

Episode 156: Surviving Tragic Family Loss and Finding Renewed Hope
Life Repurposed Podcast
michellerayburn.com/156

Michelle Rayburn [00:00:35]:

Kaitlyn Odom Fiedler was eight years old when she woke up alone in a hospital room, the victim of a horrible car accident that claimed the lives of six of her family members as they traveled on their way to vacation at the beach. Left with only one living brother, young Kaitlyn was left with the question, what now? How do you find hope after loss? 20 years later, Kaitlyn has found her hope and wants to encourage others as they struggle with their own trials. Her book brings a refreshing perspective of hope and will help answer the questions of how to move forward, not just move on. When it seems there is nothing left on which to cling.

Readers learn how Kaitlyn moved from questioning to trusting God in times of sorrow, and they will find hope and healing in their own grief journey along the way. In her book, Kaitlyn shares her pain, struggle, and personal wrestling with grief, love, and hope with courageous vulnerability. She writes as if she's introducing us to her family, her home, and her hope. She has found Christ sustaining, patient and present, and introduces him as a friend who introduces another friend. Her value of children, their emotions, grief, and the need to find ways to engage their trauma with or without words reminds us and challenges us to enter in and give space for all. Here's my conversation with Kaitlyn Fiedler.

Kaitlyn, thank you so much for joining me on Life Repurposed today.

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:02:39]:

Hey, Michelle, thank you so much for having me. So glad to be here.

Michelle Rayburn [00:02:44]:

I'm glad you're here too. And we met kind of randomly through a group of authors and speakers that we're part of. This is our first time face to face. We've not met at a conference, and so I don't really know a lot about you, and I love that. I love getting to know something new about people, and I just know from looking at your book a little piece of your story. And my listeners, I think, are going to resonate with some of the struggles that you've been through. In their own way, we all have different things, but I want to rewind way back to your childhood and I'd love to hear a little bit about your early years growing up and some of your memories from childhood.

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:03:23]:

Yes, I would love to start there. And that is the exact place that my book starts sharing my story. My book is called "What Now? Finding Renewed Life in Christ After Loss." And it is just my journey of finding hope and healing in Christ after a tragic loss. And it begins at the very beginning with my childhood family life. So glad to share that with you all today. I was born into

a Christian home. There were six of us, total six kids. I was the second to youngest, my brother was the oldest, then twin sisters, then one older sister a couple of years older than me, then me, then a younger brother and my mom homeschooled, all six of us. My dad worked in the Christian camp conference field. So when I was born, we were living in Colorado, and he was working at Trail West young Life Camp. And then around when I was six, we moved to Asheville, North Carolina, and my dad was working at the Billy Graham Training Center there, which is a conference center.

We had the picture-perfect home school, Christian, tight knit family life. And it wasn't life homeschool, Christian life, ultra conservative, legalistic. It was such a sweet and precious childhood. Like, we had around nine acres, we had a garden in Asheville. When we moved to Asheville, we had lots of animals, just did our schoolwork in the morning and then spend the afternoons playing outside, running around in the creek. Yes, so fun. And just all we were, we were super close. It was like *Little House on the Prairie* kind of lifestyle in the 90s. So that's just kind of the picture my parents taught me about the Lord just in words, but also just through watching them live and watching them parent life.

They were so intentional. I'm so thankful and just it's such a gift that God gave me. Parents like them for the first eight years of my life just to learn about the Lord at a really early age. They just really walked the walk. They thought hard about what they believed and why they believed it. And then they made decisions based around their beliefs and that showed through the way they parented, the way they worked, how they disciplined us, how they spoke to us. Like every part of their lives, they weren't perfect, but they taught me so much about God and there's so many small stories that are in my book about just the little nuggets that I picked up as a child from them that just have huge influence now in my life.

I'm 31 now, and so all these years later, now I'm a mom myself and I'm still gleaning from just those early lessons that I learned. And so if you're listening and you're a mom with young kids at home, I just can't stress enough the importance of you may not think that your children are even listening to you or that they're having any impact on them. But I am proof that the early years of life are really the most significant years of learning about God and everything. You're like a sponge. Everything, you just soak it up. So your work matters so much. Your intentionality with them every time you discipline them, every time you have conversations around what's right and wrong decisions you make, reading devotionals to them every day, just the consistency of your lifestyle and the time that you're spending with them and talking to them, they will recall it one day later in their life and it matters.

