

Bonus Episode: Kelli

KELLI DUNHAM (stage recording): I would like to bring out onto the stage, America's favorite ex-nun, skateboard-riding, houseboat-dwelling, nurturing, sweet, adorable, thoughtful, thought-provoking, anti-racist comic -- Miss Kelli Dunham.

ERIKA LANTZ: From Rococo Punch and iHeartRadio, this is "The Turning." I'm Erika Lantz. There are still four episodes left this season, but today we have a bonus for you. It's a little different.

KELLI (stage recording): So, uh, like most of you, I used to be a nun. (laughter) Uh, very relatable. That's very relatable in stand-up comedy: to get up and start to talk about how you used to be a nun. And people, you know, like in, sometimes in straight clubs, people will be like, "Oh yeah, whatever Sister Mary Bull Dyke." (laughter) Uh, but um, I used to be a nun with the outfit and everything. Uh ...

ERIKA: You know Kelli Dunham from previous episodes. She's the former sister whose mistress told her she walked like her shoulders were angry. But there is so much more to Kelli's story. All these twists and turns.

KELLI (stage recording): Some of my happiest childhood memories were learning words. I remember asking my mom, "What does 'ambivalent' mean?" And she's like, "Well, when you both love something and don't love it so much all at once." And I was like, "Oh my God, that's exactly how I feel about you!"

AUDIENCE (stage recording): Ohhhhhh.

KELLI (stage recording): What, does my mom have plants in here? You guys are like, "Ohhhh."

ERIKA: One of our producers, Emily Forman, talked with Kelli about her life before the Missionaries of Charity and after. About her faith. About her comedy.

EMILY FORMAN: Um, so, um, I just want to go back, back, back, back, back, back. Uh, what's the first joke you ever told?

ERIKA: But mostly about her complicated relationship with her mom.

KELLI (stage recording): So I'm the youngest of 7. Um. My mom had had six other kids with as many alcoholic husbands, which I think is really impressive to find not one or two but a number of alcoholics. Um sometimes we just have our types, which uh when you think about like OK so the thought process... "You know, my last five marriages to alcoholics ended in financial ruin, but I've got the right alcoholic this time." So I really appreciate my mom's level of hope. So ...

ERIKA: That is a rural Wisconsin accent you hear in Kelli's voice. She grew up there. Hard work and not talking about feelings was the family code. So was Dale Carnegie, the author of "How To Win Friends And Influence People." It was an incredibly popular book, and Kelli's dad made the book's philosophy part of life at home.

KELLI: Well, first my dad would frequently, um, mornings, he would come down, we had to be sitting at the table at 6 a.m. and he would frequently slap his hand on the table and say, "Act enthusiastic and you'll be enthusiastic." And, "Most people are just about as happy as they make up their mind they're going to be," which he would attribute to Dale Carnegie and sometimes to Abraham Lincoln, although I've since heard that it was Dale Carnegie quoting Abraham Lincoln, but it doesn't sound like Abraham Lincoln, because Abraham Lincoln had clinical depression. I bet he did not say that most people are just about as happy as they make up their minds. They're going to be in the middle of the Civil War. You know, I have a feeling that's not true, but it's a good story anyway. (laughter) Can you imagine?

EMILY: No.

ERIKA: Kelli says her dad would run "Dale Carnegie Days." And if you weren't following the "be positive" ethos, you'd have to go to bed early. She says there were a lot of rules like that. He was strict. But, the first time Kelli made her dad laugh, she knew she'd found an important tool. You could say her comedy career started in that moment .

KELLI: Being funny was, like, both a way to deflect things and a way to have positive attention.

EMILY: Whose attention were you hoping to capture?

KELLI: I mean, maybe my mom's... like hearing my mom laugh was really a nice, nice thing. You know? I mean, also because my mom had a hard life. She had all these kids, she had, like, these useless husbands of varying degrees. You know, she had a hard life. So I wanted her to, I don't know, I wanted her to be able to laugh. You know?

EMILY: When you were a kid, were you aware of life being hard for her then?

