

#9: Traveling The Road of Grief

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MJ Murray Vachon: Welcome to Inner Challenge. I'm MJ Murray Vachon, a licensed clinical social worker with more than 44,000 hours of therapy sessions and 30 years of teaching mental wellness. Join me as I have a unscripted conversation with guests just like you as we strive to take the mystery out of mental wellness.

MJ Murray Vachon: Welcome to Inner Challenge. I'm so excited that you agreed to be on my podcast today. Guests come to my podcast in many avenues, and our guest today came because we found ourself in a class together. And I was so inspired by your wisdom and your spirit that I thought I must ask this person if she'd like to be on my podcast. I tracked down your contact information I asked you, and you so generously said yes. The first thing I wanna do is to say thank you very much for agreeing to be on this.

Guest Episode #9: Thank you.

MJ Murray Vachon: Can you tell our listeners just a little bit about yourself.

Guest Episode #9: I'm 83 years old. I've lived in South [00:01:00] Bend since I was 31. This is the longest I've been anywhere. I was married and my husband died almost 10 years ago. We had three children, all of whom live far distances. I am on the road a lot. Professionally, I was an educator. I've taught everything from kindergarten to graduate school and then I did two years of training and became a chaplain. I became certified as a chaplain and I was the chaplain and director of pastoral services for a number of years.

MJ Murray Vachon: This is a fun podcast for me because I know of you, but I don't know you well, and I didn't know that you had taught kindergarten through graduate school. Was there any grades that you really loved the most?

Guest Episode #9: My favorite teaching year was first grade.

MJ Murray Vachon: First grade? Oh, that's lovely.

Guest Episode #9: I loved it. I had [00:02:00] a partner, we were teaching partners. We each had a first grade classroom and believe it or not, we each had 55 students in our class. And it was the most creative year of teaching that I

ever had. It was wonderful. We had a meeting once a month with the parents and we taught a class. One of us would teach the class to the children. The other person would be at lectern and would talk to the parents about why we were doing what we were doing, and if they wanted to help the children at home, what kinds of things could they do? And it was so well received. It was just wonderful.

MJ Murray Vachon: Wow! I already know that the weakness of this podcast is that I need four hours with you because that is such an empowering idea to give parents an opportunity to step into. I'd love to talk to you more, but as this is a podcast about mental wellness, I usually start with the question, how do you define mental wellness at this [00:03:00] stage of your life? And how do you know when mentally you feel good?.

Guest Episode #9: It would be hard to come up with a definition that I would still have tomorrow and the next day, and the next day. But I think I am doing things that keep me mentally well when I feel at peace, when I don't feel conflicts between people and when I have opportunities to enrich my life through education or other kinds of experiences.

MJ Murray Vachon: Really, A sense of calm peace, but also a sense of your mind being engaged and alert.

Guest Episode #9: Exactly.

MJ Murray Vachon: That's really beautiful. As I said, I really could talk to you for hours and hours, but we're gonna focus because as I briefly said before, you're a person I knew of but don't know well. And the two things I knew of you was that you were highly respected in the [00:04:00] area of chaplaincy. And the second thing I knew was that you were in a marriage that people had a lot of respect for , two strong, competent individuals who were married for, how many years?

Guest Episode #9: My husband died on our 41st anniversary.

MJ Murray Vachon: Oh, wow. I'm really sorry for the timing and of course, for the loss of a person who I didn't know well, but is held in high regard by so many people that I do know and that's really what made me interested in talking with you. Relationships are the foundation of mental wellness. When people are isolated, when they're lonely, we have scads of data that say they don't really mentally feel well. As my listeners know, I'm a clinician and one of the things I've spent a lot of time doing is helping people make that transition when they

lose a really significant relationship. I wanna start by asking you to share with our listeners what was your [00:05:00] own experience of grief of this relationship that you had been in for probably more than 41 years?

