

# S1:E15 - a-widow-s-walk-the-journey-from-sudden-loss-to-last...

Tue, 12/1 12:39PM 1:03:00

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

realize, grief, loss, people, women, eric, divorce, friends, kids, mary ann, life, lose, widowhood, single mom, porch, years, journey, cry, kyle, experience

## SPEAKERS

Mary Ann Stropkay, Jennifer Malcolm

**J** Jennifer Malcolm 00:10  
Welcome to the Jennasis Speaks podcast, The Transformative Power of Women's Stories, a platform that empowers women storytelling to promote collective vulnerability, acceptance and healing. I am your host, Jennifer Malcolm, self made entrepreneur, women advocate and life balance expert. Welcome back to the next episode of Jennasis Speaks: The Transformative Power of Women's Stories, where every woman has a story and every story matters. I'm Jennifer Malcolm, your host With me today is my friend Mary Ann. Mary Ann and I met actually out in California about five or six years ago, we are on a similar journey and our paths uniquely crossed. Mary Annstrop key is on a journey that most women will encounter a walk up widowhood. On her journey. Mary Ann moved past her grief and loss, discovering her truths about widowhood and our own hidden strengths. She joins us today to share how she has traveled from what she has lost to what she has gained, as she has redefined her life. Welcome, Mary Ann. And thank you so much for sharing your story with us today.

**M** Mary Ann Stropkay 01:14  
Thanks, Jen. It's great to be here with you.



Jennifer Malcolm 01:16

So we're gonna dig into you have a very unique story. But you are young, you're beautiful, you are a mom. And but you have experienced something in an early age that most women haven't. And that was losing your husband several years ago, and honored that you have the courage to come here and just share a little bit of that journey of walking through that. And as you have continued to walk through that through the years of navigating teenagers, and career and family in a really unique way. So you can begin the story however you want.



Mary Ann Stropkay 01:52

Thanks, Jen. And it's great to be here. I'll tell you, I am not sure at different points. In this journey of mine. I've been more open and less open to talk a little. It's not linear. I mean, we all hear this. We know this about loss, whether you lose spouse, or you go through a divorce or you lose a child, whatever that specific loss may be even a job. It's very different for everybody. I found coming up now and five years, it'll be five years on September 27. This is an opportunity this conversation today to really maybe put a punctuation mark on what I would consider one of the most important liminal, but chapter like phases of my life. And it's hard to go through, it's hard to relive, but at the same time, I can't think of a better way to honor Eric, and honor the debt that he was to my kids.



Jennifer Malcolm 02:53

And it was interesting, because as my team prepped your interview last week, and you know, even the the questions and the script that we you know, kind of co-created together like my team's already in tears, like you have a very powerful story. And my team was moved from the beginning of just your strength, your fortitude, your loss, your openness to discuss it. And, like you're already transforming women on my team, and I can't wait to be able to release this to other women that have had loss of some sort and that grief of, of loss, unexpected loss. And that the there's camaraderie, there is a tribe that comes together. It's not a tribe you want to be a part of, but it's one that you know, you get put into and you walk that out so so five years ago, almost you want to talk about that day.



Mary Ann Stropkay 03:51

Sure do because I'll never forget it, that's for darn sure. It was a Sunday, much like the anniversary is this year, and my son and I who was 15 at the time, we were walking back from church, so the way that our particular church facilitated Sunday school was to have

the service before and then Sunday school is right after he and I came back my daughter stayed for Sunday school and my husband was running errands during the time. So just the way our schedule ran and nurture. You know, busy parents, right? Everybody's going a different direction because we're trying to accommodate all of these scouting schedule requirements. So here we are, and Kyle and I are walking we fortunately lived across the street from the church, walk up the driveway and it to picture my driveway to probably 150 feet back, walking. So we were chit chatting, and all of a sudden I see no joke on my back porch, my husband's feet. I thought, oh my god and in that moment I just started running. I broke out into a sprint right to the house because I can then start hearing my dog barking. Oh, and Kyle did not know what was going on at this point. So he kind of follows but he, he's not reacting, like I'm reacting because I'm like, I'm literally going into an ER or burning house, right? I have a really, I've always felt like I've had kind of an outsized cortisol reaction to events, right. Like, I don't know how to act normally. But I'm your gal at the event if there's something's burning down. Send me in, I don't know what I'm doing, but I'll do something.

**J** Jennifer Malcolm 05:35  
To rescue everyone and the burning house.

**M** Mary Ann Stropkay 05:37  
Right, right, I guess. So I go to the back and he is facedown. And I went into a sequence of unbelievable action. So the door was locked. The key was in the door. So he must collapsed right there. And I told my son who is I've never seen a face like this completely stricken. I said, Kyle, go get the home phone, and dial 911. Now, if we can go back five years and remember what it's like, you couldn't use your cell phone reliably yet for these purposes. goes in. He says, mom night 911. I guess the actual 911 talk, or kids notice at least Monday night. They don't really get how to even make a phone call, especially on a school phone.

