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Kirsten Powers:

Emily, thank you so much for being here with me today. For those who are watching, this is Emily McDowell and she's the author of the popular Substack, *Unqualified*, the creator of the enormously popular non-traditional greeting and empathy Cards, Em & Friends and the co-host of the podcast *Quitted*, which she does with Holly Whitaker. Emily, I don't think I've told you this before, but I was a huge fan of yours before we actually sort of met, I guess through Substack and then subsequently have spoken, but I have, if I was to pull out right now in my office, I have every card you have ever made, so I love them so much and I just want to thank you for what you've done. It's just been incredible. Nobody else does what you do really. I mean, there's a lot of copycats. Let's be honest.

Emily McDowell:

I was very early to a thing that has become a very popular thing.

Kirsten Powers:

They're really wonderful and especially because so often people don't know what to say, and so you're giving these cards in situations where people don't know what to say and you can send it and actually says something that would be comforting to them. So there's so many things we could talk about, but the thing that I want to focus on today is quitting. And I mentioned you have a podcast with Holly Whitaker called *Quitted*. Could you just start out talking about how you came up with the idea of focusing on quitting and doing a podcast about it?

Emily McDowell:

Yeah. Well, the bigger idea about it is that I observed in my own life that the biggest changes that I made and the things that had the biggest impact on me were almost never things that I started doing. They were more things that I stopped doing. And we live in a culture that is all about starting and hacking and doing and optimizing and do more. And I had kind of started to observe the opposite in myself that actually the things that I have done and either hadn't thought about or had just become a part of my life or my personality or my day that I actually stopped doing were the things that had the best, the biggest positive impact on me.

So there was that piece of it, and then Holly and I met, Holly and I were Instagram friends, but we didn't really know each other and we met in 2021. She reached out to me and she was in the process of leaving the company that she founded called Tempest, and she knew me well enough to know not many details, but to know that I was also in the process of leaving the company that I founded. And our situations were different in some detailed ways, but basically we were both people who had founded companies that were really based on our life experience and our personality and our name and my literal name.

And so she reached out to me and said, I know we don't really know each other, but I'm going through this thing and you're the only person that I can think of who maybe understands and would you want to talk about this? And so I said, of course. And so we became friends that way and then we were both in this big sort of fundamental stage of letting go of this thing that had been a huge piece of both of our identities, and we just had tons of conversations about it as friends, and then it turned into really an interest in terms of transition and looking at how our culture does or does not really support transition

and how we do so much before and after and Phoenix from the ashes and all that, but that the middle part of transitions is really the hardest and that's where we need the most support.

And both of us found ourselves. I had sort of thought of myself as a master of transition, like a master, but I had done some pretty tough transitions in the past, and I had had cancer when I was 24 and I had quit a career in advertising, which was a huge identity shift with no plan afterwards, and I ended up starting what became Em & Friends and this time felt infinitely harder like this, leaving my company at this stage in my life, I'm 47 and looking at the unknown, even though technically it was unquote easier, it should have been, according to all outside judgements and assessments, this would've been an easier thing. I have more resources, I have a lot of experience, I have skills, I have all these different things, and yet it was really excruciating and I spent about three years in a really deep period of burnout and a similar thing happened with Holly, and so we wanted to just talk to people.

We really started witted with the idea of let's have conversations with let other people because there are a lot of us out there who are feeling this way and let's have these conversations and let's bring this topic to an audience, help people feel like they're not the only one going through it. And because I think that's also a thing that happens when you're in a transitional period, especially for a long time, you start to feel like, what's wrong with me? I'm the only person. Everyone else seems to have it together and everyone else seems to be rising from the ashes around me and they're all phoenixes and am I a pigeon? What am I? It's not happening. Yeah, that's really,

Kirsten Powers:

And do you find that there are people who are able to quit before they crash and burn because that's my signature move is to push it to the absolute worst possible place and where I'm just enlist such abject misery, I'm sick, you name it, and then I finally quit or get fired or something, someone or someone breaks up with me, whatever it is, but are there people out there who are able to just recognize this is not a good situation and it's time to quit?

