

Intro for the podcast:

Welcome to the PFE perspectives podcast. Here at PFE we are about helping every women to live with confidence and creativity in every area of her life. We believe the good news of Jesus empowers us in this endeavour and we'd love to share a bit about why.

I'm your host Connie and in our first episode we are going to be talking about the theme of loss and longing. After a year where we've all lost so much, how do we make sense of it? Where do we look for hope? What can we learn?

Join me as I chat with Leah about grief, trauma and loss in family life.

Interview with Leah

Welcome Leah

So Leah – you are a successful lady in her 30s. Graduate of a top UK university, General Counsel in a FinTech start-up, trustee of a charity facilitating emotional freedom in young people, central London home owner, and perhaps most importantly of all you share your house with Saphy, a gorgeous Cavapoo puppy. You are writing a memoir on the side and I hear you once even lived in a castle.

As I reel that all off it would be easy for me, for all of us listening to think you've made it, you're living the dream. But as for all of us in life, behind the achievements and wonderful opportunities stands a measure of loss. The things we don't tend to list in a bio.

Leah's it's a joy to welcome you to the podcast and thank you for being willing to let us in behind the scenes. It isn't easy and we are so thankful that you have taken the time to come and share with us today.

We are going to be chatting about this theme of loss and longing in the context of your family life.

Leah: *What an introduction! Thank you so much for having me. I am absolutely delighted to be having this conversation with you today.*

1. Can you set the scene for us – what was life like for you growing up?

- Who was there?

I grew up in what, from the outside, looked like a stable Christian home with two parents and one younger brother.

- What were you like as a kid?

I played several team sports, invested a lot of time in violin, and aimed for top of the class in English and French, sometimes even Maths! My parents were scientists, so there was always a lot of disappointment about my performance in Biology and Chemistry! We weren't allowed to play video games, and were only allowed to watch about three TV shows, so I usually had my head in a book. At church on Sundays, we were always the best dressed, and singing in choir and playing in the music group meant that I wasn't usually in Sunday school.

- Perhaps into that there was a darker side...

Family was functional, but looking back, it was extremely dysfunctional. When you're younger, there are a lot of things you don't understand. Our school fees and musical education were prioritised. But home-life was extremely chaotic – we were late for school every day, and my Mother had a tendency to regularly fly off the handle. My Father had a job in intelligence, so travelled a lot and was always working late, and they were both studying for PhDs in our formative years.

Connie - It sounds like you were a busy kid! It's interesting to hear a bit about your experience of life looking one way but what was going on in the background was quite different. You mentioned your Mother there.

2. Can you tell us a little bit about what it was like day to day living with a Mother who would 'fly off the handle'?

I'd say unpredictable. Sometimes I was scared, sometimes I just rolled my eyes.

- If you feel comfortable perhaps you could share an incident as an example.

She lived in her own world, by her own rules – at no point was she trying to be conventional. She was adamant that housework and cooking and laundry was not for her, and not her responsibility. Consequently those things fell to me. She spent hours in her study on the computer. I would get screamed at most days, usually with expletives, and spent most of my childhood being told I was a moron with respect to everything except the way I played my violin.

My mother had taught me to read very, very young. And I expect she spent quite a lot of time with me before my brother was born when I was nearly four. I don't remember any of it. Emotions ran very high in the house and I've blocked most of it out. On reflection as an adult, I can see ways I was neglected, and arguably emotionally, and sometimes physically abused – it is obviously not right, although I still am in denial about quite a lot of it. I say I, rather than we, because my brother had me, and I think I managed to shield him from a lot of things.

- **How did that affect you as a child?**

As I child, I would have argued I was relatively unscathed – I kept to myself, pretended to be outgoing at school even though I was very nervous and on edge, and tried to stay out of harm's way. I became a classic perfectionist in the hope that I would be accepted, possibly to prove my Mother wrong – I'm not sure. I don't think I was loved (I don't think I was seen or heard) in the ways I needed as a child.

Connie - Leah thank you for sharing that, these things are so complex and it is generous of you to be open about them.

3. Could you tell us a little about how this plays out in your relationship with her today?

That's a tricky question. I suppose the headline is that a lot has happened since then. My parents' marriage broke down when I was at university, my Mother has had several run ins with the law, and still believes she was wrongly incarcerated. Her career as a biopharmaceutical scientist has not survived the various events. More recently, she has been living a homeless and hoarding co-existence, and it has been extremely difficult to walk with her through that.

I suppose our relationship was toxic, definitely co-dependent for a long time. I really struggled with saying "no" to her. She has no affinity for boundaries, and used to chastise me for my faith if I didn't give her what she was asking for. I felt extremely manipulated – sometimes she would show up to my work unannounced, with unreasonable demands. I didn't realise how vulnerable I was. There was a lot of shame and guilt to work through, and a very long process of working out what is and isn't my responsibility.

Today, the landscape hasn't changed much, but I am different, and my expectations of her are very different.

- Ongoing nature of the trauma... still experiencing that in relating to your mother. E.g could share the police call story.

The straw that broke the camel's back though was another incident where she assaulted a police officer. She was not in her right mind at the time. Ten years earlier court records show she was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder but I had no idea what it meant. She had been sectioned before to protect her (rather than others) but it didn't do her or our nuclear family any favours. Naturally I was nervous when she was sectioned again, but this time, I was

her nearest relative under the Mental Health Act, as the eldest child, and all the while having not spoken to her for 18 months or so.

It's fair to say that I didn't cope very well with that. I had recently been asked to leave my job, various relationships were crumbling around me, I was extremely insecure, and had lost all sense of confidence. My resilience was waning and I had to face the facts: I really needed professional help. I began an arduous process of trauma counselling and I cannot explain how much stuff I am still sorting through almost four years on!

