

Audio Title: Nōn Wels You, Me, Empathy + One Heart at a Time — Row House
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Transcript

Rebekah Borucki: Hello, neighbor! Welcome to our third season of The Book Stoop...

And if you're new here, lemme help you get to where you're goin'.

So, you're gonna go past the corner bodega and down the block from the fresh cuts barbershop, and there you'll find a brick row house at the intersection of Literature Place and Social Justice Blvd. That's where you'll find the stoop.

Our host, Amanda Lytle, will be there to welcome you to the conversation. The Book Stoop is the place for the hottest takes on book culture, nerd culture, current events, with best-selling authors, change-makers, and risk-takers—our people.

And I'm Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing.

Now, come on in and meet Amanda.

Amanda Lytle: Thanks Bex. Hey, friend. Let me be the second to welcome you to our spot, The Book Stoop. I feel incredibly honored to be the host of this podcast and I'm so grateful to have you here.

Today on The Book Stoop I'm speaking with Nōn Wels. Nōn is a writer, a doggo lover, creator of the You, Me, Empathy podcast, and founder of The Feely Human Collective, a space to grow and grapple with the wonders of empathy, vulnerability, and emotional curiosity.

In the conversation today, we hear the backstory to the podcast, and what brave safety means to Nōn. We speak about using our privilege, uplifting others, leading by example, and what keeps Nōn inspired.

As a content warning, some topics include abuse, anorexia, and suicidal ideation. Before we jump in, I want to invite you to share The Book Stoop with your community.

If you're loving this episode, grab a screenshot and tag us on Instagram at @rowhousepub. Every share, five-star rating and written review helps us find more listeners and climb the charts so we're super grateful for your help.

We start our chats on The Book Stoop with a rather fitting question. So what are you reading these days?

Nōn Wels: I am reading *The Newlyweds* by Mansi Choksi I believe is how you pronounce her name. It's an investigation into love and she's a journalist. It's an investigation to love in I believe India and arranged marriage and the strictures around that and that culture. It's fascinating. I just got started.

Amanda Lytle: Right. So it's non-fiction.

Nōn Wels: It's non-fiction. I believe it's non-fiction because she's a journalist and it was sent to me – I'm in the process of reading it via NetGalley. It was sent to me because she's going to be on my podcast soon. So yeah, it's interesting. It's a world that I know nothing about.

Amanda Lytle: Fantastic segue. You just mentioned your podcast and I was going to ask about it anyway. So let's go there. Tell me about *You, Me, Empathy*.

Nōn Wels: Yeah. *You, Me, Empathy* is a podcast I started in January of 2018. I created it to be a space to be witness to the whole of each other and to try to strive for brave safety and vulnerability and to allow others to show up in whatever the way they want to show up in their mental health and their struggle and their joy and to really root it in empathy, root it in emotional curiosity and vulnerability and listening and I love it. It's something I love doing. Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. It's a beautiful journey podcasting, isn't it?

Nōn Wels: It is. Yeah. I think it's a medium that is beautiful. You can really make what you want and create the space that you want, and it feels independent in that way and like kind of punk rock in that way and also it's deeply collective and collaborative, right? Because you – I think the best podcasts are ones where you're bringing on various perspectives and points of view and I've met so many amazing humans doing the podcast. It's wonderful.

Amanda Lytle: I just wrote down brave safety and something else that you've said is emotional curiosity. Brave safety, what does that mean to you?

Nōn Wels: Well, so I lead a number of workshops for Feely Human, and I remember the first time – I think as I was building it, I used the word "safety" and I think I've since adjusted that. I've since sort of had a new perspective about it in that I can't really assume the safety of others, right?

So I'm creating space and maybe brave is the word for it. Maybe courageous is the word for it. We can strive for safety for all of us, but I can't presume the safety of someone who's coming into the Feely Human workshop who is carrying and holding a different life experience than I have or a different intersectionality than I have, right?

So the work of being witness to that kaleidoscopic wholeness is about listening and reflecting and examining my bias and assumptions and all of that is part of that, right? So I would never assume safety. I think that's a word that's thrown around. It's something to strive for.

Amanda Lytle: I had a very similar experience where I had to really step back from what I was calling a safe space. Exactly what you've said here is that I don't know what listeners or people within this community have experienced. So when you have hundreds, thousands, even hundreds of thousands of people listening or witnessing something that's going on, it's not a one-on-one experience anymore, you know.