KELLI: Only glimpses of it, especially when I was younger. Um, I think her marriage to my dad also deteriorated as, uh, as time passed. But she was ... I really don't think I saw her without her makeup until I was like in 3rd or 4th grade. Like, she was always perfectly made up and perfectly put together. She, you know, she was a person who that was important to her and she really maintained, um, I don't know if it's a facade, she maintained, you know, she also didn't want us to be like frightened and, you know, she wanted us to feel secure, I think. So I think that I didn't necessarily know it. I may have felt it somewhere, because I was a very sensitive kid.

KELLI (stage recording): So what my parents needed at that time, they needed like a cheerful, very Midwestern kid, right? What they got was me, and I came into the world screaming as a

fully-formed, whining, coastal, sensitive queer. (laughter) Uh, I was the kind of kid that, um, when it rained, do you know why I would always miss the bus when it rained? Because I would be picking up the worms off the pavement and putting them back out of the grass, so they wouldn't get run over. (laughter)

EMILY: Did you believe in God as a little kid?

KELLI: Yeah. Um, very much so. In fact, I can remember ... there's this, uh, Bill Gaither song. It's "God Loves To Talk To Little Boys While They're Fishing." It's a very sweet song, and I can remember my mom used to play it, and I thought more of myself more as a little boy than a little girl, but I would go to like one of the ponds, you know, and uh, like just take a stick with a string on it and like throw it in there. And I was like, "OK, now God is gonna talk to me. Well, I guess not out loud. OK." (laughter)

But um, um I have this, um, memory of my grandmother when we were staying with her. She and my grandpa built a cottage on torch lake. It's this beautiful lake in Northern Michigan. It has like this crystal-blue water; it's spring-fed. Anyway, so we'd go and stay with them during parts of the summer. And, um, one time I was sleeping in the room where my grandma is, 'cause, you know, it was a lot of kids there, so we were all, like, kind of doubled up. And I was sleeping in the room with my grandma, and I guess she couldn't sleep, and so she was praying aloud about all of us. And then I remember she came to me and I was like, "Oh, I got to lay really still." And um, you know, she was praying for me like, "Oh, you know, help Kelli to know how much" -- Kelli Sue, that's what my family calls me -- "help Kelli Sue to know how much you love her." And some other stuff too. I don't remember the specifics of it, but I was like, "Whatever happens, my grandmother's really praying for me, so maybe I'll be okay." You know, that was like probably when I was 8 or 9. Um ...

EMILY: Were you worried you weren't going to be okay?

KELLI: Well, I think there was like, obviously I didn't fit in with my family. Right. I was like, my parents really tried hard with the gender stuff. Like I was so clearly like a little boy growing up, you know? Um, and they tried really hard, but also like the world was against that, you know? Even now the world is against that, so, doing better, but ...

EMILY: Yeah.

KELLI: And also they were worried for me. Like, I think they thought that the world was going to crush me, you know.

EMILY: Hmm.

KELLI: But they just didn't know what to do. It was like, who gave it, you know, it was like somebody gave them a wolverine to, you know, to raise. "Well, what do we feed a wolverine? We don't know."

EMILY: And so, um, so you moved from Wisconsin to Florida, um, and at this time, what's, what's your faith situation?

KELLI: So my mom, um, wasn't, you know, when we were little was not a Christian, but she became a born-again Christian. And then when we moved to Florida, I went to -- my mom sent us to a Christian school. Um, and everyone was like, "Oh, okay. Like, this is a queer kid in the making. Let's see what we can do." Um, and I got actually really involved in my church and, you know, I would say that I was interested in what God wanted for me in my life, and I felt like, "Oh, well, there, if there's a God, there must be some reason for me, you know? I don't really know what it is, but there must be, like, some reason that I exist, and there's something I'm supposed to do."

KELLI (stage recording): When I was in high school and most of my peers were drinking Zima -- it was the '80s -- and giving each other what I now know to be was horrible blow jobs, I was attending church three times a week, wearing a "No Surfing In Hell" T-shirt and asking complete strangers, "Excuse me. Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior?"

