



The Athena Wellness Podcast  
Episode 044 – The Art of Holding Space with Don Hajicek  
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00:05

Welcome to the Athena Wellness podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

Hello and welcome to Episode 44. Thank you so much for joining me for the shortened Wellness Wednesday episode, a little midweek boost to help keep your Warrior Vibe high.

Today I'm joined once again by photographer Don Hajicek, who has created a unique transformative experience of Being Seen through the lens of his camera. In our previous conversation in Episode 43, we touched upon how he holds safe space for his clients.

And today we dive a bit deeper. We talk about:

- The importance of holding safe space;
- How Don creates the safe container for healing; and
- How Don prepares himself and his clients to enter this space.

It's my hope that as you listen, you find new ways to create and hold sacred space for yourself. I hope you enjoy the conversation.



01:25 Kathy

Once again, I'm joined by Don Hajicek. Welcome back, Don.

Don

Thank you.

Kathy

Last conversation we talked a bit about how to hold safe space. I'd like to dive in a little bit deeper on that topic. It seems like it's an art. Can you talk about how you approach that?

01:46 Don

Yeah, so there are many pieces to this. And it's different for every person that comes in. There's a baseline that I use.

So my number one thing is when my clients walk in to work with me, I know they're going to feel safe, in my experience, if they don't have to make a bunch of decisions when they get there. They can make contributions, we collaborate certainly on every session, but they don't have to say, "Hey, do you want to do this? Or do you want to do this? There's none of that by the time they get there, because that gets them in space of, "Well, now I have to be responsible for how this shows up." Or they don't have to know how to pose, any of these things.

So I know they've come to me to control the lens or you know, whatever. However, that translates for other people in other situations. And so it doesn't mean not being flexible, but it's letting them know that you have the tools to be able to hold that space. And that starts with not making them make a bunch of decisions.



So I am always kind of watching language. In a session I would never say, like, "Oh, you're really pretty." Those things just don't come out of my mouth. I find out what it is that they're looking for. And I let them know when I see those things. So like, "Wow, that's, I can see your power right now. Like, look at this photograph."

So knowing that I'm going to stay no matter what has been huge, because I almost feel like sometimes my clients give me an opportunity to say, like, "Hey, I can't handle this. So, we have to end the session."

I've heard every conceivable possible thing from you know, I'm standing alone with a woman in a studio that I have set up in a hotel conference room. And she says to me, "This is the first time I've been alone in a room with a man since I was raped five years ago. And I feel like I'm out of touch with my own sensuality. And I want to see if that still exists."

03:58

And, if I can't, in that moment, say, "Well, let's go find that, let's see what that looks like." If I'm like, "Well, geez, I don't know if, like, this too much for me right now." Right?

That not only doesn't work in the moment, but has far reaching psychological effects and the continuation of that hiding because in that moment of needing to know she's in the right place and it's safe, if that safety is violated, that's just, I mean, you never know how long that's going to keep that person from having the courage to walk into a room with a man she doesn't know. And to tell that story and want to see this in herself again, to respect whatever space that other person is coming from.



There was a client cursing, cursing me out every time I raised the camera, saying some pretty horrifying things, to what felt initially like me. To be able to realize in my head this person is speaking to the person that preyed on her. I didn't know the story at the time, but ended up being what it was. To not take it personally was a big deal. Because it would have been the same story if I had confronted her about this. She needed to know that it's a safe place, that she could say these things and not get a reaction from me because she wasn't talking to me, really.

So staying staying is probably the number one thing - staying without judgment, staying with compassion, to not try to fix. So when my clients start to cry, I don't go to them and say, "It's okay, don't cry." I wait, you know. If they want to talk to me about something they absolutely can. And if they continue to cry, I might interject something - "Do you want to share something with me?" But I'm not running over there saying, "Oh, my gosh, don't cry," or "What can I do to make you stop crying?"

That response is often, you know, just to touch back to what we were talking about masculine and feminine stuff earlier. Being a man, my automatic reaction, I want to go and keep this person okay. I've gotten a lot better about that. But certainly in keeping a safe space, that's not what they're asking for. They want a safe space to be able to feel all those things, in my experience and to express those things without someone else coming in saying it's not okay, like I need to fix this or you in this moment.

I mean, the safety aspect of it, you know, think about it, more than 700 clients, I'm often in some hotel conference room alone with this person. They need to know the whole time they're absolutely 10,000% safe.



I never use that word in my marketing or in my speeches. My clients use it all the time when they're talking to people about working with me, which at first, when I first got testimonials from the first handful of women that I worked with, they're all like, "Don is so safe to work with."

And in my head, I was like, "Well, what wouldn't be safe about working with the photographer?" Now I've since learned how some people work in this world. And the experiences that some clients relate to me about other sessions that they've had, and I'm like, "Wow, this, these things really do go on the planet."

So not telling someone they're going to be safe, but letting them know, through experience, that they are safe, is another huge piece in creating that safe space. Without saying "I create a safe space." I never say that.

Another piece would be, as I go into these things, I look at this space as if it's sacred ground. So this is like I'm walking into someone else's church, I'm walking into this woman's church. There's an altar, there's, you know, whatever that is where her family sits like, this is her sacred realm. And I conduct myself in the same way that I would conduct myself if I was walking into some, you know, 2000 year old Buddhist temple in Malaysia or something. And I keep that in mind the whole time. This is her space.

08:36

Just to touch back on, actually I want to tell you one more quick story you can use or not use, but I had a woman write marketing copy. This was two years ago. And in the copy that she wrote, she used the word safe. And as I read the copy, I saw the word and I wanted to take it out. But I didn't because I thought well, she wrote this, now I'm allowed to have this word in here.



