

Free Your Inner Guru – Episode 19
Surviving Survivor's Guilt: What Can I Find Gratitude For?



[00:13] What will you do differently now that you have survived something like this? In a word, everything. Welcome to Free Your Inner Guru. I'm your host, Laura Tucker, and thank you very much for joining me here on the podcast. This week, I am compelled to share with you some of my experience of two very different human emotions and experiences: survivor's guilt and gratitude. October 8th is the eight year anniversary this year of the day and the event that introduced survivor's guilt into my life. October the 8th is also Thanksgiving Day here in Canada. I'm highly aware that as this podcast gets released through the week, that many of the listeners who are Canadian will be thinking about gratitude as much as they are about tragedy and the challenges of the world that we live in today.

[01:18] This is part of my motivation because if there's anything that I can say that might be helpful, I'm going to do my best here to say it. The context that I want to use is what every Thanksgiving has been like over the course of the last eight, nine years if you include 2009. October the 8th, 2009 was a couple of days before Thanksgiving. It is a day that is emblazoned in my memory, in my cellular memory, and it's just something that doesn't go away. I was at the Sedona sweat lodge. Three of my peers at this spiritual retreat died in an event that was meant to be celebratory and I've taken to calling it a peek to pit experience.

[02:15] Now, there's details of my involvement that are on my website and in the documentary Enlighten Us, and actually in next week's podcast my friend Julie Min is coming on here. We actually explore in the entry that we recorded several months ago a lot of the detail around that, so I'm going to keep it to the context of Thanksgiving. But the way things played out that day, in short, left me feeling like I could have done more to intervene and quite possibly have changed the outcome for a very beautiful person who was with me in the sweat lodge, Liz Newman. And so I'm thinking of her, as well as Kirby Brown and James Shore and everybody who was there, as I share this with you.

[03:11] October 10, 2009 was Thanksgiving. I was on my way home from Phoenix after having spent 48 hours in a stupor. I was wandering around the Phoenix airport trying to make sense of where I was, what I was doing, why my friends had died, and I was hiding. I was hiding because it was all over CNN and CNN was playing all over the airport, and I did not want to be seen, heard, recognized or even associated with the event. I didn't know what to do with it. I did not have the mental or the emotional capacity, and so I distracted myself by shopping in the airport, keeping my head down and just wishing that I could be back home with my family. That was Thanksgiving 2009.

[04:12] Thanksgivings of 2010, '11, '12, and '13, they were quite different. I was living in Western Canada, in Kelowna. During Thanksgiving 2010, I was ... well, I guess we weren't married yet, but I had my first Thanksgiving with my now husband, Tony, and stepson Cameron. It was my first Thanksgiving with my small, new family and

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we cooked a meal, but I wasn't present. My mind was with everyone who was marking the day who had been with me and I didn't know how to express what was going on inside, how I couldn't believe that it had been a year, how I still really, despite going to every single type of therapist and body worker, was only just scratching the surface of what my emotions and what my extreme sense of responsibility was and what a burden, how heavy that was for me. But I soldiered on and powered through. This is one of the reasons why you'll hear me talking about powering through and how it's not good for you. We can't power through our emotions.

[05:34] 2011, another Thanksgiving in Kelowna. My Dad came out to visit and we cooked an incredible meal, and had what is one of my fondest memories. My father had fallen in love with Kelowna and the Okanagan Valley when he came out that summer for our wedding, so that Thanksgiving was really special, and the shift and the busyness around it really kept me from doing what I like to do, which is take a little bit of quiet time on that day.

[06:11] 2012. On Thanksgiving 2012, I ran a half marathon. Every step as my foot pounded that pavement, every step, every single one of you who were there with me were with me on that run the entire time. I was grounded. I was connected, and as I plodded my way through, still to this date, the most successful run of my not that glorious running career, I felt a sense of gratitude for being alive in my body and it was a wonderful, beautiful day.

[06:59] I don't remember much of Thanksgiving 2013. It was my last Thanksgiving in Kelowna. We moved back to Toronto in 2014, during which time, two years ago, I hosted Thanksgiving for the entire Tucker tribe. Minus one. My father had passed away about six weeks previous and it was very heavy. Again, all day long thinking about my friends, thinking about the families who had lost and the lives that were touched by all of it.

07:37 2015. Earlier in the year I had participated in the interview for Enlighten Us. The CNN's films the documentary that I'm featured in. Not much of a feature, really. I don't get to say much of anything about what I thought or felt, but as far as color commentary and what that experience is, you can see the weight of it on me as I spoke about these events for the first time in over five years.

[08:08] Last year, last year felt like a giant step backwards. Last year was filled with so much uncertainty because although I had seen the documentary and knew what was coming, I also knew that it was going to be airing on CNN and I'd been reliving the events of 2009 over and over again, whether it was at the Tribeca Film Festival or the one in Telluride, Mountain Film, or the many times over and over in my head as I dropped back into worrying what other people would think, and would we be marginalized again? Would we be judged for being stupid, for not doing enough?

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Things that compounded my experience of survivor's guilt. So you know what I did to handle that? I canceled Thanksgiving dinner. It was just too much for me. It was a bad. I could feel it coming and I knew I needed to go inside. So instead we went out for dinner.

