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Introducing Amy Faeskorn 00:51

I feel weary. Weary of national politics and the giant steps backward we’re taking in climate resilience. Weary of research studies, weary of social media, weary of stories, weary of managing life with chronic illness. I’m CEO of my health, and I’m tired. I’m on vacation and in a dip. Please, I crave inspiration. I need a recharge. Several weeks ago, I recorded a conversation with Amy Faeskorn. I’m just now getting around to listening to and editing that recording. Amy and I met virtually in the international Akimbo / Forward Link community and discovered we both live in the Boston area. At a couple of in-person meet-ups, we talked about improv and homeschooling. Common interests - who knew? Please listen in to our chat.

**Health Hats:** Good morning, Amy. It's good to see you. Good to hear you. Thanks for joining me. I'm excited to talk to you. How do you introduce yourself in a social situation?

**Amy Faeskorn:** I'm Amy. I'm from Swampscott, Massachusetts. I am a wife and mom. I have two beautiful teenage children. I work as a coach, a writer, and a facilitator. I try to seek balance in all things.

**Health Hats:** Where were you the first time you realized that health was fragile?

**Amy Faeskorn:** Probably as a child when my grandfather was sick, I didn't understand what was happening. But my mother's father had been diagnosed with colon cancer. We had just moved to the Boston area from Chicago. My mother was very torn at that time trying to be there for her dad and be there for my brother and me. I remember getting a sense of something being wrong and loss followed

that. My mother's brother had been ill, and I had known about that in the shadows. People didn't talk about health in the 1970s and 80s the way they do now. I felt it was very hush-hush then.

Coaching with chronic illness in the mix 03:05

**Health Hats:** How do you adapt your coaching practice when the person has a chronic illness or disability or the team that you're working with has somebody or people on the team who are chronically ill or disabled?

**Amy Faeskorn:** That's a great question. I think because I have a chronic illness, I bring empathy to that situation in terms of knowing that the level of illness you're experiencing impacts the scale of what you want to change and how you want to grow. In other words, you can't be and do everything you may dream of being and doing when your body is slowing you down. That is a process with a lot of emotion associated with it, a lot of needing to be in acceptance and self-compassion. So, I try to drive the conversation around that and acknowledge how disruptive illness is. When we think about the path that we want to be on, the journey we want to be on, and that this is life throwing a major curveball in that process. And so how do I embrace that, while not shutting down to myself in the process? That's the challenge of the coaching work, I think.

**Health Hats:** The range of possibilities is different? I know that when you're in pain, it is certainly hard to think about growth. Because you're trying to get through the moment and it's hard to think about too many steps ahead. But there's still growth to be had whatever your circumstances.

**Amy Faeskorn:** Yes, sometimes it's hard to see that your growth is happening more internally than externally at that moment. Meaning when you learn to manage pain, and move with the pain, and not resist it, you're undergoing an internal process of growth as a human being. But many people never experience that. Even though they may not have those kinds of challenges put in front of them, they still aren't understanding the natural law of what it is to be human and to grow. I have felt that a lot when I've been sick that the externals don't necessarily line up with what's happening inside. I think our culture has a hard time understanding that it's possible to be growing and changing and even leading when you're in a place of not being able to do externally what others expected of you or what you would like to do.

Improv 'Yes And' 06:15

**Health Hats:** When I think about health, I think about the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of health. I have found that some of the most spiritually healthy people are the least physically healthy. Certainly, there's a component to leadership which you just mentioned as one component of spiritual health, when it comes to leading. You can be physically quite healthy and not so spiritually healthy when you're leading. I've been mulling over what does it mean to be the CEO of your health and your health team? I wanted to talk to you because of your curious sets of experience. When I think about being a CEO of anything, I think about managing, leading, and learning as components of being a CEO. Certainly, when you have chronic illness it's harder, or it's different to be a CEO while you're on this moving train. When I met you, I was curious that you're into Improv and homeschooling. Let's take the Improv first. A couple of years ago I led a session at the National Caregivers Conference called, 'What you can learn from the clowns when you go to the doctor's office?' I learned quite a bit going to Boston Children's where I used to work and talking with the clown supervisor and talking about improv. Can you talk a

little bit about the art of improv and how that has helped you deal with your health issues, homeschooling, being coach? What drew you to it? Can you talk about a little bit more about that adventure that you're on?

