

Podcast 338 Transcription

Karen Wyatt: Hello everyone and welcome to End of Life University podcast where we share real talk about life and death. I'm your host, Dr Karen Wyatt and I want to thank you for joining me here today for episode number 338. Today I'll be sharing with you a conversation I had with Terry Daniel on the Ask Dr Death podcast, which is a podcast primarily started by Terry, but I'm a sometimes co host with her on that podcast and we recorded a conversation with one another where we talk about lots of different things, but each one of us tells our stories in a way and how we got started doing the work that we're doing. So I thought you might enjoy listening in on that conversation. And one thing I wanted to say is on this podcast, I tend to be somewhat conflict avoidant. I'm a little bit averse to controversy and so I try to stay away from asserting strong opinions. But one thing I love about Terry is that she doesn't hold back, she doesn't have any of the fears that I have and the sensitivities about topics that we talk about. And so Terry amazes me because she's willing to go into tough subjects and have difficult conversations with people far more than I am. And so that's one thing that makes Ask Dr Death a really interesting podcast to listen to. So I thought you'd appreciate knowing about it and if you'd like something with a little bit different flavor than you get here on End of Life University. You might enjoy adding ask dr Death to your list of podcasts. So I'll be sharing that in just a moment. But I have a couple of announcements. First of all today, as this podcast airs, is Valentine's Day and I want to acknowledge that this is a really difficult day for people who are grieving because they see other people celebrating love after facing the death of someone they love. And when, when I come back after this conversation with Terry, I'm going to tell you about an app called grief coach that I've been using personally. I'll give you more information about that. But uh I have found a tremendous amount of value in it. And so I'm excited to tell you about it. But stay tuned after the interview with Terry and then I'll come back on and give you some more information about grief coach, but it's something that can help people get through difficult holidays like Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, birthdays, other anniversaries. So that'll be coming up right after my interview with Terry and then one final announcement. I want to thank my two latest supporters on Patreon, Monica **Kanuska** and Katarina Mac. And again, my apologies if I've mispronounced your names at all. But my big announcement is with those two additional patrons coming on to add support for the podcast, we've met our goal to be able to provide transcripts. So starting with next week's episode. I will be able to pay for transcripts for each episode for those of you who have been asking about how to read along with the podcast. So starting next week we'll be offering transcripts. So I'm really excited about that. And I want to thank all of you who stepped up to help support the podcast through my page at patreon.com/eolu. You've made it possible for me to add on this additional service. So I'm really grateful to you. So now we'll move on to my conversation with Terry Daniel again for the Ask Dr Death podcast. Here we go.

Terri Daniel: Hi everybody, this is Dr Terry Daniel and I am here with my my buddy and podcast partner, Dr Karen Wyatt for a special little episode we decided to put together,

which is just for the purpose of introducing ourselves to you and to talk a little bit about our work and who we are and what we do and why we do this. So, I am Terry and this is Karen.

Karen Wyatt: Hi Terry. I'm your occasional, sometimes co-host on the podcast because you do the bulk of the work for this podcast. I just show up every now and then.

Terri Daniel: Well, that's because you have another podcast that takes up most of your time. Tell us about that.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, I have two other podcasts now. I have End of Life University, which I've been doing for seven years now. And so I do interviews there with people who work in all areas around end-of-life and partly just to learn from them about what they do and why they do what they do. And just to be able to share it with people who are uncomfortable thinking and talking about death so they can hear two people who aren't uncomfortable who enjoy talking about death. So and then another podcast I started is called What Really Matters. And there I just talked about spiritual issues that come up around the end of life, but also things I'm dealing with in my own life, spiritual issues I'm working on like forgiveness and love and learning how to be in the present moment, things like that.

Terri Daniel: And you also have a book called What Really Matters.

Karen Wyatt: Yes. Well, yeah, it's been republished as Seven Lessons for Living from the Dying. But What Really Matters was the original title.

Terri Daniel: It's a great title. Well, I hope you sell lots of books and I'm so happy to talk to you about this because we've talked about so many things over the years. We've never really shared with our listeners, like a little bit of our own personal story. And so why don't you start with, I don't know wherever you want to start, why you decided to become a doctor and then later went into hospice doctoring.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, I had ever since I was a little child. I imagined myself being a nurse and I don't know why, but every time in kindergarten even I drew a picture of myself as a nurse in the hospital. And so I don't know where that came from exactly. But I got inspired by my fourth grade teacher to think about being a doctor and she said you know women can be doctors too. And at 12 I decided that's what I would do. I wanted to be a doctor. So I had the goal for a long time. And at some point along the way I was a really weird child.

Terri Daniel: Me too, imagine that.

Karen Wyatt: I climbed up in trees and read books all the time and spent a lot of time by myself. But I got this notion when I was 16 that love is what life is really about. And again, I don't know where that came from. It just was in my mind that love is really what

we're here for. So I wanted to be a doctor and I knew that love was important. So I decided I would be a doctor who would love my patients and that that was what my life was about and what I was here for, which sounds very crazy when you go to a Western medical school and tell people that.

Terri Daniel: How old were you when you decided this?

Karen Wyatt: When I was 16.

Terri Daniel: That's beautiful.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. So I ended up finally in medical school on the first day of school telling everyone that I believe that love is actually what heals people. It's the healing energy and that I am becoming a doctor because I want to help people. But I think that love is the best way to do that and suddenly looked around the room and realized everyone here thinks I'm completely crazy,

Terri Daniel: Right? They all ran away from you. Nobody wanted to sit next to you or eat lunch with you.

