#233 How I Have Honoured Emma Pearson

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[00:00:00] **Susan:** Today, I am really happy to have Emma Pearson on Life Beyond the Numbers. Emma, you're so welcome

[00:00:08] **Emma:** Thank you, Susan. I'm just smiling seeing the way you said that. It's lovely

[00:00:13] **Susan:** And, and it's true. And already we've been, like, we've never met before, we've never spoken, and we're just chatting about the wonderfulness of Ireland, which of course fills my heart before we get going.

[00:00:25] **Emma:** and coasts in particular

[00:00:27] **Susan:** Yes, anywhere where the sea is in particular. and I think we could probably have had our podcast conversation before I even pressed record, 'cause we were kinda getting into it.

Emma, I am fascinated by thresholds, transitions, ma space, the space between the notes and the space between the words, and how important that is. and I know it's something that's of interest to you as well. and, I, I think of life as being a transition from

birth to death. It's that, that dash, that space between that we fill up, hopefully, with a full spectrum of what it means to be human and to live.

And-

Where would you like to go from there?

[00:01:23] **Emma:** Hmm. The w- And the, the word that I've been using a lot is threshold. and I have a monthly, monthly-ish, it's one of those monthly-ish things, newsletter, and I have only been going not even quite a year. I think I've done 10 now. And I just noticed that I was talking about thresholds more and more, and the skills for being in the threshold.

And I've had so many huge, huge major losses in my life over the last decade. and, stepping out of my life and looking around at other peoples, but also broader society and the economy and the planet, I realized that actually the skills for living in the threshold are what I believe, Emma Pierson's point of view, is lacking in organizations, is, is lacking in politicians.



And I, I don't want us to go down the political route, 'cause I'm not skilled and versed enough to be honest. but I think this capacity for being with what is changing, what's uncertain, what isn't known, what's ending, what is lost definitively, what comes up when stuff is lost definitively. 'Cause, in organizations as well, stuff has to be lost definitively.

But those skills for being in that space are actually, I, I think they're grief skills. And because of my personal life, having had lots of significant losses, I realized that, as a society, we don't turn towards what hurts. We don't turn towards what's ending. We don't turn towards pain. I'm already feeling my brain go off in lots of different directions. natural catastrophe, let's just turn off the news. Oh, like turning away movement, systemically, what it does to a person, what it does to a team, what it does to an organization, what it does to a society, means that we then, I think, rush to adopt quick fixes, and those can be soothing, which can end up

Anyway, we know where it can end up. But anyway, going back to thresholds in my newsletter, I came to a point that, oh, maybe all of life is a threshold. So you got there first. You got there f- you got there first. that, that whole transition, use the word transition, that dash between.

But I realized, actually, there's been so much change and tumult in my life that all of my life is this space of not knowing, being with the truly unbearably uncomfortable And that most people turn away. And I turn away at t- times. I couldn't survive it without turning away, so there's good reason to turn away.

But can I notice when I turn away and say, "Okay, I'm turning away. What do I need, and when will I come back to this?"

[00:04:09] **Susan:** as you're talking, you're reminding me of, do you know David White

[00:04:14] **Emma:** Hmm.

[00:04:15] **Susan:** and

[00:04:15] **Emma:** I love his work. Yeah

[00:04:18] **Susan:** heartbreak? heartbreak may be the very essence of being human, of being on the journey from here to there, and of coming to care deeply for what we find along the way

[00:04:30] **Emma:** Yeah. No, he's one of my big influences. I weave his, whether it's his constellations or his poetry into a lot of my little group, groupie things,



[00:04:39] **Susan:** Yeah, me too. And I, I think there's a healthiness

[00:04:45] **Emma:** உம்

[00:04:45] **Susan:** in being able to hold a conversation about the full spectrum of life, of not turning away even when it feels uncomfortable. And it feels uncomfortable, perhaps, this is what I'm thinking, is that because it matters, because we care deeply about things as well

[00:05:08] **Emma:** I think we notice that when we stop and take the time, but I think that's a second order of result and outcome. I think first though, we can't bear the pain, and we can't bear the pain ourselves, we can't bear the pain seeing it in other people as well. And so that slowing down and seeing, well, what else might be here, and being able to step into compassion or curiosity, courage, to be with someone in that space often gets rushed, often gets skipped

[00:05:43] **Susan:** And I think as well our organizations, we're there to be professional, whatever the hell that means, And, and it's kind of leave all of that stuff out of here. It doesn't, it's not our concern.

[00:05:55] **Emma:** உம்

[00:05:55] **Susan:** that's not true because the person you are and what you're going through is the person at work

[00:06:03] **Emma:** Well, we're living systems. Each of us individually is a whole living system, and then our organizations are made up of humans, so they're living systems sitting within,broader systems of other humans and society and ecology, the natural world. we can't produce anything without the world.

So everything is part of life. It's really not a machine, organizations. And I told you my age, I'm nearing 60, but still not quite. and I ... This was language. I mean, I've stayed in broadly the same field all my career. I studied psychology, specialized in organizational psychology, therefore people at work, supposedly normal people at work. Soon realized that normal was just a notion.

