

High-Risk Love

When I first thought about doing this podcast, I was hoping to do only episodes on moments in life that are brilliant, those that bring me and others to tears by way of their beauty, their fragility, and their ability to touch us deeply. Then I realized if I only talked about the positive moments, I'd be shortchanging all of us involved with this podcast by leaving out the moments that, while painful and difficult, are often the ones that enable us to grow. So I've decided to make "Moments Like These" about *all* of the moments that stop us in our tracks and move us to deeply think and feel, whether that involves pleasure, pain, or a combination of both. After all, isn't that what life is really about?

Have you ever entered into a situation knowing it was a huge risk? Knowing the odds were against you but you felt that what you could gain was worth facing the possibility of a painful loss? My 18-year-old son Neeko and I recently did that. We are still raw from the experience and it's not something I would normally even want to discuss over a podcast, except I know for a fact that millions of people have faced this same situation and have gone through the same emotions we are traversing now, so I'm hoping by bringing our experience out in the open we can reach others who are either going through it, have gone through it or will face it. Perhaps us sharing our experience will help make yours a little easier to bear.

The tears are already building up in my eyes and the breath is already catching in my throat as I begin this story. Seven years ago, when my sons, then only 11 and 12, moved to this mountain community, we decided to start a little business to help out the community, make a little extra money, and teach the boys work ethic and small business savvy. Part of our business offering was lot clearing, which involved raking up pine needles, trimming scrub oak, limbing up pine trees, thinning out sage bushes, and hauling away all of the green waste. It is backbreaking work and we were grossly unprepared and uneducated on how to do it correctly when we first started. That's how we first met our friend "Benji". (Name has been changed.)

Benji happened to be walking by and stepped right up to help us, offering to show us the easiest and most efficient way to clear a lot sufficiently, which would be sure to also impress our customer. He did most of the work on our first job that day and refused to let us pay him. I noticed something unique about Benji that day. Not only was he extremely upbeat and delightful to be around, but he was also very respectful of the boys and me. He'd address them as "boss" and me as "my lady", imbuing this old-fashioned attitude that was so charming and endearing.

Soon, we started to run across Benji all over the mountain, and as our little business grew, along with our involvement in the community, we learned more about him. Benji, in his late 40's, is a former teacher. His love and respect for kids is obvious. His intelligence shines through as well. He is very well-read and has a love for old movies and great American novels. He always reminds me of someone from another era.

Benji is also the community's only homeless person. He is also the town's worst alcoholic. He floats from sofas to garages to the park, or wherever he can find places to sleep. While everyone adores him because of his sweet demeanor, his alcoholism and drug abuse, (when he can get a hold of drugs,) make it impossible for anyone to house him for any permanent length of time, even though he is an excellent, hard worker, compromised only by when his drinking or drugging get so severe that he simply cannot function.

Over the years we would hire Benji to often help us on jobs. We grew more and more fond of him, despite often growing very frustrated with his disease and the challenges it presents. I remember one summer when the boys were now around 14 and 15, we were all having lunch at the little Mexican place in the village during a break from a hard day's work Benji was helping us with. He was so adorable with the boys, laughing and carrying on with them about football, engaging with them in teasing me in a playful, fun way. I pulled out my phone and started filming him. He asked me why I was videotaping him. I told him the truth. "I want to capture this, Benji, because we love you so much, and because we know you won't be around for too long."

It was so sad but true. Benji's alcoholism, which had gone on for decades, was not something anyone felt was sustainable. Eventually, it would get the best of him and we would find him dead and frozen somewhere amongst the trees, and this entire community would mourn the loss of this beautiful spirit whom we all loved, but none of us could seemingly help. We'd all tried. So many of us who were closer to him had begged him to get treatment. We'd researched to find a place where he could go. We'd done everything in our power to try and get him help, but we'd all run up against the same two roadblocks. First, this country doesn't have many viable options for treatment for someone without money or insurance, and second, Benji didn't want to get sober.

Fast forward to this last Fall. Benji's alcoholism had, of course, gotten progressively worse. My one son still here on the mountain with me, Neeko, realized it, too. We caught up with him when we heard that he was barely able to walk, his feet had gotten so bad. Turns out he had a severe case of trench foot from sleeping in his workboots, a necessary evil when sleeping outdoors as the temperatures on the mountain started reaching freezing each night.