[09:21] This year on Sunday, the family will be coming over and I am now dipping into feelings of gratitude. Gratitude to be alive. Gratitude to have a voice. Gratitude that I can answer that question: "What will you do differently now that you have survived something like this?" The answer is everything. If you're experiencing survivor's guilt, it will influence every single thing that you think, say, do, and experience. I don't believe there's any way to get around that. And as I watched some of the interviews this week, in the wake of events in Las Vegas, in particular an interview with a gentleman by the name of Brian Claypool, who so elegantly describes his feelings and the questions that he's asking himself. Like, "Who determines who gets killed in all of this? Is it based on where you're sitting, standing?" And the idea that he might have to go through the rest of his life wondering, "Why did some of these people die and why didn't I?"

[10:41] When I heard these words coming out of his mouth, I realized that I absolutely have something unique that I can be grateful for. It's the ability to know exactly how he's feeling. Not because I have empathy, which I do. Not because I have compassion or am compassionate, which I am, but because I have been in your shoes. This is what I want to illustrate by sharing what the trajectory of this very, very challenging emotional journey layered and associated every step of the way with the relationship of gratitude, because it comes every year at Thanksgiving. First of all, it will change just like any layer of grief.

[11:49] The first time I experienced grief, one of my friend's older sister said something to me like this. She had lost her husband in a very tragic situation and she could tell I was struggling at that time with the death of my youngest cousin. I didn't have the capacity to really express myself. She told me that, "Grief is like an old coat. It stays in your closet. It's the one that you can't quite get rid of. You can't throw it away because every time you pull it out, you look at it, you touch it, you feel it, and it's associated with your memories of something or someone that you loved or believed in that's now gone. And sometimes you pick up that coat and put it back on and you allow it to cloak you in those feelings so that you can be connected to them. And then other days, and as time goes on, more frequently you'll leave that coat in the closet knowing that it's there and it's not going anywhere, but being okay with carrying on, knowing that you were transformed by that experience."

[13:10] That's why I can safely say that what will you do differently, Mr. Claypool or anyone who is experiencing any form of survivor's guilt, whether it is literal, that you've had that experience, or if it's by proxy because these are some existential questions that people are asking, "What is the meaning of all this? What is good?"

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What is evil? What is light? What is dark? Why am I here and why am I still here?" Well, there are many of us, and I include myself in this, who are here to have a voice, to share our experiences, to help the path that someone else has to walk afterwards and hopefully make that burden just a little bit lighter.

[14:11] Eight years ago, seven years ago, six years ago there were many, many times where I could not conceive of what eight years after, let alone nine or 10, would feel like. But if there's one word that I'm going to leave you with it's integrated. We can remember these experiences that have shaped us and connected us more closely with why we're here with equal parts grief and gratitude. To me that's the number one goal of existence, is to expand your capacity so that you can emotionally handle the positive and the negative, the glorious and the grievous, the light and the dark because life is not just one or the other. Life is both. It sounds a little bit like a cliché, but there are a million shades of gray between the lightness of gratitude, creativity, joy, and the darkness of shame and blame and guilt and marginalization.

[15:37] If you're going through something like survivor's guilt, you are going to feel different. You're going to feel like you're out on the margins by yourself and like nobody can really understand what you're going through. It's probably true to a certain extent that your spouse or your family or your best friends won't be able to ... they may sympathize. They may have pity. They may think they know what you're going through, but they don't and you know that, so what you need to do, if I may, from this vantage point, is instead of disconnecting, make a conscious effort to connect. Connect with people who are on the journey. Connect with people who have gone before you. Connect with people who have that coat, that old cloak hanging in their closet, and rebuild. Rebuild yourself from the inside out. If you start at the core, if you allow yourself to go into the core, into your core instead of bypassing it, whether you think of it as emotional bypassing or spiritual bypassing, it's not really a shortcut, trust me.

[17:02] There are many, many people who exist to help and support: therapists of every, I want to say, designation, qualification, flavor. Authors, speakers, coaches, people who will work with your body. Work with your body. It will be storing all of these memories and emotions, and I know that's one of the reasons why that half marathon in 2012 was so incredibly healing. Have a voice. Speak your truth. Do not go quiet. Stay connected. The world needs you. That's why you are here. That's the meaning of all of this. So what will you do differently now that you've had an experience that takes you to your core, or now that you've heard someone speak about such an experience?

[18:08] We're all here for reason. I don't believe that everything "happens for a reason" as people will tell that to you, and it's very hard to reconcile that something happens for a reason so that you can somehow heal or grow. Let's not do that. Everything

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that happens has precisely the meaning that you assign to it. It may be more healing to consider, instead of what will you do differently now that you have survived a traumatic event or are experiencing something like survivor's guilt, not what will you do differently, but what meaning will it have for you? My experience has led me to understand that it is incumbent on me to use my voice when my intuition speaks to me. What will the meaning of your story be? What will the meaning of your challenges be? This is something that is individually up to you and that's what makes it beautiful in the end.

[19:20] Thank you so much for listening to today's episode. I know you have a lot choice where you receive your inspiration and information. If these ideas and stories resonate with you, I would be so grateful if you would take a few extra seconds for two quick things. One, if there's an idea or a moment in the story or conversation that you feel would make a difference in someone else's life, take a quick moment to share on whether an app or a website you are listening on, and two, subscribe so that you can become part of the ongoing conversation. Big conversations become the catalysts for meaningful change. I'm Laura Tucker, signing off for Free Your Inner Guru.