

My recap of Connor's story

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Welcome to Just Breathe, parenting your LGBTQ teen. My name is Heather Hester and I'm excited to be with you to transform the conversation about loving and raising an LGBTQ child wherever you are on this journey right now, in this moment in time, you are not alone. I hope you all enjoyed the past three episodes with Connor, we had so much fun creating them for you. And in many ways it was really quite therapeutic for both of us these episodes actually came about with me asking Connor to weigh in on a few sensitive topics that I wanted to discuss on the show. And as we shared thoughts, it kind of naturally evolved into Connor wanting to share his entire story personally, with me guiding with questions and responding in a very subtle way. And we decided ultimately that is what you would all want to so we hope that you enjoyed it. I know it was a ton of information, which is why it was over three episodes. Steve actually listened to the first two on his way home from driving Connor to NYU, and he was totally blown away. And he, as you all know, he lived through it. He always gives me practical and thoughtful feedback. Which I so appreciate. And his biggest suggestion was to do a recap episode to highlight our biggest lessons and just talk about where we were really emotionally and mentally and I have a lot of those times, and to have a place one place where all of these resources that I've discussed over the past three episodes could kind of live. So here we are, that is what I am doing for you today. So I sometimes forget as I speak about different situations we've been through,



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but



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I've had months and some cases years to process through them. And the gratitude I have for why where Connor is right now, mentally, physically, spiritually also adds a layer of calm. So if you're thinking as you were listening, gosh, she's ridiculously calm. That's why there's been a lot of work that's gone into that. I certainly was not like that, during many of those are most of those periods, but I felt like it was important to kind of point that out to you. I'm guessing that you probably listen to Connor stories, feeling a range of emotions from perhaps sadness, to surprise to terror, to curiosity, probably some shock, etc. When I allow myself to go back in time and relive our story, and go back into specific, you know, some of those very specific times. Trust me when I tell you, my emotions were always All of the above and a million times more. So I'm going to take just a little bit of time in this episode to share that with all of you from my point of view. And well, each of our children's journeys are unique to them. I'm guessing as parents, our range of emotions probably falls along a similar continuum. And that is really the biggest reason I started this podcast in the first place. No one should ever feel alone on this journey, parent, child, or ally. So as I've shared with you, and many other stories along the way, we were blindsided when Connor came out to us, the fact that we were halfway across the country and scared for his safety added enough drama to instantly put that situation in perspective, his life, his safety, and his ability to be his authentic self far outweighed any fears we had of how to help him navigate, because we were very ill equipped at the time. And even more so any dogma that either of us had grown up with



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so even now when I look back, and Steve has said the same thing, those first few months were a total blur. But the two biggest takeaways that I want to share with you are first, it is okay to mourn your movie reel. And I think I have shared that concept with you before but the movie reel is the picture in your mind that you create, whether it's conscious or unconscious, the day that you have these babies, each of your babies, and you kind of picture as they grow and they change and they have different hobbies or sports or whatever their passions are, you kind of begin to imagine, you know, this is who they'll be when they grow up. And you create a new kind of just create this in your mind, all parents do this. And a lot of times, you know, we create way into the future, right? So when your child comes out to you, that movie reel is going to change and lots of different ways. And change is not bad. These ways are not bad, but it's change. And so I really want you to take the time to mourn that. It doesn't mean you don't support your child. It's a really healthy part of your process, being able to process that, be aware of it, and move forward and really embrace the beauty of the process itself and and what is going on around you. The second takeaway that I want to share with you is education. educating yourself is so

incredibly important. Again, as I've talked about many, many times, we had no idea about anything. We had zero education in this department. And so it became vitally important for both of us to just kind of soak in as much as we could at from starting in that moment and still continuing today. My resource section on my website is filled with books, websites, articles, podcasts, videos, all of which I have watched or read or in some way vetted, and believed to be very good information, very helpful information. So please, please use that I put that together for all of you. You know, like I said, Steven, I have spent a ton of time and very intense learning mode. And, you know, that's certainly abdund flowed over time now. But, you know, we are constantly constantly learning and so I really, really want to share that piece with you as something that's really important. So kind of going back to where we were at that point. That first summer was really when I began to see changes and Connor changes behavior was his appearance, what he shared he was thinking about and it's actually also when Intuition started kicking in that, you know, feeling in my stomach that okay. I need to really kind of heightened awareness. Stories began to not add up. And because we knew he was struggling with his coming out process, on top of already struggling with depression, Steven, I really treated him very gently, which he has shared and you all know that



