



This Is Your Life Podcast
Season 6, Episode 1
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Michael Hyatt: Welcome to season 6 of *This Is Your Life*, where our goal is to help you win at work and succeed at life. My name is Michael Hyatt, and I'm in the studio today with my good friend and long lost cohost Michele Cushatt. Michele, welcome!

Michele: Thank you! You have no idea how good it is to be back.

Michael: It's so awesome to have you back, and I can't wait to hear what you've been doing and how life has taken some unexpected turns. Speaking of unexpected, life often occurs that way. Our best-laid plans go awry whether it's in our relationships, our marriages, our health, our businesses... Sometimes life just takes a turn we didn't expect.

If we can learn to embrace it and really leverage that, our stories can really have a powerful impact, not only on us but on the people who we're trying to serve. I've asked Michele to come today and just talk a little bit about her story and what has transpired over the last several months. Let's just start with that. The last time we talked with you was during season 3, I believe.

Michele: Yes.

Michael: We recorded that back in November of 2014.

Michele: Correct.

Michael: You've been on a harrowing journey since then, so catch us up.

Michele: Yes. I have had a few things going on in the last 10 months. In some ways it's really hard to believe that much time has passed, and in other ways it seems like it has been years.

Michael: True.

Michele: Okay, the last 10 months... When we finished recording season 3, I left and went back home. About a week after that, I had major surgery. I had been diagnosed with cancer for the

third time and went through a nine-hour surgery where they removed two-thirds of my tongue and did all kinds of skin grafts to rebuild my mouth (from my arm, from my leg, and from my neck).

Needless to say, the recovery from that was extensive. They gave me about three weeks to recover from that, and then they started with intensive chemo and radiation. That went until about March of this year. Since then, I've just been trying to come back to life, basically.

Michael: I asked you this question last night at dinner, but I want to ask you again. What were the emotions of all of that as you went through it? Take us back to November or maybe back when you got the diagnosis that the cancer was back, and then just walk through the emotional roller coaster it has been up until this point.

Michele: Well, when I found out the cancer was back for the third time, it was kind of the last straw in a series of difficult circumstances. I had experienced cancer for the second time in March of last year, so I had gone through surgery and recovery with that. Then in the middle of my recovery, we found out my dad had cancer and it was terminal.

Then he only lived three months, and he passed away in August. At that time, I was on tour with Women of Faith. So I was traveling every weekend, dealing with grief from my dad's loss, and still recovering from my second diagnosis. Then in the middle of all of that, in November, I found out cancer was back for the third time.

Michael: What was your first emotion when you got that news?

Michele: I was stunned. I mean, I was just stunned. None of us expected that to happen, and because it was back for the third time, I knew it was much more serious, much more advanced and aggressive than before. That meant it was going to be completely life altering. What do you do with that? I mean, it was just massive. Trying to assimilate that and understand what it meant for my family, me, my career, and all of those different things was really more than I could take in at the moment.

Michael: Kind of the irony of it is that you had just finished a book called *Undone*.

Michele: Yes. Exactly.

Michael: Was the subtitle *Making Peace with an Unexpected Life*?

Michele: *A Story of Making Peace with an Unexpected Life*. And here I get to actually live out what I wrote! How nice!

Michael: So you thought the book was done.

Michele: I thought it was done, and at this point, so many things had happened that I had rewritten the epilogue of my book three times. That's just how life is. It's always unexpected. It's always changing. So in answer to your prior question about the emotions, initially I had to just cope with the physical implications: the surgery, the recovery, the treatment... It launched me into about eight months of intense physical suffering unlike anything I've experienced before.

Michael: And the surgery wasn't the worst part.

Michele: No. I mean, it was massive. I was in the ICU over Thanksgiving. It was definitely very significant, but... I didn't know it at the time, but that was just the warm-up. There was so much more coming. I couldn't even really start to deal with the emotions of all that, because I was just trying to survive. I mean, they literally took me to the brink. I was just trying to survive, figure out how to live through the pain and suffering.

