

Minisode: Jeff McCain

[Spoke audio logo]

CARSON: Dad, if you'll sit there. Um,

JEFF: Ok. I'm nervous

JAN: Are you?

JEFF: Yes

JAN: There's no. There's no like, um, what's it called? The. The question that you throw at somebody that they aren't ready. The, not the curve ball is that it, curve ball?

JEFF: Curve ball. Yeah yeah yeah.

JAN: There's no curveball. There's no like Barbara Walters that's gonna make you cry sort of thing

JEFF: Yeah, no I know but I mean still. It can be the easiest question in the world. And I'll

JAN: Yeah.

JAN: Hey y'all welcome back to another minisode.

CARSON: It's us, but shorter.

JAN: A minisode, as a reminder, is a conversation or an interview with somebody that we had that we think is really meaningful and good, but it just didn't fit into the chapter arc structure we ended up with. So we want to give it to you -- just a free gift of something we think is meaningful to this journey. This quest, sorry Robert McKee.

CARSON: And so this interview, at some point we thought it would be really useful to define, like what is a good dad.

JAN: Like as a character archetype, what is the character of a good dad?

CARSON: Yes. So we were like, hm, who is a good dad we can interview? And I think I came to you and was like, well I have a really good dad.

JAN: You have an objectively good dad. Jeff McCain. Now, what I think is so meaningful about this conversation, isn't that Jeff was so great at defining what a good dad is. He just exemplified what a good dad is by good dad-ing at me. So if you're somebody who could use a good dad in your life, hasn't talked to your good dad in a while, or just for whatever reason would like to be good dad-ed at today, here's a conversation between myself, Carson, and Jeff McCain, a very good dad. All of that, after this break.

[AD BREAK 1]

[Theme music]

JAN: ...and one of the things that came up was sort of my, my, um, how like mythic or fable, like the idea of good dads are. I don't understand

JEFF: Yeah. Yeah.

JAN: I just don't understand that there's a book that this, uh, this writer that I grew up reading, Donald Miller wrote and he since changed the title, but he called it To Own A Dragon. And he talks about like, when someone asks you what is it like not having a dad, you're like, well, I don't know. What is it like to not have a dragon? I don't- I can't fathom

JEFF: It's like a mythical creature to you

JAN: I can't fathom what I'm missing because I don't know what it would be like to have one and Carson was like, well, I have a dad who I think is a good dad who has a lot of thoughts on fatherhood and its complications. And so we thought maybe interesting to talk to you about it

JEFF: Yeah....I have a lot of thoughts on fatherhood?

CARSON: Well you've been a father

JEFF: Well, I've been a father but none of that- I've been a father, but that doesn't mean I know what I'm doing.

JAN: So maybe we could start there. So we wanted an expert on being a good dad. Right? So do you identify as a good dad?

JEFF: You know I appreciate what Carson just said. I feel it's just, it's very honored and humbling for. And I think any dad would say this, that when your daughter says something like that, it just tears you up inside because it just makes you feel so good. And, and it, um, it just, I, but immediately I think I'm not worthy of that because if, if being a good dad, I mean, what is a good dad? If being a good dad means reasonably avoiding mistakes. I'm not a good dad because I've made a lot of mistakes. But if being a good dad means being present and showing up and feeling responsible for your kids and, and, and sort of living in this, gosh, I mean to say this sounds so arrogant because I'm not, I don't, I don't feel worthy of this, but to live sacrificially for your kids, if that's being a good dad then I mean that's something I've strived to do.

JAN: Yeah.

JEFF: And I don't know that I've been, well I know that I haven't been 100 percent successful with that and Carson will tell you that. If being a good dad to, to your question, if, if, if that's defined as being present then. And that's, that's the way I would define being as good a dad as a person can be, is being present then. Yeah, I was that.

JAN: So Carson, you grew up with a lot of friends who didn't have dads or, or could you talk to that and like what, what significance does a dad have in your development and what significance does?

CARSON: Yeah. Um,

JAN: Or what did, what did having a dad do?

CARSON: Yeah. I would say it's, it's weird to talk about that because just like you can't imagine your life with a dragon. I can't imagine mine without, you know. Um, I had a dad who I knew loved me and, and like that was never a doubt in my mind. Some, some present dads I think maybe don't express love, but, but I don't remember a time that you didn't say I love you, you know, at least twice a day. Uh, I don't, I don't remember that ever not being something I knew and, and I struggle with personal perfectionism but, but something that you have always said to me is like, I love you no matter what, you know, like you, whatever you do, like that's not gonna change it.

JEFF: I'll say something. This is just, um, you talk about affirming you everyday. For you, I felt like if I did nothing but tell you that you are loved, that you are worthy, that you are gorgeous that you are beautiful inside and out that you have what it takes that you can do anything. If I just kept, keep reminding you of those things, then I felt like I was doing My job.

