

## Hard Times & Hope, episode 9

# Katie: A daughter with a dad-shaped hole

Today's guest is KATIE. Katie and I met through a freelancer's workshop, where we connected and became friends.

Most of the time, when I have these hard times & hope conversations, until the guest says it, I don't know what the hard time is that they're going to reference. But with Katie, I knew, and it's something I wanted to give space for on this podcast.

**Trigger Warning:** this episode includes mentions of contemplated and completed suicide.

It's okay. It's a good conversation.

Let's go!

**Jule:** Katie, thank you so much for taking the time to be here for this conversation. I am so excited about it.

**Katie:** Thank you for asking me to be part of this project, I was excited that from your day one and just to be involved is , it just makes me, it fills me with so much joy.

**Jule:** You know about the whole podcast journey for me. That's really cool.

**Katie:** Yes, indeed.

**Jule:** And now you're even more a part of it. So this is hard times in hope. And I was wondering, just to frame our conversation. What's the hard time you're planning on using for reference?

**Katie:** I will be using my dad's suicide. However, despite the fact that that in and of itself is like a big splunk of a brick and like still lake water , it's actually the reverberation, that like ripple effect of that big brick in the still water over the last 18 years that has really that's the hard times and hope that I'm going to kind of talk about.

**Jule:** Yeah, let's take them separately. Let's take the brick and the ripples or in whatever order...

**Katie:** For sure. We'll start with, yes, we'll definitely start with the suicide itself. So just a little backstory. It's 2002. I'm 22, and it's six months post-college graduation, but I'm like unemployed, and it's, it was right after 9/11. There's a recession I'm trying to get into advertising.

It's just a mess. I'm living with my mom and my stepdad, I had recently crashed my best friend's husband's ATV and had to pay for it with, you know, what money? I had also crashed my car. And then I also had to say goodbye to my best friend of 20 years, my cat, Steve. I had him since I was three, and we had to put him to sleep. All of this had happened, it was like six months of leading up to the Wednesday morning before Thanksgiving.

So Thanksgiving Eve, my mom woke me up from sleeping and she's like, Katie, your dad died. He killed himself. And just like, okay. So that's like, you know, snap your fingers on we go with your life now, Katie. Really though, I have to share some backstory before that, because the actual brick is my parents got divorced when I was 12.

And my sister was nine when my dad decided being gay, that he was finally ready to live his lifestyle loud and proud rather than living the double life that he had been. I haven't had the courage to ask my mom about all the gruesome details of their time together. But I do know that he cheated on her as far back as when my sister was still in the womb, my mom was pregnant with my sister, I was three.

And I remember an incident where I was screaming my head off in the doctor's office when I was really young, because they were taking a vial, like a giant in my eyes, a giant vial of blood from my thigh, testing me for hepatitis because my dad had contracted hepatitis from someone else. And... putting my family in debt.

My parents had to go file for bankruptcy, so my mom had to support two kids, with their divorce, support two kids on her own. And he wasn't paying child support and just like all of that. This is kind of like a 'but of course moment', but he was a narcissist, and totally wreaked havoc on my mom for these decades.

They were together, emotional abuse, et cetera. And, you know, if my dad was depressed, sick, he got HIV from his partner.

And my sister and I rarely saw him, I went to school at UWM Madison here in Wisconsin and he lived in Madison and we like still rarely saw each other and he was just not interested and not one of those heroic, divorced dads that fights for custody...

**Jule:** Bye, bye now.

**Katie:** Yeah.

And so, I've just spent the last, you know, five minutes painting this horrible picture of my dad. Right? But the truth is, I'm obsessed with him. I'm obsessed with the short 47 years of his life. How charming he was, he was hilarious. He told the best stories, he was very handsome.