Then once the pain started to ease (which wasn't until June, so just a couple of months ago), the emotional toll of everything I had been through really set in. So during the summer (June, July, and August), I really went deep into this place of grief, loss, and acknowledgment of all that had been lost over the last several months. Then where do you go from there in trying to process through that?

Michael: Yeah. Recently you've begun publically speaking again.

Michele: Yes. Two weeks ago!

Michael: That's hard to believe. How did that go?

Michele: Very well. In many ways, to get up and do what I love to do and be able to even do that again when I didn't know if I would live was very, very redemptive. But the flipside of that is I've always at least aimed to be a good communicator, to be clear and articulate, to hopefully sound intelligent, and all of those things we like to do. It's not easy to be in a body that's different, to sound different and have to work harder at something that used to come so easily.

Michael: Yeah. I think speech, for example, is one of those things we take for granted.

Michele: Oh yeah. Absolutely.

Michael: When you first came out of this, could you talk at all?

Michele: No. Actually, the radiation was so intense that basically from my eyes to mid-chest, I had third-degree burns all over my body, inside and out. So there were about six to eight weeks when I had zero voice. My vocal chords were so burned that they did not function at all. There was some question of whether or not I would speak again at all.

Michael: Wow.

Michele: It's incredible.

Michael: Were you surprised when you heard your voice for the first time?

Michele: Well, yes, because it sounded very different. You know, when my voice started to come back, it was very raspy. It just didn't sound like me. The intonation was different. So it was good to be able to talk just for functioning in life but very sad for me that I had lost the richness of the voice I had before. But some of that has come back pretty significantly since then.

Michael: Yeah. Well, I would say just from my ear that I think you sound like yourself, just like you sounded before. You're having some trouble, as you pointed out, with the S sound and a few other things, but will that improve over time, do you think?

Michele: A little bit. It will improve a little bit over time. It will never be exactly the same. My tongue and my mouth will just never function to the same degree as they did before. But it will improve as I learn to exercise it, practice it, and things like that. Now that being said, there for a while I wondered if my speaking career needed to be over.

Why, if you can't speak well, should you really continue doing it? What I have discovered over the last several weeks and couple of months is that the fact that my speech is slightly different actually makes people lean in a little more and pay attention and focus just a little bit, so it may end up being an asset. I guess (we talk about this a lot on this podcast) it's all a matter of perspective.

Michael: It is.

Michele: We can either view something as a horrible loss and something that is a disability or an obstacle, or we can use it as a launch to something that is possible. It's all a matter of perspective.

Michael: Well, let's try to distill from this some lessons you've gained over the last several months.

Michele: Okay.

Michael: I do want to start with perspective. I mean, I've had a little suffering, but nothing like what you've gone through. I know it's always a perspective-altering thing, so how has this shifted your perspective?

Michele: Well, it's massively altering. I mean, you can't literally get to the brink of death without it having some kind of big impact on how you view life. So from a perspective standpoint, there are so many things I can talk about. It has impacted how I view the way I spend my time and the places I invest myself.

Things I thought were so critical and important before have really shrunk down to appropriate size, I would say. There are so many things we worry about, lose sleep over, and fret about. There are even things we spend hours and hours at a time doing every week that really don't matter at the end of the day.

I spent a lot of time on the couch and in bed, and I thought of how much time I spent on social media. It sounds silly and almost cliché, but it just seemed silly to me when what I wanted to do was pick up the phone and talk to a friend, spend time with my husband and my kids, or have those face-to-face interactions. Those have become much more valuable to me.

Another perspective shift has been in my business, my career. I still see great value in using my gifts and talents for some kind of purpose and being very purposeful in what I do. I don't plan on quitting all of my jobs and staying home all the time, because I enjoy what I do, but it has definitely taken on a different perspective. I don't have the desperation I had before.

