

Dana: Welcome to I Swear on My Mother's Grave. My name is Dana Black, and in 2016, I lost my mom. And now I'm talking to other people who have also lost their moms. And I don't just mean in death, because there are so many ways you can lose a mother. And we're going to get into it. So let's talk about our moms.

Question: What struggles do you have with if-quals and feelings of guilt about your actions and decisions surrounding your loved one's death? How do you avoid false guilt? Was it your fault? How do we move from what if to what is? You, God, saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed (Psalm 139:16).

Are you guys wondering if you're at the right podcast? What if I just started going off into sermons? I would hope that at least some of you would stick around to see just what would happen. What I just shared with you are questions and thoughts that you would find in a GriefShare workbook. This organization helps people grieving the death of a family member or a friend, and faith is a part of their message. Today's guest's mom taught GriefShare for many years at her church in Palatine, about 40 minutes outside Chicago. In this conversation, we're going to talk about faith. We're going to talk about living legacy of one's life's work. We're going to talk about children and parenting, about going back to your childhood homes and then having to sell them after the death of your mom. And we're going to talk about innate goodness a lot, the innate goodness in, well, all of us.

Speaking of goodness, in order to get into the right mental juju and to feel safe in this vulnerable conversation with me, my guest decided to surround herself with talismans of her mother's. So during this interview, you might hear her mom's necklace dangling from her neck. She's using her mom's water bottle from her church. She's surrounded with GriefShare workbooks around her. And right before this call, my guest asked Google Play to play the Cranberries radio station, to get her into that childhood-with-her-mom mentality.

This is Jess Jones. [end intro]

Jess: Did I tell you that my mom led GriefShare?

Dana: Yes, that I knew, yeah.

Jess: Okay, so I put them by me, just to orient myself, but I've got her GriefShare leader guide. And this is her church, Prince of Peace Palatine.

Dana: (laughs)

Jess: So ostensibly speaking, this would be what would be surrounding her when she's talking about grief, so let's surround myself with the talismans of grief conversation right now.

Dana: That feels right. I always joke that what I surround myself with is Spanx, all her jewelry is up here, it's like, underwear.

Jess: (laughs) I love that, Spanx.

Dana: But all her jewelry, and then I always put a picture of her out, so she's present, even though I'm like, "Are you judging me?" But I can't worry about that.

Jess: (laughs)

Dana: I can. That's not going to get us anywhere. So that's really interesting, 'cause I was just reading that note you shared with me, the picture of the note, which was so fucking beautiful. And I wrote down, so that I could read this line, and talk about faith and God and how that was important to your mom. She wrote, "Go with my love and God's protection, and be sure to remember everything, so you can tell me all about it."

Jess: So that note, it's funny because I didn't recall it. So RC and I were at her house. This is pre-pandemic, how 'bout that. Now it's like, BC/AD, PP/AP, pre-pandemic, after pandemic. So this is pre-pandemic, as a marker of time. So, pre-pandemic. Let's back up and also say, talk about layers of surreality. "Well, what part of emptying your mother's house was this? Was this AP or PP? Pre-pandemic, after pandemic?"

Dana: Or was it during the revolution? Before the revolution? Even that part of it. There was that mid-May/June thing that also changes your focus and changes your feelings. Anyway, there's April, and before, and, yeah.

Jess: So I only know this is the winter-of-my-discontent kind of thing, (laughs) pre-pandemic, because there are no kids there. And the reason I know there are no kids there [05:00] is because it is evening and I'm in my mom's house. I'm in a guest room going through boxes of books and things like this, because my mom's house has already been partly sorted by my aunt prior to my mother's passing. They were working on the house. And so I'm now not just going through the estate, but I'm going through the estate, as it had already been half-sorted, and trying to orient. Nothing is where I think it is, because it's been in my mom's house for a long time since I've been living there, period. But two, doubly, then two other people that haven't lived here at all put it halfway into boxes. So I'm like, "Okay, I need to find..."

Dana: Family members.

Jess: Family members who have offered me a lot of support, and they did a lot of the—I'm glad that that all happened, 'cause I don't know if I could have actually started from square one—but, I had to spend...

Dana: Starting is the hardest part, it's almost like.

Jess: So I had somebody else start for me halfway, so I just kind of entered the marathon mid-race, as far as dealing with the house. So I'm now trying to orient myself towards, like, where are all the things and what are all of the things. And I think RC is in my room, just kind of exploring the history of me and us, because some of that stuff is there. And I'm in the guest room, exploring the history of my whole family, and books, and things like this. And he comes from my room with the note, and he found it in my closet, on the floor, the floor in my closet.

Dana: Your childhood room?

Jess: My childhood room, the closet that I owned sixth grade through college. And this is a note that she wrote me before I went on a two-week, short-term mission trip to Italy with a faith-based group that I was with, so my first time traveling out of the country, for-real real, my first time traveling anywhere of note without her, age 19, I think it was, when she wrote me that. And it's interesting because—well actually, do you mind if I grab it really quick? 'Cause there's the front side that I didn't even share with you. Hold on one second.