[00:06:43] **Susan:** Yes

[00:06:45] **Emma:** this conversation was happening in the '80s. be authentic at work, let's allow people to be human. there wasn't the bring your whole self to work idea or authenticity, but there was the let's find out about people and their personal lives, and let's understand if something's going on that's challenging that may be affecting their work.



I mean, in organizations I worked for, that was quite common, and this is 30-plus years ago

[00:07:17] **Susan:** And is it still common or not common

[00:07:21] **Emma:** it depends. I think it depends on the organization. And this is where, in the last 10 years where I really haven't been in big corporations much at all, either as an employee or even c- or consulting. I have been in the past. I've realized that actually the ideas that I want to bring into organizations are unlikely to find favor in the very large organizations because they are so

what comes first, the kind of chicken and egg idea, but they're so structured, like I'm generalizing horribly, but structured, hierarchical, process-driven, that to change anything might be a huge risk. to suddenly say, "Well, you know, let's I'm moving away a little bit from grief and people are having a bad day, but let's just say actually maybe top-down decision-making isn't necessary.

We know that life doesn't work that way. If we got people together more fluidly and they could self-organize and make decisions." to suddenly say to a large organization, "Well, let's do this," y- y- you can't. There's too much at risk, and the skills aren't there, the ideas aren't there. But where I see organizations doing things differently are the, are smaller organizations and startups, often with much younger generation of people.

where the, the notion of leader at every level, leader in every body, is just obvious. I've got one,friend/colleague who doesn't quite use the word love when she talks about h- her organization that she leads. And I said, "Well, it sounds like love." And she said, "Yeah, getting there. Getting there with the language."

But she's really trying just to have such a caring, loving environment for everyone there that I just said, "This is love."

[00:09:06] **Susan:** And there are, plenty of people out there in the world talking about love in

organizations and in business and in the work that you do. And I think perhaps we ... I mean, I would say for myself that love is one of those words that you put on family, romance,

[00:09:25] **Emma:** உம்

[00:09:25] **Susan:** don't really think perhaps that it captures what brings you joy in the workplace.

It's also about what language is welcome where you are



[00:09:39] **Emma:** We've created a separation, I mean, in lots of parts of our lives, but we've created s- these separations which mean that we can't use certain language for our home life and our professional life. We've separated, the individual, the, personal self from the professional self.

We've separated from, the masculine and the feminine is another separation. The hemispheres of the brain, that's another separation. humans from nature is another separation, and all of those separations have ended up cutting, um... I, I was interviewed for a different podcast recently, very, very different to yours, and it was basically about eros.

It was about life force, which we ended up just we called it life force, we called it eros. and it's just about, what is mine to be in this Mary Oliver, one wild and precious life? What wants to come through me, and do I wanna call that life force? Do I wanna call that love? on my really good days, I really believe, and this is not organizational language, I really believe that love is what animates us. Now, try to say that in a, a big business meeting. But in one-to-one work, I can, and I'm often staggered at how quite senior people, whether they're coming to me through their organization or more individually, they will say, "Yeah, I believe that when I choose love, when I notice what barriers I'm putting up and I try and dismantle them, stuff flows.

Stuff flows between people. I show up differently." So yeah, it's just a different... I don't know how we got onto that so quickly from wherever we were, but there we are, love and eros and life force.

[00:11:26] **Susan:** And well, flow. if we're in flow at work, and there was something recently that how we often think of flow as being when we're creating something or whatever. But actually, if, if you're really engaged in what you're doing at work, that was it. It was another podcast guest who looks at people's, how their, energy goes during the day by tracking them, right?

she said, basically, if you're really immersed in what you're doing, then you're in flow. Your day goes by and how good that is for us, and that's love.

[00:12:02] **Emma:** It is

[00:12:04] **Susan:** that's coming through. You might not think it, 'cause it seems at odds with where you are, but yeah.

[00:12:11] **Emma:** and then the invitation is if that's the natural force, what is it that we're doing to ourselves and each other to put up the barriers, and can I notice them when they happen? I know, I'm really anxious at the moment. There's stuff going on that is making me very anxious.



And the shift to feeling fearful about things is, is, is really different, and I don't like it. And it took me a while to be able to pull back and go, "Okay, actually this is a barrier that somehow I've put up, and what do I need to dismantle it?" Rather than, "How can I overcome my fear?" what is it that the fear needs in order to gently soothe and settle? Because I think that's the dance that we have going on. when conflict happens, it's usually coming from a, a, a place of fear. And when that fear isn't there, then, flow or love or, life

[00:13:08] **Susan:** And light.

[00:13:09] **Emma:** is what's there, and light.

Yeah.

[00:13:12] **Susan:** And, as you were talking about those separations, I mean, there was quite a few different separations there, and I was back to threshold again because how do you even know you're crossing the threshold from one separation to another? And literally we have a threshold on our doorstep, so a lot of us went to work by going out that threshold and going into the threshold of work, so you could actually have that physical, but now we don't so much. And I wonder does that impact how we are in the world, Emma?