Michael: You mean like being desperate to succeed?

Michele: Desperate to make the next dollar, desperate to please everybody, or desperate to succeed....however we define that *success* word. I don't have that desperate sense. I'm going to do my best. I'm going to do a great job, but I'm more about enjoying the process than being desperate for some far-out goal I feel I have to chase after.

Michael: Wow. What about priorities? I mean, you could have touched on it here in terms of work and everything else, but what are the lessons you've learned out of this suffering in terms of your priorities?

Michele: Well... Oh goodness. Definitely the biggest one is the importance of my faith. I mean, my faith has always been important to me, but when you come to the end of your life, you

have to face some pretty hard questions about what you believe about this life, whether or not there's a life to come, and where you land in that whole question.

As a result of being forced to wrestle with that, I went through all kinds of questions, doubts, uncertainty, and all of that. But what came through... If we're willing to wrestle through the doubts and questions, it will actually make us more certain about what we believe in the end. That's if you're willing to see them through. That has become more of a priority to me...

Michael: Your faith?

Michele: My faith. Because I have seen that all of these things we invest ourselves in here are good, but they are temporary. They don't last forever, so I really want to have something that's far more long-lasting, and my faith has become that much more important to me.

Michael: One of the things you said to me along the way was just that it caused you to question some things about your faith.

Michele: Yes.

Michael: Talk about that process. Was that scary? Did that add to your suffering, or was that just a necessary part of it?

Michele: Yes. Yes and yes. It was scary and terrifying. I think that any time we question something that has been very key or important to us for most of our lives, it feels insecure. There were several months of trying to understand (for those who believe in God) how this could happen, how bad things could happen.

Those are normal questions we all wrestle with at times, but it's scary to be in the thick of it. It's one thing to wrestle with it from a distance, to see suffering from a distance. It's another thing to be in the middle of it, wrestling with those kinds of questions. At the same time, as hard as it was, I have found that the more we pursue the truth and wrestle with those kinds of questions, the more it actually builds up our strength. We know this is true.

Any kind of suffering or struggle develops strength. We experience it when we go to the gym and lift weights and when we run extra miles to build up our endurance. We study literature, books, and textbooks to increase our intellect and intelligence. So we know that if we allow ourselves to go through a little pain and suffering, it has a benefit. The same is true with the questions about our faith. If we're willing to see them through, it actually builds up our faith to be something far stronger than we imagined it could be.

Michael: Were there moments when you wondered about the very existence of God?

Michele: Oh yes, absolutely.

Michael: That maybe it was all a fantasy you made up?

Michele: Yeah. Maybe I had just been smoking something for the last 40 years.

Michael: You do live in Colorado, so...

Michele: I do live in Colorado. I mean, I had all of those questions. I felt guilty about them on one hand. Here I had believed in God my whole entire life, and how could I question his existence? Yet in some ways, how do you not? I mean, part of our intelligence is just being willing to process through that. But I can say now from the other side (even though I still have moments of struggle) that I've never been more convinced than I am now. I've never been more convinced of what I believe than I am now.

Michael: Wow. I almost hate to bring this up, but has the book of Job been near and dear to your heart?

Michele: Yeah!

Michael: There are some ways in which it's very much what you've gone through with the loss of your father, the loss of your health, the sudden addition to your family with the three littles, and all of that. I mean, it has just been one thing...

Michele: It has been one thing after another, definitely.

Michael: Yeah.

Michele: So yeah, the whole story of Job has been one I've read and paid a lot of attention to. I let God know several times that I did not want to be the poster child for the modern-day Job, so if we could come up with a different plan...

Michael: Yeah, that would be excellent.

Michele: I also developed a real affinity for people who have gone through hardship. Reading books and stories about people who have gone through some kind of loss or trauma, like Louis Zamperini in *Unbroken*... I mean, that is such a beautiful example of suffering and the beauty that can come from that. The best stories are usually built on suffering.

Michael: Unfortunately.

