

**EPISODE 85**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[0:00:06] ANNOUNCER:** You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world, with Rick Torseth and guests.

[INTERVIEW]

**[0:00:20] RT:** Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders. This is the podcast where we have conversations with individuals who've made some choices in their lives about how to lead themselves, how they support other people's development. The podcast purpose is to help listeners clean and steal good ideas and experiences from my guests, so that they can use them in their lives. As a regular listener, you know that my guests come from all sorts of walks of life and different professional careers. Today's a fun, cool day for me, because my guests is Tracy Roberts. Tracy lives down in the Sacramento, California area, and Tracy and I, which we will cover here in a second, have a long history professionally working together.

If you look at my website, everything that you see visually on my website comes from Tracy, about 98%. 2% comes from me. She's incredible at what she does. We're going to talk a little bit about that. We're going to talk about some of the things that Tracy's got going on, but let me get her in here. Trace, welcome to the podcast. It's great to have you.

**[0:01:18] TR:** Thank you for having me. I look forward to having this conversation.

**[0:01:22] RT:** Okay. Let's begin. Like I begin with every podcast, for context sake for listeners, what do you want people to know about you that will help them be oriented a little bit when we start?

**[0:01:32] TR:** One of the important things to know about me and as we get down further in the podcast, it'll make more sense, but I was the youngest of five kids and I was teased and picked on. When I was 10, I had a terrible accident, where I almost drowned. I fractured my skull and almost drowned. In that happening, I realized that dying was not the scary part. The scary part

was living. I realized that I needed to not be the little kid anymore. I needed to be strong, both mentally and physically. That started my determination, my grit to be as fierce as I could be in the world.

I then began, when I got out of college, I started being a cyclist and a competitive cyclist, which is where I met my husband and we both – we cycled from Sacramento to Yosemite. We hiked Tafton, which was very exciting for me. I always pushed myself. That was the beginning of my determination. That's how I got started moving forward.

**[0:02:51] RT:** I didn't know that. I'm a cyclist, too. We should go riding.

**[0:02:56] TR:** Yeah. Unfortunately, I can't anymore.

**[0:02:57] RT:** Okay. Well, we'll come back to that. You and I meet, like most people meet, we meet through a common colleague and friend, Leanne Morgan, who you knew from her time living in the Sacramento area and you worked together. Then she moved up to where we live and we met, because her daughters were the same age playing soccer, and that's where I met Leanne, Toby, and Sarah. I'm stumbling around with my website and my consulting stuff. She's listening to me as she is always good at doing. She takes it upon herself to look at my website and then come back to me with her assessment of what needed to be done. I said, "Well, that's great, Leanne. But how am I going to get that done?" She goes, "I have the answer to that question." She says, "I'm going to connect you with my friend, Tracy Roberts. She's a graphic designer and she does websites, among other things." And so, it began. That was, I think, 15, 17 years ago. Quite a while back. Tell people a little bit about your professional side of life and what you've been doing, because that is part of why we're here, and you're quite good at it. Help us understand a little bit about what you know about graphic design and communication through these mediums.

**[0:04:10] TR:** I graduated with a degree in applied art and design. After graduation, I started a business with another classmate. That was before computers. Everything was done by hand. Then the dotcom era came and we taught ourselves, or I taught myself how to code for the Internet, which was so different than design. It was quite challenging. But I was determined to stay on the forefront of where things were going. We did a proposal for a large corporation and

we got it. From there, everything took off. The company grew and we took on partners and that's how I met Leanne.

Then we were acquired by another company that was acquiring companies. We were the fourth acquisition. I stayed on for five years. At the time, I was the head of the design department in our office, but I did not like leading. That was not my training. I did the best I could and I failed sometimes and succeeded at others, but it was not my forte. I also did not like how the company was run. I stayed on for five years and then I left and decided, I'm just going to go back to designing for clients that I like and I can choose and make a difference. That's when Leanne connected the two of us. Then, after I had done 30 years of design history with owning a business, selling a business and whatnot. There's a lot of history back before you.