So I carry it in my wallet now. It just stays in my wallet. It's one of these things that he finds it and hands it to me, and this also why I know that there are no kids here, because after I read it, I wail this guttural, impaled-animal-in-the-wild kind of cry, because obviously it's written as a time capsule in the era and moment that she intended it, but now it feels like this missive for the rest of my life.

Dana: That's how I took it, as someone who didn't know what you were sharing with me. That line feels like, "Go forth. Live your life. Raise your kids. And then when I see you again, tell me all about it."

Jess: "Just tell me everything."

Dana: And again, that's just one part of it. So I would love to hear all of it.

Jess: So she says, "Dear Jessica. As I watch you prepare for your first mission trip overseas, it gives me time to reflect on the fact that your life has been trusted to me by God, but it's now becoming your own..." "...But it's now becoming your own task to hear God speaking into your life. Today we shared tears. Never be ashamed of tears, for

they teach us compassion for one another. I have watched you mature as a young lady, and have known since your childhood that God would use you and your talents to do great things far beyond what I have done with my life. I hope though that I have helped you to instill some values that have given me strength: honesty, fairness, forgiveness, sensitivity, and the willingness to pitch in and help wherever you can be of use. Things like that will give you a happy, productive life whether you are rich or poor, because you will be rich in spiritual gifts. Now you are embarking on your own journey, and I stand witness to your growing sense of yourself. And I am proud, happy, and blessed to watch you become the young lady God meant for you to be. Go with my love and God's protection, and be sure to remember everything so you can tell me all about it. Love and kisses, Mom."

So he finds this note and hands it to me without prelude, without whatever, and I just... whoa, you know what I mean?

Dana: Yes, I do.

Jess: Yeah. And it's so many things. It's so many things, not the least of which is that the toughness of reconciling that I do believe that my mom didn't hold as high of an opinion of herself. And even couching that, her belief that I am a product of her good work, not herself, but she's sowing seeds that are going to bear fruit beyond her [10:00] capacity, capability, potential, whatever. That's the duality, because I think there is absolutely something beautiful about a person that has a low opinion of themselves only because they're not too full of themselves. But from the outside, when you see somebody that doesn't hold as high an opinion of themselves as you believe they're entitled to, and you see how much they disbelieve the value of their own goodness or worth or what they should be entitled to also—if we want to use the faith-based framework—as a child of God, regardless of your personal perception of your own worth or goodness, de facto, square one, before you do or don't do anything. You are just that as a baseline, and therefore you are born out of innate goodness. You have innate goodness in you.

Dana: And she taught you that your whole life?

Jess: Yeah.

Dana: That never went away for you, in terms of what you understood? Do you teach your children that, or—I don't know where you are on your journey with God.

Jess: It's interesting because that's my framework and that's where I—yeah, that's my orientation, that's my journey, but church itself hasn't looked like what I believe living as a product as a person of faith should be, which—this is a whole other conversation. We

could look at even this political cycle and all these things too. So I've distanced myself from spaces for some time. And I think we've given our children a lot of spiritual basis, but I don't know that I've given them the framework.

And that's interesting too, because I think my mom felt a lot of those responsibilities when she was young, when she became a parent and she started to think about what space she wanted to put her child in, so that her child had a faith conversation. I think again it was her burden of responsibility was outward. It was because of her position as my mom, she came back to church and came back to faith. She was kind of a broken Catholic before then. And then I came along, and it was more like, "Well, I have this thing, so what should I do? I should it in church!" Because essentially for her it was.

Dana: And it's community. I think that was my first foray into community and friends and being around others and doing civic work and volunteering your time and being around others, and that felt—I don't know if my mom totally believed in heaven, hell, and of all that, but she believed in the goodness and giving back. As a citizen too: I think there's that volunteer aspect of church that my mom really believed in.

Jess: I think my mom started there because her framework was that. When she was young, her family let the kids go to church basically I think until communion or confirmation, one of the two. And then they were like, "Okay, you decide if you want to keep going." My grandmother had had an experience where she had—my understanding is—she had miscarried, and then asked the priest what happened to her baby. And the priest told her that the baby was in purgatory, because the baby couldn't have faith. "And so we have to pray for the soul of your baby." And that space was so damaging to her that she was kind of like, "Alright, well, I'll put you here, and then you guys decide if you keep going."

Dana: "It's up to you." (laughs)

Jess: "Good on ya'. Do what you want. I'm out. Deuces!" But I think that was very obviously impactful to my grandmother's experience. And that also, in my mind, does not represent the goodness, the innate goodness of a spiritual.

Dana: The Christlike.

Jess: Well, and where we are at on this plane and what our relationship is with eternal goodness, I don't feel like that product is part of it.