Michele: Unfortunately. It's true. So seeing them and seeing how they endured gave me some courage to hopefully do the same.

Michael: Okay, with regard to priorities, we've talked about faith, but how have your priorities been realigned regarding things like yourself, your family, and your business? What was it before, and how is it now? Is it different?

Michele: Absolutely. I'll start with myself because right now that's a big priority. I'm still very much in the process of recovering. The doctors have said it will take a full year for me to get my energy back and to just feel more like myself, so we still have some months to go. So now I pay very close attention to my body when I get tired, when I get worn out. I take a nap almost every day.

Michael: Good for you. I'm proud of you.

Michele: Three cheers for naps! I am careful with what I eat. All of those things were important before. They're now even more important. I don't sacrifice my health for the sake of anything, for the most part. I need to take care of myself. Otherwise I won't be able to be there for my family, my job, or anything else. So that's important.

My family is critical for me. Spending time with them and investing in them is critical. I've always said it's a priority. We don't always live out what we feel or believe, because the urgent can hijack our good intentions. I am more intentional about making sure I don't get caught up in my tasks every day so I can really be present with my family.

Then as far as my business goes... This has been a big change. I would say my business is still very much in progress as far as how my priorities have been altered, but I still love what I do. I'm still passionate about it, but I don't feel like I need to take every opportunity that comes my way. I don't feel pressure to say yes to every request.

Michael: Less FOMO (fear of missing out)?

Michele: Less FOMO, less fear of disappointing somebody. I will disappoint people because I cannot fulfill every request that comes in. Just being okay with that is something I've learned.

Michael: Yeah. That's good.

Michele: It's just the way it is. That has been very freeing.

Michael: Okay, we talked about perspective. We talked about priorities. I want to talk about joyous moments. I know it has been dark. There have been a lot of hard things, but have there been some unexpected or even funny things along the way?

Michele: Well, you can't live talking a little bit differently and having some fallout from that without finding humor in it, so I had a speaking engagement on Friday night, and of course I was texting my friends. They wanted to know how it was going. I was like, "Well, I think I spit on the entire front row, but nobody seemed to mind."

We just learn to have fun with it and laugh at it. Humor is very much a part of how I cope with hardship, so humor comes into play all the time with that. Joyous moments... We've had sweet family time. I mean, all of my kids have circled up, come around, and been very, very supportive.

Michael: Has it made your family closer?

Michele: Oh, absolutely, in so many ways. Watching my little ones... My little son, who is eight years old... Nobody has prayed for me as faithfully as that little boy. Every day, he has been praying for Mommy to get better. Just watching his love and passion about helping Mom get well has been very, very sweet.

Michael: Yeah. That's awesome. I'm sure there are some lessons in here about just confronting your own mortality. We live in a culture that does its very best to remove that consideration far from our consciousness, right?

Michele: Yes. That's actually very unique to Western culture. That's what I've discovered. I've traveled enough to places like really poor areas of South Africa, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and other countries... When I was in South Africa, every Saturday was funeral day. Death was so much a part of this one town and village I visited that that's what they did every Saturday. That was such an expected part of their experience.

Then those of us in Western civilization, in our affluence, don't want to talk about that. Yet the death rate is 100 percent, so at some point we need to be having these conversations. For me, learning to face mortality and yet do it in a way that's joyful and freeing rather than morbid... This is a part of life. We're all going to face this at some point in time. Once we embrace that and lean into it, it actually frees us up to live really well.

Michael: Oh, that's powerful.

Michele: I mean, that's what frees us up to enjoy life and be certain about our purposes, what message we want to deliver in what we do, and how we want to love the people in our lives. But we can't do that if we are living with this mindset that we live forever. You talk quite often about the stakes. We need to know the stakes. Our stakes here are the fact that we don't live forever, so that needs to be on the table every single day. How do we want to live?