**J** Jennifer Malcolm 06:30  
No, you just you just no touch your name. And it magically works.

**M** Mary Ann Stropkay 06:34  
I mean, it's it's a really different experience. I needed the help. Yes, there the dog doesn't remarkably run out the dog stays. And I thought, Okay, this is bad. So Kyle gets the EMS on the line. But he can't talk. He stops talking. So I grabbed the phone. And I tell them just

get down here and literally down the street. And I mean, they were like we're already on the way Mary Ann. And so he hangs up and I said, Kyle, I just need just need you to stand back for a second. And I get down on the ground, and somehow was able to turn Eric over. lips are already blue. And I thought, oh mother of god. I don't know if this is good. I started administering CPR which by the way, no matter what training you have, we're terrible at it. Right? You lay citizens. It's I thinking, oh my god, do I know how to breathe? Like, when do I do chest compressions? What's the sequencing? Doing it? Because I realized even if I can get his heart beating and get some air into his passageways, I might have a shot, right? No, all the signals are pointing to I mean, this guy's not moving. So this is grand total, by the way of being at church, because I happen to be Catholic. That's a 45 minute endeavor, right? Somewhere in that 45 minutes this happened. It's not like this is an hour plus situation, right? So I'm sensitive that I'm operating with potentially within a window, right and say, EMF shows up, they rush in, they tell me to get off because this is a tiny back porch. And they start doing their thing. And I think in this point, one of my neighbors could hear me screaming, I don't have real memory anymore. Sure. All of the emotions, and both Kyle and I crying and one of the neighbors ran over. And I asked him to go get my daughter. Because I didn't want dad to be carted. Like, I didn't want to scene him even though it was just could you could you create a word. But in my mind, at that moment, I was creating a worst scene if I didn't get my daughter to suffer. So they rush over, they must have explained the situation don't know. And in the meantime, the MS. person comes up to me says, Hey, I need you to know something I go, you don't need to tell me. And he said to me, I need you to just get in a car with your kids. And you're going to follow us. And we're going to go through a process for you. I said, and we can call it there I go. You don't need to call it take the pressure off yourself. You know, we're close enough to the hospital. And he goes, I appreciate that. So just give us a second. Get him in and your kids are going to see like

J

Jennifer Malcolm 09:36

wow, and I'm sure like I'm I have a 15 year old 18 year old 19 year old. I cannot imagine the complexity of seeing my husband on the ground and also trying to be a mom and protecting and navigating and directing and thinking like I don't want my daughter to come up this driveway when you know there's there's a lot of turmoil going on. So you're like, compartmentalizing as you're also trying to save your husband, Eric.

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 10:06

It's unbelievable. It's like the worst ER episode young. I'm dating myself now.



Jennifer Malcolm 10:12

I love er, that's such a great show.



Mary Ann Stropkay 10:14

That's a great show. But the point is, you're trying to imagine how bad is this at the moment, and it is that bad. So once we, my daughter came in, you know, I could hear her screaming, and it was the daddy, daddy, daddy. So it's 13 year old. So she's my young one and Neela. Didn't see, you know, his face, she saw kind of like the paramedics working yet, Eric off the porch. And at least she saw the moment and my neighbor to his credit, said, I'm going to drive you to gather my wife can come later. And we'll get you there. Right. Other neighbor on the other side, happens to be a firefighter, and he got a call from our local dispatcher. Hey, Terry, there's been something that went wrong at your neighbor's house, we're taking Eric into the hospital, you may want to get there. His wife left their dinner, show them why they made it faster than any of the family members. And then we went through the sequence at the hospital, which is just something everything from but here's the things you don't know, when you go in, you don't know that they're going to ask you to autopsy your spouse because he's too young, to just die of natural causes. Who's the one when he died? You don't realize that, you're gonna see the coroner that you just saw church have to do the autopsy. And he was literally eyeball to eyeball with you. You don't realize how hard it is to have to tell your mother that her son died. And you don't realize that people have to say goodbye. Because his wishes were to be cremated. Okay. And you have to step away from the body. So if you don't give the immediate family the moment, they won't have the moment. So we did all that. And I'm telling you looking back, you know, I certainly have post traumatic stress. Oh, I've had nightmares over it. But nothing was harder than making phone calls. And at some point, you know, a couple of my nearest and dearest friends stepped in and said, You're not doing that. We're doing that work and make the calls. Um, thank God, because I couldn't know. I mean, listen to me five years out. And energy, just think, really? Did I do that? And, yeah. So that was the night. And wow, you know, I had no idea how important that day would be for me how much it would be if you could pick a line in the sand or drop a pin. And that's how important that day is, in our lives.



Jennifer Malcolm 13:53

And I cannot imagine, I have no words to even try to relate. There's just the experience that you have and the loss that you had. So unexpectedly. I can't imagine that type of loss or pain. So thank you for your courage for today. For context for the audience, like Eric didn't have health problems. Eric wasn't like hey, you know, I might be a little not healthy red flags, I need to get my life better. Nothing else.