Michelle Rayburn [00:08:08]:

Yeah, thank you for reminding us of that. Because even though I didn't home school my boys when they were at home, we incorporated some of those same principles into our everyday life when we were at home, riding in the car, sitting around the table and all of those intentional things. And so that's a great reminder whether we home school or whether we work outside of the home or stay home. Just being so intentional about those moments.

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:08:36]:

Yeah, absolutely. Not just for home school moms, but the time that you are with them and all the conversations that you get to have, because we don't know what's going to happen. We don't know what your kids are going to face. We don't know what we're going to face. And so just taking each day and slowing down enough to just have that intentionality and an intentional relationship with your kids is so important.

Michelle Rayburn [00:09:07]:

It is. And I know from your bio that little piece of heaven with your family and that secure little house on the prairie existence didn't last for very long. So tell our listeners about what you experienced at eight years old.

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:09:29]:

Yeah, so it was like I was living in a bubble those first eight years of life, I didn't know much. God protected me from the world in a good way, where it was just special and sweet and really innocent, but it was a bubble. And that bubble burst in a way when I was eight years old. My parents had been one summer, the summer of 2000, they took in a girl from Belarus. She was here through a relief program with a bunch of women or a bunch of girls all throughout the country, staying in different host homes.

She had never seen the ocean before, she had never visited a beach before. So we had decided to take her to the beach for the first time. And also a friend of hers who was with another family at the time, she came with us on the trip. And so July of 2000, we were on our way from Asheville, north carolina to South Carolina beach coast and it was my parents, all six kids and then the two girls in the car with us. We were on one of the interstates here in South Carolina when a cargo van traveling the opposite direction from us blew out a tire and he lost control of his steering and crossed over the grassy median between the two highways and our car was in his path, so he hit us head on. And that accident took the lives of my parents and four of my siblings and one of the girls staying with us as well. So my oldest brother, myself and one of the other girls from the relief program were the only three people who survived the accident.

Michelle Rayburn [00:11:40]:

I can't because I can't imagine what a change happens in that instant.

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:11:47]:

Yeah, everything that I knew was gone. My whole life completely changed in one instant. I was asleep in the car when the accident happened. So I don't remember anything about the accident itself. But I woke up in the hospital days later to find out what had happened and I didn't believe it at first. I just thought I was dreaming for days, weeks and even months after that. I thought I was still in this really long dream and just waiting to wake up. My brother and I went to live with our aunt and uncle, my mom's brother and his wife and their two daughters. My two cousins became my new family and they were living in Greenville, South Carolina. So we moved in with

them and really started a new life. So kind of in looking back I see my first eight years of life as kind of one life.

My life started over, everything changed. I had to find out who I was all over again, what my purpose was, where my place in the world was. I was no longer my parents well, I was still my parents daughter, but I was no longer living in their home, living that life. It was just a new life. I started school for the first time after that and just had a new family, new church, how to make new friends. Everything was different. And so now I have such a heart for though it was a family that I went to live with, it wasn't the typical adoption that you would adopted kids go through, but still just the change and the loss children from adoption or hard places go through. I have just such a special heart now for kids who are adopted or have gone through difficult childhood. Just any big change really because we all go through change and have to learn how to adjust in whole new ways. And so that was what that time was like for me.

Michelle Rayburn [00:14:13]:

What was your faith journey like after that? You had grown up with a foundation of faith with your parents. How was your personal faith affected by this?

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:14:24]:

So I accepted Christ into my life through the example of my parents at age six. And I prayed and I truly understood like I felt there was a change and I understood finally that lying was a sin or being mean to your siblings as a sin, not respecting your parents as a sin. I understood that that was wrong and that wasn't honoring to God. And so just that little seed was planted then at that point. So then when I was eight, two years later, I really just came to have this very special and sweet relationship with the Lord at that time that is really indescribable now to have the words. But yes, I was so lonely and grieving and I didn't understand and I was confused. And all those things that you would imagine a kid going through that doubting, angry, just crying and grieving a lot to myself in those early years.

