



# *Our Voices*

podcast

by  OurPath

S4 Ep 5

When a Parent Transitions, A Son Does Too

## S4 Ep 5: When a Parent Transitions, A Son Does Too

Kristin Kalbi: Hello everyone and welcome to OurVoices, the podcast by OurPath formerly the Straight Spouse Network. I'm your host, Kristin Kalbi. Our guest today is Jonathan Williams. Jonathan is a writer who covers religion and spirituality, current trends and LGBTQIA inclusion and justice. His book, "She's My Dad, a Father's Transition and a Son's Redemption" was released in 2019. In addition to being a published author, Jonathan has written for the Huffington Post, Faithfully Magazine, the Christian Standard and more. Jonathan has been featured in the New York Times, Red Table Talk and PBS. In November 2018, Jonathan and his parent, Paula Stone Williams, spoke at Ted Women in Palm Springs, California. Their talk currently has over 1.6 million views. Jonathan resides in Brooklyn, New York with his spouse and two daughters and roots passionately for his beloved New York Mets. Welcome to the show, Jonathan. I'm so excited to have you today.

Jonathan Williams: Thanks for having me. Good to be here.

Kristin Kalbi: And how are the Mets doing? I don't follow sports.

Jonathan Williams: Terribly. Yeah, they're awful. They're not going to make the playoffs once again.

Kristin Kalbi: I'm in Cincinnati so we have the Bengals and the Reds. So it's normal here.

Jonathan Williams: You feel me. You understand.

Kristin Kalbi: I feel you. If I followed sports, I'd feel you even more. Well, you know, I'm so pleased to have you on the show today because you are an adult child of a transgender woman, and we're a community of Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People, and that's who we support and that's whose stories we predominantly share, overwhelmingly share. And one of the things that people often talk about is, "How are my kids going to adjust to having a parent come out LGBTQ+? How are they going to adjust if their parent comes out as gay? How are they going to adjust if their parent comes out as transgender? And what's that going to do to the family? And so I wanted to have you on today - and of course it's different if the kids are young when the parent comes out versus if the kids are a little bit older when the parent comes out, or if they're adults, when the parent comes out. But I wanted to talk to you because you have lived this entire transition with your parent Paula and you've written a book about it and I've watched also your Red Table Talk and I've watched your Ted Talk with your parent and there's just a really beautiful coming full circle story here that I think that will be really helpful to our listeners. So can I just get you to kind of start at the beginning and tell us your story.

Jonathan Williams: Sure. Yeah. So it's interesting because when I was growing up, I had no idea that my dad experienced gender dysphoria. I wouldn't have guessed it in a million years. I had a quote, unquote seemingly normal childhood. In fact, I had a pretty good childhood and my dad was a really great dad. So even now with all the changes that have taken place, I still have really fond memories of growing up. So, the worst thing my dad did to me was make me a Mets fan. Like we just talked about. (Kristen: unforgivable, unforgivable)

Jonathan Williams: It truly is, but even so when you think about the stereotypical dad son stuff, that was all there; coaching baseball teams, outings to games or outings to museums or whatever, whatever the case may be, lots of good family vacations, lots of fun, feeling really supported as I got older. And so really my dad was a pastor and still is a pastor at this time. And I decided I wanted to go into the family business ultimately so I became a pastor as well and following in my dad's footsteps and feeling like this is something admirable because my dad did this. And so I decided I would start a church in Brooklyn, New York and so I did that in 2011. And then in 2012, my dad called and was like, "Hey, I have something to tell you" and as I always say, I said, "Okay, tell me over the phone" and my dad said, "No, I really, I think I need to come to New York and tell you." And so I had no idea what was going on. Again, it was never in my world view or my consciousness to think that my dad might want to transition too.

Kristin Kalbi: Can I ask you just two questions real quick? How old were you at this point? You're obviously a young adult at this point then.

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. I was in my very, very early thirties.

Kristin Kalbi: Oh, okay, definitely an adult. Fully adult. And then the other question is what, you know, what were your thoughts on LGBTQ+ issues at the time? Since it wasn't in your consciousness, obviously that your father could be transgender how did you interact with sort of LGBTQ+ issues in your church and as a pastor?

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. It's tricky. So I lived in evangelical world and the evangelical world is widely known as being anti- LGBTQ+ and that's relatively true amongst the entire evangelical community. So for me, I was always privately affirmed for me. It was one of those things where I was like, " Oh, I can affirm anybody privately, but publicly I'm getting, you know, hundreds of thousands of dollars from these really conservative churches who are acting like venture capitalists for me to start this church. So they're giving me a ton of money so I need to keep my mouth shut." I can't really say anything on behalf of the LGBTQ+ community. So I've just been quiet. I kind of don't talk about it. I leave it alone. There are people in my church who identify as queer and they would come up to me and say, "Hey, am I welcome here?" and I'd say, "Yeah, you're absolutely welcome here" and kind of leave it at that. We didn't have to go any further, which is really, it's just, it's privilege, right. I'm a white, straight CIS guy and I can afford to not say anything if I don't want to say anything. And so I took that approach, even though I was privately someone who said, you know, I affirmed the LGBTQ+ community, I just not going to do that public.

