

Real Stories MKE Season 1 Episode 6 | Transcript

Kim Shine

Welcome to Real Stories MKE, brought to you as part of Ex Fabula's work to connect Milwaukee through real stories. I'm Kim Shine.

Joel Dresang

And I'm Joel Dresang. Ex Fabula believes that everyone has personal stories worth sharing. We host storytelling workshops, where community members can build their storytelling skills and their confidence. And we also host StorySlams, where true stories are shared on stage. Today, we're bringing you three of those powerful stories.

Kim Shine

Yeah, we're getting a little bit more serious this time. But these are some really good stories. Our theme this episode is Death. Depending on your background, it may be something you don't talk about much. Or you may have cultural traditions related to death, like Dia de los Muertos, or sitting Shiva. Joel, do you have any stories or connections about death?

Joel Dresang

You know, growing up, I didn't have much experience of losing anybody who was close to me, somebody I knew who knew me. But since I've had kids, um, I've lost both of my parents and three brothers. So my children have had that experience. And and you know, and I didn't. And after the last funeral, we had a long car ride, which is a captive audience for a parent, you know, so, so I decided to start a conversation and just talk about death and dying. And I offered a few of my observations and and, um, invited others to talk about it. And, and it wasn't so much what we said. But I wanted to establish that it was something that we should talk about, and that we should feel comfortable talking about it and that the conversation wasn't over when the car stopped.

Kim Shine

And how old were your kids when you had this conversation?

Joel Dresang

Adults. Or pretty near adults, uh teenage and above so.

Kim Shine

Did they feel weird, or did they come around?

Joel Dresang

You'd have to ask them. They probably always feel weird when I'm talking. But um, no, no, I remember that we had some some good conversation.

Kim Shine

Not bad, not bad. Well, I have actually dealt with a lot of death in my life. So this episode, I don't necessarily want to call it my favorite. But so far, I think this is probably the one, outside of the driving episode, that I have, that I feel most connected to. I don't necessarily want to go into details about all the deaths, but I have experienced death since I was, um, 11 years old, 10 or 11 years old. That was my first experience with it. And it's been kind of a consistent thing in my life. So talking about it is very, very important. And I'm glad you did that with your kids.

Joel Dresang
Thanks.

Kim Shine
Mhm! So our first story, let's just get into it. It's a short one. It's from PJ Carter. He shared this story as part of a partnership with Waukesha Reads in the fall of 2016, with workshops and then a StorySlam with a theme 'Loss of Innocence'. Here's PJ.

PJ Carter
So to recap, actually, uh, when I was in kindergarten, I had to ask my parents why I only had one set of grandparents because um, on Grandparents Day at my elementary school, you know, other people would have to like, have all four or switch off. And it was confusing to me like somebody would have grandpa—Grandma Carol and Grandma Smith. And I was like, 'What do you mean?' And because I only had a grandma and a grandpa. And um, so my mom had to explain to me that her parents had died when she was young, when she was um, about five and about 14. And um, luckily for her, she was, ah, the seventh child of eight and her older siblings were adults and able to take care of the younger ones. Um, but I thought about that a lot as a kid because you know, it's, um, a pretty easy logical jump from there to realize that your own parents are mortal and, you know, can die and disappear. And um, so that was something that I kind of framed things through for a long time. And ah, and it also made it all the harder when my grandmother died when I was in high school because um, that whittled me way, a way down to one grandparent. And to see my dad go through the loss of his parent um, was really, uh, quite an experience after you know, thinking about how my mom must have felt all that time to then see my dad going through it. And so I'm lucky and I still have both my parents but ah, it's easy to see how, um, how m-m, how many people must feel when they don't have both parents.

Kim Shine
So we caught up with PJ after he told his story for an update. And he reports that his deceased grandparents now have 19 great grandchildren with two more on the way. I mean, I guess that's, you know, life and death is always connected in some kind of way, you know?

