quite profound reality that nobody really thinks about it much because it's the way it's always been. to know that nobody knows what's gonna happen next.

the challenge of life is being at that point where you go from what you've known into that moment where it becomes unknown. And that edge or that cusp of a wave as it moves, mindfulness is where consciousness meets the universe or nature.

That moment of connection, of meeting, is the only thing that you ever know. Everything besides that is either a memory of the past or you're simulating a thought about what it's gonna be like or a hope. But that shift from the unknown to the known, to me is the edge where consciousness is

doing its work.

It's right where the rubber meets the road. Now you can't always stay there. So you fall off as you meditate, you lose your focus. And then you remember.

to come back. And what I think many people miss about meditation is that

Meditation is something that they have to do, which I think is missing the ease of it in that that moment where consciousness meets, where time moves you, that is always there. It never leaves. You can fall off. All you've got to do is step back on.

And many meditation teachers have said to be mindful, you have to remember, remember to be back at that focus. if you keep with that particular vision of, of mindfulness, every moment that when you join and move into the unknown, you're having a fresh ~ moment of reality.

Wynne Leon (24:00)

Right, right, right.

Joseph Schmidt (24:17)

that never stops, it continues, it continues. So that the beginnings of life are endless. Every moment, it's an endless opportunity that here's something to be mindful about.

I do have a little more to say. don't want to.

Wynne Leon (24:34)

Yeah, no, great. I love it.

Joseph Schmidt (24:36)

And there is also the message in mindfulness that when you are being mindful, you bring a certain sense of curiosity and care. when you meet that moment, and I was gonna say as a witness, but it's actually an engaged,

Witness you're not just

standing back and saying, let it let it do its thing. You actually are involved in that you're actually are participating in that moment.

I think that's what to me has energized things a bit from my previous where I was kind of sitting there waiting.

for something to happen, know, let me be enlightened, you know.

Wynne Leon (25:34)

Mm-hmm. Right, right.

Joseph Schmidt (25:36)

Yeah, and now it's more like, okay, we're co-creating this experience of reality and it never stops. The moment is an ongoing moment. It's almost like it's less than a moment. It's an instant.

Wynne Leon (25:55)

Well, I love what you said there that the beginnings of life are endless. there seems to be circling back to what we've talked about sort of throughout this conversation. openness, openness to, creating an openness so that you can write and creating an openness so that you can meet other people in that chaplaincy role and creating an

openness to the next moment, to the next beginning.

Joseph Schmidt (26:23)

Exactly. Beautiful. And that's, it's such a dynamic process. And I, the message I'm starting to catch a little bit is that I don't know how many people, when they meditate, see the dynamism potentially

the only thing you can really ever know for sure, because that is happening right now. You're, conscious of it. When I, if you go beyond that, they were getting into

projections, memories, and other things.

I have this, this,

idea that the universe wants to be recognized. so how is that happening? Well, here we are, got 8.2 billion humans on this earth and they all have a consciousness. So we're doing this work. We're consciously letting the universe show itself to us

I think having an intentional practice or a meditation where you are involved in that.

more consciously brings it to another level. in some way I like to say, well, we're helping the universe become aware of itself. But at the same time, by doing this, we're discovering who we are and all the fact that we are the universe, we belong.

And a sense of belonging is, one of the things that many people struggle with, where do I belong? Either do I have friends or do I belong? From a cosmic standpoint, what am I doing here? By being in that role of,

mediating between the universe and the human, you are building, a bond of belonging. Because you are seeing it happen, you're seeing it transform yourself, you're feeling yourself harmonizing with it, or at least becoming more comfortable with it.

Wynne Leon (28:47)

Yeah, building a bond of belonging. That's beautiful. Well, I want to end this interview with another quote from your book because I think it just sums up what you've said so well here. And it's from the short story called The Book. And it says, the epigraph was just one sentence. Give everything you have to everyone you meet. Feeling a surge of confidence.

I turned to the first chapter and boldly began to read. I just love that quote because I think your book does that so well. think this, talking to you has done this so well. So I urge everybody listening to this to open The Torchbearer and begin to read.

Joseph Schmidt (29:37)

Yeah.

Well, thank you for bringing that last quote.

Wynne Leon (29:40)

Well, thank you, Joseph, so much for taking the time. ~

Joseph Schmidt (29:43)

I so much enjoy getting to know you and speaking with you.

Wynne Leon (29:49)

Likewise. Yeah. Likewise. Thank you so much.

Joseph Schmidt (29:52)

Okay.

Wynne Leon (30:01)

Thank you for listening. Our music was written for us by the incredible duo of Jack Canfora and Rob Koenig. For show notes and more great inspiration see [aviva.com](http://aviva.com) A-V-I-T-I-V-A dot com. ~

Joseph Schmidt (30:17)

you

Wynne Leon (30:18)

you