Anyway, all that to say: my mom grew up, I came around, she started to go to church because of me, and she stayed. And she found the truth that enriched her life. And she's lived her life as a person of faith in a way that I could never emulate. And yet, of

course there's this note that's like, "You will do things with your life far greater than I will ever do.

And I think it's interesting because [15:00] Riley and I have had this conversation after she passed. And I realized some of the difficulty that he's had because we've had to go to the house with him since, and he's started to just kind of put himself away in my bedroom and shut the door while we were there.

Dana: This is your son? Just making sure.

Jess: My son who's 11, who's fairly tight with my mother. They have a special—had a special—relationship. And even on her deathbed, she was saying something about like, she views herself to be like Riley, or Riley's like her. I said, "Why is that?" She said, "Because he's trouble." I'm like, "You view yourself as trouble?" And she goes, "I think children believe what their parents tell them." I said, "Do you think I tell him he's trouble?" She goes, "Oh, I haven't thought about that." She goes, "I just know when I was young, people—"

Oh god, I have so many tangents right now, Dana. I have an audio recording of this, of my mom telling me this on her deathbed.

Dana: You got her in short spurts. It's smart of you to do that. I wish I had more myself.

Jess: It's strange and tough to listen to them. I knew I needed to record. I knew I needed to talk to her. I knew that time was not on my side anymore.

She was the eldest of five. I think it's a combination of her personality and the situation. Everyone reacts to different things in different ways, and her mother ended up dealing with depression and was institutionalized more than once, and received electric-shock therapy treatment, the product of which meant that large portions of my mother's childhood were just blipped out from her mind. So I think my mom kind of felt like the forgotten child. And because she was the oldest and theoretically had the most capacity to manage, she was tasked with a lot. It was the "keep calm and carry on" of that household, and she was kind of the ambassador of that charge. And I think she just kind of tried to stay small and out of the way. And I think the problem becomes that a necessary season becomes a framework of your disposition, and I think she carried that into her marriage, and I think she carried that into the world.

And then there was a Riley, who reminded her of the rough and unsanded potential she had in her youth. And they were these—of course she'd whisper things to me, like—and I

think it's funny, because any daughter feels that kind of maternal judgment from her mother.

Dana: Yes, yes, yes.

Jess: She would tell me when he was very little, she was like, "He's the strong-willed child." Because there's the thought of the strong-willed child. And I'd be all like, "He's a boy. And you only raised one child, and a girl, and mild-mannered and very compliant. So you don't even know what parenting in this house is."

Dana: (laughs) "You don't even know."

Jess: "You don't even know what parenting is, Mom."

Dana: And he's the first grandchild, 'cause you're the only child.

Jess: I'm the only child also.

Dana: As am I.

Jess: But it's interesting, because your experience with being an only child is very different than mine, because—it was always so interesting, because people have that idea of like, "Oh, only child?" No, but legit in my house was not like that, because like every family, sure, but I had a family of broken parts. My father also grew up in a house where his father came back from serving in World War II with post-traumatic stress disorder. He was the youngest of three; his older sisters went off and married, and I don't necessarily know that anyone knew. Those weird dualities: she's the oldest of five, with a mom who's depressed; he's the youngest of three, and he's left in the house with all of the broken adults. And it's interesting since things have come out—even since my mom's passed—in talking to my dad's sister, 'cause now there's this urgency of like, "I need to share all the things with you." And there's the mention that like, "Oh, maybe my grandfather was bipolar? Oh."

Dana: That's huge.

Jess: I was like, "That's really interesting that you say that, because there's part of me that wonders if my father was an undiagnosed bipolar." But all this coming up in an era where there's stigma around this. And then my mother, who was a product of a depressed mother—and now in hindsight, with all this—I was like, "Was she depressed, and I didn't understand that?" And so then, if you can consider potentially somebody that was a potentially undiagnosed bipolar, with a potentially mildly depressed person, and their only child. So I grew up in a house where I similarly made myself small, unless I saw the potentially undiagnosed bipolar picking on the potentially on the potentially

depressed person, [20:00] and then I turned into the betta fish, 'cause I was like, "That's not fair. That's a violation." Because even then I could tell a difference for places of authority. I was like, "No, that's antagonistic and nasty, and that's preying on someone."

Dana: "Stop that." Did they respond to that, your folks? Like, listen to you?

Jess: I think it's tough to say. Those are the interesting things. These are the things that I think—and maybe you too, you'll always kind of mourn not having the chance to have had some adult conversations with the adults that were adults when you were a kid.

Dana: Or you tried to—or I did—and it just never went the way I want it to. And because when you're in so much pain—well, my mom—she just cried a lot. And then I can't get anywhere, 'cause once someone's crying, you're done. They're not allowing you to really move through that, 'cause it's all about them now. It's just like any kind of confrontation.

Jess: And you're not trying to traumatize somebody by asking the questions either.