Joel Dresang
That's right. Yeah. So, you know, I think I missed out on not knowing my grandparents, they decided they didn't wait for me. They, they, they all died before I was born. Um, but had I experienced more of that natural, you know, change of life of, of, you know, death and dying when I was younger, that might have made me feel different, or I might have matured

differently. I don't know. But, but I remember as a very little child, when old people would come walking through our neighborhood, I would ask them if they would be my grandparents.

Kim Shine
Awh!

Joel Dresang
Yeah, of course, they said yes, because I was adorable. But I don't think my parents ever knew that I did that. But...

Kim Shine
Really. Wow.

Joel Dresang
Yeah. Our next story comes from Carol Davis. She shared this story at the Wisconsin Black Historical Society and Museum, where we held a 'Tell your Family Story' workshop, and then a StorySlam in spring 2019. Here's Carol.

Carol Davis
First, I'm gonna say, hey! It is such an honor to be here tonight. You know, with being a breast cancer survivor, I'm just thankful to be here. I was thinking about all the stories that I listened to today. I was that child, I come from a family of four children, me being the oldest. And I thought about all the events that's been going on in the world. Of all the four of us siblings. I have a sister that was in the building of 9/11 when they blew up the Trade Center. I'm a stage four breast cancer survivor: 15 years and counting. My baby brother is alive. I'm glad he's still living because he had a heart, a hole in his heart, and he had to have a surgery. And my sister, um, has, um, diabetes, but she's still here living. And I thought about when I was coming up. I was a sickly child that spent all my life in the hospitals. And I thought about how I had to be the strong one. I thought about how while I was going, as I was coming up, we lost 10 family members within a six months span, and my mother and father was in that group. So all of us cousins that live here in Milwaukee, all of our parents are gone. But because we came from a strong background, and you know how people say, I'm a preacher's kid? I'm a PK. I said, Well, I'm a PGK, I'm a preacher's grand kid, you know? So we have a lot of faith in our family. And I thought about how, um, me and my sisters were pray for my mother. She was a cancer—She was going through cancer and we kept praying for her. And finally, my sister said that she walked up to her and told no, she told my sister, "Would y'all stop praying for me because y'all done kept me five years longer than I want to be." So we stopped praying for her. She wrote a list down the day that she was going to pass away. She wrote that morning, she wrote a list down for my dad. She said, "This is what I want you to do." She laid down and went to sleep. And I said, um, because you—when you have that strong faith, you know that God can bring you through so many things. We go to our family reunions. And I want to just tell you a funny story right quick about my mom, about me and my mom. I was in grade school. And I don't know why people want to pick on the—I was that person that people just wanted to fight. So me and this girl get in a fight and we just duking it out. And I'm just duking, I'm not realizing that she backing up to

her house, and I'm just duking it out with her. Going to her, I'm in her house fighting her. Her mom comes out of the kitchen, hits me in the mouth, and I said, ooh, you gon' get it. I'm running on home. She's said "Oh!" Little kids is tellin' her later: her momma gonna get you. Her momma gonna get you. This woman is six foot something and my mom's five foot two. My mom comes running up there. She's fighting this lady. And I got so tickled because my mom was climbing this lady like a tree. And I turn around and look at my dad, he just stand in the corner like this. I said, I just wanted to share that little laughter. Because when you went through so many things in life, and you come from a family that knows how to pray, and to believe that you can, because the reason I found out that I had cancer, because my husband woke up one day and said, I had a dream you had cancer, you should go to the doctor. And I said, I'm not going and I went and come to find out of a stage four breast cancer. And my breast started bleeding in the following week. But I'm here to tell y'all that I know that from...I said dreams do—some dreams to be, um, that you should listen to. But you should always know that if you keep the faith and know that you can make it, God will bring us through it all. Amen.

Joel Dresang

We checked in with Carol and we're thrilled to hear that she is still cancer free.