Connie – Leah clearly that is a lot. A lot to experience, to process and to work through. These things don't just stop one day, they leave a legacy.

4. What legacy have your childhood and these ongoing experiences you've described left you with?

- How what you experienced then and in an ongoing way plays out in your life (complex PTSD and explaining as much as you are comfortable with about the wrestling and struggle internally).

For those who don't know, PTSD is a mental health condition that is developed after someone endures a traumatic experience. In the UK, complex PTSD means that you develop the PTSD symptoms (flashbacks, nightmares, feeling very anxious and insomnia) with a few more thrown in, like difficulty controlling emotions, feeling angry or distrustful.

To your question, "Legacy" is such a funny word. It's usually used more positively to show the impact someone has left on the world, or legally, it's the definition given to a sum of money left to a beneficiary. I feel like my legacy has been less palatable – something I have had to wrestle with to feel any kind of gratitude for. My adverse childhood experiences gave rise to more adverse adult experiences – the kind that it will take a lifetime to fully heal from. And that's okay. I embrace discomfort now, I'm not immobilised by uncertainty, and change is my friend.

If I'm completely honest, the thing that wound me up the most was having to disclose my relationship with stress to my work private health insurance because my diagnosis had come through a therapist! Unfortunately, it's a lot slower than a broken bone -- healing is possible eventually, but sometimes you have to experience more pain to get to a place where you are ready and able to heal. Knowing that I wasn't going to have to live with these symptoms forever was really encouraging, and knowing that it was possible for me to change through counselling, through close friendships and writing and exercising and prayer was a lifeline.

What I would say is that I needed to work through the ways that my adverse experiences had affected me. I was shocked by how much pride sits behind every defence mechanism, and I had a whole room of defences! I knew my self-sufficiency was holding me back, and because I questioned God's goodness I didn't want to run to Him.

5. It sounds so complex Leah and hard to know how to process. Yet you have been working through this grief and loss while holding down a job as a lawyer, writing a book... I could go on! **Would you mind sharing a bit about how you have navigated these challenges?**

Of course! I have an unparalleled drive and always have one too many projects on the go.

- How have you sought to make sense of this stuff?

Counselling has helped me to process my emotions – I learned to suppress everything; to push my anger down. I learned to be silent when I ought to have screamed, and to appease when I was hurting. I have had to relearn – to rebuild from the foundations. The past will not let you go until it has had its way with you, so in one sense "you can run, but you can't hide!"

- Practical things you have tried? Where have you looked for hope?

I have also done quite a few Sozo sessions, a healing ministry designed by Bethel Church. I have read more books on psychology and mental health in quick succession because I have a voracious need to understand. But in my personal Bible reading, it is clear to me that God doesn't need me to understand, He needs me to trust Him, to believe that He loves me, and to know that He is good. I have felt blessed to engage in a process of wrestling with my faith – knowing God's faithfulness means that I know He will never let me go.

I carry a huge amount of stress in my body, so I'm a huge proponent of cranial sacral therapy and flotation! There is nothing I enjoy more than an hour in a tank of warm water filled with 500kg of Epsom salts!

- How have you grown/learnt through all this?

That we all need to change – to grow – in some way. But also that change is not rocket science and it is difficult and slow. It's not something you can be good at!

- How has it affected your relationship with God?

I've become a lot more honest with God, and a lot quicker to make connections. So if I am seething with rage, I am quicker to let that surface, and when I am able to recognise that I am angry, it is so much easier to move to forgiveness. I am less rigid with my faith, less anxious about how God is going to provide what I need and the timing associated with that. I still get incredibly disappointed, and I know that there are something things that will remind me of the trauma I have experienced until die.

Ultimately, I am learning to just be. To be present with God. To be present with myself, and to just be present with others. No pressure. No stress. No fear.

6. Thank you for sharing so openly Leah. It's a gift to us that you have been willing to be so open. Thank you. For many of us listening, we may or may not have experienced this sort of grief or loss. **From what you have learnt and are learning, what advice would you give to all of us grappling with loss this year... be that through covid or other things?**

Our horizons are naturally short termist and our experience of time is warped. It's really hard to live one day at a time, but I think that has helped me not to get overwhelmed or anxious. I am devastated by how much loss, seemingly unnecessary, is being sustained around the world as direct and indirect consequences of Covid-19, but I am encouraged that none of it has escaped God's notice. I am encouraged by the little things – new relationships with neighbours, local businesses thriving, random conversations with colleagues on Zoom providing unforeseen joy and humour. When we look at loss, we also have to count our blessings, and God in His kindness never allows loss without blessings to flow through too.

7. One more thing I just wanted to ask before we wrap up. It has clearly been hard, what keeps you going?

I think that's the hardest question you've asked me yet! My University college motto is "non nobis solum" which means, Not For Ourselves Alone. The idea that my story could help one person grow in their faith or find the bravery to find emotional freedom means that I have to keep going. I have several challenging projects on the go, but honestly, like most of us, I'm living one day at a time. So I'm thankful for the ability to do that!

8. Leah if people want to connect with you or find out more about your writing how can they do that?

Ooooo, I have a new Instagram - @seenheardspoken. I'm in the process of setting up a website which I will link to there. The working title of my book is Nearest Adult, and I can't wait to find a literary agent, and hopefully a publisher at some point this year!

Thank you so much...

At the end...

If you'd like to hear more from Leah, alongside other speakers, with the chance to ask questions and engage in the conversation then join us for our upcoming event: 'Is all lost? Finding Jesus in my loss' on Tuesday 23rd March. That'll be on youtube and facebook live and you can find the link in the show notes.