Karen Wyatt: So right away, I learned never say anything like that again in the company of medical professionals because it made no sense to anyone else. But I carried that with me this idea that somehow I know that love is really important. If we honestly want to help people, we have to be capable of love. So, I was always working on that within myself. Like what patients do I find it hard to love, who don't I love and why don't I love them and how do I learn how to love them? Which was a really interesting practice to have. But anyway, about three years into my medical practice as I trained as a family medicine doctor. And so taking care of the whole spectrum of life from birth to death. Three years into my medical practice. My father died by suicide. And that was devastating to me in every way, as you can imagine as a daughter dealing with my dad's death, but also as a doctor who believes in the power of love because my dad was one of the people I loved the most in the world, and my love did nothing to help him or to save him. You know, he took his own life. So that completely shattered. Like, everything I had believed, it shattered even my competence as a doctor. I wondered if I should be a doctor, still am I any good at being a doctor? And this love theory I had didn't make sense anymore. And I really was in that desperate state of grief and guilt at that point, and that would happen to anyone who has a loved one, dying by suicide. The guilt in particular, and wondering why I couldn't fix it. But I think it was worse for me because I was a doctor and I had extra training in psychology. I did a one year fellowship in psychiatry and I worked with lots of patients who had depression and suicidal thoughts. So, just my inability to help my dad really made me question myself down to the very depths. So, I went into a very deep spiral of grief for about three years. Everything seems to happen in these three year time frames. But one day, I got this idea in my head to call hospice. And because I had no training whatsoever throughout my medical school or residency in

anything dealing with end of life or death and dying. I honestly wasn't even sure what hospice did. I knew it had something to do with death. But I didn't even know.

Terri Daniel: You were still in medical school at this point?

Karen Wyatt: No, I was in practice. I had my own practice with patients. And I, you know, I knew hospice had something to do with death. I didn't know what. But the idea came in my head like that's what you need to help with this grief. This is your way to deal with grief. You have to call hospice and start volunteering for them if they take volunteers. So that day I called our local hospital. Honestly, I didn't even know if we had a hospice in our community. That's how little I knew. But I looked it up in the yellow pages that we used to use back in the past and found a hospice. I called them and said, I don't know if you take volunteers. I don't know what you do. But I'm a doctor. And I would be interested in volunteering if I could help you in any way. And the woman on the phone line, who was the director of the program, on the other end of the phone said, what made you call us right now? And I said, I don't know. I don't know why I'm calling you. And she said, because our medical director just resigned 30 minutes ago. And she said, we've been in a panic trying to figure out how we're going to operate because we have to have a doctor, we have to have a medical doctor to sign off on everything. And she said, and then you call us, she said, it's like a miracle. And I'm sitting there going, wait, what is it that you do again? What is hospice again? And she said, um, we would love for you to become our medical director. I went down there that day. I learned a lot about what hospice does. I just became their volunteer medical director. But um, so I had lots, I had to get lots and lots of training to even understand how to help patients at the end of life and learn about death and dying. But right away, I recognize this is where I need to be. This is the kind of medicine that I meant that I wanted to practice all along where I can bring love to these patients and I can sit with them, I can be at the bedside, I can bring everything I have to offer and be my whole self, including my grieving, guilt laden wounded self and be in this setting with these patients and still be of service. And so right away I knew like this is exactly where I'm supposed to be and ultimately I quit my other medical practice and just did hospice full time.

Terri Daniel: So you volunteered, you didn't get paid at first, but eventually they hired you.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, eventually I got hired. Well we were a small nonprofit hospice in the beginning that sold out to a for profit company and they walked in the door with money and said, we'll pay you if you work full time. So that's what I did.

Terri Daniel: How many years ago was this?

Karen Wyatt: So this was a long time ago now. 30 some years ago now that I started in hospice.

Terri Daniel: You know, you brought up a really good point and I've been in hospice now starting also as a volunteer for about 14 years and almost everybody I meet who works in hospice is there because of their own grief. It really is a place to go with unresolved grief or resolved grief. Any kind of grief.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. One thing that was helpful to me was to see to recognize like, oh, this is something everyone has to deal with because dealing with suicide for me, I've never known anyone else who was struggling with the suicide death of a loved one and I felt so isolated and alone. But suddenly in the midst of hospice, it's like all we talk about all day is death and dying and grief and it's like, oh, this is part of life and that was, that was the first thing that came to me was I'm not strange or unusual. It's part of life to go through this pain and this grief. And the second thing I recognized is that when you have like that, what I've been doing earlier in my grief process was everyday, I would wake up and think someday I'm going to go back to the way things were before dad died, someday I'm gonna wake up and I'm going to feel just like I felt then that's what I wanted and what I was waiting for is to go back in the past to return everything back to that place. That's what I was clinging to. And once I got in hospice, I realized no, a momentous event in your life, like someone you love dying, that's meant to change everything not to push you back into where you were in the past, it's meant to change everything. And that part of the reason I was suffering is that I was refusing to change. So going to hospice, that was my first big step toward allowing change to happen in my life. And then I realized, wow, this is going to change everything about me and that's okay. That's what's meant to happen.

Terri Daniel: That is an amazing observation and an amazing story because so many things you just said, like that's where you saw that love idea can be put into practice and also what you just said is such an important thing to tell grieving people and this is what I say all the time too, is there, you don't go back, there's, you know, this is a cliché, but there's a new normal and when you see people who are in the most pain, especially in complicated grief, that's a big part of the reason why is because they want to go back to feeling the way they did before. There was this big hole in their heart and the whole is has a purpose, as Rumi says, you know, the wound is where the light gets in and so to help people use that wound as a way to propel them forward is really what we're supposed to do with grief counseling. So you really said it beautifully about, you know, the pain stays stagnant and hardened and absolute because you're trying to go back to your innocence.