Nōn Wels: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: So yeah, I can really appreciate the depth of what you've started to curate and at least understand and then back to empathy. The empathy that you would have in the curation of this space, just understanding that you're going to do your very best to create this brave safety. But that it's done with such love and intention that you're doing as much as you can, but you can't always have the safety that you're aiming for.

Nōn Wels: Right. No, precisely and I think I – there's – context is a big piece of empathy, right? So if I am trying to foster a space or gathering community around me, I'm also white cis man, right? And I have that intersectionality. That's a part of who I am, right?

For some, understandably coming into that space and seeing me would have armor up, would have protection because of their experience dealing with white men in the world, right? As a generalization and it's true and it's valid, right?

So how can I be aware of that? How can I be considerate and empathetic with that context? It's all curiosity, right? It's all like reflecting and examining and dismantling and reflecting and being curious and asking questions and getting perspective in relation to each other. Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: It's interesting that you even mentioned your own identity as a white cis man because in the role even as the host and the producer and the editor of this podcast, that has been a topic, something that I've even brought forward. You know, are you sure? Are you sure it's me? Are you sure that this is the me that you want in this space? I'm a white cis woman and obviously there's an entire back story to even how I've come to be what I am for Row House. But I'm so deeply aware of that and hold such gratitude for the conversations that I get to have in this space and the learning that I continue to do.

Nōn Wels: And it's what we do with our privilege, right? It's the action. It's our responsibility as – you know, I will speak for me. It's my responsibility as someone who was born with this privilege, right? How can I use that for good, right? How can I uplift and cherish those who don't have said privilege, right? And access and equity. You know, all of that, in whatever way I can.

Amanda Lytle: No. I can so deeply appreciate that.

Nōn Wels: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Of course. I want to come back around to emotional curiosity. I really like that phrasing, just that verbiage of it. What does that mean to you?

Nōn Wels: So that actually has a fun back story. So do you know the movie *Moana*?

Amanda Lytle: Yes.

Nōn Wels: It's a movie I love and cherish and the idea of Moana as a character kind of going off on her own and then sort of reflecting on her people's history and legacy of being way finders, of sort of navigating the open ocean and they call it way finding, right?

So when I first launched Feely Human back in May of 2020, I called it "emotional way finding" which I like too though some people were confused about it. So I've since shifted it to curiosity and the idea is simply, "Can we be curious? Can we be curious about our emotions, our feelings? Can we ask it questions? Can we understand that it is brave to do so?"

It's essential to do so. It's essential to do for growth, right? Moana had to leave the island to discover who she was and just discover who she was in relation to her people as well, right? Her community.

So there's bravery in that curiosity, in that exploration and it's uncomfortable too, right? And it's – it may be dangerous, and it brings up stuff that's hard, you know, and it allows us to kind of look inward and look outward and see how those things are connected.

So yeah, it's about growing our capacity for emotional intelligence, right? It's about understanding that feelings aren't facts, understanding that feelings are things that we need to be looking at as potential guides on our journey and we need to, as sensitive people, discern whether our feelings are our feelings or they're someone else's. Is the feeling telling the truth or is it not, right? We're not going to know those things unless we're looking, unless we're being curious, right?

Amanda Lytle: It's interesting just to think of something that emotional curiosity, that if you were to say, "What does that mean to you?" to anybody. Someone is going to have a completely different response to yours and when you've just talked about how feelings and emotions can be information, it's so true in order to propel you into deeper healing, which kind of leads me into something that I'm also really interested in knowing. I feel like what we choose or what we feel into in our lives always has a root and I'm so curious about what the seed was or what the root has been for you when it comes to exploring, you know, being a Feely Human, and also just empathy in specifics.

Nōn Wels: Yeah. So I was raised – I kind of grew up in an environment that didn't always feel safe and had a violent father who was very manipulation emotionally and sometimes physically violent and as a kid who was very sensitive, I – that was very hard for me. It felt very harsh, and I gathered a lot of coping mechanisms and one of those coping mechanisms was to simply shut down, right? To simply sort of guard my heart in whatever way that I could to protect myself and it served me, and it allowed me to kind of survive the childhood and it led to a lot of suffering too, right?

Because I'm shutting myself off from the emotional curiosity, right? So that led to a great deal of people-pleasing and a great deal – you know, mediating my parents' marriage, a great deal of seeing my value and worth in the world as giving all of myself to my near death. I developed anorexia in my late teens and 20s and that was a terrible, awful, painful experience to live with anorexia. It's a very painful, painful experience and a great deal of suicidal ideation.

