



## Medicine Stories Podcast

Episode 82 with Amber Magnolia Hill

What I'd Be Without You: My Mother's Life, Death, & Legacy of Love.

Air Date: December 9, 2021

[Intro]

[0:00:00]

Hi, friends, it's Amber. This episode is a little different than usual. It is me just sharing from the heart the story of my mother's life and very, very unexpected death. And there are some really special audio bonuses that I'm so honored to get to share with you all. And I'm releasing this on my grandmother's 100th birthday, my mom's mom, who is still living six years after losing her beloved daughter. She's amazing, and it feels so good to release this today on our 100th birthday. I can't believe it! I can't wait to see her. Thank you for being here and holding space for this really deep and vulnerable share, which, really, is my the personal medicine story of my life that is closest to my heart

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[Interview Begins]

*(Intro to Beach Boys' "God Only Knows" plays)*

[0:01:13]

I was driving the other night, and that song came on, and immediately, in that span of time of the few bars of music I just played, I was sobbing. And that's because the song, "God Only Knows" by the Beach Boys, will always remind me of my mother. We played it at her memorial service, and I just remember feeling this sense of expansion, almost like floating, hearing it during that. I'm smiling and singing it. And when I hear it now, it just, immediately, it just encapsulates my love for her, her love for me, and for everyone in her life.

And we listened to the Beach Boys a lot as kids in the car, mostly alone with mom when we were in the car, but when we'd go on trips to visit my grandparents or elsewhere, and it was the four of us we'd always listen to the Beach Boys. And I had this realization, was listening to that song, crying a few nights ago, that it was like a felt memory of all of us singing along to that song. I'm sure we all sing along to many Beach Boys songs back then, back in the eighties and probably into the nineties, too.

Today, the day I'm recording this, is the six year anniversary of my mother's death in a car accident, as she was driving home from work the day after Thanksgiving. We call it the blackest of Black Fridays 2015. She really was the best mom.

I remember in my twenties, you know, going off into the world and meeting new people and just kind of slowly realizing, holy shit, I am so lucky to have a mom I have, meeting other people who had other kinds of moms. And it can be triggering for people who have difficult mothers, I understand that. But I'm not gonna let that dim her light or dim my memory of her or keep me from sharing just how incredible she was.

[0:04:11]

I've been wanting to tell the story of her life and her death on this podcast since the very beginning. When I first started, I thought it would be one of the first episodes but it just never felt right. And then just now on the anniversary on November 27 — oh, and a Nixie got invited to meet some friends at the park. And even though the house is a mess, and I have so much to do it — it felt like it was finally time to talk about it. I thought I would have notes written out of the things I wanted to cover but I'm just gonna speak, and I'm sure at the end I'm going to go back and listen and say, "I forgot that part," and add an addendum at the end.

So the last time I talked to her was two days before. Her death was Wednesday before Thanksgiving 2015, and we didn't get together that year. Thanksgiving's never been a real thing in our family the way it is for some. And she worked, she always worked my whole life. She worked and worked. She was a roulette dealer at Harrah's in South Lake Tahoe. Her and my dad met there dealing in the late seventies. And so we didn't get together, but we talked that day, and she was really close to retirement. Because of the vacation time that she had accumulated, in the new year, she would take I think five weeks off, and then retire on her birthday in March.

So she, after 40, 30 years of working there —I mean, can you imagine just like dealing casino games to people, five days a week? And she always loved it. She was so good with people. She was just the friendliest, happiest, smiley, most genuinely happy, easygoing, friendly, interested in other people person. But she had started to not love it in the last couple years, which was really new, and she knew it was time to be done.

She was 64 when she died. 35 years? If she was 64, she probably started working, you know, like, 40 years. She worked there for 40 years.

[0:06:42]

So during that conversation, I said to her, "I can't wait until you're done, until you're retired, and you don't have to make that dangerous drive home anymore." Because she drove over a mountain over Kingsbury Grade between South Lake Tahoe and Gardnerville, Nevada, where she had moved to. We grew up on the California side of South Lake Tahoe, but the casinos are on the Nevada side right at the state line there. And she had moved to Gardnerville along with a lot of other South Lake Tahoe people and because it was more affordable.

So my mom, Janis with an S, like Janis Joplin, she really didn't like it when people spelled it with the C-E at the end, was born in Oakland in 1951 and two older brothers, and she was just this stereotypically beautiful, blonde, California girl. I remember the story that when her parents divorced when she was 12, her mom took her back to Massachusetts. For the first time in her life, my grandma really left her family and her, like, abusive childhood behind as a very young, like, 19 year old and came out to California. But she was flailing after her divorce, and she decided to take my mom to Massachusetts for the summer. And everyone was just so enamored of her being this California girl. I will never hear, again, the Beach Boys' "California Girls" without thinking of her.

She was kind of a flower child, grew up in the Bay Area in the late sixties, used to drive to San Francisco with her boyfriend Dave — who is going to come back into this story. They reconnected years later, and you know, he was the first to know she died, aside from the people at the scene and the police who knocked on his door that night, and he was the person who told me. But they would drive to San Francisco, see shows at The Fillmore and Winterland, and they saw the Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, Jefferson Airplane, and The Beatles. This is a whole amazing story. I guess I'll just tell it now:

[0:09:06]

So before my mom and Dave started dating, he had a crush on her, and he really wanted to impress her. And the Beatles played Candlestick, I think this was... I don't know. I'm not sure what year it was. '67 maybe? It was their last concert because, you know, they couldn't hear themselves, and no one could hear them. And this was when they finally realized it's not even worth playing loud shows because these girls are screaming so loud.

Candlestick Park in San Francisco — and Dave and a few other people got down on the field. The Beatles were there in the middle of the baseball field on this little stage. They, like, stormed the field, and Dave did it to catch my mom's attention and impress her. He knew she was in the stands. I will put this picture, there's photos on the cover of either the San Francisco Chronicle or the SF Gate the next morning of he's, like, kicking a cop (*Amber laughs*), and Ringo is looking at him. It's amazing, but it worked. It worked, and they got together soon after that, because she was impressed (*Amber laughs*), and they were really in love. And you know, then they broke up. They're teenagers and went on to have other lives and get married. And they each had two kids.