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he took full advantage of we were on two very separate paths that again, at the time, we didn't realize, but now we know fully well that this darling boy was really he was seeking to figure out who he was while we were seeking to understand and support and the means by which she was going about figuring out who he was was incredibly dangerous. We were still, at that time operating as though he was the rule following overachieving, transparent kid. He used to be as a young child and you know, early early adolescence, and as Connor has shared with you, through his many episodes, that couldn't have been further from the truth, he really had become a master manipulator and brilliant at living two lives. So as his junior year began, that nine of my intuition that just sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, just kept getting stronger and stronger to the point where it started affecting me physically and socially. I couldn't eat. I began to lose weight. And even though I'm extroverted introvert, right, so I, it takes effort. I didn't even want to have social plans with anybody. I just kind of wanted to lock it down, circle the wagons and figure out what was going on. Because I felt like there was this puzzle that I just couldn't figure out. And as each day passed, and I was working really hard to keep this atmosphere of stability and calm for Isabelle, Grace and Rowan, who at the time were 1412 and nine. The harder I worked in, the more that my intuition was really kicking in, the more I felt like I might just shatter into a million pieces. It is such a hard feeling to describe it but I'm sure many of you have been there. You're working so hard to stay strong that you feel so fragile and you just feel like at any moment like your balloon that's gonna pop. The third time I caught Connor sneaking

out was really the catalyst that broke everything wide open. And I will tell you that the intensity of my emotions in the days following that was nearly unbearable. I still hadn't shattered at that point. But I was crying I was I took every possible moment that I had alone and was terrified and devastated and just had no idea what to do and I finally opened up, you know, and this was all within a matter of, you know, days, not even a week. So this would didn't drag on for long. But I finally opened up to my therapist who did have an idea of what was going on, as well as my kids pediatrician who's always been very open and aware of, you know, one of her gifts as being very aware of each child individually. So I knew I could talk with her about this as well. And I felt this just incredibly weird relief at being able to talk to each of them about all of my fears, while actually simultaneously being terrified, because they both confirmed to me that they felt that I was right.



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So I just have to quickly interject a few thoughts here about reading our kids phones before I move on because The next part kind of gets into that. And I just want to say that I realize and respect that there are many, many schools of thought on our rights as parents to read our kids phones at any time, as well as what age we begin to give them a little autonomy and privacy. This will not be news when I tell you that this is it's tricky. And it's wrought with pros and cons, no matter how you look at it. But here's the bottom line. You know your kid best. You get to do what you feel is right for you, your child and your family. So, with that being said in the year leading up to this particular moment in time, Steven I had slowly been giving Connor more autonomy with his phone. And as we found it was a super valuable trust building tool as well. The last thing a teenager wants is to have their phone taken away and worse read by their parents. So, jumping back into the story that is exactly where I was with Connors phone in my hand,



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getting ready to read it



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and I still just remember that like, sweating and my heart was pounding and I'd have locked myself in the bathroom to do this. And I remember standing there reading his phone, just stunned, stunned, you know with grief, with fear. And it's it is one of those moments that will forever stay with me kind of frozen in time. I Remember having such a hard time processing when I was reading just thinking that it couldn't be true that it

