

[00:00:00] **Sue Marriott:** Hey welcome aboard Sue Ludwig. we are so happy to have you here at Therapist Uncensored.

[00:00:04] **Sue Ludwig:** Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm excited for this conversation.

[00:00:07] **Sue Marriott:** So my guest today was actually recommended by it's such an honor Jill Bolte Taylor. She insisted that the two Sues should meet and we would love each other. I didn't hesitate and it's turned out to be very productive. So she is president and founder of the National Association of Neonatal Therapists a licensed occupational Therapist and a certified Neonatal Therapist.

So you might be thinking why in the world is there a NICU therapist? What does that have to do with attachment? We're gonna get into that and in particular about regulation. So you talk a lot in the book by which by the way I really enjoyed I thought it was so personal personable and relatable. But you talk a lot about energy. And actually it was a Jill Bolte Taylor quote right? "Be aware of the energy that you bring to the space."

[00:00:57] **Sue Ludwig:** Yes.

[00:00:57] **Sue Marriott:** So maybe we can launch from there and what you mean by that and don't get nervous about you even put it in your book which I laughed like this isn't woo woo weird - that kind of energy but actual real the way I think of it is like bio synchronization. but yeah why don't you know that quote what it did for you and what do you mean when you talk about energy?

[00:01:17] **Sue Ludwig:** Yeah so when I first heard Jill Bolte Taylor's quote "Please take responsibility for the energy you bring into this space." it just stopped me in my tracks because I thought what does that even mean? And I had never thought of being responsible for my energy. It was just a perspective I'd never had. And so I was trying to be more intentional in my life in general and I started with that quote in mind. Going into the NICU going up to my patients and thinking what does it look like in this moment to be responsible for the energy I'm bringing to these tiny patients?

And by energy the way that I wrapped my brain around it was a couple things. One was just the energy that we all have. You know we're healthy we're rested we have a lot of energy. If we're sick if we're depressed if other things we may have low energy. And so that was one type of energy I was considering as I was going to the bedside.

And then the other type was just the vibe. Everything has a vibe. Restaurants we go to.

yeah. that's the clinical term. It's vibe.

[00:02:14] **Sue Ludwig:** Exactly. . And so what was I bringing to the babies? And I knew that that was of utmost importance because whatever I was bringing to them was of course gonna help regulate them or dysregulate them potentially.

And so I had to be extra aware of what I was bringing. While I was a I thought a really good clinician before that moment I'd never really thought about it through that lens right before I put my hands on a baby. And so I made a concerted effort to stop before I touched a baby before I went and opened the portholes to an incubator and.

What kind of energy do I want to bring and what kind of energy belongs in this moment to this baby and what doesn't belong in this moment for this little person? And so that started to change how I showed up at the bedside.

[00:03:01] **Sue Marriott:** So we're for sure in this conversation gonna get to how this translates into human regulation. adult regulation between couples relationships all those things. But before we go there let's go back to the NICU because this is where these ideas really took hold. Can you tell us a little bit about why regulation is so important in that setting and just paint a picture of what that looks like. And also when you asked yourself the question what kind of energy do I wanna bring to this patient what would be examples of the answers to that question that you ask yourself.

[00:03:34] **Sue Ludwig:** Yeah. So to start with that the answer to that question for me depending on the patient might be something like "the energy I wanna bring to baby Emma is something that feels like safety. The energy I wanna bring is something that is very calm and intentional and grounded." So I would use questions. I would actually set intentions that would help me ground that energy and the intention. I might say my intention for this next 20 or so minutes is for Baby Emma to feel safe and protected and supported through things that are stressful. and so I would try to actualize it that way in each moment.

[00:04:13] **Sue Marriott:** And wouldn't that be a great intention for all of these babies or is it more specific than that or because these are little fragile teeny tiny as a matter of fact I haven't mentioned yet the name of your book is *Tiny Humans Big Lessons*. So these are these tiny humans that are fighting. You call 'em feisty. Yeah. So the intention would always be to keep them safe of course

or the energy would be always safety. it varies on the age they are which sounds funny when most of them are still pre full term

[00:04:39] **Sue Ludwig:** But there's a big difference between a baby that's maybe 24 weeks gestation and just overtly fragile. Every single part of them is fragile and a baby that might be closer to being full term who has just a different capacity. For example a baby that is closer to full term and is healthier now my intention might be something like I really wanna connect with them.

So my intention might be more about connection or their attention or bringing something that is just supportive of that stage of their development. So I think that it seems odd from the outside to think they're that different but every week makes a huge difference in where they are developmentally and what their brain development is.

And that would lead me to feel like I could bring a different level of energy to them. The more stable the baby the more sort of upbeat if you will energy I could bring versus just this really grounded calm energy to a really fragile 24 weeker. so hopefully that makes sense to you listening.