**Amy Faeskorn:** Sure. I have a younger brother. He was very gifted in the Performing Arts and went to a Performing Arts Camp when we were kids where he wrote a musical and did improv. So, I followed him to that camp one summer when I was a high school student. I had told myself the story at that age that my brother was the talented one, so I didn't allow myself to pursue it. But it always was in the background I wanted to explore. How do these tie into being the CEO of your health? When I was very sick with a flare of this illness two years ago, I started to come out of it slowly. It was like about a good eight months experience until I was coming out of it. And as I did, I said to myself, "you must do this now." Something inside me had shifted. I realized I can't always leave it as a dream. So, I went to do it. I'm often the oldest person there. It's challenging. It's not as easy as it sounds. The lessons that have emerged are incredible. The foundational principle is "yes and." Meaning, someone makes an offer and then you can't say no to that. You must somehow acknowledge it and then add to it. When you come into relationship with someone from that perspective, it makes it very difficult for an argument to ensue, often creativity flows, positive motion flows. But lately the big one for me has been discovery versus interventions. So, the notes you get from your instructors often emphasize discovery - don't come with an agenda to the scene. Be open to discovering what it's going to be about. And for a control-freak perfectionist like myself that is very hard. But that principle helps me so much. For example, to tie it back to being a CEO of your health, when you get a devastating diagnosis in particular of a chronic illness that you know has no cure, and that is just going to be about managing going forward. That first response is "this shouldn't be happening. Why is this happening to me?" I've lived with my illness for almost 30 years. So, I've lived with that on and off many times. The spiritual discipline of when it's worsening or when it's blocking you and your abilities to lean into that and say what can I discover? What is this here to teach me? It's very similar to what is the Improv scene here to teach me in a sense right as a character. So that has helped me feel more in control of my health.

**Health Hats:** Control is an absolute monster.

Homeschooling and health 11:48

**Amy Faeskorn:** Yeah, it's a huge thing. And then with homeschooling my children coming to that place of what's emerging in my kids? What are they showing me their natural talents are, their natural abilities, their natural curiosities that may not line up with the traditional school curriculum? How can I just "yes and" that? How can I support them continuing down that path of discovery without my agenda being laid out on top of it? That's hard as a parent because you want your kids to succeed. Every parent, no matter what, wants their kids to succeed and to be happy. So, that can be challenging at times for me. But the control comes from not controlling.

**Health Hats:** Could you give me an example of that with your kids?

**Amy Faeskorn:** Yeah, so, my son from a young age was drawn to the internet and video gaming. I am a person who said before I became a parent, "I will never have games, and we will never have an Xbox." We still don't have any of those consoles. I came to it with a lot of judgment and a lot of finality in my mind, preconceived. But what I ended up having to do was see what it was about this that was so

appealing to my son? He has been a very passionate gamer. It can be very easy to be afraid of its addictive qualities. But the more I would sit with him and be curious and talk to him and see the value of how he was forming relationships; he was exercising his reading and writing skills through chat on the game; he was meeting people from all over the world; he was teaming up to level up, and all those interpersonal skills were at play. His dexterity was at play. I just had to let go of that and say, "okay, how can I support that?" So, my husband and my son built a PC, a gaming PC. Where they sat there with the parts and put it together. That was a big coming around for me around what is discovery and what is control? When I think about illness and a lot of what you talked about on your podcast and what you manage with the kind of illness you have; so much of life ends up being living in that cycle. That's the gift of the illness. It never feels like that when it's in its worst place. But that is what it's been for me.