Kim Shine

Oh yay, that is good to hear! I also loved in her story how, um, she said that her family really relies on their faith to kind of get through and stay positive. And I know not everybody does that. And that's completely fine. But it's—it was a positivity aspect of it for me. Yes. However you stay positive can help you get through stuff, even if you succumb to whatever you have, staying positive.

Joel Dresang

And it's important to have people rally around you too.

Kim Shine

So that's good. Kudos to her. Shall we get to some Ultra shorts?

Joel Dresang

Sure. UltraShorts are little stories that people write on slips of paper at our events. And they're a way to get their voices in to the StorySlam. And, um, we've got some examples of the theme Death from some of those UltraShorts. I'll start, if you don't mind.

Kim Shine

No, go right ahead.

Joel Dresang

Okay, thank you. This is from anonymous. After our great grandmother died, my younger sister was having a really hard time coming to terms with what death meant. I decided to take it upon myself to explain it to her. One winter, I called her outside. As she exited the house, I did a

dramatic fall into the snowbank and lay there, unmoving for five minutes. When I stood up, I told her death is like that, but you don't get up.

Kim Shine

Wow. Our next one is from Kate. Kate says five years after my dad died, my mom was in her last days, in and out of consciousness. Suddenly her eyes flew open wide, gaze fixed ahead. And she said with urgency "Wait up, bud! I'm coming." Two days later, his invisible hand helped her to the other side. Knowing that they are together brings me deep peace. Wow. You know, it's interesting when people say that we-we never know what happens when you die. But people who I guess have come back, they say, Oh, I've seen this or this experienced experience happened to me. And I always wonder, you know what, what happens in those final moments? Because, of course, we will never know until it happens. But it could be just like Kate's mom, you know, she-she saw her her husband or whatever she saw. Just woke her up. And she's like, Yeah, yeah, I'm coming.

Joel Dresang

I think that's important for a lot of people in their beliefs to help them through the process of dying because it gives them something to look forward to. To be with a beloved who's departed or a pet even.

Kim Shine

Yeah.

Joel Dresang

Right? Um, so I've been listening to some CDs that were made 20 years ago, okay. One of my nephews interviewed my mom and dad, like, hours and hours of interviews. And I was really surprised because the other day I was listening, and my dad, who grew up Catholic and was pretty devout. Um, he talked about his thoughts of afterlife. And he didn't really think much of that concept of, of being together with other people. And it was interesting, because he was almost like putting it into a spatial thing. Like, where are you going to be putting everybody? Right?

Kim Shine

Right, right

Joel Dresang

And doesn't God have more important things to do than arranging these reunions? Um, and, and, but he also when he was explaining this, he said that he didn't want it-his opinions to differ with my mother's beliefs. And my mother believed that yes, there is a place. Yes, in fact, my my dad preceded my mom and death by, I don't know, six and a half, seven years. And um, the whole...that whole time my mom was expecting that after she died, they would be together again.

Kim Shine

Wow. Well, I hope that that's what happened, you know, but...

Joel Dresang

Yes.

Kim Shine

Maybe, maybe you know, you'll find out

Joel Dresang

Maybe?

Kim Shine

I don't know, you said something about your recording and, and and whatnot. My grandmother, my mom's mom, before she passed on. And I don't know the timeline. I don't remember the timeline, but she started recording herself. And I also asked her, I was able to visit and ask her questions and get those on tape. And it's just great to have that because once these people are gone, you know, all the questions you've had, if they care to answer them if they're able to answer them, you know, that's all you have. So it was it was awesome to just sit with her for a minute and you know anything was on the table.

Joel Dresang

I'm glad you did that. I'm grateful to my nephew and his wife for doing that with my parents.

Kim Shine

Yeah. Awesome. Our final story is from Michael Hyder. He got on stage back in April 2012 at a public slam with the theme 'Better Left Unsaid'.