Michael: You know, when I was at Thomas Nelson, I used to have this hourglass that sat on my desk. It was literally a one-hour hourglass, so the sand would run through it. It would take an hour. Periodically I'd turn that thing over just for fun and watch it, but I've thought so often that it's such a metaphor for our lives.

Michele: It is.

Michael: The sand is constantly draining from our lives. Eventually it'll all be gone.

Michele: It will all be gone. It's just a matter of timing. I mean, really, it is. I had a lot of fear related to having cancer three times for quite some time, and now I still have moments of fear, but the sting of that is gone. We all know we're going to get that phone call, or that end is going to come at some point. Even by the end of this podcast, we're 30 minutes closer to that end. I mean, it's always ticking away, so once you know that is a reality you cannot escape, the fear of that, the sting of that, is removed.

Michael: Do you think that in kind of a weird sort of way, this has all become a gift?

Michele: Oh, without a doubt. Now I say that, and at the same time I would never want to go through what I went through. It was so beyond description that I have no words for how horrible it was, so I don't want to diminish that. I know there are some people who are listening right now and are in that horrific place, so I don't want to diminish the suffering. Yet at the same time, the richness and reward that has been gained through it... There are days (I've told my husband this) when I feel like I'm the luckiest person alive.

Michael: Wow.

Michele: I feel like I've been given this unique perspective and insight into what life is really all about, and to get that at 44 years of age... I could live another 40 years. That is amazing. I get to live (perhaps) a full life with a perspective that there is not enough money in the world to buy, and I have it. That is a gift, which is hope for all of us, regardless of the unexpected things we're going through. If we are willing to hang in there, the lessons from the suffering are invaluable.

Michael: That's awesome. Another lesson that occurred to me is just about comparison. I'm sure it's easy when you're in the throes of suffering to think, "Why did I get this hand? Why can't I get a hand like so-and-so? It looks like they never have any suffering and have a life of ease. Everything comes to them." Did you go through any of that?

Michele: Oh, yes. I still do.

Michael: Really?

Michele: I'm experiencing some of it even today. This is where I love to be totally authentic. It's hard to have a body that's different from before. I see how everyone else is able to talk without trouble. You were able to eat your breakfast this morning, and you were able to taste it, enjoy it, and swallow it without any difficulty. All of those things now require unbelievable effort on my part. From a comparison standpoint, there's this natural human fear that we have.

"What if I'm not accepted exactly as I am? Everybody else seems to be so perfect and ideal, and I'm not." I'm very well aware of my imperfection now, and I carry my imperfection in an obvious way now, so every day I have to choose not to let myself slip into the comparison mode where I feel less than you just because I'm different. That's a fight.

Michael: I'll bet.

Michele: For all of us. It's an ongoing fight for me. What I'm trying to do, what I'm trying to really lean into, is... We've talked about this before. Perfection does nothing to create connection. Perfection does nothing to draw people to you. In fact, we like to look at perfection and wish we had it, but perfection doesn't draw us in.

Michael: It's true.

Michele: What draws us in is very real, human, vulnerable people. Those who carry that vulnerability on the outside are sometimes the people we are most drawn to, so I am daily reminding myself that the fact that I don't talk the same, eat the same, and look the same could be a tremendous opportunity for connection with real people in the very raw and vulnerable places of life.

Michael: That's fantastic. I want to talk about maintaining hope. I particularly want to talk about what happens between your ears. I would think...

Michele: Assuming that hasn't been impacted by everything that happened.

Michael: Well, thinking is so much of how we deal with life. There's sort of what happens to us and then how we interpret what happens to us. How has that been a battle for you, and what have you learned about that, about controlling your thoughts and how you think about your suffering today, the challenges of tomorrow, and all of that?

Michele: I get asked that question a lot because so much of this battle of choosing to live in the unexpected places of life is really a battle that happens in your head. I mean, that's where the battle is either won or lost.

Michael: So true. Yeah.