I was a big, bananas born-again Christian, and my mom was a big bananas born-again Christian, so that made her really happy, except for I was also a big, huge, life-long tomboy, and that made her very sad.

ERIKA: One day, Kelli came home and found a note from her mom. It said, "This sounds like something you would love!" And there was a glossy brochure for a missionary training program: "The Lord's Bootcamp." Kelli looked at all the pictures of smiling teenagers and thought:

KELLI (stage recording): "Oh my God, this looks like something I *would* love!"

When I arrived at The Lord's Bootcamp, it was essentially an unimproved, Florida wetlands. And there was ... we washed our clothes by hand in sulfur water we pumped. And also the place that we were supposed to, like, wash up, they called it, uh, "God's bathtub" was just this little area of the swamp that was attached to another area of the swamp with this tiny little drainage ditch. And in the other area of the swamp were two alligators. When we questioned our leaders about it, they were like, "Now, do you really think that an alligator, those alligators are gonna eat 500 teenagers?" And I don't really think any of us thought they were going to eat 500 teenagers, but doesn't even one seem like a lot? (laughter)

ERIKA: One of the main features of the camp was an obstacle course. They'd run it at 5 a.m. Every morning. There was a series of physical challenges based on biblical themes -- all designed to help them become better disciples.

KELLI (stage recording): The last obstacle in the obstacle course was just called The Wall, and it was a series of walls. Uh, and they each were painted with something we would have to

get over in order to effectively serve Jesus. It started with lust and then pride and then gluttony. And the last wall was sexual confusion.

ERIKA: When they weren't running an obstacle course, they took classes in how to tie steel, lay bricks, run power tools, even mix concrete by hand -- all in the service of learning how to build God's kingdom.

KELLI (stage recording): I was having a fantastic time. It was an entire summer of being a tomboy. And I returned home with this newfound zeal. Also with a new haircut. I had a spiral perm, uh, and I had also attempted to bleach my hair surfer blonde with actual bleach, which meant by the end of the summer, I couldn't even get a comb through it.

So one of my fellow team members took a razor and trimmed off almost all the hair on the sides and a lot of the hair on top, which of course leaving me a rat tail in back, and I looked fantastic.

When I walked onto my mom's front porch dragging my stinky backpack, I said, "Mom, don't I look like a new person in Christ?" And she said, "You look a lot the same."

KELLI: So the teen missions thing is like a general evangelical thing, but it was being used as like a de facto conversion camp. Like my mom had hoped that I would come home, you know, changed. I mean, they had these classes on, uh, like "from grubby to grace" and "God's gentlemen," which now I realize were like gender-appropriateness classes. It was like, you know, just like the world's toughest summer camp. It was like if the Missionaries of Charity ran a fucking summer camp. That's what it was like. So.

EMILY: Who did she want you to be?

KELLI: I don't know. Maybe her, you know. I think she was worried. She, she never thought of me as like a masculine female. She thought of me as like an ugly female, right? And my mom was a very beautiful person. She was a very attractive person. And that helped her in life. She knew how to use it. She knew how to use that attractiveness. And it was her kind of also her kind of her shtick, you know? And I can remember watching my mom, uh, put on her makeup -- her whole life, like, I've watched her put on her makeup and talk to her while she put on her makeup. I mean, even the smell of makeup, like makes me think of my mom, you know?

EMILY: And so what were you searching for in joining the MCs?

KELLI: Like, I, you know, I was looking for a life that made sense.

EMILY: And what did your mom think of you joining?

KELLI: Um, I think, you know, she wanted me to have health insurance, you know, like, so she was a little bit like, "OK." You know.

ERIKA: So you already know Kelli joined the MCs and it didn't work out. But what did her life look like when she left?

MIDROLL

ERIKA: Kelli was incredibly impressed by the Missionaries of Charity when she first encountered them. She admired their hard work, and she thought she'd found her community. She converted to Catholicism, joined the order, but found she wasn't welcomed like other sisters. Maybe some of it was her sense of humor. Maybe it was her appearance or her "angry shoulders." One sister described her as scary, and in the end, not fitting in took a toll on her physically. She left. Flunked out, as she puts it.

