

Ep #234: From Why Me to Why Not Me?: A Widows Unfiltered Interview with Paula Fleming



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Krista St-Germain

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Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode 234, Widows Unfiltered: An Interview with Paula Fleming.

Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, the only podcast that offers a proven process to help you work through your grief, to grow, evolve, and create a future you can truly look forward to. Here's your host, Master Certified life coach, grief expert, widow, and mom, Krista St-Germain.

Hey there, welcome to another episode of the podcast. I just got back from visiting one of my team members and friends, Jamie. You've probably listened to her episode of the podcast called *Surviving The First Year with Jamie Galyon*. And I went to Denver where she lives last week for a Paint concert. It was amazing. And while I was there I actually got to spend time with the person you're about to hear from, Paula. We had lunch and a few of my former clients were there.

Paula is still in the master's program, but also I got to hang out with Carol and Laura and Jamie, of course. And it was really so fun to spend some time with her in person. And then the next day from Jamie's house, record the podcast episode that you're about to listen to. It's long overdue. I really don't know why Paula and I haven't recorded a podcast before because I've known her for several years now. She's been in *Mom Goes On* and *Mom Goes On Master's* since mid-2020. But I'm really excited to bring you her story.

What I love about Paula, so many things, but what I think you'll love about Paula too is she's just super authentic and honest. She never tries to pretend to be anybody other than who she is. She's always so willing to get coached and be vulnerable. And I just think you'll resonate to so much of what she says. So I'll stop talking and let you listen to this episode *Widows Unfiltered: An Interview with Paula Fleming*. Enjoy.

Krista: Hi, Paula, welcome to the podcast. I'm so glad you're here.

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Paula: Thank you for having me. I'm excited.

Krista: It feels like forever. I'm not quite sure why we didn't do this a long time ago because I've known you for so long and you've been in *Mom Goes On* for so long. But I'm glad we're finally doing it. So I will let you just start, just tell us a little bit about yourself, who you are, where you live, give us the basics, who is Paula.

Paula: I am 47 years old. I have two kids, they're 13 and 15. I grew up here in Denver where I currently live. And I went to school up in Boulder, and my husband and I actually grew up together and actually not in Denver, but in Aurora, a little suburb, not so little but a big suburb of Denver and went to school in Boulder. And my husband and I met shortly after. Well, we knew each other from high school but we re-met up right after college and we got married about four years after dating. We were pretty young.

I like to say we kind of grew up together because since we actually met in middle school the first time. And then we both pursued our education. Then we traveled a bit together. We lived in some other places. We lived in Connecticut. We actually got to live in Amsterdam for a little while. And then we settled back here in Denver to start our lives. And our families were here and our friends and so it was a great place to have our kids and get kind of to the next phase of life.

So my career was in finance and my husband's was closely related. He was more on the sales and marketing side, but we both were very career driven. And yeah, so that was where we were before the passing.

Krista: I didn't realize we were the same age until just now. I don't know why.

Paula: You're a year older.

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Krista: Right. Even though I have no idea typically how old I am, apparently that's not something I can remember, yeah. And oddly, if you're watching on YouTube, for the listeners who are watching, they will notice I'm not in my normal office, which is because I'm in Denver. It's such a bummer that we're not in the same room, but Paula and I actually got to see each other a couple of days ago and had lunch, so that was nice.

Okay, so then tell us then about your husband as much or as little as you want to share, how did you become a widow? How did you get here to this whole widowed experience?

Paula: Yeah. So, Aaron, my husband was very fit and healthy. We were both very fit and healthy together. He was a runner. He basically did all the things, we did all the things. And so he had some knee surgery in January of 2020. And then so he was kind of laid up. And looking back now even over the course of the previous year, I guess there were signs that he was struggling with some things. His asthma had come back which he had suffered from as a kid and kind of grew out of in high school.

And then so he was laid up, wasn't doing much and we were living our best lives, traveling and doing all these things. But then right there at the end, the pandemic hits. And so it was basically, we were holed up in our house like so many others. He used to travel a lot for work. So he was home and he had this knee surgery. And so we were at the house and we were just having a great time as a family in the house. He was home, we were having family game nights. We were having fancy dinner parties, just us and all kinds of things.