couldn't be my kid? Could all this stuff was going on? How did I not know? And just going through this incredible rollercoaster of emotions from crying hysterically and this sadness that was in golfing my entire body being just against dundun disbelief being angry. Like, the more I read, the more mama bear anger came out of me and I stood there for a long time and finally got to the place of just resolve a place with a plan. And as I got to the point, I pulled myself together to walk down stairs and share with Steve and his reaction was very similar shock. And then he switched to fiery anger, like find people and hold them accountable for what they had done to Connor anger. So it was intense to say the least it was one of those moments and time where everything changes, and we had a number of decisions to make, and, and quickly. So it's one of those things that I just am so grateful for still to this day that there have been many lovely serendipitous moments all along this journey and the fact that we already had a family therapy session scheduled for the next afternoon was one of them. And as you You know from Connor, it was horrific. It was horrific for him. It was horrific for all of us. And the next few weeks after that, were very very dark. For Steven me, the best visual like what I think about that time said, like wading through molasses in the fog. I don't know where I came up with that, but that is like, how it felt like just everything was an effort and I felt like I couldn't see and it was just scary and ominous and so much had to be done. So, you know, it was during these weeks that I realized that all along I felt that if I loved and supported Connor enough he would be okay. When the truth was, it didn't matter how much I loved him or how much Steve loved him or his siblings loved him. If he didn't love himself, his journey would stagnate. We knew what he needed intensive help. And we also know he wasn't necessarily safe at home. And while the Chicagoland area has, which is where we live has ton of resources for, you know, so many different things. We found this was not one of them, strangely enough. So at the encouragement of our pediatrician, we connected with an educational consultant, which is such an odd title evolvus that because what an ED consultant actually does, is work with a family and crisis to decide whether their child needs a wilderness type of project. gram, or something more structured, as well as the degree that academics need to play a part and whether their child struggle is more mental health related or substance related.



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I will actually add resources for you in the notes and pointing to a couple of different ways that you can find an ED consultant or learn more about add consultants. But as those of you who have been through similar crises with your kids can probably attest making a level headed decision when you are part frozen by fear. Another part working overtime to make sure your other kids are okay. And yet another part holding up the walls of your life that seemed to be crashing in it's really hard. At the end of the day, though, it all came down to Connor being safe and getting the help He needed. And so as he shared with all

of you, he did willingly leave for Newport Academy in California at the beginning of November. I know he shared a lot about his feelings and experiences, you know, during that time and, you know, really during the next seven months, and I wanted to share with you that, you know, our Steven, my experience of this time period was really quite different than Connors. We were relieved that he was safe. And we were grateful that we could see him every other weekend for family sessions. And so super grateful that we had friends and family who jumped in to help us with Isabel and grace and Rowan so we could fly out there every other weekend to attend those sessions and spend time with Connor and they offered so much parent education. Family Education. It was incredible and we so appreciated that. And even though our weekly zoom family therapy sessions



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usually included some surprise



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reveal from Connor, regarding the previous few months of his life as an you may need to sit down for this but this is when he told us about his suicide attempt on a zoom call with a family therapist, when he was halfway across the country. This was actually in our second family therapy session together. And I still to this day, think about that night I remember the night I know when he talks about it. You now we've talked about it so much and processed it I know that night I remember picking him up from our friend's house that night. I remember where he was, emotionally, I remember what he was wearing, weirdly enough, I had no idea that that had happened until that phone call. And I just remember, I still, you know, as I think about it and talk about it, I, you know, kind of catch my breath. I feel, you know, I feel this in my chest and just it's still so painful to think about, you know, how close became to losing him and the pain, the intense pain that he was in at the time. And it, it's hard. It is, it is still really, really hard. And on the flip side, I you know, I'm grateful because I know where we are now. So



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can be and even though



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that even that, that that was the biggest bombshell I will tell you that he did drop on us

but he did drop a couple other good ones. turret the next couple of weeks who each call is kind of one thing that he would throw out there just to fill us in. But I felt overall we were making really good progress this this particular family therapist was great. He was fantastic at drawing Connor out. He called him on his all of his BS. He was, you know, he was good. And there was there was definitely growth and movement in a good direction. So I just had to share that kind of that piece with you because you know, that piece of our experience was you know, it was ours exclusively Connor couldn't have known, you know, our experiences, his sharing was about his experience. But at that time, actually a little bit better. For that time back in September, actually, I had begun gratitude and visualization practice at the urging and encouragement of a very, very dear friend of mine. And at this point, you know, November, December, I was beginning to really experience the mental shifts and the support from that practice. And I will tell you it is It was amazing then, it is amazing to this day, it is a practice that I still do. There are definitely times when I'm not quite as consistent with it, but whenever I do pick it back up again and I'm consistent for a while holy cow could totally feel the difference. And just, I highly recommend it if you do not have one. And it's one of those great things where there's really no one way to do it. So that is something else that I'll throw into the resources in the show notes. Just to kind of help you along if that's something that you're interested in kind of jumping back into the story. We were at this point, you know, kind of December, mid December and we this is where I got really, you know, Connor I know it was this horrible horrible for him. It was really horrible for us to because we really loved Newport insurance issues became a huge, a huge piece of the story. And really at the end of the day, insurance problems and I, whenever I think about it, I still have expletives that run through my brain that I can't use on this show. So, bottom line, there were so many you know, if this happens then that is what's going to happen. And if this that you all have probably been there in some way or another with insurance. So by week seven, they stopped cover and completely. And we could only afford one week out of pocket. And of course, this was the week before Christmas that we found all of this stuff out. You can feel the catastrophe, can't you? Yeah, so we went back to the ED consultant, did some quick phone interviews with three potential therapeutic boarding schools. Steve and