Neeko and I simply could not stand it any longer. Against my strict policy of not having any man stay at our home, we took Benji in and attempted to nurse his feet back to health, but it was beyond anything I could do, even with the help of a local nurse friend and several trips to the ER. Benji needed to stay off his feet, out of his boots, and stay somewhere warm and dry. Reluctantly, Neeko and I discussed it and agreed to at least let him stay until he could walk again. Still, it was an impossible, sad situation.

I had continually talked to Benji about getting treatment, but he was adamant about never going to rehab. At one point he'd been court-ordered after a stint in jail years ago and the entire experience had left him with an absolute hatred for the entire concept.

So I decided to stop pulling at him like a horse at the end of a lead. Instead, I decided to walk beside him. I mentally changed my approach to trying to get him to consider treatment with this visualization to see if it could shift the energy over the matter between us. Much to my complete surprise, while sitting in the ER one night once again trying to get treatment for his feet, he looked over at me and said, "Okay."

"Okay, what?" I asked.

"Okay. I'll go to rehab." He said quietly.

I almost fell out of my chair. I couldn't believe it. After decades and multiple people trying to get Benji into treatment, he was finally agreeing to it! I was elated.

All the way home that night, I calmed all of his fears. "But what if..." he would ask. "It will be okay," I'd respond. "But what about..." he would voice. "That will work out, too. You'll be able to get through it," I'd reassure him.

Three days later, we miraculously found a place right down the mountain from us that not only detoxed him but kept him for three months, a beautiful facility where Benji instantly became their most popular and beloved resident. When I went to pick him up and bring him home after his stay, they would barely give him back. "We are going to miss him so much!" They all said. They even paused all of their classes and all came out to say goodbye to Benji. Benji, just like he is to this mountain community, was the rehab's golden child, too.

Neeko and I had done all of the prep work before Benji got here. We'd made a spot for him in our home. We'd made sure he had plenty of clothes, toiletries, his reading glasses, and lined up a strong support system through the local AA chapter to get him to meetings every night. That didn't go as well as I'd thought the first week and we weren't able to get Benji to meetings right away. As a result of that, I feel, he relapsed about seven days after coming home. I took my eyes off of him for five minutes while he was supposed to be walking through the village from my truck to a friend's home to watch a movie. He found a bag he had stashed that had some weed in it and smoked it. I was heartbroken and infuriated. I caught up with him and we had a long, emotional talk.

"I didn't drink, though, it was just weed!" He said.

"Doesn't matter, Benji, and you know that!" I told him. "It's either all or nothing."

I agreed to give him a second chance, and he committed to his complete sobriety from all substances, understanding that there would be no third chance given.

The few weeks that followed seemed like a dream. Benji folded right into our little home with such grace and ease. Our dogs fell in love with him. An early riser, he'd take them out for quick walks where they'd collect kindling together. I bought him a retro-

style radio that he loved so much you'd think I'd gotten him a car. I'd hear him laugh downstairs with my son as they watched movies and shows together, Benji filling a void left by my younger son moving back to his dad's last summer. I'd often catch myself just staring at Benji with tears of joy in my eyes as he told his happy stories of the new friends he'd interact with each night at his AA meetings. The pride in his eyes would shine so brightly as he told me how he'd shared his story and contributed to the meetings. Every night that Benji went to sleep, curled around our little Boxer Luna, tucked safely in the boys' room downstairs next to Neeko, I would breathe a sigh of relief. The miracle that Benji had made it through another day without drinking was never lost on me. My heart sang in celebration continuously, right along with the entire community. Just going to the post office or the transfer site with Benji took half a day, as dozens of people would stop us to congratulate the one person whom we all thought was the least likely to succeed at getting sober was actually doing it. We could not have been happier, for Benji was the guy we all wanted to see survive this disease.

When I came home last Saturday night, I'd seen Benji just hours before. I was having dinner at the pizza place with a friend when I called Benji to check-in. I invited him to pop by and meet my friend before he headed across the street to the AA meeting in the village that night. All seemed well. Benji was his delightful self and I was so proud to introduce him to my friend, who had heard so much about him over the last few months.