And we were working out, him and I together in the basement a lot. And one afternoon he said, "I think I'm going to go work out." And I was like, "Oh, I'll come join you." And he's like, "I think I'd like to work out by myself today." And it kind of struck me and I was like, "Okay." And then I thought about it, and I had been doing this trampoline workout that I think was sort

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of annoying to him. And so I was like, "I must be annoying him down there." So I said, "Well, I'll come join in a little bit then," And so I went upstairs and did a few things, came downstairs about 20 minutes later.

I saw he had one of his physical therapy video things on the TV. And I was like, "Oh, you really didn't want me to work out with you." Because I saw he was using the TV and all these things. And I was talking to him and I just didn't hear a response. And I looked down and I knew immediately something was wrong. And I mean, after that things are sort of a blur but this was in April of 2020. So we were definitely in the depths of the pandemic and there was a lot of chaos that ensued.

And the paramedics got here, my neighbor gave CPR and I know at some point I was upstairs, I was downstairs. It's all sort of a blur, but I just remember coming down the steps and having the paramedics come up from the basement and my neighbor was there and he's like, "He's okay?" And then his face fell and they were like, "There's nothing we can do." And I just remember collapsing and it was awful. And then it's just we didn't know what happened. We had no idea, here was this perfectly fit and healthy man, no, COVID. It wasn't a COVID related thing.

We didn't know at first but we came to find out and it took actually a couple of months to find out that he had an underlying disease called sarcoidosis, which causes granulomas to grow on your internal organs. And he was so healthy that it sort of almost masked maybe symptoms that he might have had. But looking back, the asthma, some things that had popped up were definitely signs of what was maybe happening. But eventually the granulomas if untreated go to your heart and cause arrhythmia.

And so he had a cardiac arrhythmia and it was just, it's a very rare disease. And not a lot of it was understood about it. And so yeah, it was quite shocking. And so, yeah, I was just sort of left, we were left with a lot of questions and just thinking. And obviously I've relived that moment so

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many times, and then surrounded in the context of the pandemic it was quite surreal for sure.

Krista: What had your experience with bereavement, grief been prior to his death?

Paula: Very minimal. I mean I had been very fortunate. I lost my grandmother when she was almost 90 but not really anything as serious like that. And I didn't know anything about grief, at the end I came to find out.

Krista: Yeah. And as we come to find out what we thought we knew maybe isn't actually very helpful.

Paula: Right. I was shocked by grief, yeah.

Krista: Yeah. What was that shock like for you?

Paula: Well, fortunately, I mean, I did get into therapy, which I had never done before. And so I had a therapist sort of helping me understand things. But I think the things that surprised me the most were the fatigue, the other fatigue. The inability to remember, the widow fog, which I didn't even know, was a thing, just completely losing lapses of time, not even knowing. Like I said, even recounting that day, I can't even tell you the order of events of what happened.

I know that our minds do this to protect us but my mind just couldn't take it all in and even the months following, it was just complete, literally your world is turned upside down and you feel like there's nothing grounding you.

Krista: Yeah. Sounds like you had a therapist though that was maybe helpful in normalizing some of those things.

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Paula: Yeah. It's funny because I would have these good days and I would tell her, "I'm having a great day." I'm on the upswing in my mind. "She's like, "Just enjoy this good day because tomorrow might not be so good." And it's not going to be. She basically prepared me for the roller-coaster which was really helpful because I'm an Enneagram 7, which if people are familiar, that's the enthusiast. So I always [crosstalk] in my life to just reframe things for the positive. We're on the upswing now. I think I'd heard described as you only experience half of the emotions, the good emotions.

And so in this moment suddenly I couldn't refrain, I couldn't. So I was grasping. And so that was helpful for sure to have someone tell me, "Yeah, you're not, this is not linear."