**[0:06:02] RT:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. All right. Let's just reminisce a little bit about the process, because I come to you in that moment without – I mean, I don't even know what the questions are that I should be thinking about, much less the answers, and I don't have a viewpoint much about what I'm trying to accomplish. We connect, and I don't remember the specifics of how you guided me through this deal. When you meet somebody like me who has aspirations and goals, but doesn't know squat about how to get there, how do you guide them to get there? Also, I think one of your amazing talents is your ability to extract, look and feel and design and ideas from people who couldn't ever in their life articulate that themselves. But when they see it in your hand, they go, “Yeah, that's it.” That's magic to me. It's probably not magic to you, but what goes on in that process?

**[0:06:56] TR:** My super talent, or whatever you want to call them, I am a good listener. A lot of clients have all this information and they just keep – they go through all these things that they think they need. My skill set is I can pick out the golden nuggets of what's really important and simplify that message, and then take that and intuitively put it into a design. Now, I often put it into a design and know that it's right, but I have to come back later and think up why it is correct, so that I can explain it to the client. Because when I do it, I don't have a reason why. I just know it's right. It's intuition.

**[0:07:47] RT:** When you get to that place of intuition, you've got it and you can look at it and you go, “I know it's right.” Then there's this period of time between then and you come to me and

explain to me if I'm not getting it, why it's right. What happens in that space in between? It sounds like you know you need to take a space between the first part and the second part. Why is that incubation period necessary in order to get to the place you're trying to get to with the client?

**[0:08:10] TR:** I have to be able to explain what I've done. Otherwise, the client may not understand it. Sometimes the client goes, "Oh, yes. That's right. That looks perfect." Otherwise, they look at it sometimes and go, "I don't get it." I have to say, "Well, you told me you wanted this, or you needed this, or whatever. This is why this achieves that objective." I have to really go back and disassemble my design. Deconstruct.

**[0:08:44] RT:** I can't use an artist first. I say that, because you have an eye for color, you have an eye for color combinations, you have an aesthetic, everything you've ever touched that you produce for me isn't just functional and do what you're messaging, all that stuff. But it's a pleasurable visual experience to experience for the people who go online. Where'd that come from? Just the sense of design and color and all that.

**[0:09:11] TR:** I laughed, because as a kid, when I took notes, my page was very beautiful. The borders were very gorgeous, the doodles around the edges. The notes probably didn't mean a whole lot, but the edges were lovely. I was also a photographer. I had my own darkroom, so I had a visual eye. I am not a typical artist, I don't think, in terms of painting and drawing. I just didn't have that. My hand eye coordination, but I could see color, and I could see – I had the visual eye, but I couldn't paint. I had a teacher in –

**[0:09:52] RT:** Hold it. You couldn't paint?

**[0:09:54] TR:** No, I could not. Or draw. I had a teacher in college that came around to everybody and made critiques. I looked at him and I said, "What am I doing wrong?" He looked at me and he said, "You're not doing anything right." He totally ripped me apart in front of the whole class and I was just –

**[0:10:12] RT:** Oh, that's awful.

**[0:10:13] TR:** I was horrified. People came up to me afterwards saying, “Okay, that was the worst thing a teacher could ever do.” I'm like, “Yeah.” My drawing and painting skills were not the best.

**[0:10:25] RT:** I never heard this story before.

**[0:10:29] TR:** I don't tell it often.

**[0:10:31] RT:** All right. Just staying inside this part of your life, you start a business, it gets acquired. You lead the business, you start another business, you're successful. You mentioned this briefly a few minutes ago, superpowers. But when you reflect, what are your gifts and talents in your craft that you know you can lean on if you're going to go do some work for somebody? I say, talents are developed. Gifts, we come down the road with those things. What do you think?

**[0:11:00] TR:** I think my determination, my persistence. I don't give up. I keep going.

**[0:11:06] RT:** Nothing to do with art and craft then, in some ways.

**[0:11:10] TR:** No.

**[0:11:10] RT:** I'm just checking. The arts and crafts still showed up as a place to go. You didn't go off and be a race car driver or – I mean, you chose the craft world.

