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**Jule:** Hi, I'm Jule, and this is Hard Times & Hope a place for real conversations with regular people, about a real hard time. We talk about what it was, how they got through it, and something good that came from it.

[00:00:29] Today's guest is Jill. Jill and I met through an online writing group that began when COVID restrictions began in March of 2020. It's a silent writing group, except for brief check-ins at the beginning and the end. I wanted to talk with Jill because I liked her. I didn't know her well, and I wanted to get to know her better.

[00:00:48] We've learned we have a lot in common, including that we're both former gymnasts. What will Jill have to say about hard times and hope? Let's find out!

[00:00:59] Jill, thank you so much for being here today.

[00:01:02] **Jill:** Oh, thank you too. This is wonderful. It's really fun.

[00:01:06] **Jule:** Looking forward to this. And even though we don't know each other that well, I just know we're going to have a great conversation.

[00:01:11] **Jill:** Yeah, yeah, me too.

[00:01:13] **Jule:** What's the hard time you'll be using for reference today?

[00:01:17] **Jill:** I'm going to talk about when my mom died.

[00:01:20] **Jule:** Oh, okay. And when was that? Or how long ago was that?

[00:01:25] **Jill:** That was July 4th, 2004, so 17 years ago.

[00:01:31] **Jule:** Okay. What happened?

[00:01:34] **Jill:** Um, I actually, I wanted to tell you that I have her here.

[00:01:42] **Jule:** Oh, there she is. Oh, that's so cool. You've got her picture. I love the frame too. You know, she just looks all around it and like you're hugging her. It's like a giant hug around her.

[00:01:52] **Jill:** And that was actually the Sunday night before she entered the hospital. So what happened was that she had had a hip replacement in March, and she healed well, but she didn't get her strength back as quickly as she would have liked. And she developed a hernia. And then when she went to have the hernia repaired, everything went wrong.

[00:02:29] So I think what the best thing to do is to start with the first operation. Should I tell you a little bit about this story? And, you know, I noticed kind of jumping ahead that you had this question of what would your future, what would you tell yourself if you could go back? And I think the beautiful thing about the story…

[00:02:53] Is it's almost as if I had that voice with me from the beginning, my mother was a very spiritual person. She had absolute faith in God, and she believed that when you die, you return home to that guy. And what is amazing to me is how beginning with the first operation it was, as if I was being prepared that she was leaving.

[00:03:26] **Jule:** Oh, wow.

[00:03:28] **Jill:** She was really afraid when she had the hip replacement. You know, those have come a long way in the last 17 years. That's major surgery and she had a lot of health problems and you could see that she had to grapple with her mortality to have the operation, which meant we all grappled with her mortality.

[00:03:48] And when she came out of that operation, it went longer than they expected. I bought her some flowers, she loved to garden. So I took this bouquet, and I arrived right at sunset. And she'd probably come out of the anesthesia late in the afternoon. And no one else was there. And the sun was kind of coming through the windows that had that beautiful gold and sunlight.

[00:04:24] And I walked in and I expected her to be in terrible shape, you know, just mostly unconscious. And she was glowing. She was radiant. And I walked in and she looked at the flowers and you could just see the joy right here. And she said to me, “I have been thinking about you ever since I started to wake up,” and she said, “I never imagined what life was like from your perspective.”

[00:05:06] “And I suddenly realized how painful your life was. And I don't know why. I never thought to think about it before.” And I just started to tear up and, and it wasn't just what she said. It was who she was. It was as if coming out of the anesthesia, she were living my life. From my point of view. And when she looked at me, I could see that for the first time she understood me. She knew me.

[00:05:44] **Jule:** Wow.

[00:05:45] **Jill:** And the love between us in that moment was extraordinary. And I, I knew that she had just changed the rest of my life for me. Because I now had a mom who completely understood and loved me.

**Jule:** Wow. What was your relationship like prior to her coming out of the anesthesia?

**Jill:** It was a really painful conflict in relationship and it, it really always had been, and I had had to work through in my twenties.

[00:06:27] I realized that I was so afraid of her that, you know, just in the way a child wants their parents' approval so badly, right. That I was never myself around her. And so, you know, when she died, I was in my forties. In my twenties, I formulated this goal and the goal was to live vourageously enough to actually be myself with her.

[00:07:02] So that one day she would really see me, and it seemed like an impossible goal. And there we were, you know, at this scene that I'd been working toward for 20 years or so. So we had, that was in March and she died in July. So we had that four months of time. To be totally in love with each other and really enjoy each other.