[00:13:49] **Emma:** So I could answer this at lots of different levels, and I think ... Are you meaning the kind of the shift to online work and home office and things like that? Yeah. I think we have to make our own transitions clear. What are the moments of transition? And I'm not saying I'm brilliant at this at all, but I do make sure I've got puncture points in the day, where I'm doing something very different away from my laptop.

and everything bleeds in being self-employed. I think it's very important to just be mindful. people can choose to work at different hours and in different places, and if your work is really nourishing, then it perhaps doesn't matter so much anyway.

[00:14:29] **Susan:** And I wonder though, organizationally, when we're all in our own homes, has that softened our approach to professionalism? And I say that in inverted commas as well, because actually the home is where the heart is. There's a different maybe dynamic. I don't know. I don't know, has it shown up that way

[00:14:50] **Emma:** sure there's research. I'm not an expert in this, and I think we'd hear everything on the spectrum from I don't know anything anymore because I just see this little square or rectangle or whatever it is of the person. Whereas in the past, if we actually came into the office space, we'd have time by the coffee machine or at lunch and, that was a fantastic creator of social fabric.

[00:15:11] **Susan:** Mm.



[00:15:13] **Emma:** So I think the organizations that are getting this better, and not right, I mean, I don't know what right is, but the ones who are getting this, online distinction a little bit smoother are the ones who are able to be creative about how do we create informal meeting times? is the equivalent of the water cooler incident when we're working remotely and online?

There are fantastic reasons to have a people, a workforce who is not coming into an office. what's gained and what's lost? and ...

[00:15:46] **Susan:** That's what I was thinking when you were talking there about what's lost, because that's kind of what we started with as well, with the change and, we have lost office life in a way.

[00:15:56] **Emma:** Yeah, we have.

[00:15:57] **Susan:** And have we mourned that correctly either, I wonder? Because I saw, I, I think it was Barclays Bank or one of them, is just bringing everybody back in three days a week, and they've just issued an ultimatum.

I don't know which, uh, it might not be Barclays, but it's like people aren't happy unless you live more than 40 minutes commute or something. they've made something up like that

[00:16:23] **Emma:** But wouldn't it be amazing to actually have a collaborative approach to ... I mean, and maybe this happened, but wouldn't it be amazing to have the collaborative approach, and I'm doing this with my fingers when I'm doing a diagonal slice, which is one of the concepts in organization development. Can we get voices from right across the system at all hierarchies?

there is a hierarchy, and there are lots of functions. Can we get that diagonal slice, different perspectives, who will all have their own hubs and their own networks and their own, groups of people that they know, and can we bring all of the voices into the system to co-create some best practices?

And maybe it isn't a mandate that comes in top-down, 'cause we resist control because it's ... Well, back to life. It stops life. It stops our- Force. Or was there a very clear process as to here's what we've noticed, here's what we're trying to do, here's our priorities, and then people engage with those.

And therefore, here's an experiment we're gonna do for a while. We're really interested in how it goes. Please let us know. I don't know. Sometimes, like, I think we forget that- Communication is actually the juice of an organization



[00:17:42] **Susan:** And humanity, we're just people at the end of the day. And I, so much is stage managed or performed rather than the experiment. Like an experiment is a great idea because you don't lose face if that's what's bothering you. You can try something out. And the thing is, we'll all have our preferences to what we would rather do

[00:18:07] **Emma:** Yeah

[00:18:08] **Susan:** So not everything you bring in will suit everyone, and that's okay too

[00:18:14] **Emma:** Well, and maybe there's capacity. I mean, back to hierarchy and, how do living systems really work? They work in networks where, it can be very far away from what's in an organization would be the, the center, the HQ, or the top hierarchy. And the best decisions, the ones that suit people most, are the ones that are created in those pockets where people understand what the needs are here.

we've heard stories, and I'm not an expert in this, we've heard stories about how, in forests the mycelial network will send out resources to trees that are in distress, ones that are being eaten too much by the deer, and they'll make the leaves bitter, and they'll take resources away from another bit.

But, they're serving the whole. there's not one big master mother tree. Well, there are mother trees, but they're, there are lots of mother trees. There's not one big master tree saying, "Here's the flavor of our leaves."

[00:19:10] **Susan:** And there's also the geese, If you ever watched that wisdom of geese video on YouTube and how they fly in formation, and when they're, like, making that, "Bow, bow, bow," it's because they're, trying to keep everybody together, and if somebody drops back, another one will drop back to keep it company, and you never see them alone, and it's so beautiful

[00:19:31] **Emma:** and they take turns being up front. Yeah,

[00:19:33] **Susan:** Yeah.

So we have plenty of examples of how things can be, and,

[00:19:39] **Emma:** Yes

[00:19:41] **Susan:** a lot since I started work in the mid-'90s. There's no doubt about that. But I think what you're saying about turning away from that which makes us uncomfortable or from the unknown is still what we do. And I also think, like with AI people don't know how



to be in not knowing because I can just turn to AI and it'll give me an answer even if it's made up

[00:20:15] **Emma:** Gosh, and then we really lose the relational.