Dana: No! And now I have a million more questions about: my mom's sister died when she was 28. She was also somebody who had learning disabilities. But maybe in today's world—she died in 1980—maybe in today's world, it's got a autism-meets-ADHD-meets—but it was also there was some issues of: couldn't take off her shoes, took her a long time to put them back on, all these things that feel like they'd be manageable today in terms of medication. And she drowned, and they always talked about it being an accident, but it was probably a suicide. And I'm just now seeing these documents, 'cause I'm dealing with my grandma, my mother's mother's move. And I'm finding all these documents, and then I'm learning and finding letters and all these things that I wish I talked to my mom about. Or why didn't my mom—I didn't expect her when I was eight years old to tell me about her sister. But my twenties, my thirties, my forties, we didn't talk about her sister. She barely came up. Why?

So yes, there's so many questions about that, but just in terms of my mom, the same. She had to be perfect, had to be the smart one, had to go to a good college, do the things, be the big sister, and be the adult when her sister was struggling. And so I think she resented that all the attention went to her, even though my grandma would say, "That's bullshit. I loved my oldest daughter Jo, just like I loved my youngest daughter."

Jess: Your attention goes to where the need is.

Dana: And they don't worry about Jo.

Jess: And I think that's perfectly put in that way, because I think that it was the same with my mom. My mom was full of all of this potential, all of this savvy. Even in the last year, how much more my cousins referred to her as the wise old owl. That was what my cousins called her, was the wise old owl. But that was who she was. She always could prattle off things about history to you. She could prattle off little-known Chicago facts. She knew the ins and outs of different administrations. She was a bibliophile to the core. She read all the time. So that person isn't where the urgent need is, 'cause that person isn't hemorrhaging attention.

I feel like she had a lot of things that she wasn't aware that she was really good at, or wouldn't receive the praise for that, because she would be embarrassed or wouldn't want to. Things that innately were worthy of affirmation, she would actually not have a consciousness of. And I think she didn't realize that all the way along in each moment—she was always in the moment making something of her life, but she couldn't perceive that she was making something of her life, 'cause she hadn't made something of her life. Does that make sense?

Dana: Yes, yes.

Jess: She was always my Girl Scout leader. I, two days before the deadline, told my parents that I wasn't going to go back to Illinois State University. And it was also my birthday. My father refused to see me. My mother drove over with a small cake, sang the most pathetic refrain of "Happy Birthday" to me, and then helped me unenroll from college.

Dana: Your freshman year?

Jess: This was after my sophomore year. I took a break. I needed a break. I knew it all during that year, that was like, "I can't do this. This is not it right now," but that burden of responsibility of not letting them down. My mom had tried to finish her undergrad. She stopped school, and then she went back to school. While she was going back to school, she's like, "I'm so tired. I feel so horrible. I keep getting nauseous on this coffee that I'm trying to drink." Oh no, she was pregnant with me. And then it became unimportant, so she never finished her bachelor's. My father was going to get a ride to college on a wrestling scholarship, and then he got injured. I was a kid at that point, and I was like, "This is not appropriate for me right now in my life. I know this. But how do I tell these two people, 'Hey, I'm not going back to school next year. [25:00] I don't know what I'm doing for sure yet. But this is not it?'" And she came over and unenrolled me.

Dana: She did not ask any questions?

Jess: She asked questions, but in the polite, patient way that a person who's unenrolling their 19-year-old daughter—it's the same summer that she wrote me this note.

Dana: Before you went to Italy?

Jess: I went to Italy in June, and in July she unenrolled me from college. So I think whatever the truths were in that note she oriented herself with, kind of affirming that listen-to-that-still-small-voice-inside-of-you thing. And so it was kind of like, "Okay, so you know you're not going back there. Okay. So."

Dana: "I've planted these seeds of how you will move through the world. I hope that you take honesty and integrity."

Jess: All those things.

Dana: "And you go and..." Then what did you do?

Jess: I did another short-term, missions-based program, and I worked with churches in Mexico, and I worked with their youth programs and different feeding programs that they had in different communities, and traveled basically towards the border from Mexico City for two months. And that's what I did.

And in that time, I met a person named RC. He was from Idaho. He was this kid, very rural, podunk kid, and I thought he needed to make friends. And so I started to befriend him as a joke, just so that he didn't feel outside of the group. And that's where I met my husband.

Dana: There you go.

Jess: So there you go. And then from there, came back in March of 2004, and I was like, "Okay." I was like, "So I want to go back to school." I was like, "So what to do." And I was like, "Oh my gosh. Moody Bible Institute, their deadline is in two weeks." And you need two referral letters and the application and, "La-la-la, let's do that." And I did that, and sent it off.

And then two weeks after I sent it off, my dad died suddenly of a heart attack at age 49.

Dana: I forgot how old he was.

Jess: 49, at age 49, he died of a heart attack.

Dana: I forgot that.

Jess: So I'm now 20. I'm 20, and my mom is 48, and we are now alone at her house. And then two weeks later I get an acceptance letter, and I go. I'm now closer to my mom. I have closeness but distance.

