Transcript

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You're listening to the My Simplified Life podcast, and this is episode number 256.

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Welcome to the My Simplified Life podcast, a place where you will learn that your past and even your present don't define your future. Regardless of what stage of life you're in, I want you to feel inspired and encouraged to pursue your dreams, simplify your life, and start taking action. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac, author of How to Get on Podcasts, the podcast matchmaker and CEO and founder of the MLG Collective.

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I'm excited to share my stories and life lessons with you while taking you on my own journey. This is my simplified life.

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Hey friends, welcome back to another episode. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac. Today I have the pleasure of interviewing a friend, former client, author, and farmer, Jeanne Blasberg. She is the author of her most recent novel is Daughter of a Promise. She's a contributing author to On Being Jewish Now, which is an anthology of essays put out by Zibi Books.

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And her most recent title is lettuce farmer, more than lettuce though. She is sharing with me all of the details about how she's made these incredible pivots and switches and what has motivated her to do all of these different things throughout life. I know you're going to enjoy hearing from her and checking out our conversation. Hi, Jeannie. Hello, Michelle. I'm so excited to get to talk to you. It's such a treat to get to talk for fun, not business stuff.

I agree. I'm looking forward to this conversation. Can you take a moment to introduce yourself to everyone, please? Sure. So my name is Jeanne Blasberg, and I am an author of three novels, Eden, the Nine, and most recently, Daughter of a Promise came out April 2024. But beyond that, I like to think of myself as a creator.

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might sound a little bit presumptuous, but my three kids are my most, my biggest pride and joy. And I not only have expressed myself through motherhood and writing, I'm also a grower of vegetables in the midst of creating a regenerative farm ecosystem in southwestern Wisconsin. And that's a very new thing. So

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it's, yeah, it's a big leap in my life from being a city girl to being a more rural agricultural person. And then I guess I also have part of my identity that I would say I'm an athlete, although I'm an aging athlete. So I'm a master's athlete at this point. I love that. There's a mom at school who will, she announces on her sweatshirts, like what she does, like runner. I'm like, great, good for you.

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But it makes me want to start announcing too of what I do because I find it hilarious. I know. You're not aging. Well, I like to also talk about being an athlete because I guess with the farming, it has to do with my interest around health and longevity and like food as medicine and food as power. And then also I just think an athlete's mindset is used to, it's just like being a writer. It's that step by step.

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plotting through what you do every day, even when you don't feel like it kind of putting in the steps or putting in the reps or putting down the words. So I do see a lot of synchronicity between a writer's mindset and an athlete's mindset. I love that. Take me back to before kids, what were you doing? What were you hoping to do? Great question, gosh.

I'll say I graduated from college in 1987 and I wound up as an investment banking analyst on Wall Street. And as someone who's read my book, Michelle, you'll laugh because the main character in my latest novel did exactly the same. And it wound up on Wall Street for very unexpected reasons. And I'd say I did the same. I took that job because it was a job a lot of people were going for and my competitive streak and my...

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desire to kind of live in New York City and be financially independent led me into an industry that really wasn't suited for me. I did fine. I was always treading water just trying to keep my head afloat. But I had a series of jobs after that in finance and I was, yeah, I was kind of searching for what I was supposed to do. I fell in love with someone I met in college and eventually ended up.

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marrying him several years after. And we moved back to Boston from, well, I was in New York, then we lived in Cincinnati for a while, which is another story, moved back to Boston. And at that time I had one kid, but I was really trying to figure out, I always knew I wanted to have a family and a big family because I'm an only child and I felt somewhat deprived of that like family fun.

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So if I couldn't be the kid in the fun family, I wanted to be the mom of a fun family. And so I was in the back of my mind, I was searching for a way to balance both having two or three kids and yes, contributing financially to our household, but more than that, I have a pretty active inner life, being intellectually satisfied.

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That is actually the time that I got a job at Harvard Business School writing case studies. And I was writing these 2,000-word case studies for students to learn the ins and out of the retailing industry. And I started to really like the writing life. I loved the assignment, which was to entertain, as well as create a conflict and a protagonist in a situation that needed to be kind of solved by the reader.

