

JAN: Hey, everybody - a minisode!

CAT: It's a minisode!

JAN: Next week is the finale. Nuts.Nuts.

CAT: I can't believe we're here.

JAN: But before that finale, there is one more thing that we need you to hear so that you know everything that we know when we walk into that finale.

CAT: Okay. Tell me what we're listening to today.

JAN: Today we're going to share a conversation that I had with therapist and death educator, Jeanne Denney. Now, Jeanne we found because she was going to be a third act breakthrough.

CAT: Yeah, you wanted someone who could comment on mourning practices, maybe from a more new age-y perspective.

JAN: Yes, and I wanted homework! Like give me a ritual around death that I can take home and do real quick so I can get my third act breakthrough. But as we were listening, seeing how I would integrate her into the third act breakthrough, I realized what she actually gave me was a bunch of clarity around these themes that are starting to crystallize for me at the end of this story.

So then I thought, well great! Not third act act breakthrough, she's a part of the finale! She'll get us ready as I clarify what my story is about walking into our final scene. But that didn't work.

CAT: No! Then the finale was two hours!

JAN: Yeah, it didn't fit there. And so I'm just giving it to you now for free. Firstly because, as we were talking about Jeann's interview, going back and forth, recording voice over for whatever episode it was going to be, it just- she clarified for me what this story has been about this whole time. Gave me a lot of insight into what I'm actually carrying with me into the conclusion of the story. And I also wanted to share it because if you're somebody who has a grief you've been carrying that you don't know what to do with, there's no language for, you don't know if it's legitimate, or you just need a heaping dose of legitimacy, like I did, I think this one's for you. Jeanne Denney, legitimacy, clarity, after this break.

JAN: To set the scene, this conversation with Jeanne happened a while back, right after my conversation with Peter Brooks for chapter 4, Plot. So I got off the train from Princeton, rolled

my luggage around midtown 'til I found her lobby, and got ready to really cry. And really access grieving and mourning. Little did I know I would come back from this trip and then enter the pit of grief for like, six months to a year. But past Jan knew none of this.

JAN: I feel so odd, okay alright alright gonna get my....grieving on

JAN: Hi Jeanne? Hi I'm Janielle it's nice to meet you.

JEANNE: Janielle, nice to meet you, nice to meet you.

JEANNE: So my name is Jeann Denny and uh, I'm a somatic psychotherapist, a death educator and um, somebody who teaches a lot about the connection between the mind, body, psyche uh, and energy and consciousness through the lifespan and after.

JAN: I start by explaining to Jeanne the grieving practice I'd just experienced - the casserole drop-off - and she loves that.

JEANNE: We acknowledge that you have a loss and we bring tangible food to you so that you can eat and rest and be carried.

JAN: Yeah I think, yeah, I think uh, I think that didn't occur to me until I heard you reiterating it back to me that it was a form of acknowledgement, was that like, so much of this story has been one of illegitimacy.

JEANNE: Yeah

JAN: Like illegitimate daughter. Illegitimate grief. Illegitimate relationship to death.

JEANNE: Uh huh yeah. Yeah.

JAN: So the act of somebody spending like, it means- one guy spent two hours making this like beautiful Filipino dish that's like a traditional thing that his mother would make him because he wanted me to have that. I was like, what a legitimate dish. What a legitimate gift. What a legitimate- like he so legitimized my grief by spending two hours making this dish and um... And so I think I've been um, opening myself up to saying, okay, well what if I assumed I was legitimately allowed to grieve? What does that look like?

JEANNE: Yeah yeah.

JAN: And that brings me to you. I'm stuck right there.
What does it, what does it look like and what, what, what do I do?

JEANNE: Wow well. I mean, it's not as if this, you know, I could pull out the number 52 on the list of things to do, but it certainly is a really active question and important process, you know? Um, have you encountered this term? There actually is a term for this. Disenfranchised grief? You've must've come up against that term.

JAN: That's what, Carson the director was the one who told me about it.

JEANNE: Yeah.

JAN: What's your perspective on it?

JEANNE: Well, it's just simply that grief that there are often people. So I'm bringing it up, not that I think it's important for you to use that term instead of illegitimate grief. I mean, in a way I really like that term. It resonates as you say that.

I think it's just because maybe for a recognition that this is a phenomenon that's not just yours. That there are often people connected to people that die, that are not socially or culturally recognized or even in the family.

The mistress of somebody, the person nobody was supposed to know about, the illegitimate child, we could say, I don't like to use that term. But, but the child that, the, um... I know one time I had a client die, and nobody knew she was in therapy. And I happened to have sent a Christmas card. So they said, who is this person? We'll call her and tell her that she died. I was stunned. I didn't, of course I didn't have a legitimate place in the mourning which belonged to the family. They didn't know who I was.

