

**Legacy & Loss by Meghan McCain and Lucy Kalanithi, MD
End Well Symposium, December 5, 2019**

Start of Transcript

Meghan McCain: Hi, good morning, everybody. I'm so happy to be here with all of you and with you, Lucy. You know, we've been talking a ton backstage I feel like I know you.

Lucy Kalanithi: It's so nice to be here with you. I sort of can't stop crying so apologies. I never cry. I mean, it's good to cry but Meghan McCain makes me cry.

Meghan McCain: I cry all the time, don't worry. It's a cry safe zone if anyone wants to cry.

Lucy Kalanithi: And we just had a conversation backstage about how both of us take booze to cemetery frequently.

Meghan McCain: We do. Yes.

Lucy Kalanithi: I pour out scotch whiskey and you pour out?

Meghan McCain: I pour out-- So, my dad loved Absolut Elixir Vodka, which is actually hard to find. And toward the end of his life, he used to drink Belvedere and then he got into Absolut. So, when I go to his grave, I always bring a cactus and Absolut Vodka. Do what you gotta do and...

Lucy Kalanithi: What's with the cactus?

Meghan McCain: I'm from Arizona and cactus reminds me of home and him and they can survive anywhere. [01:00] And I have a very special connection to cactus, which may sound weird, but whatever. But I pour it out, I do. I like to drink some and then I pour it out. So, we're talking about how both of us are comfortable at cemeteries. So, we went right there backstage.

Lucy Kalanithi: Yeah. So, thank you so much for being here in San Francisco. And I know everybody in this room has memories of your dad and the way he impacted us and I'm a physician. So, I remember in 2017, he went up there and he did his thumbs down vote that protected parts of the Affordable Care Act. And that was two weeks after having brain surgery. I think he had gone back to-- [crosstalk]

Meghan McCain: Right after he had his tumor removed, yeah.

Lucy Kalanithi: Yeah. And then this morning, a friend texted me and said, "Have fun meeting Meghan McCain. I hope it goes well." And I was looking for a GIF of you to send back and as I was--

Meghan McCain: There's some bad ones so don't.

Lucy Kalanithi: But then I found one of your dads, maybe on a late-night show like dancing super goofy and...

Meghan McCain: ...that one, Fox? [02:00]

Lucy Kalanithi: Yes, yes. And it's so cute. And as I was thinking about those things, it just made me think about the enormity of your loss and the layers of this loss of this person who's this great moral leader, and also a funny luminous person. And so, maybe starting with that because we all know your father as a leader, will you tell us about him as a father and to you as a kid, to you as an adult? What was he like?

Meghan McCain: Sure. I mean, first, I just wanna say, I'm really happy to be here, like genuinely. When my dad was diagnosed, I was obviously very angry. And one of the things I promised myself is that I was

going to talk about death and cancer and grieving as much as possible, and as much as my platform afforded. So, I'm really genuinely happy to be here with all of you. And all the work everyone does in here is so brave and so selfless. And I think really, some of the most incredible work other than like our first responders and people in the military, the most selfless people I've ever met in my entire life are people that work [03:00] in palliative care and end of life and I don't know how you do it because I could never, I just couldn't. I think it takes a very special spirit to do it. And I think people know who my dad is, but people also know who your husband is now and I think it doesn't matter if people-- if you have a person who everyone knows the name of, or if it's just you know, your loved one who maybe wasn't extremely well known, the pain is no different.

For me, my dad was, we had a-- Now I have come to find a strange relationship in the sense that we were extremely close, even since I was very little. My mom calls me John McCain in a dress because we are, like, I know. Even down to like our mannerisms and the way I hold a microphone is like the way he does it. And we like the same food. When I was very little, he used to take me to all his interviews when he was, he was a congressman when I was born, and then [04:00] he would always take me on his campaigns and to every interview and I was always surrounded by journalists. And when I later ended up going into political media, he was surprised. And I said, "What did you expect me to do? It's the only thing I ever knew." And as I got older, I worked on both of his campaigns. And then I was very integrally involved in his career in the sense that we would talk every morning about the news, about his votes, about everything about who I was dating, but specifically like the news cycle--

Lucy Kalanithi: You talked to him every morning as an adult?

Meghan McCain: Every morning as an adult, which I have to find is strange, people think that's strange.

Lucy Kalanithi: Yeah.