**[0:11:20] TR:** I did choose the craft world, because I liked it. It was something I learned. I mean, and I also have a gift for simplifying information and understanding some complex situations. Not all. I will sometimes admit that when you were explaining to me some of your stuff, I'm like, “Okay, I'm not sure I totally understand this, but I'm going to go with it.”

**[0:11:46] RT:** I didn't understand it either, probably. All right, so you're making a life and a career and you're having success and you're satisfying clients and all is good.

**[0:11:56] TR:** All is pretty good. Yeah.

**[0:11:59] RT:** Then you have an event. And so –

**[0:12:02] TR:** I do have an event.

**[0:12:03] RT:** Would you share with people your event?

**[0:12:06] TR:** Yes. First of all, I'm going to go back a bit. In 2019, my husband's diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. It was my goal to become super strong and be the rock of the family. We have two daughters. I wanted to be able to make sure that I could take care of everything when and if it came to that he was not able to. He was still working at the time. He was a dentist. Then in April of 2024, it got to the point of he couldn't work anymore. We sold his business and worked through that whole process.

Then that summer, what we – I had just gotten home from Tahoe. I think it was a week we had gotten home from Tahoe. I'm going to go through this, because I think it's really, really important for people to know what happened and how it happened, because the signs, if anybody else out there in the world can know the signs and understand, maybe it will help them. I had a headache and I never get headaches. I called my doctor and I said, I have a really bad headache. He said, “Well, take some Advil.” I took some Advil. I called him again. I said, it's not going away. It's really bad. “Take another one.” I called him three times. No help, whatsoever.

Then the night before I had the event, I was sitting on the couch and I was holding a glass in my left hand and all of a sudden, the glass was on the ground and I'm like, “That's weird. How did I drop that?” Then I cleaned that up and was sitting there and thinking, “Oh, my husband's holding my hand. How cute is that?” I looked down and I'm like, “Oh, no. He's not. My right hand's holding my left hand. Interesting. I can't feel my left hand.” Then I went upstairs. I told my husband. He said, something's weird, but I'm going to go upstairs and get ready for bed. Then it happened again.

I came back downstairs and I said, something's weird going on and I can't feel my left hand sometimes. He looked at me and like, “Her face isn't drooping. She's not slurring her words.” Okay. I went to bed. Got up in the morning, felt fine. Got dressed. Put my coffee on. Put the

leash on the dog, went outside to take the dog for a walk. My husband was outside doing something in the car. Took a half way down just to the neighbor's house, took a step, and there was a shot of electricity up my leg, to the point that it was all the way up the side of my body and I let the dog go, tried to turn around and fell to the ground and crawled and screamed.

My husband came and got me, put me in the car. I knew I was having a stroke. I don't know why I knew I was having a stroke, but I knew it was a stroke. He went in and put the dog away and I thought, "Hurry up. Something's not going right here." We got to the emergency room. They immediately took me in and they actually had to – they ambulance me to another hospital with a better ICU for strokes. They knocked me out, intubated me and I was intubated, I think, for three days and knocked out. I woke up. I wasn't able to see out on my left side. Well, I was able to see out on my left side, but everything was 2D.

My girls came in and I'm like, "Oh, flat Stanley." It was just like everything was cardboard cutout. I couldn't see to the left, and then I couldn't move anything on the left side. I was there for a week. Taken to acute rehab for five weeks. The first week, I did not wake. I didn't really wake up and they thought, "She's gone. She's not going to come out of this." Then my determination kicked in and I was like, I'm not doing this. This is not happening. My therapist were wonderful. They pushed me. They're like, "You're coming out of this. We're not letting you go." I was like, little twinges, able to lift my shoulder a tiny, tiny bit and that was a huge accomplishment.

I think the signs, I mean, I don't know if it's different for women than men, but the signs were different. It wasn't the droopy face. It wasn't the slurred speech, and so nobody said, "Oh, you might be having a stroke." The type of stroke I had was a hemorrhagic venous thrombosis, which is not a typical stroke, like 2%. That was a year and a half ago. I am still dealing with it. I still have very numb hands. They don't have a lot of function. I drop things constantly. I just have to keep going.