After I finished dinner, I came home. Benji was already here. He had bought me a key lime pie at the store, knowing it was my favorite, although ignoring the fact that I'd given up sugar and was trying my best to stay away from it. I politely had a piece of the pie, wondering to myself how I was going to get rid of the rest of it without eating it and not letting Benji know. I remember also again thinking how lucky I was to get to play a small part in the miracle that was taking place with him. Benji reminded me so much of my nephew, who, the year we'd moved to the mountain had died of severe alcoholism homeless in a neighboring community. I'd felt such remorse and guilt for not knowing about my nephew and what was going on with him, not being able to help him, to save his life. Perhaps helping to save Benji was my way of making it up to my nephew Shannon for not being able to help him. I don't know. All I know is that once again I was overwhelmed with the joy of knowing that Benji had made it through yet another night without a drink. In fact, in just a few more days, he'd be celebrating four months of sobriety, the longest he'd gone his entire adult life.

We both went downstairs and I told him goodnight as I watched him snuggle up with the dogs. Neeko had gone to Ventura to spend his birthday weekend with his dad and brother. I went into my bedroom and was preparing for bed when my phone rang. It was Benji's best buddy from his AA meetings wanting to know why Benji wasn't at the meeting tonight. I thought he'd said he'd gone. I was very confused.

I went in to ask him and he told me he'd gone by the meeting but it was really crowded, so he decided not to stay and walked home. Something wasn't right. I could feel it. He also got a bit defensive and accused his AA buddy and me of checking up

on him. I told him that yes, we are checking up on him because we care about him and are worried, especially if he tells us he's going to a meeting and doesn't. I left it at that and went to bed.

The next morning, I had just opened my eyes and lay there for just a moment, looking forward to a quiet day where I could catch up on some writing and other small projects around the house. The week had been particularly grueling and I was physically and mentally exhausted. That's when I heard Benji yelling down to me announcing that he was leaving, a stark departure from our normal, happy, morning routine.

I sprung out of bed and raced up the stairs in my pajamas, instantly anxious and fearful. Something wasn't right. Something was very wrong. I could feel it. By the time I got up the stairs, Benji was already out the front door with his big backpack on his back, headed down the street. "I just need some time alone to think!" He shouted at me over his shoulder. I knew immediately what this meant. Benji was headed for a relapse.

I grabbed the car keys and raced down the hill after him, peering out through the frosted windshield. I begged him to get in the car and come back to the house and talk. "Let's just have coffee. Let's make pancakes or eggs and just talk." He wasn't having it. I returned solo and in tears. I sat around all day unable to do anything. I knew exactly what Benji was going to do that day and I understood his mind was made up. There was nothing I could do to stop him, short of chaining him to this house.

By 4:30 that afternoon, I had to call him, as we had plans to go grocery shopping, but by then he was so drunk he couldn't remember how to pronounce my name. I felt my heart shatter into a million pieces. I sat on the sofa and just cried. I got a hold of his AA friends and they said to try and find him and they'd get him to a meeting. I tried. I searched for him. I found out who he'd likely been drinking with and pounded on his door, almost getting into a fight with the guy. I drove around the community looking in all of the likely spots. I couldn't find him. Finally, I had to go pick up my son. When I returned to the mountain that night, Benji called. Slurring his words, he explained he wanted to come by and talk. I knew what I had to do.

He came by around 8:30 pm, shortly after we got home. My son went into another room and stayed there. Mature for his age, he is still only 19 so I didn't feel he needed to witness the heartache that was about to unfold. After all, even he knew exactly what had to be done.

I told Benji he had to go. I told him that just like I'd said, there would be no third chances. I explained that I could not have the drama, trauma, and chaos that active addiction brings to my house, disrupting the lives of my son and me. He understood although he did try to blame me for a bit, claiming I belittled him by inquiring about whether or not he attended the meeting. He knew that wasn't true. He knew I always treated him with the same respect he treated us. He also tried to play the victim,

starting in with the “poor me, it always ends up like this, I always end up back on the streets, etc.,” but I stopped him right there as well.

“Benji, this is *your* decision, *your* choice. You gave up all of this: this warm home, this loving family, this future, this safety, this healthy, happy environment for alcohol. *You* made that decision today. You can’t blame this on anyone else and you can’t play the victim.”