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 14:26

This was, you know, the first conversations were, you know, is this the Widowmaker you know, the drop dead of a heart attack, you know, it was a confluence of issues that you were not anything that they could tell, they couldn't really tell again, the day it was a respiratory or a heart related event. But you know, at some point, everything is both. What most people don't realize is when you die, you actually die either have respiratory related illness or related because one stops before the other. Right. So if they're inconclusive, and that's a whole nother thing. Let me tell you getting coroners report and it's, you don't realize what the coming weeks will be. And here's the joke. You know, bodies don't stay at hospitals. Most people don't realize, you know what happens after the big moment? Well, it's got it somewhere for its next step, and that cost money and it's painful, it's painful in every single way, you're going to start going through a sequence of decisions that are, you know, absolutely unbelievable. And you're making them and the moment to like a dumb moment. It's not like how well we planned, he knew he wanted to be cremated. But we didn't go further. I didn't ask them. Hey, do you like the wooden box? You know? Right, right.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 15:48

You're young. No, you're

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 15:51

right. And oh, by the way, I mean, how lucky were we, we had life insurance. And we didn't overdo it. Because again, when you're young, and you put a 30 year term on yourself, so you can you can figure out when we did this, um, you're not planning to lose someone you're planning if you do lose someone to cover some critical expenses. And then that's it, right? It's unbelievable. And most women, despite the fact that we all go through it, generally speaking sooner than our male counterparts woefully unprepared, right? So you got to have one dimension of your life, at least going your way. Having things pre plan doing that kind of stuff is, is super helpful, because the rest of it, let me assure you is no fun, and then settle down every rabbit hole you can ever, you know, imagine.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 16:52

I know, and I can't imagine like on a Sunday morning, you're going to church. And by the end of the day, you're making decisions on autopsies, family, you know, you know, funeral arrangements, cremation, all of that, like, in one day, like your life is completely different. That's right. So how did you shield or not shield your kids through this? I mean, obviously,

that's a tremendous loss. I can't imagine. No, my I've been divorced for 11 years now. But I can't imagine that, even at this age, and in my separation from my first husband, that type of loss, you know, at their ages. So how did you, you know, help either mom, as well as dealing with your own grief?

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 17:40

That's great question. Um, first and foremost, you know, one thing that we're very practiced at as moms is we put others needs before ours. It's probably the best antidote to grief. It's not the right one, by the way, but it's the best one. And when divorced or widowed, I think you've figured that out pretty quickly. If you put your kids first, it sidelines a lot of other things in your life. Oh, by necessity, and in a lot of ways, that's good. Because you can only boil one ocean at a time. I mean, you can't do everything, even though you're going to try. Gosh, how did I shield them? So you know, here's the truth of it. I probably didn't shield them, as much as other moms would have. You know, give you a few examples. The first thing that I said to them was, this is going to be a chapter in your life. It is not the book. Do not let this be the book. Wow. important chapter. One pivotal, watershed moment like, but certainly do not put it in the camp of this is my life. Wow, people do. And what happens as you get older, is your reference point continues to be your history versus, you know, your immediate and then your future. And there's no better way to go through that than if you have an opportunity through grief, as a younger person. I think you'd be astonished at how many people step forward that lost a mom or a dad that called me and said, I'm happy to talk to your kids. Because I still think of my dad or my mom every single day. And those stories are really helpful. Sure. The other thing I didn't do in shielding them. And you know, maybe this is a little bit of a debate. I went through everything. I put a wake in place, a funeral. We welcomed people to our house. through normal grieving processes, I made them buy new clothes for the wake, and the funeral. And all of the what are called traditions that are really part of most cultures are extraordinarily helpful. Oh my goodness gracious, I had no idea how important they would be. It gave my kids the opportunity to receive hugs. To receive people's grief, particularly of their friends, it opened at a level of conversation that children generally don't talk to each other about, but allows them to say, I'm sorry? Or do you want to come spend time with me? Or, you know, why don't you come with us on this trip, maybe this would have been something you would have liked with your dad. And these are short trips, these are not like that one cross country do this. But those are so important for kids, for me, but it gives them at a tender ages of 15 and 13. a roadmap for how to lean into grief, how to instead of running because that's our, everybody's instinct, it's mine, it's yours. It's just saying, I'm gonna stop. I'm gonna face it for the moment and see what happens. You can always run. Right? Right, but which can't do is once you run from it, it's harder to come back into it. Because the fear then is overwhelming. It's bigger than you are. It's bigger

than me incident itself.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 21:45

And I'm sure some even the day trips for your kids or experiences that they had with their friends. Allow them to still be a kid allows them to experience joy and life and fun, which is and and not that this isn't a transformational event in their life. And I love that you said it's a chapter, not a book, but still through the process of grief, that it is okay to smile is okay to have fun. It's okay to grieve through experiences to and learn how to live again.

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 22:18

Oh, that's a great point. And the other. The other critical component is it's only through their normal activities that use a parent can even understand how they're handling it. So the kids had cross country meets, they were both runners that the Saturday after we had Eric's funeral, so his funeral was on Friday, they both chose to run. And if you watch their individual races, they handled it totally differently. Kyle allowed the grief to fuel his anger. And so he ran powerfully. Neela is the 13 year old in the middle, glanced out in the audience. I saw the moment she wasn't looking at me. She swore she saw her dad and choked up, literally started to cry slowed down. And that was instructive, informative, humbling as a parent, because it's not a one size fits all, not even kids, which was helpful for me to realize, oh, wow, I guess I am going to grieve the way I'm gonna.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 23:29

And it goes to the point and I've talked about this on the podcast previously, you know, I have three kids. So you kind of think like, they're going to be the same privacy, same DNA respond the same and how uniquely different they are. And so even watching them in their grieving process, one fueled by anger, to finish one, you know, enable to finish the race because of, you know, tears and all that. But both are beautiful, and appropriate responses to grief and loss, and that they're doing it on their own journey and you allowing them to experience that is powerful.