**[0:16:59] RT:** How'd your family rally?

**[0:17:01] TR:** My family was amazing. When I was in that acute rehab, my sister flew out from New York. My other sister from the Bay Area came up. They were here as long as they could be. My sister from the Bay Area would just go back and forth. My husband brought me food,

every meal, because I wouldn't eat the food there. I said, "You need to bring me healthy food. My brain is going to get better. I need healthy food. So, bring me healthy food." He brought me meals three times a day. At rehab, they even commented to the other patients saying, "This is why she's getting better. Her meals are super healthy." Because that's what the brain needs. It needs healthy food.

My family was there for me. I mean, God, I love my family and friends. They were all there. The rehab people, they do not get enough credit. I mean, the nurses were – I mean, it takes a community, there is no doubt about it. It takes a village. It's just, I would not be where I am if it wasn't for them. They're my second family. They're just down the street, so I go visit them and I just – I love them.

**[0:18:13] RT:** I wrote down in my note when you're talking about your husband's stroke, that you were bound and determined that you were going to get them everybody through this and your determination. How have you translated that to the benefit of Tracy?

**[0:18:27] TR:** My husband's Parkinson's?

**[0:18:29] RT:** No. Your determination.

**[0:18:31] TR:** I think it's because I didn't have that determination, I wouldn't be where I am today. I wouldn't have been. I mean, I wouldn't go to yoga twice a week. I wouldn't get off my butt. I wouldn't try to do as many things as I do. I wouldn't go to strength training. I wouldn't try to be out with my friends. It's just, I have to keep going as if nothing happened, and that's really helpful. Otherwise, mentally, I will just go down. If I sit and wallow in this, it's not good. It's really not healthy.

**[0:19:15] RT:** When you and I were talking in preparation for this, you made a comment, which was something to the effect that, I'm not sure why you're asking me to do this, because I have nothing to bring like the other guests you have in the podcast. I'm thinking, no. I think everybody else is going to say the opposite. You asked me the question, what was the purpose of the podcast? Which I thought was interesting, because I thought, well, we worked through this a long time ago. That's how we got the website set up. But I knew you were relating it to Tracy, not

to the larger world. As we discussed, and I think we talked about here at the beginning too, the part of the podcast is for listeners to learn something about themselves.

The way I like to frame it is leading is a choice and an activity. It can come from anywhere, anybody, anytime. It's not a role. It's not a position. It's usually involves using yourself for the betterment of something else, or a cause, or something you care about. When you and I are talking and I was learning about your situation, the very first thing I thought was, she's really stepping up and owning her life and leading her life, not just for Tracy, but for her family. I'm going to say, you've never said this, as an example of what's possible for other people who might find themselves in this situation. Now, that's a story I make up. I'm just wondering, to what degree part of that might be accurate?

**[0:20:38] TR:** Well, I think it is accurate. I will tell you that before I had my stroke, I was working with the Michael J. Fox Foundation and working with the legislature, talking with the California legislature to convince them, help them understand the need for funding for Parkinson's. I'm continuing to do that. As you know, I just got out of the hospital on Saturday. Monday, I was at the capitol asking them, speaking with the legislature, asking them to support another bill to fund Parkinson's. I will continue to do that, because I think it's critical. This is a disease that is just awful. I want to show my daughters that they can fight for something they're passionate about, no matter what. I will do that.

**[0:21:32] RT:** Okay. Let's help people here. When you go to Olympia, or Olympia, that's our capitol – Sacramento to the capitol, just telling people what to do in legislature isn't going to get it done. What do you know about what it takes to begin to get on people's radar screens, mobilize them, get them coordinated, so that something might come up of eventually. That's a lot of work and it takes a certain set of skills. What do you know about how you get this work done?

**[0:22:02] TR:** Well, thank goodness for the Michael J. Fox Foundation, because they organize it. What they do is they ask people to come and tell their stories and ask for commitment to support bills. I am one of the ones that goes in and tells my story. Now, my story is a little more unique than just being a caregiver, because my mother had Parkinson's as well. From that perspective, I've gone through it twice. You talk to them about the bill. You ask if they

understand the bill. After you tell them your story and pull at their heartstrings, then you ask them, do they have any questions about the bill? Will they support the bill? And just try to get their commitment. It just takes a lot.

