

The Tim Smal Show – 8 June 2020 transcript

Kristin Meekhof, a resilience expert, talks about her book A Widow's Guide To Healing.

Tim Smal (host): Hi everyone and welcome to the show. My name is Tim Smal. Thanks for joining me today. My guest on the show today is Kristin Meekhof. She is a resilience and gratitude expert. She's a speaker, writer and author. She co-authored the book "A Widow's Guide To Healing" with James Windell. So Kristin, welcome to the show.

Kristin Meekhof (guest): Thank you so very much Tim, it's an honour to be here.

Tim: Well Kristin, you certainly have an interest in how people deal with adversity. So would you mind just telling the listeners a little bit about your own life story, to kick off the show today?

Kristin: Sure, well, let's start – I can go all the way back to 1974. I don't know my birthday and I'm probably one of the few of the people that you may have had as podcasts guests that don't know their birthday. But I was born in South Korea and I was orphaned and so there wasn't a birth date assigned to me. And I was adopted by my parents James and Nancy in the United States in June. And so I came about four months later to the United States. And then in '78, I became a naturalized citizen of the United States of America. And unfortunately, in '79, my father died – he was 30, from cancer.

And so that changed everything for me, really. I moved in with my mother (it was just her and I) to Grand Rapids, Michigan of all places – that's where her family was and my father's family. And I was very, very fortunate from there to be able to attend Kalamazoo College and then graduate school at the University of Michigan. And I then went on to write the book, as you mentioned, "A Widow's Guide To Healing." So that's about me in a nutshell, thank you for having me.

Tim: Thanks for sharing your story, Kristin. Now, this book that you authored has been a big part of your life journey and I would love it if you could tell the listeners a little bit more about the book and of course, why you wrote it.

Kristin: Unfortunately in 2007 my husband died from adrenal cancer. I spent three years after, reading everything I could about grief and loss. And I couldn't find a book, really, that had the narratives of women – they would mention loss here and there, but it didn't really capture those narratives that I was looking for of how women not only survived, but how they coped with their loss and how they were able to heal.

And I remember reading, shortly after my husband died, something from C.S. Lewis that said "We read to know that we're less alone." And I couldn't agree more with that quote. And I thought "If I can begin to learn from other women – I didn't care about their background, where they lived, the cause of death, their age, education, etc. – I thought it would be helpful for other women who might be going through something similar, as far as learning to heal after loss."

And so I spent three to four years interviewing as many widows as I could, to put their stories together. I travelled all over the globe: I went to Kenya – Nairobi specifically, a slum called Kibera, where widows live on less than \$1 a day. I went to the UK. I went all over the United States – to the backwoods of Montana to Boston, Massachusetts to interview a widow whose husband died on 9/11, to women who live in my hometown Michigan. And

just really learned how to capture their stories and hopefully help others, give them a sense of resilience when they read the book.

And there's also practical advice in the book. So one doesn't have to read every single chapter like a typical book, you can go right to whatever chapter that you're wanting to know about – whether it's “solo parenting” or “finances” or “how to cope everyday in the very beginning” – there's something for everyone in it.

Tim: Yeah and I love the way that the book has been described. So on amazon.com (where you can buy the book) it's described as: “An inspiring, accessible and empowering guide for how to navigate the unique grief and challenges of widowhood and create a hopeful future.” So a really lovely description.

Now with your travels around the world, do you have some stories that you could share with the listeners about widows that you met and their stories that really impacted you?

Kristin: Sure. I think one of the most memorable conversations I had, I spent three days specifically with a widow who lives in the slum, as I said called Kibera – it's in Kenya. And the UN actually has deemed it “one of the most dangerous places for women and young children to live” because of the lack of running water, the lack of electricity, the violence and other things that make it very unsafe for women and children to live there.

And yet this woman that I spent about 3 days with, she really exemplified grace. And I held her baby for her as she did some other things during the day and she was always so, so gracious and grateful to me. She always said “thank you” and really exemplified true, true beauty.

And I've never actually met anyone like her – I've met hundreds and hundreds of women, but no one as special as her and as brave and courageous as her. And her story has stuck with me. She gave me a bracelet, actually, that she made that I wear from time to time and I keep near me – it just reminds me of her and my time in Kenya. And so that's really a story that's always resonated with me and really has motivated me to continue when things get tough.

Tim: And I think it's really commendable that you had the opportunity to travel around the world and meet with different women in order to write your book. And subsequently you actually had the opportunity, a few years ago, to appear at the United Nations. Could you tell us more about that experience?