Kristin Kalbi: Got it. Okay, great. So thank you for sharing that. It kinda sets the stage for what's about to happen in your life. Right. So, okay. So Paula, your parent, your father comes to New York and is Paul at the time .

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. Paul comes to New York, really my whole family came. So I have two sisters who are also adults at the time. We all had kids at that point. So it's not like, you know, it's not like we're big, right. We all are married with children at this point. And they all show up and so this is a big deal and the joke is, but it wasn't a joke at the time, that I thought my dad maybe got arrested and was going to jail or something for like insurance fraud, that was like, it's kind of something like that. He's going to ask me to take care of his affairs while he's in jail or something. You'd be like, what would it be that would get him to come out here?

Kristin Kalbi: And your whole family to come out.

Jonathan Williams: Oh, the whole family. So we sat in my living room at Brooklyn, New York and...

Kristin Kalbi: And did your whole family, like, did they all come knowing or did Paula basically say we all have to go so I can reveal something at the same time? Like your sisters did they already know? Had Paula already told them or okay?

Jonathan Williams: And Paula had, Paul already told them so it was just me and that was it. So they came up and Paul said, " I'm trans and I'm going to be transitioning." And it took me a second to recognize what was really going on at first. I was like, "Oh, that's not that bad. That's not prison. It's not going to jail." (chuckle) Slowly but surely I think I realized the brevity of what was happening. Really within a matter of minutes we're going, " Oh my God , everything that I know, not only my father, but my profession and ministry and Christianity, all of that is changing all at once right now in this room" And so that dawned on me that way and it was utterly and completely overwhelming.

Kristin Kalbi: So like, can you kind of break down that moment for us? Like, I mean, it's words often fail in those kinds of - to describe those kinds of moments - but do you remember sort of physically what happened in your body when you heard that news?

Jonathan Williams: You know, it's the stomach drop, we get that stomach drop, it happens. It happened. And so I got the stomach drop and I thought that I previously said that feeling like, oh, everything that I know is now going to change and I need to prep for it. I need to get ready for it. But, you know, the first stage of grief is denial. So I jumped right into denial within the first few minutes. And I said, "No, this isn't a real, like, you're not doing this. You have other issues that you need to take care of, and this is a manifestation of your other issues." And so then I started down that road. I started with that conversation.

Kristin Kalbi: What was Paula's response to your denial? You're saying that this can't be what's really going on.

Jonathan Williams: She was quiet. I think what some of what I said to her was pretty painful. I talked about some of her shortcomings as a human being. I talked about how those shortcomings affected me as an adult. So instead of focusing necessarily on the actual transition or in the fact that she kept the secret for, you know, tens of years. I was like, "Well, you're not this kind of person and you haven't been this kind of father in my adulthood, and you don't do this with my children." And kind of attacked her in some ways and said, "This is all a manifestation of these shortcomings in your life and if you can just fix these shortcomings in your life, then you won't feel like you need to transition genders." And I was pretty adamant about that and that initial day, that first day.

Kristin Kalbi: Right and because you have the added - I mean you're in this evangelical church community where I'm sure it went through your head that having a transparent is going to have a ripple effect throughout your career.

Jonathan Williams: Oh, it was awful. So it's awful because at the time my father worked for the organization that basically supported us, propped this up, helped us get funding and so if I told them what was going on, my father would lose his job but, you know, they would not allow him to continue working. So I couldn't tell them what was going on and yet I still had to work with them and still had to work with my father, carrying the secret that my father was intending to transition.

Kristin Kalbi: Well, let's take a second to talk about that because so many families talk about the initial coming out process. There's a time period where the whole family's in the closet together. You know, there's a moment where you're not sure, the whole family is figuring out who can they can tell and when they can tell and how much they can tell. And I think people don't necessarily outside of this experience, understand what it is like to be in a closet and they don't understand that whole families can be in the closet as well. Can you describe what that experience felt like, not being able to tell anybody?

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. I think there are two components to that. I think the professional component, I sort of hit on a little bit, but if I were to tell anybody, not only would my dad, you know, it's still his job, but I would be in jeopardy of losing my job. That'd be in jeopardy of losing my funding. So I had that kind of weight to carry and then at the same time you have all these folks who are like, "Oh, how's your dad doing your dad? He did this for me in my life or I saw your dad last week. Oh, it looks like he lost a little bit of weight. It looks like he's, he looks a little different. Is he okay?" And me saying things like, "Oh, he's fine. You know, things were okay. Everything's great."

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. He's doing great work at this organization. Yeah. He's been incredibly helpful for me and it's kind of pretending like nothing happened. And meanwhile, internally my entire world has been flipped upside down. And I know when my mom first found out I was actually visiting my family, they live in Colorado, and my mom was super quiet and kind of standoffish. And I remember saying to my mom, "Why aren't you engaged? Like my family flew out to Colorado to hang out with you, your grandkids are here, like, what's the problem?" And she couldn't say anything like that for awhile.

Kristin Kalbi: Right because Paula told your mom first.



Jonathan Williams: Yeah. Paula told my mom first. So, there's a sense in which we're all keeping secrets and we're all holding onto a ton of weight that no one should ever have to bear on their own and yet here we are all bearing it on our own.