And I worked with a brilliant professor. So I got a lot out of that experience. And mostly the seed was planted that a writing life would potentially be a life that I could combine with motherhood because of setting your own schedule and all that. I think you're the first author who's ever said that. And it makes so much sense that.

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To be a mom, I've always said working from home is easy because when they were little, they took naps and that's when I would work and they'd go to bed early and that's when I would work. And now they're in school and that's when I work. And it's really the same for an author if you are okay with being creative during those moments because I know it's like when inspiration strikes or when the iron is hot, that's when you have to sit down and do it. But it really makes a lot of sense that motherhood can bring along.

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being an author. And I think, tell me if this was for you, something clicks and kinds of change, it changes when you become a mom. I feel exactly the same. There's something about like the miracle of bringing life into the world that also makes you think and reflect a lot about your parents and the generations before you.

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and the way you were raised, and the way you wanna raise your kids. And so I think you start having a lot more big thoughts about life in general. And my first novel really like, really like was obsessive about those kinds of themes in terms of like the lineage and a family and what we inherit and then what we choose to pass down. And, you know, I had.

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somewhat of a troubled relationship with my mother, but I was really close to my grandmother. And then I really wanted to do better with my own kids. And so I just thought a lot about that. And yeah, I think that whether you have children or not, you at some point in your adult life, I think you have compassion for your parents in a way you probably couldn't have in your teens or early 20s. And that

kind of flip from being the kid to being the adult, or being cared for to being the caretaker, that like to me, it was a portal into a certain type of creativity, and also a portal into, I see life and I see the world this way. I wonder if other people see it this way. And if I could express this in writing and connect with other people, that would be meaningful for me.

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Although I have to be entirely honest, I'm not like you, Michelle. I don't think I had the brain space to totally attack the novel writing until my kids were not necessarily all at home. So there were many, many years, I was writing short stories, writing essays, taking classes, but not necessarily able to really come into my own in terms of the deep thinking and what...

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acquired until I had more peace in my home. And I think that, I don't know, things happen at a certain time for a certain reason, but that's just how it happened for me. This authoring and novel writing thing has been a long, slow burn. But it makes sense because it's absolute chaos. Having kids, I have two, you had three, I mean. But also the fact, you know, and I can't underestimate.

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how for me, how long the writing process is, and to feel like I've created something of quality that I'm not a fast, I'm not somebody who cranks them out. I really like, I let them stew for a while and they need to stew and simmer. And then I realized what's the heart of the story and I go back and do a lot of revisions. But I think that's why I fall nicely into the-

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category of literary fiction. I mean, some of my books can be considered page turners, but I really always think that in order to make it a worthwhile pursuit, I want there to be richness, lots of threads, some underlying themes. I allude to ancient stories and the Bible and I've got a lot going on.

Yes. And I loved Dot Over Promise. I remember I'm picturing myself right now. I finished reading it when I was in New York in a hotel room and I was messaging you like super late at night going, oh my gosh, I loved it. I cried and it was so perfect and I absolutely loved it. I couldn't put it down. I didn't put it down. And I was like, yes, I can't believe that I get to pitch you because I love this book. Well, that's...

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meant a lot to me getting those messages from you. Obviously, you read a lot and you're very, you've got really good taste. So that meant a lot. Thank you. You know, I, I, you said when we first got on, started this conversation, it could go in any direction. And there's this idea that's been in my head. And I think maybe this is a good segue because as a writer, I continue to take classes and think about things. And now I've got this life on the farm and I'm thinking about

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I write these shorter essays about what's going on, but I'm also thinking about memoir and my life in retrospect of my relationship to food, my relationship to nature, and how kind of detached I was from a lot of things. And now my evolving relationship with all these things might be good material, but I've been taking this class in memoir. And you know, I look back at my three novels now.

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and the different storylines. And I realize all along, I've kind of been dancing around this desire to write about my life, but fictionalizing it in so many ways. And I don't wanna say I want the route that Betsabe does in Daughter of a Promise with a relationship with a much older man. That's not the truth, but there are so many things in there like character-wise and thought-wise. And I've just really been thinking about my evolution as a writer, and I don't know.