But I miraculously only from the Lord and his grace never doubted that God wasn't there because I just came to learn and to experience that he was the only thing that was still the same. Everything else was different. Nothing in my life looked the same or felt the same. Home, friends, family, everything was different. But God was still the same God that I knew at age six and that my parents knew and that they brought us up in Tangibly. Still felt his presence in my heart and in my life even in those early years. Like I knew he was there to talk to and to pray to and to cry to and even to yell at and get angry at and scream at and ask why. And I came to Him because I really didn't know who else to go to that time.

Michelle Rayburn [00:16:51]:

Talk a little bit about asking why and crying out to the Lord because in some of our faith circles we're taught really not to express how we feel to God. And I'd love to hear your perspective on asking why, especially because of the title of your book being What Now? So I sense there's a journey there. Yes.

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:17:15]:

Oh, my goodness. I could have so much to say about feeling like we can't this somehow in our world, there's this message out there of feeling like we can't express our anger or sadness or grief or go to God and be angry with Him or to ask Him why, or even to ask other people those questions, too. But I could go off on tangent about that. It's so good and so important to go to God with our questions. So he is there for us for that, specifically for us to go to Him and ask why and to be angry and to question and figure things out. Like who are we going to figure out issues in life with if it's not Him?

So the whole message of my book, *What Now?* Is this lesson that I learned throughout many, many years of asking questions to the Lord and wrestling hard with Him around. Why do hard things happen? Why my family? Why them? Why me? Not understanding and just really getting in it with Him and wrestling and asking Him everything. And so I'm just so thankful that he is there to hear us out and to show us the truth through our questions and if we will hear from Him, if we will receive what he has to give us the answers that he has. I really came to learn that why asking why is good and needed. But staying there our whole lives gets us nowhere. So our whole lives why? I just can't understand. I just can't understand. I can't get past it. I can't move past it. And that's where people get stuck, like so many people. Christians are not whatever it is, something will happen in their life that they just can't get past and it doesn't make sense. And so I'm just going to be angry at God forever. But when I came to the point where I realized that or God showed me, he revealed to me that if I'm going to move forward in life with repurposed, I can't stay in the Why me? Because asking that question is so self-focused and it's inward and it keeps us stuck. But he gave me the question what now? And asking that question for me was just such a release of a weight that I was carrying. So it just helped me really therapeutically just be like this happened and God tells us that hard things are going to happen.

We're not supposed to understand why we're not entitled to those answers, but we can still trust Him. And by asking Him what now? It's asking Him how does he want to use the situation, our hurt, our pain, our suffering. We can't go back and change it, but what now? What will it look like moving forward with our stories, with all these hard things? So how does he want to use them? And just kind of giving it over to Him and it takes the focus off ourselves and our own issues and just kind of draws our eyes back on Him, that he is in control and he will use it. And my favorite verse is Romans 8:28 for we know that in all things God works together for the good of those who love Him, those who are called according to his purpose. And so that verse just has really meant a lot to me throughout the years of trusting that it's true, that he really does work all things out for good if we love walk in obedience to Him. So that's how the title came to be and just where I'm at.

Michelle Rayburn [00:22:05]:

I like that perspective and when I think of it in terms of life repurposed, it's such a great summary the what now? Because sometimes when I talk about my tagline of helping people find hope in the trashy stuff of life. People think that I'm trying to find a reason, and the why question is looking for a reason and the what now is looking for what God is going to make of this rather

than trying to figure out why something happened. And so I love that perspective because it's so helpful. It removes some of the platitudes we use with people who are grieving and saying something like, well, God had a plan for that or a purpose for that.

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:22:50]:

Everything happens for a reason, right?

Michelle Rayburn [00:22:53]:

And it's like, I'm not going to deny his sovereignty. But also, yeah, those types of statements kind of make you stuck in the why because you have to find it. So I'd love to hear your perspective on the difference between looking for what now and moving forward and not being stuck in that. And you talked about being stuck in contrast with what I've heard people say to people who are grieving, almost questioning, like, why are you still grieving? And I'm imagining that grief never well, I know grief never goes away, but I'm imagining that the what now? Keeps you moving forward, where grief is still sort of a companion in that. Is that an accurate way of saying that that the grief doesn't exactly go away, but God changes a perspective in the midst of it?

