

©Death Unfiltered: The Podcast

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Who Has The Right To Tell A Death Story?

Jeanne: Let's jump right into today's episode of who has the right to tell a death story. As we were preparing to do this podcast I started sending out information to people asking them if they'd be willing to tell a story on our podcast. I went to my son who is 16, and I asked him if he would be willing to tell the end of life story of a very dear friend of ours who he was present at her death. I was thinking about how hard this might be, and already kind of assumed he would say, "no" Then I had this really big emotional response come up, that was really about whether or not we have the right to tell someone's death story. I started to get really prickly around it. I wasn't sure that what we were doing was okay.

Staci: Can you tell me more about that more about what you were thinking?

Jeanne: Well, Staci you know that I'm a head first kind of person. I actually think a lot versus feeling person and this time I was all feeling. I was all feeling, I went into a place of someone that experienced family shame, that some of us grow up in. I was thinking that we just don't we don't have a right to talk about what's happened at the bedside. We don't have a right to talk about someone else's information. How does that hit you?

Staci: Actually, I can see your point about wanting to keep what happens by the bedside secret and private. At the same time, for me it is a beautiful gift that happens, that I want to share with people, in the right time and place.

Jeanne: Yeah, it might be that I'm getting sacred and private mixed up. It's one of the things that we've talked about before Staci. Let's just assume, even though we live in different parts of the country, it's -6° here and you've got 50° and sunny. I'm just going to assume that one of us will be at the other person's death. As I'm saying that, I'm just going to ask you right up front, how do you feel if after you die I tell your death story? You know, we can all write beautiful pictures about the end of life.

Staci: I'm good with it. I hope that there will be positive points that you can share with others, to help make their death more meaningful and peaceful. What about you Jeanne? Would you want me to share your death story?

Jeanne: Well it depends. If it's full of lots of ick and lots of terminal agitation I don't want that. Here we are hosting and co-hosting a podcast that's all about, "Hey, let's tell your death story". I get to this little twinge, where I have been with people where the terminal agitation has been so difficult. It just rocked me to the core. I don't do well with terminal agitation, please drug me and I don't want that story about me to be told.

Staci: If I am at your bedside when you pass away, and it is difficult, I will not tell. I'm going back to your point about sacred and secret. I believe that that is a sacred experience for me. When I tell a death story, I just give the nuggets. The valuable lessons that were learned, in that space. I may tell you that the individual was in a lot of pain and I advocated for them not to be. I'm not going to tell you all the details.

Jeanne: Maybe this is the writer in me, Staci. Where I feel like the act of telling the story with the description and the sensory experience is really very important. Let me tell you a little story: a neighbor of mine was killed in a pedestrian car accident, just a few weeks ago. Last week, I went out to the compost, in the back alley, and I saw his brother. I expressed to his brother how sorry I was about the loss of his brother. His brother was like an icon in the neighborhood. He worked in the grocery store. He was just a beautiful human being. I heard the story from the time they were walking home together, all the way through the end. When his mom and the brothers got back to the house, after the death had happened, at the hospital. We stood there for about 30 minutes, it was not as cold as it is today but cold. He told me the whole story and I got in the house and I said to my husband, "Hey, I just talked to our neighbor" and he said, "did he tell you the whole story"? I said, "yeah he told me the whole story and I was so grateful" and he said, "yeah I heard the whole story too." I thought this is part of his process, (I just got full goosebumps) this is the brother's process to tell the story and tell the story and tell the story and tell the story. I don't know if that's about wanting a different end, of course, we all want a different end, when there's an accident or something that happens quickly. We want a different end. We want to play it out, but I watched him play it out and it was almost as if I could see some softening and healing in his body, which told me, it was not his first time, maybe it was his 40th time. Who knows?

Staci: I hear that happens a lot. People tell the story, to help themselves with the grieving process. I also found it interesting when you came in the door and your husband asked you well did you hear the whole story and you said yes and he said I have too, neither one of you shared it. To me, that was sacred. That you each held that sacred story to yourself, even though you had both heard it. I thought that was beautiful!

Jeanne: Nice. Thank you. Thank you. I feel like I'm going back to when my cousin was murdered and how much I needed to process that. I needed to talk about it. I was trying to find people at the hospital who would talk to me. I was trying to find anybody who was just standing at the train station. It was 1997. We're a few years out, that was 23 years ago. It was a long time ago and I still would love to have a conversation with someone who was there. I think that we live in a culture that sees illness and death as failure. There is a lot of that, certainly in certain religious movements but there's that in general. Oh, I fight cancer. I am battling cancer. All of this language, that makes it seem like we have to keep death at bay. Even though I don't feel that way myself. I feel like that, we're so heavily laden in that lie and in that story. I was kind of rapping all the shame that is around death over whether or not we have a right to tell it and that's what I want to make disappear. I want to make it disappear for myself and I want our podcast to be a way to let go of some of that shame that exists.