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There are a lot of people who do both fiction and nonfiction, but I've been thinking a little bit about the fact that maybe I've been too scared or fearful or insecure to really write the truth, the truth that really would be the scary thing, the real stuff to put down. So I don't know. Lately, I'm feeling like my connection with the farm and this leap of faith that it's taken is also parallel to a leap of faith I might be ready to take with regard to my content and what I put.

what I write, whether it's to be shared or not. But, oh, you're going to share it with me. I must be privy to this. I know. It's just I feel, I don't know, I feel like it's a new season. It's a new year. I don't know. I'm feeling like I'm on the precipice of something else. So I love talking about Daughter of a Promise. And I love talking about my novels. But I almost feel like, whereas I

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was my thing and my thing forever going forward. It almost just feels like a launching pad now to like what I'm really supposed to write about. Like it was my warm up or something. I love that. Because if that was your warm up and it was hitting it out of the park, then whatever's coming next is really going to be epic. Well, thank you. I mean, I don't mean it's my warm up in terms of like quality, but I think it's my warm up and dancing around the actual topic. And getting comfortable.

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with it. Yes. And being the character or being more present in my own work as opposed to fictionalizing everything. Yeah. I love that. And it kind of, so in that regard, then we should talk about on being Jewish now because you did get to put yourself out there with being a contributor with your essay. So share a bit with me about how that came about.

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and your conversion story. I loved it. I was like, Oh, this is so great to get to, you know, know another part of you, which also means that a memoir would be amazing. So I met Siby when my second novel came out. I was a guest on her podcast. I think she was in early days back in 2019. And we really connected over that story, which is a campus novel, a boarding school story. She had a child who was just starting at a boarding school. And I think the

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the book really freaked her out. So we had that mom mold bonding moment as well as writer, podcast interviewer bonding moment. And we stayed in touch and I followed her. And so when she put out the call to ask if folks would be interested in submitting an essay, I said, yes, I had

this inkling of what I wanted to write about, again, being a little shy about it because as a person who's converted to Judaism.

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I feel like I'm a true Jew, but in some ways, I feel like it's not on par with someone whose parents or grandparents are Jewish. A lot of the other authors have family lines going back to the Holocaust and really like stories of identity going back to when they're children. But I do feel like my...

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conversion to Judaism was one of the most important things I've done. I did it for our family because my kids were becoming bar and bat mitzvah and I wanted us all to be equally Jewish. I wanted to also set a good example for them studying and putting in the hours and I thought I should be doing the same thing. It wasn't important to my husband when we got married because his family wasn't very religious.

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The rabbi said, as I was going through the process, you know, your husband should really attend all these classes because often the convert becomes more spiritual and embedded in this religion than the Jewish spouse. And there's a separation, you know, you can diverge as opposed to get closer. So it really was this journey we went on together and this decision to have a Jewish family. And I talk about...

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in my essay, when we decided to do that, how I was met by concern from my father that I'd be taking on an identity or a religion that would put me in danger someday. And this was 20 years ago. And I thought, Oh my God, like, you know, are you kidding me? Are you being prejudiced? And this is your way of coming up with some excuse. Anyway, I then flash forward to 2024 when

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it doesn't seem so out of the realm of possibility that there's danger associated with being Jewish. And so although my essay is a little bit about the last 20 years in that journey, and it's

really about this realization that I've chosen something. And because I've chosen it, I can choose it every day to either associate more or to separate and detach. And I've

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chosen to go all in every day, readers of my novels will know there's lots of influence from the Old Testament, and that comes from my study of Torah, which is my main affiliation with our temple right now. I go to some services, but mostly I study Torah with our senior rabbi and a group of people, and I've been in this monthly class for the last 20 years. So, yeah, I...

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I guess the essay ends with this rejuvenated commitment more than like, oh, maybe I could just blend into the scenery and not be identified as Jewish. But I was really honored to be a part of that whole anthology that came out. I was honored to be part of the launch day events. And I think I am. I can't.

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say 100% for sure, but I am one of the few converts who is represented in that work. And I think we are an important piece of the American Jewish population because we have raised Jewish children and we've been committed to their Jewish education and rituals in the home. And yeah, I do think like even like Ruth is one of the most important figures in

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the Jewish Bible. She is a convert. I am happy to be in on being Jewish now representing those of us who have converted for any number of reasons, not just because it was required in order to get married, but a lot of us have come to it on our own terms and in our own way. And so yeah, it's a beautiful book. If people haven't gotten it, there are funny stories just like Jews have used humor throughout the years. There are heart.