Kristin Kalbi: And just give me a sense of the timeline. Like, was this before Caitlyn Jenner came out and kind of shed light on this entire phenomenon or was this after? Like you guys had nobody to talk to, like there was no one for you guys as adult children to really talk to. Is that, would that be a fair?

Jonathan Williams: Yeah, that's fair. Yeah. It was 2012. So this is before Caitlyn Jenner, before transparent. Right. I remember Googling "children of trans parents support groups" and finding nothing, you know, finding absolutely nothing. And I live in New York where there's a group for everything. So to not find that I was like, "Wow, I truly am by myself on this one. I don't, I don't know what to do."

Kristin Kalbi: Oh gosh, it's so isolating, even when you have a community of other people who have experienced the same thing, to just the Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People that we support, even knowing that there's a community out there of other people who have gone through it, it's still an isolating experience. So with your parent and we've talked about what that initial moment was like, then what was the adjustment period like? Did you have anger? Did you have resentment? Were you immediately affirming? Were your other siblings immediately affirming? How did that go for you all?

Jonathan Williams: Right. So my sisters are both immediately affirming, I think they were there. They, like I said, they all live in Colorado and we lived in New York, so they were there. I think they were on the ground with my father, so to speak, with Paula, so to speak and I wasn't. I was separated from her transition, but, you know, I have to go back to that professional piece. Professionally this was devastating. And, and so I was pretty angry. I was really angry that Paula put me in a place where I now had to keep this secret that would not only jeopardize her employment, but jeopardize my employment, jeopardize my funding. You know, when you start a church, you raise X amount of dollars from these other churches and it's kind of what a startup might do with a VC (venture capital). So you have series A, series B and so I'm going to raise my series B, so to speak and I have the secret I got to keep it or I won't get any series B money if I let people know this so my livelihood is at stake.

Kristin Kalbi: And your ability to provide for your family and you're children.

Jonathan Williams: Right, right. At that point, my daughters were, jeez, my daughters were four and three at that point. So it is jeopardized my ability to live successfully, live the way it needed to for my family. So I was angry and angry with Paula and it took me a while, it really took me a long time to fully accept her. I objectively, like I told you at the beginning, I accepted the LGBTQ+ community, I affirmed them and then as soon as it happened to me in my family, I didn't want to affirm my father. I wanted to stay angry and I wanted to stay resentful. I did not want her to do this.

Kristin Kalbi: I think - tell me if this feels true to you though. I think there's a difference between affirming someone's identity but then processing sort of the - one of the things that we talk about in this podcast and in the community is there's a - I'm not going to cuss but there's a mind bleep that happened, I insert F-word there as the second I have. Like it's a cognitive, tsunami, earthquake, cyclone, hurricane all in one. Like is anything I knew in my history real? Did you have any of that sense of what did I know was real? What did I know was this person real? Was my family real? Did you have any of that? Like, did you have to go through a reconciliation process essentially saying, was my childhood real? Was this person real? Any of that?

Jonathan Williams: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. There's a really clunky term, it's called a "Perspective of Madness" and basically what that means is that so long as something benefits the narrative of society, it benefits you and we don't want to hear the bad side of it or the difficult side. And so for me to affirm, objectively the LGBTQ+ community was a perspective of madness. I could do that because there was no cost to it for me to do that necessarily and then as soon as my dad comes out, all of a sudden there's a cost. And I remember sitting down with her, and she said, "Well, listen, my brain has changed, my chemistry is changing, my neurons, my neural pathways are changing." And I said, "Hey, my brain chemistry is changing too. My neural pathways are also changing. Everything that I thought was true, those pathways in my brain that felt secure and routine so to speak, are no longer there. I'm having to switch everything up. So yet did that game of catch we had when I was 10, was that, you know, playing catch with my dad or was that Paula dressed and drag?" I don't know and so I had to almost reframe everything and create those new neural pathways. There was a cost to that. And that cost was a lot.

Kristin Kalbi: I am so glad that you said that because I think that's one of the aspects of this experience, whether you're the spouse or partner or whether you're the adult child. I think maybe young children adapt, especially really young, they adapt and maybe a little bit better because they don't go through all of this cognitive upheaval quite so much as an adult would. I could be wrong about that. There may be other issues for young kids, but anyway, I think that people don't understand just how much cognitively is thrown up into the air when someone you've been living with someone who's in your family basically says to you, "My identity is not who I've been living as, not who you thought this whole time." And that's a real - for people who are on the outside looking in, who are eager to see affirmation right away and immediately, they're not calculating for that adjustment period where you're having neural pathway regeneration. You absolutely are and that's a process. It doesn't happen overnight, like it doesn't happen overnight. So, and I will take a moment just before we take a quick break, I want to say to our audience members who are listening, we're using the term father and dad, but we're also using the pronoun "her" to describe Paula your parent, and so can you just tell us a little bit about that? How you arrived at sort of that naming?

Jonathan Williams: Absolutely. Yeah. So when throughout the many conversations Paula and I had finally asked her, I said, "Hey, what do you want me to call you?" And she said to me, "I've always been your dad so call me dad." So, I think for me, what I try to do when I'm in public is call them my parents. On this podcast, it's a little bit easier just to call her my dad. The name of the book is, She's My Dad so it's a little easier that way but there have been times when I've been in a restaurant and one of my kids will go running away and I'll say, "Dad, dad, dad," and everybody looks around like, who's he talking to, there's only another woman I see so yeah, I've been in that situation before.