Karen Wyatt: Yes, exactly, because in your mind it seems like everything was fine then and I want to be fine again. So I have to go backwards somehow, but I did come to realize, so I've had so many revelations of course, through this entire process all this time doing hospice work processing my grief over my dad, but that the idea that my whole love theory got shattered by my dad's death. That was important too, because because I honestly didn't understand before his death that sometimes love hurts and it breaks us apart and that it was really, as you said, I almost had to have my heart broken in order to really love people so that the light could come in, I could truly love once that was broken open. And so then I saw, wow, everything that has happened has provided me

with an opportunity to grow in ways I never expected, you know, in ways I never could have imagined or could have sought out for myself.

Terri Daniel: You know, a lot of people are really uncomfortable with this idea that everything happens for a reason, because it's been sort of hijacked by Christian evangelicals who are I guess what they mean, when they say everything happens for a reason, is something like, you know, God has a plan, but I believe that, and I just try to not say it in those words, because it's become so sticky in the culture. So I like to say that everything has a purpose. Pain has a purpose. It's really true because the only option is that everything happens for no reason. You know, your father just killed himself. So what, there's no reason, It's just a random meaningless event that can't possibly be true in any universe.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, I agree with you completely. And I look at that everything happens, and it's up to us to find the meaning within it. Like, and it isn't that, oh, it was predestined that my dad would kill himself, and then I would go to hospice. No, these are things that happened on this journey of life and millions of other things could have happened. But these are the things that did happen. And then it has been my job to figure out given what has happened. How do I create meaning out of this? How do I find the most meaning and the most possible growth and the most love in everything that has happened. So for me, to myself, I always have that thought, everything happens for a reason. Like, oh, I got a flat tire on the side of the road. Oh, well there's some reason why that happened. That's fine. I'll deal with it. But I agree with you. You can't say that these days. The meaning of it is too distorted in many groups.

Terri Daniel: Yeah, it's gotten too commercialized, it's too pop spirituality. It's yeah, so we have to find another way to say it. But what you're saying is, I mean, humans have a natural instinct to attach meaning to things, which is why we created religious structures and religious doctrines. And the thing is that we do attach our meaning so we could just have these random events. Um, and we can decide if we want them to mean something or not. And one of the ways we do that, this is an exercise that I give my in my grief workshops as you draw a line a timeline and you mark across this line, all your losses, like when I was three, my father left and when I was six, my grandmother died and so on and then I got divorced and my dog died and my mother died, here's your timeline and then next to every one of those marks that you put on the line for a loss, you put another mark of what did that transform for you? It's called the grief and growth timeline. So my father left when I was three, but then my mother got married again and brought in a really good stepfather and I was able to grow up with a father or then, you know, my dog died and but then I went and got another dog in another town. And while I was there getting that dog, I met my next husband or you know, whatever, everything turns into something else, that's what it means, that everything happens for a reason. Everybody bumps into each other in intersections of moments, like a pinball machine, right? You bump into one thing and you're blowing over there and bounce over there and that's how it works.

Karen Wyatt: I love that. I love that timeline of yours. I think it's so important because we actually have to look for the growth because it's possible for us to ignore the fact and not see that we've grown from an event. We have to have the mindset that we're willing to look for it and to review our lives and reflect upon things that have happened in order to see it and otherwise we might fall into that despair of "nothing happens for any reason." It's all random.

Terri Daniel: Well, that's why that timeline is such a useful tool and the reason I developed it is because somebody told me they had gone to a grief workshop where the attendees were told to make a timeline of just of their losses and nothing else. So she tells me about this. And I said, well then what did you do with it? And she said, well, nothing. They just wanted us to map out all our losses. And I said, and then what did you do with it? And she said nothing. There was no process. There was no ceremony. There was no conclusion. And I was so upset by that. I thought it was such a bad approach, you know? So that's when I came up with the idea of adding the growth spurts. And then I added, and the third thing to it which goes in between the loss and the growth, there's another thing in the middle which is a decision you made. So your father leaves home and abandons the family and you make a decision that men can't be trusted right? Or your dog gets killed and you make a decision that you probably should never have a dog again anyway. You know, because they're messy and you have to take them for walks and I don't really want a dog. You know, that's a decision you made out of your grief and so you put the decision into that timeline too. So it's the loss, the decision and then the growth, it's really, it's a fascinating process.

Karen Wyatt: Oh, I love that. I think that's just so helpful. And sometimes another thing besides not everything happens for a reason that I hear in the, I think it's in this new grief movement in a way is, oh shoot, I forgot what I was gonna say.

Terri Daniel: It's probably another cliché, probably something from the Prosperity Gospel or, you know, the law of attraction of, you know, think positive thoughts and you can manifest.

Karen Wyatt: Oh yeah, I know what it was though, that I actually read one person who said it's okay if you don't grow from your grief, a lot of people will tell you that's a good thing, but it's fine. You don't have to grow if you don't want to. And I agree with validating people wherever they are, whatever your experiences right now. But to me that seems wrongheaded as well. Like why not just say people, it may not feel right now like you'll ever grow from this grief, but keep an open mind. Maybe someday your experience will change. That's what I think that's a good way to validate where people are now, but to just say, you don't have to grow, don't let people tell you you should grow after your grief.

Terri Daniel: That sounds like something that, this is one of the problems with social media is everybody posts their ideas. Everybody thinks they're a grief expert. I came across something on facebook once, a link to something that was called something like

65 things I wish I had known about grief And it's this long list of absolutes and it's full of the horrible advice, like what you just said, you don't have to grow, no, well you don't have to allow growth to happen. I suppose you could choose that. Then you're going to be in complicated grief, it's going to go into your body and you're gonna get depression and physical illness. Yeah, you've got that choice. But some of those 65 things were some of the worst incorrect grief theories I've ever heard. Like one of them said, if you think it's going to hurt when your loved one dies when it really happens, it's going to hurt a million times more. That was one of them.

