Kelly Holden on Kintsugi Life: Finding Strength and Hope in the Face of Loss

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Guest: Kelly Holden

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Kelly Holden: 0:29

Grief is hard and comes in many different forms and it's not just losing people we love, it can be losing all different types of things. But for me it's realizing that life is really short and trying to do what makes you happy, trying to give grace to other people. I don't believe we get over losing someone. I think you learn how to deal with it. Right. I'm still gonna always be a little bit angry that his life turned out the way it was, that my kids don't have their father. Those things are still always going to upset me but I try to focus on the positive and the good and hopefully have way more good days than bad days.

David Lowry: 1:05

That was Kelly Holden, our guest today on Peaceful Life Radio. She's an author of Kintsugi Life: Finding Strength and Hope in the Face of Loss, and she's really got some great ideas for those of you who may be facing loss right now. And all of us will, as you know. And with me today, of course, is my good friend Don Drew. Don. I'm glad to see you online today. Wish our viewers could see how great you look. But this is an audio program. We always look better in audio.

Don Drew: 1:34

Thank you, David. I'm doing really great today, and this week's guest, as you mentioned, is Kelly Holden, the author of A Kintsugi Life, Finding Strength and Hope in the Face of Loss,

which is the story of her and her husband Nick's journey with two bouts of cancer. She describes their 16 year journey in the aftermath of his death in 2013 in the book, and the story continues with finding love and joy again in life with her husband Keith, who is also widowed. She believes that although life can be shattered and broken, it is possible to put the pieces back together again to find beauty and love and living. Kelly is the mother of two children and two stepchildren who are a fun family that loves to vacation and be together. She is an attorney by profession, but her true love is writing books and reading In her spare time. She volunteers as a board member at the local food pantry, and is involved in her church St. Veronica. She loves to exercise, ski, cook, entertain, and travel whenever possible. Kelly, welcome to Peaceful Life Radio.

Kelly Holden: 2:32

Thank you very much for having me today.

David Lowry: 2:34

Welcome Kelly. So glad you're on our program. We absolutely want to get into your personal story because it's the core of your book. But first, why don't we explore this concept of Kintsugi, which is the title of your book. It's, as I understand, the art of gold joinery. And frankly, the use of this word or concept is what drew us to your book in the first place. Can you tell us more about what Kintsugi means to you?

Kelly Holden: 2:57

Sure. So I read a lot and it's this Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold and transforming it into something new. This idea of just because something is broken or shattered doesn't mean it can't be put back together. So I thought, What an awesome metaphor for life. Certainly for my life and I think for most people's life, because I don't believe that any of us are immune from tragedy and heartbreak. I thought it was such a beautiful concept and a great title for my book.

Don Drew: 3:32

Kelly, Kintsugi Life is a bit unusual in that it is an extremely personal book and it recounts in detail the illness and death of your first husband, Nick. Having gone through a similar

experience myself, I can say that much of the frustration you experienced, I also experienced in my life. Can you describe what happened to Nick and your family during those years?

Kelly Holden: 3:52

Sure. And I first wanna note that I didn't start writing this to write a book. I was a journalism major in college and always found solace in writing and in reading. So when he got sick, I basically started journaling. I'd never journaled in my life, but I started journaling, sitting at a computer because it helped me process my feelings. I started journaling and kept adding to it and adding to it. And then people kept saying to me as the years went by, you should really publish a book. That's how the book came about. Nick and I met, I was 19, he was 21 we met in college. He was truly my best friend in the whole world. And to have this tragic thing happen to him so young, he was dealing with it physically and emotionally. So I couldn't talk to my best friend about how hard it was for me, because that seemed incredibly selfish for me to say to him, while he's physically going through it, This is really hard for me. He was a two sport athlete in college. He was six-foot-seven. He was really cute and just the nicest person you'd ever, ever wanna meet. He didn't drink alcohol. He didn't smoke. He didn't do drugs. And he was the guy who in theory should have lived to be a hundred, right? He was the picture of health. And unfortunately got Crohn's disease early on in his life. He battled through that in his twenties. And then the summer, right before he turned 30, he got really sick. He wasn't feeling well at all. He was anemic. He had a lot of really odd symptoms. We went through reams of tests that summer of 1996. And then at the end of September, his bowel perforated while we at home. I was 28, he was 30, took him to the emergency room, transferred him to another local hospital here in Cincinnati, and found out that his bowel perforated needed emergency surgery on a Sunday night. And subsequently was diagnosed with stage three Hodgkin's disease. I was shocked, is a complete understatement. Right? His mother was a nurse, she was an emergency room nurse. She lived a couple hours away, but she came in and helped us a lot through that journey. He went through about six months of chemotherapy, multiple surgeries. Anyone who's dealt with a cancer patient knows you don't just get cancer, right? Like you get. All these other problems. So we were navigating through all of that. He recovered, felt great after he recovered. Actually the chemotherapy, cured his Crohn's disease, which was nice. And he had about nine really good years. And then the Crohn's disease came back. And when it came back, it came back with a vengeance. I mean, to the point the physician here locally sent us to Chicago to see an expert on how to treat him. And then, fast forward about seven years later the winter of 2013 started feeling sick again. Again, he'd been sick a