Staci: I really believe that the mission that you and I have, really includes the idea of getting these stories out. Each time we tell a story keeping the private details, private we loosen that grip on death being a shameful activity. What do you think?

Jeanne: Hey, I'm thinking I'm confused! I'm not sure if we should tell someone's death story or not? Because are we keeping it sacred or secret? But yet, I just heard you say, we should tell death stories while keeping the details secret to reduce the shame around dying, right?

So, I'm not coming into the episode saying, we shouldn't do this. We should not be telling stories. I came into this episode, knowing that this is something that I'm struggling with, a little bit and that other people might be struggling with too. It's not that I had this major magical turnaround, it's just this is an internal conflict that I walk with. I think that there are a lot of people out there like me who say, "I'm not going to tell the details". I had someone ask me the other day, "were you with this person when she died"? I said, "No I was not. I was there before and I was there after". He said, "Well I need to talk to who was there, because I need to know how it went"! Oh! Did I get my defenses up! I absolutely did! Because you know my motto, my motto is, "My job as an advocate is to be holding a sword and a shield. I'm going to protect this person. I'm going to protect their story. I'm going to protect and I'm going to advocate and fight"! So in that moment, I went into protection mode. Because there's a I need to know, or the story would be helpful for me, is a very different energy.

Staci: Yeah. It was different. It was a different ask. Because asking someone to share the experience is different than, "I need to know the details of what happened". It comes from a different place. I hope that I would say that if given the opportunity. I would share parts, a censored part, of people's end-of-life stories. If people want to know, and I believe sometimes it helps that person bring closure. I was just part of a death, a week and a half ago and I didn't describe the details, but I could describe how beautiful and peaceful this gentleman looked. It gave the receiver a lot of comfort. How I described this gentleman, was in his pajamas and how he looked beautiful, and his skin looked good and all these things. He thanked me, because it brought a sense of closure for him. The process of telling the story, and editing the story really does provide that dignity. That's what you and I strive for every single time.....to provide dignity and respect at the end of life. There should be nothing less and everything more.

Jeanne: Absolutely! I know we've had it before and it's something that just keeps, keep, keeps coming up for me. I need to keep ironing out the details of why, this is such a good thing. It really is a good thing. I appreciate the dialogue, in the conversation, around it and I might need to have it with you again. I'm open to that.

Staci: I just want to say something about us, in the work that we do, it may be a good thing to us, but I imagine many of our listeners it's not a good thing. By us role modeling, it's okay to tell a death story, hopefully we will make it less stigmatized, talking about end-of-life.

Jeanne: When you say, "it's a good thing in our work, it's a good thing". You are talking about death?

Staci: Right.

Jeanne: Okay. It can be meaningful for us, and our listeners, to hear about a death story. But just like you started out, many religions and cultures do not want to hear about it. So the more you talk about something, the less stigmatized it is. I believe that's one of our missions, of our podcast.

Jeanne: Excellent! Here's what I'm thinking..... as we go forward, kind of a little bit of a call to action, I would love to invite our listeners this week to, " Ask someone they know, if they would be willing and interested to share an end of life story with them." I have participated in the end of life experience with dozens of people, some people have one, or two or three. Some people weren't there but they still know the death story and I would just encourage our listeners to go ahead and just ask somebody, " Hey, would you like to tell the story of your mom's death"? Just notice what you get in response to that this week.

Staci: We will be back again next week, with another what's your story episode. If you want to be on that episode sometime, talking about this little experiment we're challenging you to do, we would really love that.

Jeanne: You were describing the challenge to our listeners, and I got chills. I got chills because it resonated, because I was thinking, not only pay attention to the words but pay attention to the body language, to the eyes, to their face, to their legs, see what is really happening for them, in addition to what they're also saying.

Staci: Very cool. Very cool. Thank you. We'd like to interview you, for our what's your death story segment. We are looking for a wide array of everyday people, willing to tell their stories. Please pitch us your story, in a couple of sentences and send the pitch to [death.unfiltered@gmail.com](mailto:death.unfiltered@gmail.com).

Jeanne: Thanks for joining us, on another episode of Death, Unfiltered. If you liked what you heard, and want to hear more, subscribe to us on iTunes, Spotify or wherever you get your podcast. If you'd like to know more about what Staci and Jeanne are up too, sign up for our tiny letter at [tinyletter.com/death\\_unfiltered](http://tinyletter.com/death_unfiltered). Can't wait to connect with you again about all things death and dying.