

Author Kate Feiffer's Journey Through Caregiving, Creativity and Her Book, Morning Pages

Candace Dellacona: Welcome to the Sandwich Generation Survival Guide. I am your host, Candace Dellacona, and I am thrilled to welcome today author/illustrator, filmmaker, Kate Feiffer, who's here with us. Kate has appeared in magazines, a newspaper, she's been on television. She is the author of a number of children's books.

Candace Dellacona: And she is also a prolific writer in her own right as it relates to the Sandwich Generation. As a recent author of the Morning Pages, welcome Kate.

Kate Feiffer: Hi Candace. It's so delightful to be here. I've been listening to your podcast and enjoying it. It's so important what you guys are doing.

Candace Dellacona: Well, thank you for that.

Candace Dellacona: We hope so. We hope our listeners agree with you. So, you know, I, I provided that little introduction a bit about sort of who you are to our listeners, but I think it would be best coming from you to share with us sort of who you are and how you got here.

Kate Feiffer: Uh, well, I, to start from the beginning, I grew up in New York City.

Kate Feiffer: I both, my parents are writers, so in some ways I went into the family business, but first I avoided going to the family business. So I moved to Boston in my early twenties. I was living in New York, dating someone. Who lived on the island of Martha's Vineyard, which is off the coast of Massachusetts, and we both decided to move to Boston to see if the relationship had legs.

Kate Feiffer: So I got to Boston, started working in television production. I was producing talk shows and television news, and worked on a documentary about Tibet. He never made it to Boston, but our relationship, we still got married and we had this commuter relationship. And then in 1998, our daughter was born and I left Boston and moved to Martha's Vineyard.

Kate Feiffer: To raise our child, but there was no work for me there. There was no television production, so I had to sort of figure out what to do with myself and this, you know, it's a small island. There are about 20,000 people who live there in the winter and over a hundred thousand people who live there in the summer.

Kate Feiffer: And. There were very few jobs I was actually qualified to do, right? So I started writing and I started writing for the newspapers, and I started writing children's books. And then in, I don't know, around 2011, I was down visiting my mother, and I described my mother as she's glamorous, she's an intellect, she.

Kate Feiffer: Has boundary issues. She enjoyed like asking me and my friends, you know, questions, probing questions about our sex lives, even before we had sex lives. And she has a fiery temper. And I was down visiting her and I started finding envelopes stuffed into her books. And there were bills and they were unopened bills.

Kate Feiffer: And I asked her why they were there and she said she put them in there on purpose. But it turned out that this was not her new filing system that in fact. She wasn't paying her bills. And this is what led me on the path to writing this novel that I have called Morning Pages, which just came

Candace Dellacona: out, which is really terrific.

Candace Dellacona: And I think you, you set up so many things in, in that little introduction, the first being, you know, as women we often find ourselves having to sort of figure out what's next and reinvent ourselves in ways when child rearing and life sort of gets in the way. So. I think that that is something that's really universal for so many of us.

Candace Dellacona: I'm sure our listeners can relate. And then of course, you know, stepping into your parents' home, a person that you once probably look to as a guiding light in some way, and realizing that something is amiss, right? That you know, the, the bills, the errant bills, or the file system as you put it, is not.

Candace Dellacona: Really representative of a new way of, of organizing, but rather that something is wrong. And it's interesting that it sort of led you to writing about that, that sort of new role that you found yourself in.

Kate Feiffer: Well, I came back and I started telling, you know, friends stories about what was going on with my mother, and they were the ones who encouraged me to write about it.

Kate Feiffer: They said. Said, you know, you have a humorous take on this and these things are, can be so challenging and difficult. And they are. Yeah. And they encouraged me to write about it. But using, trying to wedge in some humor to talk about these experiences.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, I mean, I think that that's really what we need is with dealing with such really heavy and complicated and oftentimes sad feelings.

Candace Dellacona: That are brought to the surface when you're thinking about your parents' own mortality or fallibility as it relates to age and the diseases of the age that are now sort of they're faced with and then you as their child are helping them face. So how does your journey as Kate align with maybe what Elise's journey is?