[00:05:39] **Sue Marriott:** Absolutely. And of course I can't help but think about therapists doing this before they're adult patients right? taking this pause of what kind of energy and that it can make that big of a difference with these teeny tiny ones within days. Days can make a difference. A week can make a difference but I also think about developmentally everybody that we see. And for each of us we're all at a different place and being attuned to where any of us are. I just really love how that this is gonna keep echoing back to adult world. So what do they look like when they what do you what kinds of signs are you looking for around being on the right track or not?

[00:06:18] **Sue Ludwig:** Yeah so let's take that baby that's maybe only 24 weeks and super fragile. So we're talking under two pounds, very thin skin, very fragile tissue paper skin, very little muscle tone at all yet has developed. so just a very fragile human. And that baby would likely would be in an incubator or they would be on their mom's chest ideally. So I would come up to that incubator. I had a little mantra I went through to set my intention and ground my energy. And then I would always call them, even at that tiny gestational age, I would always say their first name before I touch them because again, they're in this really fragile state and just touching them would be start too startling for their system.

And so what I know first is to grade that sensory input and do something verbal and soft like hi. And it also was just a sign of their personhood, respecting that this was a person, not baby in bed B. So I would say hi to them and then I would put my hands on them in a very firm but contained way to provide human touch. Because we know from the research that babies in the NICU mostly receive what we would call procedural touch where we're doing things to them to take care of them - suctioning, diaper changing, the nurses are doing a lot of that of course, but just in general they're being taken care of and those things are stressful. So we want to, as much as possible, provide them with this human touch first and then I would be in partnership with the nurse so that while she's doing those tasks that are necessary medically, I would use my hands and my observation skills to watch for these subtle signs of stress from these pre-verbal babies to help co-regulate, to help them self-regulate in any small capacity they could. For example they're gonna be calmer if they're in a flexed position, but if you just go in and turn them over, they're gonna sprawl into sort of this startled extended position. And if a nurse is by herself doing that she can't she doesn't have enough hands to do what she has to do and keep the baby's whole body stable. So I would use my hands, keep them tucked, inflection, maybe let them grasp my finger, all things that are regulating to that baby's nervous system and motor system. And so we would work in like a dance the whole time during care to help that baby's system experience that as less traumatic, potentially supportive hopefully and keep their whole system more regulated than if we did not do any of those.

[00:08:50] **Sue Marriott:** And little things like this can be life or death at this stage. is that too dramatic to say?

I think I don't know if we can always say A plus B equal C in that way but what we know is that say we do let them sprawl out if the nurse is alone and she can't keep them as contained in things their motor system, their arms and legs and their whole system will work to try to regulate itself, but they're so fragile they really can't do this on their own and it's exhausting. And so if that motor system becomes more exhausted then they will show those stress signs in their autonomic system which is when they'll turn blue and drop their heart rate and have apnea, have these episodes of not breathing and things. It's all interconnected. So the more we can support them, the less likely they are gonna unravel down to those autonomic stress signs. And so it seems like if you are looking from the outside oh I'm being nice and helping the nurse, but when you know what I'm doing and why I'm doing it and what that does to support the motor system while we're doing these things, we know that we're going a long way toward mitigating or preventing deeper signs of stress and hopefully not letting the baby's system have to go into a stress response every single time they

receive care, which can be every two hours at the least probably in that small of a baby.

[00:10:09] **Sue Marriott:** Man I can actually remember it in my body. One one of my three ended up in the nicu and we've talked about and you mentioned in the book that it's very different now but with the sounds and the light, we were only allowed in for these short periods of time. And and I'm and in just thinking about the fragility that you're talking about. Now this was a full term baby but just the difference that it can make for sure. And you mentioned touching them with a firm containing hand. I'll imagine imagining in my mind like cupping or. Like holding can you show us what that looks like? And maybe we can verbalize that.

Yes. So we always do this like we're tucking so we can have one hand on their little bottom, including their feet. Okay. Including their feet most likely flex their little feet up toward their bottom and have one hand containing them that way and then one hand on their head. and again it would be Firm and just still meaning we're not stroking them because that light touch can be too overstimulating for their nervous system at that age at least. we're talking about small babies right now but and we and just hang out there firm hand on the head and then tucking their extremities in and just hanging out and it's almost like a hug. We call it a hand hug because that's Feeling that it is. and we would just rest there and let them settle into being touched and make sure that we'd be watching them for any signs of stress. And and then when they were nice and settled, no stress cues, then we would take them in that contained position and slowly turn them over.