Guest Episode #9: Yes. His actual dying was traumatic. It was very hard. But a week before he died we had our own goodbye conversation and we both cried. But one of the last things that he said in that conversation, which you know, I shall never forget, was we are who we are today because of who we've been to each other all these years. And death will not stop that. I had that to hang onto. The rest of the week before he died, the house was full of people and as the children came, it was their turn to have their individual last time with their Dad. After everybody left and I was by myself, I think the first thing that I realized was, I had never lived alone before.[00:06:00] I lived, with my family then I lived in a community and then I was here at Notre Dame for two years on campus. I lived at Lewis Hall, and then I got married and lived with my husband. And the message I gave to myself was, this is a new chapter and it's my responsibility to decide how I'm going to live it. So that was step one. I also told myself and allowed myself that whatever feelings came up, just to allow myself to have them, and if I need to write about it or talk to somebody about it that it was all okay. And that was how I get through it. So the first year was really hard. Everyone will say that, and it was hard. In the second year, I knew that I wanted to move out of the large house. I had hoped that my husband and I would've moved, but he had no desire to leave the house, but I did. So again, going through [00:07:00] the house, going through every room, allowing myself to have the memories and blessing each of the rooms in the house. That was also part of the process, I think. Then I moved to a smaller place and there was something exciting about, this is just my space. Decorating it and putting up artwork that I loved just, I loved that was a good experience.

MJ Murray Vachon: What I hear you saying is throughout the whole process you were in conversation with yourself and that conversation in yourself sometimes were really hard and painful feelings and sometimes was really almost a north star. The surprising realization of I've never lived by myself and I have to step into this. It almost is a parallel to what you were inviting the parents of the first graders to do who also had never had a child in school. This is what we're doing. We [00:08:00] invite you to step in and partner with us in their education. You are doing that with yourself. This is a new chapter and it's up to me. It's not necessarily up to my friends or my children. Of course, they will be a support, but that's a very profound mindset for one to have. I want you to talk a little bit about that mindset just didn't happen for the first time.

Guest Episode #9: No, I don't think so. I can't remember when it started, but it's probably been with me most of my life.

MJ Murray Vachon: I think one of the interesting parts of this podcast is we're not talking only about a mindset for someone who's in their seventies who loses their beloved life partner because that's a kind of transition that can happen in your mid thirties.

Guest Episode #9: Exactly.

MJ Murray Vachon: Or it can happen when you're 45 and you're laid off from a job. Or when you're 50 and you have an accident and many of your abilities are taken away. You're in the process of grief with all the [00:09:00] feelings, and then you're also in this process of really redesigning your life. Did you have practices for either of those? You talked a little bit about writing that helped facilitate these processes.

Guest Episode #9: Writing helps, and as I said, talking to people, walking, walking is meditative for me. I do try to have a meditation practice but it works better for me walking rather than just sitting. I try to do daily meditation. I'd like to say one more thing about the grieving. I tried each year on the date of my husband's death I tried not to schedule anything and I just tried to let that be a special day of remembrance. All the children would just check in and we've had conversations, which have sometimes very beautiful. This year on the date of his death, it would've been our 50th wedding anniversary, and I decided that I [00:10:00] just wanted to do something. So, I invited four of my close women friends. I asked them if they'd be willing to come. What I wanted to do was to share the story of our meeting and all the things that happened up to our wedding. All four of them said yes and it was a wonderful experience. We laughed, I got a little teary, but then they got a little teary.

MJ Murray Vachon: So again it's another example of this conversation that you have with yourself. I often use the term that you did an update, that you had this process that worked really well for you for nine years, you had this ongoing conversation with yourself, you were able to meet your need on this really significant anniversary, not only of his death, but of your wedding. You came up with something else that sounds incredibly nurturing. And I think that's part of what mental wellness is that often people think, oh, it just happens. No, it really doesn't. It happens because [00:11:00] we have a conversation going on with ourself that allows ourself to be open to what we need and what we want in order to lift our spirits. I think it's just a beautiful example that you listened to

yourself, created this opportunity, this really neat event with your friends. When the day was over, I'm sure we were sad, but you also had nurtured yourself.

Guest Episode #9: I wasn't sad. It was very joyful and happy. I did not feel sad that day at all.

