

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 53 – Michael Graff – Along the Way

Memory and Love

And now a personal word,

In a class I teach called *The Good Life*, we spend the first week of class talking about death. We don't talk about it for very long. The mood in the room gets complicated: fascination mingles with moments of grief and feelings of dread, sadness, and despair. The conversation tests the meaning of our lives. What's the point of anything if we are going to die? So we come up with ways not to die. We believe we will live forever in heaven. We fall in love. We create artifacts that outlast us. It's our only way to get on with it. The label we give it all is the "human condition."

We move on to other topics in the course. We discuss happiness, venturing, ways of knowing, relationships, and material success. We grasp at insights. We piece things together. We make plans. The question driving the course is what to do with this life.

It's the same question that informs Michael Graff's work. To read his columns and essays and articles is to consider reasons that keep us soldiering on. He writes about the loss of medical care in rural communities, racing muscle cars along highways, skydiving 20,000 thousand times, a basketball player who made a famous shot who later committed suicide, eating crab cakes with his brother on the Chesapeake Bay, and finding his way in the wilderness. In all his works, facts are reported. A beginning, middle, and end to the story takes the reader on a journey. But there is something more in his work: a search for lost time, a remembrance of things past, moments of involuntary memory that lead to fragments of recollection. These are themes familiar to readers of Marcel Proust, who famously wrote of the memories that flooded him when he dipped a madeleine biscuit in his tea.

I don't know if Michael has Marcel Proust in mind when he writes. I do think Michael explores memory in his writing because all remembrances are stories that begin and end. As do our lives. As does every love.

When all of life is fleeting, when all that once exists fades away, Michael seeks to slow time down, to express eternity now, to give voice to what we have before it's gone. We hear it in his love for his wife, Laura, heart stopping in its devotion, heartbreaking that it will end.

And this is where Jason Isbell, singer-songwriter from Alabama, comes in. Jason sings about the same things Michael Graff writes about: salvaging meaning from loss, downfall and redemption, the fragility and tenderness of life. Michael mentioned Jason's song "If We Were Vampires," in which a husband tells a wife that he hopes it isn't him who's left behind.

In a profile on Jason Isbell on *CBS Sunday Morning*, reporter Anthony Mason explored the love Jason has for his wife, Amanda Shires. Mason said this about Jason Isbell: "He might be a solo act, but he is not alone." That's how I think of the love Michael Graff has for his wife, Laura, and his work as a writer exploring what to do with this life: "He might be a solo act, but he is not alone."

That is the story that Michael is telling. We get on with it by loving the people we are with and the moment we are in.

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