Dana: 'Cause she's in Palatine?

Jess: She's in Palatine, and I'm in Chicago. And I'm going to school. I'm coming and going from her house with roommates. We might stay a long weekend at the house, and all of this. I'm now a person that's going to a Bible college, which feels like the culmination of the parts, and also realizing that being a person of faith is in direct discord with what I believe a faith community (laughs) reflects to the world. I'm having just that consciousness of feeling uncomfortable with my associations.

When you boil down what the odds are of any of us being here, based on like the temperature of the water being just right on the night that your parents got together.

Dana: It's a miracle.

Jess: It's a miracle, and so we're all supposed to be here. We all have a thing. We all have our *raison d'être*. There's a thing. There's a reason you are here. There's a reason I am here. You do not need to believe the same thing that I do. And there is a plan for your life. And whatever you want to call the thing: Mother Earth, the spirit, the universe—for me, God—God wants good things for you. And God loves you. And you are full of all of the goodness and potential that God and the universe wanted to dump in your very one unique life, that needed to happen—clearly based on the ratio of odds of all the reasons that it didn't need to happen—there's a reason you're here. And so, I think that my knowingness of that about everyone in my core world that I meet, and how many people were not met with that same spirit of love, made it tough for me to exist in the spaces in the way that I had when I was coming up, or that my mother still did. But I still believe that we believed and looked at the world in a lot of the same ways. She was always proud of the fact that I oriented myself as a person of faith to the things that sparked joy.

And my father passes away. In the later years, in these last handful of years, we've had some conversations about some things. [30:00] But I feel like she really took that experience and figured out how to make other people's lives better with it, by leading GriefShare.

Dana: Will you talk about that? What is that mean? What did it look like? Was it just at the church?

Jess: GriefShare is—yeah, she did it.

Dana: Did she get training in it? Did she just train herself? What is it?

Jess: So I feel like we share that. I think that the experience of the three of us living together had been such a complicated thing, that I think that we both spared each other from the grief within our grief a little bit. I don't know how else to put that. I think that I had always speculated that it would be hard to lead a GriefShare group after experiencing the loss of a spouse so young, but also having had a complicated marriage. And there is a grief there. But I was like, that's where I feel like it's the grief within your grief. And when other people—I don't know a better way to say this—when other people are grieving in earnest, just solely like, "I want this person back exactly as they were, exactly as it was, exactly as our relationship is." And I am imagining here, because even on her deathbed, unsolicited, she says in one of these audio recordings I have, "Your dad was a good man."

Dana: And she'd never said that?

Jess: She wanted to set the record straight, that if we're putting it on the record, she wants it understood that he was a good man. And he was, as much as we're all good. Back to that, we are all good, good, good. We're all good. And things happen. Life happens, whatever, and good people can do bad things. But that does not necessarily innately make people bad. (laughs) It's *Hamilton*: "Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?" The duality.

Dana: That'll be our sponsor.

Jess: There you go. (laughs)

Dana: When it comes back, the tour of Hamilton.

Jess: Lin, call us.

Dana: (laughs) Call us.

Jess: That's a thing. I'm very conscious outside of myself in talking about all of this, because these are good people. These are good people that had a complicated marriage. And then because of their complicated backgrounds, parented in a complicated way.

Dana: So you and your mom never talked alone about your dad, about the grief, you're saying? You never sat down, made a drink, had a cup of tea, whatever, and said, "Let's hash this out"?

Jess: No. I think I share everything I just did because I think it kind of explains how we shared with each other. I know that in leading GriefShare, she had to choose to self-disclose to the people that invited themselves there, as self-identified people needing support in their grief journey. So I'm conscious—

Dana: How many times did she do it? Every week?

Jess: Years, she did years. I don't know how many groups. Sometimes she'd tell me—of course she's not disclosing about individuals—but she's be like, "There's a young husband who just lost his wife, in this group. There's a daughter who lost her mother, in this group. There's an adult who lost an adult child, in this group." She'd tell me the makeup of a group, sometimes, that she was talking through. 'Cause these were huddles that would meet every week, and she did this over the course of years. And so it was interesting because I always knew in my head that she's disclosing things about our journey that I don't know. Unless I ever determine that I want to go to her GriefShare, I don't know that I'll hear it. But then I don't know that it's a space that I'm invited to, because it's where she—

Dana: Did you ever ask?

Jess: No.

Dana: Yeah, it's so interesting.

Jess: And it's kind of my regret, because it's trying to find out what was said in private spaces. And that's partly where I have all of her stuff now. I haven't made my way through it. But she's got pages in her that she's filled out.

Dana: For other people, for that specific group?

Jess: "Leading Your Group Well: What if no one talks? Be comfortable with silence. Ask the questions in the round, but it's okay to pass if you want to. Start with simple questions, like an icebreaker. [35:00] Let each person have their own comfort level. Talk to quiet people alone or by phone. See if there's any reason they're not yet participating. Remind the group that everyone benefits from sharing." She's just got her notes of how to lead well.

