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Lily Cornell Silver: I'm Lily Cornell Silver and welcome to Mind Wide Open, my mental health-focused interview series. Today, I am talking to Alua Arthur, who is a death doula, as well as a minister professor and attorney. She is also the founder of Going With Grace, which offers support services and classes for end-of-life planning. Thank you so much for watching and I hope you enjoy. Hi, Alua thank you so much for being here.

Alua: Hi Lilly, I'm happy to be here.

Lily: I'm so excited to talk to you. I would love to start just by the baseline. I think there's probably a lot of people watching that don't know what a death doula is or didn't know that you could be a death doula or what that means. So tell us what that looks like on a day to day for you.

Alua: Sure. Big picture, a death doula is somebody who does all of the non-medical and holistic caregiving and support of the dying person and the family through the process. That looks like a number of things: from emotional support - helping people reconcile their emotions around dying - work through their relationships around death, to spiritual questions about the afterlife, if there is any at all, but just getting clear on what their beliefs are, practical things like getting their affairs in order, and also just logistical things like organizing, who's bringing food and what to do with the car and stuff of that sort. A death doula is really a supportive person who walks people through the end of life and the family.

Lily: You do a lot [chuckles]. That's a ton for one person, but it also sounds really specific to the person that you're working with because obviously everyone has very, very different belief systems when it comes to what happens in the afterlife and how they want to feel. How do you navigate people maybe with very different belief systems than your own, or what does that look like for you?

Alua: It's our job to stay as neutral as possible, to allow the person who's dying to have their own belief system. I'm here to like help people sort through whatever's coming up for them and help them get a little bit more clear, as best as they can, or just even be a bouncing-off place for ideas and questions. Some people want to talk about it, but other people don't at all and for the people that don't want to talk about it, that's just fine. The doula's job is just to meet people where they are, to offer them support where they are.



I think people often think that my job is to help people like get comfortable with dying or bring people into acceptance of the fact that they're dying and that's not remotely it. It's just to be of support where they are and what they need support with. Does that make sense?

Lily: Absolutely. No, it makes complete sense because it's such a, such a subjective subject. I would imagine that anyone that you work with could be on total opposite ends of the spectrum on any given day, any given month. That neutrality seems like it would be vital to be able to do this job.

Alua: Necessary and also constantly checking in with our own personal relationship and our feelings about death so that I'm not putting it on other people. If I end up working with, let's say a black woman in her mid-'40s who is of a certain education status or something like that, I might collapse our two experiences and think that she has some of the fears that I do, which means that I'm going to be trying to support her for what I think she needs, rather than showing up to support her for what she actually needs.

That doula's constantly need to do the work around our personal relationship with death doesn't mean that we can't be afraid of dying. It doesn't mean that we can't have our own sticking points. We just need to be aware of it so that we're not spilling it out on somebody else.

Lily: Absolutely. I think about that a little bit when it comes to this series for me and I got involved in mental health advocacy because I struggle with my mental health and because that's something that I'm passionate about. I'm wondering if you got involved in this work because that's something that touched you personally, death and dying touched you personally, and how you navigate that.

Alua: Oh, Lily, what a great question. I am a lawyer by training.

Lily: Wow. Okay.

Alua: I practiced law for 10 years. I worked at legal aid. So it's like feel-good law stuff, but something wasn't all the way right and it manifested in the very severe clinical depression where I took a leave of absence from work. I couldn't manage to get myself up and dressed and eating food and listening to clients and filling out documents. If you've ever had serious depression, you know how emptying it can be and I had nothing left for anybody. I had very little left for myself, even and during that time, during my leave of absence, I traveled to Cuba and I met a woman on a bus who had uterine cancer, a fellow traveler. And we talked a lot about her disease. I asked her I mean, I was stunned, like, I hadn't known anybody around my age who died. There had been a guy in high school when I was 17 but I wasn't close to him and so it had never directly impacted my life and this is the first person who was around my age, and we talked a lot about her death. I asked if this disease were it for her life, if this disease is the thing that killed her, what would still be undone?