[00:11:38] **Sue Ludwig:** Back in the day, we used to take head and bottom and literally flip them over like a little pancake, and so they would sprawl out and heart rate and respiratory rate, everything went crazy. And we were, I think back then, the thought was like, this is stressful so let's get it over with in a hurry and then get them settled again. But we didn't yet know the cost of not doing that all along. And so over time we learned a lot more about their neurodevelopment and what stress and chronic stress did to their brains. And so we learned slower, more contained, giving them rest breaks when they have stress instead of pushing them through it because they don't have the capacity to push.

as you were describing that I can just so feel it and feel the containment and the warmth of it. totally get it. To me it's like being in the womb, right? Yes. That's part of that containment cuz they're supposed to be squeezed at that point right? Really tight. Yes. yeah. And it makes me even think of again with adults and it's not just. folks that are neuro atypical but just anybody that like I was even

thinking of the hand on the head at like just of the application of that and or whatever their comfort signals are. I think of temple Grandin's squeeze machine.

[00:12:50] **Sue Ludwig:** Yeah. Adults respond to that proprioceptive input as well, and so it's very similar in that it's calming to their nervous system as well. what it looks like has to be obviously because of their capacity at the time. Yeah.

this is so compelling. Can you go through that again? But with a older baby that's still a teeny baby . but Yes. What your thinking is and what

[00:13:11] **Sue Ludwig:** that looks like. Yeah. So let's pretend this baby's now maybe 33 weeks postmenstrual age, so still seven weeks preterm. So still a little person but just way mu could be way more stable than that other baby, of course, if they don't have any other issues. And so with a baby of that gestational age, if they are stable, they might be in a little bassinet. They might be still in like little positioning aids we keep them in. But I would be able to go up, I would still say their name, I would still put my hands on them in the same way first just to help them wake up or transition from a sleep state to a drowsy to more of a quiet alert state would be one of the goals. whereas that 24 weeker doesn't have those all of those states available yet most likely. and with the little bit older baby. I would try to help them through that transition of state. And then I would while I'm taking care of them I might be changing their diaper, getting them ready to be held, to feed or things like that, and I would be able to take them out of their little positioning aids. I would be able to support them but they would have more capability at that point in their motor system. So instead of being all extended they have a little flexor tone. Now they can bring their hands more toward their middle. Their legs have some flexion in 'em. They have a more capable motor system, and they have a more capable autonomic system. And so I may be able to have a more interactive experience with that baby. Still graded. I'm not gonna be ringing bells and having loud conversations, but I could read to them. A baby that age, I could swaddle in a blanket. I could pick up and hold in my lap. we may work on pre feeding, oral feeding skills or things like that. So just a much different interaction than a baby that is so overtly fragile at the younger ages. And again, my energy might be able to be a little more up. If they are able to attend visually, I might be able to have them just look. They don't have a fully developed visual system yet, but they start to look a little bit more focused, and I would just again still be grading that input. So I'm not gonna have them try to look at things visually and have a lot of noise and try to feed them, all the things at once. It'd be verygraded input so that they can manage it.

[00:15:20] **Sue Marriott:** So then let's fast forward to a baby close to full term if you don't mind doing that again. It's really interesting and informative.

[00:15:28] **Sue Ludwig:** Yeah. And one thing I wanna not forget to say is that the main goal always is really to connect the baby with their parent. So a lot more than used to be in the past for sure. And so whether they are at 24 weeks, 32 weeks, 37 weeks, that's really the goal. If the parent is there at the bedside, I would be helping them do all those things I'm talking about and I would help narrate for them and help teach them what stress cues look like and self-regulation looks and co-regulation so that they are empowered to start noticing their own baby's cues and start telling me. I want them to become the expert telling me what they're seeing over time would be the goal. So didn't wanna forget that but yeah. So closer to term or full term baby if they are still in the nicu, we would still approach the same way. We're still gonna grade and speak first and touch second and things, but that baby might be starting to really visually focus and look around and be able to engage in really looking at you, and you're talking to them at the same time and those things might not be causing them any stress. They might be very regulated by those things. At that age they have a much more capable motor system, autonomic system. And then also their attention and interaction is coming on board, that higher level ability. They're eating unless there's something else wrong. They would be breast or bottle feeding by then. So able to engage in much higher level activities and interactions and complicated interactions in comparison. And so our role as a neonatal Therapist is really to continue to bridge the gap developmentally between what that infant system expects to have in their environment and what they're getting by being in this strange environment of the nicu and how can we bring their development along best we can in this new environment and mitigate the problems they might experience from that loud, bright, bustling nicu. How do we modify the environment? And then how do we modify every interaction so that we're thinking of their development? Not just right then cuz that makes a huge difference in their next 10 minutes of life, how they tolerate things, but also we're thinking 10 months, 10 years from now because how that baby system is collectively being wired in the NICU experience is laying down a lot of important neural pathways for of course later on. And there are just some things because their brain is not even full term yet, some of them are one shot deal. Most of them are very plastic. But of course those early experiences are so important. Those full term babies, it's just super sweet to see them have the greater capacity to interact to be in a healthier spot, that breathing and surviving is not their only direction of their energy all day every day. Now they get to have other things.