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I



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were trying to weigh the pros and cons while also telling Connor that he couldn't come home yet which was awful. Meanwhile, I'm trying to make gingerbread houses and create

a Christmas spirit. Because my kids, you know our kids love the holidays and Christmas size but a very special time in our house we have a ton of traditions things we always do. And this one was already hard because Connor wasn't here and the kids were sad and just trying to make you know things special and have some level of normalcy for them. And meanwhile, this is you know, all going on in the background. So that was super fun. And you know, of course that adding on top of that, telling them that Connor not only wouldn't be home for Christmas, he wouldn't be home for a while. A few days before Christmas, our ad consultant just stopped communicating with us. And I remember crying hysterically through Christmas Eve service and church as my phone was blowing up with just the best way I could describe it as like circular reasoning, and really just caustic texts from her. I was a hot mess. I mean, I really was. I was trying so hard to be super strong on the outside but I was tangle of fragility on the inside just absolutely a mess. So, Christmas Day, we flew out to California to be with Connor. And we had four days with him, the six of us. And that was really the only gift that we needed that year. It was



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so lovely.



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And you know, we went against what every single person said to us, every single professional said I said Do not do what we did pull him out from one place and take him immediately to the next. And, you know, this is one of those times that Steve and I were like, No, we know our kid. We know our family we need this time. We're taking it. And, you know, even though we all had hanging over us, knowing that he was going away again. Oh my gosh, that time was just really precious and having to say goodbye to him at the airport. As he and Steve flew to North Carolina, and Isabel grace Rowan and I flew home was really one of those moments where I thought I really don't know how much more of this I can take. So I have to tell you that I was truly pleasantly surprised with how Connor has processed his time at monforte Hall, which is where he went next. One of the many gifts of he and I doing this three part series was recognizing and appreciating all of the growth that has occurred, as well as taking the time to mentally put ourselves back in those moments. Recall all of the emotions we have felt at the time, the mistakes we made, the victories that occurred. And all of the lessons that we've learned along the way, it was, the process was exhausted, for sure, but so completely worth the exercise. So to hear him reflect in such a mature way, about five months of his life that were so hard, was really really cool for me. And I actually think that he may be more at peace with those five months than I am because for Steven me



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vaxxed variance was just



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awful to be mean that it was awful. It began with extraordinary misunderstandings. We were thrown under the bus by Connor by the administration, which then caused him not to speak with us for a month. We were told by his therapist that our relationship with him would never be as close as it once was. And we were constantly pushing the therapeutic staff to look beyond substance use as the issue. We knew that substance use was Connor's coping mechanism for much tougher underlying struggles. And we fought the entire time he was there for them to uncover and to work to uncover those. So thankfully, there were some professionals around Connor who could see that, and I think that is largely why, you know, Connor is able to reflect on this in such a positive way because they've really helped him restart his coming out process in a much healthier way. And they were able to help him begin to heal some of those wounds and to share experiences which that I am grateful for. So finally, you know, mid May Steve and I just decided we're done. We called their bluff about a number of things they had said, and we pulled him from that program, which brought him home at the beginning of June, which was awesome. And once again, I couldn't only read it reiterate this to all of you which something that you know, I say again and again, you know, your kid Don't ever let anyone else tell you otherwise, even if your kid has lied to you, or done any other number of typical or a typical teenager things, you know their heart, it is our job as their parent to advocate for them. Especially when that nine feet feeling in your gut is urging you to speak or to take action. So, back to the story, that summer, fall and even early 2019. We're pretty quiet in comparison to the beginning all these beginning pieces. And Connor and I pretty much covered this time period for the end of his senior year. The only parent note that I would add is that Steve and I were on high alert at all times. Once Connor came home from being away Newport and mop furred, we had set up a transition plan with a ton of checkpoints that, you know, over weeks and months, he kind of eased out of them, which is you know how it was built to work. We did, however, always set the house alarm at night, we required that he allowed us to track him. We did periodic phone checks that he, you know, we could just ask for the phone he couldn't prepare for, and we had weekly family therapy as well as individual therapy. So there was this very delicate balance of rules and open communication and slowly increasing his autonomy. Because you know, he was a senior in high school and, and the whole college application process, and then you be getting that preparation for leaving home. So we really had to begin to get in that mindset. And we were aware of that. And while all of that was hard, we were all happy to have him home and we're so happy to have him home for a number of things that I know

