

Catching YOUR Memories

THE PODCAST

WITH DIANE ATWOOD

Diane Atwood: Hey everyone, this is Diane Atwood, and you are listening to the *Catching Your Memories* podcast. Everybody has an inspiring story, a memory, or an experience to share if only someone would ask. That's where I come in. In this episode, I have a conversation with Claire Hersom, from Winthrop, Maine

In 2006, Claire was with a group of people who started discussing a show they had seen about poverty. She caught the gist — if they just tried harder or did harder they wouldn't be in that position. Claire spoke up and said she was sick of hearing this stereotype. It wasn't the first time she'd tried to enlighten someone about the reality of being poor. But this time, she went home and wrote a poem called *Drowning*, which led to a book by the same name. A poetic memoir about the years she spent as a single mother trying to raise three children and keep all of their heads above water. Today her children are grown with children of their own and doing well.

I met Claire through a mutual friend, Nona, who took a memoir class that Claire was teaching. She also teaches a

basic education class at Adult Ed. Family always comes first, but Claire also tries to help people succeed as best they can and to speak the truth about what it means to be poor.

Diane Atwood: Welcome to *Catching Your Memories*, Claire. I'm so delighted that you're here to share your wisdom. I have to call it wisdom because you've had a lifetime of life experiences that gave you this wisdom.

Claire Hersom: Thank you. I'm very glad to be here. I appreciate it.

Diane Atwood: I thought that maybe we could start with now, and if you could tell us a little bit about who you are now. Uh, what is your life like now?

Claire Hersom: Um, let's see. What is my life like now? I think I'm the happiest I've been, which I think I'm just realizing that as I'm answering your question. But it has been a real need of mine to be useful, you know. It's been a very big need to be appreciated for who I am. I haven't always been able to have a way to express that part of who I am. Very busy, as you know, in my life, tending on other people or other things or other problems. So right now I'm teaching adult education. I teach people who are from the same kind of background that I have written about. And I find that oftentimes they come to us, meaning the program, from places where they had experienced prejudice or shame or not being able to do the dreams that they had, even begin them because of one thing or another, many things. And so it's particularly satisfying to me to be able to help them move to where they need to be educationally in order to step out of the situation that they're in or to expand the situation that they need and want to be in the middle of. I've met some

marvelous people and people who are just full of such energy and such love for their families and just struggling along and wanting to do better. And it's a wonderful program. And so they have enrichment and they have education. Two of the people that came to adult education for their high school diploma through adult ed, we did quilting with and I can make one quilt, one pattern, and that's it. And I've made seven. All of my granddaughters have a quilt from this very same pattern. And so I took these two students and said they had to do a class that was just kind of, uh, they could choose whatever they wanted to do. So I've done guitar lessons and I've done quilting, and that's been fun too.

Diane Atwood: That's important. We need education, but we also need to do something else that maybe feeds our soul, our, uh, creativity and outlet. So we have a balance in our lives. And I think that it's likely that the population of people that you're describing and you from experience, would know that you're just scrambling so hard to put food on the table that who would even have the notion that you could do something just for yourself?

Claire Hersom: Yes, very true. And I find also that many people that come into that situation have been so busy just surviving that when they are asked the question, well, what do you want to do? What do you want to do after you graduate? What are your dreams? They almost hesitate to say them because they have this feeling like, can I ever get there? Can I ever really do that? And of course, they can. So I think that's very true. You're so busy just getting from point A to point B, day after day after day.

Diane Atwood: I want to talk more about what you're doing now, because you are doing more, but also based on what

you just said. I would love to jump back to the past because you are, to me, talking about some of your own experiences.

Claire Hersom: Yes.

Diane Atwood: Let's go back to your childhood. You grew up here in Maine and was it a happy childhood?