Kristin: Yeah, so I've been there three times, I think – yeah, three times. So I was invited actually by Lord Loomba (Rajinder Paul Loomba) the first time. He's from India and he lives primarily in the UK. His mother was a widow very early on in his childhood. And he noticed how widows were treated in India and that she was no longer allowed to wear the bindi, she couldn't wear bright coloured clothing – she wasn't even allowed at his wedding because widows are viewed as a curse to a new couple. And so he has made it his life's work actually to help and empower widows at an economic level and a social level. And he occasionally goes to the UN as an ambassador.

And so I had the great pleasure and honour of, not only meeting him before I went to Africa, but then again in New York City at the UN Headquarters and I was able to introduce him as a speaker – it was the privilege of a lifetime. I was also there because I wrote a chapter in a book: the “Live Happy” book (Ten Practices for Choosing Joy) about gratitude.

Many other people are in it: Ariana Huffington, Alanis Morissette, Jason Mraz, some other notable writers and then myself. And that book “Live Happy” was actually introduced at the UN bookstore for World Happiness Day. So I was introduced as an author or a contributor to that book – I believe it's still there. And when I go to the UN, it's for the conference on the status of women. I go as a voice to help to elevate and to learn about women empowerment and how to help them throughout the globe and what they're doing and on a microfinance level as well.

Tim: Ah, sounds like a really incredible experience. And thanks for telling us about the “Live Happy” book – I'm certainly not surprised at all to hear that Jason Mraz was featured in that book... he's a very cheerful chap!

Kristin: It's interesting, you know – when I wrote the chapter, I didn't know who was going to be in it. So when I got the book, I was really surprised that my piece was included. So it's a huge honour.

Tim: Yeah and speaking of surprises, I guess if we look back on your life: you graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Kalamazoo College, with a major in psychology. and then you went on to complete your Clinical Masters in Social Work at the University of Michigan. So you've become a licensed social worker, but I imagine back in those days you probably weren't thinking about being an author. Has that been a bit of a surprise to you – what has your journey been like, in essentially moving from your studies through to the work you're doing today?

Kristin: Yes, it's a huge surprise. Never in a million years did I think I'd be speaking with you. And I know that when we first talked, I asked how you found me and it was because you saw me on CNN – I was on CNN speaking about resilience. So the path that I chose is something that I never guessed in a million years. And I look back at it and I say “even though I had a master's degree in social work, really nothing prepared me for the loss of my husband.” I was 33 at the time in 2007. And it was only because I have always believed that the narratives and learning from other narratives of women can change the trajectory of one's life and in particular, one's healing after loss – regardless of what the loss is. And that's why I decided to write the book. But never, never did I think I would be speaking about a book I wrote.

Tim: Well, speaking about loss, it's certainly an interesting time at the moment in the world with the coronavirus and everything surrounding that. People are certainly experiencing loss in a variety of different forms. Now, you've been speaking about healing and that healing is possible – can you talk about resilience and how that can contribute to healing during difficult times?

Kristin: So I think that resilience is really something that one has to look at in small steps. Sometimes it's difficult to take a big leap towards one's healing after your life has been hit by a loss – whether it's an economic loss, an emotional loss, or a death, or a relationship loss, or a career loss, whatever it is – that there's a point at which it is possible to begin to start to take small steps to rebuild one's life. It doesn't have to be a big leap and that's part of just taking that initial first step, really, is part of healing and part of resilience.

And so when I do individual coaching with clients about resilience – and it doesn't have to be necessarily, the loss of a spouse – but nearly everyone I know has experienced some type of loss. And I work to help them to understand that small steps really do add up to significant changes later on that can help to put them on the road of healing and also to

rebuild and restart and start a new life.

And I think in the time of COVID-19, people are experiencing loss on a level like nothing else has ever happened before. And it's very scary and fearful. And it's okay to ask for help, to ask for guidance.

Tim: So would you say that developing skills like staying positive, having a gratitude journal or even a gratitude buddy – these are skills that one can practice to essentially experience healing and build resilience?

Kristin: Yes. You know, I talked about getting “a gratitude buddy” on CNN and I got some weird comments after that – I mean, not on the show directly, but I mean, after the segment aired. And what it is: it's nice to have a time in which somebody checks in with you and sometimes just shifting your focus to something that's going well, is a way to see your day in your life through a different lens. And that small micro shift in changing one's perspective can make all the difference.

And so “a gratitude buddy” really – you know, is someone to share things with. It's someone that you sharing things that are in common with, because you both want to have a positive outlook. And not everybody has a good day all the time – that's not what it's about. But it's really – especially now – nice to remember that some things do go well and there are some things that are positive to take note of.