[00:18:15] **Sue Marriott:** A word that you used in the book was feisty. Yes. I really love that. You also just mentioned the idea of teaching co-regulation. So

what does co-regulation look like at let's just go ahead and have the baby full term. this is parents of young children. Some parents would say what do you mean co-regulate? They just are sitting there. What should parents look for? And what are stress responses? What do stress responses look like in a young baby?

[00:18:39] **Sue Ludwig:** Yeah. So in that full term scenario the stress responses are pretty similar along but they'll be more dramatic in different age sections. But for a full term baby, some of the stress responses will still be that big motor startle, if they hear startled by something abrupt like a sound or movement where their extremities fly out. They may have a really strong like hand finger splay where their hands are spread, fingers are spread apart with a lot of extension. One really subtle cue of a even a full term healthy baby, it's just if they're really looking at you and attending to you but say the environment becomes really overstimulating they'll just avert their gaze. So the gaze that was right on you just looks they look to the side. It's just a subtle sign of I'm a little bit stressed. And they may go over there and then they may come back if they're able to regulate, but they may not. And it may start a cascade of other stress cues depending on the environment. So as a parent say I am holding my baby. And I know a lot of people come around and if we're still in the nicu pretend they're in rounds. And rounds typically are loud. A lot of people if your baby then does that little gaze aversion it's just like hmm. Interesting. Noted. and you wouldn't wanna add any extra sensory input at that point but you could be holding them giving them that firm touch to help again co-regulate, which means you're using, as a parent, your energy, your groundedness is going to translate at some level to your baby.

So if you're really high energy that is going to perhaps stress that infant out and if you're really grounded energy and calm, that will have an effect on your infant. Humans are different that way where we're meant to co-regulate. Instead of this human infant being alone and trying to develop we're meant to be with a parent or an adult. The way that we show up and how calm we are, if we're moving slowly they're able to absorb that and move with that. If we're really brisk and we're changing the diaper whipping 'em around, they're gonna pick up on that. And depending on the stability and capabilities of that infant, they might tolerate that and they might show us some of those signs of stress.

that's really lovely. And and I was also thinking in terms of even these teeny humans are also co-regulating us. Like they're they. Like we are impacting them but this is what you're teaching your parents.

[00:20:59] **Sue Marriott:** But learning to notice how they communicate. Cuz they can't tell us with words but they're signaling more or less the same come closer step away. Is that the way you would like how would you say it from your discipline or from your perspective? As far as the baby co-regulating the parent for that direction?

[00:21:18] **Sue Ludwig:** Yeah so what was startling to me in my own journey was I had all these observational skills as a neonatal Therapist but when I tried to really be intentional about bringing that being responsible for my energy I realized that the babies were doing that if I was really tuned in because of what they needed from me and because of what they were showing me.

I then had to just bring myself way down. I so their necessities their needs really told my system what needed to happen. And I when I fully understood that the gravity of that for them it changed how serious and consistent I was in what I brought to them. And it also changed which was hard how hard it was to see other people not be that way.

Oh absolutely. and so to have a and I'm not acting like I was floating around on some perfect cloud and no one else was by any means but as you go along that journey and you're You it's hard to explain very concisely in care to even people who do this every day for a living the power they have to positively affect that baby's development and how important it is to not just be chit chatting over top of the baby about what the heck ever not realizing that they're slowly kindfalling.

Because of the extra noise and the extra when we're not quite paying attention and we move them a little too fast. So being that really attuned to them was the most powerful teacher to me and what it meant to be really centered and grounded and how to show up for them as they needed. So in that way they were definitely regulating me.

that's lovely. Now . Ben what happened to you personally? You said that you weren't floating around on a cloud that this was work that you were intentionally doing but it sounds exhausting. it sounds like I understand that it is life giving as well but like you're saying that you matching the state of the baby makes you more vulnerable in a sense right?

[00:23:17] **Sue Marriott:** Like your awareness. To whatever's around you is heightened and you're feeling it more deeply. That's what I mean by like you're having to and then you're also having to manage yourself like your own chit

chat or your own eyeroll or your exhaustion or what have you. So how has this impacted you as an adult human these insights?

[00:23:37] **Sue Ludwig:** Oh so much really they started me on I was at a period in my life like I say is in the middle of my NICU career probably I was in the NICU for 20 some 20 something years. But where I my own life was really I would say scattered super busy. I was working a lot. I had the NICU job I was consulting I had two young kids.

We went through things personally in our own life and family with dead and money and trauma to one of our children. Just a lot of things and they I. at a point of burnout myself and for me that felt like I was just pretty numb honestly. I was just running through my life hamster wheel every day and falling into bed hitting repeat getting up.