CARSON: Yeah. I'm crying a lot it's fine

JAN: That's great. I started crying as soon as we got started and I don't really know why. Um, I've done much harder interviews than this, this should be a softball interview, but um.

JEFF: Yeah, this is nothing

JAN: Yeah, but the majority of my life. I'd say the past 25 years I spent before my dad died, um, it was really important to not acknowledge lack. Uh, and so I guess um, there's sort of a tricky trap I'm feeling which is a, do I say I had everything I needed? Is that the way I look back at my life and think about it? Or do I look back and say I was missing a huge thing and I should acknowledge that and sort of embrace that and understand that that might bring its own limitations and challenges and both of those feel like a trap to me right. Uh,

JEFF: Yeah. I can't imagine. I can't imagine Janielle. You know, I've only known you for a few years and you know how much we love you. And as I've heard this story, It h-. I feel a whole, I feel a loss for you. I'm grieving. I'm sort of going through this grief because I think you're grieving a loss and it's not necessarily, you're not grieving the man you knew, you're grieving the dad that you didn't have.

JAN: Yeah.

JEFF: And the loss, you're grieving the loss. I think that's real. I don't think, Gosh, I mean, I'm not qualified to talk about this,

CARSON: Yes you are.

JEFF: But it's just, I don't understand how...it's like Carson said about the dragon earlier. You know, I had a good dad. I had a good example as a dad. Um, I've got good examples in my life with good dads. My best friends are good dads. So I don't know how to talk about your loss. It just, it, it hurts me. I grieve with you over it. I'll say this, you know, if this is meaningful to you. Me being a quote unquote good dad or a present dad, it, it was a decision I made. Okay. It's important for you to know that, that, that it was a, it was a decision that I made. Um, it had nothing to do with Carson. Okay? I love you Carson, but you, I mean, it wasn't, you didn't earn my love for you. I, you're great and it's been a blast being your dad. It's been one of the best things in my life. But me being a present dad was my choice. You didn't earn that. You didn't have anything to do with you. Your behavior did not make me be a good dad. Okay. If you had been a bad daughter, quote unquote, whatever that is, I'm still going to be your dad and you can't run me off. There's nothing you could do that would make me love you anymore, and matter of

fact, there's nothing you could do to make me love you any less because it's my decision, not yours. And Janielle, his decision to be an absent dad didn't have anything to do with you. You didn't. You didn't. You're worthy. You are worth it. You are. I can tell you you are 100 percent worth it, more than worth it. That was his decision. His alone you didn't- you know which is, I don't know if somewhere subconsciously or consciously you've ever thought, what did I do wrong or why wasn't I worth it? You were, it didn't have anything to do with you sweetie. It was his decision and I don't know what I'm not, I don't, I don't want to be judgemental of him. I don't know what circumstances existed in his life for him to make that decision. You know, standing afar, I can, I can, I can, you know, cross my arms and stick my nose in the air and say, well he's, he's selfish. He made a decision that was selfish instead of selfless.

JAN: Yeah.

JEFF: But I don't know his life story. I don't know what was going on. I don't know the battles he fought that caused him to make that choice. But it was his choice and it didn't have anything to do with you.

[music]

JAN: Could you talk a little bit about, um, to Carson's earlier point of thinking about, uh, her, how she thought about men that she wanted to date or how she might have thought of for future marriage. She had you as an example of. Oh, I, you know, I, I how my dad is my mom and my dad was with me. There's a sense of, just understanding the, another gender through the lens of your parent, um, which is like gets creepy and oedipal or it gets like really warm and sweet or like also kind of get like, it's like weirdly incestuous when I think about like all the, like weird, like purity practices I grew up with. Like the dad walking the daughter with a little white dress and some of that seems kind of creepy to me, which is like, what does your dad have to do with your dating?

JEFF: Yeah....yeah.

JAN: But could you speak from your perspective? How did you think about, um, you know, when Carson started dating boys, what was your role in that? How did it feel?

JEFF: Yeah. Well, you're right, I mean, part of it that's what you just described is sort of this cultural thing that we have where dad's give their daughters away to some, you know, hairy legged boy that you really don't like. You know, it happens. It happens in life. It's okay. Um, but yeah, when Carson, you know, and I hate to keep going back to that whole self esteem thing, but it was, sort of had in my mind that if she did not get her self esteem from me, which, you know, I

see you as a very, as a person who is very confident and poised and lots of self es-, you know, rightfully high self esteem, you are very highly esteemed by so many including me. But I always sort of with Carson, I just, there was a thought that I had maybe not articulated that if she doesn't get the proper amount of self esteem for me, she'll go get it from another source, from a boy who may have another agenda. It was important for me to let Carson know that she is, um, awesome, regardless of whether some idiot dates her or not. You know, and you know, so I was never really the, you know, if a boy comes around, my daughter I'm gonna shoot him with my shotgun out there on the porch, I'm going to tell him I'm not afraid to go back to jail. The old joke. But um, uh, so I never was really that way.