[00:07:35] And it was wonderful. I know another one of your questions is what made this so hard? So one of the things was we only really had those four months, you know, to have to have that quality. And yet that's enough, right? There was a lifetime achievement really to have that kind of love between us.

[00:08:02] The other thing that was really remarkable was this was in early March. Her birthday was March 29th. So she'd been healing for three weeks. She was really getting better. She was well enough to be at the birthday party and all of that. But on the eve of her birthday, March 28th, I had a dream and the dream was of her grave site.

[00:08:34] But the grave site was a field of sweet peonies, which is not actually a real flower. It's kind of a dream mixture of sweet peas and peonies. And what's beautiful about that is her most loving moments to me when I was a child, she would call me sweet pea and her favorite, one of her favorite flowers were peonies.

[00:09:05] And so it was a whole field of these fragrant flowers. So it was her death site, but it was just infused with love and beauty and all of that.

[00:09:18] **Jule:** When you said sweet peonies, I thought, well, there's a flower I'm not familiar with.

**Jill:** but it's a dream flower.

**Jule:** Yeah. What I get from your dream is since she called you sweet pea, the sweet part represents you and the peony part represents her and the field brought those two together in love.

[00:09:38] **Jill:** Oh, that's beautiful. Yeah. I like that. Yeah. And it, but it did leave me with this sense... foreboding is not the right word, but it was definitely like a signal that I was feeling that we weren't quite out of the woods the way we thought we were.

[00:10:00] **Jule:** Yeah. I was going to ask you after the surgery, when she was healing, so well, if you had any sense that her time would be limited. But it sounds like this dream gave you something of a sense.

[00:10:11] **Jill:** Yeah, it was for me the dream. And then the next thing that happened was in June, just before she went into the hospital. She called me on the phone. And she was almost in tears and my mother was not someone who easily cried, and she was discouraged that she wasn't feeling better.

[00:10:38] And, and she really gardening was a passion for her and she couldn't kneel to weed her flowers. And I had her on the phone ,and I looked out the window. And my daughter was in the front yard kneeling on the ground, planting flowers. And I thought that seems too perfect. And I thought to myself, I should take my daughter to help her out.

[00:11:11] **Jill:** And then, you know, I do, I don't have this often, but I do sometimes have. That soft, inner voice that gives commandments to me rather than it's just my ordinary thought. Right. And that voice stepped in and said, “Do it now.” Yeah. And that was the next feeling that I had, you know?

[00:11:37] **Jule:** Yeah. I'm getting signals. I don't have a lot of time. We don't have a lot of time.

[00:11:42] **Jill:** We don't have a lot of time. So we went immediately. I brought all my daughters, and they spent the afternoon gardening, and she was delighted and had some ice cream and she gave them a plant as a thank you. And that was our last afternoon together.

[00:12:02] **Jule:** Oh, wow.

[00:12:04]**Jill:**  Yeah. So then what happened was she woke up vomiting and in pain and ended up going to the ER and getting admitted.

[00:12:15] And, um, they did exploratory surgery, and I went to see her after the surgery and this time was so very different from the first time. She looked really gray and… not well, and so what happened were a series of mistakes really that led to her death, but the night before the surgery, so they admitted her.

[00:12:46] And then the next day I went and sat with her and they were having her drink the stuff and she couldn't keep it down, you know? And, and she was in tears. And yet she was talking about the two people in church who were scheduled to have surgery the next day. And she was worrying about them and how they would do, and she was also reliving the memory of being in the hospital and losing a child.

[00:13:24] And it was just, it was such an open, vulnerable moment where she didn't usually talk about these things, but she, she was kind of, all those walls were breaking down that had her not share the pain. So after the exploratory surgery, I went again. And so the next morning I met my dad at the hospital, and he met me out in the parking lot and he just collapsed in my arms and just cried and said, “I've, I've been, have been through this before. Um, and I don't think it's good.”

[00:14:17] And of course we both cried, and he said, “We can't go in there like this.” And I said, “That's why we're out here.”

[00:14:27] **Jule:** So she hadn't passed yet?

[00:14:29] **Jill:** But she was not doing, not doing well. So they had moved her to the ICU. And when she was in the ICU, that was when… really mistakes began to be made. So immediately I noticed there was no hand-washing. We had had our babies and NICU and there was a big, you know, hand washing station and instructions and here there was no hand washing station.

[00:15:03] We were all walking in and out and she was very unhappy. And she started saying, “I want to go home, get me out of here. They're killing me.” They put her on morphine and that seemed to make her more difficult and she was being difficult. And, and the nurse kind of crossly threw me out of the room.