Meghan McCain: And I just-- we were best friends. I worshiped him. And not a weird way but just I think any daughter who's close to their father can understand that love and it's very specific, and I-- Every source of advice, I called him the sun in the center of my universe. My grandmother, Roberta is 107 years old right now and still [05:00] going strong. I know. So, it never even occurred to me my dad could die. It never occurred to me, never crossed my mind he could get sick. He was tortured in prison for five and a half years and never complained about it, it never crossed my mind my dad could die. How arrogant am I? I mean, I know that's a very level of, sort of I guess selfishness, if you will. I never thought about mortality. I never thought about dying. I never thought about cancer. I was living a very semi-charmed life in that sense, that you think of pain and loss in sort of the periphery, but I had never experienced what I experienced.

And when he was diagnosed on July 19th, not that I'm counting, the world sort of already knew something was wrong because and you only know this if you're like a John McCain autobiography person. But he had been speaking in a hearing, and he had screwed up his words and you can Google it, it's on the internet. He was talking about [06:00] think something having to do with General Petraeus. And he was like...like he couldn't say it correctly. Like he couldn't say his words. They weren't coming out and it started trending on Twitter, "What's wrong with John McCain?" And I specifically remember Joy Reid, the MSNBC person tweeting, "Is John McCain okay, hashtag old?" Which I will always remember that because I think it's cruel. And then I called my mom and I said, I don't know what's going on he's got to go to the doctor because something's happening. And he hated going to the doctor, hated going to the doctor, hated it, the process he hated it.

And then we took him to, I forced him, and my mom forced him and my family forced him. And he went home to Phoenix and he went to Mayo Clinic, he got a scan. And then he took our car and he was driving up, we have a ranch in Sedona. And he was on his way driving and the doctor called him and said, turn around immediately right now, wherever you're going, you have to come right this right this moment. And I was in New York at the time just assuming [07:00] that whatever he had the flu or--

Lucy Kalanithi: He's gonna get his checkup.

Meghan McCain: Yeah. And he went home, and he had to get, he was diagnosed. He called me and he said he had a melanoma that needed to be removed, which is a lie. And I said, he had had melanoma before, he had had, just skin cancer, obviously. And I didn't understand and then my mom texted me, he has something called glioblastoma. And I googled it and it said mortality rates, I think, to up to 12 medians, 12 months. I started screaming. Luckily, my best friend from high schools' husband is a cancer researcher. And I called her screaming like an animal like a primal, like in my apartment, like my doorman called me and asked me what's going on afterward. And I called him, and he said, "You got to get home now." And he said, "Just get, whatever you have to do."

Lucy Kalanithi: Your friend said that?

Meghan McCain: My friend and my family's very waspy we like don't talk about our [08:00] emotions that much. You know, we're very like political whatever. So-- I know. So, he-- it's true. And so, I started screaming and then I called my mom and I said, and I'm gonna put this PG for you guys because we're in a sophisticated environment but I was swearing. And I said, "Why are you blanking lying to me, what is going on?" And I couldn't get a flight till the next morning. My boyfriend now my husband came with me, came from DC as in from DC came with me. One of my dearest friends, Abby Huntsman, who works on The View with me, came over to my house and she was super pregnant, and her sister came over, and I got wasted, super drunk, start drinking myself and had like 10,000 margaritas, threw up. She was holding my hair back. I don't remember [09:00] much else, I passed out at some point. Got on a plane the next day, went home, went to Mayo Clinic with my now husband, and we went into the see the doctor and his surgeon who is an absolute artist, incredible I mean, I forever I'm grateful for the work he did. We went in and they said he had something called glioblastoma and they showed us a graph of the mortality rate and what it means and I just, I reacted like a child. I mean, I was just screaming and yelling and screaming at him and screaming at the doctors and it was just as anyone who knows it was such a shock. And I ended up getting engaged at Mayo Clinic for whatever it's worth.

Lucy Kalanithi: When? When? Like that that day?

Meghan McCain: That day.

Lucy Kalanithi: What?

Meghan McCain: Yes. Because I started screaming my dad's never gonna blanking see me get married. And he's never going to see me have kids and my now husband said "Yes, he will." Which is not how you picture getting engaged, but all right.

Lucy Kalanithi: That's so romantic.

Meghan McCain: That's how I got engaged. I know. It is [10:00] but it's like and then I was like-- [crosstalk]

Lucy Kalanithi: And you moved up your wedding too?

Meghan McCain: I did move up my wedding. So, the process started that he got his tumor removed. And then he flew to DC to do the infamous thumbs down healthcare vote. And he was not supposed to get on the plane because they said he had, and I don't remember the exact-- I don't remember the statistic. But it was a very high likelihood that his brain could basically explode or hemorrhage, because he had just had brain surgery. And he was like, it's the biggest fight we ever got. And we never really thought that much--

Lucy Kalanithi: You said don't know.