MJ Murray Vachon: Well, I love to be corrected because I think grief is so personal and that my experience as a therapist is that when people can actually do the inner work to grieve, whether it's a marriage, whether it's the death of someone they love, whether it's the loss of a job, having to move cities, if people can do the inner work they often find updates of doing new things that do bring them happiness and joy. I think joy and happiness are often [00:12:00] underrated. We often look for them in material possessions or even experiences instead of going inward and saying, what do I need to do that would lift my spirits? A lot of time it's connecting with people and that's a beautiful thing that you were able to share this really significant anniversary with your friends. Which leads me to the second thing I want us to talk about. Part of what therapists think a lot about is the question, who am I? In some way, anyone who comes into my office, they're wrestling with that even if they're clinically depressed, they're wrestling with, I am a person who's suffering from depression, and how do I move through this and reclaim who I am? Part of what I want you to talk about off the top of your head, because these are unscripted conversations, which is why I'm so appreciative that people are willing to be on this podcast is when you think about how you've answered that question in the last 10 years. I wanna know what your process has been [00:13:00] and what are some things that you've done that's helped you in redefining, if that's the right term, yourself in this stage of your life.

Guest Episode #9: I think I wouldn't call it a redefining as much as I would say an evolution. Every once in a while I do ask myself the question, who am I, ? And I write down a list of all the things. Sometimes it just turns out that it's roles, I am a woman. I am a mother. I am a sister, now I am a grandmother. Taking the time to walk the Camino has been very powerful and important for me. I've done it five times, but there were hunks of time in between. I started in 2001. I think taking that time connecting with the earth and affirming who I am. It's always been a very deeply spiritual experience for me. I feel freed of anything that holds [00:14:00] me back or ties me down that doesn't need to, like stuff or or getting overly wrought up over things that aren't that important. If I had the money and the time, I think I would've done it every year as a spiritual practice because it helps me. The coming back and realizing that I bring back to my regular life what I experience in that short period of time. I see myself as a very relational person with people, with nature, it's relating to

nature, relating to the earth and I think that's just deepened a lot of the aspects of myself. I think in these last 10 years it's been more a deepening than a switching.

MJ Murray Vachon: I like your word of evolution. Will you take a minute for our listeners who don't know what the Camino is.

Guest Episode #9: The Camino de [00:15:00] Santiago is an ancient pilgrimage route across Spain that people have been doing it since the eight hundreds. Supposedly the legend is, I call it a legend, I can't call it anything else, that St. James who had gone to Spain to convert people was supposedly buried there. And in the early eight hundreds discovered bones and the church declared that these were the bones of St. James. So since then, people have been making the pilgrimage to Santiago. In the last probably 20 years, it has really gained in popularity, especially here in the United States. Some people may have watched the movie, the Camino. When I went in 2010 a quarter of a million people had done the Camino. The traditional starting point is in Spain, close to [00:16:00] the Spanish border. But all along the way there are places where pilgrims can stay. As the years have gone on, these places have become quite a bit nicer than when I first started there were a few places where there could be a hundred bunk beds in one room, which was tough.

MJ Murray Vachon: The last time you did it, Mary, how old were you and how many miles did you walk?

Guest Episode #9: 500 miles. The last time I went was to honor my 80th birthday, so it was in 2019.

MJ Murray Vachon: We were in this class together. I had just done a week of the Camino, not 500 miles, trust me and here's this woman who I know and know of, and she says on her 80th birthday, she walked 500 miles and my mind blew up. I was like, wow! That's the kind of person I want to be because having just done a week of it, the Camino is a physical experience, but it's much more a [00:17:00] mental and spiritual experience. One of the things that I hear you saying when you think about, who am I? That it's an evolution and that here's this practice, that you started for your own reasons in sixties that you were still doing 20 years later? Yes. And when you think about what it did for your spirit, what it said to you about you, who am I at 80? How would you put that into words?

Guest Episode #9: First, I would laugh. I don't think of myself as, being 80 I just keep living. But, every once in a while, sometimes when I stand up, it's a

little creaky. I know that I'm 80. It's not like I'm, in denial that I'm aging. I don't feel that at all. I just motivated to be as engaged in life as I possibly can. Always.