I'm obsessed with how he was adopted and I have, through ancestry DNA, I've been able to find who his mom is. I mean, she's passed away, but I, I know his mom's side of the family. I still haven't discovered his dad's side, but I'm like obsessed with figuring out that part and the DNA, like his DNA that's like swirling inside me. I'm kind of obsessed with how paradoxical, like his death actually was as suicide because he didn't leave a note, it might've even been this careless, but purposeful, accident, the way it happened. So I'm like obsessed with how selfish he was and how anybody related to me who, and I consider myself a pretty selfless person, how somebody like me could come from somebody like that. And what does that mean for me? Obsessed with the shades of darkness in him. It just comes down to the mystery, being obsessed with a mystery, whether or not he'd loved me and knowing I'll never know for sure.

**Jule:** Yeah. That's hard too.

**Katie:** Yeah. And this is like, you know, going on like 18 years now of just this addiction to knowing and not knowing and just, that he was or wasn't or who I try to make him out to be,

it's like, what I've just kind of revealed is this like, those string maps that police detectives use, it's like my life is constantly staring at the string map of putting these pieces together.

Like what does it all mean? And like trying to resolve the fact that maybe it doesn't mean anything. Like it means everything but nothing all.

**Jule:** Oh, I can't imagine. And this, this pull, this push-pull for wanting to know, being angry, being hurt, being admiring, you know, he's charming. I have a friend Elaine, because I have a father that was also not the father that you would pick for yourself.

And, I said to her one time, cause she's my therapist and she's my friend, but I said, why is it that I spend so much time talking about him? And she said, that's how it is. When there's a hole, the child is always looking to fill that hole.

**Katie:** Yes. Yes, it is. It's, that's exactly what it is.

**Jule:** So you got woken up. Was that the morning of Thanksgiving or the day before? And were you expected just to like go on with life?

**Katie:** Well, it just, I mean, it was my mom. I mean, my mom clearly raised my sister and I, and the reason we, the great women we turned out to be today is because of her amazing work as a mother.

**Jule:** Yeah.

**Katie:** I mean, at the time, I didn't know a lot of this stuff about him.

It wasn't until this weird incident I remember being in her bedroom where she finally, she and my sister sort of like. I don't know if it was like, finally, like we are going to have to reveal this to Katie somehow that we're not really a big fans of her father and that we're kind of on this other side.

And I remember just crying, I'm so alone. But I want to stick up for him and all that stuff, you know? And that was shortly after the suicide. And so I just had to kind of buck up and go on my own.

**Jule:** and you're twenth?

**Katie:** yeah, I was at like 22, 23 by then. And it's like, you know, time to put your big girl pants on. And you know, here's a big juicy plate of mayhem to chew on for awhile. But you gotta do it, you know, you gotta grow up sometime. And my life was pretty rosy.

Obviously aside from all this and even, before and after the divorce, my life was peachy keen. Like my dad was a Lutheran pastor, so we grew up—

**Jule:** What?!

**Katie:** I know, add that into the mix. so yeah, we grew up like a totally “normal nuclear family”, white family, suburban family.

And even after my mom met my stepdad, within the few months, and they got married when I was 14. So two years after the divorce and my stepdad's amazing, he's very loving

and I mean would do anything for me and my sister. So I kind of just like was handed off into more normalcy.

So it's like, it's this weird sensation of "Katie, everything's fine." And yet you continue to, I really have made the hole for myself. I mean, it's all, as anything in life, when you're, you're dragged into some kind of darkness, it's a darkness that you kind of create yourself.

I'm sure there's an incident that, whether it's a short one, long-term abuse, what have you, but, you know, it's takes two to tango kind of thing. You know, there's, you can't play the victim forever.

**Jule:** Yeah, the choice to hang out in the darkness is our own choice. And at the same time I'm going, you know, your parents get divorced and you really become very all alone.