he you know, he shared with you which first, huge wins and so lovely and so deserved. So, the other quick note that I want to share with you is about Connors High School nutria. He clearly has no love lost there. And for good reason, actually, when it comes to the kids He attended school with except for just a couple of them whom I adore and I'm super thankful for.



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I however, had a phenomenal experience with several staff administration members, particularly the junior boys chair, Connors, post high school counselor. his junior English teacher, and his senior kW teacher, above and beyond does not even begin to describe what they did for Connor and our family, and I will forever be grateful to them. And after Connors searing review of nuclear, I felt it was very important for me to point that out to all of you. So you can imagine by that spring, I was in a much better place, mentally, physically, emotionally. I started with a book coach at the beginning of 2019 to write a book and felt like my energy was just evening out, I was just in a much better place overall. And it was you know, a lot of this was, I wasn't having to work so hard to protect everyone around me but particularly as above And Rowan because for the most part, you know, they were okay. And while they were, you know, dealing with their own struggles as well as fallout from everything that had occurred, I felt connected with them and available which I had not always felt so that, you know, it was a it was important to me and it was important for me to point that out for you, you know those moments after you've been in a crisis where you're able to begin to relax a little and allow yourself the space to focus on your own needs and goals that that lovely, this lovely moments. This is where I was it my daily gratitude practice. I was enjoying my writing process. I was soaking in my family. And then mid April that nine feeling returned. That I was so I could tell you, and truthfully, I really tried to ignore it for a few days because I was like, no, not a gun. But as you know, your intuition doesn't allow you to ignore it tonight should have known that from the first time around. But you know, Connors, senior itis was really amping up, as was his anxiety. And he was beginning to lose weight again, which was always a sign of sign of nothing good, that's for sure. At the beginning of May he totaled our kids car, complete with a fabricated story that Steve and I had had enough experience at that point to read through and after hours of talking



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and confessing



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it basically it revealed Kotter and crisis again. So once again, we were That total lockdown mode. And like before he quickly swirled into depression, and we were once again looking for help. And this time we needed it to be local because he wanted to graduate and he was so close to graduating he'd had just a few weeks until he finished his senior year. So we were definitely looking for something that would allow that to happen. And we did. But I remember at that time, you know, it's another one of those very specific memories where I remember feeling. And in telling this to Steve, that I felt like an elephant was sitting on my chest like that is just everything was like crushing me. And, you know, questioning our decisions being so worried about Connors health and his future. And I was once again back in that place of putting an incredible amount of energy and to making sure that Isabel grace and Rowan didn't feel forgotten, which is such an easy thing to happen and I was hyper aware of when one sibling is taking up more space than all the others combined. And I remember one night Steve asked me what I needed as I was explaining this feeling to him. And I went into this detailed description of how I just needed a few days away by myself. Somewhere in nature somewhere I wanted to be outside it didn't matter for the ocean, the water, it didn't matter. I just didn't want to be in concrete you know, in a city I just needed to be out. And after giving them this you know, several minute very detailed description of



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this is what I need.



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You to look to man. He has like, what I was thinking more like, would you feel better if you had a manicure or a massage? I still laugh thinking about that conversation. Because he was trying and I love him so much for trying and he knew that I'd, you know, I needed support. And I don't think it really hit him until that moment, the complete depths of my exhaustion and my worry, and my, you know, I was just completely depleted, I had nothing left. And so, you know, laughable on one hand, on the other hand, just a total picture of where I was in that moment. So with Connor and a daily local support program, we were able to take small actions hails. And I know I can speak for all six of us when I say we felt like we were dragging ourselves across the graduation finish line. This was not like a graduation. It was. Thank God, he made it. And at that point, literally all we could think about was, will he be ready to leave for New York in August? And what do we need to do to get him to that point? It was, I know, this is so cliché, but it was the constant. One step