And at some point I became really restless and. I wanted something. I thought there there has to be more to adulthood than just all these things I'm doing. And when I went about on a little journey to find out like how not that intentionally honestly but it led me to do some things.

I went to a women's retreat which. Honestly was a ridiculous thought. I was that was not something I would've ever done. I was I started doing things that required me to be present and required me to be a little bit more intentional and I fell in a rabbit hole of wow there's this whole other way to live potentially where I'm actually present where I'm actually not running on the hamster wheel.

but I didn't know how to get there. I could just tell it was real . I was I just couldn't get there. And what was fascinating over time and this was over a long time but is in the end what was most helpful to me was the same things I was learning from working with the babies in the nicu which I was being responsible for my energy noticing it first.

[00:25:15] **Sue Ludwig:** So I just wasn't even noticing I might walk down the steps in the morning and energy in 1 million directions. Never once was I paying attention to all the things I had signed up for where my energy was going how I was showing up for other people. But so I started by trying to do that in the nicu and what I learned is that those lessons were the most powerful things that I could carry outside of the NICU as well.

Meaning that the same way of when I'm gonna walk from my car after work into my kitchen with my children I could also just I could before the incubator stop and say what energy do I wanna bring in this house with me? who do I

wanna be to these people who are children and are learning from me whether I want them to or not?

and I could bring that same practice. into my adult life. And so I started to it was a lot harder. honestly. the nicu while it seems harder I had the skillset for that and I had to learn to adapt that skillset. But it also had a beginning and an end. A treatment session began and end ended so you could hold it together for the session.

[00:26:20] **Sue Ludwig:** And then I gloves on off. there were giant cues of when I was entering that space in the NICU and when I was leaving it but at home it just like never ended. . There are these people all the time. and

yeah I was gonna say I was gonna ask you as you pause in the driveway and you and let's say that we have a the wherewithal to pause cuz that's we're doing pretty good there already.

and you say what kind of energy do I wanna bring? into the home. but that your reaction is more of oh my God they're gonna be crawling all over me . Yeah. I'm late for you know what I'm saying? That I'm trying to like the realistic Yes. Moment before you enter.

[00:26:50] **Sue Marriott:** So what is that what are your thoughts

[00:26:52] **Sue Ludwig:** about that? Yeah so it sounds great right on paper. and I remember very clearly. That literally like one of the first days that I remember remembering even to do this that I thought like I should be doing this at home but then I would forget and would forget.

So the first time I actually remembered to do it and then I literally opened the door and just walked into the scene. And at the time my kids were in middle school and I just. everything like went out the window because I walked in and there the dogs were barking. There were like literal tumbleweeds of fur rolling around.

the backpacks were everywhere. There were already papers all over the kitchen counter. there were snack wrappers. so just the visual.

[00:27:30] **Sue Marriott:** of all the things. everybody is nodding along with you. They're like yep. Got it. Yep. Seen that. Okay. Yes go ahead.

[00:27:35] **Sue Ludwig:** So all my little pretty plans about being intentional seemed to literally go out the window.

Like I forgot them in that moment because my mother frustration came back of just the visual anarchy that was going on in front of me. And so I on this particular day I remember. just I forgot. So I was just going at how I always went and I asked the kids how their days were. I was getting the mail I was throwing something in the microwave whatever.

and then I just something reminded me I don't know what oh I was trying to be intentional and I was like clearly I already am not good at this thing outside the NICU and. And then I said okay I could start now in my head so I just put the things aside I was doing and and my daughter hopped up on a little stool and I just put everything else aside and I thought I'm just gonna listen.

[00:28:19] **Sue Ludwig:** And she chat chat if you have middle schoolers just all the chatting. And so it was all the things about the day and I didn't do anything else which was really the amount of and I didn't even have a smartphone then. I can't imagine now I'd be looking at email I'd be doing whatever.

and I just remember that at that moment I was looking at her and she's talking away and I just noticed like these beautiful little colors in her eyeballs that I had not noticed. I made my own kid 10 years old and I was just like wow were those always there? I just and then she we I talked to her with her.

[00:28:51] **Sue Ludwig:** We had a conversation. Nada. yeah. As I was doing other things and then she hopped down pretty quickly and was likeda. And but I really we had a actual conversation and then she hopped down and went outside with her brother and I. . Oh. Like when I was I think what I was thinking as a mom is like when I come into the house they need me for all the minutes.

So I have noth I don't have all of that to give especially after a day of giving to other people and other humans. And I felt all consuming and exhausting. But in that little moment I thought oh she doesn't need all the minutes. She needed six. She just needed me to listen to her for and just connect with her instead of just being around.