As I started coming into kind of my own and started figuring out who I was – because I really didn't know who I was for the longest time. Really not until my 30s really. I met my partner Jessica and she sort of nudged me into therapy and therapy helped for some time. Medication helped for some time.

Being in connection with others and allowing others to love me. That was hard and still is hard for me. That has been a crucial piece and the empathy and the vulnerability within that is everything. You know, when you have someone struggling in your life, I'm sure you've experienced this, right, Amanda?

You're not entirely sure what to do, right? It's such a human thing to want to like fix or to want to try to solve the puzzle, right? I feel like that's maybe inspired by sort of capitalism or whatever, right? But the reality is most of the time, we just need to be seen and heard. Most of the time, we just need to be sat with and to truly know that the people love us and that we deserve said love. It's a big obstacle.

I'm still grappling with all of that. I'm much better than I was in my 30s or 20s for sure, but I saw that empathy was a crucial healing element to my journey and that's empathy for self and empathy for others and the empathy exchanged in sharing our stories and listening to other stories. It's why I started the podcast, right?

I was doing a lot of writing about my mental health experience with depression and eating disorder and my childhood and all that stuff and I just felt I need to do more. There is more to do not in a *checking boxes* way. In a human like let's grapple with this stuff because it's meaningful and powerful and life-changing way.

Then, you know, fast forward a few years and then I'm like I need to do more. So I started Feely Human. It's like keep sort of challenging myself in that way and keep – empathy is not a checkbox, right? It's like this active ongoing messy affair with the stuff that matters. So it has been a huge part of my life that has been so beneficial to me and to the people in my life and to my community and yeah, I want to change it for the world.

Amanda Lytle: That's an incredibly beautiful vision that you have and even having been an educator for the last 10 years and working with such a wide variety of kids from preschool right through to young adulthood, you know, and even to adult education and this is where I can just so deeply appreciate when you were talking about navigating identity and even into your 30s and sinking into the fact that as a cis het man, you've been socialized a certain way and that's often just to button it, suppress it, don't talk about it.

So the fact that you're modeling that and you're leading by example, you're leading with love is it's making it more OK. Do you know what I mean? The conversations that you're having, the things you're bringing forward, the things that you're talking about, the topics, the depth of your relationship with your parents, your upbringing, the things that you've worked through with your mental health and with anorexia. It's really, really important. It's really monumental. So I have such deep gratitude for what you're bringing forward with your work.

Nōn Wels: Oh, thank you. Yeah, I mean sharing allows others in, right? Sharing unites or stories unite us. When we share our stories in a way that's meaningful to us, in a way that feels safe, right? It allows others on the other end whether they're witnessing it in person or over a podcast. They say, "Oh my god. I relate. I did the same thing," or – right? Like that's the connective tissue of empathy that's really truly powerful and that's just so meaningful in my life.

Amanda Lytle: And it comes back to what you were saying too about in the vulnerability is that just that human desire, that really deep innate desire to just want to feel seen and validated and that's what you're doing. So now, I really want to come back to Feely Human and what that is being built upon.

Nōn Wels: Yeah. So the Feely Human Collective, I started it in May of 2020 and it's a website. I envisioned it as sort of a collaborative collective of people who are Feely Humans and a Feely Human is someone who maybe is highly sensitive, maybe who – I don't know. Growing up was called an old soul like I was called a lot or you as well.

Amanda Lytle: Me too.

Nōn Wels: Yeah. You know, someone who – like activists and advocates, people who like to care deeply about our communities and our collective and want to make change in the world, right? That's a Feely Human. So when I launched it, and it was just me. The ideas I had were big and some of them haven't come to light and some of them have.

So part of the work that I've done is foster sort of workshop space around empathy in some of these ideas online and in person. I've helped others facilitate their own workshops for Feely Human. I've done art collaborations with Feely artists, and I do a monthly Feely hike series locally to Southern California where we move our bodies and our hearts together and it has been great and it has been wonderful. I have a shop and I have the podcast of course and then the recent iteration where I'm taking it.

I'm in the process of building out like a membership community and the reason for that is I – you know, part of the way that I've sort of connected and built that community is via Instagram and Instagram serves its purpose and it's wonderful for what it is and in my opinion, it's not a community-building platform.

I want to be where the people are. I'm like Ariel in that way. I want to – like I want to grapple with this stuff that's hard and uncomfortable and meaningful in person and face to face, virtually.