Dana: And facilitate. And I wonder if in there you'll find specific personal notes about her grief. Who knows. Even though she was facilitating, maybe there's a section where she's forced to write about your dad. That's so intense, that feeling of, "She probably shared things in there that you'll never hear."

Jess: Yeah.

Dana: And that she held space. Like those stories of kids: you're the child of a minister, and that minister probably is giving all his love to the congregation, but you hope they're giving it back to the home. So I wonder if, yeah, your mom was holding all this space for these people. Not like she didn't hold space for you, but you didn't really have these moments. That's weird. That's intense.

Jess: Well, it's interesting, because she's solicited to be invited in that space with them in a specific way.

Dana: And if you're not soliciting it back, or...

Jess: And it's like, even though I don't think she'd see that as a position of power, she's in a position to lead. But even in leading, I think she sees them as the protagonist. She is like, "You're supporting the protagonist on their journey." It's still about them, not about her. It's about, "What do I have to enhance your experience?"

Dana: "I'm advocating for them. I'm advocating for their journey," and help push them along, but didn't come and didn't call you up after those grief sessions and say, "I've had an aha moment about facilitating your journey. Let's get you through to the other side."

Jess: I've also felt like I am grieving my dad in a different way, because I'm emptying their estate. I feel like I'm grieving the entirety. And now it's going to be interesting to be like, "What can I put together from what my mom would have said? How can my mom lead me through my grief of losing her, and losing him all over again?" It's a little bit like, yeah, piecing together the framework, because they didn't.

And it's just all interesting, because one of the leaders that co-lead with told me that one of the things she'd said in GriefShare was something that I'd said to her, which I didn't remember. She said, "We'd come to church after my husband passed. And something would make me emotional, and I'd shove it away. And Jessica would say to me, 'It's okay if it doesn't feel appropriate for you to cry right now. So find time. Don't not do it. Find time to do it later, when it is appropriate.'" And so that would apparently be something that she'd share repeatedly with people to invite them into exploring what they were feeling and why they were feeling it, and not to squirm away from the pain.

Dana: And you had shared that at what point in your journey with your mom, did you say that? Or do you say it all the time?

Jess: When I was living with her. That was one of those things where I was like, "Oh my god, she's been sharing that for years? And that was something that I said when I was 21?" I can almost guarantee you that that came out of the framework of looking at her

and being like, "Somebody needs to give you permission to cry, because it doesn't feel like a socially acceptable emotion to show here right now. And so I need to be the person that tells you that you need to grant yourself permission." Also because for so long I watched her squash emotions in the context of conflict, so that she would get through the conflict quicker, so I was conscious of the fact that I feared she would have a squashed emotion reflex, so it would just continue.

Dana: So you were like, "If you can't get it out now, and you want to just get through this, please give yourself the permission to go somewhere, or do it later, or do it in the shower. Get that out, 'cause it'll just sit here." Well, some people believe if they start crying or processing something, they'll never stop. That's another thing of like, "Once you open that shit up, here we go." But you're teaching her that, and now she taught others that.

Jess: That was one of those things that I didn't even know that she said or shared, which has been one of the things that I've hung onto just going through her house. So I read this note, and I cry like an impaled animal. Same thing happens, I'm going through some garbage that had been sorted out, and I find the candle that my parents lit on their wedding day.

Dana: I remember you said that. And it is. Well, now you're grieving your dad too. That's really heavy to have to process something from years ago [40:00] while you're processing something that's really fresh too. But yes. And it's funny how certain things you go, "Eh." I go like, "Yeah, I've seen that." And then like my mom's birth certificate or her baby book, and you see it again two years later, and it's a whole new feeling of grief. But to me, I feel like I would have taken that letter in the closet as a sign. I'm somebody who, I keep—when I find little things, it feels as if I'm supposed to. Even though I don't know if I believe in all of that spiritual stuff or the woo-woo aspect of it, I do go, "No, I should have found that, at this exact moment." But the stuff that knocks the wind out of you is really hard. It's heavy.

Jess: So this week is actually the week that I emptied my mom's house. My mom's house was emptied this past Wednesday. In the same way where you're like, "Everything's happened in the way that it's, in the order that it's supposed to happen," you and I picked this day to talk, weeks ago, and then this past Wednesday was the day that the Cleanout King had available.

Dana: Crazy.

Jess: I was like, "Of course it is." Of course it is, 'cause it's the Wednesday before we're going to talk about all of this, which, in the 2020—

Dana: In 2020, that makes sense. You're like, "Of course, it's 2020." When I asked you on May 12, the realtor had just been contacted about somebody being interested, which was interesting, 'cause I talked to you in May, and then now, yeah. You posted on Instagram. What did you say? It was so beautiful about, "Goodbye, childhood home. And it's now time to take my children home." So that was beautiful.