lot over the years, so it wasn't anything super concerning. Come to find out he had acute myelogenous leukemia caused by his prior treatment from the chemotherapy. He spent four months in two different hospitals here in Cincinnati trying to get his leukemia into remission to get a stem cell transplant from his sister who was a 10 for 10 match. And he was not able to survive that. So on July 12th, 2013, ended up passing away. My son was 11, my daughter was 15, so I had to come home and tell my kids, and we sort of went from there. There's so much more that happened. A lot of it's in the book. Not everything is in the book, but that was his journey. It was rough.

Don Drew: 7:14

During all this time, your life is going on. You complete law school. You're starting a practice. You end up adopting Megan. Three years later you give birth to your son. And you're trying to raise a family. All of this is going on. I mean, life continues, right?

Kelly Holden: 7:28

Honestly, I think back and I don't know how I survived it. You know, you think How did I do all of this? It's day by day, like, you don't know what's coming in the future. I've said to my husband Keith now, It would be nice to know the future. And his comment was, I don't think we wanna the future, it would be paralyzing because it's not always good. Do it day by day and celebrate those really good days to get through the dark days. And Nick had a lot of really dark days. And for somebody who was an athlete and used to going out and about and doing things and being sidelined on a couch or in your bed for days on end was really difficult for him emotionally and physically. And then I'm having to be the cheerleader to say Everything will be okay and get his medicine, my kids, and my job. There were days where I can remember going to work and sitting at a light waiting to turn into work and falling asleep in the car because I was absolutely exhausted, right? But also, none of us get through this life alone. I had family and friends who helped me every step of this journey. I remember calling a neighbor saying, Nick needs IV antibiotics. He's got an infection in his legs and has to go to the oncologist's office for a two hour infusion. Could you take him for me? So I called in friends, family, neighbors all the time to help us out. Otherwise, I wouldn't have gotten through at all. It would've been really difficult.

David Lowry: 8:51

Kelly, this is a very heartbreaking and personal story. Was it hard for you to put this in a journal? Were you worried about somebody discovering or seeing it? Even though it was private at the time, was this hard?

Kelly Holden: 9:03

You know, I never actually thought about that. I never worried about it. I just kind of wrote it down and kept writing. And when people kept saying, you should write a book, you should write a book. And I really didn't wanna publish a book that was just all heartbreak, and poor me, feeling sorry for myself, and sorry for Nick, I probably wouldn't have published it had the story not turned out better, quite honestly. But when I met my husband, Keith, who's also widowed, as you noted, and the journey of life got better for me, for him, for our four kids, I realized that believing again in love, trying to stay positive despite everything that happened, is really important. And some people don't recover from things like this. You know, grief is a very individual journey and it's really difficult for some people to ever get through it. And I don't know that any of us fully get through it, and I don't believe we get over losing someone. I think you learn how to deal with it. Right. I'm still gonna always be a little bit angry that his life turned out the way it was, that my kids don't have their father. Those things are still always going to upset me but I try to focus on the positive and the good and hopefully have way more good days than bad days. When I met Keith I kept writing this story, I thought, Maybe it is something worth publishing to tell people. Gosh, I got through it. You can get through it. It's not easy. Here's what I did. Maybe that doesn't work for the next person or the next three people, but maybe snippets of it'll work for those people. And if it's a book that can help somebody, that's when I decided I wanted to publish it. And it is really personal and it still makes me cry. Like, you know, 12 years later that, Gosh, like all this stuff happened to poor Nick and his family. But after he passed away, I was literally looking for books or stories of How do I get through it? You're looking for a manual, like I'm a person, I'm a fixer. That's why I became a lawyer. I like to fix people's problems. I like to make the world better for people, and I wanna solve everybody's problems. But now I had the biggest problem. So I was looking for someone to tell me This is what I did and this is how I can get through it. And I loved reading stories about people or listening to podcasts about Here's how I got through it. So I thought, Well, if this book helps somebody or it gives somebody hope, then maybe that's what I need to do.