Like I really want to do that. So I'm building out this membership community now where there's going to be ongoing workshops from many of my Feely Human friends and we're going to do a book club and various other things altogether and managed by me and sort of shaped by the people within that community.

That's launching in the fall sometime. There's no date yet but building that out because I feel like it's like the next iteration of what this community can be.

Amanda Lytle: When you have these visions for this growing community that you're a part of, that you are building so beautifully and with such intention, what keeps you inspired or what inspires you the most?

Nōn Wels: Oh, the humans within it really, the people that I know will be a part of it. You know, the people that I've met throughout the years in doing this work and hosting the podcast. You know, I've met so many beautiful, courageous people. You know, Bex being one of them, right?

It's such a gift. Like I feel I have like deep privilege and honor to be witness to the stories of these people and then, you know, the listeners of the podcast and the folks who have written for the Feely Human journal or have led workshops for Feely Human or have attended workshops, who have attended Feely hikes, right?

Like all of these people are so courageous and brave in doing really truly meaningful work in their worlds and so part of the community is also about uplifting and championing each other in ways that it's just more intentional and meaningful and impactful in ways that we're – they're actually going to get a response and support from people, right? Not obfuscated by robots on the internet.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, gosh. Yeah, the robots are everywhere, and they can be so damaging. Like even when you said robots and like back to Instagram, that's where I feel like even with so much intentionality behind a platform to create communication opportunities and connection opportunities, it's like that just pulls away from it so much where the in-person, you can truly feel another person's energy field. You can really connect. You can see and you can feel emotion in a space together.

Nōn Wels: Yeah. The in-person stuff is definitely my favorite. Yeah, there's nothing like it. I think you can do a lot virtually though yeah, there's nothing replacing that. Just a hug. I just want to – you know, just a hug, just more hugs please.

Amanda Lytle: I freaking love hugs and I'm a really good hugger.

Nōn Wels: Me too. I love a hug. I'm also a good hugger, I think. I think so. Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Yes. One day when we hug, the room will explode, I am sure.

Nōn Wels: Yes. Yeah, birds will be chirping, rainbows, fireworks.

Amanda Lytle: And this will obviously be after a hike where there's some beautiful vista.

Nōn Wels: Yes, absolutely. Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: I have a question as well about when things get a little bit tougher. You're feeling a bit dysregulated. You know, you've got lots of balls up in the air with your different communities even that you're a part of, that are out there. You're curating these beautiful spaces. But life happens, right? So when there is that dysregulation, you're just kind of feeling out of it, what are some personal practices that you have to just come back to center?

Nōn Wels: Well, nature is always one that helps humble and ground me. I grew up being a pretty active kid and going camping a lot as a kid and to this day, I backpack. So I go off in the woods for a week or so. But just, you know, I live in an area where I can walk right into a regional park and hike for a few miles, you know, without seeing any houses.

So being in nature is one for sure. Being with my dogs is another one. I think dogs – I know dogs are – first of all, they remind us humans to check in on ourselves because they're picking up on it, right? They're picking up on those emotions. You know, so if I'm feeling anxious, sure as hell they're going to feel it too.

So they remind me. They're mirrors like that. They remind me to check in on myself and they also just remind me to like take life a little less seriously sometimes, you know. To not allow myself to like stress too much that they've just trampled their mud mallets into the house all over the rug, you know.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Nōn Wels: I mean just like who cares, you know? That's a rug. It's a rug. Who the fuck cares?

Amanda Lytle: I know.

Nōn Wels: Yeah. So being with the dogs is one, being in nature and then I – and I haven't been doing it as much and I need to get back to my practice of it. But it is just reading regularly. I love reading. Books are I feel portals to empathy, and I've just been so kind of – a little flailing lately with so many different things going on and I lost a day job back in April and I've been doing part-time jobs and all these sorts of things. I think I fell out of my practice of reading and I would like to get back to a regular sort of intentional time to read. Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: I can totally understand what you're saying about the reading thing and feeling like you're flailing because it's interesting how reading and books have become almost like a benchmark for me where it's like, OK, I must be regulated right now because I can actually read an entire page without going back and rereading being like, "Wait, what did I just read?"

Nōn Wels: Yes, yes.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Nōn Wels: I feel that. Yeah, absolutely.

Amanda Lytle: I also just had to mention too just because of the dog thing, my nails are like a pastel neon coral color and you would best believe that our 16-year-old miniature beagle who just had her birthday, her nails match mommy's.