MJ Murray Vachon: That's what I so picked up from you in that class, and even as we talk this constant, I'm going to keep doing it [00:18:00] and it's a lot harder than you make it look. Having had clients in their seventies, knowing lots of other people in their eighties and nineties, it's an inner commitment to yourself that nobody can make you do. It's an inner commitment that's, probably a result of this conversation that you have with yourself that we think everybody has, but most people are having conversations in their head about other people. I don't have research on this, I'm saying this as a clinician. When you realize oh my gosh, I have never lived by myself. I have to figure this out. That's what I call tending and befriending, that we have wisdom within us, that if we have the courage to turn inward and listen to it in a way that's kind and open and gentle, it's a very different experience than what I experience many people doing is they hear, I've never lived by myself and they begin to blame and unclaim it. They [00:19:00] begin to I can't possibly do this, or, I need my children to do more of this, or I need my neighbors to do more of this, or I need the food in the facility I live in to be like this. And you have this spirit that actually allows yourself to be gentle with yourself and that pushes you to do some pretty hard things. hard the Camino was very hard. Losing a spouse after 41 years is very hard. Not having children in town is very hard. Yet, you really have kept yourself engaged. So you have this very vital spirit that just watching you in that class. I'm like, that's what I want.

Guest Episode #9: Some of those things that are hard, it's not that I don't occasionally think about them, but I don't dwell on it. There's another story that I would like to share. When I was young, I was a member of a religious community I was a Dominican sister, [00:20:00] and also my husband was a Dominican. In our marriage this was always important to us, the Dominican charism and how that was lived out. We nurtured each other in keeping this as part of our our lives. When I went on the Camino in 2016, my husband had been gone for three years. About midway on the Camino, there is a Dominican monastery, and across the street there's a Dominican Parish church. I went in and up near the front was a giant banner hanging and evidently, it was the 800th year of the founding of the Dominican order, and there was a giant picture of St. Dominic. I started crying and I could not stop. When I finally got it together and went on, I spent a couple days just, it's like where were those tears coming from? What is it in me? So long story [00:21:00] short, what I realized was that you can't be a Dominican by yourself. So, I decided to become an associate of the community that I had belonged to, and as an associate their governance is everybody belongs to what they call a mission group. There's small groups, like

a small, little community. As an associate, you can be part of one of the mission groups, which I am, because that's one way that I can keep that part of me is missing still alive and vibrant because it's still important to me.

MJ Murray Vachon: Wow, it's another update of this deep value, the charism of the Dominicans that had really formed you in some ways. In profound ways, I'm sure. And not only formed you, but formed your husband, but also formed your marriage, and formed your parenting. I think, it's so interesting. And again, it's just this [00:22:00] conversation that you're not afraid of what surfaces. And a lot of people are, it's not easy to be in the middle of Spain in a church and break down, and that you really have this courage of embracing whatever surfaces in you, in your own way, in your own time, and to look for what is the update. That really does help you answer the question, who am I?

Guest Episode #9: Exactly right. Exactly.

MJ Murray Vachon: And it's this new form. You were Dominican as a religious, then you were Dominican living out the charism without the official structure, and then you went back to I can connect with them. And all of that is because you were formed in a way that you know how to do what I call inner work, that ability to look inside yourself. I wanna move to my last mining your wisdom because one of the concerns I have is with our world that pulls us outside of our interior life. [00:23:00] That's why the Camino's so powerful because you're walking and you're just talking to some people and then you're by yourself. But it does allow you to have your feet on the ground connected to nature, which just connects most people to what's going on inside of them. I worry for our young people that we don't have the processes that are just built into daily life like they have been from the beginning of time. Walking from distances when we didn't have cars, riding bikes in childhood to go to a friend's house. Now everyone walks and they have earpods in and they're listening to things and it becomes really hard from my experience of working with young people for more than 30 years and seeing the transition for them to have connection and inner conversation with themselves. I wanna ask your advice on that, your wisdom of what you would want to say to young people, why this inner conversation's important and what are some practical day-to-day things that they could do [00:24:00] to try to cultivate that within themselves.

Guest Episode #9: That's a very tough question, MJ.

MJ Murray Vachon: I know, I think of it every day. I don't have an answer.