Michael Hyder

Ah, I don't know what is this about this theme that tends towards, ah, melancholy stories about fathers. But that's what I have. Um, I am going to reverse the theme a little bit and talk about something that, ah, was unsaid for too long. And then ultimately was said. Um, number of years ago, it's about—yeah, over 25. Um, I had to give up my longtime lover, alcohol. Ah, my friend, my lover, my port in every storm. I was not happy. I was not happy about having to do this. Fact, I was usually woke up every morning and before my eyes were fully open, I was pissed about the whole project. And not too shortly, not too long after that happened, my father who had been sick for years with various cancers, um, decided that enough was enough, there was going to be no more surgery, there was going to be no more treatment. Um, he was going to accept the end. My father and I, and my mother and I struggled with and against each other, uh, for as long as I could remember. Um, it was one of the many things that was on my mind and process of letting go of my lover. And it came down to he was sick. He was finally—he was in a hospice. I talked about this before telling his story, he was in the hospice at St. Joe's. And for the first time in many years, I was present for what was going on in my family. So I spent a lot of time with him at the hospice. And I was angry at him. I was angry at my mother. I was angry at everything but especially those two for what I thought were many of the rotten

things that had happened to me and my wife. And I was up there with them. And we were talking and we spent some time together in this. He was in this hospice at St. Joe's and I left. I left for the day. And I walked out and I had to walk. This was in November and it was cold. I remember it was really cold. And I walked about, uh, I had to walk about three or four blocks to my house, ah, to my car. And while I was walking in I realized that I hadn't probably since I was a little kid told my father that I loved them. And I and I and I wouldn't. I was stubborn, I was mad. Somehow or another in the childish way I had of doing things then, I was going to punish him. And somehow in the walk to the car, I realized that that was just one of the stupidest god damn things I'd ever come up with in my life. And I got to my car and I turned around, and I walked back to the hospital. And I walked in to his room, bent over, kissed him on the cheek, which is something that I don't remember the last time that happened. And I told him how I loved him. And at that time, if I were to be entirely honest, I would have said that that's a lie. I didn't really believe it at the time. But for the first time, in a long time, I decided not to be the stubborn, willful son of a bitch that I had been for so long. And think about somebody else for a change, and that maybe he would like to hear that. And that, whether I thought it was true at the time or not, I needed to say it. And I did. So I was very glad. It's—I have a lot of other things in my life that are left unsaid, and at my age, they're going to stay that way. Uh, but I'm glad I said what I said at that time, because that's when that's when I started to grow up and become a man based on a lie. But it was the best lie ever told. Thanks.

Kim Shine

Now, though this story was almost 10 years ago that it was told, Michael continues trying to say the things that he used to leave unsaid. "My experience with my dad guides me to this day," he tells us.

Joel Dresang

That's so important.

Kim Shine

Yeah.

Joel Dresang

It's-it's a good, it's a good reminder. And thank him for telling that story, so that we are reminded.

Kim Shine

Yeah, it was so powerful, his story. Definitely one of the ones that will stick with me throughout the the ones that we've heard so far, because you you never know what's going to happen. And you also have to just not think of yourself all the time. Sometimes people need to hear good things.

Joel Dresang

That's right.

Kim Shine
And that's okay to say them.

Joel Dresang
And you know, and sometimes if you don't really think you mean it at the time, as in his case, he realized later that he meant it.

Kim Shine
Yeah. Awesome. So Joel, should we do some more UltraShorts?

Joel Dresang
Yes, let's. Here's an UltraShort from Arij It. In 1998, my father visited me for the first and last time from India. I filled his visit with events: travels to exotic locations, gustatory experiences, and social events. Two years later, he died. And when it gets down to the nitty gritty, all that remains is a memory of a hug he gave me when he left. That's nice. I'm glad he had that.

Kim Shine
Yes, very sweet. The things that you remember about people when they pass on, can be just like a hug in itself, you know.

Joel Dresang
And all of the care that he took to entertain and be with his dad when they were there, that one simple thing was what remained.