[00:20:17] **Susan:** Yeah

[00:20:17] **Emma:** Yeah. Yeah Yeah. And, and back to, you said a couple of things that piqued my interest. one was actually when you first brought up the word threshold in organizations, and my mind immediately went, 'cause you said that how do we know when we're crossing a threshold, and I thought you meant when we're coming up for a big life transition or we realize that, it can be unemployment, or it can be a death, or it can simply be, this organization isn't going in the direction that I believe we need.

'cause we grew up as well in our evolutionary capacity. so I was wondering about that a little bit. but then the other thing that was coming to mind, doing grief right, doing endings right or something, you said do, does any organization, has any organization ever done an ending well or something like that?

Was that, can you remember if that's what you said?

[00:21:12] **Susan:** Well, I think I probably said that I certainly hadn't been anywhere where an ending was done well. So I'm sure some people do it

[00:21:20] **Emma:** They can be done well, and when it's done well, and I think it is rare, but when endings are done well, it's really about honoring what has been. It's about honoring

[00:21:33] **Susan:** word I was thinking, honoring. Yeah

[00:21:35] **Emma:** And especially when an organization... And, and, and I think one of the elephants in the room in this conversation is the state of the world today. And I'm not a good enough consultant or business psychologist to really understand how organizations need to change, but I know they have to. I really know they have to because organizations and business and capitalism has been so damaging for the planet. Now, there's the whole political side, which I know that isn't where I've grown up and spent my time, hugely challenging.

But organizations could be such a force for good, and I've always done this. I've known this since my 20s, and I really think this is why I went into this field. But I understand this at a very different level now. What does it mean for an organization to be life-serving, to be society-serving, to be planet-serving?



I, I don't have the answers, but I think those are the questions. and I don't need to know the answers 'cause I'm not in those organizations, and no, no one individual needs to know the answers either. But by getting people together, you can have the conversations. And so then when finally, let's say an organization, let's say a midsize organization, 'cause I really can't get my head around large organizations.

Midsize organization needs to do an ending because we've been going down this path, but it's not gonna work.

but if an organization realized that it needed to make some changes and it could see, looking further out, and I suggested 25 years 'cause it's really a huge, huge long way in today's terms, rather than three months, we could be looking at what's made us successful up until now, what we want to honor, what we want to take with us.

when there's an ending, not everything stops. Even when people die, and I ... and believe me, I think s- everything ends when someone dies. But actually, over time you realize, okay, here's how they live in me. Okay, so in an organization, what is it that we want to take forward? What do we know has to stay in the past?

What do we need to do to mourn that? And let's use the grief language. and what processes? we might talk about rituals. We might talk about people just getting up and saying, "I loved how this," or, this ... a, a favorite leader leaving. "Here's what I remember. This is a conversation," or

And to air all of that, that richness, the jewels that made us successful for this amount of time, and now we compost. We're not always in... We're not always trying to be in spring, summer, spring, summer, spring, summer, growth, creativity, expansion. But actually now, look, we need to do what nature does, which is move into a shedding, move into a autumn, probably a winter.

life includes winter for very good reason. There would be no spring without winter. what does that mean in an organization? Can we just... Again, I, I say I don't have the answers, but the questions, I think, would just develop new thinking.

[00:24:38] **Susan:** Totally, and I've, I'm so excited. I've never heard compost before, and I love that. And, the shedding, and, and it, like, it is, it's somebody leaving or it's a system being retired or a new, And I think what I like about when I read your blog and so on is you talk about endings and beginnings, whereas most people will say beginnings and endings, and then the endings drop off at some point.



[00:25:12] **Emma:** Yes. Yeah, and we, or, or we rush through them, or we expect people to get on board. And I mean, this work has been out forever. I always quote William Bridges because people have often heard of him. this was his language 30, 40 years ago.

Every beginning starts with an ending, and every ending has within it the seeds of a new beginning. In other words, when we want to be doing something new, when an organization has a new shiny strategy and expects people to get around it, one of the big reasons it doesn't work is, I mean, we know it's the human side. We call it resistance.

How about instead we saw that resistance as wisdom about what we loved about how it was in the past? Can we explore a little bit, some of it will be about safety, belonging, but can we at least explore and give expression and space to what has been so that people have a chance to do the psychological transition that's necessary?

And it takes time, and people move at different rates, but- if we just pretend it isn't there and that we can flick a switch and it just, the metaphor of the organization as a machine is the way we expect things to be. humans don't do that 'cause we're not machines

[00:26:35] **Susan:** No, but I think some people like to think that we are as well, and that our brains work like computers and, you can just go to work from the head up

[00:26:42] **Emma:** Yeah. Yeah. And some leaders are like that and wish everyone else was like that, but something's gonna happen in the end, I think

[00:26:51] **Susan:** I think it's the school of life that says, as a leader you probably wish that everybody else is just like you, 'cause then that would just make life...