Karen Wyatt: Wow.

Terri Daniel: And one of them said, um happy events, like birthdays and holidays will always be sad. I mean, it was like a handbook of complicated grief and it's posted on some website I have it marked somewhere and the reason we get these ideas is because everybody thinks they're an expert and there are a lot of people out there giving grief advice and acting as a counselor or a grief guide or a chapter leader for a grief group that have no training in grief theory or group dynamics or psychology or any of the things that you need and there's a lot of really bad stuff being spread out there.

Karen Wyatt: Yes, definitely, definitely. I'll share one more thing that I bristle at a little bit, but then I want to hear your story Terri and have you tell us you know how you ended up doing what you're doing. But another thing that people often say is, I read all these posts about what not to say to someone who is grieving. And my concern about that is when I was grieving over my dad's death, most of the people in my life said nothing to me. They didn't come around, they didn't respond, they didn't help me. And honestly I wouldn't have cared what they said. It wouldn't have mattered to me what they said if they had just shown up at my door and been there. So I worry when we tell people these are the wrong things you could do when someone is grieving. I worry that we're scaring people away like, oh well then I won't go, I won't call my friend, I won't go talk to them because I don't want to say the wrong things. I don't know how you respond to that.

Terri Daniel: Well this is why we have to teach them what the right things are.

Karen Wyatt: Yes.

Terri Daniel: Because there are wrong things, you know, I mean somebody could have come up to you and said, well your father is in hell because all suicides go to hell. People say that all the time you know. Or they'll say oh Karen I'm so sorry that your father is in hell and you'll never get to see him in the afterlife. They say it with compassion or all the usual you know like oh God needed another flower for his garden or something you know? So yeah there are wrong things but we need to teach people what the right things are and the right things are to show up and not say anything at all. Exactly. Right. So the right thing is um here's what I would say I would come to your house and say can I would you like me to clean the bathroom for you? That's what I would say, can I go run to the store and get you something you know? And I wouldn't even ask "what do you need" or

“what can I do for you” because you won't be able to answer that, you don't know what you need. So you just kind of walk in and you say here I brought some food, give you the food, maybe walk in the kitchen and straighten up and just don't give advice. Just listen. But that's so hard for people to do.

Karen Wyatt: And don't feel that you have to try to say something that's going to soothe the other person because for the griever, like nothing can soothe you in that moment anyway. You know I mean someone being there is far more soothing being there and saying nothing is more soothing than any words they could say.

Terri Daniel: And soothing is not even a thing. You know you don't want to soothe somebody because as you just said, you can't and I heard this said once really beautifully, reassurance devalues suffering. So if I'm going to reassure you what I'm doing is trying to tell you not to suffer please. Okay Karen, your suffering makes me really uncomfortable. So I'm going to say all this stuff to make you stop suffering because I can't be with your suffering. That's what reassurance and soothing really is. But how many people know how to just sit with another person's pain. We're not taught to do that in this culture at all. We're taught to run away from it and try to make it go away.

Karen Wyatt: Exactly. If we can't do, if we can't think of something that would make it better then we just have to run away because we don't have any other tools to use.

Terri Daniel: Yeah. So the options to make it better or run away when in fact there's a whole other set of options which boils down to just be present with it. And that's you know that's what chaplains are trained to do, you know, which is a whole different thing. You know this is what I tell my chaplaincy students, you know is that if you pick learn one thing from being in this program when you walk out of here is that you learn the skill of just sitting being present with somebody's pain.

Karen Wyatt: Mm hmm. That's interesting. That's like, that would be one of the most valuable things parents could teach their children to do from the time they're really little. It's like oh this feels bad. Let's just sit here for a minute. Let's just sit here together for a minute in the quiet.

Terri Daniel: Yeah, I don't know. Then you got to wonder if like, if a kid sees another kid get hurt and fall down on the playground, are they going to interpret that as being, oh I have to be indifferent, I shouldn't feel sad. I shouldn't do anything. I shouldn't run and tell the teacher. I'm going to just sit here and be present with the kid who fell off the slide.

Karen Wyatt: That's true, could backfire.

Terri Daniel: It's different with kids I guess. Will you tell your story? My favorite story of yours about your neighbor's kid. You know, I love that. Just we got to put it in here because it's so cute.

Karen Wyatt: Okay, so yes, so I became a full time hospice doctor in the, during that time we had two children and so I raised them as a hospice doctor. My husband's also a doctor. So they had lots of medical talk going on in our household and our kids knew from the time they were pretty little that I helped take care of people who were dying and would go visit them at their homes and they kind of understood that was my work. But when our son was about seven I would say six or seven years old he had a friend over to play with him one day and while he was, while they were playing in our living room I got a phone call from Hospice and it was telling me that one of the, one of our patients just died. And so my son and his friend kind of overheard me talking and his friend said what's going on with your mom? What happened? And my son said oh it's one of my mom's patients just died. You know it's no big deal. And his friend said her patient died. My son said yeah all of her patients die and his friend said I am never going to your mom as my doctor.

Terri Daniel: Oh my gosh! Kids are so amazing.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. So it was really cute that my son understood that like for some reason all of them, all of my patients died and that was somehow a good thing, you didn't quite have all the pieces to put together.

Terri Daniel: And of course all of your patients don't die, sometimes they actually get better and leave hospice.

Karen Wyatt: Occasionally, yeah.