Claire Hersom: It was a happy childhood. I think there was an innocence that surrounded us as children. I had two very distinct families with the same value system, but one were Irish potato farmers in Pittston and the other one owned a clothing store in Gardiner since 1842. One of them were relatively wealthy, one were not. They lived off the land, they both informed me in many, many ways. And they were all Irish. We're all Irish descendants, you know, McNallys and McFaddens, and O'Gradys, they're just all over the place and they've been here since the very beginning. The land that they actually lived on is named after them, which is really kind of interesting. We have O'Grady Mountain in Whitefield and McWilliams Hill in Pittston. That was my Nana's farm, both of them. We have these long histories of a sense of place and also a sense of community within our families. They were big, big families. And family to them was everything and very structured, a very different time. We went to church on Sunday mornings. You had baked beans and brown bread on Saturday night faithfully, and Dad came home at 05:00 from Bath Ironworks and the table was set and the food was on it. And we had a lot of freedom in a way that I think informed my generation to be appreciative of nature. We weren't on a computer particularly, we weren't on a phone, we certainly weren't on social media. That didn't exist then. The thing was that you had to be in by five for supper and then in before the streetlights came on. We

played. We played and we imagined and we sang. We're very musical. We had a big upright grand in Nana's dining room and people would come even to visit and they could play the piano and we would sing and it was fun. And we would go on a ride as a family and people would sing. There was a lot of that. We were very strong in faith. Not particularly perfect in faith, but strong in faith and the community. We just were proud of everything. I think World War II informed probably what my dad and his brothers were like. A lot of post-traumatic that wasn't recognized. Dad had the most gentle heart and soul and the biggest voice. There was these times of frustration and you would think, I don't know what's going on, but when I look back and have looked back, it was, I believe, post-traumatic, and I think that happened to many people as hard times and social things that people have to get through. But I think as my Aunt Bev said, and this was my dad's sister, "When the boys came home, they drank to get rid of the pain." And I never really realized that, but I think that's probably true. Not only was it promoted socially in your media and your movies and that made jokes of but I think people accepted that this is what we're going to do on a Saturday night. We're going to go out and bring a little whiskey bottle and do whatever. And so it was a period of time, I think, that informed a lot of families with that kind of stuff.

Diane Atwood: We hear a lot these days about post-traumatic stress disorder and there are all kinds of programs, but back then there was nothing. It was recognized. The men in particular came home from.

Claire Hersom: War shell shocked, that's the name I'm thinking.

Diane Atwood: And that they were probably different, but there was nothing available to help them, really, was there?

Claire Hersom: True. Just, uh, VFWs, and I think that was put in after World War II where people could go to a legion, the guys could get together. I think at first it was just for men and they would go and they could talk about their war experiences, they could talk about their pain. Because I think in that period of time, I know my dad and many people my age say Dad never talked about the war, and he would never talk about it to his family. And I think it was this protection of the women in his life or the innocence of the kids just wouldn't talk about it.

Diane Atwood: I've interviewed several men. I also interviewed a female veteran. She was a code girl in World War II. She wasn't allowed to talk about her project. And so, when she came home from the war, people would ask her what she did and she said, oh, I was a clerk. But at any rate, I talked to several older gentlemen who fought in either the Korean or World War II who talked about not being able to talk about it and even refusing to talk about it toward the end of their lives.

Claire Hersom: Yeah, it was kind of a code of honor not to, I think, in a way.

Diane Atwood: So you had a relatively happy childhood?

Claire Hersom: Yes.

Diane Atwood: But everything sort of came to a screeching halt when you were 17?

Claire Hersom: Yes. I call it my grief trinity because Dad went off to work. He was 41. He had a heart attack and

passed away shortly thereafter. And ten years later, my mom came down with lung cancer and she passed away. And then after that, I ended up as a single parent with a one-year-old, three-year-old, six-year-old, and no family to really fall back on. Everybody that gets kind of pushed off that cliff, you really need a support system, and I think that's what you talk about when you talk about veterans of foreign war. You need a support system to be able to lean on somebody or something or just have help getting forward to where you need to be.

Diane Atwood: When your father died, one might think there was a support system there, your mother and your older, younger sibling, but what happened?