**Katie:** Yeah. And it's so interesting because I, this is like synchronicity sort of, but leading up to this podcast, you know, I'm thinking, okay, how do I talk about this? And you know, what am I even thinking nowadays? Because sometimes, you know, I don't really address it every day. As much as I'm obsessed, I try not to address it every day. But my husband and I went out to have drinks with my mom and my stepdad just this past weekend. And so a little bit of backstory... I received a package from my aunt, my dad's adopted sister. She sends me packages of my dad's stuff cause she has to go through it because my grandma died and she had boxes of stuff.

Yada, yada, yada.

Like every year she sends me a package of like old photos and letters.

**Jule:** But he's been gone for 18 years?

**Katie:** 18 years. Yeah. Well, my grandma only, well, she didn't recently die. She died like, Ooh, maybe four or five years ago, but she was a hoarder. So, my aunt is going through this stuff.

And there was a letter from 1989. So I was nine and my parents were still married, and my dad had written his mother, his adopted mother, catching her up on all the latest and greatest. And in the letter he talks about teaching my sister how to ride a bike. And he's like,

"Oh yeah, I put on just one training wheel and she was all excited. She couldn't wait to take off both training wheels. And it was like, fun, blah, blah." I brought this up to my mom. And I was bringing it up to say like, see dad was good, he was a good dad. He was teaching my sister how to ride a bike, but she (Mom) immediately said like, I'm paraphrasing, but she said something along the lines of.

"Well, he was probably just, you know, saying that he was probably just making it sound like he was a good dad to prove something to his parents," because she knew he was constantly trying to prove himself. And it's really just like, and I remember just being like, ah, and upset because I'm like, of course, of course you are, you're going to assume that like he was making something up or lying about teaching my sister on a bike.

And so it's this weird mix of grappling with the fact that, yeah, he had this kind of pretty rough childhood being adopted and being gay and he had a very religious upbringing combined with living this lie in so many ways, hurting people. And then here I am sitting there hoping and praying for just a shred, a tiny shred of my dad being good.

And my mom's like, "Nope, he isn't," more or less. Well, So, you know, and again, going back to like being on an island, feeling like I'm on this Island, I'm the only one who holds a candle to my shady character of a dad and the reverberation of that constant in my life two decades later, whatever.

Well, after we part ways, I go reread the letter and she's right. I had put on these like rose colored glasses, read what I wanted to read. And I went over it again. And what he was saying about the training wheel was that he wanted to put the one training wheel on so he didn't have to push her around anymore or help her out.

So she could go do it herself. I mean, maybe it was a little of both, but I was just like, Oh, I could totally see taking it that way. He's just like, "Yeah, I got really winded pushing her around and helping her so I put one training wheel back on, so I could just go do my own thing and not help."

**Jule:** Interesting the lenses through which we see the world. So is that the ripples? You said there was the brick and then the ripples...

**Katie:** Yeah.

They're just so, I mean, for those who don't know me at home, I am a very capable, intelligent, go getter of a person. I have my shit together. I'm happily married. Everything's going well. And yet I'm constantly struggling with my emotional, mental wellbeing, or always just, it's just a struggle bus of a time.

And it's always kind of like a loop of trying to say like, but "Katie everything's fine," but it doesn't feel fine. And so going back to, you know, the one big thing, the big, you know, string map and being that detective and trying to dig around and say like, well maybe if I figure out this mystery of my dad, I mean, right down to the DNA thing, like, I'll tell you how many hours I'll get into the ancestry DNA hole trying to figure out like, well, maybe there's somebody in his past. If I figure it out, I can finally resolve myself somehow. Yeah. And that's not gonna happen. It's just not going to happen.

And so the ripple, we'll just bump up against something I'm doing, something instructive and important even, And, and I'll just not be able to get over it. And then I'll just like, you know, sink back down. And yeah, it'll, it's hard to let go of.

And I've done, in addition to the classic therapy counseling, , I do have a mindfulness practice and a lot of self-reflection, that's more constructive as opposed to the self-reflection that's more destructive. There is a difference.