Like, what would she have made of her life if this was going to be it, and I should have been asking myself those same questions but I hadn't and thinking about my life and what it had been thus far I wasn't feeling complete, I hadn't felt like I'd used up what I'd been given when I came to earth. I wanted to do something that felt like it was in contribution in a meaningful way. Depression had made it such that I was living completely out of alignment with every part of myself.

I just couldn't find my way back to my center but through that conversation, and also through the help of tremendous therapy, and taking good time off of work, I was able to start trying to imagine what life could be like for me, again, a life that I felt really engaged with and sitting on the bus with this woman talking about her death was the first time in a long time that I felt, that spark of life again, in my body.

I leaned into the conversation like my eyes were open, my heart was beating fast, I was breathing deeply. I was like, yes, there is some juice here, let's do this, let's have this conversation, and also started to realize that people aren't having it. That conversation, that brush with death wasn't mine directly, although I had almost been hit by a car earlier that day but that was the way. I know. Here's a really wild bit, is that the car that had almost hit me she was in that car, this woman that I ended up talking to on the bus, and I didn't know when we're talking.

Lily: You were really meant to-- The universe is going to make sure you met her in some way.

Alua: All the days when I'm like, why am I doing this like I'm I thinking about my death all the time. It's so weird, right? I remember that I really have no choice. I was on a crash course with this work anyway. That's how the work came to pass and I got really intensely focused on it, because I felt alive again for the first time in a really long time. I threw myself into it and then not long after that my brother-in-law, Peter, St. John, got sick and then about four months later, he was dying. I packed up my bags and went to New York, and got to be with him and my sister and my niece during the end of his life and that's where all the ideas I had on the bus with this fellow traveler became real and the company I run that trains death doulas, Going With Grace, was born right after that.

Lily: Beautiful, that's amazing and I think about, my own experiences with bouts of depression and how in those times, you desperately want to feel that spark, you want to feel something but there is something out of alignment, like no matter what you do, you don't have the energy. I mean, that's been my experience, I didn't have the energy to put it towards anything, and so to find something that gives you that spark is so important. I'm wondering how you take care of yourself on a day-to-day basis. When it comes to engaging in this work.

My first interview that I did was with this amazing woman, and one of my close friends, Laura Lipski, who is a trauma expert and she's really open about, she works in trauma stewardship and there was a point at the beginning of her career where she almost had like a mental break because she was putting so much of herself into this work that personally affected her because it's around trauma. Now it's a matter

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of her making sure that she's able to help others and take care of herself. What does that look like for you?

Alua: Well, I'm happy you asked. I just came back from Puerto Rico, I had a birthday on Saturday.

Lily: Happy birthday.

Alua: Thank you, 10 of my best friends from different points in my life, were there. For five days we ate delicious food and danced and drank and laughed, so many laughs, and stared out at nature and felt really grateful for the gifts of both life, but also the gift of love, to be really seen by other people who I've allowed to see me. One of the ways that I do my best to take care of myself is staying vulnerable, and not pretending like I got it all together because I can do that easily. So staying vulnerable is one way I'm allowing myself to be loved, receiving love.

Also playing constantly with my shadow side, recognizing when I am behaving out of some stories that say that I'm not good enough or not worthy or, I'm not loved or something, like paying attention to those conversations and shutting them down as much as possible, interrupting them I'd say. Then also the other things like went on a bike ride by the beach this morning. I have a team that handles all the operations at work. I can write in my journal and stare out the window because staring out the window is one of my favorite life activities. I think it's a good use of time. I take naps and I eat potato chips, take a bath, push back, drink water, [crosstalk] that feel good to my spirit.

Lily: Right. Checking in with yourself. Amazing. You're also a professor and a minister. Does that fill your cup in the same way? Is that like, does that ignite that spark for you as well?

Alua: What really fills my cup is when with death doula students, they come and they think that I'm teaching them but we are all equally teacher and student. I learned so much from them. They are constantly inspiring me because they're coming from their own perspectives and ideas about these things that I spend a lot of time thinking about but I don't know everything. I barely know anything at all. It's so wonderful to be in the company of people that have this fresh energy and excitement about and want to learn and have questions. That's really inspiring. And also therapy. Let's not forget therapy. I'm talking to my therapist in an hour.