Claire Hersom: Well, my mom was so incredibly devastated. It was just so unexpected. And they were a well thought of family in town and integrated in the churches, the parades, the Memorial Day, everything. And basically, everything got very silent. I think grief is a big deal, and some people reach out and some people reach in, and it's so big sometimes and I think this is very typical. It's so big sometimes that you don't know what to do with it. You can't articulate it, you can't really hold it inside of you, but it stays there. And Mum just had an awful time, and because of that, there was nobody for us to go to, or her either, to have that grief be shared. So we got very silent. And it changed the dynamic of the family, of course, which tragedy oftentimes does one way or the other, and it changed the dynamic of the structure of the social life around everybody. Mom was a writer, very strong writer, and loved to write. She went back to the University of Maine in Augusta, where she took writing courses. She got hired for the Kennebec Journal. She was the Gardiner correspondent.

She wrote for the Portland Sunday Telegram often. She interviewed Stephen King when Carrie came out, that's the era. And she also interviewed Muskie. She was very good and very well thought of, and she loved Gardiner. She was a Gardiner historian. So she found ways to stay relevant, and I think that that's a very important thing to do, too, when you have a huge life change, whether it be divorce like I did, or a death like happened within our family, you have to find a place to put that energy and to still be relevant in your world and the people around you. And it's not always easy to do, because sometimes the world around you looks at you different, particularly, if there's, and I'm going to say this very general, and it's probably not always true, but widows have the respect of people still. They say, oh, my goodness, you know, she's lost her husband, or he's lost his wife. Divorcees have a very different connotation with that stereotype. And that was a very hard thing to deal with, where the society puts you after you get titled. Is that a word? I don't know. But after you get in one of those situations. Socially in the world, divorce was something, like in my family, when I got divorced, none of my cousins were divorced, none of my relatives, except for me, and nobody has since. And there was a huge amount of shame around that. Not from them to me, but in the society, there was this huge shame.

Diane Atwood: Uh, your mother passed away, you said, ten years after your father, when you were a young mother and still married. She still must have been a strong support for you.

Claire Hersom: She was. When Mum passed, which was 1977, Patrick was six and Kate was three and Jess was one. So it was just months after we ended up on our own. So she

was a support to me for a period of time, but it was very short-lived because she passed away very unexpectedly. She found out she had cancer, and ten days later she was gone.

Diane Atwood: Wow.

Claire Hersom: Yeah.

Diane Atwood: So after your mother died, about six months later, your marriage broke up, is that right?

Claire Hersom: Yes. Our marriage ended and we were in my family home of four generations. My children were the fourth generation to be in that home. And it was too much financially for anybody on one income to take. And my children were so young that working outside of the house was impossible for somebody who had to work in a job that was a minimum wage or barely above minimum wage. And I think the minimum wage at that time was gosh when I worked for the Kennebec Journal, maybe \$2.40 an hour.

Diane Atwood: That's astonishing.

Claire Hersom: Yeah.

Diane Atwood: You were there in the family home then with the three children?

Claire Hersom: My children were there for that very short period of time, maybe a year and a half we were there. The thing is that to stay in that town with the ghosts all around, um, we moved out to Winthrop and just began anew. I did have an aunt that we lived beside, and she was a great comfort to me. It, uh, was the last one. All of my dad's brothers died of heart attacks as well, so I think it's a family

thing. Most of the women live into their hundreds. The guys died in their fifties, you know, I mean, or 40s, as in Dad's case. But Aunt Beverly was there and she was a wonderful woman and a strong woman and a great comfort to have. I was going to move completely away from the area because I also have a strong family in Portland and South Portland, but I wanted to stay close enough so the kids could see their dad and their grandparents when they wanted to, and could. The idea of keeping a single-parent home operating like a double-parent home, which is kind of what my goal was, was to just give them a normal environment. I worked usually 60 hours a week, but I went to all their games. I would hit the house, come home from work, hit the house at 5:30, and I'd be off into the middle of western Maine to a ballgame. But it just was the way life was, and it went on.