[00:26:59] **Emma:** I think it'd be quite horrible, but I

[00:27:00] **Susan:** It would be horrible, but

[00:27:02] **Emma:** that. Yeah. I can say that now, but, I probably would have thought it a few times in my life at different stages

[00:27:08] **Susan:** Which brings me to Kaleidoscope, because that's the name of your business. And, uh, d- I mean, kaleidoscope to me is kind of something always changing and never... I, I, yeah, what is it,

Emma?

[00:27:21] **Emma:** and, and, and what would I have known? I know exactly how that name came to me. my business is now 15 years old. and I chose Kaleidoscope Development 'cause



I couldn't choose Kaleidoscope 'cause it was a cafe in Sydney or something. I just, I couldn't get the domain name, so I put on development.

and when people said, "Oh, why did you choose that word?" And at the time, the logo, which is still on my website even though the website's changed, since then, the actual core of it is still there, hidden somewhere, but present to honor the past, to honor the previous website. It's kind of brought that with me because it was so figural for me.

back in those days, before my life fell apart many, many times, I just simply said, "People are always changing. We come in so many different flavors and shapes and sizes and colors and everything." And, it really was simply, quite naively, about, can we explore people at work in all of their diversity, in all of their beauty and change?

it was simple language. And the word, the name Kaleidoscope Development has actually held its time, has held its own or whatever the expression is, for even how my life has evolved and, the core threads are still about what gives life to people's working lives. I now look at work with much more of a systemic perspective, right out to societal as well, ecological.

Um, but yes, the notion that there's an energy and that things are always moving and changing is, is still there. Mm-hmm.

[00:28:57] **Susan:** No, it's a, it's a great... I, and I love that, that there was a part of you that always knew that this would,

[00:29:04] **Emma:** Yeah.

[00:29:05] **Susan:** serve you and others, that's quite beautiful. And we've touched a lot in various ways through this conversation so far just on loss and death and what you've gone through in your life, and I know you have a book forthcoming, Emma.

[00:29:24] **Emma:** No, I do

[00:29:27] **Susan:** so maybe you take this whichever way you want to go with it

[00:29:32] **Emma:** Mm-hmm. Thank you. Yeah, the long and the short of it is that within a four-year period, I lost four deeply, deeply important people in my life, and it was between late 2015 and early 2019. I lost one of my best friends, my, my one and only male friend, truly, truly, truly good male friend, then my younger brother, and then my husband, and then our youngest child took her life two years after he died. Very connected to his death in terms of her location, at the choice, at the time. And, and then COVID happened, so just to



situate listeners, Work fell apart, life fell apart. Life fell apart for everybody, 'cause of COVID. But I just really, um

I mean, life carried on. Life carried on, and I wanted life to carry on, and I never went into a depression. I had moments of just thinking, "What the fuck?" of course. I mean, you know, quite naturally. Um, but what I, what I did and how the book has come out is that I, I wrote. I wrote, and I wrote, and I wrote, and I joined grief writing 30-day programs which were just so beautifully held.

Um, you know, with not live sessions, but real people. You weren't just doing it all in your own corner. And over time I've written, I've lost count, but a couple of years ago when I started writing my book, it was over 400 pieces of writing, specifically in this, my blog site. My personal blog site is called Widowing Empty Nest.

it's within the Kaleidoscope, Development website. But I have two blogs. I have one that's more leadership oriented and one that's really about personal losses. So I wrote, and I- At the same time, because work fell away because COVID happened, where I did engage was two primary places. O- one was end-of-life work, 'cause two of the four deaths died at the end-of-life hospice in Geneva where I became a volunteer, where I started to train volunteers, and where I still work today, a beautiful place called La Maison Le Taha.

And then the other thing was how I stayed connected with people in society was through learning. So all of this learning went online, and I'm a bit heady, bit of a heady person. It was probably grief avoidance, but that's fine. I stayed connected with how psychology was changing, how coaching was changing, um, got interested in climate issues, which I hadn't been in u- up until then particularly.

And eventually, I think enough people asked me, "So when are you writing your book?" And I thought, oh, no, I'm a short form writer, I'm not a big form. But I thought, actually, I know I am becoming a voice. And there is the connection to organizations. I'm proud of my roots as an organizational psychologist.

They've really served me well. My personal experiences, very early on I could see, oh gosh, we turn away from what hurts. My friends are turning away from me 'cause they can't bear to be with me, 'cause, projection. They think, oh my God, if I lost my husband, partner, and a child. So I was very, very isolated.

but then I thought, this is actually what we do in society. This is what we do around death. This is what we do around our mortality. We turn away from everything that hurts. But what happens... I got curious about what happens when we turn towards. And then this is where I've done a lot, of training in a systems approach called systemic constellations, which comes as it root, uh, from its roots in family constellations by Bert Hellinger.



Um, and I suddenly realized, and I connected the dots. I thought, oh my God, all of these problems in, let's say, organizations, 'cause I wouldn't do family constellations, but let's say we use constellations in an organization. A lot of the problems that we're really unable to solve come from something a long time ago that's been, that we've turned our back on.

a leader could have left under a cloud, or there could have been some ugly funding going on that we don't, we never talk about that. I do believe energetically that creates ripples in an organization, and that we can go back to when those things happened and resolve them. So I thought, back to the book, I've got something to say.