Don Drew: 11:15

Yeah, you write about embracing brokenness rather than trying to hide it. But quite often, that's not what we tend to do. Why do you think that's so prevalent that we wanna try and hide our brokenness?

Kelly Holden: 11:25

I think it's especially true for men. Men have a harder time dealing with mental illness or these acute type situations. For me it was really important to process and to talk about it. So I started by journaling. Nick and I went to a cancer support group the first time that he was sick. That was really helpful for me to be in a room with people who really understood I was going through. I learned very quickly that there were some people who really did wanna talk to you and help you through it. And other people It was very uncomfortable. And when they said, how are you? They actually didn't really wanna know how you were. So it's learning who your friends are or your family that will let you process it. After Nick passed away, my son and I did a group in Cincinnati called Fernside, which is a phenomenal organization here and it's really for children who've suffered loss. And it's that peer support. And for my son, it's truly what got him through that first year, which is always the hardest. I also went to a group at Fernside. It was great. And then I did individual counseling because it's a lot. It's really traumatic. I was 44 years old and just lost my spouse which is difficult on so many levels for so many reasons. So for me, I don't understand why some people don't wanna process it. I don't feel that's healthy, but every person's different.

Don Drew: 12:41

And your husband, Keith now, is also a widower if I recall correctly.

Kelly Holden: 12:45

Correct. His wife Tracy, died of multiple myeloma at age 40. So he was 39, she was 40, and their kids were 10 and 11. It's a similar journey. She was diagnosed. She did have a transplant, which was not successful, and she lived about 13 months from diagnosis to death.

David Lowry: 13:02

Kelly, I really like how you're encouraging people to seek help from organizations and support groups and things like this. Events like this come at us at the speed of life, and we cannot process it all. And these groups help us slow down and learn from the wisdom of other people. You talk about the art of Kintsugi and taking something that's valuable to us, gluing it back together with gold. Taking all those pieces and putting'em together with gold and, creating these golden repair lines. I love that thought. You lost a lot when Nick died, but something broken in your life would become more beautiful in the repair. So what did that Kintsugi look like for you?

Kelly Holden: 13:43

If you're going through something, work at how you get to a better place in life. Life is short. I do believe that our loved ones would want us to enjoy life. Certainly, I think if the table was turned, I would've wanted Nick to find happiness, whatever that looks like. And the other big thing is give people grace. None of us know the journey that someone else is going through. I am not the same person that I was before everything happened with Nick. In some ways, I've improved, there's still pieces of me that feel a bit shattered. Grief is hard and grief comes in many different forms and it's not just losing people we love, it's, it can be losing all different types of things, but I think for me it's realizing that life is really short and trying to do what makes you happy, trying to give grace to other people. I don't think I'm as high strung as I used to be when I was 20 or 30 years old, and maybe some of that's just a little bit of wisdom and aging, but I do think certainly this experience has helped me and I think the biggest thing that helped me with is being in empathetic person. Not just feeling sympathy for people, but really being empathetic. And I'm way more of a feeling person than I used to be. The inside of me is a little cracked, but with some gold everywhere, hopefully repairing those pieces. So that's what Kintsugi means to me as far as how I view myself and my personal life, that I took those little pieces and put'em back together and it's not the same, but maybe it's a little bit better in some ways than it used to be.

Don Drew: 15:18

So a lot of our listeners might be experiencing some kind of loss or brokenness in their lives and so on, what would you want them to know?