Jess: It's been these realms of reconciliation with it. We did a webinar at the Kaufherr Center that was on grief and grieving. It's not linear. You can have different trajectories for different things. You can be in this meaning making over here and in denial about something else entirely. In the spring, I was in the act of meaning making of some things, and I was in denial about the fact that I had to empty this house, because there was no emptying the house during the pandemic, during the era of P.

Dana: Well, you could... yeah, right.

Jess: What are you going to do? What are you going to do during the middle part of social—all the Goodwills are closed.

Dana: Yeah, you're right.

Jess: You could be in an area of denial there, sustained denial supported by circumstances.

Dana: And then you're angry, because you can't actually deal with it, yet you're just angry at the whole situation.

Jess: Your aunt asks you how things are going, and you get angry because you're in denial about the fact that you have to do it. But you're also supported in denial, because if the pandemic never ends, then bargaining: "Do I never have to empty the house?"

Dana: "Do I never have to deal with it?" (laughs)

Jess: But that went into a whole realm of meaning making, for sure, because what happened on the back end of because-of-pandemic is the people who did estate sales didn't want my mom estate, because it just wasn't worth it, 'cause they were backlogged. They were just too backed up.

Dana: They had too many to deal with.

Jess: They had too many worthwhile estates. And I needed something sooner, and they were just not really—they knew it wasn't a money-making endeavor for them. And so it became apparent that, okay, so because pandemic, estate sale isn't happening. And so what turned into the meaning making was this free sale that was happening in

my mom's driveway, which brought somebody my way that ended up being a harmonica guy, who ended up playing one of my dad's harmonicas in the driveway. And I spent the whole day crying, basically, after I came home, just listening to harmonica.

Dana: And people just showed up, right? Friends, neighbors, and random folks, and just took stuff. You didn't charge anything.

Jess: Yeah. No, I didn't charge anything.

Dana: Nothing.

Jess: Just, I put out a jar for donations if you wanted to make one, but no cost necessary. And cool things happened like that that day.

And then we made one last pass last weekend with what remained. And that was the last time we brought the kids out there, and explained to them that this time we were coming to Yaya's house together. And it ended up being this incredibly joyful day, which goes all the way back to the Instagram post you were talking about, which was Riley more regularly came out of that bedroom, and put on the swim clothes and played with a sprinkler in the yard. And I had the garage doors open, and was sorting through the boxes. And Jolie's playing in the little blow-up pool. And one of the best moments—it was the only time this happened during this whole process—was Riley was encouraged to bring his scooter out when we went out there, and so we decided to take a walk around the block, me and him. And so I walked with my son the same route that I used to walk to my grade school.

Dana: [45:00] That's a lot, yeah.

Jess: And said, "This was my commute to school when I was a kid." And walked around the block, and stopped on the back in the house, and said, "Look, see, you can pass through to Yaya's backyard from this house, so you cut through the block here. So when I'd come from a friend's house, I'd cut through the yards." And I effectively got my child from being enclosed in my bedroom to scooting in wet swim clothes around the block, just by the nature of mutually unburdening, the mutual unburdening of inviting each other in.

That was the last day there. And as we're wrapping up, my best friend from grade school came over—and she met me in the sixth grade when I moved into that house—and we took pictures of the two of us out front. And then she points. She goes, "Look, a rainbow." (laughs) And turn around. And there had been no rain, and yet for some reason there's a rainbow on one side.

Dana: No rain?

Jess: No rain, no rain all day. But there's a rainbow on one side of the street, and a sherbet-colored sunset on the other side, behind my mom's house. And that was as we were loading up to the car, and getting ready to get out and get the kids home. That's was our real goodbye. That's the last straw, but it's funny because it's like, I've had this whole pandemic of sorting through the things and not wanting to be done with it, and now I'm super done.

Dana: Isn't that weird? Isn't that weird? Holding on, holding on. I was kind of mad mine went so quickly. I was like, "That's it? That sold in four days?" My mom's somehow sold to old friends of ours. My last moment when I closed it, I looked around, and I had a moment just to myself. And then I left a picture from my childhood with those people—those people who were about to buy the house—and me. My mom wasn't in the photo. But it's from some Christmas together, so I left in the kitchen with a note. "Enjoy the place."

Anyway. But yeah, I feel like I put off. I was like, "Aw, it's already over?" even though it does not feel like that in the moment. It took four months to get there. And yet, I was like, "Aw, now it's done. Now I have to go." For me, it also feels like then I had to go deal with the grief that might be coming later. I could just focus on the logistics, which you and I have talked about.

Jess: When you have work to apply yourself to.

Dana: And that's a purposeful work. I have work. I get to organize. I get to sort. I get to feel good about selling it or having everything moved out. And you can check, you can write on your to-do list "Done." But you don't check off grief. You don't go, "Done."

Jess: It's the reason why people talk about why...