But I always loved hearing the stories about Dave growing up, and when they got back together, I was terrified when my parents divorced when I was in my early 20s, because my mom was such a pure, kind, trusting person, and I was so afraid she was going to get hurt. I can't even... It was such a

deep fear in me that my beautiful, loving, trusting mother would be hurt by someone. But then her and Dave reconnected.

And the first night they met up in person, after months of emailing and calls, my sister and I were there, too. It was like a gathering where all their high school friends got together in Sacramento, where Lacey and I both lived at the time. And we just fucking loved him from the beginning. And I couldn't believe I was meeting this guy whose stories I had heard about him my whole life. And I always liked him when I heard the stories. And he was so clearly enamored of her and like just, "Janis, do you need anything?" standing by her side, making sure she was taken care of, so kind to us, but clearly just fucking in love with her. And we, Lacey and I, were like, "Yes, Yes, Mom. Yes." And they had 10 years in their fifties and into their sixties together, the last 10 years of her life. And she was so happy and he was so happy. They were so well matched so much better than her and my dad.

[0:12:06]

So I woke up on the morning of November 28, 2015. I was house sitting for my good friend, Jen, here in Nevada City. And I had gotten my daughter, she was my only one at the time, Mycelia, back from her dad that afternoon. And we just had a sweet time at our friend's house. Jen's daughter, Nesh is Mycie's good friend, and so we had spent a lot of time in that home. And remember, like we watched America's Funniest Home Videos on Netflix (*Amber laughs*) because I just wanted to show it to her. And she went to bed, I read a book in their beautiful, big bathtub.

And my sister and my mom and I had been texting. We had, you know, an ongoing group chat. There was hardly a day went by that my mom and I didn't text, and then we usually talked at least once, sometimes two or three times a week on the phone, too. And we had this group text going, and we were going to talk on the phone when she got home from work. I think she got off at, like, 5 PM. Yeah. And then she — and we were going to talk because my Uncle Terry, my dad's brother, had called me and was like, "Your dad's not doing well."

Some of you already know my dad's a really severe alcoholic, and he was not, was not, is not, has not been doing well for decades; somehow he's still alive. She's gone, and he's still here, and it makes no sense. And so I was like, "Mom, you know, we got to talk," and she's like, "Okay, I'll call you when I get home." And then she didn't.

She wasn't calling me, and I called her a couple times, and the phone did this weird thing: it didn't go to voicemail. I forget what it did, but it made, like, maybe a high pitched kind of screeching sound, and I was like, "Oh, that's so weird." But for some reason, I didn't get worried, which is really, really unusual, considering that my entire life, from young childhood, I was terrified that she would die in a car accident driving home from work.

She worked swing shift when I was little, so from 6 PM to 2 AM, and then my dad worked nine to five during the day, and they did those shifts so that someone was always home with us. And I've always kind of been an overthinker, and that would sometimes lead to me lying awake in the middle of the night, or if I got up to use the bathroom or something, and she wasn't home yet, because she would do her grocery shopping also on the way home from work, when there's no one at the store. And it's fucking snowing at South Lake Tahoe, you know. So it's scary to be on the roads, and that's what I

meant when I said to her during our last conversation that I couldn't wait till she was retired, so she wouldn't drive that scary mountain road in the snow anymore. That's, like, a very steep incline up the mountain and then back down, morning and night.

So this was a really deep fear of mine, and I just can't believe that it didn't occur to me that something might be wrong. And same with my sister, she went out that night and had a sushi dinner with her husband and friends, and she said it was, like, just this great night. And even though she had been part of the text that we were going to talk later and that didn't happen — which is totally unusual. Mom was so reliable, she loved us more than anything. She wanted to talk to us all the time — she didn't think anything weird, either. Of course, Dave was having a very different experience and my grandmother, as well.

My grandmother, who was 93 at the time — and is about to turn 100 in a couple of weeks — Mom called her every day on her way home from work. They were also super close. And so Meme, we call her, it's the French Canadian word for grandmother. She grew up speaking French there in Massachusetts. Meme knew something was wrong, because her daughter didn't call her and Meme and Dave were on the phone throughout the evening. But we didn't know anything about this. So I'm so grateful for that, if only that we got a full night's sleep. And I hate that Dave and Meme and my Uncle Charlie, my mom's brother who lives with Meme, didn't have that experience and had the experience of not knowing for hours what was going on, but knowing that something was wrong. *(Amber cries)*

[0:17:09]

So I woke up early the next morning. Owen and I, who's now my husband, were going to drive down to Sacramento to look for a used car. So I was up before seven, and I turned my phone on, and I have a voicemail from Dave. And I'm thinking it's my mom, and she's gonna tell me about how she dropped her phone in the toilet or something. But it was Dave and he said, "You know, your mom was in an accident, driving home from work last night, and she didn't make it."

And maybe because of my lifelong envisioning of this very thing happening, there wasn't like a "No!" you know, how, like in movies and stuff that happens? I didn't feel that sense of, like, absolute shock. I felt like, "Oh, it happened. It happened." Like I don't, it was this inevitability feeling. And I remember I was oil pulling, so I had coconut oil in my mouth when I got his voice mail. And I ran into the kitchen and spit it out and called him because my first thought is like, "Wait, what?" like, "Okay, need more info, need to confirm that I just heard what I think I just heard."

So I called him and he answered, and I was like, "What happened?" you know. And he said she was in an accident. And I just remember saying, "and she died?" and him saying "Yes." And I was thinking she probably slid off the road on the mountain, because that was my fear for her, but that is not what happened.