Kelly Holden: 15:26

There's a lot I'd want them to know. The biggest thing is that you're not alone. There are so many people who've walked in your shoes in a whole variety of different ways. I would want them to know you can get through it. It won't be easy. You're gonna have really good days and you're gonna have really bad days. And if you have a bad day, get up the next day and do whatever it does to make you feel better. I was with somebody who lost her spouse after almost 60 years. Very close family friend, and my comment to her was, Be a little bit selfish right now. Do what makes you feel better. You have a lot of heartbreak right now and you may not be able to do a lot of things for other people and that's okay. I do recall that first year after Nick passed away thinking I don't have time to help a lot of other people other than what I needed to do for work. But right now I have to focus on me and my kids. I have to figure out what we need to do to get through this. It's a little bit like running a marathon. it's emotionally and physically exhausting but knowing you can get through it, but you're not gonna be able to do it without wanting to get through it. And getting whatever help you need, whatever that looks like. I said before, everyone's journey is individual. That is so, so true. What worked for me may not work for other people. I am a really big believer in support groups or counseling. There are people who are professionals trained in dealing with grief and trauma that can help you get through it. Without those two things, I think it would've taken me a lot longer to be back to a space where I felt more happy than I felt sad. It does take time. You can't do this overnight. Time will heal. I hate it when people said that to me initially. I really did. It made me mad. Because part of me didn't wanna heal from it because if I felt better, then maybe that meant that I wasn't loving him or missing him anymore. And that's so not true, right? Like, you're always gonna love and miss that person. But your mind does crazy things to you when you're going through grief. Do what you need to do that makes you feel better and I literally wrote out a plan. I'm the kind of person that I like to write a personal and professional plan. That's always my New Year's resolution of, What do I want to accomplish this year on a personal level or a professional level? And I did the same with my grief journey. What do I need to do?

David Lowry: 17:42

Very wise words, Kelly. I've never thought about writing that kind of a personal plan. That's what I love about doing these programs. I'm always learning new ways to live. We call this Peaceful Life Radio, and one of the reasons we have the show is because we want people like you to talk about these things that have broken us, and yet you found your way to a new life picking up the pieces and moving forward with all of that. You wrote this book several years ago. Tell us some things that, if you were writing it again, you might put into the book.

Kelly Holden: 18:13

Oh my gosh. Every time I go through it, I'm like, why did I write that? Why did I not say it this way? Or why did I not add this information? Which I think all of us do in life. Part of being a journalism major is you learn to write succinctly and briefly. I wish I wouldn't have been a little more verbose in the book, but I didn't start out writing a book. Right. Like it's truly vignettes and it's a journal and it's not To Kill a Mockingbird by any means. Right. Like the greatest American novel ever. It was Kelly's heart heartache pouring out on a page at times. So it's a little bit raw and rough but I kind of left it that on purpose because these are things that I started writing in 1996. I didn't wanna change a lot of it because that's truly how I felt back then going through the journey. So I wish it was written a little bit better, but I didn't start out writing it to publish it. I had so many people, like our friends and family said, I read it in one sitting'cause it's not very long. I read it in one sitting and I just bawled my eyes out or like, I had a cousin who reached out to me and she said, I feel like a horrible cousin. I had no idea you were going through all of this and I didn't help you. I didn't do enough for you at the time. But back to what you said, like you don't fully share that. Even in 1996 when I was going through stuff and I would show up at an event or a family party or whatever and people would say, how are you? I'm like, Oh, I'm good. How are you? And you just move on with life. You don't really tell people how you are because you don't wanna be Debbie Downer at the St. Patrick's Day Party, for goodness sake.

Don Drew: 19:40

It's very readable. I think it's 97 pages long. In the back, you've got a number of poems and some things. Can you tell us what that's about?

Kelly Holden: 19:49

That's actually my favorite, favorite part of the book. So my husband Nick was a teacher, an art teacher, and he taught two to 300 students a year. His students loved him. I wish I would've taken more pictures back then. But his students sent us artwork and poems and I tried to hang all this stuff in his hospital room,'cause he was in the hospital for four months, to make it seem more hopeful, right? And say there's all these people out here and you're changing lives by teaching these students and these are the people that you're fighting for, as well as like me and the two kids, you're fighting for these people too. So when I decided to publish the book, I thought I really wanted to include some of the poems. There's a paper by my son, a paper that his niece Rachel had written when she was in high school, a drawing from one of his nieces, artwork from some of his students to show the profound