Michele: I tell my friends often that some days, the biggest and hardest decision I make is to wake up and choose to live. When you have a body that does not work the way it should work, the temptation is to crawl back in bed and not put yourself out there. Just doing this and choosing to put myself back on a podcast that thousands of people will listen to is a very vulnerable and terrifying step. So that battle in my head is happening every single day.

I have to choose whether I'm going to let my life be diminished by my circumstances or let my life be enhanced by them. There are moments when I think that's unique to me, and then I realize, "No. This is what we all have to do every single day." We have to choose whether we're going to let our stories become smaller or bigger based on what we're enduring. We get to decide.

Michael: This is kind of a hard question. Then we're going to need to take a break. Have there been moments when you've thought before in this process, "I wish I could just die"?

Michele: Oh... Yes.

Michael: Does it give you empathy for people who are suicidal or struggling with deep depression?

Michele: Yes. Absolutely. That is a hard question, and it's such a fair question. There were many times, especially from the end of January until the end of May (we're talking about a four-month stretch)... There were even some moments this summer when I was dealing with the emotional fallout when death would have been far easier than life, and I wished for it. When you are in that kind of pain that does not end (it was a 24-hour-a-day pain in spite of all of the pain medications I was on), you just want it to end.

That's a terrifying place to be, but after being in that place, I have a whole new wealth of compassion for people who are dealing with chronic pain or deep loss that just doesn't go

away. I hear from them, in fact. I hear from just a small sampling of these people, but I get e-mails every day from people who are in that place, and I know what that feels like. Any judgment I had before is gone. I don't judge, because I understand how a person can get there.

Michael: What would you say as someone who's a fellow struggler, someone who is still on the path, the journey, to someone who's listening to this podcast and really wondering if it's worth the struggle? They may be ready to check out. What would you say to that person?

Michele: The first thing I would say (Oh gosh, I can feel them) is, "We need you. We need you to fight, because you have something you're gaining in this place of darkness, something we don't have access to. If somehow you can fight through it, we desperately need you to live."

Michael: That's powerful. We're going to take a quick break. We'll be back in just a minute with more from Michele Cushatt.

Has this ever happened to you? You write a list of goals with the best of intentions. You're excited and motivated for a couple of weeks, and then life gets in the way. You get distracted or discouraged. You stop moving toward what really inspires you. If you want to achieve what matters most, traditional goal setting will only get you so far. You need a proven plan.

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Michael: We're back with Michele Cushatt. We're talking about lessons learned in the crucible of suffering and the transformative impact of suffering. Michele, you've shared with us some lessons about priorities, perspective, comparison, and finding hope when you are ready to quit, but I want to just talk a little bit about appreciating and stewarding our bodies. How is

your perspective of your body different today from how it was before the surgery and all you've gone through?

Michele: Well, the obvious answer is I'm very well aware of how finite we are. Our bodies don't last forever. I've been ultra-healthy. I'm a runner. I've always eaten well. In fact, in the couple of years leading up to these last two cancer diagnoses, I was over the top, eating organic food and all of this kind of stuff. So I'm very committed to that.

I'm even more committed to it now. At the same time, I am also aware that we can only control so much, so I have a good balance between the idea that I want to steward this body I have, take good care of it, get plenty of rest... I sleep now more than ever before, which sounds so counter to our achiever natures, right?

Michael: Right.

Michele: Yet I probably am achieving more because I'm actually resting more and taking care of myself more.

Michael: That is so important.

Michele: It's critical. It's critical.

Michael: Of all of the things you could do for your health, I'm convinced the longer I live that getting adequate sleep is the single most important thing you do for heart health and everything.

Michele: Emotional health... I go to bed at 9:00 every night and get up at about 5:30 every single day. And I take a nap.

Michael: We may have kept you up a little bit late last night.

Michele: Yeah, last night you did keep me up.

Michael: I'm sorry. That was my wife. Just let the record show that.

Michele: Poor Gail. We just threw you under the bus, Gail.