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 24:06

Yeah, it's hard. I don't know how much I allowed it and how much it was just, you know, a lot of the stuff you don't know, because I was in my own fog, right. I had to do my job as a parent, certainly pay bills, get through it, but I was grieving. I didn't I am not sure I was even lucid at that point.



J

Jennifer Malcolm 24:30

No. And I want to go back. You said this about five minutes ago where you were talking about putting your kids first and that it may not be the right thing to do as you're going through loss through the death of a loved one, divorce, trauma. It may not be the right thing to do, but it's a functional thing to do. If I can focus in on getting my kids off to school, helping them with their homework, doing laundry. It gives us something to do versus just being consumed by our anger or grief. And I remember doing that, when I got divorced that, you know, being a single mom for the first time and, and the HA, this is not what I expected, the loneliness, the anger, the embarrassment, the shame, the all that, you know, feelings after a divorce that, you know you focus in on Well, let me just make a good meal, let's just play a board game, let's do something functional, which didn't necessarily serve my healing process. But it was a great way for me to cope through, you know that pain as well.

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 25:38

I think you said it even better than I did. I mean, that is so accurate. And what you realize is, most good therapists will tell you that if you are still functioning, you still don't need traditional therapy. It's really when you stop functioning, and you're allowing the emotions, whether it's grief, anger, frustration, the feeling of overwhelm. When that takes over, then you're in trouble. It's the movement, it's the action, it's the, it's the progress that allows you to set distance, everybody will tell you that grief, any kind of grief gets better with time. gets better, it doesn't go away. It's it is with you forever, but you need time. So the best we could time in between the event, and your eventual healing, whatever that looks like, is to have steps, concrete steps, dinner and board game.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 26:41

Exactly. So did you jump into grief counseling immediately? What was your steps coming out for you, your kids?

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 26:51

I'm a gal of action. So yeah, of course, you know, the first thing I did was, oh, we're gonna go to therapy, you know, we're gonna follow the Mary Ann 10 step program of how we're going to it didn't work, right, the first three sessions, which is what was available in my employer, which was terrific in support of me and the kids. But you know, they have a typical Employee Resource line. And so you know, most people don't even realize if you access that, if you're employed, you're able to go to three sessions, generally speaking. So

around there, they said, you know, the number of sessions that are on them, because typically, and very frustratingly, so many, many therapies are out of pocket, right? Because, you know, we still think that this is not real, this mental health, mental health things over here. It's like woowoo stuff. Right? Right. Come come to us when you have cancer, and you can't go further. But everything pretty much feels like in between is not for you. So when we availed ourselves to that, the therapist said to all of us, you're not ready. Wow, your continuing to do what you are supposed to do? Keep at it. When you start feeling like you can't, you know, that one shower, which let's pretend like we're not in COVID, right now, showering, brushing your teeth gaming up for life? in general. Right, right. There is a slippage in that. Only at that point. Do you engage everybody, currently, so I don't want to give a one size fits all, because that's not what it is. But unlike me, your are my stuffs, you know, this is not going to work. I can't force a therapy process where it's not appropriate, yet.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 28:43

So interesting. So you're saying like, maintain the path. Keep going. And when you see that dip, or feel that dip, or you feel something shifting in a negative manner is for you when Hey, this is a time to go see a therapist.

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 28:57

Yeah, and by the way, you know, it's also really good for being humble enough to ask for help, which I'm terrifically bad at. So if you really stretch that muscle, how on earth are you ever going to ask somebody, hey, I could really use some company or I'm having a difficult day or here's the other thing about being a single mom, he can you help me hang my draperies or I've got a problem. All the things that we weren't socialized to handle right out of the gate, right guess sandal.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 29:31

Right. Exactly. And it's one I have a few close friends that are in the process of going through divorce and, you know, it's it's ugly, and I have such compassion because I went through it and, and mine was not pretty, it was pretty antagonistic, and I learned a lot through it. But the things that you don't realize that you as me as a single mom needed help, because at that point, my son was eight you know, like being the head Christmas bins out of the attic and bringing them down like I was, you know, I think God, my dad lives close, but you know how to do certain things on the car and realize I didn't have medical insurance. So all those things that you navigate for the first time, as you're trying to raise kids, I'm sure we're the same with you of like, Alright, I need my drapes hung and I

need an extra set of, you know, hands or body to help the set. And sometimes it's the simple things that that were most frustrating to me, because I felt like I could do it. And I realized I couldn't without the help of someone else.

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 30:36

That's right, whether it's a constraint on your time, which is maybe the most important thing, you know, look, you're capable gal Jenn I am too, right. But there is a limit. You're too tired, or I haven't washed my hair in three days or, you know, whatever. The reason is, you have to honor that, that took probably three years for me to think, holy cow women, I can actually call a friend of mine who's been on me, you know, Mary Ann, what do you need? What do you need? Oh, no, no, I'm fine. I'm fine. Got it? Well, maybe not so fine.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 31:08

So how did you transition? Or maybe you didn't transition? Obviously, going from a married couple. Having neighbors friends, you know, colleagues that were, you know, knew of Mary Ann and Eric hung out with Mary Ann and Eric, did that impact the social life that you had your friends? Or did it kind of just keep going on as normal?