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There are stories that I think most of them combine some humor and some heartbreak, but I was, as I was saying to you, I listened to the audio version, which is really cool because many of the authors read their own essays. And so you hear the variety of voices through the audio

book. Something that stuck out to me from your essay, because I was like, Oh, Jeannie and I are so alike.

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was, I believe it was the rabbi said to you, he didn't know that you weren't actually Jewish because you were always present, you were always there, you were doing all of the Jewish things. I'm such a good student, you know, I'm a rule follower from way back. As am I. And that's why I was like, oh, Michelle, like me. Michelle, did you find yourself in the same position in a temple with a rabbi or? I might have at some point back in the day. Yeah, wow. Yes, yes.

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But no. We do have a lot in common. Yes. Yeah. That ended. But yeah, because it's just the way I do everything in life. It's like, I'm going to jump in and it's both feet go forward, learn all you can. And that's in everything. So I felt like, oh, wow, this is Jeannie too. We are so alike in that way.

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So that part stuck out to me a lot. And I loved that I read the essays, especially the ones that the contributors that I know personally. And it was great to connect on that other way because there were things that I remembered reading Jane Rosen's and in the garment district. Yeah, it was about being in low men's in the dressing room, right? Or something to that effect. Well, and then.

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Yeah. When her first job in the garment district, and then she would take the rack to the coatmaker, she took her, the button man, she took it to him and then she noticed the tattoo on his arm. Yeah. And it was his number. And it's such a short essay and yet it brought so much emotion and feeling. It was beautiful. And I hadn't heard that story from Jane and I've talked to Jane a bazillion times. I was just emailing with her earlier. But we hadn't.

touched on that. And there's so much, I think that talks about just life in general, the stories that we don't know about the people that we know. And then you go to the funerals and you're like, oh, well, there was so much more we could have talked about and I didn't know and I wish I'd known. So I appreciate that this book brings some of that to light for all of us that we get to hear these stories.

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I think it's an amazing project. I think we're just living through a really difficult time and being Jewish is a blessing. It's a constant struggle though. That is the definition of being a Jew. It's struggling with God. It's struggling with the commandments. It's struggling with your government. It's struggling, you know, it's questioning and struggling. And that's one thing I love about it. That's

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the learnedness about it and the constant engagement with text and discourse is one thing I really love about it. But yeah, we are all struggling because there's so much going on that we both feel committed is right and somewhat wrong. And it's not easy right now in this environment. I mean, there's so much besides just the war in Israel and Gaza and Lebanon and everything going on.

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there's this election coming up. I mean, I think even if you're not Jewish, you are feeling this internal angst and struggle and this uncertainty about what's going to happen. So I think it's a really relatable book for everyone going through, like if you're in a community of people who are sharing a struggle, it's something you can relate to.

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Oh, that's much funner. Yeah. Not that that wasn't fun, but I'm so intrigued. How is it that you and your husband were like, let's go buy a farm and be farmers and grow lettuce? The way you say that, it sounds so peaceful and bucolic, but really I lost, can I say a swear word? I lost shit during COVID. And I felt like the world was falling apart.

and that we weren't doing anything worthwhile to save it, and that we had resources and we had our health and we had three children who were not needing us much anymore, and we had parents who were either gone or not needing us anymore. And we had this opportunity. I'm like, if we have this window to do something really important, what would it be? And we've always been interested in the intersection of the environment and health and wellness.

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It was this moment of having some food insecurity ourselves around getting fresh produce and accessing the types of things that we wanted to eat and just knowing how much hunger there was in our city and in our neighborhoods where there hadn't been that much hunger before. Also just looking around at the population's relative unhealthy state.

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and knowing it was coming from over-processed foods. All these things converged to make us wanna do something different and kind of something big and different. So we sold our house and we simplified a lot and we downsized in a lot of ways and we made it possible to buy a farm. Why we ended up in Wisconsin is an entirely random story that will make you feel like I'm completely off my rocker.