Michael: What lessons have you learned about friendships and the value of relationships?

Michele: Oh, yes, yes. Well, this whole process has been, in some ways, a weeding out of friendships. There are some people who cannot handle or are just not at a place to walk with

somebody through a dark place. Then there are those people who have a gift of sticking right next to you through the hard things.

I have seen some of my friends sacrifice... I call it sacrifice. They would say it wasn't sacrifice, but I've seen them give up so much of their lives to walk with me through the last several months, showing me that once again... We talk about it, but to really understand on a day-to-day level how critical our community is...

Michael: Wow.

Michele: Relationships are so important. It's not just about fun even though my friends and I have had a lot of fun. I mean, we're all going to go through these seasons, and the load becomes so much lighter when somebody is helping you carry it.

Michael: I'll bet.

Michele: I mean, you and Gail were very much that. You were so faithful to text me. I couldn't talk, so texting was our means of communication. Sending just a gift to say, "We haven't forgotten about you. We're still thinking about you..." You prayed every single day. Those people who prayed faithfully... The knowledge that there were a handful of people who were praying every single day gave me so much hope.

Michael: I'll bet.

Michele: I have one friend who flew out to see me every eight weeks just to stay at my house and be physically present with me through the hardest seasons.

Michael: Really? Wow.

Michele: I have another friend who rode a train, which is like a two-day trip, just so she could be at my house during one of the darkest seasons.

Michael: Fantastic.

Michele: I mean, those kinds of experiences are incomparable and also made me realize that's the kind of friend I want to be. I want to be someone who isn't so caught up in my work that I can't buy a plane ticket, go somewhere, and actually physically be with somebody who needs my presence.

Michael: I love that. Okay, let me just turn the chairs just a little bit. If you were advising somebody who had a sick friend on what they could do... I think that a lot of times, people

absent themselves from our lives because they just don't know. It's awkward. They don't know what to say. They're afraid they'll say the wrong thing and make it worse. What would you say to somebody who has a friend in that situation about how they can be a better friend and love their friends or family through suffering?

Michele: Well, we all feel that awkwardness. I still do. I have a friend who was just recently diagnosed, and I felt that awkwardness even though I've gone through cancer.

Michael: That's surprising.

Michele: I felt that awkwardness. We don't want to say anything wrong, so our natural human inclination is not to mess it up. But what we have to do is push through our discomfort and make it about the other person. When we allow our awkwardness to hold us back, we're really making it about ourselves, and sometimes we just have to be willing to push through it.

The best thing to do is ask, "What do you need most right now? Do you need to be left alone? Do you need somebody to sit with you? What is it you need most? I want to walk through this with you." That would be the first thing to do. Ask that question. My second suggestion would be to be persistent after you ask what they need.

There are times when the person who's ill or suffering doesn't know what they need that day when you ask them, but they might know the next week or the week after, so don't be afraid to be persistent. My third suggestion is not to take it personally. I had some people who thought I was mad at them if I couldn't respond to their texts.

Michael: Oh my gosh.

Michele: They were so worried that they had done something wrong and all of that. Well, I was in so much pain that there would be stretches of weeks when I couldn't respond to texts because I physically did not have the strength to even type out a text.

Michael: Are there two or three things you shouldn't say to somebody who's in suffering? I mean, I could think of some things, but I'd love to hear them from you.

Michele: Well, I'll leave this person nameless, but I did have someone on Facebook (this happened a couple of times) say, "Yeah, well, I know your situation is bad, but at least you aren't such-and-such. At least you're not in this position." I had a day when I was just being vulnerable and saying, "Gosh, it's hard not being able to eat," just trying to be authentic about the process. Somebody said, "Well, at least you're not in a wheelchair."

Michael: Unbelievable.

Michele: Their intention, I believe, was to try to bring joy and perspective. It was not helpful. It was not helpful at all because in just that one phrase, she invalidated my suffering. When somebody is really hurting, to invalidate them is adding suffering to suffering.