Kim Shine
Yeah.

Joel Dresang
Here's one from Maggie. I've now been alive longer without my father than the times he was alive as my father. He died on an icy cold day in January 1989 from lung cancer. Not a day goes by that I don't think about him, and I wish my boys could know him. Don't smoke, be a grandpa.

Kim Shine
Our next one is from anonymous. On February 14 2018, my life changed. My grandmother passed away. That broke me and changed my mind. I gave up on God because I could not understand why He gives us people to love and then takes them away. Why does He give us a heart to love people and then take people away and break the heart that He gave us? A few months later, I had to understand: with life, comes death. God bless you and me.

Joel Dresang
You know, Kim, I was really fortunate when my dad was in the hospital and really sick in near his last days. I was in the room when the doctor came in and explained to him, we can't help you. Anything that we would try to do to save your life would probably end it. So we're just going to take care of you and you know, keep you pain free. Yeah. And, and, and is that okay

with you? And I got to watch my dad as he processed that. And I want to think that it helped him to have me in the room, too, processing it. Um, but it was just a really beautiful thing for me to, to see him except this and to say, "Okay, I'm at peace with that."

Kim Shine

And you know, I think, I mean, that was, that was a hard thing for your dad to process. I can only imagine, you know what's going through his mind because there is nothing, you know, from what the doctor said, nothing that he could do. But how did you process that?

Joel Dresang

Um, I just, I just saw how courageous that was. How, even though you don't really have a choice in the matter, it's just sort of...and, and the fact that the doctor basically presented to him that way. To-to sort of say, Is this okay?

Kim Shine

Right. I think that also goes back to just the the more positive, higher level thinking. You hear something, like what the doctor said to your dad, and then there's really nothing you can do, but think about the now. And I think that 2020, 2021, just life in general has really taught me specifically to think about my actions and think about my process and think about the people who are in my life right now. And I don't always get this right! I do, I do still make mistakes, I do still cry about things, I do still, you know, do stuff and say, oh, man, why do I do that? Why do I think that. And I still think about the past, sometimes more than I should. But overall, I think at least like the last few years, I've really started to process death a little bit differently. And I've started to see the the good in it, you know, that life does move on. And you have to look at the lessons that you've got from these people. You have to look at the love that you got from these people, and use that to create a better life, not just for yourself. But for other people around you.

Joel Dresang

I think with with that sense of mortality, um, we can be more urgent about bringing meaning to our lives and the people around us.

Kim Shine

Right, right. Because our lives have meaning. And I think if more people thought that way, about themselves and just about life in general, not saying that people don't. But um, if that's something that you struggle with, you should know that, yeah, your life has meaning and there's love and there's, there's always a reason to continue on. If you're fortunate enough to have another day or another hour or whatever to do that. Our last one comes from Cynthia. Cynthia says: When my father was 55 years old, he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. It was terminal. He convalesced for 15 months. During that time, people came out of the woodwork to see him. I asked him before he died if he was angry at God and he said, No, you know, even to die, you have to be lucky. I had the opportunity to close circles with people I had not seen in years. I leave no stone unturned. That's a great way to think of it.

Joel Dresang

That's a great way to end.

Kim Shine

I agree. So that's all the time we have today for Real Stories MKE. Thank you so much for sticking with us on this topic that's a little bit deeper than we've done so far. Ah, don't worry, guys, though. We've been at this for more than 10 years. And there are more audio and video stories available at exfabula.org.

Joel Dresang

That's right. Our website lists upcoming storytelling workshops and StorySlams, and we hope you'll join us at an event and maybe even share a story. You can also connect with us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Kim Shine

Thank you to everyone who makes this program possible including Ex Fabula staff, the storytellers, and audio engineer Sam Woods.

Joel Dresang

Yay! We love you, Sam. For Real Stories MKE, I'm Joel Dresang.

Kim Shine

And I'm Kim Shine. Thank you so much for listening.

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