And it took us a while to piece together why she was hit by the car that hit her. And it took a lawyer and a wrongful death suit to find this all out, which is one of the reasons we did that. Within the first week, three different people — one was the funeral director, who cared for her body and cremated her, one was the attorney who had done her trust a few years earlier, I'm forgetting who the third

person was now, but some professional, it was a police officer — they all said to us, “This shouldn't have happened. Someone fucked up. Someone is to blame, and you need to get to the bottom of it.”

Death is so hard as it is — maybe, especially, unexpected death like this. But then when there's like this layer of police and investigations and things involved, it's yeah, it's just another layer. Just another thing to deal with.

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Okay, so that morning, I'm alone in the house. Mycelia's still asleep upstairs. I'm talking to Dave, and finding out what happened, which was that it was dark — because, you know, daylight savings had happened. It was around 6:30pm. She had carpooled with a friend over the mountain, and then her friend had let her off in this small parking lot where people who carpool from Gardnerville into South Lake Tahoe park. And from that parking lot, she had texted Lacey and I for the last time, and then gotten her car and driven the road she had driven hundreds of times already and came up to what was normally a stoplight, but the stoplight had been knocked out earlier in the day by another accident — someone driving drunk.

But all Dave knew and all he told me that morning was that the road mom was driving on is kind of a lazy, country lane. The road it intersected is a highway, just two lanes. This is a very rural area. So just a little two-lane highway. And I think she's 19 at the time, a 19 year old woman, mom was at the stop. She knew it was normally a four-way stop with a stoplight, right, because she had driven it all the time. So she came up to it and stopped.

The woman coming from her left was not familiar with the area. She had been to a Thanksgiving thing the day before, didn't know there was supposed to be a stoplight there, and so she just blew right through the intersection at the same moment mom pulled forward into it, and so she T-boned. Basically, her car hit right at the driver's door (*Amber cries*). He said she died instantly then. I hope that's true.

Mom didn't see her coming from the left because there had been other cars also coming from the left but who had moved into the little lane to turn right onto the road that mom was, you know. So those cars that were coming from her left, but were turning right onto the road she was on were blocking her view of this car coming.

And then, of course, I wonder maybe she was looking at her phone, maybe we were texting at that moment, or maybe she was fiddling with the radio. And you know, I don't know, maybe she could have been more aware that that car was coming, but I don't know. And she wasn't, obviously, because she put her foot on the gas and pulled forward. That moment just haunted me so deeply the first few months. Even still, sometimes I'll pull up to an intersection, and a car will come fucking racing in front of me from the left, and it'll like trigger me, like it happened to me.

She's so close to retiring, and her and Dave were gonna move here to be with me and my daughter. She loved being a Grammy more than anything else. She was such a good Grammy. Oh god, I can't even tell you how much I was looking forward to spending the rest of her life with her just like being with her was always fun. And it wasn't like it was just like “Woo fun!” She made everything enjoyable

just by being herself, just by being happy and loving. And she loved music, and we would sing in the car.

I remember, probably a year after her death walking into Staples, and suddenly having the thought like, "Oh, if she had moved here, what if I had run into her in Staples," or like anywhere, you know, and just how fun that would have been and how happy I would like to see her somewhere, anywhere unexpectedly, and in my town, where I don't, I've never seen her randomly because she didn't live here. And if she was here, she was with me. And oh, I just started like crying in Staples.

[0:26:01]

Grief is so unpredictable like that and, you know, our grief is equal to our love. That framing has been really helpful for me to realize that I'm this fucking sad because I loved her so much.

I remember in the first kind of after the initial few weeks of just hell, and like reckoning with the fact that this was actually real, I remember hitting this place of, like, being high. And I felt this feeling the other night when "God Only Knows" came on, of being so flooded with gratitude that she was my mom, that I was just like floating on air.

And, you know, many spiritual traditions hold — and modern science also backs up — that gratitude is like the highest state of being. It's like the highest frequency emotion we can experience. And so I realize that now, and I have that framework now that the reason — and some people thought I was crazy, they thought I should just be like, you know, in a suicidal depression — but I was like, "No, no, I am. I am a lost on a wave of gratitude and love because I knew her, because I was born of her, that was born from her. I was made inside of her." Then I grew up bathed in her love, and she taught me to love my own daughters. And there's such a gift in grief because it means that we have loved.

So that morning, my first thought was, "I have to tell my sister." Lacey is also super close to mom, and Lacey, like me, is very sensitive, emotional. And Dave had not called her; he had only called me the night before and left that voicemail because he knew that I should be the one to tell Lacey. You know, her sensitivities are the same but different from mine, and I appreciate so much that he knew that she should hear it from me because that was right, and we all agree that that was right.

But she wasn't answering, and I called and called and called, and she didn't answer. And then I heard Mycelia wake up upstairs and start to come down the stairs, and I stood at the bottom of the stairs as she walked down, and I was sobbing. She was like, "What?" and she stopped and she told me later she thought that maybe Owen broke up with me, and that her thought was like, "That sucks. But it doesn't really affect me." So I didn't want to tell her until she was closer to me physically, but she was stopped, like, near the top of the stairs, like "What happened?" And I was like, "Come down, come down," you know, and she got a little closer. And I told her, and I remember she went *gasp*, and then she jumped into my arms from a couple of stairs up.

And I had already told Owen at that time. He had been up early, too. So as soon as I hung up with Dave, I called him, and he was on his way over. He brought food, coffee, but he wasn't there yet when she woke up, and I'm glad she and I had time. So then the three of us sat there for the next two hours, while I called my sister 1000 times.

And I called her husband's cell phone — this was before his paragliding, traumatic brain injury. And he had gotten up early that morning to go skiing on some remote mountain. And by some miracle, he had no reception there, had never had a bar of reception there, but my call went through, and so he answered. And he was like, "Amber," you know, "What's up?" and I told him what happened. And he was like, "Oh my god. Okay, like, I'm on the top of this mountain right now an hour away, but I'm gonna go right home. And I can't believe I got reception here to hear this."