She needed me to be with her and then that didn't really wasn't that long and then she was quite satisfied. That is

[00:29:35] **Sue Marriott:** so fascinating. Okay. You said she didn't need me. wait. She didn't need to be around me. She needed to be she needed you to be with her. Yeah. Oh wow. In six minutes I think we can do six minutes.

That's now that sounds more realistic to the ordinary of us . Yes. but if we back up for just a second. Yeah. So you're in the. free way of doing stuff and not think and but and you said you don't do women's retreats but you signed up for a women's retreat so I'm actually curious about what this change is like what was happening? going from really it's again I'm just imagining so many people relating cuz we're just without the schools and the this and the that So this all does sound good but what's the actual transform transformation transformative process?

What were those things that gave you the light bulbs that were actually sustainable?

[00:30:22] **Sue Ludwig:** Yeah. Yeah. So I in a nutshell I would I'll say first that I. didn't know this while I was going through it. Just like we don't usually know when we're in something that's transformative we're not usually aware of it except it's really hard.

Yes. What it feels like at the time is this is really hard. but what I know is I just followed what I would call like breadcrumbs so it wasn't a big like lightning strike or a thing. Now we had already lost all our money. We'd already. Trauma in our family and things like that. So we were reeling for some years and what I and I remember being I was actually in Target and I just picked up a random book.

I read it. I loved it. It was just I had no idea just whatever I wrote to the author which I never ever did in my whole life just said thank you for writing this book. It was really amazing. it had some really poignant things mother and daughter things and just about being responsible for your life what have you.

And so through that relationship that that author and I kept in touch and then she actually recommended oh hey I found this blogger. This was circa something in two thousands. this blogger that you I think you'd the way she. And sends me a link and it ended up being the person who led the retreats that I eventually went on.

So this very weird completely unplanned. I just and I thought oh okay I lo like this person much like when you said Joel Digital came to you. Like they were just like steps stepping stones. And so I followed the link. I started reading all

this woman's stuff and then I saw she did retreats and I thought that looks really cool but I'm just not that person.

But I kept being so I kept there was something in me in that restlessness and numbness that wanted something more and I just kept looking for it. I didn't know what it was. I didn't know if it was a professional avenue. I didn't know if I needed a personal thing. I just needed something different.

And I just kept following my curiosity if something piqued my curiosity. I went into that. and I went on the re so I I finally got over myself and went on this retreat and it gave me for the first time in probably a decade it had gave me silence. and time all just about myself which as women we a lot of times tend to think is selfish and I was leaving my family for this.

We didn't have the money for this retreat any all the things. And I went anyway. And it was something happened to me in that space where I understood that I had forgotten myself. Somewhere along the way in motherhood in professional life and marriage and whatever and I forgot I ever had hobbies I forgot I ever had things I like to do.

And there the space that place held for me for just a few days started to plant some sort of seed that said there is more. But first you have to take care of yourself. Like you can't. And one of the things I really learned from the babies is we can't nothing transforms from a place of depletion.

the babies don't they cannot develop all their energy shunted toward survival unless we help them develop as they're surviving. And I was in survival mode. I wasn't developing anymore and I had to kindfind my way back toward that if that makes sense. So I went to the retreat. I. Came home feeling like wow.

that's really when I started trying to be more intentional in my life. And in the NICU was after that retreat. And then I just kept following the little things. So I am very imperfectly tried this intentional practice. I got better at it in the nicu. I tried to just get good at the moment cuz honestly anything else felt overwhelming.

[00:33:52] **Sue Ludwig:** But I could commit to a. and say I'm gonna try to be intentional for the next five minutes or when we sit down to dinner for . Just have one thought in my head that's other than slinging food to hungry people. And and so I could I could deal with a moment and I could deal with myself if I messed up the moment and thought oh I just didn't handle that well and thought oh this is a new one.

Look at this. So I just really tried to get good at the. If that along the journey.

[00:34:16] **Sue Marriott:** No totally. And I hear the role of compassion in that and you said something in their book you said being at the end of yourself that was one of the things that happened at the retreat which I thought was such a wonderful was that a realization that you had?

Like where how did that come to. .

[00:34:31] **Sue Ludwig:** Yeah. I felt I remember the retreat we had to sit in the requisite circle and say some things about why we were there which is why I part of what I dreaded the whole time. And and I was thinking what am I gonna say? I don't even know why I'm here the whole time.

And as it came around and I had not a thought in my head and I just heard myself say I'm here because my life is screaming at. Period. And then I just didn't know what else to say and everyone looked at me and then I just said looked at the next person your turn

and I did feel like at the end of myself meant I didn't know where else to go. I didn't know I didn't wanna feel this way anymore but I didn't know the way. . And so I was at the end of the self that I had raised that I had been until this point in my life and I didn't know what to do.