**Jule:** There is a difference. Yeah.

**Katie:** And it's only been recently, and this, again, it probably comes with age. I mean, as everything comes with maturity, as long as you take onus over your mental health, and you just say like this isn't right. I don't want to, I don't want to keep sinking. I don't want to keep going down in the ripples. I would like to ride the top of the ripples, surf them.

And so seeing myself outside of myself, you know, that classic self-awareness. Mindfulness practice where you're the, you play the role of the observer and seeing how I can get obsessed.

**Jule:** Yep. When you, take the role of the observer and you see Katy in the ripples, what would the loving you say to Katie in the ripples?

**Katie:** Well, thanks to people like Elizabeth Gilbert, for example, I try to be more of that loving person, that person that's like a maternal character that's saying like, "Hey, if you're spinning, that's okay, I'll be here for you. I'll listen to what you have to say. I'm not going to judge you. I'm not going to say that you're a terrible person for loving your dad right now."

And that's been hard. I mean, just. Being that kind of a person to myself.

I don't know. It felt really awkward and gross at first. Eeeww, I don't like this. I don't like loving myself.

**Jule:** Because it felt so different or...?

**Katie:** Yeah. It felt different.

And so I can, I can take responsibility for myself, but to do that, I do have to be loving. I do have to be that maternal character. So I have to build that up and it's going to take time. It's really going to take a lot of practice. That's the whole point is the practice to show that respect for myself and to, to know that I'm worthy of that love and everything.

Yeah. And, and really like practicing the fact that there can be a paradox. There can be two seemingly opposing thoughts at the same time, where, you know, when I'm thinking about can good people come from bad people? Could my dad be redeemed through me? And thinking, you know, my dad was awful. I love my dad.

I mean love and forgiveness. You know, I'm very Buddhist-minded and the only real way you can let go is to just like forgive and forgiveness.

It doesn't mean like, once I forgive I have to hold you close. I can continue to forgive and let go. I mean, you could do that. So that's the hope I hold. It's a, it's, you know, it's obviously... you gotta practice hope, you can't just like hope one day.

**Jule:** Yeah, I like that. You've got to practice hope and anybody who's dealt with--I call it the blue cloud, you call it, the ripples that take you down-- knows that it's a practice, and, it takes love. And if you're not being, you were physically mothered by your mother. She fed you and all that, but in terms of a safe Harbor, she wasn't really that for you because she had to be a safe, she was, she was in a place where she had to take care of herself after coming out of what she'd come through.

**Katie:** Yeah. And it's, like I said, that's fine. because if she had continued to be that safe Harbor, emotionally speaking, protecting me and, telling me what I wanted to hear I'll I would never have, I wouldn't be able to grow. And it's super-fast growth. I mean, it's the theme in your podcast? The growth part is painful, painful but necessary.

**Jule:** One of my beliefs is that there are benefits to hard times and good things come out of them that never would have been possible otherwise. So if you look back at the brick that hit you with your father's suicide, and then the ripples that followed, what good things do you see that came, that couldn't have come otherwise?

**Katie:** I above all else, I think, I mean, this isn't even that warm and fuzzy, but like self-reliance, self-resourcefulness, just being the type of person who figures stuff out all on my own. And that goes for just like life stuff, but also like my job. I mean, I'm a freelancer, so that's, that's par for the course.

I have to figure everything out all by myself all the time. Getting to where I have been today, I've survived. Any and every layoff that has happened at all the jobs I've had, I've been like one of the last people standing because people recognize that in me, the hardworking, the resourcefulness, et cetera, , I've bounced out of places when I could tell that something was on the horizon layoffs, et cetera.

I think in addition to my mom teaching me that, I mean, my mom's very much the same way. I'm like, you know, Apple doesn't fall far from the tree. It's a blessing and a curse. It's funny. Cause it's like, you're asking, you know, what's the good that kind of came out of it. And again, it's a blessing and a curse, but it's, it's gotten me places it's helped me survive.