Diane Atwood: So you're basically, you're a single parent raising three children. You have an image of how you want their life to be, but you also are facing rules of the society at that time that applied to single parents, females in general. It sounds like maybe you ran up against quite a few roadblocks in trying to manage this balance.

Claire Hersom: Well, I think anybody does, and during that period of time, of course, women's wages, we all know women's wages were not equal to men's wages. Women really couldn't work in a lot of professions that men could work in. When I did end up as a single parent, originally back in the Gardiner house with the family home, I didn't have a car, so I went to the bank in Gardiner and I had an inheritance of a sort although it wasn't huge. But I wanted to have a car loan, and they wouldn't give it to me without my dad's signature, of course, who was dead, or my husband's

signature, who wasn't in the scene anymore. So I have a man's signature on my loan. The change in society that was happening all over the country, where all of a sudden, it was lovely love, you know, and divorce had become kind of common. I mean, I was certainly not the only woman that ever faced that, but the stereotype was certainly there. And I'm going to be very stereotypical saying this, well she couldn't keep her man or it never seemed to fall back on the action of the male. It was always on the woman. Well, what was wrong? What did she do wrong? I'm not perfect, but nothing. I mean, m perhaps the person left because they had something going on. So it was frustrating that it stayed that way for a long time. That was 1970 something. So we're looking at a long time.

Diane Atwood: What kind of work were you able to get?

Claire Hersom: Let's see, when I was, Dad died, I was 17. Graduated from high school at 17, and went to UMA. I went for two years and got an associate's degree. When I graduated from high school, here we go again, I can't believe these words, but I was told that I was not college material, and I went, really? Okay. And I had the choice to either get a job right out of high school or I could marry well. It was such a different, I mean, nowadays I would say, don't you ever say that to my daughter. Why would you say that to my daughter or my son? Either one. So it was a tough place to be at that time. Um, let's see, I was the first person to go on welfare of my family, ever. And welfare has its connotations. It's there for people who need it, and people should use it. It's not there forever and ever, amen, but some people have to have it for a long time. Some people whose houses burned down or their children come down with some horrible disease and

you've lost an income, or a spouse dies and you've lost an income. People should not be shamed for needing to have that. But during that period of time, that was very much the case. It was promoted that this was because people were lazy. And they still do that with people who really well, gosh, they can work. Well, not everybody can.

Diane Atwood: What kind of jobs were you able to get back then?

Claire Hersom: I worked 25 years for the state of Maine. I worked at the Kennebec Journal for two years, I think, in classified advertising. I'm a very good salesperson. They would do the inserts like they'd have a boat show or something or other, and you would have to call and make cold calls to different places. And I happen to be relatively good at it because I have the gift of gab. I don't know if that's Irish or what it is, but I needed to get better insurance. And I began working, ironically, at Child Support Enforcement, which was difficult because that prejudice in the 70s was there. People would be on AFDC, what they called it at that time, and food stamps, and there was a lot of grumbling about it with that stereotype. And, uh, I would hear them grumble around me, and I finally just said, look, you're talking about me, I don't want to hear this anymore. And that was a quiet, silent room there for a while. And I said this is not fair. Before I got this job, I was on welfare. You're talking about me, I don't want to hear this anymore.

Diane Atwood: You had four mouths to feed. You had children who grow quickly, need clothing. When you were on welfare, and your ex-husband did pay child support, thankfully, but it was not enough to cover all of the things that a normal growing family needs, was it?