Kristin Kalbi: People who have gone through it, it's still an isolating experience so we kind of talked about that a period of being in the closet, a son's redemption. So I want to hear about that redemption process for you so we'll be right back with more Jonathan Williams. (slow music) Hey, everyone. We want to take this moment to thank everyone who donated to make the new website for OurPath.org, a reality. Your generosity means we can help people in new ways. We can provide more resources than ever before and we can reach more people who need our help. You made this website happen and we could not have done it without you but the work isn't over. Websites require upkeep and maintenance, podcasts need to be produced and general operations need to be funded. If you would like to contribute to OurPath, please head over to OurPath.org and click on give support. (music ended) And we're back with author Jonathan Williams. So Jonathan, we want to hear now kind of where we were talking before the break was just the immediate aftermath. That this threat, this existential threat to your career, your livelihood, that you're feeling, in the wake of your parent coming out as transgender. Obviously the transition started, the hormones and all of that at this point, is Paula looking more feminine at this point? Is it getting harder to stay in that closet?

Jonathan Williams: Yeah, I think so and I think that was a big thing for me as well. I mean like I've said I have two sisters and then I'm the son. And so when you see your dad transitioning before your eyes, your idea of manhood changes with it. And so there was a sense in which she's becoming a thinner and her face is changing and her voice is changing and her hair's growing longer and I'm going okay, " Well, this was my dad, this was the epitome of manhood for me and now that manhood is literally changing before my eyes. Who does that make me in light of my dad?" And there was a bit of me - not I wasn't questioning who I was as a man. I think it was more just questioning my entire being. If she could change...

Kristin Kalbi: Wait, hold on, wait, wait, can we just pause on that, "Like, I'm not just questioning myself as a man, I'm questioning my entire being" and I think that that is something - another point that people don't necessarily realize is that when the identity of one member of a family shifts, the identity of every member of the family shifts in response.

Jonathan Williams: Absolutely. Absolutely and so my identity shifts in with it. Yeah. When Paula first told me her name, she said, you know, I said, "Hey, what's your new name? And she said, " It's Paula." And she said, "It's just one stinking letter." And I was like, "No, it is not one stinking letter that stinking letter represents the entire world's worth of change that I'm still trying to comprehend and go through and so are you. Don't downplay that's not one letter." And I think that's true, you've questioned every part of yourself and I questioned every part of myself, seeing Paula in front of me.

Kristin Kalbi: I think that's okay. That just gives me goosebumps. The idea that the letter A contains within it an entire world of identity, of self concept, of shifting narratives about the family, who I am in the family, who the other members of the family are . Like that the letter A has a whole universe inside of it of identities and anyway, that's just, I'm waxing a little poetic here, but I just think that I love that stuff.

Jonathan Williams: It's so true. It's so true because I'll geek out with you for a second. It's almost like that letter A for me at much strong believer in like multi-verse so for me, it was like, it opened up an entire different world. Like...

Kristin Kalbi: It's a portal to a whole other dimension of.. .

Jonathan Williams: Who was once my father is now a completely different person and I'm in a completely different kind of way of living and so I think that letter is it.

Kristin Kalbi: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That makes sense. What's your - was Paula - do you feel like, because I've seen interviews with Paul, I've seen her Ted Talk - I actually really appreciated her Ted Talk on the experience of being a woman versus being a man. There's a Ted Talk that basically Paula talks about getting on an airplane and sort of having men being rude to her over seat assignments and stuff that had never happened to her before when she presented as a man. And as a woman, I was kinda like, "Aha, Thank you." (chuckle) But, you know, I've seen Paula's talks and her presence and everything and she seems to me to have a lot of permission for the people around her to have you guys, her children, to have the feelings that you're feeling and to be willing to hear how painful her transition was for you. Did you feel like Paula gave you a lot of permission to - and a lot of kids - the reason I'm asking this Jonathan is because I feel like a lot of either spouses partners, and sometimes children, don't have permission to say, "I'm angry about your transition or I'm hurt or I feel whatever I'm feeling." Right and it seems like Paula maybe gave a lot of permission for you guys to express whatever was real for you.

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. Yeah. You know, I think at the beginning and when I seen the beginning of talking to the first two, three weeks of finding out. I think at that point, she was like, oh, "This is no big deal. This is okay. This is, you know, this is going to be fine. Hey, look at this video of this person who came out. " And very quickly, we said, "No, this is a giant, this is a life changing deal. And so you need to give it the weight that it deserves for our entire family." And she heard that really well and so from that point forward, she allowed us to question things, she allowed us to be angry, she listened to us, she allowed us in some cases just kind of allowed us to yell at her and then walk away. And, and, you know, I regret some of that. I regret a little bit of that but she was incredibly gracious throughout the process to her family and I'm thankful for.

Kristin Kalbi: Okay. I just wanted to see that was my impression just of her from watching videos and I just wanted to see if that jives with your experience. Okay. So how did you then go through the process of reconciliation? Did you feel like your father had died? Did you feel like you had to grieve your father? Did you feel like this is a total stranger? or...