Lily: We're very pro-therapy on this show. It's definitely every I literally cannot get through episode without being "like my therapist told me this".

Alua: "My therapist said...", I'm just so annoying every time I say, but it's true.

Lily: So true. Your mission statement for your company Going With Grace is what must I do to be at peace with myself so that I may die gracefully. As we talked about that obviously looks different for everybody. It's such a subjective thing. Do you have an answer for that yourself? What does that look like for you?



Alua: The question is twofold. What must I do to be at peace with myself so that I may live presently also and die gracefully because the two go hand in hand. For this birthday, I spent a lot of time in contemplation because my brother-in-law was 43 when he died and I just turned 43. Thinking about my life through the lens of his, he never saw 44. Like if this were actually it, if I had just a year left to go, am I pleased with the choices that I've made? Am I at peace with the person I've become? Have I said the things that I wanted to say, have I made my apologies? Have I gotten as much as I could out of this life? Today, gratefully, I can say the answer is yes. There's one other thing that I need to do. Other than that, I feel like I've done it. I feel really pleased. In the height of my depression, I definitely couldn't say yes.

Lily: When it comes to feeling fulfilled in the life that you're living and feeling in the present moment-- In my own struggles with things like anxiety and things like depression and PTSD, that can be like one of the things I struggle with the most is feeling guilty almost or really frustrated that I know that I want to be living this life. I feel like I'm being hindered by these periods of struggling with mental health, especially with anxiety which is an ongoing thing for me. I'm wondering if you have any words of wisdom for people who want to feel that way, but sometimes mental health can be an impeding factor in feeling that fulfillment.

Alua: The only thing I can really think of is to allow ourselves grace to be human, to allow ourselves grace to struggle. I don't wake up every day like "Yea, this is it. I'm killing it". Most of the time I don't, but I think I allow myself space to mess it up and to feel anxious about something. To turn that one thing I did over and over and over again in my head. I always say this, that the question that I ask myself far more than am I bored or am I hungry? I ask myself that question all the time is, am I doing this right? Did I do it wrong? Did I do it right? Maybe I should have done this, maybe I should have done that. When I can remember that I'm human, right? Nobody is ever expecting that I get it right.

I can give myself some grace to do it wrong, if be, but also to recognize that this human ride means just being on a ride, it doesn't have to look a particular way. It can't look a particular way. It's not going to, my depression was just as valuable as the times where I feel healthy. Any times when I struggle is really just a part of what it is to actually be human. We can't fix death. We can't make it go away. We can't fix grieving. We can't, there's no magic pill or solution or book that you read, and everything's better all of a sudden, we just have to be with it. This is part of the work I was explaining to you. My job is just to meet people where they are.

I have nothing to fix. I don't have to make it better. How can I show up for myself in a way that I can also just acknowledge that it is what it is right now? It won't always be this way because we also know everything is temporary. It won't always be this way, but this is just what it is right now. I don't have to try to fix it. I still struggle. I wake up mornings and, some mornings, I feel a hint of that emptiness again. I'm like, "Oh, God, please tell me it's not that depression coming back [crosstalk] please God" But I'm like, "What if it was? What if it was?" I survived it once. It was tough and I was



deeply depressed for a while, but I worked my way through and I'll do it again if that's what happens.

Lily: I'll bring up something that my therapist said which is that-- It was my therapist, but also David Kesler who is a grief expert and he is so amazing. I actually got to have him on the show. He talks about how not all grief is traumatic, but all trauma has an element of grief and I'm wondering how that comes into your work if you ever work with people where there's traumatic grief involved in their loss?

Alua: Being with people that have experienced a traumatic loss is incredibly difficult because I'm used to working with people that have some awareness that death is coming. Death doulas often show up at the end of an illness or we're helping healthy people plan for the end of their lives when they are still healthy and they have a ways to go, but they just want to get themselves ready. When the death has been sudden and there's been no planning done and nobody was prepared for it, it's a whole new event because now we're processing over and over again the moment that it happened, how you learned, the fact that it's happened, remembering every morning.