Candace Dellacona: You know, within morning pages, I would ask maybe what are the similarities and what are the differences?

Kate Feiffer: So I'll give a little recap of what the book's about. Yeah, please. So the book is about a woman who is in her late forties and early in her career she was very successful. She's a playwright and she was considered, you know, a playwright to watch.

Kate Feiffer: And for the past eight or so years, she has been unable to get a play produced and her career has just sort of. Fallen, fallen away. She has an 18-year-old son who smokes a lot of pot, barely speaks to her. She has a mother who she learns throughout The course of the novel is in the early stages of dementia, but at this point early on, she's trying to navigate this erratic behavior and she unexpectedly gets a commission.

Kate Feiffer: To write a play and by prestigious theater company and she is trying to finish the play and dealing with her mother, her son, her ex-husband. And her writer's block and, and the story is told through, essentially through these morning pages, which are like journal entries. And so the character of Elise who is writing about her experiences is very similar to me.

Kate Feiffer: She's, she is not me, but she is. Her thinking is much like mine. Her ruminations are much like mine. Her experiences, while they don't mirror mine, are very similar to my experiences and particularly the relationship with her and her mother. Sure.

Candace Dellacona: So it's sort of an amalgamation maybe of what your experiences were and I presume.

Candace Dellacona: Your peers, because we all are sort of connected to each other. And one of the great things about the sandwich generation and what many of our listeners are looking for is the community that sort of comes out of trying to survive and be pulled in different directions. But the book and its themes are so universal to all of us in, in terms of the theme of, of trying to figure out who you are.

Candace Dellacona: In Elisa's case, she's a playwright, she's a daughter, she's a mother, she's an ex-wife, she's a friend. She's all of those things, which we all are, right?

Kate Feiffer: Yes. And I think for those of us in the sandwich generation, which are so many of us, yeah, we start to very easily. Lose who we are or who we think we are.

Kate Feiffer: We become the person who is taking care. We become the caregiver. Yeah, the organizer. We become the, you know, we're sort of always on for somebody else or often and on for someone else and can lose ourselves in that process and, and during this time it's very hard to. I mean, there's no balance. And if you're trying to find balance, you, you're just not going to, because balance doesn't exist.

Candace Dellacona: I mean, maybe on some days it does. Right? But I think it's, I think the bar is way too high to set it, asking for that balance every day. In terms of your journey of writing about Elise. Do you think that that process of writing helped you find who you are in your identity, or at least get a better sense of self than perhaps you had before when actually putting the story down on paper?

Candace Dellacona: It was definitely

Kate Feiffer: cathartic. I mean, it was very helpful to write about it and it was very helpful. I'm in a few writer's groups. To share these parts of the story, to read aloud the stories to writer friends, and not just for literary feedback, but just for life feedback and community. Yeah. So that, you know, just in terms of dealing with life when it is at its most complicated, writing about it was extremely helpful for me.

Kate Feiffer: Yes,

Candace Dellacona: absolutely. And then in, in terms of the feeling of the caretaker. Being there for the one who needs the care, whether it's my three teenage children, or your daughter

or Elise's son in the book. The feeling of always being there for someone else and then while losing yourself, the theme of invisibility and not being seen by society, not being seen in some cases by the person you're caring for, which can be particularly wounding and not being seen.

Candace Dellacona: The professional light that you've worked so hard to make a name for yourself.

Kate Feiffer: So yeah, so I call the book, uh, coming of Age Story for the Sandwich Generation because it's about a woman who is feeling invisible, you know, she feels professionally invisible. Her son doesn't speak to her, her mother. It's just complicated all the time.

Kate Feiffer: And she, and, and, and she's, she, she, even though I don't actually talk about. Invisibility, but that's what's going on. And she, through the course of the novel, sort of finds herself. And so I, I do feel, I mean, I think people our age and particularly women our age are incredibly powerful and wonderful. But we take on, we so much that we start to lose ourselves and, and it's just a matter of not disappearing and coming back.

Candace Dellacona: I mean, I agree. You know, the parent of three teenagers, I find myself sort of like the needy, significant other, waiting for, you know, verbal cues that they're still with us, approaching the door to see if somebody wants to hang out with me. Oftentimes studying, quote unquote, gets in the way. Certainly friends, and I know that that's part of the process of being a parent to teenagers and the teenagers.