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:23:47]:

Yeah, absolutely. I think there's so much pressure when people do experience loss of I just have to get through it and get to the other side. And after a certain number of months or years down the road, I'll be over it and I'll be able to move on and it'll be done. And I just want to make sure that I'm doing all the right steps and right things to get through this and get through my grief. And I've even heard people say, it's been two years and I'm still crying. Why? I feel like I shouldn't still be sad. And I'm like, so it's things like that where there's this cultural pressure or on ourselves to we should be better, we should feel better.

Other people are like, thinking or assuming that we should be not sad anymore, not still having days where it's still hard to get out of bed or not still having breakdowns in the grocery store. Like, that shouldn't happen anymore. We should be better. I just want to tear all that down and just the reality is, like you said, that we walk forward in life throughout our whole life, years and years and years carrying the grief with us and that that is good to do. And when the grief hits us in the grocery store or in church or wherever in the car, to let ourselves feel it and to know that it's part of the journey and that God gave us those emotions to feel and to not just to tear I want to just tear down this idea that we have to stuff it away or wipe tears, fix ourselves up, not show it. That we shouldn't be any shame for crying or feeling guilty around still being sad.

We should feel confident and empowered and even respect our grief. It's good to feel and good to carry. And so a counselor told me one time, when we cry, we are just showing respect for the person we lost. It shows us how special that relationship was with that person. And when we miss them, when we cry, we're crying because we miss them. And that's a good reason to cry and a good thing because we're supposed to miss people and feel the void because they're not with us. And we loved that person. And so just allowing that into our lives and carrying it with us and as I don't know what you would call it, just a companion, like owning it as a part of your story

and carrying it. And for me, that journey has been like it's been ups and downs and it's been trying to figure out how much to cry, when to cry, is it okay to cry, like, wrestling with asking those questions. So when I was younger, I really didn't. I cried every now and then by myself in my room, in private, and I didn't want to show it to anybody. And when I got older into college and then the couple of years following college, it slowly started to come out more. And I was like, this is good. I just started to allow myself to show it more, whether in counseling or in church with friends, like just being a little bit more okay and comfortable with crying publicly and seeing if I could trust the people around me when I was crying and how they reacted and stuff.

And so just gradually now, I mean, though it still doesn't feel good to cry or it's still not like ever really comfortable, but now I really do feel life. I'm at a place where I can say that it's good and that I can let myself at any point, anytime. I really long for others to feel the freedom as well to grieve and to know that it's okay.

Michelle Rayburn [00:28:22]:

How about talking with family members or meeting friends? Have you felt a freedom to talk about your siblings and memories and share those things? I'm thinking about, like, even on your wedding day and thinking about your parents and your siblings not being there with you, have you felt that freedom? Or is that something that in our Christian circles we can improve on more?

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:28:48]:

My family and those around me have really been a great support system for sharing memories and talking about my family, my biological family members and those I lost. And so, yeah, I do feel like I have had really positive moments to remember and reflect on who they were as people and memories. And it's been really sweet. Everyone who knew them, family members or friends of theirs all say the exact same things about who they were because they were the same all the time to everyone they knew. And so people just have really consistently awesome, sweet memories and things to say about them, which is really cool for me to hear because I have those same memories too.

But I will say just to answer part of that question, I guess feeling the freedom or the safety to share with other people, that's something that I've had to learn. Like you don't want to share super personal hard things unless you know it's a safe place. And so, yeah, I've had to kind of learn that and figure out what groups of people, what relationships are safe enough to share those really personal memories.

So for me, that has looked like church community. My family, my husband and I, we have an amazing church community and I have felt so just surrounded with people there who it's really been a huge part of my healing of people who want to hear and ask about them and just really can just listen and have given me just the safe space to process and to heal. So I would say second to my own personal counseling, just having a great church community has been such a gift that God has provided me for my healing.