Michael: Well, I don't know if this is the case, but my fear is that in that situation, you probably get tons of books shoved at you.

Michele: Oh, I got so many cancer books.

Michael: I mean, people say, "You just have to read this."

Michele: I got so many grief books and... Uh-huh.

Michael: Yeah.

Michele: The gesture was nice and wonderful, and I was too sick to read, so it wasn't even possible. That's why that first question is so critical. "What do you need most?"

Michael: Yeah. That's good.

Michele: "What would make you feel good right now?" For me, having some soft music was calming. I had many people send me blankets, which was very, very kind, but I couldn't possibly wrap myself in all of their blankets. Just by asking that question, you're making it about the other person.

Michael: That's really good. Okay, as we bring this interview to a close, I want us just to summarize the takeaways. If we had to distill this into two or three things the ordinary person who's listening to this podcast can take away, what would you say? The truth is that suffering is going to happen to all of us.

Either we're going to bring it on ourselves or life is going to throw us a curve, but we're going to go through some suffering. I think it's important that we know how to handle it before it occurs. I'm sure we can never be fully prepared, but what would be some takeaways from your experience that you would leave?

Michele: Okay. I have three. The first (we talked about this) is that the unexpected...

Michael: By the way, it just cracks me up that you have three. You just knew them right off the top of your head.

Michele: Well, you know, I've been mentored by one of the best right here. The first takeaway is that *the unexpected is unavoidable*. It's just unavoidable. That sounds like bad news, but when we incorporate that into our daily lives, into our stories, we realize it's totally unavoidable, so we shouldn't be surprised by it. Don't let yourself be completely derailed by the phone call you didn't expect, the promotion that didn't work out, the child who's struggling, or whatever it may be. The unexpected is unavoidable for all of us. We're in good company.

Michael: Yes. Okay.

Michele: The second lesson is that *the suffering is invaluable*. I tell people that's not a good party conversation. Nobody wants to talk about suffering, but it is invaluable. In the midst of suffering, you can be mad at it, you can be angry at it, but if there is a way to lean into it, the rewards on the other side are just incredible. So somehow we have to figure out how to not resent it and resist it.

Michael: That's good.

Michele: I mean, it's going to come. We can't do a lot about it, so if we can somehow not resent it or resist it and instead lean into it, the suffering becomes a great teacher. John Piper is a pastor, and he simply said this. "Don't begrudge the school of suffering."

Michael: Very good. Excellent quote.

Michele: So wise. Then the third takeaway would be that *the reward is incomparable*. We know we run those 26.2 miles of the marathon because of how it feels when it's done, to know we accomplished it, and that's just a race. Imagine how much more rewarding this life is when we choose to run it well to the very end. So the unexpected is unavoidable and the suffering is invaluable, but the reward is incomparable.

Michael: That's awesome. Michele, thank you so much for being with us today. I'm so excited that you're going to be with us for the entirety of season 6.

Michele: Me too!

Michael: I'd love for you to go to michelecushatt.com, Michele's website, where you can find all kinds of good stuff including her very thorough, very deep (now) blog posts. I would also love for you to read her book, *Undone*. What's the subtitle again?

Michele: *A Story of Making Peace with an Unexpected Life*.

Michael: Okay. Fantastic. If you could do us a favor, if you could go to iTunes and rate the podcast (and leave a comment if you want), that really would help us in keeping the visibility of this show up. As we conclude here, are there any final thoughts you have? You always ask me that, but I'm going to ask you. Do you have any final thoughts?

Michele: Well, all of us are living a story, and I'm a storyteller, so I love that whole metaphor, but we're living a story. We get to decide how we live it out. We don't get to decide all of the details, but we get to decide what kind of characters we play in the story. That's a powerful responsibility but also a powerful privilege: to live it well.

Michael: Perfect. Well, remember: This is your life, your one and only life. Now go make it count.