Candace Dellacona: Finding their own agency and finding their own way in the world. But in the meantime, it sort of wallops you on some days, doesn't it? Absolutely. And then you also

Kate Feiffer: often find yourself. Driving because when you're driving with teenagers, that's when a lot of them will actually open up. So you find yourself driving endlessly.

Kate Feiffer: Like just so you can talk to them or they, or,

Candace Dellacona: or you know. So, oh my gosh, Kate. So true. And I said to my husband recently that my middle daughter began to drive, and I'm losing those opportunities to hold them captive in the car. And I never wanted to spend those years on travel lacrosse, but I'll tell you what, it was really fun being able to hear my kids and their friends talk about what's going on in their lives, because I didn't often have that sort of inside view to what their lives were like and who their friends were and what was going on.

Candace Dellacona: And in some ways that invisibility, that theme of invisibility actually helped me gain some insight. That's

Kate Feiffer: when the invisibility is good when you are driving them and they forget entirely that you're in the car. Yes. And they're completely unset, so that's when invisibility is at its best. Absolutely worst.

Kate Feiffer: You know, when you're. Professionally not seen. You've worked hard, you have decades behind you of experience, and yet you are hitting a wall and hitting a wall constantly.

Um, or at least that was my experience and that's what the experience of Elise in my novel came from.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, I mean that totally makes sense and with invisibility.

Candace Dellacona: Feeling that you're not seen or that you're not worthy to be seen because the outside world isn't seeing you the way that you see yourself or once saw yourself. How do you not lose your sense of self when you don't feel seen and and going further if you have lost your sense of self? Have you figured out or can you give our listeners tips on how to regain your sense of self while being sandwiched between these two factions and the invisibility of the outside world and all of those things?

Kate Feiffer: I think, you know, I, I, I don't have the answer, but I think what's important is I, if only that the answer

Candace Dellacona: right, I wish you did. This would be the most downloaded podcast ever if you did.

Kate Feiffer: I think it's important for us to find. It's almost like having like an affair with yourself, like a little tri of time where even if you're just watching funny dog videos or reading a novel like morning pages where you can escape and laugh a little and see yourself, or listening to a great podcast like this one, just finding snippets of time or taking a bath or walk with friends.

Kate Feiffer: There's nothing better than walking might, you know, but just taking, stealing away some time. For you. Yeah. And you And doing what it is that you can do to escape from all the noise that is coming at you. And also think humor is really important to be able to, like you have the three teenagers. Yeah. And you know, I'm sure they're great.

Kate Feiffer: Fabulous fun for a few hours a week and but, but just being able to find the humor in the situation and the, because without that you'll just get swallowed by it.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah. I think that's, I think that's really good advice and sort of, because we're all different people, we all have different things that make us feel good, whether it's meditation or to your point, you wrote it out and even Elise's way.

Candace Dellacona: Of coping with what she was dealing with was writing it out and I, I think when people talk about journaling or going to support groups, I once heard someone explain that it's not so that you can complain to other people. It's about being able to tell your story because you understand it better when you tell it over and over.

Candace Dellacona: And I thought that was really great advice. I

Kate Feiffer: think that's really true, and I think that just being able to talk about what we're going through and what people are going through when they are juggling aging parents and kids at home. And we love our parents and we adore our kids and our partners, but it doesn't.

Kate Feiffer: I mean, it isn't complicated. And just being able to talk about what happened when the dinner was burning and you were navigating, you know, a phone call for an assisted living home, and then there was a work thing happening. And just being able to share those experiences with other

Candace Dellacona: people is really helpful.

Candace Dellacona: It really is. And you just said the word complicated and I think. You know, that's definitely something that there is a lot of shame around and it's the complicated relationships that you may have with an aging parent where perhaps your whole life it wasn't such a great relationship. Maybe it wasn't so nurturing, maybe you weren't parented well.

Candace Dellacona: In some cases, sadly, there could have even been abuse, whether physical or emotional. And now you are left caring for this person who maybe in your mind didn't do such a great job of caring for you and the complicated feelings that go into that.