CARSON: I never felt like you owned me or needed to give me a way in any sort of way. Even even getting married, it didn't feel like you were like giving me to Preston. It felt like it felt like more like my, my dad and my support system for my whole life up until this point is welcoming in the second support system. Um, so rather than like a giving away, I kinda, I, the more we talk about it, the more I don't love that term. I like the welcoming in of like, and now we're one big family.

JEFF: Yeah. All that stuff was just ceremonial.

CARSON: Oh totally.

JEFF: The minister said who gives this bride and I say her mother and I. And it was, it was mainly about you just becoming, you know, leaving, um leaving from under my roof to being under someone else's roof or your own roof. And that's hard. That's hard for a dad. You know I balled at your wedding. I mean I- the um, it's strange how you raise your kids to successfully leave the nest and then when they do it just breaks your heart, you know, so there's, there's a conflict there, but yeah it's supposed to happen; it's life.

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

[AD BREAK 2]

JEFF: When you said to Carson, so you've got this skill set of how to freely accept love from men are- implicit in that was, is that something I don't have or that something or are you believing that that's something you don't have?

JAN: I think, I think I didn't realize that when I imagine myself in the future, I imagine myself alone. Like I can't picture what a man being there for decades would look like. I'd like that. But that is something I hope for, but I didn't realize like, oh, I fundamentally sort of think of myself as a lone wolf. When I thin- when I plan out my future? Um, what was so tricky about this past breakup was that this was a person that I um started to picture being there. It feels a little bit more like a death than I thought it would. Uh, I. So I, I guess, um, and then back to your point about freely accepting love. I think I sort of have viewed love through the lens of performance.

JEFF: Yeah.

JAN: I have a wonderful mom who would always tell me you don't have to earn everyone's love and affection. You,

JEFF: You don't have to earn anybody's love.

JAN: Exactly. She was always reinforcing that for me.

JEFF: That's not love.

JAN: Yeah, exactly. But then if I think about what I practiced--intellectually I understood that, but what I practiced was um after school going over to someone's house, figuring out the rules of their home. Oh, okay. So like dad and mom don't talk about this sort of thing that gets them upset. Okay. Um, they have this worry about their daughter who is my friend. Okay, great. So then I will function as this way and at the dinner table I will be the joke teller and alleviate this weird tension I feel in this home or I will be the responsible one who like helps my friend with her flashcards and we have that kind of relationship and that will be what was, what's, what's useful and kind of earns my, earns my keep in this house.

JEFF: Keep. Yeah. Gosh.

JAN: I didn't practice as much of the um, being surrounded by a family whose, um, who I can just take for granted and, and, and act out and misbehave, which I certainly did with my mom. But if I just think about the hours per day I spent as a child, a lot of it was in other people's homes

JEFF: So that existed in our home that we, we had unconditional love in our home. We have unconditional love in our home. Nobody. I don't. I hope. Oh my gosh, I pray that we never fostered any sort of environment where anyone, whether it be our kids to our child, a parent or husband or wife, felt felt like they had to jump through any sort of hoop or perform a certain way

or behave to a certain standard to quote unquote earn love. That's that. That's what we had. But Janielle I'll say I don't. I don't necessarily believe that what we have is normal. Okay

JAN: Tell me more about that.

JEFF: No, I'm just, I'm, I'm. I want to affirm you and not make you think that, oh, I missed out on something everybody else has. I know a lot of families who are living in that performance based home.

JAN: Yeah

JEFF: Kids that have dads and they live in a performance based relationship. Husbands and wives living performance, it's, it's a shame. It's not right. I don't think. and it's, it's not rare. And um, I'll talk to you like I talk to my daughter when she's ever gone through a breakup, you know, I say all the cliché things oh he wasn't worth your time. He what? He didn't deserve you. I believe that's true. I happen to believe that's true. I would say that I am, um, I don't believe that everything in life happens randomly.

JAN: Sure

JEFF: Okay. I believe that there are reasons things unfold the way they do and um, it hurts and it's valid what you're feeling, but there's something better. And it may be that what this better world is you find in a guy some day and being a wonderful wife and companion, maybe even a mom maybe who knows, or it may be that you are the lone wolf, that you've always sort of visualized that you're going to be a strong, beautiful single woman and artist who's gonna conquer and, and rise. And so it could be either one of those things. But, I guess what I'm trying to say is don't feel like there's one right way or wrong way, or that there's some idealistic thing that you're going to get some day that looks exactly like this because life rarely unfolds that way. God has a purpose for you and it's going to be, um, it's going to be for your good because he loves you unconditionally. And um there and, and there are people in your life that love you unconditionally. Carson loves you unconditionally. I love you unconditionally. Devin loves you unconditionally. You can't run us off. You know, your life could go off the rails tomorrow. You've got people in your life that are going to be there for you. And it just hasn't manifested in your life as in the form of a dad or in the form of a husband or significant other yet maybe, but that's not a reflection on your ability to receive love. Okay? Your ability to receive love has nothing to do with another person's love for you. Okay? Because there again, you're thinking performance.

