



A Nurse First | Episode 10

At a crossroads

[Melissa Sherman] I realized that I was at a crossroads and in a bit of a desperate state to say and possibly experiencing extreme burnout was when I was a school nurse sitting at my desk thinking, "Now what?" And then having the epiphany that, "Anything."

It was just like a big realization. Do you ever have an "aha" in your life? That's what it was for me. I literally sat there and thought, "I'm so deeply unhappy." Like there was no other words. I'd been crying, and I don't feel fulfilled.

Fulfillment is so important. You don't want to look back on your deathbed, whenever that may be, and say, "I should have worked less." Or "I should have played more." Or "I should have become a singer." You don't want to look back with regret.

[Welcome to A Nurse First. This is Melissa Sherman telling her own A Nurse First story.]

My very best friend in the entire world, best friend, died three years ago. I helped her through the entire process, especially at the end, especially at the end. What I learned through that experience was not only A) oh my gosh, we really can die this early, this young. A second thing is she said, "I think you'd be really good at helping others at the end of life." She literally was like, "I think you could make this special for other people, too." And I was like, "Okay." But I said, "I can't do it for a while." And I was like, "I think getting over your death is going to suck." That's flat-out what I said. And I said, "I think it's going to be like earth-shattering for a while. And I'm not going to be ready to just delve into that." However, it planted a seed. It planted a seed in my brain.

She taught me through her life experience and death experience that life is short, is precious, is what you make it to be, and is what you decide to make it to be.

She died in my arms. She died the way she said she would wish to die. We had that moment. Afterward, I could hold her for hours. It's something you can't take back. So that obviously planted a seed for me realizing that nothing can really stop you. But at the time I had to grieve her death. To this day, obviously I grieve her. She's a very important person in my world. But moving forward now at this stage, I realized that it also brings in the finality of life and the importance of doing what your heart leads you to do.

[Staring at the wall from her desk in the school nurse office where she worked, Melissa came to a life-changing realization. She was experiencing severe burnout in her career.]

I literally had a moment of clarity where I said, "Seriously, your mental health and yourself and you know your heart and you know you're pure and you know that you're being truthful." How is my mental health? Oh, it's plummeting. It's plummeting. I'm crying a lot. I'm dreading coming in. I have anxiety. I think I might be getting really depressed.

It just hit me in that moment. Am I being my most effective, most authentic self that I wish to be? Am I living a fulfilled life? This was just me, regular nurse Melissa, going into work, trying to do a great job for her family, her kids, and the kids at school and everybody, administration, everybody, and then realizing I'm probably not being my best self. Is that good for anybody? Is that good for me? And if I'm not my best self, what kind of nurse am I being?

That same day, I think by 10:20 that morning, I quit. I said, "I'm so sorry. It's actually taking a toll on my mental health." My husband, I called him on the way home and I was like, "Oh my God, what are we going to do? We have a mortgage, we have children, and my mom's moving in." Like literally my mother-in-law had moved in three weeks before. We were going to look for a new house. Worst time ever.

It feels like you're stuck in that moment. It feels like there's no way out. It feels literally like you're a trapped mouse, literally in a maze that you cannot maneuver your way through. If we really got down to nitty gritty finances, the stress of feeling like a failure, the stress of feeling like you're giving up, all those things, trust me, it's not like I was immune to them. It's just a matter of, in the end, do you see this being something that's fulfilling for you in your heart? And do you feel like you are worth more than that?

You don't want to be at your deathbed whenever that might be and realize I lived an unfulfilled life and I could have done something different. I could have been braver. I could have taken that chance. And I'm not saying it's not scary. It takes guts. Like it takes like that courageousness to say, "I'm going to bite the bullet. I'm going to go for it. Oh my gosh, I don't know where I'm going to step." There may not be a step there. What if I just literally land in deep water and like nothing saves me? That's a horrific thought when you really think about it.

But in reality, I promise you, you will have a safe landing spot because you're following your heart and your gut and your soul. And I feel like you cannot go wrong. That's been taught to me over and over my 43 years of life.

[With "What happens next?" and "How will I pay my bills?" weighing heavily on her mind, Melissa's first instinct was to check LinkedIn for local job openings.]

I don't know why I picked LinkedIn. It's not like that was my platform of choice. I just knew that they had jobs. Went on there and I was like, all right, I have to figure out what I want to do.

Oh my gosh. Everything felt so heavy. Like it was just like whatever decision I made was going to weigh on me forever and for my family and have repercussions. That led me to looking for a resume coach. I never heard that there was even a coach in the world other than like a basketball or football coach. But anyway, I did find out on LinkedIn through looking for a new job that they had them.