The reason we're doing it in California and there's probably one in – they're probably doing it in Washington and every other state is because federal has pulled all their funding for research, because that's where it used to come from. Now we're doing it in individual states.

**[0:23:09] RT:** I'm going to shift it, but only slightly. In the midst of all of this, you create people who are listening are going to think, this is weird, but they're going to find out it's really awesome. You've created an Instagram page.

**[0:23:24] TR:** I did.

**[0:23:25] RT:** I don't use Instagram, but our friend, Ms. Morgan told me, "Have you seen Tracy's Instagram page?" I said, "No." She goes, "Well, stop what you're doing and look at it." I did what Leanne told me to do. I was blown away. I'm a fledgling artist. I've taken art classes. But I'm looking at this and I'm thinking, this is pretty cool. It's blown away by the art. But tell people about your Instagram page, why you started it, how you design it and utilize it. Let's start there, because there's a few other questions I got about it as well, but let's just, why Instagram? What was the purpose of that for you at this date?

**[0:24:08] TR:** When I was in my therapy, the therapist, one of the things is the brain-hand connection is very important, and I didn't have a whole lot and I still don't. My brain does not connect to my hand.

**[0:24:23] RT:** Your left hand.

**[0:24:24] TR:** My left hand. One of the exercises, therapies is to paint, or draw, or something. She said, "Why don't you start painting?" I'm like, "Okay. This is going to be a mess, but okay." I started painting. My sister told my cousin, our cousin who had an arts play store. She imported French art supplies, who said, "Oh, I can send Tracy art supplies." She sent me this lovely watercolors and pastels and paper. She's like, "Here, Tracy. You can use these." I'm like, great,

these lovely supplies with my messy art. I started using them and as best I could and continued making messy art, which was really hard for me, because I'm a designer and everything's perfect and nothing was perfect than I was. About four weeks later, she says, "When's your first gallery showing?" I laughed and I had her and I said, "Oh, never. That is not happening."

**[0:25:27] RT:** One second, just for listeners. Are you left-handed, or right-handed?

**[0:25:31] TR:** I am right-handed.

**[0:25:32] RT:** Okay. All right, good. This is my non-dominant hand to start with and it doesn't work. I was talking, I was just telling my sister that Maureen had asked when my gallery showing was. Deb said, "Well, Tray, why don't you put it on Instagram?" I'm like, "Oh, gosh. Deb, I don't want it on Instagram. Then people will see this messy stuff." She's like, "No. You could try." I decided, well, at least Maureen would get to see it. I thought, well, if I do it, I'll write a note of what it is and then we can put it up. So, I did. I put it on Instagram and I don't have a lot of followers. I never use these social media. I put it on my Facebook page, which I don't have followers on there either, and I put it on my Instagram page. I only put a message on my Facebook page saying, "If you want to follow me, follow me on Instagram, because it will never be on Facebook again." So, I did and I have probably 30 followers, or something, I don't know. I am now, I posted probably 224 pieces of art.

**[0:26:36] RT:** You have a post in there that says what your goal is around the frequency of this, right?

**[0:26:42] TR:** I was doing it once every other day. I'm not doing it quite as much. I've had too many bumps in my road lately, so I've missed a few days. But I've done 224 in the last year and a half, so that's a lot.

**[0:26:59] RT:** For listeners out there, I want to reinforce, first of all, we will put a link to your Instagram page in the show notes for the podcast. I'm going to suggest everybody that they go to this Instagram page and see what you've posted. Knowing that you're doing this with your left hand, which is the stroke side of your body, not your dominant, skilled, coordinated right hand. Let's let them judge for themselves about the quality of what you're producing there, lady,

because it is astounding. Utterly astounding. I was so humbled, because I'm trying to paint with my dominant hand and there's no comparison. You wiped away all my lame excuses for why I can't paint and draw. You did it in three images that I looked at before I got to the rest of my thought. Oh, bloody hell. What am I doing here? Such an inspiration.