[00:15:40] Well, when I came back, she had been intubated and they didn't ask us or tell us they were going to do that. And, and the woman said, well, her oxygen levels were okay, but it was going to have to happen eventually. And that seems wrong.

[00:16:07] **Jule:** Yeah.

[00:16:08]**Jill:**  Yeah. And yet it's done, so there's no point of making a fuss, but it, it felt like it was mostly impatience with her being difficult.

[00:16:19] So then she was intubated and then from that point every day, it was a different story and the stories didn't jive, it's all different people. They're saying different things. The system for the communication isn't clear. And of course we're a family, so different members of the family are getting different pieces.

[00:16:43] So it was just very painful. And at some point again, I just had that thought. They're gonna make a mistake and we're gonna lose her. And, you know, it both felt like, like human error and like divine intervention at the same time. Cause it was, you know, this feeling that had started back with the dream, back with the moment she gave me what I needed before she left.

[00:17:25] And really, while there was human error, it would be difficult, like even one person couldn't make enough errors for it to turn out the way it turned out ,and it turned out she had MRSA. MRSA is pneumonia, but it's often in hospitals, it's one of these superbugs. Right. And so it took them a long time to figure out that's what it was.

[00:17:55] And then they got her on the right medication and then she began to get better. And then she woke up. And my dad was just beside himself. He was like Charlotte, Charlotte! And, and he like grabbed her eyeglasses and put her eyeglasses on and she's just totally combobulated. And then they did a test to see if she could breathe on her own.

[00:18:27] And she did. So they are really, everyone was really excited. So I actually went out to buy her flowers now that she was conscious and she was aware, and it was the 4th of July. So it was people who didn't know her. Right. It's a holiday. And so the regular people have a day off. And, apparently, I was not there.

[00:18:53] My sister was there, a new doctor came in and said, let's do this. and he took the tube out without testing her. But the real problem was apparently there's a, a cuff test that you do to make sure that air can get through the trachea so that, you know, there's not too much swelling and they didn't do that test.

[00:19:21] And so they, they took the tube out and her throat swelled shut. And then she had a heart attack from lack of oxygen. So it was, you know, it's, it's so shattering. It's so shattering for everyone, for my dad, for my sister, for me. And then we are all not at our best. And I'm sure it's shattering for the doctors and the nurses and they have to keep doing their job.

[00:20:01] But that afternoon they, they told us she was brain dead. And I don't exactly understand how the body works at that point. But we, we did go home that night. And then I, I got a call in the middle of the night saying she was… gone.

[00:20:24] **Jule:** I'm sorry. Especially because it seemed like she turned the corner and she was coming out. So that picture you have is from the day before?

[00:20:37] **Jill:** The picture I have is from the Sunday night before she went into the ER with the hernia. Okay. Yeah, it was Father's Day and we had a picnic and, you know, I was saying to my husband this morning, I don't have other pictures like that. I mean, we had family picnics all the time.

[00:20:57] I didn't snap a picture of my, just my mom, you know, and she's looking right at me.

[00:21:06] **Jule:** Yeah. It's almost like the dream or the other things that made you think you didn't have a lot of time with her also told you, take a picture. Now's a good time to take a picture.

[00:21:18] **Jill:** Yeah. And you know, the other thing that was amazing was that as shattering as it was.

[00:21:29] What happened for, I think easily a month after that day was that in my dreams, my mother was so alive and not just as a character, but her love for me was so alive. And in my dreams, I relived my life. But it was almost like my mother became a fragrance in the air that was with me, even when she wasn't with me as I relived my life.

[00:22:14] **Jule:** Wow.

[00:22:15] **Jill:** Like I could just feel her as love for me. And there was one wonderful dream. Just after she died, where she came and knocked on my door and I opened the door and I said, mom, you won't believe the dream I had. And I told her the reality.

[00:22:46] And then we had dinner and we laughed and, you know, and then I woke up of course and realized it was the other way around.

[00:22:55] **Jule:** And that's a hard wake up.

[00:22:57] **Jill:** It is, but it was, it's a really comforting.

[00:23:03]**Jule:**  I was thinking about how you, for most of your life, you had a troubled relationship with her. And then you had these months when she was alive, where it was a loving relationship, but then this, with you dreaming of her in your reliving your life with her as love there, it's sort of like it, it went back and covered all that period of time and repaired that, or fill that, or I don't know what the word is, but it's, it seems like you had a whole lifetime of love.