Terri Daniel: They die eventually I guess. Yeah, I love that story. So much.

Karen Wyatt: So Terri, I want to hear from you. I want you to tell us your story of, well I mean I don't know where you want to start either with your story, but how you ended up becoming all of these things that you are chaplain, grief counselor, Doctor of ministry.

Terri Daniel: This is so much fun Karen, and we're interviewing each other, you can interview me. So I got started in this because I had a child who was severely disabled and seriously ill for half his life. He was diagnosed when he was 10 and given 5 to 10 years to live. And he died when he was 16 and that was 15 years ago, that was in 2006 and so during those years, um I had the experience of caregiving of course, but I knew that he was going to die and I had always been a mystical spiritual person since I was 12. So as soon as he was diagnosed and I heard that he was going to die in addition to all the normal human responses of shock and sadness and grief, I also had this other response that was like, wow, this is interesting, I wonder why this is now happening in our life plan together. So I had, in addition to all the normal stuff I had curiosity and eagerness to understand and to learn. And so when the time came and he actually died and I was sitting with him, he was the first person I ever saw die. He was 16 years old. It was such a mystical experience, just witnessing the process of, for lack of a better term, a soul

separating from a body just closing down. And yet there's still something present. And I felt that so strongly during his actual death that I knew I wanted to be around that more.

Karen Wyatt: That's so profound. Terri and I loved that you talk about facing this challenge with Danny with curiosity and already recognizing like there's something here, there will be something for me to learn or to experience or to grow from having that mindset. I can imagine that that helped you hang in there and get through those years, which had to be really challenging.

Terri Daniel: You know, I have to give credit to Ram Dass for that because one of the things in one of his books, I think it was *Grist for the Mill*, he talked about looking at tragedy by saying ah, interesting. Oh cancer huh interesting. Which is how he lived his whole life and up to the end. And you know, he was such an inspiration to me all through the 70's that I think that really put that way of responding into my mind because it was interesting and it was interesting in an even bigger picture like why did this being this little soul and this little body of my child come to me in this part of life in this time in my life to do this journey together. I also went back to, do you remember the boy in the bubble?

Karen Wyatt: Yes.

Terri Daniel: So back in 1974, I was 21 years old. I was sitting in my friend's house watching tv and there was this story about the boy in the bubble who was this kid who had this immune deficiency and he had to literally live in a little plastic room inside his house. And I remember at 21 years old looking at that thinking and again, I was always a weird spiritual mystic kid. So I always thought everything this way, why would a being choose that body to incarnate in who is in that body? And why would he choose to come here in that form? And I immediately heard the answer to the question which is well, he wanted to come here this time around and have no ego. So like no attachments to the physical body to you know, you know, sexual attractiveness and you know, all the things that the ego likes. So I thought, what an enlightened kid, who is that being? You know, and then when my son was diagnosed, I sort of saw him the same way. It's like why did he come here and choose this? And so that does certainly help you know, with the loss of his physical presence because that wasn't the only reason he was here was to be physical. So after he died just the numinous experience of being around somebody dying. I just wanted to get more of that. So I became a hospice volunteer. I moved across the country long story short and I was a hospice volunteer for about, I don't know, two or three years and I realized that the patients were having all these spiritual questions. Of course they were at the end of life. And as a volunteer, I wasn't really allowed to have those conversations with them And that's where I really wanted to go. And I very quickly learned that the only people who really allowed to talk about spiritual things with the patients were the chaplains. So at 56 years old I went to college and I never went when I was young. And I started out as a freshman at 56 got a bachelor's in religious studies because that's what you need that helps with the chaplain. And then I did a bunch of internships at inpatient hospice facilities. Then I did a unit of C. P. E. which is also

chaplains training. Then I did a master's and pastoral care and was a volunteer chaplain for three years. And at that point I realized that I didn't actually want to be a chaplain. I wanted to be a teacher because I'm a better talker than a listener. So then I had to go back and get a doctorate so that I could teach because that's what's expected, to teach college these days. So, so here I am, um I loved my education, I love teaching and now I'm doing everything I want exactly the way I want it. It's kind of amazing. So I'm a PRN very, very part time chaplain. I only see a few patients a year, really not that many, I'm just kind of on call when people, other chaplains are on vacation and I teach at the Graduate Theological Union in the chaplaincy department. So I teach up and coming chaplains. So that's that. Oh yeah, and along the way, I started the afterlife conference Which I have done for the past 11 years and which is how I met you, Karen as a speaker at the conference and that has now become the conference on death grief and belief because the focus of the conference changed over the years as my focus changed. And now, because of my background in theology, I am really interested in people's religious beliefs and theological perspectives and how that impacts their experience of death and grief.

Karen Wyatt: I'm really interested in that process of transitioning from the afterlife conference into death grief and belief. Because I wonder if within that, the broader umbrella of the afterlife, if you saw things there that were not, I mean sometimes toxic or needed to be addressed a little bit differently. And that's what caused you to shift,