forward, two steps back, but all of us were equally determined to get him to that point. And as he shared and we did talk about a bit and one of his episodes, we were all rather naive and our hope that his first semester would be a smooth one. We all know what happened. And I will tell you that well I cried hysterically leaving him at his dorm and Brooklyn at the beginning of us freshman year. There was a huge part of me that felt relief. And I don't think that I've ever shared my god bubble technique with you all, which I know sounds so funny, but stick with me here. This is actually when I started really employing this technique daily and I swear by it, it is it works. So here it is. This is this is how it works. So at the beginning of each day, as Steve is about grace and Rowan leave for work and school, and you know, this started about a year ago, so of course now everybody's home. But anyway, then and I would picture Connor and my mind's eye, I would I picture each of them in a protective bubble. Like a, you know, a bubble that you would blow with your kids, you know, with the one of those ones.



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And



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that's what I picture in my mind. So I picture each one of them in a protective bubble being held just lovingly, like in a really large hand. And in my particular case, that hand is God's hand. But this would work for any faith, any belief system, you know, it could be being held by the universe being you know, that there's no limit on this. It is, whoever, whatever your higher power is, that's what you visualize. So, going through that ritual, allowed me then and still to this day to, you know, put each of them in God's care for the day. And what that did was also allow me to once again, create a little space for myself. For my passions, and for me, which I desperately, desperately needed, I feel like Connor and I shared a lot. He shared a lot about his journey through his freshman year and, and I reflected a lot through that. And so I



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really don't feel like I left anything out. So



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that kind of brings us to present day. And I just want to just reiterate a couple of things. I

know that I've written a lot about this in my newsletters, and in other places over the past few months, but I really am overwhelmingly grateful for the gift of time, bonding, conversations, growth, and laughter. That COVID has brought my family and I know that sounds so weird. Because yes, it also sucked. And yes, there were definitely days that we were super annoyed and add each other. And it made us all slow down and discover new things about ourselves and each other and appreciate knew things about ourselves and each other. It allowed us to work on our abilities to sit through discomfort and certainty, which, frankly, we already had some experience with. Right. So, really grateful for that. And, you know, Connors, freshman year sendoff was with crossed fingers and a sigh of relief on everyone's part, his included this year, however, it was



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with sadness that



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this time together was over. And it was also just joy that he was returning to Place He loves to continue an education he's passionate about. And for me with peace and faith and delight, that the extraordinary growth he has realized over the past year will give him the strength and confidence to get through harder times. Which there will be harder times there will be bumps there always are right. But is Connor and are we all better equipped to handle them now? Without a doubt? Oh my goodness. So I hope allowing you all a glimpse into my emotional journey with Connor has been helpful at the very least, and letting you know that you are not alone. Clearly this process has the ability to test and for those of you who have had Have a love sideman experience. I am truly grateful for you and you are so very luckily lucky. But I have a sneaking suspicion that the road has been a little rock here for a great many others of you and for all of you, I just send strength and love and hope. And my final takeaway that I want to share is this. I have been asked many times if we would do anything differently, and the answer is a resounding yes, we made mistakes and lots of them. But here is what I've come to embrace. recognizing those mistakes, owning up to them, learning from them, and moving forward is one of the greatest gifts that we can give our kids making mistakes is human. Oh, in them and growing into a better human is what our kids see and what they copy. So, we are grateful for the mistakes that we made and we are grateful for all of the humanity surrounding that. I am so grateful that you have joined me today. Remember to just breathe, taking those few minutes each day to focus on your breath, and calm and center yourself will give you strength and clarity to keep moving forward. If you have ideas for just breathe, I have a brief survey that is going to run through the end of September attached to the

show notes where you can share all of your thoughts with me and I would love to hear them. You can now review just breathe and just one easy step through the



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Lincoln notes,



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please subscribe to my website to stay informed. You can sign up for my monthly newsletter there as well as access tons of resources. All of the resources I've mentioned during this episode, and tons more will be listed in the show notes. So please be sure to read those if you are in need. If you need a place to chat with other parents and allies, join the private just breathe Facebook community. And finally, please share this with anyone who needs to know that they are not alone. Until next time,