

## UFYB 286: Grief at Lives Not Lived



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Welcome to *UnF\*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard Law School grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello my chickens, how are you? I just got back from a trip to Europe which was awesome. If you listen to the podcast you know that we were in Morocco in February and that the entire trip, my nervous system was just in intense fight or flight. So it was nice to have a trip where I actually relaxed and I had fun. And the gentleman consort and I went to Madrid first. And one of my favorite things when I travel is just to see how different people's thoughts are in different places. And sometimes it's so funny.

So we had a great tour of the Prado Museum and we had an amazing guide, she's an art historian, she's super knowledgeable, it was really interesting. But as we were going through, we had two hours to do the tour, because I can take about two hours of art lecture and then I'm done. We're kind of going through the museum and she's taking us chronologically. And 90 minutes in I started to kind of be thinking, we're only in the 1600s right now. How are we going to wrap this up in time? Are we just going to be here for hours? What's happening?

And then she speed walked us through 100 to 200 years of art history because according to her, it had happened under the Bourbon Kings which is a French dynasty. And so she felt it was not important. Her thought about the art history of Spain was, all the stuff was important until the French kings come then it's boring. Court art, and who cares, and now we'll go to Goya. But I mean if you went to France you'd be hearing all about how incredible that period of artwork was. It was just such a beautiful example of people's brains.

And one of the things that the gentleman consort and I were talking about while we were there was the idea of 'retiring' to Europe and that's in quotes

## UFYB 286: Grief at Lives Not Lived

because he's kind of already retired and I'll probably never fully retire in the sense that I can't imagine not teaching or coaching or writing at all. So really more it's, what if we lived abroad after the kids go to college? And that's always fun. It's really fun to fantasize about future lives that you might lead. I can imagine moving to New Orleans or the mountains of Tennessee or the Bay Area or Paris or maybe Madrid.

Those are all still lives that I might lead in the future. And so fantasizing about those can be quite delicious. And I actually coached someone on this recently, the idea that if she just enjoyed fantasizing about other things she could do but didn't really want to change up her life, that was okay. She came to coaching saying, "Well, I could do all these things but I just, I don't know that I really want to do any of them. But then I feel like I am supposed to do something different than what I'm doing."

And my coaching to her was actually, "Maybe you just really enjoying that sense of possibility and fantasizing, that's fine." I don't recommend putting your life on hold because you're like, well, when I get to the fantasy state, when I lose all that weight, when I live in a different city, when I have a partner or when I get divorced or when I have kids or when the kids go to college or whatever. That's when my life will count and matter and I'm on autopilot until then. That's very different.

But this person I coached was living her current life very fully and really enjoyed it. And she had the freedom to potentially do something different and she liked to fantasize about a lot of different things but she wasn't really sure she actually wanted to change her current life. And she thought it was a problem. And my coaching was, "That's fine." Fantasy is a delightful thing that humans can do. There's nothing wrong with that.

But I want to talk a little bit about how we feel and think when we're fantasizing, not about lives that we could still have, but about lives that we know we won't have. And this is why I'm thinking about this, a few days

## UFYB 286: Grief at Lives Not Lived

after we were in Madrid talking about what would it be like if we sort of retired here. I was in Paris on my own. I was just there for 24 hours. I hosted an event which was amazing. Those of you who were there, it was so, so fun to meet my students from Europe. And also I had students from Asia come over. We had a couple of people from the US also.

It was a small intimate event. We had tea at the Ritz Hotel. It was just really lovely. And I absolutely love Paris. And before I met my partner I thought about moving there. I never did it, which is very important. But it was sort of this active fantasy of something I might do at any moment or that's what I told myself. I mean the truth was that by the time my business kind of took off enough for that to be feasible there was only maybe a year or so until the pandemic started and after that I met my partner so it didn't happen.