Terri Daniel: Very astute observation, Dr Karen. Exactly, that's a really big part of it and um what caused me to shift is I became, I started getting all these credentials right, I got all these degrees, I got certified in trauma counseling and and I looked at the people who were coming through the afterlife conference who were pitching me, who wanted to be speakers and they didn't have any credentials and they would say, you know, I'm a grief support person, I am, you know, um I'm a death awareness educator and I would look at them and I'd say, what are your credentials? Where were you trained? And they said, well no where, you know, I just really um I'm really good at being with death and you know, my mother died and or I took a weekend workshop on home funerals or I did a weekend training as a death doula and to me that's not enough and I got kind of tired of that also, you know, everybody is a shaman, everybody's a reiki master, everybody is a medium. I got overwhelmed with all the street corner practitioners that were bombarding me to be part of the conference. And so I said, you know, I want to be more academic, I want to be more professional, I want a different audience. I want my regular audience, which is grievors and also people that are interested in interdimensional experiences like after death communication. I'm still all about that, but I wanted to bring in a more professional mix. So you know, I got it set up so that I could now offer ce credits and my speakers are now, you know, people with professional histories and academic credentials to talk about these things and I really kind of got tired of having mediums Um you know, 11 years of having mediums at the conference, I'm not dismissing them at all, but I kind of have moved beyond that myself and I guess you know, the conference is following me where I go. I've had tons of readings with mediums, I know all the top mediums and they're wonderful and they're excellent but at a certain point I didn't need that anymore and I think that grieving people should be able to move on from that. You don't go get a

reading with a medium every year, you know, unless and this is a big a big caveat unless the medium is able to tell you where your loved one is now. So he died five years ago, I'm going to go to a medium and asked what's he doing and where is he, has he incarnated somewhere in the world? Where is he in the universe? And mediums can't really tell you that. And so I started to see a lot of limitations with that. I saw grieving people really relying too heavily on mediums to ease their pain. I saw a lot of spiritual bypassing with people not feeling their pain because they just over spiritualized everything and missed out on the human earthly side of the grief experience. So I just kind of, I was just ready to do something else. And the biggest thing was really, I wanted to bring in the toxic religion piece of it, which was completely missing from the afterlife conference before. And toxic theology also exists in the new age world. Just as much.

Karen Wyatt: It's so true and I think surrounding the idea of the afterlife in multiple ways, because there's toxic theology associated with religion and who goes to heaven, who goes to hell and then and then also, as you were saying, toxicity on the other end of it with the New Age movement, not quite, not quite grasping the, this the spiritual realm, the consciousness around us and not utilizing it properly to, I think, so it seems like it was your own growth is the conference has grown and transformed as you've grown and transformed over time.

Terri Daniel: Yeah, the conference is totally a projection of me, I mean it always has been and one of the funny things about it when I first started it, I wanted to get to know my heroes. So in 2009, whenever it was, you know, I wanted to meet Raymond moody and Bill Guggenheim and um and I can't remember his name anyway, Suzanne Northrup, you know, the medium is all these people. So I reached out to them and said, I have this conference, you know, would you come speak at my conference and they did. And so now all these years later, all these people are my friends, I know them and now I'm finding myself attracted to other heroes, other superstars in other fields. So at the afterlife conference in 2017, we had Bishop John Shelby Spong and he really opened the door to that other world to like theologians and religious scholars and everybody loved him. Most of our audience had never heard of him before and they were like, who's this priest up on the stage, you know, what's he going to talk to us about? And by the time he was finished, he got two standing ovations and people were saying, I've never seen anybody like this. I didn't know there were, you know, bishops that said these sorts of things. So that kind of helped open the door to I love speaking. He just died this year. Such such a brilliant guy. So yeah, so the religious piece is so important. And in the new age world we have exactly the same theology using different language and the language is think positive thoughts and you will manifest and co create with the universe whatever you want, your health and love and wealth. And if you don't have those things, if your life isn't working, you're doing something wrong because you're not thinking right and how is that any different than God is punishing you because you did something that God didn't like exactly the same thing.

Karen Wyatt: Exactly. Oh, you're so right. And I'm sure you witnessed in your hospice work, what I saw as well, that there were some patients who were comforted by their

religious beliefs as they were facing the end of life. But I believe I saw more who were threatened and terrified by their religious beliefs because they were so afraid that when they died, they would go to hell and it was a huge struggle for them at the end of life.

Terri Daniel: Yeah, that's what I noticed too. You know, that's what got me onto this. And, you know, my doctoral dissertation was called, um, toxic theology as a contributing factor in complicated grief. I mean, I was seeing it all the time. So I'm kind of glad to hear you say that, that you also observed that with your patients all those years, that the people with traditional religious notions had more anxiety.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. And some of those patients that I, that I spent time talking to, expressed a feeling of almost being betrayed that they got sick and they, one man in particular said, I lived my life according to all of the rules and all of the religious laws. I was taught. I never made a mistake. I never wavered. I did everything right. And now I end up with cancer. And um, it was this idea that if you do the right things, you'll get rewarded for it, which isn't how things work here. It's not how the universe works at all. But that is that way of thinking. I think that's even true. Well actually we had a New age patient, I would say. Also, similarly, she said I was a vegan, I do yoga, I exercise every single day. I don't drink any alcohol. I take care of myself and I end up with cancer. How is that right? I did all those things. So I wouldn't get cancer and it's like, but it doesn't work that way. That's not how it is.

Terri Daniel: And that's just the physical things that she was saying, you know, the other New Age thing is, I thought the right thoughts. I didn't allow any negativity into my body. You know, I said positive affirmations every day. I made a vision board of all the pictures of the things that I wanted. You know, the handsome guy and the fancy car and the beach house, you know, because that's, that's the whole law of attraction thing. And what's, you know, the book, the secret I think is one of the most spiritually damaging teachings that has ever come out uh next to the notions of hell and punishment. That's the same thing because people come up to me all the time and they say, you know, I did all the things I made the vision board and I got, I didn't think negative thoughts and what am I doing wrong and to me they're just as broken and suffering as the people who are afraid of going to hell because they went to church and they tied and they did all that and they're still sick. It's just a bad theology all the way around to think that there's um you know, a system of input and output. I can't think of the word that I'm looking for where you know, if you invest and you get a fair return on investment or something.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, I think of just a vending machine, you put your money in and you get a treat back and it just, it doesn't work that way. You know what I what just popped into my head is that I was kind of thinking that way after my dad's death like but but I know all about love, I have all these theories of love and I studied this and I studied that and I'm a doctor like why couldn't I save my dad and all of that thinking has to be shattered. And for me it was probably essential that that got blown away very early on. So I could, I could become like you were more just curious about, oh this is what's

happening now, I wonder why or I wonder what will come of it. I wonder what can be made of it not, there's a cause and effect for every single thing, you know?