And I wanted him to be there when Lacey got the news. I did not want her to be alone. So I'm so glad he got that call, but at the same time, like I had to tell her. It was just like I could not think of or do anything until I talked to her. I did call Meme during this period, and I talked to her and to my Uncle Charlie, too.

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Finally, Lacey answered. Tyler wasn't there yet, but I couldn't wait, and he did get there, like, five minutes later. you know, on TV shows how they always say, "Are you sitting down?" I didn't do that. But I found out later that I should have done that, because she told me that she had been standing, like, doing her morning thing, and that she collapsed on the floor when I told her. She had woken up and seen all the missed calls from me and assumed that something had happened with our dad because of his alcoholism and because Uncle Terry had called the day before to say he really wasn't doing well. They lived together at the time. He did end up going into the hospital that day — which was the least of our problems.

So I told Lacey, and I remember I just said it: I said, "Mom died in a car accident last night." And she has also said, though, that she's glad I just came out and said it. But in retrospect, sometimes I wonder if I should have been softer, said like, "Mom died last night" and then told her how when she asked. I don't know. I don't know. And I just remember her saying, "You're coming to Tahoe, right?" And I hadn't even thought of that yet. But I was like, "Oh, of course. Yeah, of course I'm coming to Tahoe."

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I just stopped recording to take a little break. So it's hard to tell, only because I'm afraid I'll leave something vital out, and like, not honor her in some way which is a feeling that I say that I've had a lot in these last six years, living in a culture with no real grief rituals or ancestral remembrance practices — I often wonder if I'm doing enough to honor her. Like sometimes we all get together, me and Owen and the girls and my sister and her husband, Tyler, go to my grandma's house in Sacramento, and Uncle Charlie's there, and Dave will come, too, and we'll have this whole beautiful day, and I don't know if we ever actually don't mention her. I think she always gets mentioned, but I always have the feeling like we should be, like, doing ritual every time we're together. We should be singing to her and talking to her, but that's just now what we do.

Nixie, she's five now um, she talks about her a lot, and I do feel like she has a sense of her, and she has a sense of the sacred around Grammy. And she really, like, loves to honor her and talk about her, and look at her photo and light a candle or burn herbs when we do that.

[0:35:00]

And then Nixie's Grampy, Owen's dad, Mike, died in a car accident last summer. I still can't believe these are our truths. I just had such a moment of disreality saying that sentence, and that's happened a lot of times when I've said the sentence that "my mom died in a car accident." I can't believe that Mike did, too. My mom was the best grandma, and Mike was the best grandpa. I was super close to my incredibly loving mom, and Owen was super close to his incredibly loving dad.

Owen's dad was driving with his new-ish girlfriend on a date, and it was about the same time of day, 6:30, when, again, a young, young woman crossed the double yellow line and hit him head on. His girlfriend survived; she was definitely banged up, but she's okay. Mike died instantly.

That woman was very drunk; the woman who hit my mom was not. There was no substance involved in my mom's accident. The woman who hit Mike, I think she was Care Flighted. And then when she was released from the hospital, she disappeared, and she was eventually arrested, and she's in jail now. She was at first ruled incompetent to stand trial, but I think that was reversed recently.

It's been so bizarre, both Owen and I, yeah, losing our beloved parent. And then, like I said at the beginning, going through processes of dealing with courts and police and investigators and insurance companies.

Nixie has some very strong grandparent spirits watching over her. I feel that. We have photos of Grampy and Grammy. It's kind of cute, too, that those were their names. They never met, but they would've fucking loved each other. I think about it all the time. They would have been such good buddies, but I feel that they're together now and that they are just raining their love and their blessings on us, on their granddaughters. Mike loved Mycie as if she were his own granddaughter, and she loved him, too. He's just just like my mom, like, impossible not to love: so warm, huge smile, so generous.

I still wish that we had more of a culturally learned, culturally sanctioned, ritualized way of remembering them, instead of having to just piece it together. But that's what we're doing. That's what we have. And that's all we can do — sorry about deep breathing (*Amber laughs*). Just thinking about where to go next with a story.

[0:39:42]

I wrote my mom's obituary, I planned her memorial. I heard this podcast, Brene Brown's podcast, where she talks about over performing and underperforming in times of crisis and how among siblings, the older sibling tends to overperform while the younger one underperforms, meaning usually the younger will kind of fall apart, not really be functional, while the oldest one, like, goes into high efficiency mode and takes care of business, and it's definitely what happened.

And then after the memorial, which she died November 27, the memorial was December 12, oh, I just crashed. I fell apart after that. Jen who's house I was at when I got the news and was my best friend, I remember, I came home, and I couldn't function. I was not, like, I remember being hungry and being like, "Okay, I'll make a bagel. That's easy." And then standing in the kitchen and being like,

“What do I do? What do I need?” And just going through all this effort of, like, making a list like, “Okay, bagel, get it out of the fridge. Cream cheese, get it out of the fridge. Get a butter knife, get a butter knife to spread it? Toast it. Yeah, toaster oven is what I put it in.” It's really common in grief, you know, to be super forgetful. Like, I remember getting into the car and then like, I didn't have my keys, and I couldn't find my keys. Just little things like that.

So Jen, let us stay at her house, and she let me sleep in her room — the room I was in when I heard Dave's voicemail. And Macy slept upstairs with Nesha, and Jen slept in another room. And she got Mycie to school every day that week. She got her fed for all three meals. She got me fed. And I just fucking laid in bed and cried and cried.

You know what else is kind of crazy, thinking about that bed in that room? A month before all this, in October 2015, Joanna Newsom's album had come out — oh, why aren't I thinking of the title? And the last song on it, “Time as a Symptom,” is so beautiful and just one of my favorites; such a meaningful song. And I remember laying in Jen's bed the month before Mom died listening to that song on repeat and weeping, thinking about the people who I loved who had died and thinking about death. It's a song about death. So much of Joanna's work is about death and impermanence, and that song really is. And it just kind of feels like my lifelong fear of her dying in this way, like a premonition or like a pre-echo, or something.