Claire Hersom: Well, I think that during the period of time, and I don't want to be, I don't want to be blameful to the kids' dad, because he did pay faithfully, he helped, his mum helped with boots and snowsuits and whatever. But the courts, a lot of it was the courts, they didn't go by a percentage of somebody's income like many other places do. If an ex-spouse, male or female, the one that has to pay the child support, they go by 20% of their income or 25% of their income and it's a done deal, no matter where you work, no matter what it is. And they didn't do that in Maine. Working for child support enforcement, you would see the documents come through and it would be \$5 a child per week, \$10 a child per week, and that was a common amount of money. Many, many, many single parents. But many people could also go back and live with their parents. In my circumstance, I call that the three-ring circus, there with one grief after another. My parents were gone. I didn't have that. But it was a very difficult time for many people who were left with children. I happened to be one of the ones where I did get regular child support. It was paid faithfully, and I could say the kids need sneakers and those would come to us. So I was thankful for that. Was it enough? No. But I think there's a lot of different reasons, legal reasons, the court reasons, the way that society looked at the whole situation. We were learning. Society was learning. And I'm not sure that they've learned what they need to learn yet, but they've got a long way. I think that it's quite a bit more fair. At least I would hope so. And honestly, in the child support enforcement, you'd have an absent parent that wasn't paying child support. People work under the table sometimes or whatever, but they would take that paycheck and leave a single parent who was paying child support \$105 a week. Nobody can live on

that. So the system seemed to be one that was still getting regulated to what it needed to be as the society was changing. It was a very tumultuous time for social time in this country.

Diane Atwood: In order for you to earn enough money to be able to fill in the gaps, you had to work long hours.

Claire Hersom: Yeah.

Diane Atwood: But how did you manage them to create that environment that you wanted for your children?

Claire Hersom: Well, I don't know as I was totally successful with that. But I think what I wanted them to have was the ability to be in whatever activity they wanted to be in. And it was sports and music, lots of music, just things, and we could get movies. We would get the movies from the movie store. It was a whole different world back then. So I would get three. And Patrick, who is my son, the oldest, could pick out what he wanted and the girls could pick out what they wanted. And I could pick out one that I wanted. And I always picked a classic because I wanted them to know the classics. So I would pick like *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It was, oh, Mom, do we have to do that? Oh, Mom. And they would have to watch mine first, but then they loved it, the ones that I picked because I knew that they would. And we watched PBS like crazy because we had a black and white TV, and you could get it, number one. Number two, it was educational, and they could be exposed to culture that way, I couldn't necessarily bring them to. That was important to me, so that was part of that. And the other part was if they wanted something, or that was something that the school was doing, or the rest of the kids were doing, or I just made

sure one way or the other, they got it. So I would get up in the morning, and I had a little bakery, there was a little bakery in town, and at 4:30, I'd go to the bakery, I'd make the coffee up, because I opened like, uh, I think six. I put all the drizzle on top of the pastries, and I would sweep the floors, and then I would go off to work for the State and come back in the afternoon, so.

Diane Atwood: So you would be there when the kids got home from school.

Claire Hersom: That was my goal, yes.

Diane Atwood: And somebody helped them get to school or were they old enough by that time?

Claire Hersom: Uh, they got to school themselves. Yeah, they got to school themselves. They were old enough by then. My goal was to go back to work after my youngest was in school. But I believe and still believe that young children need to be with a parent because that's their learning time. That's their biggest learning time. That shapes them into who they are, um, just so many ways. And I think it's very important to have young children be at home if that can happen.

Diane Atwood: And so your youngest, when you got divorced, was about one year old?

Claire Hersom: A little bit past, yeah.

Diane Atwood: And so was it that period of time before she started school? Were those the years that you were on welfare?

Claire Hersom: Yes.

Diane Atwood: And then when all the kids were in school, then you started work, and you didn't just tootle off to work for a 40-hour week. You went to a job and then went to another job and made sure that you were home when they got home. Looking back, how do you feel about your mothering?

Claire Hersom: That's a big question. I think I'm pretty much a kick-ass mother. I mean, they're really good people. I don't think that's an accident. When you have good people, you know, they're good kids. They're really good people. They're not kids anymore. Patrick is 51, and the girls are in their mid-forties. They're just wonderful people. And I know that sounds prejudiced, but that's the truth, they are.

Diane Atwood: That's wonderful, wonderful, wonderful to hear. Getting back to your story, once the kids were gone, you were probably in your 40s, early 50s maybe?