And I knew that when I met gentleman consort that if I integrated my life with his, I was agreeing to limit my travel and essentially eliminate my ability to live abroad for the next 10 to 12 years. That's when both his kids will be in college. So unless they independently decide they want to go to boarding school or something, we're here for the next 10/12 years. And that's, to be very clear, if I want to travel, even if I wanted to move abroad for periods of time, he would be supportive. His position is, do what you want, we'll make it work.

But obviously I've decided to integrate my life with this person. So for now, at least I want to be around him. And I want to be around the kids and the children are young. That's just not something I see myself doing, moving abroad solo, and my partner and my bonus kids are living in another country at this age. And that's just a personal preference. That's not a statement on what other people should do. Every family and person is different obviously. Some people are separated not by choice. Some people are separated by choice and that works great for them.

## UFYB 286: Grief at Lives Not Lived

So, so many disclaimers, none of this is saying anything about anyone else's life. And I'm just talking about my life, that before I met my partner I had this kind of active fantasy about wanting to move to Paris, even though I never acted on it which also is important. And I sort of gave that up when I partnered with him. And I knew all that when I made my choice. And I knew that my brain might have feelings of regret at various times and I knew to just expect that and manage my mind around that and allow for that feeling.

And as predicted, I hadn't really had those thoughts and feelings since I hadn't been to Paris for a while. But then while I was in Paris, especially because I was there by myself, they totally came up for me. I love that city so much, I find it so beautiful. And I felt really sad, true physical sadness when I thought about having given up this fantasy version of my life where I move to Paris as a youngish single woman and make a whole new life there. It's not that my partner and I couldn't move to Paris at some point. It's not that we couldn't have an amazing life there down the line if I wanted to.

But this particular version, this fantasy where I move there and the rest of my life unfolds as being centered around living in this totally other place is not something that's going to happen. And again, this is not a new feeling to me. When I met my partner and got serious with him, I went through a really intense grieving process for the life that I had imagined, that I thought I would have. I had been looking for somebody who was geographically unconstrained and I didn't want to have children. And I thought I was going to find a partner who didn't want kids either.

And we were going to be able to travel the world and live from wherever we wanted. I had a real vision of that life. And I gave it up for a good reason. And I did that on purpose, but I had to go through a grieving process for that in order to really embrace my new life. And so when this kind of grief came up in Paris, I totally recognized it, even though that version of my life

## UFYB 286: Grief at Lives Not Lived

that I was grieving, it was not a life I had and it was not even something I was working on. It was not in process. It was just an idea I had.

But I think it's so important to give yourself space to grieve those things because I think that we don't make enough space to grieve the lives we haven't lived or that we will never live. And when I say to grieve them, I don't mean to wallow and ruminate in unexamined beliefs that if we just had that other life we'd be happier. That's not what it's about. If I had moved to Paris I'd still be having the human experience. Life's still 50/50, maybe 60/40, 70/30 some days, one way or the other.

But that doesn't mean that you aren't giving up a different version of your life and it's okay to have kind of clean grief about that. I think that we don't allow that because we're so afraid of regret because we think it means that we made the wrong decision. We don't want to feel regret because if we start to feel regret we make it mean I made the wrong choice. I would have been happier if I'd done the other thing. So when we feel sadness or grief about a life that we won't live, we try to suppress it because we're afraid that having the feeling will mean something about the choices we did make.

And I think we sort of continue the fantasy in this unhelpful way where we tell ourselves, I would be happier if I had made this other choice and we believe that. And I think it also brings home our own mortality to us especially if we live in a culture that isn't comfortable with death. We don't spend a lot of time thinking about our limited time on Earth. And sometimes I think the kind of more whitewashed parts of the self-development world contribute to that because there's this kind of you can do anything mantra, which is trying to paper over the real grief and loss that's part of life.