[00:23:35] **Jill:** Isn't that cool? That's what it was like. And the other thing that was just really poignant was the day she died. I don't know if this was required, but we immediately were at the funeral home, which is kind of a dizzying experience when you've waked up not imagining you're going to be there.

[00:24:04] And while we were at the funeral home, I just formed a picture of exactly what I needed to do. And I went, I called the minister of the church where I grew up, that my mother was devoted to, and I got a key to the church and I went there all alone. My grandfather was on the building committee of this church.

[00:24:32] And I, I love it purely for its architecture, as well as all the memories. And it's an A-frame and the front of the A-frame is all windows that face West. So you look out and if there's a sunset, you see the sunset. And I got there. I had around sunset. And I sat in the pews where I used to sit beside her and I, I took out a hymnal and I, I sang to her and I said, sort of a prayer to her, which was, “I don't need a sign.

[00:25:13] “I don't need a message. I don't need anything from you. I just. I just want you to know how much I love you.”

**Jule:** I'm so glad you went to that church and did that and honored her and yourself that way.

**Jill:** Yeah. I didn't get a message or a sign or anything, but what I did feel was I, I felt almost immediately there the truth that, that she now lived in my heart.

[00:25:51] **Jule:** There may have been a sign from the moment you walked in, because as you were describing the church and you said it faces West, and if there's a sun setting sun, and I thought, of course there will be a setting because there was a sun coming in when you brought her the flowers in the church. And it just seemed that you to have a connection around sunsets and flowers.

[00:26:11] **Jill:** Oh, that's really interesting. Yeah. And, and, you know, one of the beautiful things that both of my parents devoted themselves to was the creation of a Memorial garden. And so they actually created the garden that is now underneath those windows.And my mother was the first person who was laid to rest in that card.

[00:26:39] **Jule:** I just got goosebumps. Wow.

[00:26:44]**Jill:**  And my dad's way of grieving her became to, to tend to the garden.

[00:26:56] **Jule:** Anything else you want to say about that time? Losing your mom and transitioning to a new relationship with her?

[00:27:08] **Jill:** I don't think so. That feels pretty complete.

[00:27:12] **Jule:** To me too. Then let's travel to the present. And what I’ve found is it can be so hard to be thinking about the past and be so in it and then to try to reflect on it. So that's why I'd like to ask what's one of life's simple pleasures that you appreciate?

[00:27:32] **Jill:** My bird feeder.

[00:27:35] **Jule:** Tell me about your bird feeder.

[00:27:37] **Jill:** You know, I, I love birds and I love bird feeders, but a few years ago I was feeling a bit powerless and I wanted to kind of claim the power to create something beautiful. And so I chose a bird feeder and put it outside. And the thing I never imagined is that birds draw other creatures or maybe the food does, that's probably the better way of putting it, right?

[00:28:14] Yeah. Everybody gets hungry. And so, you know, it took a few years, but gradually the raccoons started showing up, which many people would not like, but I love the raccoons.

[00:28:29] **Jule:** How come? What do you love about them?

[00:28:31] **Jill:** They're gymnast's and they’re, you know, I have my bird feeder on my deck and they would come and they'd hang upside down and they'd kind of suck on the bird feeder. And then at night I would be looking at them and they would stand up on their hind feet and look back and it's like, well, let's see which one is the one in the zoo cage.

[00:29:06] **Jule:** So with the benefit of some distance from that time, what do you, what do you think that did for you?

[00:29:15]**Jill:**  I'm really tempted to use your words. I love the way you said that, that it's like, that love went back and, and infused itself almost rewriting my past with her. And that's so beautiful. And you know, my mother's faith in God was often problematic for me, it seemed a little too much faith and a little too little evidence.

[00:29:53] But that experience made me feel that she and I were connected to something that is loving is mysterious is alive. And that makes it very real to me that while she isn't here physically, that somehow she is alive and we still have a relationship. It's just different.

[00:30:28] **Jule:** Yeah. Anything else that you'd like to say about hard times or hope?

[00:30:35] **Jill:** You know, my relationship to my mom. Was really difficult and really hurtful things were said between us and both of us did that really hard work that everybody says is a good idea, which is to forgive each other. And it, it wouldn't have been enough if only one of us had done that work. But the fact that we both did that work, when I did say goodbye to her, it felt like one of the most beautiful gifts that is possible, I think more than I could've imagined.

[00:31:37] **Jule:** Thank you for listening. That was Jill. I'm Jule Kucera, host of Hard Times & Hope. My website is Julekucera.com. That's J U L E K U C E R A .com. If you think this episode would be helpful to someone, please feel free to share it.

Take care, take heart. See you next time.