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 31:31

You may have noticed my phone is not ringing off. Yes, it completely impacted it. Oh, my God, I am I think I'm the biggest loser. That's going to be a podcast. He calls me I mean, a few of my really good friends. And I'll get to them in a second because I've got to honor those doubts, guys. Because they're so important to me. But you know, here's the difficult part, somebody died. Unlike divorce, which is always ignite did not realize this, I was naive, I thought it would be easy to hang out with divorced friends, and but they're treated differently. They're more welcomed, because it's immediately assumed that if you're divorced, we'll certainly want to get back together with somebody. Right? Regardless of what your journeys were, how agonistic or how painful your divorce was. There's a different bar that people allow for you socially. However, you're the widow and oh, my God, for my widow, we're friends even worse, because you're like, what? I don't know what to say to him. Does he cook? I mean, that's the first. It's unbelievable. So no, you know, in the beginning, they would call and people eventually, because they're so used to seeing people in pairs, right? we orient our social existence, it's really not being alone. And my personal growth and accepting myself as a single person has been really something. And I always considered myself really independent, and I got this, but boy, you don't got this when you're sitting alone on a Saturday night and think, Oh, my God, can I do this for the rest of my life? Right? And guess what? Apparently, in my five year journey, you can you

just believe you can? I won't lie, but that was not the answer you expected?

J Jennifer Malcolm 33:31

No, it wasn't. And I wouldn't make that I put you on my to call list.

M Mary Ann Stropkay 33:35

So thanks. I didn't realize I was I'm asking for friends.

J Jennifer Malcolm 33:41

Okay, we can all use more friends. No, sir. But that piece of I realized after my divorce, and I know we're talking about different types of loss. But after my divorce, I realized I had never really eating out in a nice restaurant by myself. I had never gone to the movies for myself. I had never done experienced some social things. And I forced myself to do those. And it was so awkward. I was like, This is everyone's looking at me is like the poor woman sitting over in the corner by you know, by myself. And then I realized that there's a lot of people that just go and grab coffee or grab a meal. They're traveling. There's lots of reasons why people eat by themselves. But I felt so isolated. And so judged by people who weren't even looking at me, probably, but it's those first experiences and I appreciate that you said that our society is built for couples that there's no, you know, to, you know, plus one's nose always that you know, who you bringing. And it's like, No, it's just me. Just me, right? And then people the worst person is they don't have to say to that.

M Mary Ann Stropkay 34:48

Oh, okay. You know, that's usually the best that you get. It's not it's, we're not there yet. And there's so much great writing on singlehood and release. How particularly women have embraced it. You know, it's a shame that we don't spend more time in the okayness of different statuses because it sure would help me. I'll tell you what, in my friends would tell you, oh, gosh, we don't judge you for you for being single. And of course not. I know that they don't I know that they love me. I know that they care about me. But their wishes and their hope for me. Is that out of out of that, right, may not be my wish and hope and check it because you're operating from frames of references that I don't sit in the same frame anymore. I'm outside of that frame.

J Jennifer Malcolm 35:37

No, that's powerful. Now, how did you navigate going back to you know, the weeks after

Eric's loss? You know, you're you're navigating you're trying you're you're realizing counseling is too soon for you? Did you just jump back into work? I mean, did you have to live life normally again? Like how did that transpire?

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 35:58

Wow. Yeah, I did. You know, I took the week that he died off. So he died on a Sunday. And the funeral was on Friday. And I was back to work the following Monday. Wow. That was me. Wow, that was an employer. I had terrific boss. My colleagues around me were amazing. In their support, my teams were amazing. It was me. Remember that action gal talking about that. That was the way of I needed to feel more and more. And guess that prepared me for what the struggle people have is normalcy, right? When I went through my loss, I had no footing, and workplaces and support that is just outside of your community, right? That you're not watching your kids grieve all the time. The look on your mom's face. Oh, my God, your mother in law, who is bereft because she lost a kid? You know, it's a welcome relief. Now, what I will tell you is I spent because I tracked the first two years of my grieving and crying, every commute into work, and every commute out in the commute is an hour long.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 37:29

Wow.

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 37:30

So I gave myself two hours of cry time. And it's not like I even gave myself permission I just had to, or the only release mechanism I had. That was my ability to process I am sure the people along the Cleveland shoreway were like, I did that woman bawl her eyes out. And they, you know, but I was too upset to even notice. And it didn't matter as long as I could drive, right? It allowed me to talk therapy myself, believe it or say to myself, I'm okay. I'm okay. today. I'm okay. I only cried really hard for 10 minutes, which is great. Considering what the beginning was like, like, good job Mary Ann job done within two years. Wow. years. And, you know, that might not be what it takes for other people. But it took it for me.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 38:33

And you gave her I love that you gave herself permission to do that, though. Or maybe you didn't get your permit self permission, but somehow subconsciously did to allow your emotions to flow. I my, my triggers are usually anger and tears. And so this past winter,

you know, I'm like, I need a healthy outlet when I'm mad and sad and angry. And so Chad went out and got me a punching bag. And so it's like one of those things like that outlet of moving this energy. And for you that two hours a day of moving this energy. I might swear in this car, I might curse in this car. I might, you know just sob in this car. But it's your time to feel and move those emotions through your body. And I think most people don't, they will push it down and stifle it. And that movement of energy, grief loss, anger, sadness, frustration, fear. You know, is a healthy way to in my opinion. I met a professional to you know, move that that energy forward.