In that deepest, falling apart grief in that week, when I just laid in Jen's bed and cried, I just remember being in so much pain that I looked online for help, like “help with grief” or something, and I found this website Refuge in Grief. I'm gonna look right now and see if that's still the URL, but it's the work of Megan Devine and it really helped. It actually helped because it reflected back to me what I was going through — yeah, [refugeingrief.com](http://refugeingrief.com). She has a book also called, *It's OK You're not OK*, and she has an online course called *Writing Your Grief* and a bunch of other things. It's really good and I really recommend her work: D-E-V-I-N-E, Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*.

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And this is the week leading up to the Winter Solstice, too, which, you know, it's a very hard time of year for a lot of people, just so dark. So dark and then wait, I feel like maybe it's something else I wanted to tie in. I don't know, but then Christmas happened.

I love Christmas. I was coming out the other side a little bit at that point, got the tree and had a really lovely celebration with my landlords at the time and their family. And I remember being over at my landlord's on Christmas, and I had had a glass of wine, and I was talking to their son. And I suddenly felt extremely nauseous. And I was like, whoa, it must be the wine and like, the grief, and I'm just still in a weird place.

And then, a couple days later, still feeling weird, and I took a pregnancy test, and it was negative. I was still, like, five days from the first day of my period at that point. And then, day after my period was late in January, I take another pregnancy test. I was alone in the home I was renting at the time, a tiny little place that Mycelia and I lived in, and it was positive. And I just immediately started sobbing, sobbing, again, in this elevated state of expansive love and gratitude, knowing this was a gift from my mother.

So another aspect of this here is that on the New Moon in November, a couple weeks before she died, I believe it was November 5, Owen and I, we've been together for two years at that point, and we had always said that we weren't going to have kids or a kid together. I felt like I wasn't resourced enough. I'd had Mycelia at age 25. We had no money, we had no family help because we didn't live near family who really helped. My mom helped whenever she could, but she was a couple hours away and working full time.

But Owen and I were together all day, and somehow, somehow, by the end of that day, we had decided that we did want to have a child. It was so unexpected. Like, neither of us woke up that morning thinking about it. It's just the way this conversation unfolded throughout the day, but we were like, but we need resources. I was like, "I'm not doing it again, scrambling every fucking day to survive." And so we talked about, like, could we ever afford a house? What, how could we even do this? We don't know. But now we're, like, setting the intention that we want to.

And I remember thinking, "Okay, I'm not going to tell my mom we've decided this," because there was nothing she wanted more than another grandchild, and I didn't want to get her hopes up in case we never did acquire those resources. And we never did have that child." But a few days later, I was just like, "I have to tell her."

And I remember I was driving when she called, and I pulled over into a parking lot and told her, and she was so happy. She loved Owen. Owen's a lot like her husband, Dave, was just super, sweet, soft, loving, gentle, easygoing, kind man. And those last couple weeks of her life, she was constantly sending me links, like nutrition for conception, and things like that. And I remember at her memorial, a number of her friends being like, "Okay, your mom was always happy, but she was so happy these last couple weeks." And they didn't know that that was why, you know, they were like she was just glowing with her retirement coming up and and everything.

And we had used a condom — let me say that, as well. Like we were, I thought okay, mom's dead, and she was like the one resource I did have and would have, because she was going to move up here. So yeah, I don't know about this whole having a baby thing anymore. So let's definitely try to not conceive, and yet we did. And so when I saw that positive result on the pregnancy test, I was just like, blown away, just overwhelmed with gratitude and love and meaning. It felt so meaningful, right?

And I sobbed and sobbed and sobbed, happy out of my mind, and I called my sister first and didn't tell Owen. First I told Lacey, because it felt so connected to mom, you know, and to our lineage, and she was thrilled. She loves being an auntie. She doesn't have kids of her own, and I wanted to tell him in person, too. So I did that, I think, later in the day, and he was happy, too.

[0:50:13]

And I will always, always feel that Nixie is a gift from my mom, a parting gift. It's so hard that she's not here, like I can't believe they haven't met, you know, like, makes no sense to me that they didn't overlap in the physical. And I just think all the time how much my mom would love her, how much she loved Mycelia when she was little, and always through all of her life.

But like, my mom could just have fun. Like, she could have a little kid fun. She was goofy, she was a total goofball. I'm gonna try to play this audio clip that I took the last time my mom visited us, it was in September of that year in her new car, which was the car that she died in. My mom and Mycie were laughing so hard, and I opened a little audio recording up on my phone and took this short little recording, and I'm so glad I did.

—

*(Recording of Mycie & Janis laughing)*

*Mycie: I was walking, I was trying to turn those lights off*

*Janis: I said, "Why don't you turn those lights off in the kids' bathroom and her bedroom..."*

*Mycie: And it was on, and I was going like this... I was like... and then I'm like...*

*Janis: It just looked so funny (Janis laughs).*

*Mycie: But it was way different than that. It was more funny!*

*Amber: A little slapstick?*

*Janis: Yeah (Janis laughing), definitely.*

—

Yeah, so I think about how much she would love Nixie as this joyful, magical little girl that she is, but then, she would love seeing Mycie as a teenager, as a beautiful, young woman, so grounded and sure of herself, intelligent, interesting, and talented. And oh god, that's like taking a stake through my heart when I think about the fact that my mom's not here to watch Mycie be a teenager, become a young woman, become herself.

My mom, my mom had a lot of fun in her teen years; she was close to her high school friends her whole life. And I did too, and I'm still close to my high school friends. And I see Mycelia doing the same thing we did, just loving her friends and having fun and being a nice person who people liked to be around.

And I know she'd be so proud of me, too, to be so proud of me as a mother. She told me that a lot. She told me that she had learned from watching me mother, and that she wished she could go back and do things differently when me and my sister were little — even though I find no fault in the way I was raised, you know. She just kind of talking about the processed food and constant Western medical interventions and, you know, like, endless TV consumption, but that's just what everyone was doing back then.