Meghan McCain: I said, "You're crazy. This is suicide." And he said, "It's my life and it's my choice." And then that was it. And we all got on a plane and I actually have a picture on my phone of all of us on the plane and it was him and his longtime speechwriter and longtime chief of staff and me and my husband

and my mom, and it was horrible. The whole thing was horrible. I was like sitting the whole time waiting to see if something was gonna happen. And he was flirting with the flight attendant the whole time, but okay. And [11:00] I was like, "He just had brain surgery. Can we not turn this into something scary?" And then we landed, and he went to the office and he made a really beautiful speech after he did the-- I don't remember, it's all very blurry. I don't remember if he did a speech or the thumbs down vote. I think you did the vote first. And you're so raw and so numb and I always say it was just like a bomb went off in my life and I was in survival mode. And then you cut to what's next? What's the next treatment, which is I think as anyone with glioblastoma knows its radiation and with my dad's case, he ended up doing the proton beam radiation with the scary face mask. And it went from there and he continued working for a little while. He continued working for gosh, I think until November. Right after my wedding and right after Thanksgiving, he got very sick, and he hurt both of his legs, his ankles. [12:00] He broke it or he sprained it, but he did one and then he did another and then we went home and he was supposed to get just care and rehab, and then he ended up not being able to go back. So, that's making a very short question a very long answer.

Lucy Kalanithi: No, it's great. I mean, I think you're really helping people like the fact that you said like, You screamed, and you threw up and like, even the scary face mask, the details are so poignant, like the details, I think are what helped people, you know, and feel less alone when you're sharing them.

Meghan McCain: I found myself you know, googling everything, and trying to find support groups, and I wanted to know what it was going to look like. I wanted to know what dying of brain cancer looked like. And I found and I don't remember the name of the photographs that I found, but it was a woman who had documented her husband who had glioblastoma and the stages of it up until him dying and the pictures of him dying, and the pictures of them are moving his body, [crosstalk] [13:00] and-- It scared me, but then it helped me. But I found myself so-- I felt like it was a language I needed to learn. It felt so overwhelming. It was overwhelming for my entire family, obviously. I have six brothers and sisters and I just wanted to be more open because it's such a taboo subject that makes people so uncomfortable. And I don't understand because it's a process of life. And I think no matter what your faith is, it's something we're all going to go through, and we're all going to experience. And I think, had I been more open about it, it wouldn't have been so traumatic for me the entire experience as it is for anyone who has gone through it.

Lucy Kalanithi: I wanted to say thank you for something that I'm sure many people in this room noticed. I remember where I was in my house is in my living room, when I read that your dad had chosen to do hospice care. And I think there's a word you said, your [14:00] family put out this statement and said that that was what was happening. And then you said "With his usual strength of will" was the way you described that decision. And I think for this storied war hero to announce that he's having hospice care, like totally up ends the battle metaphor that pervades the narrative of cancer, right? It's like John McCain is doing hospice. And I think that probably gave a lot of people a sense of how brave a decision that is to make. And I don't know if you have anything to say about that, but I was so like, grateful that maybe you feel like you have to announce it when your family is so public, I don't even know. But can you talk a little bit about what that meant for you guys, or what response you got about announcing that?

Meghan McCain: He was very adamant that everything be open. He was not ashamed that he had glioblastoma. He was not. I mean, he-- I mean, to go back to the timeline, a little bit after he was diagnosed, maybe like three weeks later, he was like, "Let's do a documentary." [15:00] And you can find a documentary about it on HBO if you're curious, called For Whom the Bell Tolls. And he had a documentary film crew filming himself in his last moments where he was, I think, fully himself. And I think when it comes to palliative care and hospice, I didn't even though there was a difference between palliative care and hospice before I went through what I went through. And I think even just having a blueprint for people to understand this is what the process is going to look like, is important. And I think when he ended up well, we all collectively made a decision as a family that he was going to go on hospice care. I didn't want to feel like there was shame involved, because I think that there is a lot of shame and we want to hide, and we want to act like everyone has to be strong all the time. But if you get brain cancer and it and you're treated and it is not effective, it's okay that this is where this is where you ultimately go and what ultimately happens. [16:00] I'm not saying it wasn't hard, and I wasn't screaming and all the things. But I don't want anyone to feel like they have to hide what they're going through. I think

that right now I always say I have this magic power from this experience that nothing freaks me out; blood, cancer, dying, what dying looks like, it doesn't make me uncomfortable talking about it doesn't make me uncomfortable. When he was very, very sick at the very, very end it didn't make me uncomfortable. And I've found that it's the thing that I am truly most proud of in myself in life of everything I've ever done. The thing I'm most proud of is that death no longer scares me and what it looks like and feels like and sounds like and smells like no longer and I am sure most people in here have the same gift which is incredible, but it is not that common. And I have come to find that.