Michelle Rayburn [00:31:08]:

That's good to hear. And the process of writing a book is also kind of cathartic. I know my first book was a memoir and just telling some little stories, but it's also so vulnerable because now you're opening up that story for anybody who doesn't know your heart as well as all the people around you. And so there's like this vulnerability of putting it out there in the world. So I'd love to know about your book life, what made you decide to write it and who did you write it for?

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:31:41]:

Yeah, that's so true. I know I'm talking about sharing your story with people who are safe to carry it and receive it and now it's out there for anyone to read, who's going to read it. So yeah, it was a huge risk, a huge step of faith for me to do that and to be that as I was writing, I could have written a very more topical teaching on grief, like more like self help biblical grief principles. But I just felt this responsibility, I guess, or calling just to make it super real and just to share my personal story and everything that all my memories and my emotions and put it all out there. And so that's what came out. But I think I needed to write it like that for my own healing. Just the cathartic process of not holding anything back and being able to freely write my experience and my journey of grief in hopes that someone else out there can feel heard and seen and understood as well through my words and through my honesty and vulnerability. Just that's my prayer that other people, our stories will all look different, but the feelings that we feel inside and the emotions can feel the exact same no matter what we've been through.

And so I just really pray that people don't feel alone through what they're going through. And I wanted people to feel like I've been there and that there is hope, no matter how devastating or no matter how hopeless someone might feel. So I wrote my story originally just for my own healing, because I knew I had to. I don't know if you all had that feeling of when you're in church or when you're hearing something and you're just constantly thinking like a step you need to take in your head, like the application of what you're hearing, I'm going to go home after church and I'm going to do this. And that nugget you take with you.

Well, for years, everything I heard, it could have been I don't know what the pastor was even preaching on or what the message or podcast was even talking about, but whatever I was receiving through, it was the Holy Spirit just saying, share your story, share your story. Because for so long I hadn't I had not talked about it. I had just been super. I'm just going to get through it, I'm going to keep it in, I'm going to keep going, just live my life, and nobody really cares that much. I don't have to be that vulnerable. It doesn't matter. It's not that big of a deal if I don't share. But I kind of felt like Jonah, because for years I was life feeling like, I need to write it, I need to write it, I need to write it. And I wasn't.

And so finally, you all might have your own things in your head that you're thinking about, like, yeah, I keep hearing this one thing too, but I finally just came to the point where I was like, I can't ignore it any longer. I just felt such a huge burden of you have to write your story. And so I guess you could say I just wrote it because I knew the Lord was telling me to. The short answer, but it was for healing. And then as I started writing and I started learning a little bit more about

the publishing world and the Christian author world, and I just became more interested in the possibility of it being published. And so, yeah, years down the road from when I first started writing it just for myself, found a Christian publisher and it was published in April. And so now my whole heart behind it is just for others to know that there's hope and that whatever it is that you have gone through just really challenging people to consider how the Lord might use their own personal stories and what steps do you need to take in order to do that.

And so whether it's small, like, maybe you haven't been to church in a long time and, you know, you need community. So, like, going to church, showing up at a church near you on Sunday or going to your doctor because you feel like you have some mental health issues and you need to talk through that kind of thing with your doctor or your therapist or taking care. There's all kinds of steps that we in life to take just to heal and to process our own stories. And so I'm just a huge advocate for people taking those steps in order for them to feel better and to heal and also to be able to help others around them.

Michelle Rayburn [00:36:56]:

Yeah, there's so many ways of doing that, and I love that your life is a beautiful example of that. And there may be a listener out there who's like a friend of mine who gave her daughter up for adoption. And during the years before they were reunited, she was volunteering at a pregnancy center and just pouring into women who needed that help with their babies until one day, 20 years down the road, when she gets that phone call or email or whatever it was that said, I'm looking for my birth mom. So there's stories that we all have our own piece of pain that we're turning into something that God can use even while we're waiting to know if there's a resolution. And speaking of resolution, I love that you've shared your story, Kaitlyn, because oftentimes we become sort of voyeuristic.