KELLI: Yeah. I was so sad when I left. You know, 'cause I was like, "All right, well, do you guys think this is working out?" And they're like, "Let us think about it. No!" You know what I mean? (laughter) Like everyone else that left, they were, like, begging them to stay. Not me. They were like, "Bye."

And um, I remember my mom was with my sister when she picked me up, and she was like, "You seem like you're grieving." Like that was the word she used. And I was like, "Well, first of all, it's like this big dramatic 'Goodbye! I'm off to marry Jesus! Goodbye!' 'Oh, hi. I'm back now.'" (laughter) You know what I mean? Like, um, so first it was, like, kind of anticlimactic, but it wasn't even just that. It was just like, it just felt like, it just felt like you're -- "Oh, here, Jesus. Here is my life. I give it to you." And Jesus is like "Smack, nobody wants your dumb gift of your dumb life," you know?

ERIKA: After she left the MCs, she started nursing school, joined a softball team and spent time with the Catholic Worker Movement -- a progressive, faith-based group. And she was talking to a friend there one day.

KELLI: And she was like, "Kelli, like, I know people who are, um, trying to suppress their sexual orientation. And I watched them not be able to love the people around them the way they should, because that's where all their energy is going."

And I was like, "You know what? That's true, and I've seen that a lot, and that's not what I want." Like, if I really believe in love, if I really think that love is something that changes lives and helps people, then I just have to be myself.

KELLI (stage recording): OK. So, I was raised a strict evangelical Christian, and when I came out to my mom, she ripped up my birth certificate and sent it to me. Uh, yeah. And I was complaining about it to my therapist. I was like, "Oh, that was so passive-aggressive." And she was like, "No, Kelli, that was aggressive." So I took it to the county clerk's office, and he looked at me, and then looked at the pieces, and looked at me, and then looked at the pieces, and he thought for a minute, and he said, "We get a lot of this from people who look like you," which tells you my mom was not as original as she thought she was.

KELLI: My mom would say that that is not what happened -- a different narrative. Um, my mom was a dramatic person, you know, it was a very dramatic reaction, like, OK. I also, even when she sent it to me, I was like, "This doesn't, you can send me my birth certificate all you want. It doesn't make me not your kid." You know what I mean? Like that's not how that works. Uh, you know, and we didn't really have a relationship for a long time. Like I went long periods of time without seeing her. Um, I think it didn't really even become comedy early in my comedy career, because it was still so unresolved. I think it was still too raw in me for other people to laugh at it.

ERIKA: Kelli met Heather at the Newark Airport hotel during a queer conference. They both went to Christian high school. They both knew all of the words to the chorus of "The Trumpet Of Jesus." And that was that. They started dating long-distance.

At the time, Heather was in remission from ovarian cancer. Within the first six months of their dating, it came back. Heather would call Kelli to get through the night, to keep her distracted with stories and jokes until she could take her next dose of a heavy pain-killer.

KELLI: It became clear that she was going to die. You know, maybe not right away, but eventually. Like this wasn't a long-term relationship. You know, and Heather struggled at first. Like, she was like, you know, "Well, who starts a relationship when they're so late in life, you know? It just doesn't seem like it follows the rule book." Like she ... you know, I think she didn't know if I was going to be able to stick it into the end. I knew I was going to be able to stick into the end. I knew what I'd been through, you know? Um, but there was something really beautiful about being able to be the right person at the right time, that was, in the same way that, like in the Missionaries of the Charity, just felt like, oh, I'm like, "Oh, this is what I'm supposed to be doing. This is, this is, I'm answering this call." I felt like I was answering the call.

KELLI (stage recording): We kind of try to have a sense of humor about it around the house. I mean, I'm a stand-up comic and she was a total smart-ass. So in between the two of us, like, for example, one day when she was really, she had been on chemo for a long time and she wasn't feeling that well, and I called her from the supermarket and I said, um, "Is there anything, uh, I can bring you?" And there's this long silence and she says, "Yeah. Um, how about a quarter pound of a will to live?" (laughter) So I was like, well, she's going there, I'm going to go there, too. And I was like, "Oh honey, you know how it is. I'm at Trader Joe's, and they only have organic, and now ... now they're all out." So just like that, she came back, she's like, "Ah, damn, I had a coupon."