**Jule:** Oh, yeah. It's it's made you very resilient. It's interesting. And you, you commented on it as you were talking that you're a freelancer now, but you were also a freelancer in your youth. You've been very solo-responsible. And because we're friends, I know that you're making a job change.

**Katie:** Yeah.

**Jule:** This is really interesting because you won't be freelancing anymore.

**Katie:** Yeah. And it's one part of the healing process. This choice I made to join three wonderful, amazing, talented women and their business, instead of keeping up with my solo gig, which was fine. I mean, I'm, I've climbed, it's not running away from like a lack of clients is it's that I, I recognize that I need some more togetherness and support and community in my life. I'm so solo that it's been easy for me to kind of build walls around myself. And I know I can't heal that way and it's not that I want running into their arms, hoping you're gonna save me from myself. It's more just the kind of underlying current, that there's somebody there, even just in a job sense.

You know, it's that resourcefulness coming up, and yes, resiliency, but to a fault, you know? You can be resilient, but is it resilience or is it that you like put up all these barriers so that nobody can come and grab you and snatch you away? So I think part of my healing process, now that I'm 40, you know, it's like you turn that big milestone.

Um, I did that this year, and it's really just Katie, you're in your now. It's the mid age time where you need to make some new choices. If you're going to feel more comfortable in your own skin, I dunno, more loved by the world instead of feeling so alone.

**Jule:** More loved by the world instead of feeling so alone. That's beautiful.

I'm really happy for you with this job. Not because of the job, but because you're opening yourself up to make yourself vulnerable, to not have to be always the one who handles everything and to be willing to accept support and love and care.

**Katie:** And I want, and if there's a reason to get better, to get to feel healthier, it's that I want to, I want so badly to give gifts to the world just like that. And to get into provide some sense of wholesomeness, healthiness to others and not just in the cheesy way, but because it's, so, I mean, this world needs help--it's a hot mess right now. And we need more, the

more helpers the better. And you know, when we're also exhausted, it's like, what what's that going to do? And so all the more reason it's like that driving force, just thinking about it in that perspective is a huge driving force for me to I can kind of return the favor.

**Jule:** Is there anything else you'd like to say about hard times or hope?

**Katie:** I think, if this ever reaches anybody, who's struggled. With either somebody in their life who has contemplated or committed suicide, or if someone, themselves has contemplated, tried even, it's important to talk about it to someone, even if it first starts with just talking to yourself, over, you know, a recording that you're never gonna show anybody else, but just to hear yourself say the words aloud, who it is makes a huge difference because you have this burden you're carrying around and you think it's, you think it's everyone else's burden, but it's not. Don't worry. It's not.

I mean, once, once the deed is done, the book is closed and people are left wondering, and wondering and wondering and wondering until probably their dying day. And let's just not close the book. Let's just try, let's just try and again, like I said, it starts with opening up your mouth and listening to the words, even if it's just a recording to yourself, or are you talking to the shower or whispering to yourself in your bed at night? Something.

**Jule:** Thank you for saying that

**Katie:** Sometimes you just have to look at again, it's that self-awareness look at yourself outside of yourself and say there there's hope.

There's hope. There's always hope. Just, just one more, one more moment. Take one more moment. Can you do one more moment alive and then do another moment? How about a third moment? Get going and you'll see that it's possible. It's possible.

**Jule:** It is possible and it's good.

**Katie:** Very good.

**Jule:** It may have been bad, but it gets better. I'm glad you have decided to stay here. I like having you on the planet.

**Katie:** I like having you here, Jule. Let's stay here together as long as possible.

**Jule:** It's a deal.

Thank you for listening. That was Katie.

I'm Jule Kucera, host of Hard Times & Hope. My website is [julekucera.com](http://julekucera.com), that's j-u-l-e-k-u-c-e-r-a.com. Take care, take heart, see you next time.