Nōn Wels: Sixteen? Oh my goodness.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, we didn't think she was going to make it back in May. But she is thriving and she just had her 16th birthday. So ...

Nōn Wels: Wow.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Nōn Wels: That's amazing.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Nōn Wels: What's the beagle's name?

Amanda Lytle: Shawna.

Nōn Wels: Shawna.

Amanda Lytle: And my partner has had her since college. So ...

Nōn Wels: Wow.

Amanda Lytle: It's like a bit of a joke that this is Shawna from college and even friends of ours that we haven't seen for so long will come in and they're like, "Wait. There's no way this is Shawna from college." It's like it is! That's her.

Nōn Wels: That warms my heart. I love Shawna. That's wonderful.

Amanda Lytle: I love Shawna too. OK. I've got one more question for you and this just has to do with just life now. What is it – if you're open to sharing because we had mentioned about being open books. What is something that you're currently working through in your life that we could just send you some extra love for?

Nōn Wels: Oh, wow. What a generous question. I think the main thing that I struggle with currently is feeling overwhelmed. I get overwhelmed because I want to do so much and not

doing in a capitalistic sense but meaning-making and a community-building sense. I have such big ideas and I'm like a dreamer and my head is in the clouds all the time and I sometimes get stuck there.

Then up there in the clouds, it's like oh, I'm seeing all this pain and this hurt and sometimes I get stuck there and I have to come back down to reality and understand that one heart at a time. It's what it is, right?

So I have to remind myself that but I'm also – I think more in my – I just turned 41 and like I feel like I've been struggling with anxiety as part of this overwhelm more the last five years than I have in my whole life. You know, mostly I was a depressive person. But anxiety has been one and I think it's just – you know, as you sort of come into your own and you gain more confidence in that and you're – I'm not in a public sphere but like you're building a community and maybe you're the face of that community.

Not that I'm the face of anything but like – I don't know, one or I put pressure on myself, you know, for what it will look like and how it will be and, you know, I have to remember that to let a little bit of that go and understand that it's one heart at a time. I'm not out here like – you know, angel investors aren't giving me like millions of dollars. You know, it's like boots on the ground to use a – oh, I don't like that. I'm anti-war. It's Crocs on the ground. That's what it is.

Amanda Lytle: *Four-wheel drive [0:29:31] [Phonetic]* strapped on.

Nōn Wels: Yes, yes.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, this is fantastic. I have one more official wrap-up question for you and that has to do with a shoutout. If there was an account, a person, an organization, a disruptor, an activist, or a change agent that you can give a shoutout to, who would it be?

Nōn Wels: Yes. So short story, my partner Jessica and I back in April, we started an Airbnb up in our little – we have this little space above our garage and it's Studio G [*Indiscernible*] and it's adorable and it's cute. We put a lot of work into it and we had – there's this movie called *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. That is just my whole heart and I love it to death. It came out this year and if you haven't seen it Amanda, do yourself a kindness and see it.

Amanda Lytle: OK.

Nōn Wels: But on the soundtrack for that movie was this artist named Surrija and Surrija actually stayed at our Airbnb, and this is after I was like geeking out about the movie and like crying about it. Then when she booked the room, I was like, oh my gosh, freaking out. Trying to be cool. Yeah, trying to be cool, trying to keep it in. But eventually we were able to like talk and I was able to like open up and we were talking about the movie because she was – she did a little bit of music, singing on one of the tracks.

So we geeked out about that and then back in the end of July, we got to see her live. She's a musician. Her name is Surrija. Her real name is Jane Lui and a beautiful artist, a beautiful voice. I think it's just Surrija.com. Reminds me of Fiona Apple in some ways and just a Feely Human and a new friend and someone who's like not a super well-known artist or anything but like someone everyone should know and listen to because her music is heartfelt. It is deep. It is meaningful and I love it. It fills my heart. So yeah, Surrija I wanted to shout out.

Amanda Lytle: I will make sure to link that in all of the show notes. I'm also going to encourage everyone listening to send you that extra love for the overwhelm, the dreaming that you're doing, any anxiety to help that just simmer and calm.

Nōn Wels: Thank you.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, I have so much gratitude for you and this conversation. Thank you so, so much for being a guest on The Book Stoop.

Nōn Wels: Oh my goodness. Thank you Amanda. It was such an honor.

Amanda Lytle: Thank you so much for being with us. Please be sure to check out rowhousepublishing.com/podcast for full episode transcriptions and guest image descriptions and the show notes for all the links. Talk soon.

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