ERIKA: Kelli calls the day Heather died "Pudding Day." Heather chose to end her life -- surrounded by chosen family -- with a lethal dose of medication mixed into a pudding cup.

All this time -- through the relationship, Heather's illness, nursing school, comedy sets -- Kelli's relationship with her mom remained strained, until her stepfather's dementia became worse, and she flew home to help. He was a retired Army colonel, and everyone still called him The Colonel.

KELLI (stage recording): And so most people, when they develop dementia, uh, they forget the names of their kids or where they live, or, you know, their most fond childhood memories. That is not what happened to The Colonel. The Colonel forgot he was a jerk, I think because he forgot where the scotch was.

So I went to my mom's home and helped her set up hospice. And The Colonel was lovely to me, like, "Oh Kelli, I just, I love you, I love your haircut, soldier. I love" -- the ultimate compliment (laughter) -- "I love your haircut, soldier. That's, oh man, that's fantastic, oh." And, uh, we thought that he might not make it until Christmas, and he was really so, you know, cognitively impaired at that point, that he couldn't even follow a sitcom. So my mom put up the Christmas tree, and he asked her just to turn off the lights, and he just watched the tree. And every so often he would say, "That's a heck of a tree, Nance, that's a heck of a tree."

And so I would sit with my mom, watch her as she would put on makeup. And I wanted to tell her it was going to be OK, but I knew it wasn't, so I just sat with her.

KELLI: I don't know, something really changed that year. We just talked about our lives and, you know, kind of what was important in life and what wasn't and not having any regrets. And, um, and it healed in a way that I never thought was possible.

KELLI (stage recording): So The Colonel died a few days before Christmas and when people came to drop off food and, um, say, you know, send their condolences, my mom's response was, "This is my daughter, Kelli. She's also a widow. She lost her spouse as well."

EMILY: What's a moment that happened that you would have never expected to have had with your mom?

KELLI: Oh, she came ... she came to watch me perform at the Stonewall Inn in June.

ERIKA: The story of Kelli's mom at the historic Stonewall Inn in a moment.

MIDROLL

KELLI (stage recording): Alright, so my mom, nine years I've been performing. She has never seen me perform. You know where my mom wanted to come see me perform in the middle of June on the 30th anniversary of Stonewall at the Stonewall Inn. The gayest thing ever. Right? It's the gayest thing I've ever done. Guess who I was opening for? Linnie Breedlove.

EMILY: Who is Linnie Breedlove?

KELLI: Performance artist. Queer performance artist.

KELLI (stage recording): Now you remember Lynnies last show where Lynnies, like, had a little stuffed animal, like “Hi, I identify as an elephant. Hi, I identify as a Teddy bear.” Right? Very cute. Very tame. I thought that that’s the show that Linnie would be doing. No. Oh no.

In the show my mom came too, Lynnies walked on the stage wearing nothing but a dick. (laughter) And also, for no apparent reason that I could figure out, there was 20 minutes of Lynnies peeing into a bucket on stage.

Now, if you’ve ever been upstairs at the Stonewall, you know that the stage is maybe two or three feet from the front row where my mom was sitting. So I’m sitting in the audience thinking, “My mom and Lynnies Breedlove are having a golden shower scene.”

Audience (stage recording): (laughter)

KELLI (stage recording): And then I said the words I have not said before, or since. I turned to a friend and I said, “Could you please get my mom some more wine?” (laughter, clapping)

So we got through that incident more or less OK, but, oh, the questions the next day at breakfast. So she’s, like, trying to figure things out, right? So she’s like, “So there was a woman, a man, no a woman, no a woman dressed like a man, sitting on the lap of the woman, the man, no, the woman dressed like a man? Is that the way it always is?”

ERIKA: By this time, Kelli had met her partner Cheryl, a writer and a poet. Cheryl was at the Stonewall performance, too, and Kelli introduced her to her mom.