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 39:37

Oh, I agree. Yeah, you brought up a couple things that I want to touch on too. I was an avid runner before Eric died. And I was always of the mind that I needed to pound it out right when I was angry much like you. The best and most effective thing was physical exercise which thank God that I did what changed in grieving is if you can't run and cry if you can't breathe, right, so, I know that sounds ridiculous, but I needed to prioritize the crying. And then I would downshifted and I did other things. And by the way, I did a round a stint in boxing myself. Certainly walking all kinds of other exercises, I tried yoga, not a really good Yogi. It's a, it's a work in process. So we're in presence Exactly. But nevertheless, I mean, the, the externalization of grief, whether it's through crying, or through pounding pavement, or pounding a punching bag is such a healthy and productive outlet. It's way better than day drinking is way better than other abuses to your body. And those are options for people, right. But remember, we live in a society where we have options, generally speaking of how to cope. And the real opportunity is to choose the best ones. I had to live for my kids. You know, my goal, in all of it was, I've got to put the maximum number of years between the dad's death in my demise. So if you realize that it's my job to stay healthy. Yeah. And it's tough because I want them to literally push me in a grave. I want them to be like, okay, like, no, shelflife we're done here. instead of having a be a traumatic, awful thing, if I can control it, which of course I can't. But up here, I believe I can.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 41:44

I think that's powerful and beautiful. And that, that you have an exit strategy with your kids? Yeah, I do. It's beautiful. And who knows what life will hold. Because we're obviously you know, from most people that, you know, there's no guarantees in life, and loss happens unexpectedly. But when you put your mind and your heart and your intentions, and that gives us a big time gap, and I'm gonna make my kids push me off for this earth versus, you know, suddenly, you know, getting lost. I think it's brilliant.

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 42:18

I think it works for me, because it gives in a focus on you know, I have a target call, I've got to be super old. And really, you know, everybody's like, Yay, she finally called it. Yeah, it's, it works for me, it injects a little bit of humor. And you know, the other thing that you learn when you lose someone to death, is death is not scary anymore. Right? It demystifies dying. And it would be extraordinarily helpful. I lost my mom earlier this year, it was actually part of the reason why we didn't see each other at the award thing. She was rapidly declining that evening. And she was gone a week later. So I know that date, and I know when she died. So I say this to you, because you're able to be more present, when people around you are failing. Once you experience the death of a loved one, at least for me, I was better able to bear witness to other people's loss and grieving. And that is a gift, a better funeral goer. I'm a better participant in weight. So whatever the tradition is that you may have, culturally, I'm better. I'm a better human being. Wow. And tell ya. I hope Eric is looking down on me and doesn't strike me with a bolt of lightning. But I hope he says it's my girl, you know, she's she's doing it the way it should be done. And that would make me happy.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 43:59

That's all and that you can pivot and use the loss as a gift to other people. And to be more compassionate, more in tune more intuitive to help someone through their grief process is such an honor. And most people be like, thank you. But no, I never want to experience that piece. But death is a journey. And it's going to come to all of us. And we're we're all going to experience loss of a loved one, or whatever journey in our life at some point we will. And to have a person there to help you grieve or to really just understand your wants before you can even articulate them. I think is amazing. And Eric would be very proud. So did you change atmospheres locations, Home City Schools, or did you just say you know what this happened here. We're going to Create life new and different. How did that work for you and your kids?

M


Mary Ann Stropkay 45:07

Wow, that's a great question. So I definitely doubled down on the household for period of time. So I did a couple of things which are important. I demolished that back porch. Wow, it took me a year to get the courage up to do it. In fact, this is going to be a little gross, but I'll share it with you. I didn't have the heart and my son Finally, thanked me. And this is where I realized I had to make some changes. You know, when Eric was face down, he drooled a little bit on the back porch. And I left it there because I didn't have the heart to clean it. I don't think my experience is all that unique. But when my teenage son says of thank God, you finally wipe that off. Interestingly, he didn't have courage to do it either.

So it's a learning process. That back porch got demoed. And we hunkered down. And we lived in a beautiful old home for all these years, until this year. And I woke up one day after my mom passed, and I realized, I have to be done right now. Caring for other people's needs. As it relates to space, it take back a little bit of life for me the way that I need to do it, and sold that house very happily to a wonderful family, and move myself into another city. Wow. And I'll tell you, the reason I did that was I didn't want to be the widow anymore. I wish I were a bigger human than to admit that out loud.

 Jennifer Malcolm 47:00

I think it's normal. And I'm sure on that street. That is how people saw you. That's what they experiences. You know, there's Mary Ann, you know, our that our neighbor, who's the widow versus new identity, that you're very no beautiful hot single mom. So

 Mary Ann Stropkay 47:18

Oh, my God, who can we show this to?