[00:35:15] **Sue Ludwig:** And so I did feel like my life was screaming at me like hello wake up this you only get one of these so what are you gonna do?

I really particularly the incremental just like with the little babies the you supported yourself incrementally. And I love the I'll just do it right now.

[00:35:33] **Sue Marriott:** Like when you were describing that with your daughter it's oh I'm not doing it. I'll just do you know what I mean? Like making that conscious choice to shift into presence. and those are things that any of us can do right? We don't have to be a master yogi ora teacher of any of these things but at any given moment.

So those of you listening that you get to do that as well you would get to do as she's describing these little moments of really showing up in presence with presence and experiment and just see how that goes.

So another thing that you have said in your book that I thought was interesting that I want to go to before that we talk a little bit more about what stress looks

like in adults as far Like how that carries forward from children to adults. you said the expert care without empathy misses out on sharing the powerful energy of our presence.

And I think about so many of us are on that autopilot kind of numbed place but we're still working whether we're therapists or cardiologists or whatever it is that we're doing we're still able to do it. We're still able to work but that there's something missing. And so it feels to me like you're talking about that thing that's missing.

which has something to do with showing back up for yourself.

[00:36:44] **Sue Ludwig:** Yes. Yes. I think yeah. Good.

so that's good because that's how I'm hearing it. And it also it fits with a lot of what we talk about on the podcast or about how to what secure functioning really is. and you're this is such a good story of kind of describing.

[00:37:00] **Sue Marriott:** Describing the process and that you're not finished you're not done that at any given moment we can come back to ourselves. Would you say it that way or what would be your version?

[00:37:10] **Sue Ludwig:** Yes. I would say that is true. and I think in my OT brain what I would say is that. that we're all in development forever.

You know that. And the babies we don't say oh we don't shame anyone a baby for where they are in their development. We don't say oh you sh you don't. Hey man other 27 weekers look like this. we accept that every baby's on their own developmental path. . but we don't do that for ourselves and we also don't do it past childhood much period.

Where we think oh we're adults. We're literally finished somehow or like baked instead of that we're always in development. We have different seasons of life different stages of life and that we go a long way toward our own self-compassion and then therefore for other people as well.

when we have that sort of grace if you will for ourselves of. . I don't at any point in my life I'm not finished. I this is another place that I am. I'm gonna get through this. It's gonna teach me something that we're always just taking what we learned from previous things and moving it into the future and hopefully discarding things that aren't working for us forever and ever.

and that's how development works. whether a baby learning to walk falls a million times we don't consider that. A bad thing. It's part of the process. And in fact the falling and getting back up is literally makes them stronger works on their balance helps them navigate all of their senses and everything.

[00:38:30] **Sue Ludwig:** It's useful to fall down and get back up and yet we at some point we stop having any sense of that. And so I definitely felt like in the process again that I'm still in forever of. Trying to show up. Be responsible for my energy be intentional be accountable. So if I'm not who I wanna be In a situation in an email in a meeting in my family also being like as soon as I can be accountable to that and say oh I'm just I'm sorry that is not how I meant to show up and I'm gonna do better or whatever it is however whatever makes sense for the situation but that allows me to keep moving forward instead of tethering myself to a place back here.

and holding myself there for some sort of self torture

and it is self torture because we're not we're surviving just like those little babies. we're surviving but all of our energy is being shunted. As you said in that direction where there's not the dealing with it and the learning and the updating.

again we as therapists and also people who work with it attachment especially modern attachment with the neurobiology really baked into it. that's definitely some of the way that we describe it. And And this it's so been so interesting to hear the co-regulation but across disciplines and how that they just feather together so perfectly.

there's things that you've said that I can just absolutely guarantee you as people are listening their nervous systems are calming down. there there's there's an inspira there's a hope. So we know that you're hitting the right note when like you're regulating the audience.

[00:40:06] **Sue Marriott:** You know what I mean? and that's I think that what we're talking about is if we can gather ourselves in that way and then we can be that we call it like a tent pole that the one that holds up everything. Yeah. . So if that tent pole does that and takes the oxygen and does the breath and does the pause and gathers themself the power of that and also perhaps the requirement of change maybe even big changes in one's life career changes relationship changes.

You did some big things related to your organization partly in response to this. Is that right?

[00:40:39] **Sue Ludwig:** Yeah. While I was at said retreat I wrote down a little note that just out of nowhere really that said hey somebody in the world should start an organization for neonatal therapists O T P T speech who work in the nicu because we were all doing this for decades but just we just worked in there.

There was no group of us and no specialized education et cetera. . And so I wrote that down in a sort of a little goal setting thing. But my literal goal was like someone should go do this, and I was gonna go find the person. So lots of miles between that thought and then me being eventually the person to start a national organization for neonatal therapists, which I did actually about a year and a half after that retreat.