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I was starting to just follow all of the validating signs and the connections we were making took us to Southwestern Wisconsin, which is really a beautiful, fertile crescent, although it gets pretty cold. We were introduced to a fast casual chain of restaurants. Its founder, it's called Forage Kitchens. It was founded in Madison about 10 or so years ago.

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a proprietary organic vegetable farm. So it's a salad bar concept and we're growing more than lettuce. We grew 22 vegetables for their salad bar this year. We delivered to six locations. It was our second year of growing, really 1.5. I don't count the first year. The first year was like the first pancake in the frying pan. We threw it in the garbage. So we're in kind of our first full year. We grew 22 crops. We delivered to second.

six stores between the months of May and we're still delivering for a few more weeks because the weather's been so warm this year. And in addition to that, we're grazing cattle or we're grazing livestock, sheep and goats this year. We'll be bringing on cattle in a few months. We grew 80 acres of organic corn. We have 40 acres in a pollinator habitat. We're embarking on this whole...

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program with composting and fertility so that we create a circular system where the earth is really gaining a lot of organic matter from the compost and homegrown fertilizers and we're not going to have to source fertilizers from off-farm in the not too distant future. We're also, education is a big part of our mission. So we're...

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modernizing the land with infrastructure so that we can have events and host people there. And yeah, there's just a lot of things going on, but hopefully we'll be a model for other people who want to create a regenerative, healthy system. And we can show that it is not a money loser, right? You know, we're on our way to being break even in a few years and then hopefully a money maker and that it's win, win, win. We can.

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pay our farmers well and create career opportunities for young people. We can regenerate the soil. We can create the most nutrient dense food there is and we can serve it through this restaurant chain in an affordable price that the average person won't choke on. No pun intended. But I don't know if all those things are possible at the same time, but we're trying to see if we can make all of those things coexist.

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You know, in capitalism, maybe it can't, but maybe success is adding organic matter to the topsoil and having employees who are really happy humans. I recently wrote a sub stack about the people and the average age of a farmer in the United States is over 60. The number of farms in the United States is declining by the day.

farmers suffer the highest rate of suicide of any profession in the United States. So what does that say about our food system? It says pretty soon, if we keep going this way, everything's going to be grown on a big monocultured cropping model with big machines and lots of chemicals and fertilizer from places that are far away from where most of the population lives. I know you're in California and you're in the bread basket, but

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being in Wisconsin or even in New England and having your food shipped from California and Arizona, we saw during COVID how vulnerable we are to supply chain issues. And we all need to invest in our regional food systems. We need to support our local food systems. We need to eat what's in season. We need to eat what's regional and available where we live and start, you know, if you're not becoming a farmer yourself at least.

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buying food from your local farmer and that's not just going to farmers markets or CSAs. That means like asking for local organic in your grocery store. The distribution channels really need to be made mainstream for healthy food. So that's all I'll say. But it's been a, it's a, it's, we've joined a movement. It's not just, I'm, I'm out there enjoying the sun on the fields and picking lettuce in my spare time. It's really an important movement that this, this country needs to get on board with.

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It's amazing. I love this. And I do love the pictures of you and your overalls. It's so cute out in the farm. I'm like, oh, look at Jeannie. She's such a cute little farmer. But I love that there's so much into this and that you're sharing all of this and that you've made this huge pivot, both you and your husband. As you went, you know what, we've had our careers, we've raised our children. Now we're going to do something that's really going to benefit our country and our neighbors.

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and we're going to teach other people how to do this and be the example. I mean, that's huge. It's a huge pivot and a huge movement to do in this second half. Yeah. And I don't want to act like so sanctimonious. We're getting a lot out of this ourselves, the peace and joy of being on the farm. I love working with a team of young people. I've been a solitary author. My children are all kind of moved away and living their own lives, but I'm hanging out with...

a crew of folks who are about their age. So I get that dose of, you know, young kind of wise, I don't know, that dose of the culture. I love it. Yeah, there's a lot of beauty there and there's a lot of healing. And it's also it's fun. Like we wanted we want this to be a fun place to work. So yeah, I think that, hey, if people look at what I'm doing and say, you know what?