Terri Daniel: Yeah. And the law of attraction, there actually is a law of attraction. But it doesn't work like the vending machine. The law of attraction, if you're going to call it that, is when you come into this life, you bring to yourself whatever is going to move you further, you know? So you attract a father who dies by suicide and I don't know, I take that back. I'm not going to say attract, I hate that word because that means that there's something you did. You know, when you say you attract abusive boyfriends, you attract drama. I hate when I hear people say that because it's so, so I try to think of another way to say it. You know, you create, and this was another thing that Ram Dass said, you create the painful situations or the situations that will bring forth what you're here to learn. So let's say that instead of attract, you know, um, there's a wonderful Ram Dass saying that goes something like that. I wish I could remember it. And so yeah, you know, we invite these things on a very subconscious level. Otherwise, you know, do we really want to have a life where we never have any loss? Of course it's not possible. Like nobody ever dies. Nobody ever says an unkind word to us. You know? Yet there are people, religious people who feel that that's possible because they're protected by faith. And those are the people right now who are not vaccinated against Covid.

Karen Wyatt: And those are the people I saw in hospice, who get shattered one day when they do get sick and something challenging does happen to them, that they weren't expecting that, that it doesn't fit with their belief system.

Terri Daniel: So there's two things that can happen when that happens. So that's a crisis of faith, right? And, you know, I deal with people struggling with that all the time. And so you have two choices. You can cling to the old way of thinking to the old rules and system of faith and then be angry at God or angry at the system because it didn't work. And you can still cling and cling and fight and fight and try to put that square peg in a round hole forever and it's never going to fit or you can give it up and let it go. So, you know what, that belief system obviously wasn't true, what I believed all my life since I was three years old and what they taught me, Damn. You know, now I'm 50 and I'm finding out that that wasn't true and you can start reconstructing a new theology and that's what the new conference is really about.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, that's beautiful. And when, when I apply that to like, my process of dealing with my dad's suicide when looking back at it now, in retrospect, clearly, like, his suicide is what propelled me to shift my whole career from family practice to hospice, and I ended up writing a book and becoming a speaker and a teacher and doing a podcast all about death and dying and finding all this richness and spiritual wisdom that, you know, that completely changed my life. And so, but would I ever say, oh, I'm so glad my dad died by suicide? No, I wouldn't say that. But I would say this profound meaning has come about after his death, and I can only express gratitude for the way life unfolds sometimes that we're not prepared for, we don't expect it, but things happen and when we can at least can be curious like you were saying, and just go with the flow of it, we may

be moving towards something, a change that's important, that that will help us in the future.

Terri Daniel: And even if we don't know, we never can know what that change is going to be until we get there. But looking at it, the way you just described gives us peace. Peace along the way in the process. You know, when people say to me, I'm so sorry that your son died, I say, you know what, it's okay, You know, it was part of a bigger thing and if this hadn't happened, I certainly wouldn't be sitting here talking to you on the asked dr death podcast right now or doing any of the other things. I'm sure I wouldn't have gone to college and gotten this education and I wouldn't be doing this work. So because of my son's death, I have a life that's more productive and more meaningful and contributes more to the culture than I would have had otherwise. Now I don't know that for sure. I don't know what it would have been otherwise. But based on the rest of my life, up to that point, I wasn't really doing much of anything special. So I think that it did contribute to me having something to offer the world that I wouldn't have before.

Karen Wyatt: Oh, absolutely. And so as someone observing and getting a chance just to just to watch how you show up in the world and how you've worked. I can experience gratitude for where you are and what you're doing and what you're bringing to the world because it's so important. I was just gonna say that the very conversation we've had about, um, about spiritual bypassing and also about toxic theology. I don't hear those happening very many places these days. I think it's so important.

Terri Daniel: Yeah. It's going to become a thing, You know, it's because people are, the statistics are showing that people are dropping out of religious structures like flies. You know, it's um, The people who identify with a particular religious denomination or tradition according to the last Pew and Gallup poll, um, drop about one point per year in the last 20 years, which is a lot. So you know, the term toxic theology is going to come more into the language and religious trauma syndrome is also something new that I hope that we will see in psychology, but we're only just now beginning to hear about it, you know, religious abuse people who are raised in really strict religious environments as children and kept away from the rest of the world, only allowed to play with other kids in the same religious community, not allowed to read outside materials given you know, biblical literalism and strict codes to follow etcetera, that ends up somebody who grew up with religious trauma. So there's so much to talk about and thank you Karen and you know, the same back to you, my friend. I mean your work is so amazing. When we did the symposium this last weekend, all these people emailed me and said I've been following Karen Wyatt for years, I'm so glad you had her on the symposium. Everything she says is so rich and so full of value. So I've gotten tons of wonderful compliments on your presentation at our symposium and you really, you're well known, you have a following, people just adore you, you're really good at what you're teaching.

Karen Wyatt: Wow, I mean it's nice to hear that every now and then because part of one of the problems with podcasting is that you sit in your own home here we are each in our

own little um studios recording and you have no idea if anyone even listens, will anyone even here this will anyone even care that we did this. But it's nice to get feedback.