Went with my gut, picked the person I thought would maybe helpful to me. And then I was like, "He'll help me write an awesome resume and then I'm going to find a job of my dreams!" And after our first

session, I'm like, "Can we just refocus?" Forget the whole resume thing. And he's like, "Okay?" And I'm like, "Can we just talk about how do I do what you do before not only just other nurses, but clients in general?"

That's where my heart started to light up. And I was like, "I want to help other nurses, not just nurses, but people that are literally in a crossroads or they're like, I'm stuck. I'm in this pit of sand and I'm drowning." I then very quickly started researching. He met me where I was at and that's what a good coach will do, which now I know. I thought that was really amazing.

And I always will say to him when we talk periodically and check in how grateful I am to him for having not only had the courage to literally say, "Okay, this is outside my comfort zone. I haven't been like a regular life coach since I trained, but I will meet you where you are as my client, even though this is not what our intention was."

And I joined a life coach program, from the beginning of the program you literally start kind of figuring out your, whatever your business is going to be and your niche. And so I was kind of divided between regular life coach and end of life. And then realized literally last week that why do I have to choose? Why? Like there's no, you set the limits upon yourself that are limiting you. This is where my heart is. I love both of them, and I'm going to go for it.

In order to help others that might be at end of life, I needed to branch out on my own because there's not one company or one place that does that. And I wanted to bring my own flair and touch to that. I wanted to bring my own, what I find to be the core values of what I want my position in somebody's end-of-life care to be not dictated by someone else's values and core and mission. Not that they're wrong. They're just at this point, I have established my own. And so I'm ready to share that with others, and I have the confidence to share that with others. And that takes a little time. Some people might be ready in five years. For me, this is the right time in my heart and gut and soul.

And then also for life coaching, same thing. I mean, I've been through enough now in my own life. A lot of personal and work experiences that I felt I got. Like I can really do this on my own.

[Thinking back on all that you've overcome with your experience of burnout, what advice would you give to others finding themselves in a similar boat?]

If you literally make a little tiny list, whether it's one thing like I started with that led to three or three, I always say five if you can, but that's huge. But I'm saying baby steps. "Today I will have grace with myself." "Today I will forgive myself for literally needing two naps." Fine. "Today I will call a mental health specialist that might be in my network." Whatever steps that might take you this much closer to whatever your goal might be. That's one step closer. That makes you feel like you're empowered. You took action. Even if it was this big, that makes you feel like you can take the next step, the next day. That gets you a little closer.

And in the end, it does make a difference. It goes a long way towards getting out of that burnout. The more you raise your self-esteem, your self-confidence, and realize that you have more control over your journey than you ever thought you did.

You could do anything within nursing. It's one of the best places to find fulfillment. I think it's one of the best careers to choose. It does make you somewhat prone for sure to burnout, but it also gives you the best avenues to get out of burnout if you're able to recognize it. But it also gives you, I think, and I really believe this, the biggest areas to literally explore the entire world. The world is your oyster.

You can every year of your life decide, today I want to try pediatrics, try for a year, and then try school nursing. Maybe you want to write. Maybe you want to be an author. Maybe you want to be a speaker. Where that might be looked down upon in some careers when you think about it, right?" Oh, she was only at this company for a year and a half or two years." It really isn't in nursing because I wanted to switch fields. I wanted to see, and that's the truth. I'm a very curious person. I want to learn every single day of my life.

Overall nursing brings such an amazing range of opportunities, whether it's scheduling, money, fulfillment, experience. It's a range and joy, which I think is the most important.

[Melissa, you are radiating joy, and I bet your best friend is watching over you with a big smile on her face, too. What do you think she would say to you if she were here?]

"I'm so proud of you Mel. You did it."

100%. I've been thinking about that a lot lately because it's taken a lot of, not just work and sacrifice, but a lot of belief that it's going to work out no matter what.

When she was dying, she would share with me, "I'm really going to miss you." That's a gift from someone that's dying. A lot of people don't talk about that and I would say to her, "I can't even tell you. My heart will be a big void." We were able to tell each other those things, which are normally taboo. Like you don't talk about that. You don't ask the person that's dying, "How do you feel about the fact that you're dying?" It just doesn't happen. That's what I hope to change.

Because of the experience that I had with her, the fact that she gave me that gift and that ability is something that I will never be able to obviously to pay back, but I will be able to pay back with future experiences that I have and hopefully make that transition for other people better.

She planted the seed of courage and of encouragement and of love. And I always think of her every day of my life, and I'm grateful for the experience that I had and for the love that she gave me and for the belief that she had in me when I didn't believe in myself particularly.

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