KELLI: Um, she was like, “She’s beautiful.” And I was like, “Yeah, I know she’s beautiful.” (laughter) Um, yeah. She was like, “Kelli, um, uh, in your subculture.” And I was like, I didn’t even know she knew the word “subculture.” “In your subculture, uh, are you considered attractive?” And I was like, “Yeah, mom, actually in my subculture, I am considered attractive. There’s like some women that want to date a masculine female.” Uh, and she was like, “Oh, I didn’t have any idea.” And that actually just made her so relieved, you know?

EMILY: Mmm

KELLI: And I, I think she started thinking of me as more her son than her daughter, and I think that helped, too. Um.

EMILY: Wow.

KELLI: Yeah.

EMILY: I was curious at the moment at Stonewall, at that performance, if like seeing your mom there and your friends there and your girlfriend there, like all hanging out, having this time, does that sort of, like, I mean, when I think back of like you as a teen, having these questions about

your purpose, you know, that moment where you sort of done in your searching and did you have answers?

KELLI: I felt happy for sure. I mean, I think, you know, I don't know if anyone's ever done in their searching, you know? Um, it was a moment who that it felt like a lot of people worked really hard to get to that moment -- helped me get to that moment. You know, like my mom's gay hairdresser. You know, my mom had been watching Ellen for a long time. Um, you know, uh, Linnie, even who like when they saw my mom just gave my mom a big hug like they've been waiting their whole lives to hug each other, you know, um. It seemed like there was some people who were interested in me and her being happy and me and her being friends, and that's a really nice, you know. And also that she got to experience it. You know, she got to experience what it feels like to be ... to be loved by chosen family.

ERIKA: And then, unbelievably, Cheryl was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma.

EMILY: And how did your mom and Cheryl get along?

KELLI: Oh, my mom, my mom loves Cheryl.

EMILY: Yeah.

KELLI: Like when Cheryl started chemo, my mom bought her bunny slippers and, like, fussed over her. And, like, my mom tried really hard to, like, give Cheryl some mom energy, and Cheryl really appreciated that. And I appreciated it. And even my sister was like, "Weren't you jealous?" And I was like, "No, in a way that's, like, perfect. Because I get to observe that love towards somebody I love, and it's not complicated the way it would be between us," you know? So I actually really appreciated that.

ERIKA: Kelli says that whenever there's a tragedy in her life, she does a show. When Cheryl died, she booked a whole southern comedy tour.

KELLI: I don't know how people get through stuff without having an outlet of writing about it and performing about it and trying to make it funny. I don't really know. You know, it just seems like, wow ... that seems brave.

KELLI (stage recording): I, one thing, um, being involved with somebody who has a serious illness is I really feel like it gives you a perspective. It definitely challenges the assumptions that the universe is a good place, right? Definitely challenges those assumptions. Like, you know, like those bumper stickers that say, "God is good all the time"? I'm like, "Well, I'll buy the 'God is good,' but don't know about the 'all the time' part." Right? 'Cause some kids get leukemia, and some kids get a pony, you know? (laughter) It's OK, you can laugh at it. My therapist totally does.

ERIKA: Kelli lives in Brooklyn in an apartment she affectionately calls “Queer Study Hall.” There’s always a revolving door of friends coming through. She’s a community school director, and she works part time as a nurse. And she’s developing a new comedy tour -- 50 churches in 50 states.

As for her faith, Kelli stopped going to church after her time in the Missionaries of Charity.

KELLI: Actually, if you look at the world, it does seem like there is a God, but it seems like God hates us, right? That’s what it really looks like, you know? Um, the Haiti earthquake and then a cholera epidemic, you know, like, come on.

ERIKA: But after a while, she discovered it was actually harder *not* to be involved in a spiritual practice than it was to do it. Why fight it? So, she found a church in New York -- a very open church. In fact, she says the pastor once said that even atheists are welcome.

KELLI: And I was like, “I think this is my church -- the church where they don’t care what you believe in” (laughter) But, that almost in a sense, doesn’t matter. What matters is like the community and the connection and trying to find meaning, you know. The meaning is like, for me, the meaning is the spirituality, like trying to find meaning in, like, whatever I experienced, like try and convert whatever difficulty it is into something that can help other people.