Jonathan Williams: Oh yeah, yeah, yes to everything you said, yes. So I had to grieve and there's a sense in which I remember one time saying to my father while she was there, I started crying and she said, "What's wrong?" And I said, "You're dead. My dad is dead." But she's right there so that in itself is a mind blank, right, since...

Kristin Kalbi: Yeah. I mean, we do, because sometimes they'll say it's a mind fuck. There it is. (laughing)

Jonathan Williams: It's an absolute, yeah, absolutely. Yeah. To just be beside myself, I'm just crying, just heaving right, you know those heaving sobs and Paul is right there. She said, "What's wrong?" And I said, "My dad is dead. I don't have a dad anymore." And that person - it just, it's, I don't - I still, to this day don't quite know what to do with that. Or so my friends will say, "Oh, I'm going on this trip with my dad. We're going to go fishing here." And I'll say, "Oh my gosh, that's amazing, I can never go on a trip with my dad again." And then I'll call my dad and be like, "Hey dad, you want to do this?" But it's not my dad. So there's still a sense in which I'm trying to figure that out, you know, here we are almost 10 years later. I'm still trying to process that whole piece and still pops up from time to time, "Oh, this was what my dad would do, but here's my dad, but she doesn't do that anymore."

Kristin Kalbi: What might be some of those things, do you mind sharing? Like what was something that your dad would have done that Paula doesn't do? And then you can tell us something that Paula does do, that you can do with Paula.



Jonathan Williams: Right, right. You know, I think there's some physical things that Paula isn't able to do, although, you know, I'm not going to tell you how old Paula is, but you know, she has a grandparent, so maybe that's the...

Kristin Kalbi: There's an age. Yes. We do. There are a few, sometimes we get more limited with age with what we're able to do. Yeah.

Jonathan Williams: So maybe let's talk some of the things that the age as well, but, you know, I think there's been a couple of different occasions on which Paula has said to me specifically, "You know, I can no longer do this because I'm no longer the man I once was and so I physically can't do this thing that I used to do." One of those things is mountain biking.

Jonathan Williams: And so when she tells me that specifically, that's something yes, that's happening. I think, you know, on the flip side of all of this, there is a sense of in which this is no longer my dad, oh but there's my dad and personality wise it's the same person. And so there's a lot of conversations that we'll have, especially conversations around progressive religion and conversations around progressive social issues, that it's still like talking to Paul back when Paul was, or Paula was Paul and so I think that part is nice. So that part is familiar. That part is comfortable.

Kristin Kalbi: That makes sense. You know, one of the Red Table Talk, episode with Paula, with your dad, Paula, one of the things that I thought was so self-aware to say is that, you know, she said something like, You know it's very - I'm paraphrasing so please it's not a direct quote, but something like, "You know, reconciling that I exploded the entire family narrative." And I felt like that was something that was so self-aware and to have the presence to be able to say - to take ownership of that, say that this, " I understand that this transition process explodes the entire narrative of the family for everybody." And I just, I appreciated that acknowledgement from her.

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. It's interesting, right. This is a place where I don't think she thought that would happen and I think she admitted, I think she's missed from time to time that she did not think that was going to happen.

Kristin Kalbi: I don't think anybody really does think it's going to happen. That's the thing is I don't think people understand outside of this experience. I don't think they understand that all the identities get - It's like, you know, you have a puzzle that's 99% put together on the table and then somebody slams their hands down it and all the puzzle pieces go up in the air and you're putting a new puzzle back together only you don't have the box picture, you know, and it's that way for the whole family and people don't understand that. Yeah.

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. I absolutely love that. I'll tell a story that I've never told before. It was a couple of days before Red Table Talk and I'm on the phone with my mom and we're talking about something and my mom says to me, " You know, hey, when you do this show, making sure that this happens because I don't want this to blow up our family." And I said, "Mom," I said, " Our family has been blown up for six years." Now our family look when dad came out, like the way it was is no longer. And she stopped and she was like, "You're right. You're right. You're absolutely right. I don't know what I'm still trying to hold on to." But there's a sense in which, for those of us who haven't transitioned, there is a sense in which we do try to hold onto those things and stop it from blowing up and the more you stop it from blowing up the worse it becomes. It's almost like you just have to let those parts and pieces go in the air so you can start building it.

Kristin Kalbi: Right. You have to let it all fall apart. Like, I think that's the hardest part of healing for Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People and possibly for children too now that we're talking is that and it was for me as well. Letting the collapse happen, letting, allowing, not resisting, like that's so hard to not resist this thing that you didn't want to happen in your life, you didn't ask for, you didn't expect. We all - no one gets out alive in this life in terms of having things that they didn't expect, didn't want to happen to them and then it's like, when they do like, what's our response? And I think you're right. Like the more that we can accept that this is the new reality and that takes - it is a process, it doesn't happen immediately. The easier it goes, like we come out on the other side, maybe less scathed in some way. I want to, oh, go ahead...

Jonathan Williams: But no, I was going to agree with you. I was going to say, we fight that blowing up. We fight that implosion or the explosion, whatever you want to call it. And I think in my story, and it sounds like in your story as well, that the minute we stopped fighting that, is the minute that we start to make progress, that the family starts to heal and I think that's so important. You know, we fight so hard to keep things, quote, unquote more and the second we accept that it's not, it gets better.