Krista: Yeah. And we don't have to measure ourselves based on what we would call a good day. It doesn't mean anything if today feels good and tomorrow feels terrible. It doesn't mean we've fallen backwards or we're doing something wrong or we're not on the right path. It doesn't mean anything, but if we don't know that, we do tend to make it mean something that it doesn't have to mean.

Paula: Yeah, I was like, "I'm going to get stuck." And I went to some of the Facebook groups which I don't mean to generalize all of them. But they were discouraging to me. Personally I just was like, "Oh my goodness, some of these people are five years out, ten years out, oh, my gosh, I'm going to get stuck." And I was so worried that I was going to fall. I used to call it the downward spiral. I was just going to fall under the downward spiral, yeah.

Krista: And plus you're dealing with the pandemic. You've got two young children.

Paula: Yeah, it was so crazy. I didn't know anyone who had lost a partner and no one in my social circle had had anything like this happen. I had one

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friend that had lost a child. She was really helpful to me but of course, during the pandemic I couldn't really connect with people. So it was crazy. I felt like I was in a dream, a nightmare.

Krista: Yeah. How long did your widow fog last?

Paula: It's funny, it lasted a long time, even, I'm sure we'll get to this, but my kids and I took a long trip. I'm on a finance committee for a non-profit here and I was doing meetings with them before we did our trip. And then I took a hiatus from doing that. And I came back and I was on these meetings again, and I was like, "That was like a real litmus test for me, being on those calls again." Because I remembered, I would be on those calls and the numbers weren't registering. And this was a year later.

So I think it took honestly, a year and a half to really, I mean obviously the really deep widow fog definitely subsided, but it wasn't gone for quite some time.

Krista: Yeah. I think it's so valuable for people to hear. It's different for everyone, of course, but it can last for a long time.

Paula: Yeah. It lasted longer than I would have expected and yeah, it was very telling for me when I was like, "I understand these numbers again." I did them when we left and now I do again.

Krista: Knowing what you know now, if you could go back and give yourself some advice in the early days of his loss, what would you tell yourself?

Paula: Just breathe, I mean, just breathe and just be where you're at. And I mean I think I was grasping, trying so hard and I just needed to surrender a little bit to it. I would, in a way, just surrender to it. And once I could surrender a little bit and just let, for me it was feeling the 100 felt feelings, all of that. That's when shockingly, I was so scared of those emotions, I was

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so scared of going down the downward spiral. But actually when I just surrendered to where I was at that's when I actually started to feel even just a little bit better.

Krista: But the fear of going down the spiral, emotionally speaking, is what kind of held you back from letting yourself have the experience of surrendering to those feelings?

Paula: Yeah, I was really scared I wasn't going to come back from it. I was really scared that my life was over, too. There was a part of me that wanted to be where Aaron was. I mean we had built this big life together, this wonderful life together. And I just could not imagine how I was going to possibly go on without him. And I had never, ever in my life been to that dark of a place because I always was a re-framer. I was always glass half full. And so it was just, it was so hard for me to just open myself up to, you're okay feeling this way. This is okay. It sucks. It's horrible.

And once I let myself do that and I surrendered to it and I saw I wasn't going to fall off a cliff, it was just really helpful for me.

Krista: Yeah. And it makes so much sense why we would worry about falling off a cliff or going down a spiral. If we haven't actually had the experience of feeling feelings and knowing that they're not going to take us somewhere we don't want to go, of course. So how did you end up in my orbit, podcast first, how did you get there? Tell me about that.

Paula: Yes. And early days, honestly, like I said I was grasping and I was a big podcast fan. Aaron and I were big podcast junkies, always listening to new podcasts. And I remember, of course, I wasn't sleeping. And I'm like, "There has to be a podcast on this, my grief and help. I just need to know, I need information, I don't know." And so I had listened to a couple of different ones. And then I landed, I got to yours, and those were okay but I

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got to yours. And you didn't have a lot of podcasts yet at the time. But it was your first few and I just was like, "Yes, this is it."

It spoke to me because I think that everything right then was just how do I live again? How do I not want to just go where Aaron is? How do I just feel that I'm still alive? And so I think your podcast in particular was, okay, here's someone who is all about this, creating the next chapter, living again. And so yeah, so I started listening to your podcast. And I heard about the program and we had a little chat. And so I actually joined in June of 2020, which was early but also in a time when I was isolated.