Guest Episode #9: And of course there's no one answer. Now I'm thinking of my grandchildren. My oldest son just turned 50. Oh my gosh! It's hard to believe, when they were young, to go outside and even if it's five minutes and just around the block. I do think that's important and I think it has the capability of promoting inner voice. My grandchildren who live in Colorado, they're only about two blocks from an open space, and I'm very grateful. When I'm there, I take them, but also their parents take them all the time and there are no earpods yet, but, at least they're getting it and they're watching the prairie dogs and they can walk to a beautiful lake. They do that regularly and I think that's important. I also think it's important [00:25:00] to ask young people what they're feeling. I can't remember as a young person, anybody asking me how I was feeling. I could recognize it. I couldn't put names on it, but I knew when I was feeling something and that it was important. When I'm with younger kids I just try to focus on the sad, mad, glad, scared as the basic four, and to help them to start recognizing. I think that's a good start for young people.

MJ Murray Vachon: Because really that's the village and young people need us to help them hold their emotion. They're too big for them to do on their own.

Guest Episode #9: Exactly.

MJ Murray Vachon: I want to end by really validating. We often think of meditation in the form of someone like the Dai Lama, so it seems unattainable to most of us. But I love the fact that you have really encouraged people to see walking as a [00:26:00] meditation. There's a whole body of research that validates this, but you didn't need the research because you ran your own experiment and said, this works! I get connected to who I am inside of me, and then I can do some work to lean into cultivating a spirit that is engaged. Is alert. Is happy and maybe even most importantly, knows what you need for yourself. And that's a beautiful thing. Thank you so much for being part of this. I wish I had hours and hours.

Guest Episode #9: To, be continued!.

MJ Murray Vachon: Okay. Thank you. I'd like to do that!

MJ Murray Vachon: Oh my gosh. I hope you listened to my other podcast with my guest who is 92. Because these two women, they're blowing my mind and giving me so many Inner Challenge Insights. So, let's go.

MJ Murray Vachon: Insight number one. Maybe one of the secrets of aging is not to think so much about [00:27:00] aging, to stay engaged with yourself and others.

MJ Murray Vachon: Inner Challenge Insight number two. What's the charism that helps guide your life? For my guest, it was a charism of the Dominicans who are committed to contemplation, community service, and study. What are your north stars? Hopefully they're not Instagram influencers, but practices that help develop you from the inside out.

MJ Murray Vachon: Inner Challenge Insight Number three, do you have an ongoing conversation with yourself? I hope so. Not only because you're fascinating, but turning inward and really listening often puts you in touch with your deepest needs. These needs don't surface as we rush through our busy days. But if we're brave enough to have a little solitude or move through a big cry, we'll learn what we need, what we really need to take care of ourself, and it [00:28:00] probably won't have much to do with ice cream shopping or sports.

MJ Murray Vachon: Insight number four, how do you connect to your inner voice? If you don't have practices such as walking or journaling, then maybe this whole idea seems a bit foreign at best, or woohoo at worst. I recommend you run a two week investigation looking for when you don't listen to yourself. Yes, we can often find our inner voice by noticing what we're avoiding and ignoring. Start simple. Notice how often your inner voice says, Time to go to bed. Hey, you don't need that second cookie, or, this project is good enough. Don't be a perfectionist. Then run your own experiment and notice what happens when you listen instead of ignore. It won't bring world peace, but it will slowly and with more practice, bring connection and help you cultivate inner [00:29:00] peace. It's a sad part of mental wellness that often our best tool, our inner voice, is somehow lost along the way. I say, go find it. Trust me. No one else is looking for it, if you aren't .

MJ Murray Vachon: Inner Challenge Insight number five. How's your evolution going? I loved when our guests said that word. We often are given the impression that we can design our own life. My guest today, in all her wisdom, invites us to consider that life is probably more of an evolution than a one shot design. An evolution that happens gradually, but is much kinder and better fitting when we open our heart, minds and soul and accept the challenge of the present so we can listen and figure out how to move through it in a kind, healthy, and honest way.

MJ Murray Vachon: Inner Challenge Insight number six. [00:30:00] Wanna learn more about mental wellness? Check out episode number one. What is mental wellness? Number three are about ages and stages. And if you wanna get ready for a big cry, check out my favorite episode, episode number seven Are Your Emotions potty Trained?

MJ Murray Vachon: Thanks so much for listening, and as you move through your week, turn inward and find your own Camino. This is your Inner Challenge.