Emily McDowell:

If there are, I would like to meet them. I think it was really interesting though because the folks that we had on the show, and even we had a big call out for submissions, and so we went through hundreds and hundreds of submissions and it seemed like pretty much everybody has the similar version of that story where we push and push and push and push, and then if something breaks and the quit comes,

Kirsten Powers:

Then you're forced to quit basically.

Emily McDowell:

For your health or your insanity or your relationship, the rest of your life is crumbling around you, you're clinging onto the thing. I think that that is a lot of people's experience and I think that where I hope to go with my next career and the more I have learned, done my own coaching work, and I'm studying with Martha Beck right now on her coaching program, and I have a master's in spiritual psychology, which sounds,

Kirsten Powers:

Oh, I didn't know that. Oh my gosh, that's amazing.

Emily McDowell:

I shouldn't say I lied. I don't. I went to three quarters of a master's program, so I just,

Emily McDowell:

It was because the company took off, so I was starting M and Friends at the same time.

Kirsten Powers:

Oh, I see. Where did you go to school for that?

Emily McDowell:

University of Santa Monica. It was a two year program

Kirsten Powers:

That's so great

Emily McDowell:

Since the seventies. It was a two year program and now year, but it was great and I wasn't ready to take the lessons from it. I took some of the lessons from it and then I quit my job in advertising and I started M and Friends, which was much more aligned with who I am internally, but I didn't get the bigger picture. It's taken me now this many years later to understand the bigger picture in terms

Kirsten Powers:

Of are you comfortable saying what that was the lesson that you needed to learn?

Emily McDowell:

I mean, I used it to, what's the best way to say this? Instead of learning how to be in my own integrity and stay in my own integrity and live a life from that perspective, which can mean, which often will mean saying no, disappointing people quitting things when they're not right for you before you hit rock bottom, for example. I used it to, I got really clear on what I wanted and I wanted to use my gifts in this different way, and then I chased capitalism. I was like, I'm going to make this company, I want to have lifestyle stores. And I totally went against so much of what my inner knowing was saying and my inner compass was saying in favor of this story that we all get sold about what makes us happy and what success means,

Kirsten Powers:

Which is getting bigger and bigger and bigger,

Emily McDowell:

Right, bigger, bigger and better and more and faster and more employees and more if something works, scale it. All of that was we all just, I think everyone in our generation in particular got very programmed with that and I was no exception, and so it was like it's taken me, so it was like I learned this stuff and then now I'm circling back and learning it again. And so I think that the long answer to that is that as you get more comfortable and more centered and more trusting in who you are and what you want and are able to separate that from what culture wants of you, I think it's easier to quit things.

Kirsten Powers:

Yeah. Well also since you mentioned that you have three quarters of a degree in spiritual psychology, what role does spirituality play in that? So I do think there is a part of getting aligned with yourself, authentic who you authentically are and what your values are, but is there for you a role of, because there is, for me of getting sort of aligned spiritually, to me that almost helps. I mean, I wouldn't say more, but it's as much I guess in terms of believing that as long as I stay aligned that everything will be okay. Do you have any beliefs like that?

Emily McDowell:

Yeah, well, I have a meditation practice and a breath work practice, and I do all kinds of sort of woo woo stuff, but I think

Kirsten Powers:

Love the woo; here for the woo.

Emily McDowell:

The first thing for me is life. From the spiritual point of view, trying to live this way, it's as much as I can is the idea that life is happening for you and not to you. And so everything, and this isn't toxic positivity, so I think people get hung up on

Life's happening for you, not to you. Then you're supposed to just be grateful for everything and you're supposed to be able to just magically alchemize everything into a learning experience and that's not helpful or healthy, that it's really important to acknowledge and feel and grieve and be mad and sad about things that happen that are hard. The purpose of that is to feel your stuff so that you can move through it and that you can be with it and ultimately come out with a genuine belief or feeling an understanding of what you can take away from this.