I also want to just say, so beautiful. Your eye for the design and seeing things in a different way is really on display here. Then it comes out of your hand. But you see the world in the ways that I think a lot of us would like to see it, but don't. I put that down as a Tracy gift. But this talent is really incredible, too. I'm a fan and I'm a follower of Tracy's Instagram. I'm being straight with that right out the gate.

**[0:28:25] TR:** Well, and I will say that I start with an idea in my brain. It comes out nothing like that. Not even close. Sometimes it's just my hand doing what it can do, moving ever how it can. That's all I can do.

**[0:28:42] RT:** You could tell them the title of your Instagram page.

**[0:28:44] TR:** Art of stroke.

**[0:28:45] RT:** Art of stroke. All right, so we're coming down to it here. You've mentioned this a couple of times during the deal about your husband's Parkinson's. I just want to ask you, how is it for you to support him and him to support you when you both have these different situations health-wise that are challenging for you? How do you make this work and how do you get through it together?

**[0:29:09] TR:** Well, as two people who were super healthy, we sometimes just look at each other like, how the hell did this happen? Then we're like, but here we are and we have to keep moving forward. There's days where his day is bad and there's days where my days are bad, and we just have to support each other. It's hard. I won't deny that. But you make it work and you find joy in the little things. I've really learned to laugh at myself. I drop things all the time and I laugh at it. I break things, I laugh at it. My phone has so many cracks in it, there's nothing I can do about it. We both do things to try to help ourselves. He does all the things for Parkinson's. I do all the things for stroke.

**[0:29:59] RT:** What's ahead for you, do you think?

**[0:30:01] TR:** I will keep fighting for Parkinson's. I will keep trying to walk straight. That's a big deal for me. I think one of the biggest things for me is really learning to not try to go back to my old life. To be okay with my new life. That's a hard thing to do, because for the longest time, I was like, I'm going to ride my bike again. I'm going to go do this again. I don't think I am, and I need to be okay with that.

**[0:30:28] RT:** Would you mind sharing with people how you actually make those small decisions and how you stick with them? Because I'm thinking, what you're talking about here is probably true for everybody in different ways. Something that they've always been, their identity is made up of partially this thing and it's no longer available, whether it's my actual job, or health situation, or something. What have you learned about letting go of parts of your identity and who you were and move forward?

**[0:30:56] TR:** I think it is, I mean now that it's a year and eight months later of trying to hold on to that and realizing that I keep hitting roadblocks, that it's not helping me mentally to hold on to it, and that I need to find joy in other places. I was like, my daughter really likes bird watching. Maybe I should do bird watching. Maybe I should do other things that I can do, rather than go out and ride my bike. Maybe there's things that I should look into that are not what I used to do. It's not an easy decision to just let go, by any means, because that was my identity. Being a designer and typing on the computer and doing design on the computer, ah, that's easy. Riding my bike, hiking, those were all easy things. I mean, I'm not even – going to the altitude is not even really a possibility right now, or flying, traveling. I have to find things here that I can do that are okay, that I enjoy.

**[0:32:02] RT:** And your support system of people?

**[0:32:05] TR:** I have really great friends. My sister is wonderful, my husband, and even my strength training class, the people in my strength training class, or my yoga class, they're all really wonderful people. They're not my best friends, but they're super supportive.

**[0:32:21] RT:** Okay. Any final thoughts? Anything I haven't asked you that you want to share here before we bring this to a close?

**[0:32:27] TR:** I would just tell people to stay strong in adversity. Laugh at yourself. That's what's getting me through.

**[0:32:35] RT:** Tracy Roberts, you've always been a special person for me, but the last year. You've been a source of inspiration, and I hope to do something well by it. Thank you for how you're living your life and taking care of yourself and your husband. It's really a testament to what's possible. Thank you for being on the podcast.

**[0:32:53] TR:** Well, thank you. It's been an honor.

**[0:32:55] RT:** Bye-bye.

**[0:32:57] TR:** Bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[0:33:00] ANNOUNCER:** Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please, take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

[END]