And yet relationships exist outside those constructs. Right? It sounds like yours did. And so I want to just name that. You're not the only person who struggles with that, and it can happen in funny ways even within legitimate families or you know, uh, enfranchised families or whatever we want to say.

JEANNE: So, so there are questions I'm going to ask you and then we'll get back to the idea: What do we do with this? But it, but I wanna, I would like to actually look at the relationship you did have rather than the relationship you didn't have.

JAN: She asked me to give her more context around the details of my birth and I tell her how my mom was so excited, that I was her miracle, and my dad wasn't present for any of that.

JEANNE: So that automatically, that's part of the family triangle that you came into. And people can say, oh, well you don't remember any of that.
I just want to say that the things that happen around the news of our arrival as a being

on earth or a pregnancy, the way mom received you, which sounds like strong and clear and intentional, and the way your father couldn't - both have been formative in your life. Even in his absence.

So I just want to point out that your relationship is right here. It's deep, you know.

I facilitated a program in New York City for a couple of years called The Art of Dying Certificate Program. And an interesting thing happened last year. We had a new teacher, Kay Kowalski from John Hopkins, who'd started an infant palliative care unit in the NICU at Johns Hopkins. These were for parents who knew, either knew they were going to give birth to a child who wasn't viable, or children who would die soon after. And it's very very deep and that day was extremely deep. And one of the things that, uh, impressed me was a. how deep everyone with that, when this birth and death thing came together. But also Kat talked about how parents, even parents that lose children at 5 months, you know, in their pregnancy, often need to grieve that, need to acknowledge it, need to retain... Their dying days they'll talk about that child as a child. So these things that happen, even perhaps with fathers, you know, we think about well that's the mother. I don't know. But it's a very deep imprint to have been the child of somebody.

JAN: Because at funerals, funerals are so-

JEANNE: Uh right, I know.

JAN: So much of the living, yeah.

JEANNE: Or about the heroism or the perfection or the, you know, the cookies always were coming out of the oven. The "she never was angry" you know?

JAN: Yeah yeah. Is that something you, you think is something we should reform about how we do funerals?

JEANNE: I think it's just natural. I think it's part of unresolved grief. Usually when people are further along in their grief, they can talk about the reality a little bit more. But when people are still either traumatized, shocked or they don't know what to do, or they're frozen, we elevate people to the status of anybody that dies is, you know, a hero and was perfect and we, we feel responsible for selling only the really good things about their life and it's much more complicated to accept people. So...

JAN: Yeah, so then I walked in.

JEANNE: Right.

JAN: And just my existence completely complicated the narratives. And one thing that kept happening is, people kept, or a couple people, liked to ascribe things to me that belonged to Rick. Oh, you've got his you know smile.

JEANNE: Right, so feel in this how your father and you have been in a dance, even if it was unconscious, even if it wasn't visible and tangible, named, socially sanctioned. Because there's real feeling here.

So I mean, this is very real grief. I just want to say because even people that have the tangible people in their lives will feel so many of these things.

Um my own dad too, and not to, but my own dad too. He. There were things. Of course we have to grieve. Never. We'll never get that. We're never going to get that from him.

JAN: I guess. So that's the side that feels like empowering about acknowledging an energetic relationship. Right? Like, there's real grief here. Real loss.

The other side really makes me feel weird because like I don't want to be like him.

JEANNE: Right. So is there a chance you first need to reject him?

JAN: What do you mean?

JEANNE: Well, it's kinda hard, isn't it? Because you never got to attach. But one of the things just like the people in... at the funeral who could only say glowing things about him, you're in a kind of similar situation in that you're pretty pissed off that he wasn't there for you, it sounds like.

JAN: Yeah, finally I am I think.

JEANNE: Yeah. Yeah. That, that seems like a very real aspect of a very real relationship and something that you might need to take up.

JAN: Okay

JAN: I think this is why like my anger so much right now.

CAT: Hmm.

JAN: How fun to be real angry at your real dad. A lot of people, we don't- we never got to be real angry at our real dad. We just got a lot of pain and a lot of weird shapes that are hard to hold. It's fun to feel real angry at my real dad. Fuck you dad. You know?

CAT: Yeah.

JAN: I hate you. Slam the door. You don't understand me! And I jump on my bed, cry.

CAT: Yeah. You get mad at even good dads.

JAN: Yeah. It feels real.

JEANNE: So, so what I'm saying to you is what if, you had this energetic relationship with your dad. There's a lot of things going on between you, consciously and unconsciously. In the absence, in the no, in the rejection of each other. Because there's got to be here:

You rejected me, I'm going to reject you. Right?