 47:22

We do like dating sites or something so

 Mary Ann Stropkay 47:26

No. And that's another world that you can't even I made the change. For me. I realized early on that grieving process that I knew my kids were gonna be first. So I played that out. And I did give myself five years. So you know, here's a spoiler alert, almost at five years, like I got two weeks. And I said, not time for Mary Ann. Time for kids. Time for healing. Time for shifting. And then you go on? I don't know. But I'll tell you what, I'm looking at my beautiful new windows. And I think like my change of scenery,

 Jennifer Malcolm 48:09

I love it. Yeah, amazing, even when we travel because Chad and I travel quite a bit. When we travel. I'm like, well we don't know if we want to go we go to Charleston, South Carolina, we go to Nashville, we go to places and how just a change of scenery, new stimulus, different experiences, different food, different smells, different flowers, different sky because it's so gloomy and Cleveland sunshine, you know how much that changes your mood and your heart and your, your countenance. And so I can't I can't imagine that



the beauty of this transition for you of, you know, new beginnings and new opportunities, new views is beautiful.

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 48:53

Absolutely. You know, and it's for women. You know, everybody asked me oh my gosh, you know, I lost a dog, my beloved family dog last year, right? So you know, the question with the brand new house is always Oh my goodness. And of course if it's you know why? Why did you move? The next question is When are you getting the dog the cat or whatever? And I I can't say this often enough, please stop asking me because here's why. I don't want to care for anybody for a while. I want her for me for a while that I make sure that all those things I talked about, you know the I don't need therapy right now the you know, I am processing my emotions, but putting my kids first that has to now stop. Because they're adults. Can you believe their 2018 crazy. It's their time. And it's my time, but they're not saying

J

Jennifer Malcolm 49:49

it's beautiful. No, it's beautiful. And I saw on Facebook a few weeks ago that you went to Chicago for your daughter's 18th birthday. It was absolutely beautiful. But it is that it's a weird because I have to now in college college aged kids and one's a sophomore in high school and realizing like within two, three years, I'll be an empty nester. You know by name, I don't know whether they come back or, you know, do summers here or in school, it's a different thing. But it is a different chapter of life, that they're adults. They make they get to make their adult decisions, and I get to be their mentor, and their friends. But I don't have to take care of them anymore.

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 50:29

It's awesome. I mean, so I have to share for anybody that's in Cleveland with me to this, you know, my only emotion moment because the other question I get asked frequently is Oh, like, the empty nest you know, so I uprooted I moved, I got rid of stuff. And you know, I did all this baggage unloading, including the children, Baba, you know. And then the Saturday after I do all of these magical things, so that's like three plus moves in a summer. And the plus is because, you know, we were back and forth on what we're going to do COVID wise for my dog. Right. So here I am. I walk into the grocery store. I love Heinen's. I'm like a hymens person. I walk in and I start shopping. And I realize oh, my God, I there are aisles. I'm never gonna see again. Now you think this is like, moment? No, I start to cry. Oh, yes. is apparently Okay, maybe this is just projecting. But I foisting my entire empty nest experience on the four Heinen's staff. Like I apparently I'm not going to do the same

magic Voodoo that I did four years, for the first time in 23 years. 23 years that predates my relationship with Eric. I was shopping for me. Awesome. I mean, in retrospect,



Jennifer Malcolm 52:00

Isn't it weird, though, like the crazy like nuances or you're like, wow, I I get to go and I get to buy only the things that I want to need. And no one's making a list. No one's asking me to run their errands on saying can you pick it up as an extra gallon of milk? Or this box of cereal? You're like, what am I want to eat? This is what money to buy? This is what I'm going to cook. And it's good. No, that's it that's has to be a fabulous not there yet. Almost there.



Mary Ann Stropkay 52:25

We're almost there. And you know that that's one thing I you know, all women, we all experience all this stuff differently. But it that's a good moment. And it's a particularly good moment for you know, your widow or friend here who's saying I spent five years almost to the dot launching, caring, loving, sheltering, guiding children, to now get the reward, whatever that looks like, whether it's they come home what the holidays are not of having them launch and me being me. Oh, my God, like what an interesting chapter.



Jennifer Malcolm 53:11

And the self discovery or the re self discovery of who you are. What are your? What are your likes now? I love it.



Mary Ann Stropkay 53:20

Oh, wait, I don't have no idea. So I'm open to suggestions. If anybody can send me a few ideas, ideas? That would be great. I need them.



53:29

So I have one last real question. And then we'll put some closing remarks. But as women, we are likely statistically, to live our partners. Is there something that you learned on your journey that you wish you would have known from the very beginning? And any guidance that can help? Because obviously, we're all wired differently? We respond differently. We have different emotions. Was there something that you said, you know, looking back, like if I knew that from the beginning, or I can give this to women at the beginning that you

can share?