And it's very simple things: this morning I went for a morning run and that was something that I'm very grateful for, you know – the sun is out here and it was peaceful. So you know, it doesn't have to be huge accomplishments to make it on to your gratitude list.

Tim: Yeah and I guess every little bit counts, right? If you're spending time with friends (in terms of social support), if you're finding a way to be creative, to express yourself, perhaps you're learning how to meditate or speak to yourself with compassion... as you build all these skills, you're essentially growing your mind to be stronger and more resilient, right?

Kristin: Yes and sometimes, you know, it's very surprising because it's not until we look back later that we realise how those small steps added up. So meditation is very powerful: we know from scientific studies that the minds of – or the brains of those who meditate, the grey matter looks different. And my dear friend, Dr. Deepak Chopra, has studied this extensively, as have others. It's well-documented that meditation really is a portal to healing and also to happiness.

Tim: Yeah, meditation is definitely one of those important skills. And everybody can practice it in slightly different ways. Because as long as you are ultimately, stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system and you're slowing your body down and you're being present in the moment with whatever it is that you're doing – whether you're sitting outside or perhaps even just listening to some music... whatever you find relaxing – it's doing a lot of good work for your body. It's like you're teaching your body to be present-focused and to really be grateful ultimately, for the life that you have.

Kristin: Absolutely. And everybody has a different way of doing it. And I think that, you know, find what works for you and continue to look for that, if the first time that you tried something didn't work. There's various ways people meditate – various apps, for example, that one can use and you don't even need one. You know, I started and I didn't have an app, I didn't have a specific place in mind I was gonna do it – I just started in my living

room one morning. And it is something that I started before the book came out and it's really changed the way that I've been able to experience things.

Tim: Yeah, I like the way that you put that. And if any of the listeners are wanting to reach out to you and find out more about your story, of course, they can visit your website at kristinmeekhof.com – but I wanted to recommend a video to them which is your talk that you gave at Rochester Hills public library and that's on YouTube. It's a 45-minute talk and you do dive quite deep into a lot of information around the topic that we're talking on. What was the purpose of that talk, specifically – I'm just trying to get some context?

Kristin: So, that in Rochester, Michigan, it is a situation that I was invited to because widows wanted to learn from me about ways to heal. So the audience were primarily widows and what really struck me about that – I offered tips for healing – is that, I believe the camera was off at this point during the Q&A... I can't remember because I've done so many things since then.

But I remember afterwards, a gentleman walked up to me and his wife was several feet behind her and he said "I wanted to bring my wife here, because I knew that I'm going to die before her and I wanted her to know how to heal afterwards." I'll always remember that because it really was so bittersweet that moment, that he was offering her – my book and this talk that I was doing, as a way to help her beyond the time that she would have with him. And so that's really something that I've taken with me.

I take something with me from every single thing that I've done – and often something very unexpected, you know, something that you don't necessarily think is going to happen to you or something that someone is gonna say and that's the one thing I remember from that talk.

Tim: Wow, well thanks for sharing that story – that's really amazing. I'm sure you've done a lot of interviews over the years and so you've spoken about the topic a lot. But I suppose as time goes by, you certainly are probably gaining new insights or even learning new lessons perhaps, for a new book that you might be writing in the future... I'm not sure. But at this point in time, do you perhaps have any recent insights or takeaways for the listeners that you've been thinking about in recent times?

Kristin: I think one of the takeaways that I have is that – well, certainly, nobody predicted a pandemic – but I think one of the takeaways is that: healing after any loss, whether it's a health issue, or a financial issue, a relationship issue, a personal issue that crossed a boundary for you... that it is possible.

And I think that that's a really important message now because lots of people are very fearful – they don't know what the next steps are, they don't know if they can rebuild their life, they don't see that hope for their lifestyle to continue the way it once was before COVID. And so because of that big change that affected at all of us, I think that it's important, now more than ever, to express the message that healing is possible.

Tim: Wow, thanks for sharing – that's really helpful. And you certainly have a number of really useful resources on your website, including lovely articles that the listeners can get hold of. So once again you're welcome to visit Kristin's website at kristinmeekhof.com

Kristin, I thank you so much for joining us today. I hope the next time that you visit Africa that you will give South Africa a visit.

Kristin: I will. I really thank you for this opportunity – it's beyond anything that I thought would ever happen, that I would be speaking with you. And thank you for finding me.

Tim: Yeah, thanks so much Kristin. Have a lovely day and I look forward to actually reading your book, because I haven't had a chance to read it yet. But I'll certainly follow all of your activities online and I encourage the listeners to do so too.

Kristin: Thank you so much, I really appreciate this Tim. My best to you and your family.