Lucy Kalanithi: Do you think that's just because you loved your dad so much. So, it's like love was bigger than that fear, like what do you--

Meghan McCain: Yes. [17:00]

Lucy Kalanithi: Yeah?

Meghan McCain: Yes. And that this is what a body looks like when it has horrible cancer. That is what-- [crosstalk]

Lucy Kalanithi: But it's your dad's body.

Meghan McCain: Yeah. And I was, I quit my job when I was working at Fox News when he was diagnosed. And I thought it was going to just spend the entire time with him. And then about four months later, I got the job offer for the show I work on right now. And I didn't want to do it because I just wanted to be with him the entire time. And he said, "What are we going to do? Just sit around and look at each other? You have to live." I know.

Lucy Kalanithi: He's still your dad.

Meghan McCain: Yeah. And he was like, "That's ridiculous. You still have to live and work." I know. Ever the sensitive so--

Lucy Kalanithi: He's preparing you, he's like caring about you into a future where he won't even be but he's like leading you there.

Meghan McCain: I can't decide if he was, if it was 100% right or he was psychotic because I have gone through so many things so publicly on the show and people on social media were like, "Well, she's clearly grieving." And I'm like, "Yeah, it's what someone grieving [18:00] looks like on TV. Okay." And when your dad's dying of cancer and Joe Biden comes on and his son had died of the same cancer, and you have a meltdown that goes viral, it's because you're raw. And I think the thing that I have found is that people who are going through the process of having a loved one that is dying, and you know, it's a very specific process, because you're aware of what's happening. For me, it was like having my skin ripped off. And I was so much more emotional, and every emotion was exaggerated. If I was happy, it's the happiest I've ever been. If I was sad, it was apoplectic doom and gloom. And I think it's okay to see people in raw elements of their life. And my problem with daytime TV and this is no knock at my competition. But we live in intense times, and it's okay to talk about things that are hard and dark and not everything's going to be perfect all the time. And I'm still actively grieving. I think anybody that knows anything about me knows that and I don't want to hide it [19:00] or act like there's anything wrong with it because this is life and bad things and crazy things happen. And I'm incredibly blessed on so many different levels and I don't think I'm a victim and I don't feel sorry for myself. But I do accept the fact that grief comes with its own set of challenges.

Lucy Kalanithi: Your posts on social media are so poetic, on Twitter, Instagram, it's literally like you're writing poetry about grief. And I just want to say, so you mark the days you write like it's been 84 days, so at 84 days after your dad died, you wrote, "I don't know how you go from talking to someone seven times a day to never." And on the first anniversary of losing your dad, you said "I still can't believe my heart didn't stop when yours did." And you often write, "Stay with me." And I love that you write those in the

second person like to your dad. And then you're still counting the days, right. So, can you tell us what it means to you to be counting the days still [20:00] and then how grief has changed, if at all?

Meghan McCain: Well, it's three months and 16 days today, and I think of it as like an addict in AA like counting the days of being sober and counting the days since he died because when he died, my waspy family was all very stoic, and beautiful and I was not. I started screaming and-- [crosstalk]

Lucy Kalanithi: Although your eulogy was like--

Meghan McCain: Thank you. And by the way, people want to talk to me about eulogies all the time and I love it. Anytime you want to talk about a eulogy you have to give, I am more than happy to talk about the experience of it.

Lucy Kalanithi: Just on Twitter.

Meghan McCain: Yeah, you can. I mean, and it's also a beautiful element of my life. I don't-- [crosstalk]

Lucy Kalanithi: Sorry, I don't mean to cut you off.

Meghan McCain: Oh, not at all.

Lucy Kalanithi: You were also talking about how you weren't stoic.

Meghan McCain: I was not. When my dad died, I was not stoic. I was screaming, just like it was not-- I did not-- As much as you think when the time comes, I thought I know it's coming, I'm ready. And then it was like watching a car [21:00] accident or fire or something. So, I have been extremely emotional throughout the entire process. I'm an emotional person in general. Excuse me. I don't remember the initial question. I'm sorry, what's that?

Lucy Kalanithi: Oh, counting the days and then like how grief has moved for you or not.