So I used it. And I put it on the Facebook ad. And it was public for people to see the ad and they could comment on the ad. One of the first comments I got was something like, “Who the hell do you think you are to tell me that I’m safe being around you?” And you know, as happens on social media, there was this sort of dog pile of like, “Yeah, who is this?”

Oh my gosh. And so actually, I responded to the initial, to the first woman. This was a localized ad because I was going to this local area in Oregon to do sessions with people already, so I wanted to offer it up to the public.

So I responded to her and I said, “Would you like to talk about this? Would you like to meet in person when I come to your town and tell me? Because I want to learn, not from a place of challenge, from an opportunity to learn. I want to sit down with you and I want you to talk to me about why this was so triggering for you.”

And so she did. And there was the peanut gallery online wanting to know when the meeting was and she was like, “I don’t want this to turn into something.”

So we met at this coffee shop and we had the most amazing conversation. She runs a halfway house for abused women in Oregon. And she had her own story of not being safe, and she’s like, “You can’t, it’s not okay to use that word.”

And that was really when it sunk into me that - yeah, let them experience it, don’t say it. So I mean, that’s another piece of holding safe space, being willing to have those conversations. Because I, you know, treating it as an opportunity to learn something, even if it’s terrifying, because your odds of learning something in a terrifying situation,



like meeting someone for coffee who has, you know, verbally, and from her perspective, rightfully attacked me on social media, and say, "Let's have a conversation and see what we can learn about each other," that created a safe space for her ironically, to be able to express that part of herself.

11:03 Kathy

Yeah, you know, the one thing that strikes me is that I always think about this space as this container, which you alluded to, but it's different for everybody. And so in the first example that you gave and talking about, for those more Type As, you know, I raise my hand, if you were to tell me, "Hey Kath, for the next hour, you don't have to make a decision, I would love you forever. You know, that would do it for me. But for others, acknowledging the safety in a nonverbal way, acknowledging the courage and the vulnerability that somebody is feeling at that moment, is something completely different. So you're working this and you have to adjust to whatever sacred space you're walking into, to use your words. And I love that. I love to hear the way you think about that as you step into these spaces, but it's different in every single situation.

12:02 Don

Yeah, absolutely. Oh, there's actually a client that I worked with, five or six years ago, that hired me for the sensual portrait session. And she was, you know, a powerful force in the world. And, you know, I had the space all set up in this hotel and she came in, she's like, throws her bag down on the bed. She's like, "Alright, I'm gonna change now. So she comes in and she's like, she goes by the window and she's like, "Take a picture of me by this window." And she's by this window and I took a picture. And then she's like, flings herself across the sofa. "Take a picture." So I take a picture.



And I thought, I was out of sorts. I was like, she's not getting what she hired me for. She's not. And so I stopped her and I said, "Hang on, just, I know, you hired me so you would see what you know that I get with my clients. You're not going to see it in these photographs. I'm creating the space for you. I promise, you're going to get everything that you want out of this. But you have to let me do my work. Like we can be a collaboration. But you don't have to make these decisions. Like I've got this. I've got this."

And I honestly thought she was gonna respond with, you know, "Who the hell do you think you are telling me how my photo shoots gonna go?" But she didn't. She flopped down in this chair. And she's like, "Oh, thank goodness, I thought I was gonna have to run this thing like I run everything else in my world and I hate it. I don't know how to make this work. I don't know."

I said, "You don't have to, like, I've got this, we can go from here." And from that moment, like, in which space do you think she really felt safer? Like her mind was telling her she was going to be safe if she controlled every aspect of this session. I mean, she's like, put the light there, you stand there. But at the end of that, she wouldn't have gotten what she desired, right? At the end of controlling every single one of those things, she would have gotten to the end of it and gone. I hate these photos. This is not why I hired him. This is not what I want, right?

But when she knew she was okay not to have to control all those pieces like she does in every aspect of your life. Because maybe in all those other aspects when she doesn't control those pieces, it's a disaster at the end of it. But to know, here's a place where I can let go of all these things, like that creates the safest space. Honestly, I'm all for her in that moment, right? Because this was not only unfamiliar territory, but also required





such an incredible amount of courage and vulnerability to say, "Here I am in my lingerie or whatever the case may have been. I mean, that's huge.

14:50 Kathy

Yeah, it seems like the unifying theme is surrender. Whether it's surrendering the control or surrendering the fear or surrendering whatever it is that person's going through, it's handing you the reins really.

15:04 Don

Yeah, that's a perfect word for it that I use sometimes with repeat clients. That's a word that I avoid, as I avoid safe as well, when it's someone I haven't worked with before. But after I work with someone, they're like, "When I finally surrendered to it, it was awesome." And I heard that enough times to know that's a huge part of this process.

And it's not just surrendering to this environment that I'm creating. It's not that really at all. It's surrendering to what exists within them and saying, "I will know my full power when I become completely vulnerable and surrender to whatever exists there and to say, 'Okay, here it is, is this enough?' You know, is this enough?" And the answer is yes.

In a world where the message that they're hearing constantly is, that's not enough, you're not enough. I know nothing about you and I will still tell you that you're not enough, because I'm trying to sell you something or I want you to behave in a certain way. So I would say that you're not enough as you are.

That's the overarching message that especially women hear everyday. Men get that too, in different ways. But just surrender to be enough within ourselves is a scarier proposition than one might think.



16:21 Kathy

Wonderful work that you're doing in this world, my friend. Thank you so much for sharing some of that world with me. Appreciate it!

16:27

Thank you. It's my pleasure.

Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.

If you'd like to access the show notes, download the Gentle Spring Reset PDF or would like a transcript of this episode, visit [www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast](http://www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast).

Until next time, be well!