I mean, I don't want to impose. I shouldn't assume that-

JAN: No, no I think that's useful.

JEANNE: Okay. But there was a lot of energy here. And what if not all of the energy's no longer?

JAN: Okay.

JEANNE: But is here to be worked with. Just as if maybe this is the way you get to know your dad now.

CAT: Let's take a break here. We'll be right back.

JEANNE: What I really love about death studies, it's hard to put words to. Is that it's constantly showing us that death and life are not separate. There's no separation. This is a human construct, a cultural construct that we... that we make the separation and then we suffer for it.

So this same frustration you had with him on the, on the, the negative side, the frustration's still here. The fear's still here.

Of course you can still send the email - so to speak.

Uh, but what if the potentiality is still here too?

Of resolution. And maybe even the possibility of having a more positive outcome than you would have had if he was in body.

I do believe in the potential for healing, which is, after all, has to be part of what you're doing this project for. Right?

JAN: Yeah. How do I... You, you just said that maybe there's potential for something even better than could have been here. What- what would that look like?

JEANNE: See, I think here it's really important for this to be your divine creation. For one thing, you're a creative. I know that there are people in some shamanic traditions that say, ugh you know, you new age people, you Western people, you want - you think you can just create all these things. There are traditions, you need to learn traditions. The fact is, well, it's important to work within the traditions we did get perhaps, love the casserole thing. Um, these things are very personal and intimate to us. But there are basic things that we do psychologically in resolution. And this might be of help to you in your work through it. One is that, you know, Ira Byock said this actually. Said the four things people say.

JAN: Okay.

JEANNE: But this is also spiritual traditions throughout the world. In fact, even our courtesy system says, the things we say are: Thank you. I love you. I'm sorry, or please forgive me. I forgive you. And actually the fifth one is goodbye and fare you well. I wish you well, I give you a blessing.

These five things seem to be the important things and that doesn't mean we can force them. May get stuck on one rather than the other. It might be a five year process for you to work on. Thank you. Or um, I forgive you.

JAN: And that's the order? It's-

JEANNE: It's not any order. It's like, those are just the things. These are the things that people say.

JAN: Okay okay so it's the five are... The five are thank you, I'm sorry, or I forgive you, um...

JEANNE: I'm sorry or please forgive me.

JAN: I'm sorry or please forgive you, please forgive me.

JEANNE: And I forgive you.

JAN: I forgive you. And then-

JEANNE: I love you.

JAN: I love you and goodbye. Hmm...
That would be useful.

JEANNE: I mean, you notice it there. The courtesies that we either have or don't have in the culture we have right now. But, but they write closure.

So these are pieces I'm giving you in terms of what do I do?

JAN: Yeah, I appreciate that

JEANNE: Um, I don't know how it's going to look for you, but I, I would love to give you encouragement to explore how do I need to, or not that you need to produce these things, but what's in the way of them?

JAN: Yeah.

JEANNE: First we must be really emotionally truthful. We must, that is part of our grieving process. And I think we often protect the dead from the rawness of our emotions.

JAN: Yeah.

JEANNE: Uh, uh, uh, of the, you know, the WTF, of you know, you didn't even stay around so that I could send you my damn email?

JAN: I know! It's the least he could have done.

JEANNE: I mean what kind of a shitty dad is that? Right? I mean, and that's the beginning of your love, is your rage about your disappointments. And to really let yourself have it.

JAN: Huh. Yeah okay, that's some useful homework.

JEANNE: I would say-

JAN: I'm turning it into what I-

JEANNE: I would say it's the beginning of a ritual.

JAN: Okay.

JEANNE: A beginning of coming into the truth and laying down your gauntlet of I'll have a relationship with you and truth is going to be a part of it.

JAN: It hadn't occurred to me that our relationship could start from a place of like, fuck you.

JEANNE: Sounds like that's one of the places you- Because to start with an agenda that I need to be, this needs to be all clean and tidy and I give you -- but there's more to the story, right? There's also some fuck you here.

JAN: Yeah. There absolutely is.

JEANNE: Yeah. And that truth is a beautiful and a true thing.

JAN: Hm. Okay um.

JEANNE: Well, it's real.

JAN: Yeah. No, it certainly is. Um yeah.

That just- It's funny too that that hadn't occurred to me. That like the energetic relationship after someone's gone doesn't have to be uh, one where like, you see a robin and think of them.

You know?

JEANNE: That's where I think Malidoma too helped me because uh, when you would set up, do an ancestral ritual or whatever, which uh, you could go rail and sob and rage. But you could certainly expect them to be of help service to you.