I've got something to say about carrying multiple losses. I've got a point of view around grief being something not to get over, not to overcome, but to understand that it's actually a flavor of love. It's probably the harshest flavor of love, but love, like back to love, I think love includes gratitude.

It includes probably joy. It includes bittersweetness. It includes sorrow. I think these are all flavors of love, and grief is a particularly heavy flavor. so yeah, I started to think, actually, I love my life. I've never, despite it all, thought I want out. I really haven't. So what is it that's going on?

And I've come to just hold, paradoxes around this. my love is wrapped in grief. My grief is wrapped in love. ways of living in a both and way. How do I carry these people forward? I don't want to be living just for dead people. My life's gonna end soon enough, right?

So how do I carry them with me? Painful as it still is, extraordinarily painful, but the skills in learning to carry that pain back to what leaders need, I think that skill of being b- with what's hard and what is still possible is that life skill of grief, of leadership, of being with what's ending. 'Cause stuff needs to end.

Everything dies. We're all made from dead things. You can get me on this and I'll, it'll be just one long sentence without a full stop, so do interrupt me.

[00:35:48] **Susan:** But what a beautifully articulate sentence. I was with you the whole way, and one of the things that came up was, especially for organizations again, is our secrets make us sick. You know that saying. So that when we don't let go or end something, it does kind of haunt the background often. And you know it, like in the places I've worked and where I go into, somebody's always talking about something that happened in the past that was never resolved.

It's always there, isn't it? A tension.

[00:36:25] **Emma:** Yeah. And then it gets named as resistance.



[00:36:28] **Susan:** yeah.

Yeah,

[00:36:29] **Emma:** the challenge rather than getting curious

[00:36:30] **Susan:** And because people change and, there's a whole lot going on, it's like, yeah, there's so many moving parts, but there's usually something to trace it back to, isn't there?

[00:36:42] **Emma:** and then if we, if we're conscious of things ending rather than let's just slam the door and pretend it didn't happen, but if we can at least bring some conscious awareness to what's ending That then becomes or feeds into the new culture of the organization. So people who are staying, like, you know, we talked about Geneva.

I, I live just outside Geneva in France. WHO, World Health Organization, has lost 40%, 40% of its people. The people who have left are unhappy bunnies. The people who are staying are unhappy bunnies. Everyone's unhappy. there's no easy fix here. Of course, these large organizations had to restructure.

But if a beloved leader leaves from one day to the next and nothing is ever said about it, that is gonna create ripple effects. If people are marched out of the door without being able to say goodbye, and I'm not saying this happened at WHO, it didn't, um, but we, we know where this can happen. if there isn't space for the sorrow, if there isn't space for passing on lessons, passing on the culture, then the new culture becomes how we end it.

People who stay are watching how the people who are leaving were asked to leave, how they then get talked about because guess what? We're aware that one day it's us, whether we leave with our nice little retirement or whether we get asked to leave ourselves before we really want to.

We want to matter. We want to have belonged. We want to have contributed. So it's another skill. Let's talk about what's ending, and then let's carry forward names of people who helped us get to where we are today 'cause we can't... back to that word honor. We're here because of them. I'm surviving because you had to go.

Gosh, I mean, I get goosebumps just saying that.

[00:38:36] **Susan:** as you were saying that, I'm thinking of, I spent time in, in Khartoum in Sudan many, many years ago, for an Irish organization that I was working with at the time. And on one of the walls was a photograph of a bunch of people, and nobody knew who any



of them were. And I used to think that, like, that I was only there today because of what they had done before me.

But yet I didn't know ... there was no honoring them because I didn't know who they were, and it was only a few years earlier. Things change quite quickly often, and we don't realize. But I, I also think legacy, it's one of the things that I thought about reading through some of your,

[00:39:22] **Emma:** ह्म्म

[00:39:23] **Susan:** blogs was

I, I don't know if you've read James Kerr's book about the All Blacks.

[00:39:31] **Emma:** No,

[00:39:32] **Susan:** going in a

[00:39:32] **Emma:** No, but I think I've heard it mentioned before, and I do love a bit of rugby.

[00:39:36] **Susan:** Yeah. Well, he has, I don't know, 13 lessons for leaders or something in it. But one of the things, when I read one of your blogs, it just reminded me of that because, when you take on an All Black T-shirt, well it's certainly under him,

[00:39:49] **Emma:** உம்

[00:39:50] **Susan:** the whole thing is you're going to pass that T-shirt on or that jersey on to somebody else.

So you have to honor it. You've got it from someone, you have to honor it and pass it on well. Uh, something like that, and something I read of yours just reminded me of that

[00:40:08] **Emma:** Yes. so I bring mortality into my conversations a lot with people, whether it's, coaching or whether it's a leader program called Mortal Leader, which has taster sessions. And ultimately, one of the things that people worry about is what legacy will I be leaving with my life.