**Health Hats:** How do you approach health and illness as a homeschooling parent with your kids.

**Amy Faeskorn:** When I've been sick, when I've had to be on the couch for extended periods.

**Health Hats:** You have a cyclical thing where you have exacerbations and remissions?

**Amy Faeskorn:** Exactly. During this past flare, I was down for the count. That was hard. You feel like you should be doing things and how is this going to get done? And I had to learn to let others help, including let the kids help let them step up in household tasks and things like that. I had to let go of with homeschooling what we should be reading Huck Finn right now or whatever it is. I had to look at it as another life lesson for them. The flip side is with what the illness I have there is a theory of genetic - runs in my family. So, there's always a fear in my mind. I received my diagnosis at 19. So, I always have this fear what if they are burdened with this like I am? Mine's been fairly manageable. Though there have been times it has not looked like it would be, and I think what would happen if they were really ill? I go down the 'what if' path sometimes and then I have to pull back and say, first of all, the gene part you can't control. But you can control lifestyle factors. So, we are trying to stay physically active. But I also recognize what I can control and what I can't and that you just lead by example, even if you're not feeling well. You're still leading.

And now a quick break to hear about our sponsor, Abridge. I see many clinicians on a regular basis, way too many. I'm appalled at how little I can remember when I get home. My wife asks, what did she say? What about this medication or that test? I'm happy to remember half of it. To help me remember everything, I downloaded a new smartphone app called Abridge.

Now, when I go to the doctor, I ask if it's okay to record our conversation. Nobody has said no yet. I push a big pink button to record, and after I'm done, the transcript from our audio appears -- not the whole thing that's too much, but sections around medical keywords like fatigue, pain, tests, exercise meds. Now when I'm done, I can share my visit with my wife, and she can listen to exactly what the doctor said. Abridge was created by patients, doctors, and caregivers. Check out the app at [abridge.com](http://abridge.com) -- a b r i d g e .com or download it on the Apple App Store or Google Play Store. Record your health care conversations. Let me know how it went!

Seize control. Cede control. 17:57

**Health Hats:** How do you set people up to take control of their lives? Well, you give them the opportunity. That's a big part of leadership. I can remember the best boss I ever had. I was Director of

Quality for a managed care company. I was three months into the job and having supervision with my boss, the CEO. He was saying, "how do you think it's going?" I said, "well, I don't think we're moving along at the speed you'd like us to be." And he said, "what do you recommend?" And I said, "well frankly, I think we need to start with you." When I said that, I thought, "oh my God, this is a career-ending statement." but he replied, "okay, 7:30 to 8:00 every morning it's your agenda, every day I'm in town." It was so empowering. And then, I had to get my shit together. You can't just make a statement like that; be given the gift that I received in terms of respect and control. And we did great things. It was ideal. Then in my last real job where I was the boss, I had a similar situation. I had hired somebody, and her recommendation was X, Y, and Z. It didn't make sense to me. And I stopped myself, and I said, "oh my goodness, I hired her because she is good at this. What am I doing?" So, I stopped, and I said, "okay, I'm sorry. You guide me." I'm telling you those stories to follow up on the way I've learned and the way I've mentored: Seize control and run with it and to cede control and follow as a leader. There are times when you're a leader you follow. It just makes sense.

#### Metaphorical hugs 20:10

**Amy Faeskorn:** A lot of what you just said is very spiritual. If you're a reader of the Tao-te Ching, for example, that's the yin and yang of leadership is knowing when to act and when to observe. In my healthcare, in recent years, I have finally understood that. I've also been really clear how I lead my own health like the CEO. I realize what I can get where and from whom. And I don't try to impose my needs on providers. For a long time, I used to look to Western medical doctors who are still the core of my treatment. When I seek care that doesn't involve self-care practices, right? So I used to go to them for emotional reassurance. I need a metaphorical hug. I switched providers recently and new provider it has zero bedside manner. He's very kind, but that's not his strength. His strength is he's totally up on research. He's totally up on best practice. He gets the job done. He's very first 'do no harm.' Which with my illness I appreciate because the impulse to intervene pharmaceutically intensely can be there and he's more of a let's hold off. So, I realize the gifts he gives are the ones I need. He doesn't need to be my counselor or my psychologist? He can just be my Western Medical provider specialist.