So what if your father, now this is just an idea, I'm not selling this idea to you. I'm just saying this is an idea that's out there for you to play with, work with. Does this help you? What if your father is going to be of more help and service to you now than he ever was? And this blessing you need to give when you're ready, might be something that you could make into something that's really true, including the anger, the WTF, the you were kind of a Shitty Dad. Now make up for it.

JAN: Yeah the least he could do is let me get some good art out of this

JEANNE: And thank you and I love you and fuck you and I forgive you. Maybe.

JAN: Yeah because people with real- well real dads, people with real dads have all of those things.

JEANNE: Yes.

CAT: Let's take a break here for an ad.

JAN: I was floored by this conversation re-listening to it, because what she's done is she has brought into focus like the core themes of my story.

I couldn't see it then when I was in the conversation, I was just like trying to follow along, but now, looking back, I can totally see it.

My story, at its core, is about legitimacy. Legitimizing that potent, molecular loss of a parent, even if you didn't meet them, or didn't know them, or didn't have any words to describe their absence.

Having been the child of somebody- what is it she says? It's a very powerful-

CAT: Uh, she said, it's a very deep imprint to have been the child of somebody.

JAN: Yes. Having been the child of somebody, whatever the conditions around that - that story is worthy. And having experienced a loss of that, under any circumstances - that grief is worthy. That has been in this story the whole time! And I think it's part of the resolution - is me inviting other people in to legitimize their potent, molecular losses. And their illegitimized grief. In the oxygen mask way, which is I've done it for myself, I've put mine on first, now here, you do it for you.

Another thing she touches on: My story is about adding nuance to one-dimensional pdfs we make when we flatten people at funerals. Like "oh that was- oh he was just, you know, he was a great guy and he was just doing the best he could" like done - ding! No one need to examine more. Or "oh yeah, he was a deadbeat who didn't care about you and abandoned you" like done - ding! No need to examine more. Like, he was many things, and all of them are worth mourning. And there's no need to illegitimize him and to flatten him into one thing.

And my story ultimately is about accessing anger and rage. I can't believe she said that, I don't remember her saying that. But that is the beginning of my love - because those feelings are the honest feelings.

And walking into my resolution or my conclusion, I am experiencing an ending of sorts, but I'm actually experiencing a new beginning, which is I get to have a new energetic relationship with my dad now. And just because he's dead doesn't mean that I can't start by being honest with him now. I can be honest with him now. And just because he's dead doesn't mean that I can't figure out how to love him now, on the other side of figuring out how to be angry with him now. All of that is stuff I still get to do.

CAT: Yeah, something you said in, um, episode seven Third Act Breakthrough, you said that feels like just something you say to someone. The familiar, the fuck you, that I can say. You know?

JAN: Yes. As I start to understand you.

CAT: Yeah.

JAN: It's honest. And - and whatever I'm gonna feel in this new chapter I'm starting when I end this story right now, Untitled Dad Project, as this ends I'm gonna start a new chapter... And it's all gonna be honest. Me and my dad, on my terms. I just think it's incredible. That all this clarity

was waiting for me, and I couldn't see it then while I was sitting in her office with like the white noise machine. And it's just all been there the whole time

You know what it is? I'm just an unreliable narrator. I'm a pretty good protagonist, I've been, I've been working really hard to try to be an honest protagonist. But boy, do I miss the stuff that's happening around me.

CAT: Sure. But we all do.

JAN: Yeah, yeah yeah yeah. I just, I just... Yeah. As a writer I can notice this Jan character sure doesn't notice the themes that are brewing around her as they're brewing around her and crystalizing and forming and underlining themselves and highlighting themselves and repeating and coming full circle.

CAT: Well sure, but luckily we have this evidence, right? Like, we recorded it.

JAN: Luckily I have- Yeah, yeah.

CAT: If you hadn't recorded it, you wouldn't know that she said all of these wonderful things.

JAN: It's true.

CAT: I've heard that a therapist's job it just saying the same thing over and over again until the client can hear them.

JAN: That's also your job. To say the same things over and over again until I can hear you.

CAT: I mean, yes.

JAN: Yeah.

CAT: Thank you all for listening to this week's minisode. Next week, all this disenfranchised grief comes to fruition in The Finale. A funeral, a story, the end. I can't wait to share this with you. UDP is created and hosted by Janielle Kastner. Our production team is me, Carson McCain, Kelly Kolff, Lauren Floyd, Jenna Hannum, Evan Arnett, and Will Short. Our executive producers are Alia Tavakolian and Keith Reynolds. Special thanks this week to Jeanne Denney. Thank you for sharing your wisdom and for giving us all the space to legitimize our feelings. You can find her work at jeannedenney.com. That's j-e-a-n-n-e-d-e-n-n-e-y .com. We'll see you soon.