effect that he had on other people. It's truly, truly my favorite part of the book because they're showing their love for him, and then the heartbreak. The poem that's probably the most appropriate for the podcast'cause it's the shortest, is the one that called Coach by Riley Kincaid. And Riley was on my son's fifth grade basketball team being coached by my husband Nick. And Riley was a really quiet kid back then. A little shy. He did not go to school with the kids. He just played basketball with them. He wasn't as well known by the kids. I came home from the hospital one night and just found this in my mailbox, and I hung it on Nick's hospital room. And I got Riley's permission before I published this in the book. But I'd love to read this one to you. So it says, My coach believed in me when I didn't know a thing about basketball. My coach believed in me when it was time to make my first basket. My coach believed in me to keep fighting for that rebound. My coach believed in me to make that three point shot. My coach believed in me when my lung was not perfect, My coach believed in us and never let us get down. My coach believed in our team and never let us give up. I believe everything my coach taught me. I believe in my coach. It's a great poem. If you knew Riley and his circumstance and how he played that year, it's such a cool thing. This kid was 11 years old and wrote this little poem, and put it in my mailbox, and he was so quiet. So it was kind of a shock to get it from him. And Riley had some health issues he had gone through. At the time he wasn't the most skilled basketball player. He was learning. And the very last game they played, Riley gets the ball passed to him. We are getting killed. We're in the final four of this Fifth grade tournament. We are getting annihilated, right? We're losing by like 30 points. So we're not gonna win this game. And Nick knows it's gonna be the last game these kids are gonna play together. So Riley gets the ball passed to him, and Nick's standing right behind him and he goes, Take the shot Riley. Take that shot. Because in the past, Riley would pass the ball. Riley makes a three pointer. You would've thought like we just won the NCAA tournament. I mean, every kid on that bench went crazy. It was the best thing. But not only did Riley do that, then he goes down rebounds the ball, like it's a defensive rebound, takes it back down and scores another basket and scored five points. That three point shot gave him confidence to do that. And I remember getting in the car after we lose the game and saying to my son, That was the coolest part of your whole season, to watch Riley have confidence to do that and know that Nick gave him that confidence. It was really cool!

David Lowry: 23:10

Wow. As I've listened to some of these stories, I have to say that, Don and Kelly, both of you, I'm riding a small line between emotionality and rationality. There's a part of me that feels, because I'm a very empathic person, there's a part of me that says, Oh, I wish I could make

this good for you. I wish I could make this better for you. And I also feel it because of my partner Don Drew, who lost the love of his life after being in a lifelong marriage and relationship with his beloved Marsha. And Don, as you've heard Kelly's story, tell me some of the things that are coming up for you and how this is impacting you in what she's saying.

Don Drew: 23:49

I thank you for asking that, David. I love the book for a lot of different reasons. Of course, Kelly and my experience are gonna be different. I was married 39 years and Marsha's illness was relatively quick. It was over in 20 months, which had its own challenges. There were many things that stood out to me. One was the very principle of Kintsugi, the idea of being broken, but learning to put your life back together again, being richer because of it, and understanding that just because you lost your love doesn't mean you lost your love. You still love that person that meant so much to you. And yet, like Kelly, I've remarried, and I love my wife dearly, and I love her just as much as I did Marsha. And I love her in different ways because I appreciate the experience I went through. Her detailed description of working through the medical system resonated with me greatly. She's brutally honest there with many of her frustrations. And not only were they identical to many that I had, but I think also a lot of physicians and nurses and so on also, suffer from the struggles of the system. And that really comes out in her book a lot. There was just so much that resonated with me I couldn't even really begin to talk about all the details, but it's a very simple book. Like I said, it's very easy to read in terms of length, but Kelly really pours herself into it. And what I really also love is that she talks about the gold part, her relationship with Keith and the fact that he brought into the family two children, and so now they've had to rebuild this family. Neither family ever thought that they would be structured like they are now, but they are. And, that's just really incredible. Kelly, what is next for you?

Kelly Holden: 25:31

Hopefully at some point I retire. I would love to do that. I have made some career changes in the past couple years and those have been good. It's given me more time, quite frankly, to just enjoy life a little bit more. Our kids are now in their twenties and we have three who, well, so let's say two and a half have moved out. So two have fully moved out, one's in the process of moving out. And my son just graduated with his master's in social work and is finishing up licensure exam and finding a job. And I don't know that I have any big goal next. It's just have some fun, right? Like enjoy life, continue traveling, continue seeing our friends and family. Sometimes Keith and I, because we suffered so much loss and we went through

so much, we're always looking for, What can we do to have fun and what's the next big fun thing we can do? And we sometimes have to be a little careful'cause we over schedule ourself and then we're like, we're exhausted from having fun, which is a good thing. But yeah, so it's just continuing on and enjoying all those good days that you have.

Don Drew: 26:32

Kelly's experience is unique to her in many ways, but the experience of loss or brokenness is not. Loss does not need to be the end of the story. As Kelly writes In the end, my life has been put back together, but I am not the same person in many ways. I like to believe that I am a bitter version of myself. I am happy and living a life that I never thought was possible. Although Keith has been the catalyst for much of this, I had to do a lot of this on my own. I hope that most days my life resembles that broken pot repaired with gold. Not the same, but in some ways more beautiful. Kelly's book, A Kintsugi Life: Finding Strength and Hope in the Face of Loss is available at Amazon in Kindle format. Kelly Holden, thank you for joining us on Peaceful Life Radio.