[0:53:56]

So Mycie, speaking of her being so grounded and self-assured, she spoke at my mom's Memorial, nine years old, me and my sister stood up there, and I said (*Amber laughs*), "Just like at mom and Dave's wedding, Lacey and I are standing here together: I will be speaking, and Lacey will be crying, but I'm speaking for both of us.

And Mycie stood with us, and she read this beautiful thing that she had written the morning we found out that her Grammy had died. So my sister said, "You're coming to Tahoe, right?" And I was like "Oh yeah, okay, of course, I'm coming to Tahoe." And me and my uncle Charlie, were going up there, too.

So Mycie and I drove to her dad's house to pick up some of her things to drive up to Tahoe, and I remember driving up Broad Street in Nevada City on our way to her dad's house. She just started sobbing, and, you know, she had been crying all morning. But she was like, "She was just about to move here, Mom. She was going to be with us!" It just broke my fucking heart into a thousand pieces.

So we got her things from her dad's and then we drove to our place to pack up. And she came out of her room with this plastic bottle that Grammy had given her when she was visiting a couple months earlier. And this was something that she had bought back in the sixties or seventies, my mom, and always held on to and she had just found it. And so she thought, "Oh, my granddaughter will like this." This is plastic bottle, and it says, "Message from California," and on the inside, there was a blank piece of paper. So it's like supposed to be like a message in a bottle, you know, but no one had ever written on it.

And so Mycie came out of her room with it and was like, "Mom, I just found this." And I said, "You should write a note to Grammy on that right now while I pack," and she did. It's the sweetest fucking thing ever, and she read that at the memorial. So proud of her. I'll see if I can get an audio of that put in here, too. And if not, I'll, um, I'll post a photo of it on the homepage for this episode, which will be at [mythicmedicine.love](http://mythicmedicine.love). I'll put all the relevant photos — like Dave kicking the cop as Ringo watches (*Amber laughs*).

—

*(Mycelia speaking at Janis' memorial @56:40)*

*Hi, Grammy,*

*I love you. You're not here anymore. You're in heaven. I want you to know how much we love you and we still and still love you.*

*It was such a surprise when you died. Everything you did, you did with love. I love you with all my heart. Your love and compassion with everything and everyone brought me so much joy.*

*I love you, Grammy.*

—

[0:57:14]

When we went up to Tahoe, and it was so beautiful. I remember I had Owen pull over on the side of the road once we got into highway 50, and I got out and just took photos. And like here I was, a few hours from finding out that the person I had loved the most for the longest period in my life, a person I had loved so thoroughly for 34 years, had died. But I was just enraptured and in awe of the beauty around me.

And the whole next few weeks when I was in Tahoe, I haven't gone up to Tahoe in the winter in a long time in all four-wheel drive. I'm so out of practice driving in the snow. And so being back there in the snow, it was like so visceral, the memories of growing up there, and again, a sense of gratitude to my parents for raising me there, but really feeling this connection to my mom through the landscape that we had lived in together for so long. And I just, I was just in awe of the beauty of Lake Tahoe in winter through that whole period, and it felt really interwoven with my grief and my love for my mom.

I want to talk a little about her memorial: so it was a snowstorm in South Lake Tahoe, and yet there were 350-400 people there, and more people would have come if it weren't for the snow, too. A lot of people didn't because of that and because it was near Christmas, and they were like, "I'm already flying in a couple weeks. I can't afford to fly again," you know. But it was just packed because people loved her so much.

So many people during those weeks and at that service came up to me and Lacey, and were like, "Your mom was my best friend." And I mean some of them, I was like, "Who are you?" And I had never met these people but just that was the impression that she left on people. And she was such a good listener, so compassionate and kind and loving, that people literally considered her their best friend. And it kind of made Lacey and I laugh because we both considered her our best friend, too (*Amber laughs*).

But the story I want to tell about her memorial is that when Dave spoke, he had everyone, like, cheer and yell and clap for her — I'll try to get that moment put in here, too. And it was so beautiful and amazing! I've never heard of anyone doing that at a memorial, and I didn't know he was going to do it. And it was just like... Ugh, talk about like, a collective ritual, you know. We kind of all got to process these huge feelings by doing that, and it felt really good. And we just kind of got to, like, physically and vocally express our love for her together that way. It was so awesome. I really recommend it (*Amber laughs*).

*(Dave speaking at Janis' memorial @1:00:34)*

*We're all gonna, on the count of three, we're going to yell, and we're going to scream, and we're going to clap so she can hear us. Alright? So, you know, just to show your appreciation to her, and how she touched everybody in this place right here. Okay? Don't be shy (crowd laughs). Okay, 1, 2, 3...*

*(Crowd laughs, cheers, whistles and claps)*

—

[01:01:22]

I want to share something really not helpful that someone said to me during this time.

I learned a lot about how we treat grieving people in this culture, how terrible of a job we are at supporting people in grief, how many stupid things we say to them. One of them — this isn't the story I want to share, but I also really hate "Everything happens for a reason." I don't think that's true. Like, I think the truth people are trying to get out there is that you can find meaning and growth in anything. But that doesn't mean that everything happens for a reason. That's a fucked up thing to say to someone who just lost someone.

So I, right before she died, I had been emailing with someone, and we were going to do, I don't know, we're going to work together in some way, some business thing. I think I was going to like wholesale products with them, which I don't do now, but at the time, I was just starting to explore it. And like I was supposed to send them a bunch of products, then this happened.

And so a few days after she died, I remembered this, and I emailed this person. I said, "This is what's happened. I don't know when I'll be in touch with you again." And they wrote me back and were like, "Oh my god, I'm so sorry! Of course, I understand. Also, your mom's soul is lost right now because that's what happens to people who die suddenly, and you need to do this ritual from Native American tradition, and then say this prayer from the Taoist tradition..." It was like this hodgepodge of different beliefs and traditions and what I had to do to guide my mom's soul into the next plane or whatever.