Kristin Kalbi: And sometimes people even want to go 20 years out, 15 years out, they still want to go back and make it not have happened. And that just - that's one of the reasons I really wanted to have you on today because we were talking about in your terminology, redemption, but at the same, in my terminology, it would be - gosh, I'll have to think about what it would be in my terminology. I'll think about that, but in your terminology it would be redemption. And so, like, what was the key process for you that really turned the corner? Like when did you turn a corner and what was that over and what was it like?

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. You know, I write about it in the book, but there was a specific time where I just felt like Paula, I did not want her to be estranged from and especially from my kids. That she was and still is an incredible grandparent. My kids were, I believe they were six and four at the time, something to that effect and I wanted her to meet the kids but I knew I had to talk with her first. And so we talked and we talked for a good three, four hours. We were in Brooklyn and basically just kind of laid it all out. "Like, hey, this really put me in a professional bind. Like I really got messed up by this and my professional livelihood got messed up by this and this put me in a personal crisis. You know, I didn't know who I was because I didn't know who you were." And then she was able to say some things to me that I thought were important and appropriate. She said, "Well, you and your, in your professional bind, you did not help me as I was being shown the door by the evangelical Christian community. You did not stick up for me. You did not back me up on that."

Kristin Kalbi: Right and Paula last, just for the listeners, Paula lost all of her jobs in the evangelical church within like a one-week period once she came out. Yeah. So, right, right. Yep. So, okay. So she said, "You didn't, you didn't go to bat for me."

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. She said, "You didn't go to bat for me" even to which I said, "You know, I was angry and so when I'm angry, I don't want to go to bat for you. I want to be resentful with everybody." And so we, you know, I had to apologize to her and she did the same for me and then we literally turned around and we walked back to my apartment and that's when she met my kids for the first time and really from that point forward, that was the point in which healing began and...

Kristin Kalbi: Wow. And did your kids - so that your kids were already four, six by the time Paula met them and did they know Paula as grandpa at all before? Or how did that, like and did your kids be like, you know, wait, grandpa's a woman or what, you know, how did that go?

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. Yeah. So we told them the week before where we said, "Hey, grandpa's going to look different" and they did know grandpa so they did, they were familiar with grandpa. "So grandpa is going to look different in, you know, grandpa, feels like a woman on the inside. So she's going to start, appearing and dressing as a woman on the outside" And the kids, I don't know if they necessarily understood it or not, I'm not sure what they thought, but my older one, my six, six year old said, "I think I'm going to miss grandpa." And I said, "That's okay." I said, "You're allowed to miss grandpa, but grandpa will be different and we can even give her a new name", and they got excited about that. So she came back to the house and they were prepared and so they saw her and it was silence, right. There was a lot of silence for, it felt like two hours, it was 30 seconds I'm sure. And then my little one, my four year old asked, she said, "Grandpa, do you still have a penis?" (laughter) (Kristen: okay just get right to it.) Just get that broke the tension, I like that just broke the tension. Everyone started laughing and at that point I remember pretty specifically my kids grabbed Paula and they said, "Hey, we got new press on nails, come look at our pressing nails." And they brought her back to their room and that was it. I mean, that's as easy as it happened.

Kristin Kalbi: Yeah. I mean, that's what I mean by, I think young kids adjust pretty, pretty well. You know, if there's a lot of love and a lot of acceptance around the coming out, that sort of thing. And what do your kids call Paula? (Jonathan: They call her Grandpaula) and I think that's really, that's super, that's super cute, but I mean, come on, that's super cute. What, so what did ended up - I want to talk to you about your career. Like what ended up, what did end up happening in your career over all of this? What the fallout was? And then we'll take a quick break and then we're going to talk about your mom. So what happened to, what did end up happening in your career?

Jonathan Williams: Right. You know, when we talked about two seconds ago where we said when we stopped denying and stopped resisting, we opened ourselves up to a ton of healing. And so when I stopped at denying who Paula was and stop resisting that I was able to be, I hope I was empathetic in some respect, but had a lot of empathy towards the fact that she, like you said, lost all her jobs in a matter of a week and had limited acknowledgement of her as a full human being and especially in the Christian evangelical church was seen as persona non grata, right. That was that bothered me a great deal and I had to make a choice. So I said, " You know, I can secure live in my privilege. I can live in this place. I can not bring this up. I can continue to get this money for my funders and all the rest and grow this church

Jonathan Williams: or I can go out on a limb and support Paula and the millions like her in this country and be loud about it and say that our church is going to be an open affirming inclusive church," and I chose the latter. And so I say it all the time, you know, we'd lost hundreds of thousands of dollars. We'd lost half of our congregation at the time. It was the best decision ever made. So, so yeah, so now we are, you know, I no longer work, I just stepped out of the church that I founded last month actually.

Kristin Kalbi: Congratulations on taking a leap.

Jonathan Williams: I mean, it was good. It's celebratory.

Kristin Kalbi: Yeah. It's terrifying and amazing at the same time.