And so to me it was such, I know I wasn't and probably in my first few calls in coaching, I imagined. I don't know if you remember, but I was probably like a zombie a little bit. I would go back and relisten to those calls and I'm like, "What, did that happen? I don't remember that." But I needed to connect. I needed to meet those other women that were on the calls. It was just so good for me. And then, because I was so isolated and I was in such a dark place, I have on my calendar, was, okay, the biweekly call or the two times week calls and then my one therapy session a week.

I mean, those would just get me through, my grief bucket would fill up and I'm like, "It's Tuesday, we have our *Mom Goes On* call." I can release a little bit. And the grief bucket would fill up and then come down and it just it was really helpful for me to have those. It was the three things a week that I had.

Krista: It's such a relatable visual, your grief bucket filling up.

Paula: I thought about it a lot. I was like, "Okay, it's just your grief." And fear of going down the downward spiral, I'm like, "No, it's just your grief bucket filling up, you're going to empty it. It's going to get empty. You're going to get some release, it's going to happen."

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Krista: Yeah, I love that. Was it difficult for you to reach out and apply for the program or was it an easy thing to do? How was that for you?

Paula: It was, I mean, I remember from my, again widow fog, thinking it's pretty easy. I think I maybe sent an email or I'm not sure. However you were doing it back then. And then you and I had, you scheduled that free consultation call.

Krista: Back in the day where we made you get on the phone with us, yeah.

Paula: Yeah. And then you told me about the program. And I was so excited that there were workbooks because that was something tangible that really spoke to me at the time. Because I was like, "Let me just do a workbook and this is going to get better."

Krista: Yes. All we need to do, pages in a workbook, yeah. How was the experience compared to what you anticipated it might be like?

Paula: I mean I had never done therapy. I had never really done life coaching. I had seen a career coach at one point. But I guess I just, I didn't know what to expect then. I guess I was just whatever comes my way, it's got to be helpful. But then when we got into the modeling process and then dealing with the manuals that you have for yourself and other people. I mean these are just tools that I learned through *Mom Goes On*. Maybe they had to be repeated to me a few times as I went through it but I mean, in my daily toolbox now. This is a manual, also this is the manual you're having for that person.

I don't know if that will totally make sense to your listeners but that was really helpful. That's been really helpful.

Krista: Yeah, I think what I hear pretty consistently is that people anticipate that they will receive help and support related to grief. But they don't

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anticipate that the tools they're going to learn will continue impacting them in their daily lives, kind of outside of what they assume that the tool will be for and that usually seems to be surprising.

Paula: Well, for sure and that's why three and a half years later I'm still in the program. Because I still find it applicable to everything, I mean and grief doesn't end as we know. It just keeps going and there are grief related things but I think as time has gone on, I've gotten away from acute grief and it's become more about living.

Krista: Yeah. So you kind of mentioned it a little bit earlier, but I'd love to hear or my listeners to hear the details. Talk about the trip that you took your kids on, how you came to that, what that was about for you. That was kind of a big deal.

Paula: So, there was a little bit of, because losing Aaron, being in the middle of a pandemic, feeling like the rug had been completely pulled out from underneath me. I would say that the silver lining of all that is you just don't really, you just don't care anymore. You just are kind of, I could do anything. You just suddenly have this realization that life is short, the rules aren't what you thought the rules were. And there doesn't have to be any boundaries on this.

Clearly there's no boundaries on life because this thing happened that I thought could never happen. And then it's just, oh my gosh, there's no boundaries. What are we going to do? And like I said, there was a part of me that was really aching to feel alive again, just wanting to know that me and my kids' life was going to continue, that we weren't going to just evaporate. And so I think a lot of things came with that. And yeah, so I tell the kids, "We can do anything we want now. We could go live in Hawaii." We could just really do anything.