So from being in that place of numbness. And I had no thought of this, not even a tiny smackerel of a thought. and just writing that down, being intentional, I learned to try to protect my own energy, which was half of my job with the babies and not give it away to every single thing all day long and try to direct it towards something meaningful and purposeful.

And you know a year and a half later, I founded the National Association of Neonatal Therapists, and we're 13 years old now. But all of that really came out of being intentional, directing my energy, protecting it, and allowing myself to not have to get all the way through.

So I think one of the historic things in the NICU was we got really good at survival but not development. The outcomes didn't improve even though survival did. And we had to learn that while you're surviving, every ounce of energy doesn't have to be directed to survival. You have some room to develop. And that's my job, and was my job in the nicu but also for ourselves. We don't have to like get through all of our stuff, and then we get to grow or then we get to develop or then we get to change our career or marriage or relationship or whatever it is. While we're in some sort of stress, we can still develop. And I had to learn. I had to go get help. I had therapy. I did acupuncture. I I did all the things to try to really deal with my own baggage that I had and things so that I could put my energy towards something more purposeful. But it was all together.

I didn't like ta-da have this mm-hmm. and after experience and I think that's what we're taught happens but that's not the truth.

[00:42:55] **Sue Marriott:** Yeah that's not the truth in that for the babies or for the adults. The another thing I'm really loving about the conversation is I'm just thinking about all the disciplines that feather into the same conversation whether it be education or med medicine obviously that's teachers attorneys who are dealing with very dysregulated situa you situations and trying to coax the best out of people those that kind of thing. It's not owned by anything or anyone or any discipline but we're all finding it. but we're joining and finding the same thing which is super cool. that says very helpful including spiritual there's a spiritual component of this and I'm thinking about Jill Taylor Bolte with the stroke and kind of coming to it that way. Yes. The psychedelics or another part of you know what I mean? There's this these this eye-opening that is happening. And I guess for the audience I want to encourage everyone one of the things I noticed about this you said breadcrumbs earlier you would just follow the next breadcrumb. You weren't clear about your path but you were clear about listening to yourself . And I think that's very describe. The journey in of healing and therapy and so for those of you that like try to read and look outward for what it is that you're supposed to do. the bad news is it's not out there that you came with this insight that just bubbled up from inside of you. So the thing that you're looking for is that carbonation that just comes from the bottom up letting you know your direction whether that be about relationship or career or should you get your child evaluated or should you respond. Whatever those questions are, they're so idiosyncratic. There's no way that anyone else will have the wisdom that you know and have in your body. And I guess this is an invitation for everybody listening to do their own pause and their own gathering and to listen and to look for the next breadcrumb and to trust.

This has been very inspiring. If people wanted to find you where should they look and your book is *Tiny Humans. Big Lessons*. That's available everywhere. I would really recommend it. It's really great. It's an easy read in the sense that it's not real dense and technical. It's very personable. and it's inspiring. but yeah. Where would people find you?

[00:45:04] **Sue Ludwig:** Thank you so much. Sueludwig.com is a easy way to get ahold of me. And then The NANT website if you have any NICU related questions is just neonataltherapists.com. so that's that but that's the easiest way to hold of me and same name on social most places, some version of Sue Ludwig.

[00:45:21] **Sue Marriott:** L U D W I G. Yes. it has been delightful. I so appreciate you sitting down with us and I know there's gonna be light bulbs going off in people's minds about their own lives and just inspiration around us because I was also thinking about us as tiny humans. And I'm gonna post there

probably because I've been talking about this and getting ready for this interview. what popped up on my feed of course was these little babies And there was this one TikTok or Instagram I don't know what it was of this a baby through cesarean but that was still in the sack. . And you watched it. you watch the sack come off and then you watch the second sack come off and then you just watch the baby take its first breath and it is just stunning. . And yeah if you want some feels check that out for sure. the work you do is. I don't know if it's thankless but I certainly would like to thank you on behalf of all of these little kiddos that you have held into existence and into thriving.

[00:46:15] **Sue Ludwig:** Thank you. Thank you so much. And just thank you for the invitation. It means a lot to me.

[00:46:19] **Sue Marriott:** Absolutely. And the other thing that you've done is you've held and birthed and nurtured this organization which I'm sure has been supportive to therapists everywhere. You know what I mean? So that's wonderful. Thanks everybody for listening. If this has been valuable we encourage you to share it, and it really helps to give us a rating and review. That helps other people find us. Is there anything else you wanna say as I let you have the last word that you want people to know or remember?

[00:46:45] **Sue Ludwig:** Just like I said to the babies, just remember that you're more than survival.

[00:46:48] **Sue Marriott:** You're more than survival. That's right, and don't lug your stuff around and just carry it with you, but unpack and take care of yourself. Thank you all for listening and we will see you around the bend.