Claire Hersom: Well, they came and went and came and went. I was probably late 40s, early fifties.

Diane Atwood: At that time, you were pretty established in the work world?

Claire Hersom: Mmm, and in the community as well, yeah.

Diane Atwood: How did life change for you, if it did, once the kids were grown up and on their own? Did you have to search for new meaning in your life? Did you take on new causes? Did you stay in the same job?

Claire Hersom: No, well, I stayed working for the State because they had a wonderful benefit package and I needed to retire and have a retirement. I worked for Child Support Enforcement, State Police for five years, I think, six maybe.

And uh, then the Maine Department of Labor for the end of my time there. And then when I stopped there and decided I was going to retire, I was 62 when I retired. In a nanosecond I was 62, I said bye. Then I wanted to do things that I wanted to do, and I had again picked up a part-time job with Winthrop's Adult Education program. Of course, I'm an English major, at school at UMA, and I'm a writer, and I love that, I love that. But one of the English teachers said my parents aren't feeling well, we've got to go down to Florida for like a month. Can you take over this class? And I said, probably. It was ABE, which is what they call Adult Basic Ed. I sat in with her for two or three days, and then she went to Florida and I took the class for the month. Then she decided that she wanted to work at the middle school, and I stepped into that position, so I started teaching.

Diane Atwood: So you've been doing that for about eleven years now then?

Claire Hersom: Yeah.

Diane Atwood: But you also do something with memoir writing?

Claire Hersom: I do. I get into poetry when I get really, really angry. After dad died, I began to write poetry, and it was horrible horrible poetry, but it was just tempting. So I got into poetry through a group of people that I knew, and I was kind of like the least of these. These were poets that had big kudos. They had books published, they were reading all over they had published all over the country. And they decided that I had a voice, I guess. And so I'm sitting there, at probably my second or third time in this poetry group, uncomfortable as all hell. And they were all people who

were, had master's degrees and just way, way beyond where I had educated. So I was a little shy to come out and say anything of critique because there was always a critique and you would offer suggestions or whatnot. But as I'm sitting in the living room of one of the people, one of the poets, and I was tuning his guitar for him, I'm hearing this conversation about a program on 60 Minutes. I don't remember who it was. It had to be like 2006, maybe 2008. They were talking about the poor, and if they just tried harder, they just did harder. And I said I am so sick of this stereotype. And then I began to write. Well, 2:00 in the morning, that morning, I get up and wrote *Drowning*, the actual poem *Drowning*. And I said this is maybe worth writing a book about, a poetry book. And I began to write narrative poetry in a memoir setting, kind of. It was chronological when it went on and thought, if nothing else, maybe somebody will read this and either be inspired that they can live through it because that was big enough, or they can maybe rethink the way that they think about it. That was asking a lot, but I think that that did happen. The University of Maine Rockland campus uses it in their Health and Human Services as a supplemental read.

Diane Atwood: I'm curious, what did it do for you, writing the poetry, the book?

Claire Hersom: Well, see, that's the grief part that we were talking about. They say that if you're really upset at something, writing makes a big difference. And I read this out. I read this in many, many, many places, sold lots and lots of books. And I ended up on the Board of Directors for Maine Equal Justice Partners because of this book, because they went to one of my readings and said, nobody advocates for this population. Nobody. Which is true.

Diane Atwood: So what you were able to write about is your feelings, in a way. No, it's more than that. What you were able to write about is factual. This is what happened to me. But you also were able to write about and this is how it affected me personally to be treated that way.

Claire Hersom: Yeah, I would say that's true. I would say that's true. It's difficult, and it's still difficult. And I think, looking back, which is 2020 vision, I think there was huge grief that I had not been able to get by. It was in me, I just couldn't get it out of me because it was so big and it was so chronic because the trip out of the poverty was long and hard and chronic. It was just constant, constant, constant. And the thing is that inside yourself, you're thinking how do I come to forgiveness? These are my Christian roots. But I also think forgiving people is important. And I can remember going to my minister. How the hell do you get to forgiveness when you want to do anything but? How do you get there? And then I just said, okay, God, you can forgive, I'll get to it when I can get to it. But the thing is that you do need to get to it, and then you begin to heal.