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And so I'd always loved to travel. Aaron loved to travel. We had the opportunity to live abroad before we had kids and we'd always said, "Oh, my gosh, wouldn't it be cool to have our kids have this international experience maybe when they're at middle school or high school." So that was in my brain. And then I have a really dear friend who lives in Spain and her and her family were like, "Come here for a year and just spend a year here." And so that was initially sort of the thought.

And then with COVID and visas and all this kind of stuff it sort of morphed into let's travel for a year. And so that's what we did. So I rented out my house here in Denver. And just I planned out the first three to four months sort of because I was nervous and I wanted to have a plan. But as the year went on, it became a little bit more willy nilly and kind of deciding where we wanted to go next and got much more brave as time went on and I homeschooled my kids.

And so once I got into this, I found out that it's something that's called Worldschooled. It's actually a community of people out there doing Worldschooled. And there's Facebook groups. And so I joined these Facebook groups and I started to learn about these meet-ups, where families would meet up in other countries. And so that dictated a little bit of where we would go. We would join these Worldschooled meet-ups. And so we started our trip in August of 2021.

And so the pandemic was still, I mean COVID things were easing, but then they would come back and go away and come back. So we had a little bit of juggling as we traveled, but honestly it was a great time to travel in that there wasn't many people out there and we were being cautious and all the things. But yeah, so we got out there, we traveled through, we road tripped through the UK for about five weeks where I had to learn to drive on the other side of the road.

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And then we ended up spending three months and staying with our friend and her family and then we went to Egypt. And then in the meantime we had planned to come back to Denver. My dad passed away, which he had been sick for a while. It was a very different experience than the sudden loss of Aaron. It was an anticipatory loss of him, because he had esophageal cancer. And so we'd planned on coming back for Christmas to see him. And sadly he passed away right as we started our trip.

And so we did come back through, which was great and just to spend Christmas with the family, sort of. We packed our bags and we headed to South America. So the rest of the trip, the rest of the year. It basically turned out to be a little over 11 months. But we went through, we were in Ecuador and Peru and Chile and Nicaragua and Panama. So we kind of made our way all the way south to Patagonia and then made our way all the way back up through Central America, so yeah, it was awesome. It was awesome. It obviously had its challenges. I don't want to totally say it was perfect but yeah.

Krista: I just think it's so interesting how your brain went to all the options are available to us. And then also, sometimes you see people's brains go to the complete opposite, which is now I can't have anything I want, nothing is available to me. And so it's just fascinating how different people respond in different ways and how you went to, okay, no, all the rules are apparently not applying anymore. What do we want to do now? And then opened doors for yourself with that.

Paula: Yeah, I think I was fearful of going the other direction. I did not want to go the other direction because that's me. I mean there were days I wanted to go the other direction, I felt like I was going there, my life is over. And then I just thought, I mean, there's so many reasons that I didn't want to go there but one of them was it would not have been what Aaron wanted for us. He would have wanted us to do exactly what we did, he was just, he

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had a zest for life. And I used to be a really kind of nervous mom. I'd never wanted my kids to get too close to the edge.

And he was super brave. And we went on a via ferrata just a few months, well, August so, within a year before he passed. And the whole time, I don't know if anyone knows what a via ferrata is.

Krista: I don't know what it is.

Paula: A climbing thing. It's basically climbing, it's this iron road in Italian but there are ladders and you're hooked in, but you're basically climbing mountains. And I had a terrible fear of heights. He never had a fear of heights or anything. But I did it with him because he really wanted to do it and I just gritted my teeth and I went and got through it. And he joked, there were no pictures of him because I couldn't let go to take a picture and all the pictures are of me. But it was weird, after he passed, I feel like he gave me his braveness in a way, it kind of came to me.

I know that sounds kind of woo woo, but I kind of lost my fear of a lot of things suddenly. And I started climbing, I mean I started doing these things that I wouldn't have probably done before. So I just felt like it was him sort of pushing us, giving me that gift, what he might have wanted for us. I know he would be so proud. He was always so proud of me and the kids. He would brag about us and it would embarrass me. He was so proud. And I know that continuing on and doing that would have made him really proud as well.

So if I had gone the other direction, it would have been a total discredit to who he was and what he would have wanted for us.