And I was just so fucking pissed when I read it, because — and I had read that idea before, too, that people who die unexpectedly their souls can become lost. And I'm not saying that can't happen or doesn't happen. I don't know if that happens or not. It certainly makes a certain sense. But my sense had been from the beginning — and I had actually had this conversation with both my sister and my grandma — we all felt that mom was at peace from the moment she died. Like, we felt that strongly and a number of people who worked with her, who also lived in Gardnerville and drove through that intersection every day on their way to work, after her death told us and like some of them posted on Facebook, "Every time I drive through this intersection since Janis died, I get such a feeling of peace."

And what makes sense to me here is that we died how we lived, or we are in death how we were in life. And in life, Mom did no one wrong. Everyone who she loved knew they were loved. None of us feel like anything was left unresolved. There's no feeling of "I didn't get to say that thing," or "she never said that thing to me that I always wanted her to say."

[1:05:07]

And there's, there's this line in that Joanna Newsom song, "Time as a Symptom." She says, "I know you can yield when it comes down to it," — "bow" I think is the word — "bow like the field when the wind blows through it."

And in those early weeks when the moment of impact was playing in my mind, over and over again, that line brought me comfort because my sense is that she yielded into death. She went peacefully because nothing was left undone. Her soul was not lost; that she was welcomed by her ancestors as someone who had done the best she could, in the time that she was in her body on Earth.

I eventually wrote that woman back and told her how hurtful and unhelpful her email had been. And she got it, and she apologized. And I think it's a good story to share, to make sure that we don't throw our own beliefs on other people who are deep in grief. If you know they share your beliefs, if you're Christians, and you know it's going to comfort them to think that their loved one is in heaven, now, then, by all means. But if you don't know they share your beliefs — and especially, especially don't say something negative like “her soul is lost”. I wish we did grief and understood grief differently in our culture because it can be extremely isolating. Megan Devine, again, she has good work around the unhelpful things people say. I think she might go into it in that book as well.

[1:07:29]

Okay, wrapping up now. Thank you. I love you, anyone who's still listening at this point.

I found one of these posts talking about the intersection that my mom drove through. It popped up as a Facebook memory yesterday because this was posted by a co-worker of hers on December 1, 2015:

*Every day as I drive through the valley, I look over towards the place where your soul was carried to heaven. Even if every other part of the valley is gray, that small area has been beautiful and bright.*

*I have been overcome with emotion every single morning on my drive to work, but it hasn't all been sadness. I feel like you are at peace.*

She wrote this on my mom's wall:

*I feel like you are at peace, and you are smiling down on your family and the people you loved, and your soul is flying high over the mountains of this valley. You had such a beautiful smile, Janis. You will be dearly missed.*

Seems like a good place to tell you that at the homepage for this podcast that [mythicmedicine.com/podcast](https://mythicmedicine.com/podcast). I've just put up a bunch of pictures of my mom including when she was voted best smile and her high school yearbook. And I also put up a video clip — or, I hope to. I haven't tried yet. Hopefully, it works — of her 40th birthday.

So I hadn't seen this video until after she died, but her friend Delicia hosted basically a roast. It's so sweet. I'm wondering, like, did they all do this for each other at their fortieths? Probably like 15 women there, and I was there, too. Delicia's daughter, Steph, was one of my best friends but, you know, we were like playing downstairs while they did this roast, and someone took a video.

So I mean, it's not the best quality. I literally videoed a VHS on a little TV from my phone, but it's about a minute long of her friend, Cindy, talking about my mom volunteering to help with Girl Scouts, about how she really wasn't very helpful because all she did was talk (*Amber laughs*) — which I, you know, I realize now, listening to what I've said so far, that I talked more about her death than her life. And just the one thing I want to share — I'm sure it's already come through — but how friendly she was and how much she loved people.

[1:10:13]

So Lacey and I both have so many memories of being, like, at the grocery store with her, and she would run into someone she knew and just talk and talk, and we would be like, just begging, you know. I remember being, like, near tears at some points just wanting to leave, but she just loved people, and she loved talking.

And so she talked on the phone a lot, you know, these eighties and nineties phones with the cord attached to them. I remember getting cordless phones in the late nineties. And, oh, there's a photo of her on the phone somewhere. I'm like, oh, this is her. This photo just captured her essence: nineties, cordless phone. She talked to her friends all the time, and to my Auntie Karen, a lot. They were married to brothers, Gary and Terry.

And there were a few times where she would be on the phone forever. And you know, kids — like, my kids are so the same way now — if you're distracted in any way from paying all your attention to them, they're like, "Mom!" and then she would finally get off the phone. And I'd be like, "Finally, who was it? You know, Alicia, Robin, Auntie Karen, Chris?" She's like, "Oh, it was a wrong number. Maureen lives in Ohio, and she has two kids..." (*Amber laughs*)

She would, like, know this person's life story, and she would meet strangers like that all the time, too. And they would just drop deep during whatever time they had to interact, and then they'd go on with their lives. And I think about that, when I do this podcast. I think that maybe she blessed me with some of that innate curiosity about other people and desire to know their stories.

[1:12:07]

I kind of wanted to wrap up about what happened that day and about the wrongful death suit because that might be a little confusing.

And also, I had said earlier that there was not a substance involved in my mom's crash, which there wasn't, except there kind of was because it never would have happened if the drunk guy earlier in the day hadn't knocked out the stoplight. And again, we never would have known that happened if we hadn't filed a wrongful death suit against the state of Nevada, the Nevada Department of Transportation, NDOT.