**Health Hats:** He's a coach in that area.

**Amy Faeskorn:** 100%. He's leading by example. He pushes back a boundary that says you don't need that from me. Remember why you're here. This is what I can give you. So, take that because that's all you need from me. The other things, I get them from my family and my friends. I get them from alternative providers like a massage therapist I see things like that. Because I think people with chronic illness demonize providers and Western medicine. I can't do that anymore. I have been in that place, but I can't. I must recognize what is this resource for? Just like a head of a company would say like you said subcontractor. My specialist is really good at what he does. His subcontract, I will renew. If someone hasn't been providing that, then you can say it's time to go. But that's huge growth for me. But I feel like I had to go on a long journey to get there. I wasn't there for most of this illness at all.

#### Eradicate illness 22:35

**Health Hats:** That's so interesting. I have a chiropractor who's just a genius and the combination of physical therapy and chiropractic to build habit routines of physical care that are so important having a progressive illness. Whatever they say, I'm going to do it. That's a dimension of leadership. I've been struggling with the challenge of leading in this health care system and what that means and how do you

do it? How do you support other people who are on a journey and trying to lead? I'm a friend, or I'm a coach, or I'm a listener. Maybe I'll go back to improv because I'm thinking there's something to the 'yes and' about being supportive to people who are on a difficult journey. What can I do to help them manage, to lead, to learn may be only being present and planting a seed? Then somewhere down the line, whether I'm there or not, doesn't really matter, that seed might sprout. But that's hard to generalize. I'm comfortable with one-on-one. But if I think about what are the lessons for groups of people? Well, that's harder. I think having reasonable expectations is something like expecting teachers to raise your kids. That never made any sense to me, but I'm a homeschooler, too. We never did expect teachers to raise our kids. Doctors and hospitals have a skill and have a service that they provide. You or yours need to be present and set your boundaries and whatever. But to expect them to raise your kids, to get you healthy...

**Amy Faeskorn:** Right and I think there's a lot in Western culture around the desire to eradicate all illness; eradicate all physical suffering is really strong. Because it is so hard, and I understand where that comes from. That's what drives the research that's what drives the use of war language around illness. I'm a fighter. I'm a survivor. It's a very warlike way of addressing what arises.

**Health Hats:** And we're going to cure everything.

**Amy Faeskorn:** I appreciate the progress so much. I vaccinate my kids happily. So, I'm very grateful for all the discovery - to go Improv - that took place and then an invention came out of that. There are aspects of the achievements of western medicine that are just incredible and such a gift. To what extent can we alleviate suffering? But then at some point also accept that suffering may be part of the journey for all of us, ultimately. Right? So, I feel like the expectations are often on Western docs, you're going to save me. You're going to cure it. You're going to make this all go away. You're going to make everything better. You're going to make it so it's like this never happened. I used to think that often with my illness too, and I just got to a place, I think I had to hit a kind of a bottom to realize that I can't ask that of these people. All I can ask them for is vigilance around my overall state of disease, treatment, and intervention that may or may not help me. As you said, I have to make informed choices with the help of a partner. I have a very sensible partner who's a trained nurse like you, who works in health care administration, sees behind the curtain. He's such a powerful resource in my pocket. I'm so grateful, and I feel for people who don't have that in their lives. All you can do is take that team, realize what it is and what it's for and take from it what you can and then let the rest go. That's hard. It's probably easy for me to say that like, someone else with a level of illness and challenge probably sees it even differently. But that's the way it is for me though with what I've been given that's the way that I can do it and feel sane and feel like I am also leading as you said. And showing my kids is how I approach this.

Health as gaming 27:09

**Health Hats:** One of the things in your stuff had this quote. "I do not keep children to their studies by compulsion, but by play." Plato. How do you think play fits into this either for you or for your kids in relation to health?

**Amy Faeskorn:** Well, I think it's when you think of health more like in a game-like way, right? Because it can get so, oh my God, it's so serious. And if you read blogs and if you read all the research that the media is constantly disseminating, it's so daunting. Should I be a vegan? Should I meditate or not?