Krista: And what an opportunity to help your children see you being resilient. And I can only imagine when you're traveling through foreign countries during the end of a pandemic. There's got to be a lot of other

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opportunities to practice being resilient and have things not go your way and then decide who you want to be when that happens. And I don't imagine how we could possibly recreate that in the school system, going to class day-to-day as you could in that experience.

Paula: It was, yeah, it was definitely, it brought us, the three of us so close together. And I think we were able to have moments where we could really remember Aaron and think, daddy would have thought this or he would have thought that. Or we used to joke that he wouldn't have necessarily loved, because we didn't travel in luxury. And because he traveled for work, he always was 5 star hotels and he had [crosstalk]. And so we joked that, "Daddy would not like this place that we're staying."

But yeah, I mean, it was definitely, it was good. And I think for me, also a big thing, for some reason when we'd left and we got out on the road, I felt like a huge weight had been lifted off of me. And I think a lot of it was because it was the pandemic and just the circumstances around it. I mean really well-intentioned friends and family but I couldn't say no to anything. And my calendar was just, people were trying to be involved and I appreciated all of it, but it got to be a little much

I was a little bit, I hate to use the word, but a little bit smothered by just my day-to-day. I was like, "Oh my gosh." And all the decision making and the things and feeling pressure to do things financially and all this other stuff. And then it was good to just step away and just go and do this because at the end of the day there was no rush for any other things. And to maybe move on to what I was going to do next in a career, this or that.

It was just nice to just step away for the 11 months and just breathe and just not have to think about, well, where are we going to live? What's my career going to look like? All that stuff. It was good to get away.

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Krista: Yeah, I remember, it was fun when I would see you had signed up for coaching. So I always see you in a different place or in a different time zone, it was kind of fun, yeah. What was it like coming back off of that trip back into your real world? Because I remember some conversations about that being kind of hard.

Paula: It was so hard. It continues to be hard, honestly. I mean, I think I have a little wanderlust, naturally, but I did feel like it was, the kids, my daughter was starting high school. And it was just, it was their time to settle in and regroup with their friends and all the things that come with being their ages. And so it was a little bit of, okay, what now, Paula? And it still is. I'm still sort of sorting through that a little bit. And that's what I mean, that's why I'm still in *Mom Goes On*. Because I still am working through a lot of these things but it's been good.

I mean, it really was wonderful to come back to our community. We have such a great community here, friends and family. And we've met great people out on the road, we met amazing people traveling. But it was a great experience to come back and just pick up where we left off with a lot of people. And then getting the kids into their routines. And so yeah, it's been a little tough, I'm not going to lie, but there's some good and bad about coming back.

Krista: Yeah. And I think sometimes when people think, I'd be curious to hear what you thought compared to what I'm about to say. But sometimes I think when people hear me talk about loving life again, they think what's in the way of loving life again, all have something to do with the loss and the relationship and the person. And sometimes things like what you mentioned, people pleasing, figuring out what is it that I want? How do I say no to people and prevent my calendar from being completely booked?

What is my identity? Who do I want to be? How do I want to be in the world? Yes, it's in our face because of the loss but it's maybe not as related

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to the loss as we thought it would be, which is why I think and many other *Mom goes On* members keep staying around, because they're still working through some of those things that maybe they just didn't anticipate.

Paula: Yeah. I mean I would say I had not done the work before. I think my life was, I was kind of floating in a cocoon. I mean I was very fortunate, things had just fallen sort of into place. And I hadn't done the work. And then after Aaron, it was, oh my gosh, everything fell apart. I fell apart and then I got to pick up the pieces and sort of put them back. And I'm still kind of putting them back. And not that that's an end all be all. I don't think I'll ever be this one certain person.

But it's just been a whole process in the last three and a half years of thinking about how do I want to show up, living with some intention, doing the work, thinking about it, feeling the feelings. It's day-to-day, I mean it's ongoing. Now I really believe I don't think I'll get to the end.

Krista: Because there isn't one. Yeah.