Meghan McCain: Counting the days is just I didn't-- I actually thought and I hope this doesn't sound melodramatic. I actually thought I would die when he did because we were so connected. And so my life revolved around him in every way. And again, people seem to think it's weird, but I also think that some people are just close to their parents, some people just have a special connection with their loved one, whatever daughter, mother or whatever. And I felt like when his heart stopped beating mind was going to stop too. And there were moments when he was very, very sick that I would, and I hope I don't cry. But I would [22:00] pray as much as possible to give me cancer instead, to kill me instead. Because I thought the world needed him so much more on so many different levels. And--

Lucy Kalanithi: You hear parents say that about kids a lot when a kid gets sick. So, it's lovely that you're...

Meghan McCain: And he would have hated, I mean, he would have hated that I never shared that with him. But I didn't want to live without him. I didn't want to keep doing this without him. And I'd still don't completely understand it. I have surrendered to a lot of things much more. I was very angry when he was diagnosed, I was very angry when he died, and now I have just sort of surrendered a lot more than I thought I would. But I was, I didn't understand why God didn't give it to me. For whatever it's worth and then counting days, it just means I've gotten through another day and it is true what they say at least in my experience about time helping that I'm a year plus out obviously, and it does get a little easier, but the waves of grief when they do hit me at least, [23:00] it's really intense and really strong. Bear with me on this because I know this isn't going to make a lot of sense, but just bear with me. When President Trump didn't support the Kurds, I woke up the morning and read it on the news feed in my phone. And I couldn't stop crying to the point that it was I had to call my husband like I was like on the floor, hysterically crying.

And there was something about like, and if you follow politics, my father's belief in America's role in the world, and I knew he would just be disgusted and horrified, and I could not get myself together. And it's why the Kurds are a specific trigger for me. I can't tell you why. But it was and I could not stop crying. And that's the trick about grief is that every once in a while, something will happen. I was in CBS two months ago, and the Beach Boys came on, which is his favorite music ever. And I'm like standing in line with my groceries or whatever, my toiletries hysterically [24:00] crying and the guy was like, "Are you all right?" I was like "I'm fine. This is hard to explain." God only knows what I'll be without you is making me cry. I'm sorry. But it just you're not in control of your emotions and the way you once were and I do all the things by the way, I'm in therapy. I'm in acupuncture, I do. Everything everyone tells me to do, I do all of it. Everything, any panacea you can give me that's going to work please, by all means. I believe in all of it and I'm constantly trying to grapple with it and move forward but doesn't make it less difficult.

Lucy Kalanithi: Can you tell us I think maybe as a last question, have you come to think of life any differently? It sounds like yes, but since going through this experience with your dad and losing your dad.

Meghan McCain: Oh, yeah. I mean, I think you can't not feel-- I'm completely I always say that. I'm like a snake who shed its skin. Like I'm still the same snake but I'm a [25:00] totally different-- Yeah, I mean, still the nucleus of who I am is still there. But I don't look at life the same way. When I am happy, which I for whatever reason I am today. I'm very happy today probably because I'm around all of you, thank you. I am so grateful that I'm happy. I feel pain and empathy from other people in a different way than I did before. And I am just so f**king grateful to be here today and alive and healthy. And I know that sounds, I really am, and I think that's for me the silver lining of the gift of my dad's cancer is that even when like you know something stupid happens every-- we all get irritated. We all have bad days, but the small things that happen really don't impact me in the same way they used to. And I'm so grateful for my health and acutely aware of it in a way that I never ever would be before. And I always try and stay as present as possible because I know this end, we all know [26:00] this is going to come to an end. And while I'm here, I want to do as much as possible and feel as much as possible, and speak as much as possible, for as much as anyone will hear me and have me.

And I like, probably wouldn't have gotten married if my dad weren't dying. I didn't really believe in it. Now I'm like a total like, get married is wonderful if you find the right person. I know before I was like, marriage isn't for me, whatever. I want to have kids. I didn't want to have kids till my dad died. I didn't believe in that either. And now I believe in the cycle of life in a totally different way. And I just think that there's so much beauty everywhere and there's so much kindness and compassion. And also, this unique gift all of us have in here to talk about death and to be with people if you are hospice or palliative care work or anything in the industry, that's a gift and it's incredible all of you in here, do this. And for me again, I feel like it's my special power. I really do. I feel like it's this gift I have been given through this process to be able to be so open and [27:00] raw. And again, people want to talk to me about eulogies, it just happened on the Amtrak train when I was coming home from DC to New York after Thanksgiving, when - talked about a eulogy they have to give. And the fact that people want to talk to me about eulogies is such a privilege on so many different levels. And if I'm known for a eulogy, great, then that's all I-- then I've accomplished something, so I don't know. I just feel less alone. And I hope everyone in here feels less alone because we're not. And I think for a while I felt really, really alone, if that makes sense.

Lucy Kalanithi: Yeah.