We see the news story, the headlines, the clippings of the accident on the highway, and we hear a reporter read in just straight terms, this is what happened to this family, and we don't know what happens after that. And you telling your story gives us all hope because we can see that you aren't just a news story and your family wasn't just a moment on a few days of TV news, but that you are real people and you have a real story and you have a story of hope. And so I love that you're doing that and that you were obedient with the book because it just gives me a different perspective. Even when I see the news stories of knowing every one of these that I see on TV every day, there's somebody looking for that hope. So thank you for doing that. I really appreciate that. Where can people find your book? Where can they connect with you? I know what your book is on all the places books are sold, but where can they find you?

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:38:50]:

Thank you so much for sharing that encouragement. Yeah. Just about others who are on the news and yeah, you're right, you don't know what happens to people. My prayer every time I hear of something, especially if it's kids involved, I long for them find the Lord one day if they don't know him already, because that's the only thing that will help them live a life and a full and abundant life so people can find me on. I have a blog, ABeautifulBelonging.com is the website address, abeautifulbelonging.com and I'm on Instagram, KaitlynFiedler and then a Facebook

page, A Beautiful Belonging there as well. And my contact info is all on my blog. My book is on Amazon and a lot of other book places. Oh, one other exciting thing, I just finished recording the audiobook oh yeah, for my book. So that should be posted soon, I don't know when, but maybe within the next few weeks. It should be available on all the audio listening platforms.

Michelle Rayburn [00:40:15]:

I do mostly audiobooks because then I can listen to books while I'm out driving somewhere, going for a walk or cooking supper or something like that. Can you give us the full title of the book? I will link in the show notes but just for those listening and want to search later. The full title of your book is.

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:40:32]:

Yes, it's What Now? Finding Renewed Life in Christ After Loss.

Michelle Rayburn [00:40:39]:

So you can look for Kaitlyn Odom Fiedler. But again, I'll link in the show notes for people who are looking for that. Kaitlyn, I would like to directly address the person who's listening, who's joining us just for this podcast episode, who's going through something difficult and maybe hearing your story and thinking, well, that's nice for Kaitlyn, but I don't know if there's hope for me. What do you say to that person?

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:41:07]:

I hear you, I see you. And I've been there. I've been exactly in that place of feeling that way life nobody understands and you're all alone. And I would just say that God is with you. He is right there with you and he longs for you to walk with Him. God wants to take your pain and your suffering and your story and whatever you've been through and whatever you're carrying and he longs he is the God of making all things new and redeeming lives and changing life and bringing hope and restoring. And so he longs to take what you have been through and what you're feeling and to make it new, to redeem your story, to redeem your situation. And I can attest as much as I can, I can tell you that that's what he has done for me and my life. And I know if you would reach out to Him and trust Him and take hold of his hand and His Word, he will do the same for your life.

But practically speaking, I would say if you feel like you don't know where to start in finding because we can't do it alone, we have to have help reach out to God, but we also have to surround ourselves with people who walk through it with us. And so find a local church, find a community group, a body of believers who you can share with and who can walk through your journey with you and help you practically day to day with things you need done, logistical things, things around the house. Like, we have to have help in life, and there are good, good people who are following God who want to help you, and it won't be a burden to them. They want to help you and to walk with you.

Michelle Rayburn [00:43:13]:

Speaking of helping people, I love that your next step is working toward becoming a counselor. So as we wrap up, can you tell us a little bit about what God's taking you to next?

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:43:26]:

Yes, so that's been a whole nother journey on its own, but through the past, like ten years or so, I've really had a heart for helping others who have also been through hard things. And so I really feel like the calling of mine is to be a counselor and through counseling of my own throughout the years, and then through not official counseling, but like just mentorship of other women and things like that. I just know the healing power of being able to share completely, openly and vulnerably and holding nothing back with another person. And so I love being that person for other people as well, because I've experienced such healing through my own people. And so I am in a master's program at a seminary, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, to become a counselor. I'm in internship right now, and I have about two more years left of class before I graduate and get licensed and be a counselor. So super excited about that journey as well.

Michelle Rayburn [00:44:37]:

Thank you so much, Kaitlyn, for sharing your journey with us today and taking some time out of all the crazy things going on in your life as a young mom and a seminary student to share your story with us.

Kaitlyn Fiedler [00:44:49]:

Thank you so much for having me, Michelle. I loved getting to talk with you and just to share my story with all your listeners.