Paula: I'm like, "I'll reach Nirvana one day." But it's a process. And the more I discover about myself the more that I see some other things that I'd like to be curious about.

Krista: Yeah. I think it's so good to normalize that too for other people because I do think it's so cruel to measure yourself against a standard that's not even reality. It's not even the human experience. And so to hear that it is a constant thing, we're always growing and changing. What was your experience with self-doubt like? When you go back and you look at your self-confidence when you were married to Aaron and then the impact that grief had on that and figuring it out, what was that like for you? Because I think that's also important to talk about.

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Paula: Oh, man, yes, I think, and this is again, very real here, my confidence was shattered. I don't even know where my confidence, actually thinking about it, where did my confidence even stand before he died? Just because it just went, it just evaporated. I remember after he died, I think because of the way I was raised or grown up and the culture we live in, so much of my worth and validation was in having a partner and my entire identity. And then on top of that, my entire identity had been created through this 21 year partnership.

And so after he died I was like, "Oh my God, I'm just going to hook up, I'm going to find the next old man that wants to marry me." I mean these thoughts are going through my head. I'm like, "What do I have to possibly offer? Who am I? I can't be alone. I can't be by myself." I felt groundless and no self-esteem, I mean at all, complete doubt of how I was going to possibly continue as a solo person. Which is so weird because I've always been this independent, I had a successful career, none of it really makes sense but that is exactly how I felt.

Krista: Yeah. That's why I think it's so important to talk about it because it is so surprising to so many widows. We don't expect a confidence hit and then as you just said, it felt like it evaporated.

Paula: Yeah, it was just absolutely gone. And yeah, it took a while to get back. I still am working on who am I as an independent woman. That's part of this whole process.

Krista: How have you noticed, when you notice the way that you thought about your life after Aaron died compared to how you think about your life or maybe thought about yourself and how you think about yourself. What kind of shifts have you noticed from then to now?

Paula: I think I'm more thoughtful about it. I think, I mean, I loved my life with Aaron. And honestly, there's a part of me always, I just in a heartbeat, I

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would go back if I could. I know I can't because it was supposed to happen as I remind myself. I mean I would go back. I wish I could go back and also go back with all the things I've learned since then. Yeah, that would be amazing. That would be perfect, Utopia. It was a great life, but sometimes I feel now, I go back and forth.

I have days where I just wish it had never happened. And then I have days where I'm like, "Wow, you're such a badass, Paula, you've done this and done that." And it's the whole spectrum. So I think I'm a little more thoughtful about where I'm at whereas before like I said I was sort of floating in a cocoon, a happy cocoon, a very content cocoon. But it's just that it's a lot more complex now.

Krista: Yeah. And I also think it's good for people to hear that you don't actually have to be happy that you had a loss to be okay with where you are. Yeah, you can still wish it hadn't happened and believe you would go back in a heartbeat and still be okay. It doesn't have to be one or the other.

Paula: Right. And I go back a lot to the why me, that happens kind of early on. And I think getting to the why not me, that was huge too and just especially in my social circle, everyone else is still in their partnership, they haven't experienced this. And it's, why did they get that and I don't? And then I'm like, "But why not me?" I mean that's been helpful too.

Krista: That's so powerful. I've got goosebumps.

Paula: Yeah. And then to think about what's come out of it.

Krista: Is there anything we didn't talk about that you wish other people knew, advice that you would give them, parts of your story you wanted to share? What did we miss?

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Paula: I guess just that I think that we can be grateful for the times that are hard. I mean not grateful but there's just something to be gained from the times when your whole life falls apart. There is a silver lining because it's not, like you said, doesn't mean that you wanted it to happen or you wished it would have happened, it's just that it did happen. Because again, I was such a type A control freak. And I think to the days came after Aaron died was like, "We control nothing, almost nothing." And there are some insights that can be gleaned in those times.

Even now I still struggle, sometimes I want to get that back, that open thinking because I fell a little bit back into wanting to control things a little bit. I think it's human to want to have things go a certain way. But I think in those moments when you're totally open and just completely raw, there's so much insight into life. And then, especially one of the big things that came out for me was just having compassion for other people and where they might be at.