Jolie: Mommy, look!

Jess: You don't have pants on.

Jolie: (laughs)

Jess: (laughs)

Jolie: Come on, chase me!

Dana: (laughs) She laughs maniacally.

Jess: I can't chase you. Are you going to put on underwear or a diaper?

Jolie: Oh!

Jess: You need to put something on, 'cause I don't want pee-pee on my floor.

Jolie: No.

Dana: Sometimes on Zoom, I don't wear pants either.

Jess: (laughs)

Dana: I ask people at the end of all these calls to say their mother's name and how you feel about her right now, today, in this moment, at the end of this conversation. What's coming up for you?

Jess: My mother's name is Jean Marie Schlobohm. And I feel grateful that I am the living legacy of her good work.

Dana: That's beautiful Jess, thank you. You are definitely a living legacy of someone's good work, and we'll give it to Jean, 'cause you're a really wonderful person, and you give a lot of yourself to a lot of other people. And I'm appreciative of all you've given me in my career, and as a friend. So you're the best, and I really appreciate you.

Jolie: Bye!

Dana: Bye! She's so cute, oh my god. Does she have pants on?

Jess: No.

Dana: [start outro] I got to say, if you're going to start a podcast about grief and your dead mom, having a kid interrupt the call right at the end with no pants on and giggle is pretty sweet. And I kind of wish that could happen in every single one of my conversations. How do I top that?

As always, you are invited to go to our website, which is mothersgravepod.com, to see some behind-the-scenes images of this episodes, and to read more about GriefShare and find a group near you, if that's something that you're looking for in your life. This organization means a lot to Jess, because it meant a lot to her mom. So check it out: mothersgravepod.com.

I want to thank Jess for talking with me. Thank you, friend. I love you. I love you. I also want to thank Suzi Pond, one of my oldest friends, with Redbird Media Group for editing and producing this podcast; Alice Anderson for sound mixing; Na'Toria

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When I was growing up, there was a Trivial Pursuit question that said, "What is the town in the U.S. with the most churches per square mile?" And it was my hometown of Wheaton, Illinois. And then randomly, years later, I would leave that town to go to college in the town with the most bars per square mile. Yeah. That town also has a famous racetrack, but I didn't really go there much.

My mom was raised Lutheran, but I wouldn't call my mom religious. And I know we shouldn't label anyone as just religious, because there's so much more nuance to Christianity and faith and spirituality. But for my mom, she was such a fact-based, freethinking, science-driven, feminist, leading woman that I just can't imagine her giving herself over fully, 100%, to a believe system, to a book, to just let go and let God. No, my mom was pretty controlling. The thought of just freely giving of herself to really anything is hard to picture. But my mom did believe in community and giving back to your fellow citizen, being a beacon of love in the world and being kind to everyone you meet: that was my mom. She was the light of the room. She loved people. She loved giving whenever she could.

And so I think she instilled that in me when she enrolled me in youth group services at St. Paul Lutheran Church when I was in middle school. I did handbell choir, that's right. I wore white gloves and rang bells when I was 12 years old. Yeah, I didn't date for many years after that. And because I was just starting to act and hone my skills as a public speaker, any time I got to get up in front of the congregation and read a poem or a passage out loud, ooh, it was my time to shine. I took it way too seriously, and I also got really hyped up about it, and it was just usually Proverbs. I would go on mission-based trips to Nebraska and paint homes on a reservation. We went down to New Orleans and worked at a food pantry. All the civic work I did, I remember loving. And I think that's why my mom got me involved. I think my mom wanted to remind me that there is something outside of myself, and that being good to your fellow citizen and being a good human in the world is really the religion that you want to let guide you.

When my mom died, I inherited a lot of things, and one of those things was her Bible. I hadn't seen it in a long time. I think it was in the basement when I was growing up. But I saw it again. And here it was in my hands, this cream-colored, cracking-along-the-binding, engraved-with-her-name, from-1963 Bible that was encased in a zipper. I

think a lot of Bibles back then were put in a jacket that zips up. And the zipper itself is a cross. I was nervous to unzip it, because truthfully, I knew that she had written inside it. And now, I don't mean some mythical poem or some message to me, but my mom loves writing notes on everything: on the bottom of pots and pans, on the side of a hammer, on the bottom of shoes, on clothes. She will label everything, and write notes on anything. And sure enough, I unzipped this book, and inside it she had written recently, in 2011, that she was reading it. It says, "S. Jo Black, January 1, 2011." She had picked this back up for what reason, I don't know. What was she searching for? What did she need from it? I don't know. But whatever she was looking for, I hope she found the answer, or it gave her some peace. And now I'm going to zip this thing back up, and I'm going to put it back it back in its Tupperware container, and I'm going to put it back in storage, because I have inherited a lot of things, and I just can't have them all around me all the time. It's a lot to carry.

I'll talk to you next time. Go shine your beacons of innate goodness all over this world.
[end 55:05]