And I think that's can be good language. how do I want to live on in people? Often we, our legacy's visible only after we've died with, family and relationships, so what does that mean in a workplace? But I think too often we think of legacy also in short term, what's my legacy in this particular role, or a new leader comes in and wants to make their mark and



intentionally goes in a different direction just to differentiate themself from the, the leader who's left.

And I think that's where legacy language becomes a bit more harmful. And, what I love about the, the All Blacks is the idea of, oh, I've got the baton for now. Let me steward. you used that, some of that language in, in one of your emails. Let me steward this organization, this living system, this precious living system.

it's temporary. I want it to remain capable of really strong life after I've gone. I don't want it to break up and be fragile when I go. So rather than thinking of me being essential to the organization, how do I keep repairing what needs repairing, pruning, hospicing, composting parts that we don't need so that the, the whole system remains vital and healthy over time.

so that, distinction of I've got the leadership job, I've got the leadership title, I'm gonna leave a big mark and a legacy instead to, okay, what's the life that wants to come through me and this organization and all of us, and our customers, and our suppliers, and the planet, and the health of the ecology, um, why I have the privilege of being in a leadership, a formal leadership position.

and I think when we bring a mortality awareness lens to our life and our work, it actually brings life. in the end, death, mortality awareness isn't about death. This is usually one of the insights that people have. It's about life.

[00:42:21] **Susan:** About living

[00:42:22] **Emma:** about living, and it's about what matters, and what matters now in this moment, and so much doesn't.

[00:42:28] **Susan:** oh yeah, absolutely.

I love that, the mortality lens and the awareness of mortality, breathing life into something in... And, and I want to go back to your book in a moment, but just in my own book, because it's reminding me, I did a, a balance sheet because my background is accounting. And one of the things, the liabilities on the balance sheet is to death, because we owe our life to death

[00:42:54] **Emma:** Oh, beautiful. Oh, I got goosebumps with that.

[00:42:58] **Susan:** And then our assets are our aliveness and our sense of, our body and our brain and all of that. And then our equity, the owner's share, is the essence. It's what we decide matters to us.

[00:43:12] **Emma:** Yeah



[00:43:13] **Susan:** And, and I think there's something ... you've given me another level to look at that from this conversation, so thank you for that as well.

And your book, 'cause we kind of skimmed past it, but I'm aware that you, just recorded the audiobook. So I kinda wanted to say ... Well, I wanted to ask about was it cathartic reading that book? And I don't wanna put the words in your mouth, so maybe what the experience of writing was like. But then also reading it aloud

[00:43:49] **Emma:** Hmm. Well, I want to take a few steps back if that's all right. So the book is called Still Fire Inside: A Memoir of, on Love, Loss, and Life. and it's specifically about living with those four big losses. Drawn and it includes some blog posts, not too many I hope, and a lot of reflections. And, I really resist a tidy transformational arc around anything to do with grief and loss.

And yet using, staying with that fire metaphor, which by the way came to me in a psychedelic journey. Psychedelics have been part of the picture. I kept with that language and the, after introducing everybody who died, I have a section called Ashes, a section called Embers, and a section called Sparks, which is essentially, a transformational narrative at some level, of course it is.

but I think what's really important to say is that so the losses were 2015, '16, '17, and '19. And I was writing right from 2016 before my husband got ill and died, before there was any sign of anything with him. It was a very short disease. I wrote the book between June '24 and May '25, and then I pressed pause, got some really good feedback that I paid for, started doing the editing process, and was finishing the editing process.

I was doing that between, say, September to December 2025. And then I had another huge loss. My eldest brother took his life just before Christmas 2025. I had such a good year. 2025 was my year where the phrase I used about myself was, "I still don't recognize my life, but I recognize Emma." So while I'd been, still enjoying life plenty and grieving heavily, I felt like I cohered in 2025 in a way that I hadn't felt before. the book was pretty much done. It wasn't, I s- I managed to weave in my brother, and then just as I was finishing, my dad died suddenly on the 3rd of May. And, he was an elderly man, but he was out hiking, and had a sudden heart attack. So my parents have lost two children.

my mother's 87th birthday is today, so she gets a little mention. and so she's lost her husband and two, sons. And, I can't answer the question, well, how was it to read the book without bringing in these two other recent deaths, because they have absolutely shattered my 2026, quite rightly.

Um, which tells me what? I didn't do my good grief work? It doesn't tell me that. It tells me that healing is really fragile. I've l- I've got enormous capacity and skills for being with what's



hard and what's happened, but six huge losses is ... I mean, I, I l- I, I do sometimes look at my life from the outside and I just, I really do think, "How does she do it?"

So the book is about ... is really up to 2025, doesn't really include the, the last two losses. I've woven them in lightly, but not in the story. So how was it to go back and read it? It was really hard and at some level I don't recognize the woman who wrote the book, and I felt some shame around that at some stage.

I thought, "Oh, God, can I stand by this?" 'cause there, there is, you know, there's distress, there's despair, but there's also positivity. And this year's been really, really hard and I thought I don't recognize her. But then some of the writing was nine years ago, so I have changed enormously. So reading the book was hard.