You can do so much more than you think, 100%, but you can't literally do everything. I can't be 42, I'm 41 but I'll be 42 soon. I can't be 41 or 42 and living in Brooklyn with a partner and bonus kids and also be the same age living in Paris single or with some European partner who I met in this

## UFYB 286: Grief at Lives Not Lived

alternative life. I can't do those at the same time and that's okay. And it's also okay to feel grief about that.

We all hit inflection points in our lives, like do I take this job? Do I move to this city? Do I stay in this relationship? Do I have children? These are big decisions that open one world of options to us and they unavoidably close off another and that's okay and it's okay to feel the whole range of emotions around that.

So while I was thinking about this topic I had coffee with a friend who is trying to decide whether to stay in her marriage. And we were talking a lot about that. She's re-envisioning what would she want her marriage to look like from scratch. Because she's willing to potentially burn it all down. She has this opportunity to rebuild it from scratch if that's what she wants. And that's a beautiful gift to have that opportunity. But no matter what she chooses she'll also be choosing not to do something else.

But if she chooses to stay married, even if she completely reinvents the relationship, she'll be choosing not to experience what it would be like to be single at her current age and life situation or to have a relationship with someone else during this period of her life. And conversely, if she chooses to separate from her partner she'll be choosing not to experience what it would be like to build a new and different marriage with someone who she's already been with for a long time and to reinvent that relationship from scratch and see what it's like.

Those are both incredible and rich and meaningful and challenging experiences that she could have, but she can't have them both. And I think our reluctance to accept that prevents us from fully acknowledging the grief of the lives we're not going to live. But also from fully acknowledging that any life we live is going to involve a mix of positive and negative emotion. I think sometimes when we get stuck or unable to make decisions and move



## UFYB 286: Grief at Lives Not Lived

forward in our lives it's because we aren't allowing the grief or the loss around what we might leave behind.

Sometimes we aren't willing to feel the grief of leaving what we have for something different. And sometimes we aren't willing to feel the grief of giving up the idea of what we might have and committing to what we do have. So that then we're not fully committed in our current situation, we're also not taking any action for a new one. So whatever version of this you're experiencing, I want you to know it's okay to feel grief about the lives not lived. But here is what you also need to remember.

When you are imagining the life not lived, you're only imagining the highlight reel. Usually when we have a fantasy like this, we imagine that we'd be happier in that scenario, that we would not be irritable or upset or feel lonely or hate our bodies or whatever else is going on in our human experience.

When I imagine myself living in Paris I am imagining myself sauntering down a beautiful street with fresh flowers in one hand and a baguette in the other, my hair looks perfect, I'm laughing with some handsome French man walking next to me. We're heading back to our beautiful classic Parisian apartment. It's a fantasy. I'm not imagining the moments when the handsome French man is chewing so loudly I want to murder him or when I have to go to his mother's house even though I hate her or whatever.

I'm not imagining the many lonely nights I would probably experience if I moved to Paris and tried to build a whole new life at my age. Now, those things may all be worth doing. I might choose, I'm in for that. Life is 50/50 and I want to have that 50/50 in Paris and I'm going to do what it takes. That's beautiful too, but it's just important to know that when you're imagining a fantasy, it's a fantasy. It's not 50/50. So it's important to grieve the lives you're not going to live.



## UFYB 286: Grief at Lives Not Lived

And it's also important to remember that any life you choose is going to be 50/50. There's no perfect life you're missing out on where you always feel like you're in a movie highlight reel and you never have to have the inconvenient, messy, painful experience of being a human being. So my advice to you my chickens is allow that grief for lives unlived, let it flow through you. Make sure it's clean pain though. Remember that you're grieving a fantasy and that's okay.

But don't buy into the belief that because of the choices you've made or you're going to make you can't be happy or you can be fulfilled or you can't have some other perfectionist fantasy of the human experience. Don't tell yourself that that's only available in this fantasy world. Because the perfectionist vision of a human experience is not available to you in any world.

Have a beautiful week my chickens. I'll see you next week.

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