Terri Daniel: We can look at the, you know, we can look at our dashboard on our podcast, let's see how many people have listened, you know, so we sort of know but yes, you know we got to keep, we gotta keep marketing, we have to keep putting this out. It's a lot of work, this is your retirement and you're probably working just as much now as you did.

Karen Wyatt: That's true. But I wanted to say for you, this symposium that you just did. The success of that symposium is about real validation that this new path you're on is exactly what's needed right now. Your timing is perfect.

Terri Daniel: I was surprised how many people responded to that symposium and most of them were like nurses and social workers and chaplains and psychologists and the same with the death, grief and belief facebook group. You know people are saying oh my God I've been looking for a place to talk about this, you know this, I've been thinking about this as a hospice nurse but I can't really say it at work because nobody really talks about this. So yeah, I hope I've opened up a brand new door, we shall see.

Karen Wyatt: Hey Terri, since we mentioned the symposium, I don't know the answer to this. If someone is just now hearing about it, who didn't get a chance to attend? Can they still pay the fee and get access to the recordings of it now after the fact?

Terri Daniel: You know, I hadn't thought about that, but I don't see why not. You know, I mean, I'd have to charge the same fee because a lot of you know, otherwise it wouldn't be fair to the people who paid. But yeah, I should probably put that out there pretty soon and let people know.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, I was just thinking now that we're singing the praises of it, I thought, oh someone listening might be like, darn I missed that. I wish I could get in on it.

Terri Daniel: All right, good, good idea. I could definitely do that. Okay, Karen, thank you. This is perfect. This has been just great. I just wanted our listeners, our millions and millions of listeners that we don't have, to get to know us a little bit. So I think this was perfect. They can hear us, they can't see us. Which is good because this is audio only. Karen and I are both in our workout clothes, not camera ready. So we're glad that it's audio. Alright, everybody thank you so much for being with us and we'll see you next time on Ask Dr Death.

Karen Wyatt: Well I hope you enjoyed my conversation with Terri Daniel and I do want to say one thing. As much as um, for me as a doctor and someone being highly trained, I value academic training and knowledge and learning. I also value experience as a teacher and wisdom as a teacher. And I will say that some of the most important lessons I've learned around grief and death and dying have come from people who were not

academically trained. And so I wanted to add this as something I didn't say during my conversation with Terry, but I do believe that any one of us can be a teacher for someone when we share our own stories and when we tell people our path that we've been on and what we've learned primarily if we don't assume that just because we've learned something that helped us grow, it's the answer for everyone else. If we're making that assumption, we're going a little too far out, they're applying our own experience to everyone else. But if all we do is share with other people, this is what happened for me and this is what worked or helped me and we understand that everyone is different and unique. So my experience may be nothing like anyone else's experience. And it might be that me telling someone what happened for me or how I see, it isn't helpful to them and as long as we recognize that and we have a lot of sensitivity toward who we talk to and how we talk to them, but also our assumptions, we have to have humility. We have to know that we don't know everything. None of us do. Even those of us who are highly trained and have lots of credentials and lots of letters after our names. We don't know everything. So I don't think you have to become an expert in everything around grief and death and dying and hospice care and the end of life. I think that you have to have some sort of wisdom, some basis of information and knowledge and a huge amount of humility. And you also have to be willing to be an ongoing student and to keep learning to keep adding tools to your tool kit and to keep growing your own base of information if you want to go out in the world and help other people and teach other people. But as I've said, I don't think you have to have lots of degrees and credentials in order to do that. So there I'm offering you my opinion on that topic and before we say goodbye, I mentioned the grief coach app and I want to tell you a little bit more about that. Before we leave. Um, grief coach is on a mission to make sure nobody ever has to grieve alone. And it's something, it's a really unique service that I haven't experienced before. A grief coach subscription is a secure private and easy way to get guidance and support. After someone dies, you can sign up in minutes and you'll start getting text messages right away. Texts are written by grief experts and personalized based on your loss and this is what I did. I signed up for grief coach and I happened to sign up before the anniversary of my mother's death and I got a really beautiful message on the date of my mom's death of her, of that anniversary, and also a number of messages surrounding that event with some suggestions of things I might do, but also just comforting comments, talking me through what's normal to experience on an anniversary like that. And it was extremely comforting several years after my mother's death to have someone reach out to me with just a little bit of contact and acknowledgement that this is a difficult day for me because to be honest, there's no one in my life who remembers that date who would connect with me on that day. So I found the grief coach app to be extremely comforting. And another thing that's really helpful with grief coach is if you have friends or family members who want to help support you in your grief, but they aren't sure how to do it. Grief coach will also text them with customized tips and date reminders so that they will remember to show up for you and they will remember to give you a call or ask if they can be helpful to you or even even just to check in and see how things are going. So for this Valentine's Day, the day that celebrates love, you can give yourself or someone else ongoing care and support after the death of a loved one through grief coach and you can get all the details about it and get \$10 off your subscription at grief.coach/eolu. And that's my affiliate link. I

became an affiliate because I am so impressed with what grief coach is offering. So again, that's grief.coach/eolu. And I want to remind you if you enjoy this content, please remember to share it with someone else who might also benefit from listening in to End of Life University and go to the platform wherever you happen to be listening to be sure and subscribe or follow this podcast and then leave a rating and review. That's extremely helpful for getting more eyes and ears on the End of Life University podcast. I also really appreciate hearing your comments and your recommendations for guests for me to interview on the podcast. So please feel free to keep reaching out to me at KarenWyattMD.com. So, until next week when I'll be back with another interview and a transcript, remember that we're here for love. So face your fear, be ready for whatever life brings you and love every moment of your very precious life. Bye bye.