There's so much content, and you're almost drowning in content. If you realize that you can access information whenever you want, then look at it more as 'what's the game?' What does it mean to be healthy from a game standpoint? That's when you get physically active doing activities you enjoy because they're just fun and not because there's any end result or achievable outcome at the end. It's just for the joy of doing it like playing frisbee or hiking in the woods or whatever. And then the same with food because food can be so loaded. And in our family my kids have been challenged with eating from the very beginning. It's been hard to have them be open to new foods. My daughter was sharing that she discovered she loves herb cream cheese on a bagel. She was in New York this summer, and I was like, oh that sounds so cool. Let's find a recipe and make the herb cream cheese. That's a yes. I am. That's also like they don't have cream cheese and it's not the well, we shouldn't have dairy in carbs. We should have a salad and said it's let's make the herb cream cheese and have it on a bagel.

**Health Hats:** So, literally, gaming. One of the things I see with gaming is it's just trying a lot of stuff. Something doesn't work when you don't progress, and so you have to try something else. I think the game, the play, is that did it work? Yes. Yay! It worked. No, it didn't. Okay. What am I going to try now? Part of managing, leading, and learning in your health is constant experimentation. I'm trying something it worked. Well, I tried it. It didn't work. But you know, I'm in a different place right now. Maybe it'll work now and then having this array of solutions that may or may not work. But the power that you feel of knowing that you've got a couple of things you can try is huge in managing lots of symptoms.

Embracing the mystery 30:15

**Amy Faeskorn:** I think also embracing mystery is a really tough one. But my illness is a is considered an autoimmune disorder. Is MS also considered? I'm not a medical doctor. I don't play one on TV either. But I do feel that I can say, correct me if I'm wrong, that there's enormous mystery associated with autoimmune conditions meaning why is it some people are completely you know incapacitated by that illness and others have this very mild form or why does it flare seasonally for someone or whatever, right? There are all these unknowns that the medical community is still working to discover. Part of the spiritual practice for me has been to embrace that. I don't know why. Why have I sometimes been enormously ill and other times I've been relatively symptom-free. Can I attribute that to a medical protocol like a pharmaceutical protocol? Maybe. Sometimes not, quite honestly. And can I attribute the lifestyle change I never know? And when I know I'm in a place where things are flaring up; I have to go to that mentality like you just said of okay I may need to experiment with the medication differently this time around. Or I may need to try a lifestyle choice or an alternative practice I've never tried or whatever. Because there's never going to be one solution that you can implement ad nauseam. It's just never been like that for me.

Just drink water 31:41

**Health Hats:** Never one solution. I agree. I do have two solutions that work a scary amount of the time, and one of them is to drink water. And the other one is to manage manageable stress. That those two make so much difference both preventatively and when I feel myself sliding, or I smell an exacerbation.

**Amy Faeskorn:** Can you say more? When we were together the other night, you mentioned that. As a way of passing on that leadership, I told my family that we were talking about water intake. Can you say more about what that has done for you and when you do that?

**Health Hats:** Practically?

**Amy Faeskorn:** Yes. What's been your experience?

**Health Hats:** It's pretty direct. When I'm feeling weaker, having symptoms of pain, urinary tract issues, dizziness, proprioception, just take the laundry list. The first thing is drinking the glass of water. It helps so often. And then you know, there are no side effects. It's just scary how often that works. You're not asking me the pathophysiology of that? Good because I'm not sure. I know dehydration isn't good. That's what I thought, but it seems like I forget to drink water.

**Amy Faeskorn:** Yeah, we all do.

**Health Hats:** I think that's precious that it works 70% of the time. That's nuts.

See the show notes or my website [www.health-hats.com](http://www.health-hats.com) and click on blog/podcast for more information, to subscribe or contribute. If you like it, share it. Thanks.

No blame 34:14

What do you think I should be asking you that I'm not related to what we've been talking about? What would you like to add?