Kate Feiffer: And that is very much the case with the main character. My novel, she had a difficult mother and a difficult relationship with her mother, which is.

Kate Feiffer: Now becoming more difficult because she is in a position of having to navigate care for her mother who is starting. To forget to do things and starting to need someone to be there to cook for her, to take care of her. And there's that complication on top of all the other difficulties in their relationship that it pre-existed, these new complications.

Kate Feiffer: And so emotionally, it's, it's very trying and. That's one of the themes that is explored in the storyline of this book.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah. Which I love because that part of it, obviously the tender parts of caregiving and the beauty that come out of caregiving is not without the trials and tribulations that a caregiver faces, um, whether it's a parent treating you as though you're invisible and that the care that you're providing isn't up to par or it's not enough.

Candace Dellacona: Or they don't feel cared for, mostly because we are sandwiched and we are simultaneously trying to raise our kids or write our play or in my case, draft a will for someone else. So it, it really does sort of beg the question in terms of how best to care for someone who maybe didn't care for you in, in a way that you would've liked when you were younger.

Candace Dellacona: Do you have tips on that? I mean, how do you manage? You know, that's a really good question. I would say that whenever possible, if you can't do it, there are so many resources out there. Kate, one of the, the guests that we recently had on the podcast was a geriatric care manager. And a geriatric care manager is someone that can sort of play that role to help you orchestrate the care.

Candace Dellacona: And what that means is. Finding the right caregiver so that you don't have to be the one providing the care and helping navigate those complicated family relationships. Now, that comes from a place of privilege where many people can't employ professionals to help them navigate, which makes it even more complicated.

Candace Dellacona: Less resources mean less options. We all know that. But there are really good organizations, charitable and otherwise area offices on aging that will provide social workers who can give you tips of the trade and provide you some insight on professionals who can help you as a courtesy for free. There are also some really great.

Candace Dellacona: Public programs like Medicaid who will provide the care for your aging loved one, and you can sort of be left a bit in the background to supervise that care.

Kate Feiffer: And it's really important, if you can, to bring people in to the care because I. They won't have the same say triggers that you do.

Candace Dellacona: Exactly. I mean, Kate, that is so important.

Candace Dellacona: I think that your life experience informs your behavior in so many ways, and we all do plenty of therapy and introspection to try to sort of abate our reactions that are not the most becoming of bus. But that brings me to my next tip that I learned from a professional, which is delegate, delegating responsibility.

Candace Dellacona: We as women, Kate, we take on. So much. I think the statistics are overwhelmingly nearing 90% of the caregiving that's being provided to aging parents and to children fall on the women, the mothers, the daughters. And what that tells me is, is two things. A, we're capable, we have the intelligence, the strength, the fortitude, the ability to hold our tongue, but it also tells me that someone else isn't doing their part right.

Candace Dellacona: Right, so and so delegating can really be a way where everyone sort of pitches in.

Kate Feiffer: Yes. And there are areas in which it's really important to delegate. I remember when my mother was finally agreeable to having caregivers in the house, and she was fairly far down the road at this point to no longer bathe herself alone.

Kate Feiffer: And the first thing they said to me was, you shouldn't be giving her baths that. That should be, that's too emotionally grueling. Yes. And so to sort of pick and choose like the the areas in which I'm going to hand this over to you to someone because this is beyond my abilities to handle emotionally.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah. And also there is only so much time in the day. Right. I remember when my kids were young. And I was feeling overwhelmed baking lunches every day, as silly as it sounds right, and it was a task that I did not enjoy. And I remember saying to my husband, okay, you're in charge of lunches. And inevitably I would open up the lunchboxes and find that it was missing a piece of fruit or something else because it wasn't done the way I would've done it.

Candace Dellacona: So I think in delegating and asking other people for help, we also have to be ready to give up some control.

Kate Feiffer: You

Candace Dellacona: have

Kate Feiffer: to accept, you have to. I remember when my daughter was young, and it would always astound me when my husband would take her out in the winter and I was like, coat, coat,

Candace Dellacona: coat. I still say that, Kate.