It's layered. It's a lot of layers of trauma and a lot of layers of grief that I'm used to looking at it through a particular lens. When it's traumatic, there's just different angles for it that needs a lot of support, community support and also professional support through a grief therapist.

Lily: What would you say to someone, whether they're healthy or whether they're on their death bed even that maybe has fear around death or that something that they can't-- Like this conversation would make them really uncomfortable. That kind of thing. That taught fear and that taught stigma around what death is?

Alua: First of all, it's totally normal. It's completely normal. Fear of death is part of the reason why humans have existed as long as we have. It's that thing that tells you not to keep walking when you get toward a cliff or if you see a dangerous animal coming to run. That's the fear of death kicking in. It's a survival instinct, so it's totally normal. Where it becomes challenging, is when it gets in the way of us living authentically and it gets in the way of us being able to engage with life fully. Like, "I'm not going to do these things because I'm afraid I might die." Or we get paralyzed by anxiety around it.

I have this small exercise that I encourage people to do. It's a teeny-tiny one. It can be very confronting, but to go to the mirror and look at yourself in the mirror. Look deep into the eyes of the thing that's looking and look at the thing looking back at you, and just say to yourself, "I am going to die." You might seize up everywhere, but you might also find yourself being like, "Oh, right. Now, why I'm I so stressed out about my boss or the shoe that my kid left in the hallway or the dishes that I didn't do last night? I'm going to die. I'm going to die." It has the capacity to unlock our authenticity, but we have to be willing to let it, and if you fear that, it's normal.



Lily: That idea of thinking about all those things while you are still healthy, I feel like people often don't go that in-depth when they are still healthy because it can be regarded as a weird thing to do or that's a cynical thing to do is to focus so much on end of life, but it really helps people. It's a really helpful exercise versus one that puts you in a dark headspace.

Alua: Life and death are just two sides of the same coin. Thinking about death impacts my life. Thinking about my life means I'm also actually thinking of my death, that one day none of this will be available to me anymore. It's available now because I live. When I die, it won't be, so let me make as full use of it as possible. It goes back to what I was talking about before about in the middle of my depression when I was not filling up my body. I was just barely in there. I wasn't capable of being in life and now I have such gratitude for that experience because I know what it feels like to be completely empty. I'm aware of what it feels like to also be living authentically and fully.

Lily: That's such an incredible thing and I think about the stigma around mental health. What I always say is, the stigma makes no sense to me because it's something that everyone deals with at some point, but I think one of the only things that really everyone deals with more than mental health is dying. Everyone dies at some point. Everyone knows someone that dies. The work that you do, I like that, in it of itself sheds the stigma, but also helps people prepare for it, I think it's so incredible.

Alua: Thank you. Well, I'm pretty into it myself.

Lily: [chuckles] I'd love to know, what is something that is giving you hope right now?

Alua: That's a good question. The fact that the sun comes up every day gives me hope. It hasn't not done that since it started doing that. It just reminds me that this is all so cyclical in nature, and that they'll be a tomorrow until there isn't, but that it's just like going to keep going. Nothing is the same. The sun is never in the same position in the sky. It's constantly moving and all of this is temporary. When something is difficult or even when something feels good, it's temporary.

The sun is moving, but it gives me hope because it reminds me that the thing that whatever the thing, is going to shift at some point. My niece who's 12, she gives me a lot of hope. The way that she talks about, she gave me a whole lecture the other day on the difference between bi, pan, and omnisexual, I did not even know Omni existed, but she gives me a lot of hope for what future generations will do in terms of allowing people to be exactly who they are.

They are already making such leaps and bounds far more than I think my generation was able to, certainly more than the generation before me. I hope that we continue to go in that direction when people can just be who and how they are. That gives me a lot of hope. Love always gives me hope. It gives me something to continue living and striving and working for. I really think that the essence of my work is love in and of



itself, loving this human ride for exactly what it is. It's like the roller coaster of it all. Also, the fact that it comes to an end.

Lily: Beautiful. This has been so profound and so important for me, this interview. Thank you so much for making the time.

Alua: Thank you. Thank you for having me. It was so fun to talk to you.

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