**Amy Faeskorn:** Well, I would like to add that I love this analogy of running a business for thinking about how we approach health. I think that is just a fantastic connection. That it's very timely given the way that healthcare is changing and how we think about health. Where the locus of responsibility for health ultimately lies. That's not to say blaming ourselves or illness. Because I've done that, too. I've been in a place where I say, "My psychology has caused this or whatever." Especially with autoimmune the stress piece can be big and related to flare for me certainly. It can be easy to get in a blame cycle. I don't mean it like in the sense of blame yourself for your health but acknowledge the agency that you have.

**Health Hats:** Agency as in control?

Ask for help 35:22

**Amy Faeskorn:** Yes. And you need to ask for help. I listen to the [Tim Ferris podcast with Eric Schmidt](#). He's a CEO of Google or was. He was talking about working with a coach and the power of that. To bring it back around to coaching, that leaders ask for help. Leaders don't do it alone. When you're sick, you often feel like I don't want to burden my family. I don't want to burden my friends. But in fact, when asking for help you're freeing everyone up to do what needs to be done. That's going to make things shift in whatever way. It doesn't mean it's going to make it all go away, but the shift of taking the burden of doing it all away from someone who's suffering. That's the nature of being human. That's very hard to do when you tell yourself, "I have to do it alone." But if you can lead the company - your company of one, your body and your mind and your spirit - then you have a whole team helping you, but they'll only help you if you tell them that you need to help.

**Health Hats:** I don't remember where in my career this occurred, but it was very early. It was that to stay at the top of your game; you need a coach. It might have been Atul Gawande. I think he wrote an essay in the [New Yorker](#). He was as a surgeon. He was thinking to stay good at surgery you need a coach. And I just thought that was brilliant. I say, I'm the CEO and I have all these subcontractors. I have a lot of



coaches. I have a coach that when I'm feeling grief. I have a coach. I've been going to the same physical therapist for ten years, but I probably have seen her seven times, but it's something less than ten. Because she put me on a routine. It made sense to me, and I've gone as I've progressed. I've gone back to get a tune-up on my routine, and so she's that coach. My PCP, you know, her attitude towards me is, "you're still an old white guy, you may have all this stuff going on, but you're still an old white guy, and that's my responsibility. I'm here to help you coordinate all this medical stuff and deal with that you're still an old white guy." I think there's coaching in all sorts of mysterious places. Okay last question anything you want to ask me?

Mr. CEO, how is your company performing? 38:01

**Amy Faeskorn:** If you're the CEO of your health, how do you feel your company is performing at this moment?

**Health Hats:** I think it's great. It's a silver lining of having this seriously annoying situation is that I feel like I am operating at peak performance. I don't know that I've ever felt that before. I mean I get discouraged, oh my God, I shouldn't be doing this good. So, I feel like it's working and that's just so exciting. And just feeling, spiritually feeling that is self-fulfilling. It cascades. Knock on wood; it's going great. I don't wish it on anybody. I won a lottery I didn't buy a ticket for. And I would just as soon not. But I got no complaints. Life is good, which is why I'm so interested in this. I want to stay good at this.

**Amy Faeskorn:** Well, you are.

**Health Hats:** So anyway, thanks for the question. And thanks for your time. This has been lovely.

**Amy Faeskorn:** For me too. I think that you are I think you're leading in ways. You might not even recognize by doing the work you do and sharing of yourself the way you do. And I hear your voice, and I echo it so much. I'm grateful for all you're doing.

**Health Hats:** Well, thank you. All right. Take care. I'll see you soon.

Reflections 39:53

Thank goodness, I'm not so weary now. My company performs well. Thank you very much. I have seized control. I can ask for help and cede control. And I know the difference. I appreciate the Improv lesson Amy teaches here about the 'yes and' approach to best health. In my language it's 'accept what is' and build on it. I have MS, and I'm operating at peak capacity! How cool is that?! What have you learned recently that inspires you and may inspire other readers and listeners? Go to my website, send me an email, comment on your podcast app. Talk to us. Onward.