It cut through my heart like a dull butter knife to speak these words to him, but I knew I had to. As he stood there in our living room, filling the air with the smell of booze, I just felt like someone had hollowed out my heart. Telling him he had to go out into the night, knowing it would reach 35 degrees that night, was soul-crushing. It went against every nurturing, maternal instinct that I’m made of. Fortunately, I knew that Benji could survive. He had a zero-temp sleeping bag if it came to that, but also plenty of friends who would, I’m sure, house him temporarily, and some who would even be happy to drink more with him that night. After all, misery truly does love company.

I’ve always said that I think the absolute worst-suffering victims of this disease are the parents, and most specifically the moms. Moms are hard-wired to do everything we possibly can to protect our offspring from harm. I’ve had to watch several moms, including my own with my brother, try to navigate through learning how to *not* help their addicted children, because they know that by doing so they are just enabling them and making their disease worse. Yet not helping them goes against their very fabric. What a horrific plight for any parent.

Sending Benji back out into that cold night on Sunday was certainly not to the level a parent would feel, but it still crushed me, and it also devastated Neeko. We had invested so much of our hearts, time, finances, hopes, and dreams into saving Benji’s precious life, even as we fully understood that it was ultimately not up to us, it was solely up to him. Yet to see it all disintegrate in one day was just awful. We both spent the next several days unable to fully function. I spent the entire next day in bed with a splitting headache, as if the emotional pain of it all had not only split my heart in two but had also splintered my brain.

Today is a new day and the sun is shining, the birds are singing and I am trying to heal a little bit each day. I am still thinking of Benji hourly, as I’m sure I will be for quite some time. Is he safe? Is he drinking heavily already again? Where is he staying? Has he gotten back with the guy up here who regularly abused him in exchange for work and a garage to sleep in? What will happen to him now? Will his AA friends be able to rescue him and get him back to the rooms?

I know enough about this disease to know that if I were to give Benji a third chance, I’d be giving him a free ticket to abuse the situation here over and over again. He would know he could fall off the wagon as often as he’d like and we’d continue to take him back. I know this because I’ve been down that road before. Once you go back on your statement: “This is it. This is the last chance. There will be no more chances after this,”

you lose all credibility and you open the gate for repeated abuse. I can't have that, not for the importance of maintaining our peaceful lives but also for my self-respect.

I guess the only consolation in all of this is knowing that Neeko and I took a chance on love. We knowingly took the risk of getting our hearts broken by investing our time, love, and efforts into someone who had the world's odds stacked against him. We went into this eyes wide open. I'd always talked very openly to the boys about addiction. They are very well educated and know the chances of successful, long-term recovery. Neeko and I decided to help Benji together and with full awareness of how it might turn out.

Still, it hurts like an absolute bitch. There's just no way around the pain. The only elixir that softens it at all is the memories. The sweetness of it all. The time Benji came home from a meeting and said, "I was walking up to the front door and thought to myself how good it feels to be home tonight. Then I thought about how amazing it is to even feel like I have a home. Is this really my home now, too?" He asked. "Yes, Benji," we told him, "this is your home now, too."

Or the time when I heard him saying to the guys at the rehab as I was picking him up to bring him home, "Don't worry about me, guys, I have the best family in the whole world to go home to."

Or the time the counselor at the rehab said to me, "Boy I wish every one of these guys could have someone like you and your son to return home to. What a difference that would make."

Or watching Benji do a few important house projects around here and complete them himself. Now sober, his intelligence and abilities shined through. Or that precious moment when he stood next to Neeko at the table and helped Neeko with a homework assignment, his natural teaching abilities shining out from him. Fortunately, I got that one on video and will cherish it forever.

Or just walking into the boys' room each night and seeing Benji curled up with our little Boxer Luna, safe, warm, healthy, and happy. Or hearing his joy and pride in sharing what he shared in the meeting that night after he got home. I would purposely stay up, no matter how tired I was, just so I could be there for him and let him share his joy with me. Somehow that felt monumentally important.

There are so many precious memories that we will always have from the few, extraordinary months that we got to see Benji get and stay sober. If he hadn't relapsed, today would have been his fourth full month of sobriety. There's no way to get over the loss of losing him again, except to keep telling myself that at least we got to show him how beautiful life could be on the bright side, however short it lasted.

It's moments like these that make me realize just how human I am because of how deeply I feel. We love you, Benji. We always will. If you ever decide to get and stay

sober, and you find your way back to our door, the pups and Neeko and I will be waiting for you, our arms and our hearts open wide.

We love you so much, dear man, always and forever.