And so, what, you know, hiring an attorney did for us was made an investigation happen that wasn't gonna happen either way, or any other way because NDOT really wanted to brush this under the rug and pretend nothing happened and they weren't at fault. But what the subpoena of the NDOT workers showed is that they knew they were leaving the intersection unlit and dangerously, dangerously unlit. But they were told by their superiors to go home and figure it out the next day, or

maybe even on Monday. Part of it was definitely that it was the Friday after Thanksgiving, and people still wanted to be on their Thanksgiving break. They didn't want to work.

And there's one, like, farmhouse on that corner. There's not a lot of houses there, but there's one house right on the corner where the accident happened. And the guy who lives there, he also talked to our attorney, and he said that when he saw the NDOT workers packing up without having lit the place to make the intersection, make it clear that it was an intersection, that he ran out from his house and told them, "If you leave right now, someone will die here tonight." That man was also apparently the first person to get to my mom. I've always wanted to just pull my car up and knock on his door. Maybe I will do that.

I get really triggered sometimes seeing accidents and seeing ambulances and, like, lights blaring at accident scenes, that, a few times, has just set me off, you know — deep, heavy breathing, crying, thinking what that intersection looked like that night, how many personnel were there, how many lights and sirens are flashing, and that they were there for my mom, who was dead.

Going through the wrongful death suit was a five-year process. It was five years. They were supposed to be one year, like a kind of a statute-of-limitations thing. But somehow it just kept getting pushed, and then, of course, with COVID, but it finally ended last month. And we won, and we weren't sure if we were going to.

Like, it doesn't feel like a win at all. It doesn't feel like a victory. Actually, the whole process felt so dehumanizing. My sister was like, "I don't even want to open the envelope with this check in it, because it's not Mom," you know. And, obviously, money is nice, but for us, this was about accountability for NDOT, so that they never again cause someone's death or injury by their own negligence, by their desire to go home and eat more turkey.

And it was hard. It was hard sitting across tables from their attorney and having him be like, "We didn't do it. It wasn't a big deal." And like, I don't know. I won't go too into the process, but it was very dehumanizing. And I guess I felt like them finally being forced to admit culpability by a judge would help, emotionally, in some way, but it didn't. It's not an apology. They were made to admit that they were negligent and that caused her death. But no one got in touch with us, personally, to apologize or make a human connection — which I realized, I don't know we thought that would happen or we at least wanted it to happen.

[1:17:13]

One human connection that was made, though, was that we have had contact, my sister met in person with the woman who was driving the car that hit mom, and I've talked to her on Zoom, and we've emailed and texted also. But, you know, we just, we don't hold her accountable at all. It wasn't her fault. It wasn't her fault. And ultimately, she joined us or whatever in the wrongful death suit because she was, her life was also greatly impacted by this accident; she has lifelong injuries. And we just have so much care and love for her, and she has so much care and love for us — me, my sister, and Dave. And that feels good that at least there was this one human connection made through this.

And okay, also wanted to talk about just another really interesting coincidence with my mom's death and then Grampy Mike's death — both dying at 6:30pm, both hit by young women, that they died in

counties with the same name, although they were in different states: Douglas County, Nevada for my mom and Douglas County, Oregon, for Mike. And also, the towns were similarly named: my mom was in Gardnerville, and Mike was in I think it's called Gardener. It was just so bizarre, the first few days after Mike died to, like, see these parallels between them. I don't necessarily think it means anything cosmic, but it's definitely interesting.

[1:19:02]

Okay, I think I'm just gonna close now with something that my mom's good friend, Robin, another Facebook wall post about a month after mom died, she posted this on my Facebook wall.

And I want to say here, too, if you know someone who has lost a loved one, please share your stories about that person, share who they were, too. I can't even tell you, I'm telling you, and you heard the audio clips of all these people that loved my mom so much, this is the only — it was probably not the only — but do it in writing. Do it in writing so they can go back and reread it. This is the only thing I think that I've received in writing that really captured who my mom was to her friend, Robin, shared stories about her, and I can and I do go back to it a lot. So, you know, please don't just say, "I'm so sorry," if you really knew the person who died. Share who they were to you, share why you loved them, share memories. It means so much and do it in writing.

*Dear, dear Amber,*

*Your angel mother has been on my mind a lot lately, and I've been thinking about the ways she touched me over the years.*

*I loved the way Janis' face crinkled when she laughed. Oh, how she loved to laugh — and laugh, we did. I loved that Janis was entirely non-judgemental. She never had a bad word to say about anyone, only seeing the best in each person. She really knew how to enjoy life, and my, how she loved you girls intensely.*

*Janis, me, and Delicia would walk up Tall Mountain together and nearly every morning after we got you children off to school, and we just lit each other up with stories, held each other, and grew together.*

*I love that Janis was spiritual without becoming dogmatically religious. She just lived love, and it radiated from her. Janis had a special quality of self-love, a clarity about who she was and her worth, and she poured that out on to others.*

*After I moved from Tahoe, Janis stayed in touch with me, even up to this past September, when we messaged each other about a meeting in Tahoe after years of not seeing each other. Her unexpected passing has reminded me that our friendships are like gold to be treasured now in a world that is uncertain. Now is all that we have, and our friends are our biggest treasure.*

*I feel Janis now. She has changed this world for the better. She has changed me, made me a better person, and I will never ever forget her.*

*I'm so sorry for your loss, dear Amber and Lacey, I love you.*

[1:22:07]

Thank you, again, for listening to all my sighs and deep breaths. I know that anyone who made it this far is holding my mom in love and me in love, and I appreciate it so much. I love you, too.

And one thing I realized when I was in that state that I talked about earlier, of just, like, riding this wave of love and gratitude after her death, which I still often feel, I realized that the love she had for me was the same as the love that I have for my children, that I have for everyone. And that, like, love is all the same.

Love is this universal force. And it gets channeled through individuals, towards other individuals, but it's all the same. It's all the same. Love is love. And I'm so grateful that I had love channeled to me through this woman in a maternal archetype. So fucking lucky, the biggest blessing of my life. But I realized I wasn't bereft of love after she died because love is still all around me. Love is everywhere, and love is why we're here.