Kirsten Powers:

Yeah, and I think part of the problem is a lot of people who have this belief do engage in a lot of spiritual bypassing and almost well will be superstitious, so I'm not even going to feel anything that's negative or I'm not going to say anything that's negative because I got to keep my vibe high, which is totally not, totally not the way that it works for me. I often think, is there a lesson in this for me? Is there something that I could take away from it that doesn't mean I'm happy that it happened, and a lot of times it does involve feelings and getting in touch with some things that I wasn't really dealing with, but that doesn't mean that I have to turn around and be like, everything happens for a reason and that was so great. It's just sort of, I guess thinking of the universe sort of partnering with the universe or God or whatever you call it, whatever people want to call it. Do you find that a lot of the people that you talk to have some sort of spiritual grounding that they rely on when they're going through these processes?

Emily McDowell:

It's interesting thinking about our guests. I think that most of them do, I think that most of them ended up did. It's not a question that we asked people, but thinking through our guests on quid, I think that that is true and I think that I know that most of the folks in my life, close friends, just people that I

surround myself with at this point also do have some sort of spiritual framework grounding that helps just navigate life.

Kirsten Powers:

Yeah, well rock bottom will do that for you. Yeah, that tends to be what comes out of it and I think to a certain extent you also see a lot of things because you're so desperate. You'll see a lot of things that you didn't expect to see or experience when you're in those situations. We're coming up on our 15 minute mark and so as to try to keep these things short, but I do want to ask you, you mentioned at the beginning that it seemed to be easier to quit when you were younger, which has been my experience as well, and I'm wondering what do you attribute that to?

Emily McDowell:

I think it's a few different things. I think that I have feel more pressure now to get it right. I definitely feel very aware of time in a way that I didn't when I was younger and I felt like when I was younger it was like, oh, you have your whole life and you can fuck around. And at this stage in life, I feel less that way. I also think that right now is particularly from 2020 onward has been a time of a real collective anxiety and collective struggle, and I think that the backdrop of that is going to inform and affect everybody that's going through some kind of a transition, even if you're not going through a transition because the planet is in transition and the world is in transition, and so it compounds that with all of our personal experiences. I also think that for me, I've been in perimenopause since 2016 and it's really ramped up these last few years, and so I had the additional layer of not only the symptom, the things that we think of like anxiety and brain fog and some of the actual perimenopausal symptoms, but then perimenopause itself is a huge transition.

You're shedding parts of who you were and you're stepping into a new part of life. You're stepping into potentially a new role in most other cultures that aren't modern western culture. It goes along with stepping into a role of wisdom and a role of elder, and we don't really have that. We just have you get old and you fight it and you try to minimize it as much as possible. And so for me it's been acknowledging that I'm actually going through a really big internal transition in addition to going through this external work identity transition and then the collective transition that we're all being affected by.

Kirsten Powers:

And so just to wrap this up though, are you still associated with the cards? Are you still doing that kind of stuff or now that's behind you? No, I'm

Emily McDowell:

Not. I am no longer affiliated. We sold the company in just under two years ago. It was March of 22 and I was consulting for them up through the fall, and that role is now done and I am no longer a part of the company.

Kirsten Powers:

And what if somebody wants to do coaching with you?

Emily McDowell:

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They can contact me. So I've been in a non-compete agreement that is up on April one and after which I can do anything, which I'm really excited about because it's been fairly restrictive up until now. And so I am going to be offering some, offering different things, coaching, I'm not sure if it's going to be group or individual. Definitely some business coaching. Holly and I are going to be doing a series of workshops called Negative Space

McDowell:

Going to be virtual over Zoom. The first one is going to be March, and they are specifically four people who are in that messy middle part of transition and helping to navigate that and be with it. And yeah, I am figuring out what's next.

Kirsten Powers:

Is there a link I can get from you and I'll put that in this so people will know where to go if they want to sign up for these things?

Emily McDowell:

Yes, Emily on life.com is going to continue to be my site. Right now it's a placeholder, but I think by the time this airs, there'll be more there and also my Substack

Kirsten Powers:

Well, I will put all that down there below, or I guess it's technically will be above or I've been putting the video, so I'll put it somewhere. You'll find it people. So Emily, thank you so much for doing this. It's so fun talking to you. So.