Was it cathartic? I don't know that I would use that word. It was powerful. It showed me that grief is very much alive in me, and it shows me that I can stand by my words and I'm not the person who wrote them, if that makes any sense at all. So the book itself comes out on the 21st of October, which is the date in 1987 that I had my first date with my husband, Mike.

We were together 30 years minus six months, and that's why I chose that date. And then the audiobook I think will probably be out, be out in November

[00:48:21] **Susan:** And honoring, that's the word, that throughout all of that, that, you are honoring the person you were

[00:48:30] **Emma:** Ja.

[00:48:30] **Susan:** through this, honoring that there's been change, honoring all the people that you've lost. That's the word that it's really interesting how, and, uh, it's such a, uh, it's not a word we use every day, is it?

Honoring

[00:48:52] **Emma:** Yeah, and why not? And, and my golly, doing the work that I do in the, at the end of life, it's all people want. Not to be on a pedestal but to, to somehow feel like they've mattered. I think it can be very, for those of us who will have an illness and time to reflect as we come to the end of our lives, be it short or long, I think we'll have deep excavation work to think about how I have honored people who shaped me.

Did I appropriately do that in my lifetime? I've started a practice where I, when, 'cause I can be awake for hours in the night, I really will try and go back to a number of generations and



I'm, again, I'm ashamed that I can't actually go back many generations in my family. People weren't talked about.

I had my maternal grandmother until I was in my late 30s. That's exceptional. So a very strong marker, but the others less so. But my word, how was she shaped and, you know, can't even go back 200 years. I can't even go back 100 years. So who's remembering me? Who's remembering me? And, I know with people end of life, this is a big worry, and they realize, "Who's gonna remember me?"

And therefore they start thinking about, "How have I remembered others?" Can we remember others during our life and know that we all come from the same thing and we're all gonna go to the same thing? And how would I then live differently, talk about the dead differently, honor them, honor life?

Yeah.

[00:50:30] **Susan:** Yeah. Like the question that you, how do I fully live, fully love, fully embrace my

life? Because that's honoring life

[00:50:40] **Emma:** Mm. Yeah. Whatever, whatever comes my way. I mean, that, I remember exactly when I wrote that piece, it was a real moment of kind of like, duh, simplicity and, "Oh gosh, this is hard. How do I do it?" Is I have to fully be here. Fully, fully, fully. Simple

[00:51:01] **Susan:** you said at one point when you started talking earlier, it was life goes on. And that's the thing, life is always living. It is always alive, even if we feel checked out or not fully embracing things. Life is, wants to be lived

[00:51:19] **Emma:** Yeah. Well, back to organizations, if we see them as living systems, what wants to live here? What life wants to come through in this organization? What would nature do, is one of the questions I invite leaders to think. What would nature do in this situation? What would life do?

[00:51:35] **Susan:** No, i-a-absolutely. And the word that hasn't come up that is in my head nonstop is dignity

[00:51:45] **Emma:** ஓ டம்

[00:51:46] **Susan:** And we often talk about leave with dignity, or wouldn't they have enough dignity to know to go? Or, die with dignity. And actually honoring seem- I mean, there's,



there's room for both and, not one or the other, but honoring seems like such a more beautiful way to also appreciate it

[00:52:14] **Emma:** Yeah. I'm just trying to think what the distinction would be for me. I think both words can work and maybe one, there'd be a clever Venn diagram to see how they go together. But, um, I think for me dignity feels a little bit more cerebral

[00:52:25] **Susan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:52:26] **Emma:** and a bit more about position. Whereas honoring for me really allows for the full, fullest person as that, in terms of how I use that language anyway

[00:52:38] **Susan:** Mm. Yeah. Emma, not only have we run out of time, we've run over time. But thank you for allowing me, uh, to do that, and it's been such a, a fabulous, beautiful, uh, conversation. I want to honor that because I've enjoyed going with you through all of this, and didn't even get to touch half the things probably that we may have done.

But I appreciate the invitation to go where we went

[00:53:09] **Emma:** Thank you very much, and I've loved your curiosity. That was really helpful and, yeah, lots of things will come up whenever we're asked good questions and listened to well, and that's the skill for organizations too

[00:53:22] **Susan:** Absolutely. So you can contact either of us for work. No, uh, thank you so much, Emma, and if somebody would like to know more, buy your book, what's the best way of, of knowing all of that?

[00:53:38] **Emma:** So you've been looking at an old version of my website. The new one is literally coming out, I think, in a week or two, so probably by the time this podcast is out, kaleidoscopedevelopment.com. Under that you've got my organizational offerings, my individual offerings as well, I work directly with, with people going through transformation.

My book will be on there, as any of the Amazons. do support your independent bookshop if possible, but Still Far Inside by Emma Pearson wherever you buy your books. And I'll be doing, I'm, I want to do some readings, virtual, in person as well, I'll have an events thing going on on my website too.

[00:54:15] **Susan:** Great idea. Yeah, great. Thank you so much, Emma

[00:54:19] **Emma:** Thank you. With pleasure, Susan