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. And that's exactly what it is. But you know, our church is now, you know, one of very few in the evangelical Christian world that is open and affirming and we have a membership that runs through the thousands grew exponentially because we made that. So, to me that was the cherry on top of restoration, so to speak.

Kristin Kalbi: Thank you so much for sharing that unbelievable full circle journey. I just, I feel like it's so packed with wisdom, that our listeners can hopefully hear and embrace. I want to take a quick break and then when we come back, we're going to talk about your mom. So we'll be right back with more of Jonathan Williams. (background music) Hey everyone. OurPath, formerly the Straight Spouse Network is looking to add new support contacts to expand our volunteer force. Support contacts are the people who reach out to Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People in those critical days, post discovery or disclosure. Support contacts are the heart and soul of OurPath and we need more of them. If you remember those early weeks and months in this process, you know how critical, compassionate, neutral, nonjudgmental support can be. And if you're far enough along in your own healing, that you are ready to be there for someone else, we hope you'll join us. Visit [OurPath.org](http://OurPath.org) and click on, Become a Support Contact, under Give Support to learn more. (music ending).

Kristin Kalbi: And we're back with Jonathan Williams. So Jonathan, when you and I chatted on the phone before this interview we talked about your mom a little bit. And one of the things that I notice, and I think Partners of Trans People who go through this and Straight Partners as well, is when you're doing the Red Table Talk with Paula and you and your sister, and you're doing the Ted Talk and it's you and Paula, the person missing from this picture is your mom, the spouse, the partner, the wife. And I think it speaks to, a lot of partners feel like there is maybe not room for them at the table in this experience. And I just want to just open up to you what it was like to, I don't want to speak for your mom, but I would like to address the idea that there's this whole other being in this experience. That at the moment, you know, we're not hearing from and she is a full human being in this as well that has a whole experience that nobody really gets to hear about and I just want to see if there's anything that you can talk about it. Like what it was like watching your mom go through this? What it was like watching your mom experience this?

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. It's been the most difficult for my mom, I think this transition has been the most difficult for her. And I think again and unfortunately evangelical Christianity plays such a big part of the story for her as well where she lived in this world with Paul and then Paul transitions and my mom has to hear from the evangelical Christian side. Well, you know, "This is awful, this is terrible, we're so sorry and we're praying that Paula turns around and becomes Paul again." And my mom's like, "That's awful. Why would you pray for that? Like, that's a terrible thing to pray for." And then on the other side, it goes back to that a perspective of that, "Isn't it great that Paul is finally the human being that she always wanted to be" And my mom's like, "Well, that's great, but I don't have a spouse and my spouse has gone. I, you know, I'm separated from my spouse and I didn't necessarily want that." So, for both sides, there is no peace, you know. On both sides from my mom, it's almost like, you know, I don't have peace in this at all and I think it's been, I, yeah, it's been hard for her. It's been a different in my experience in talking with her, I would imagine it's hard for her.



Kristin Kalbi: Yeah. Well, in our experience in supporting Partners of Trans People, it is, you know, it's a whole experience that again, with the identities, you know, you have to ask yourself typically, most overwhelmingly right now, the people who we support are women whose partners transition male to female. That's the age the middle-aged cohort that are coming out after marriage and children as trans, are people, are men, who've been married to women and have children, right. And it's overwhelmingly, not that there aren't a few women who transitioned to men and then their husbands come seek support, but it's overwhelmingly women who are seeking support. And, you know, one of the things that they experienced over and over again is like, you know, their identities have to - if I'm going to stay in this relationship, I have to reconceptualize my sexuality. I have to reconceptualize; Do I see myself as a lesbian, staying with a trans woman? Do I, can I see myself as a lesbian? Is that authentic to my sexuality? There's a whole added layer in terms of sexual identity and in terms of sexuality and authentic sexual expression that go onto the spouse or Partner of the Trans Person that people don't necessarily account for I think. And so we, you know, we wish your mom just all of the best and all of the healing and good vibes and things that we can possibly send to her.

Jonathan Williams: Absolutely. Yeah and not that I want to talk about my parents sex lives.

Kristin Kalbi: Yeah. Of course. Right. Like, that's not what works, we're not talking about that.

Jonathan Williams: The last thing I want to do. But I think we brought - I think regardless, yes, I feel deep sympathy and as much empathy as I can feel because that is a decision that I've watched my mom make that is heartbreaking. It's heartbreaking decision to have to say, and, you know, am I going to change my sexual identity to continue to stay with the spouse I've had, for my parents' case over 40 years, and that's a decision that nobody wants to have to make. And so I think for everybody that has to confront that, yes, to those same well-wishes and those same, you know, ways to support them so glad that you all are able to support folks who have to make those choices.

Kristin Kalbi: Well, let's just talk a little bit, I want to kind of get your advice here as we get close to time. I want to ask you advice on a couple of fronts. Like one, what do you think that Paula did really, really well that you feel helped the family heal? And then there, I don't want to say what did Paula do wrong, but I also want to say, like, to other people who are listening, if there's trans partners out there who are listening, who have children who are going through this, like, what would you say, "You know, hey, this will help your kids transition, or your family, or your partner transition more successfully and healthfully versus not." Do you know what I'm saying? Am I, did I ask that question in any kind of a coherent way?