EMILY: Did you talk about, um, your mom’s death with her? Did you talk about death with her?

KELLI: Oh, all the fucking time. That’s, like, her favorite subject for the last 5 years.

ERIKA: Kelli’s mom died at the end of April, after a year in assisted living and then hospice. She had a form of blood cancer. Kelli flew to Florida to be with her. Her mom didn’t ask her to come because, as Kelli says, she’s not a complainer. But Kelli went anyway.

KELLI: When we were kids, like, I can remember her being like, “Don’t put me on a machine,” and we’re like “Mom, we’re just going through the McDonald’s drive-through right now, but OK -- don’t put you on a machine. Got it.” And she always said, “I’m not afraid of dying. I’m afraid of, um, I’m afraid of suffering, and I’m afraid of being alone.” Every conversation for the last year, she said, “They shoot horses, don’t they?” She really was like --

EMILY: Wow.

KELLI: I think it made her really, you know, she had a very honest relationship, I think, with God, but, you know, she always said like, “I just keep asking, ‘Why am I still here?’”

ERIKA: Kelli talked to the staff at the assisted living facility, and they’d say things like “I love your mom’s laugh” and “I just want to tell you this great thing your mom did for me.” At one point, even the director of the facility was in tears talking about Kelli’s mom. So Kelli had an answer to her mom’s question.

KELLI: I came back, and I was like, “Mom, like, I, I can't tell you why you were here, but I can tell you, like, why God gave you this extra year that has been so difficult, but I can tell you that you made people's lives, people at a assisted living facility in Florida, in the middle of a pandemic -- the epicenter, right? You made their lives easier in some of the, like, the hardest times they will ever imagine.” I was like, “You changed, like, you brought light in this, like, terrible, difficult year.”

EMILY: Hm.

KELLI: Um, you know, and I was holding her hand when she died. So she got, you got what she wanted, you know, so -- she wasn't alone and she wasn't suffering. So.

EMILY: Do you think that your time with the Missionaries of Charity -- all this sitting in silence with others -- helped you be there for your mom?

KELLI: I mean sure, you know, you spend years doing that, you develop that capacity and you develop, also, that it's not an uncomfortable thing. Like we could be quiet, you know?

Even, like, one of the hospice doctors was like, “Yeah, usually when you come into a room, people are just like -- and there's an unconscious patient -- people are just chattering at them or talking around them, you know, even though we know that hearing is the last to go.” And I was like, “Well, I don't -- there's not some secret I need to tell my mom now, like we've known she was going to die for a long time, and she uh -- like, we've said what we needed to say, like, what else am I going to say now,” you know?

Um, but I think, like, the comfort with silence is ... (laughs) I guess the two things are like, you know, being a nun and also stand-up comedy, 'cause definitely stand-up comedy, you know, you have to -- when you have to wait for the laugh, that silence feels like a really long time, but if you can hold the silence, you'll get a bigger laugh so ... I don't know, I hadn't thought about that before.

KELLI (stage recording): And so now people ask me where I am theologically, um, and I don't really worry too much about the afterlife, except for maybe that it just sounds exhausting like another life after this one? I only want that if I can sit on a couch and watch HBO documentaries, otherwise I'm out. But, uh, you know, there was an attraction of, like, you know, baby-butch nuns and priests in drag and of groovy-smelling incense, but also there was the wonder of, like, thinking you knew all the answers and that if everyone thought like you the world would just be fine. There was a lot of power in that. And sometimes, even now, I'll hear, like, a hymn being sung in a Catholic church as I walk by, and I'll get kind of nostalgic, and I'll think, “Ah, well,” and then remember, “You know, I was married to that guy, and he was a little bit of a jerk.” I'm Kelli Dunham. Thank you!

Audience (stage recording): (cheering)

CREDITS

ERIKA: This episode was written and produced by Emily Forman. Our editor is Rob Rosenthal. Andrea Asuaje is our digital producer.

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I’m Erika Lantz. Thanks for listening.