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 54:07

Yeah, thanks. Um, first is that you are human. I had to learn I was human, that I wasn't superhuman. And that I was allowed to be upset and to grieve. Because most times, especially if you want to be a strong woman, you can't nobody can see you sweat. I think I grew up watching a commercial saying that to me. I think I believe that you In fact, can grieve and grieve for the rest of your life. You know, I'm kidding myself. If I think that I'm not going to miss Eric, I missed him every day. Every day, in every way. I just have to look at my kids. Some people The second thing I would say is remember your you. And that is a big statement. But let me break it down for what that meant to me. I've told women, time and time again, chicken, my younger women, please make sure that you stay in the workforce. Regardless of how you feel about childcare if you're lucky enough to have children or care for aging parents, whatever, circumstantially you're facing to the extent to which you can have the support and the love that I got from colleagues, the self fulfilling opportunities that work presented, they were absolute game changers, Jenn, I couldn't have asked for one thing you can't live without really understanding the implications of not being employed. So if I go back in time, if I had not had a job at age 43, this picture looks a lot different. It's not relocating into a new house, it's not sending kids to college, that's practical and real. Overall, I would simply say, be yourself. Don't forget yourself. But if you find yourself as the single parent, and caring for other people, perhaps a parent, whatever it is, because you know, middle age is horrible, I enjoy some elements of it. But you know, I could live without all of the responsibilities because we take them on as weights, literal weights. Um, make sure that you have, your next step is always in your mind. Because you never know, when this happens, whether it's divorce, or it's widowhood. Having options is a gift from God, if you believe, right, when you don't have options, you lose hope, you lose continuity, you lose perspective. And that's easily remedied if you give yourself options. So if we can remember that as women and share that with each other, and if there's somebody that you know, that experiences widowhood, like I did, and maybe isn't employed, make it your priority, to help that woman be employed. There's no amount of Social Security benefit that makes up for lost income. Right? It's just not true.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 57:39

And what practical advice as well as spiritual, emotional advice, there's some practicality of getting some ducks in a row, keeping your options open, and choosing you at times choosing, choosing self care and self love and self, you know, that the path of future no matter what it looks like, that puts you in a powerful place financially, or with options, that

you may find yourself someday that you didn't expect. Yeah. And I hope that through this, you know, I've equated some of your story with some of my loss as as I went through my divorce, but I know that's night and day pain as well. And I'm never wanting to diminish. Or, or compare in that way. It's just that that is my filter of loss at probably the one of the deepest levels that I've experienced as a human. And but it's, it's very different than losing the love of your life. And very, you know,

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 58:45

here's the thing, though, they're cousins. There's lots of cousins, I mean, they're very tightly correlated. And the truth is, it's okay to let yourself and your kids in particular, live a different kind of life. Don't hold yourself up to the standard called, we're gonna do it exactly the way it's always been done. Because in fact, it cannot be whether you're a single mom, where you share custody or or you lost your spouse. It's never going to be the same as it has to be okay. Oh, it's good. One, but it has to be okay for you. No, that's really good.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 59:21

So we've created I've created this space for women to connect and for women, to find their voice and for women to listen to these stories and maybe get one ounce of courage, one ounce of hope that they didn't have when they woke up this morning and, and maybe one act of activation that I'm going to do something I I may choose to go to yoga, I may choose to punch a punching bag, I may choose to journal I may choose to get into therapy. I may choose to have a conversation with a friend. And we're all going to have outlets that serve us well. And the goal is That every day. And along these two seasons and journeys that we're making baby steps towards healing and babies have baby steps towards voice and baby steps towards encouraging encouraging other women. What's a last piece of gold that you can drop in to women to give encouragement? Obviously, at your age, widowhood is a small percentage of women like you're, you know, you're very young. And they're that threshold isn't there, as we age that, you know, more and more women will experience it. But what's some nuggets of wisdom that you want to leave with the women as we close this up today?

M

Mary Ann Stropkay 1:00:41

Reach out to your women friends, I mean, that the lifesaver, it's in so many circumstances, but particularly when you experience loss, you'll be amazed. First of all, we tend to reach out more productively we as women, so women don't find you to say, let me help or how are you today? Then? Do the big favor. Most people are just afraid that is not the right

time? or How will she feel? Just do it? Don't get the courage to talk to somebody? A little bit?



Jennifer Malcolm 1:01:16

No, that's good. So let's put that as our activation. So if you're listening today, I am going to implore to you to reach out to a friend girlfriend one or two, to either have virtual coffee, happy hour, or face to face coffee to build that friendship, reach out to someone that you haven't seen for a while maybe. And let's just continue to build this powerful community of women who are advocates and supporters of each other to give hope and courage, because all of us can use a little more hope and courage in our lives. So, Mary Ann, I am so honored. I think Likewise, we laughed, we cried. If we take some clips from this, our hands are all over. Well, I know.



Mary Ann Stropkay 1:01:56

We just don't don't focus in on my nose. You know, I was my nose was running.



Jennifer Malcolm 1:02:01

That's right. I had a coughing fit too. So I am so honored to call you my friend and that you you have such a powerful story and your story is going to resonate in so many women who are just trying to find overcoming grief and overcoming loss and you are powerful. You are beautiful. And I am beyond honored to call you my friend.



Mary Ann Stropkay 1:02:22

So right back at ya' Jenn. Thanks for the time today. What a joy.



Jennifer Malcolm 1:02:27

You're very welcome. All right, well, this wraps up our next episode of the Jennasis Speaks podcast. So get out there and make a connection with one of your girlfriends today. And look forward to hearing and connecting with you next week. All right, have a good one. Bye. Thank you for listening to the Jennasis Speaks podcast. If you love the show, one of the best things you can do is to share it with a friend. Tell them what you like about it, how it inspires you and invite them to listen. Subscribe to the Jennasis Movement to empower women's voices and reclaim the power over your own narrative.