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60 is the new 40 or whatever. Like I've got a long time to live. And maybe yeah, pickleball is great. But like, come on guys, let's really do something else. Like things are, our country's kind of in trouble. And whether it's food or whether it's anything you feel passionately about, whether it's, it could be anything, but like we, you're going to have a long life.

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do something that makes you feel young and invigorated and a beginner again and that you're making a difference. There's so many, and I don't want to be sanctimonious about what I chose. Everybody can choose their thing, but I think it's really important to not hit a certain age and have it all be about seeking out leisure activities. I just don't, for me, that wouldn't...

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lead to a happy, satisfied genie looking in the mirror every morning. Because I know I'm capable of a lot and I have a lot to contribute. And I want to feel like, yeah, like I'm making the most of my intelligence and also all the privilege and gifts I've been given. I love that. It's inspiring and hopefully it does motivate others to do the same. I wish that I could farm. We

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We didn't have a good crop this year in the backyard. We got some zucchini, but the tomatoes, we didn't get a single tomato. And we have tried our hand at corn. That was during COVID in which my kindergartener at the time had announced to everybody, harvest, harvest, harvest. We have a farm. No, we did not have a farm. We had a few corn. It was hilarious. But it's really hard work. That is such hard work and I am.

not the one in the fields. We recruited an incredible team. We were so lucky that the people who've signed on to this farm decided to sign on and jumped on board to a very new venture with these two crazy people, my husband and I. We have a produce manager who is like the vegetable whisperer. He grew the most beautiful crops even in our first year throwaway year out of, in a drought.

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with very little irrigation. He grew the most beautiful things. And this year, we had more rain than anybody would ever want, and he grew the most beautiful things. So we're really lucky to have the talent on our farm. And in any number of ways, we have lots of folks who are showing how much, when a human works in collaboration with nature, what can be created.

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But yeah, so my biggest contribution has kind of been this people team building and culture creating side. And then I was in the kitchen for three straight weeks trying to process this bumper crop of tomatoes. So Michelle, I can't believe you didn't grow any tomatoes. This was a great tomato year. And I passed sauces and froze and cored and skinned until my little fingers were pruned.

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That's been years past. I don't know what happened. We were so bummed. We had three different types and like they came, they didn't turn red. They just, I don't know what, but it was really hot here too. So I don't know if I overwatered and then it got too hot. You know, writing a book takes so long. There is something satisfying about like the 30 to 40 day germination to actual produce.

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like seeing the head of lettuce in the field that it's going to be harvested and then it's going to be in someone's bowl and then someone's going to, you know, there's something kind of fun about the cycle of a vegetable garden if done by Kyle, not done by me.

better luck for me next year, then we'll compare our crops. I don't want to compare. I can't take credit for it, so it's not a fair contest. I have loved getting to have all of these different pieces of you in this conversation. It's been so much fun to hear you as a mom, as an author, as a farmer, as someone who's pivoting again in life.

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It's just such a joy. I like you, Jeannie. I love talking to you. Michelle, you're a wonderful person. And you know what? You have done and are doing a lot of things. And if we're all lucky and blessed with a long life, let them be full and energy-filled and filled with abundance and health. And let us always be conscious of our gifts so that we can share them.

36:28

I love that. Thank you. Where can everybody find you before we go? Yeah, the best place is geneblastberg.com. There's links to everything I do there. And if you're an Instagram person, I'm Gene Blastberg author. Perfect. We'll get in the show notes. Thank you so much, Jeannie. I had so much fun talking to you. Me too, Michelle. Thanks again. What an absolute inspiration Jeannie is. I loved hearing...

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the different paths that have brought her to where she is today and what's the motivation behind each of these decisions. 60 is the new 40, so let's go with it. Let's not rest on our laurels, as she puts it, and keep going after things that are going to better our lives and the lives of those around us. It's so important, especially in these times that we live in right now. If you're needing your next read, go check out Daughter of a Promise. I promise you, you will enjoy it. I...

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couldn't put it down. And if you would love to read some of these essays that she has written along with many other friends of mine and other people within the publishing industry and more, check out On Being Jewish Now, which is also available as a podcast and a sub stack. And be sure to go follow Jeannie and see what she's up to next. Maybe we'll get that memoir out of her. Until next time, friends.