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. And I think maybe we've sort of hit on a few different parts, but just to create clarity around that. Yeah. I think what she did well was allow us to be heard. When I say us, my mom, my sisters, myself, allow us to be hurt when we were angry when we did have questions when we were struggling. I think, the other thing that she did well eventually was to say, "Hey, I blew up the family narrative and so now we need you to start putting it back together" And we almost needed her permission or we needed her to say that so that we could all do that. Because I think the thing that maybe she could have done better was at the beginning say, "Hey, I'm about to blow up the family narrative instead of just saying, " Oh, this is a transition, but it's okay. Everything is going to stay the same."

Kristin Kalbi: Right. Like, don't minimize what is at like actually acknowledge how huge a shift that it is.

Jonathan Williams: Exactly, exactly. Acknowledge that your entire being is changing and that we're all going to have to change as well and that it's going to completely change the dynamic of the family and then we can start from neutral.

Kristin Kalbi: You know, I think one of the things she said on the Red Table Talk, and this is a quote, but I appreciated it. She said, " You know, we're, so self-absorbed the first year basically because we're so happy to be transitioning" and that she said something, "I think we should just go in a room." You know, like in other words, she was acknowledging that during transition, there's not a lot of room for anybody else's experience. And that's a common thing we hear. You know what I mean? Like, I think that would make sense that during transition is a very self absorbing period and yet everybody else is like going through emotional turmoil.

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. And there's gotta be a balance there because knowing what I know now, I want my father to finally feel comfortable with her body. I want her to really, you know, celebrate the fact that she is who she's wanted to be this entire time. And how do we balance that with what it's doing to the rest of the family and the chemistry and neuro pathways that are changing their brains. You know, I don't know if I have the perfect answer. I don't know.

Kristin Kalbi: Well, and what would you say, you know, just for other people who are going through this, whose parents are transitioning, maybe they're young adults, maybe they're teenagers, or maybe they're already adults. Like what, what would you advise them in terms of grappling with and coping and processing, parents transition?

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. I think first and foremost, I've told people in the past who have gone through a similar experience, you are allowed to be sad. You're allowed to be angry. You're allowed to feel like this isn't fair, you're allowed to feel those things. The rest of the world is telling you, "That Oh, you should be incredibly happy, you should really support your parent or whoever it might be and I can't believe you not support them by crying about this", whatever the case may be and that's not right. You are allowed to cry if you need to cry to be sad, if you need to be sad to be mad and all that. I, you know, I remember just standing at a checkout line at a supermarket and it said the headline was like Kim Kardashian blasts, you know, blast Caitlyn Jenner by posting a picture of Bruce. And I remember thinking like, "That's awful because I'm sure she just missed Bruce and that was kind of it." And, and it's sad that we have to treat these narratives that say we're not allowed to miss somebody who used to be. And so I think that's the biggest thing I want to tell people; if you have permission to feel all those things and it's okay, it's normal and it's not a front to your family member who's transitioning.

Kristin Kalbi: Right. Oh, that's so - I love that full permission to have the full range of emotional responses that you have and that's normal. Jonathan, I am so grateful that you came on today. I feel like it's such a healing and affirmative conversation to have and I want to just let everybody know that we have on the OurPath.org website, we have an all new resources section. We have resources specifically for Partners of Trans People and for LGBTQ+ partners and we're going to post your book, and the Ted Talk with you and Paula and the Red Table Talk links to that in the resources section on our website so that everyone can find those if they want to be able to check that out further. And again, thank you so much. Your book is called, "She's My Dad, a Father's Transition and a Son's Redemption." So just so everybody can if they want to go look it up now they can and again, thank you for this, I feel like just really wonderful conversation.

Jonathan Williams: Yeah. Thank you for having me. It was a great conversation and I'm glad that you're doing it with you all. I think the work you're doing is so incredibly important so thank you so much.

Kristin Kalbi: And please, you know, my best to both your mom and your dad.

Jonathan Williams: Thank you.

Kristin Kalbi: You. So thank you again, Jonathan, for coming on the show today, and I want to thank our listeners for tuning in today. Be sure to check out the OurPath website for all of the great resources, the podcast, the Straight Talk blog that are all found there. Don't forget to subscribe to our podcast if you're not already subscribed, you can find us wherever you get your podcasts. This is a reminder that the views of the host, yours truly, are not necessarily the views of our path or its board of directors. Thanks to our engineer and editor, Drew, right here at Gwynne Sound in Cincinnati, Ohio. And this is a reminder until next time, keep using your voice. (background music) Transcribed by: Designrr

Jonathan Williams Bio: Jonathan Williams is a writer who covers religion and spirituality, current trends, and LGBTQIA inclusion and justice. His Book, "She's My Dad: A Father's Transition and a Son's Redemption, was released in 2019. In addition to being a published author, Jonathan has written for the Huffington Post, Faithfully Magazine, The Christian Standard, and more. Jonathan's has been featured in The New York Times, Red Table Talk, and PBS. In November 2018 Jonathan and his Parent, Paula spoke at TEDWomen in Palm Springs, California. Their talk currently has over 1.6 million views. Jonathan resides in Brooklyn, NY with his spouse and two daughters and roots passionately for his beloved NY Mets.