Diane Atwood: And were you able to get to it by writing about it?

Claire Hersom: Writing was important. It was very important. And the memoir classes that you made reference to that I, here I am, I'm retired, but I have to work. I have to work. I love what I do. So even if I didn't have to work, I think I'd be doing this anyway. I'm 73. I don't know when I'm going to stop working. I might not, I don't know. But anyway, so I just said, well, I can write, I can teach memoir, and I can do poetry classes because I can do both of those. And the memoir class, everybody that came in there and said, I don't

know how to do this. I don't really know what memoir is, I'm not quite sure if I can remember everything and how am I going to. And I am a relatively decent teacher, but I want people to be happy and balanced. And I'm in this room, and I'm thinking, this will be good for these people's families. And I think that's my history of not having a family. I look at my children and they never knew my mom. They never knew my dad. There were no stories about Claire and what she did when she was a pipsqueak running around. There was nothing. They didn't have that history. It was like this black hole. And they had no connection to these people. It was an abstract to them. They had no connection. So I knew how important memoir could be. And it happened that all of these women came. They were like seven or eight of us. And they are fast friends. They write now as a group. I wrote with them for 40 weeks. I said, this feels biblical. You guys can do this. You don't need me anymore. You can do this. It was so cool. But anyway, you would find people that would write about things that they had never written about that were painful to them. And they were in a group of people because we had come to be friends. They trusted the people that were going to listen to this. Because one of the rules in my classes, no matter what I'm doing, is that if you're going to critique, it's different than criticism. If you're going to critique, it has to be about the writing, not about somebody's choices or somebody's, there's no unkindness that will come. And you can be honest, but you can be kind. You can do both of those things, and at the same time. So they would write things about their life, things that had happened to them that were big and scary and devastating sometimes, and they would get confirmation for who they were and what had gone on. That is a step towards forgiveness and acceptance of

saying, okay, I went this far, I had this problem, but I'm still going on, which is kind of what I'm doing too, maybe.

Diane Atwood: I am so glad that Nona told me about you.

Claire Hersom: Thank you.

Diane Atwood: I want to give you an opportunity to impart any final words of wisdom or inspiration or hope.

Claire Hersom: I think hope is a big deal because you have to have something that you're moving towards that is a positive thing. Even in the worst of times, I think people don't understand how strong they are and how that strength can show up in some pretty weird ways and weird places, you know, and it can surprise you, but there you are, and you just don't lose sight of that centering of who you are. And if you've got grief, find somebody that you trust enough to talk to about it and just keep going forward. You have to see the beauty in you. Everybody has that beauty and you've got a reason to be here. It's like, what is my reason? Why am I on this Earth? That's a big question, isn't it really? Well, mine seems to be to write a lot of poetry and teach adult education and maybe bring up some kids that are awesome, awesome.

Diane Atwood: I see you also, as a vehicle of sorts, a facilitator. You give people not just permission, but you give them this opportunity to be able to express themselves, to grow. So that's wonderful. Thank you so much for spending this time with me. It's been delightful.

Claire Hersom: I have loved it. I've loved it.

Diane: That brings us to the end of this episode of the

Catching Your Memories podcast. Many thanks to Claire Hersom for sharing her story with us.

If you would like to read a transcript of this episode or leave a comment, go to CatchingYourMemories.com/podcast, where you will also find a sample from Claire's poetic memoir *Drowning* and information on how to order it and other poetry books she has written.

Be sure to come back next month for another episode of *Catching Your Memories*. And if you have stories or memories you would rather not share in a podcast but would like to preserve for your family, I also record personal interviews. You can learn more about that at CatchingYourMemories.com send me an email – diane@dianeatwood.com. This podcast was created, produced, recorded, and edited by me, Diane Atwood. *Catching Your Memories*, the interview of a lifetime.

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