Because like I said I had never been in that mental place before, I'd never felt that darkness. And I think I was like, "Paula, you don't know what it is to wake up in someone else's head every day." And people are probably waking up like this all the time and you're just experiencing it for the first time. And that was super eye opening for me. It just, I think that that compassion and then also compassion for myself, that I think I didn't have before or didn't think much about. So those have been huge things for me, especially now as I move on three and a half years post losing Aaron.

Krista: Yeah. What was the shift like in compassion for yourself?

Paula: I mean, what I learned was, which it's crazy because now it's something I've just repeated to myself so many times that I can't believe it was surprising to me. But that once I had compassion for myself, it's the gift to the world. It just opened up my compassion for everybody else. Once I started to not be so hard on myself and to try to understand and be curious

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about why I was the way I was, or why I might have acted in a certain way in a moment. It just started to get me thinking, well, maybe this person, it's been this chain reaction for me.

And I think it's improved a lot of my relationships as a result and in just my general relationship with the world.

Krista: Yeah, Sounds like you probably feel a lot more connected maybe. I don't want to put words in your mouth.

Paula: Yes, very much so, way more connected. I think Brené Brown says just that, "Everyone's doing the best that they can." It's just been more of that shift because I know I'm just doing the best that I can. And people have thoughts and feelings about it. And that was something I worked through a lot in *Mom Goes On*. Those are their thoughts and feelings and that's okay.

Krista: Yeah, we can't control them.

Paula: Yeah. And it's being curious about, and even being curious, maybe they have those thoughts and feelings because this happened or that happened and try not to get my own anger, I have my own thoughts and feelings about their thoughts and feelings.

Krista: Okay. Is there anything else we missed, parting words of wisdom?

Paula: I don't think so. I so appreciate you, Krista, and the impact you've had on my life, it's been amazing, it really has. I used to tell my friends, I call you KSG. They're like, "How's KSG?"

Krista: I love that.

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Paula: Early days they were like, “Yes, when is your KSG call this week?” So thank you so much.

Krista: Well, I’m so glad our paths crossed and it’s been rewarding on numerous levels. But now what I love about continuing to have you in *Mom Goes On* is that I think you’re such a source of inspiration for all of the other women who were where you once were. And I just really appreciate that you’re so open and willing to share. Whenever you get coached, you don’t hold back. You’re always just so present, so vulnerable, so willing to let yourself be seen and supported and that just sets such an example.

Paula: Thank you. I appreciate that because I didn’t start that way. So I was a little guarded.

Krista: And I think that’s totally to be expected. I mean, it’s such a fear that humans have to be judged and to not be accepted as who we are. And so at the most vulnerable time when we’re feeling the least confident and our brain is working less efficiently and effectively than ever, to come into a community where, you know no one and be honest about what’s really hurting. That’s really freaking hard. And so no reason to feel bad but also something to totally celebrate that it’s no longer in your way.

Paula: Right. And helpful that these people get coached and you’re like, “Oh my gosh, she just said what I’ve been thinking.” That happens, it still happens all the time.

Krista: Yeah. I don’t think people appreciate that until they’re in a group coaching container and you realize, actually so much of the benefit isn’t when I get coached, it’s when I see myself in someone else. Yeah, I love it. I love it. Well, thank you so much for being willing to come and share your story, Paula. I just love you, yeah.

Paula: I love you too, thank you.

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Krista: If people want to get in touch with you, I'll tell you what, if you're dying to connect with Paula, email me and then we'll figure it out, okay.

Paula: Okay, thank you.

Krista: Thank you so much. Okay, take care.

Paula: Thank you, you too.

If you like what you've been hearing on this podcast and want to create a future you can truly get excited about even after the loss of your spouse, I invite you to join my *Mom Goes On* coaching program. It's small group coaching just for widowed moms like you where I'll help you figure out what's holding you back and give you the tools and support you need so you can move forward with confidence. Please don't settle for a new normal that's less than what you deserve. Go to coachingwithkrista.com and click Work With Me for details and next steps. I can't wait to meet you.