JAN: How's so?

JEFF: I didn't. I wasn't raised in a family where I knew how to receive love from a man and therefore I've got to somehow learn how to do that in order to have a successful relationship. For you, for you to think that way is you're going down the path of performance.

JAN: Yeah

JEFF: I've got to learn how to receive his love, something I didn't have when I was growing up, and so therefore I can therefore earn his love by learning how to receive his love. You can't do that. Just be who you are and someone will love you, does love you and will love you unconditionally. And it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what you. What you--you don't need a skill set to receive love.

JAN: I do think you have to. Receiving love is still love in action though. You know, it's still a thing. A thing you have to do is what I um. Yeah, it still feels like a verb. Receiving still feels like a verb.

JEFF: Yeah.

JAN: Maybe receiving. Just like you were saying about giving love, maybe receiving love is also a choice. I choose to receive this love it. I'm, you know, Carson can send all the unconditional love my way that she wants and I think I still have the choice whether I receive it or not.

JEFF: That's true. But it does not mean if, if her love is truly unconditional, your ability to receive it does not matter.

JAN: Yeah, sure, sure. It's unconditional love is unwavering and I, I've definitely experienced that.

[music]

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

[AD BREAK 3]

[music]

JEFF: When I first heard, and I didn't get all the story until today, but when I first heard sort of the broad strokes around it, it was very, very easy and very typical Jeff McCain to think, to paint him as the bad guy character. And that's not true. I don't know what the truth is, but they're, that's not true.

JAN: And that's what's been so hard because anyone that's in my life loves me obviously, or you know loves me unconditionally. And so they can't fathom how my father couldn't do that for me. It's so easy for people who love me to say like, yeah, you had a deadbeat son of a bitch of a dad. And like, how dare he miss out on the experience that is you because we love you.

JEFF: Right.

JAN: And so that's what's useful about generating this new, this new project, this, this Untitled Dad Project has been forging this middle path where people can be wrong and still be a person.

JEFF: Yeah, it's true.

JAN: It's really increased my empathy and um, has felt really productive.

JEFF: You can, two things, can be true and there are more than one. It's always more nuanced than just black and white.

JAN: It is. And it's, yeah, it always is and I

JEFF: Because he could have been a very good guy he made a very dumb decision and didn't know how to get. Get it back.

JAN: Yeah, yeah.

JEFF: We've thrown around this word unconditional love and you don't ever earn that. It's not unconditional love if you have to earn it.

JAN: Yeah.

JEFF: I keep coming back to that because it in the context of what you just said about the decision he made and you know, the man that he was, sometimes people just don't know how. Life is hard. I want to quit talking about somebody I don't know. All I know is, is this life is really, really hard. And, and, um, I just, I've got so much admiration for what you're doing for, for what you and Carson are doing here because um, those problems, those journeys, most

people never want to face. They just avoid it. You're not avoiding it Janielle, I have so much admiration for you. In that way.

JAN: Thank you. I appreciate that. Thank you for being willing to go on record as like, as a good dad. I know that was hard for you to sort of-

JEFF: Yes I'm great, I'm so great I'm such a great person. I'm so awesome.

JAN: I know that makes you feel sort of. We've kind of trapped you in a corner of a, against your sort of desire to be humble about your mistakes. And, and I appreciate you gamely walking into this with us. I'm um, I'm really grateful for your perspective.

JEFF: You're awesome. You're awesome. Thanks.

JAN: I'm really glad that you, uh, you had this kind of dragon. You know?

CARSON: Me too. I'm very grateful.

[music]

CARSON: Thank you all for listening to this minisode. Thank you to my dad, Jeff McCain. If someone lined up all the dads in the universe and told me I could pick whichever one I want, I'd pick you every time. Next week is Chapter Six, Character Development. It's a big episode where Janielle is finally ready to talk to one of her dad's sailing buddies. And to hear some of what he might have been like if he would have chosen to be a dad.

Untitled Dad Project is created by Janielle Kasnter. The production team is me, Carson McCain, Kelly Kolff, Lauren Floyd, Evan Arnett, and Will Short. Our Executive Producers are Keith Reynolds and Alia Tavakolian. Special thanks this episode to my dog, Bella, for not barking during that interview. And if you re-listen you can definitely hear her toes clicking on the floor. We'll see you next week.