Candace Dellacona: Um, and my youngest is 15, so I, I completely get that. In fact, I recall a time where the elementary school called me and told me that one of my kids couldn't go out for recess because they went to school without a coat. And when I asked my husband who had dropped the kids off that day. Why they didn't have a coat, the answer was because they said they weren't cold.

Candace Dellacona: Right. Um, so, you know, I, I feel that one deeply. I mean, you know, I think that in delegating we do have to give up some control. I think distance can be really hard. And so for those relatives who do wanna pitch in and are able to help, maybe the task we provide them is bill paying. That's one less thing we have to do.

Candace Dellacona: And if you can get an aid in. A couple of times a week to help mom get into the shower, then maybe that's money well spent because it saves and preserves your own sanity.

Kate Feiffer: Yes. And thankfully now a lot Bill paying can be done online and automated. Absolutely. So that is helpful. But the bill paying piece, managing that, figuring that out, getting those bills transferred so you are able to pay them.

Kate Feiffer: I mean, you. I'm sure do a lot of this with your work, and it's an overwhelming task. You need power of attorneys, you need all sorts of things to, to just make that transfer. And then you have to often remind the parent that, that they're no longer doing this 'cause. Yes and yes. You know, with, and, and you know, the aging people who are aging are often scared and angry and frustrated, and they're going through.

Kate Feiffer: A lot of emotions as well.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, I mean, I think it's such a grieving process for everyone involved, right? The person who's receiving the care, who they do not feel the autonomy, and sadly, in some cases, the dignity that they once did. And going back to Elise and her journey on how she coped, I think that it cannot be.

Candace Dellacona: Overstated how important one's girlfriends could be, or friends or that support. There was a lot of walking and talking done in your book, and I know you're a walker, you've shared that with me. So the importance of friendship and the feeling of community, I think was a really beautiful theme that you brought out in in the morning pages.

Kate Feiffer: I think it, it, it is an essential part. Elise has a best friend Maya, and they spend a lot of time walking and processing each other's lives together. There's a whole subplot with

Maya, and I think that piece of it is really important if you have a great friend to get out there and just have a girlfriend and best vent.

Kate Feiffer: Yeah. Yeah. We call

Candace Dellacona: it walk and woe. I love the walk and whoa, I'm a big fan of the walk and whoa. I mean, community is really what will save us, and certainly that is one of the reasons why. I have this podcast, you know, we're trying to survive together. We're all connected to each other, so reach out to those people who can provide you the support to get through and thrive the sandwich generation and turn to a book like yours, Kate, to find the humor in it all, to feel connected, to know that you are not alone in going through this experience and being a caretaker.

Candace Dellacona: So, I am personally so grateful that someone like you has written a book like this. To make us less invisible and to make us more connected. So I'm really grateful. Well, thank you. Thank you. I, I appreciate that. It's been a blast having you on. And to our listeners, please pick up Kate's book and your local bookstore or on Amazon and the very exciting news, I think, Kate.

Candace Dellacona: If you wanna share quickly that you are creating a play that Elise started right in the book of the Morning pages.

Kate Feiffer: So morning page. So Elise is a playwright, and I thought it was important to learn how to write a play if I was writing a play about a playwright. So I took playwriting classes, I read a ton of plays while I was writing the book, and I wrote the play, not a play that I would've written, but a play she wrote.

Kate Feiffer: Yes. And. Decided to include it in the book, and now the play is starting to have some readings on its own. So it is a book with a play in it. It's two stories. The story, Elisa's story, the story of the Play, and which is about a 40-year-old woman who's professionally successful and single. And her parents divorced when she was.

Kate Feiffer: Young and very acrimonious divorce and for reasons both in their own lives, they end up moving back in with her and so now the play is starting

Candace Dellacona: to be performed as well. Amazing. That is such great news, Kate, and really our listeners I'm sure will get so much out of this and, and I really hope that all of our listeners pick up a copy of Morning Pages and give KA review and we're so grateful for you being here.

Candace Dellacona: Thank you again.

Kate Feiffer: Oh, Candace, thank you. It's been such a pleasure to be here and congratulations on the podcast. It's really useful and will help a lot of people. Thanks so much.