

S2E5 JEN BLAIR

Wed, Nov 22, 2023 3:36PM 43:07

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

kid, people, child, puzzles, thinking, gay, mom, family, parents, mama, community, world, dragons, years, knew, nap, question, brain, podcast, church

SPEAKERS

Jen Blair, Elle Billing

E Elle Billing 00:00

Hi, my name is Elle Billing. I am a chronically ill queer femme, and I'm tired. I'm here this episode and every episode to dig at the roots of our collective fatigue, explore ways to direct our care and compassionate and sustainable ways and harness creative expression to heal ourselves and our world. And welcome to Hoarf Radical care in a late capitalist heckscape. My guest today is Jen Blair. Jen Blair was born and raised in Utah, where she met and married her husband of almost 30 years. They graduated together from Brigham Young University. Jen graduated with a degree in elementary education. Jen's early adult years were spent moving around the country to support her husband's education and raising four children. Just over a decade ago, Jen's oldest child shared the information that he is gay. This launched a new season of learning and advocacy work for her and for her family. When not practicing yoga, or reading, she's often having lively conversations with strangers on the internet. I'm excited to have Jen here on the podcast today. Welcome. Well, Hi, Jen. Welcome to Hoarf

J Jen Blair 01:31

Hello, how are you?

E Elle Billing 01:33

I am I'm pretty well today. How are you doing?

J Jen Blair 01:36

Good. Actually having a good morning.

E Elle Billing 01:37

Yeah, it's great to have you here. I guess it is still morning there. We just hit the noon hour. Central time. My dad's home for lunch, he played with the dog a little bit. It's a typical noon routine. The dog knows when it's noon, and she starts watching for Papa to play ball.

J

Jen Blair 01:54

All excited for grandpa to show up.

E

Elle Billing 01:58

She-- My dog is probably the most routined person in the family besides my dad, of course. But like in the morning, she gets me up to get fed. And then she wakes me up again when she thinks I've slept long enough. And then at noon, she watches for my dad. And then in the evening, she watches for my dad

J

Jen Blair 02:14

like a little babysitter.

E

Elle Billing 02:15

She is, it's really nice.

J

Jen Blair 02:17

That's awesome.

E

Elle Billing 02:18

I wouldn't have as much of a routine, I don't think, if I didn't have a worked-- like a working breed of a dog.

J

Jen Blair 02:23

That's awesome.

E

Elle Billing 02:24

She has no cows. So we are her cows.

J Jen Blair 02:28
I love that.


E Elle Billing 02:29
So the first question that I ask all my guests is how have you received care this week? And

J Jen Blair 02:36
And when I read the question earlier, I was actually trying to think about the ideas of self care or like receiving care from other people. And I really kind of just focused on the self care part because I have been trying so to be so mindful the last couple of years about things that keep me moving forward and healthy ways. And I try to consistently do those. But I've discovered with my ADHD that I get bored of these sorts of things pretty quickly. And so self care for me, when people say things like, try to drink enough water, try to get outside, try to move every day. Absolutely true. Love those things, try to do those things. But if I try to go for a walk every day, for the rest of my life, it does not turn into self care, it turns into like a task and a job and I start to hate it.

E Elle Billing 03:24
It's a chore.

J Jen Blair 03:24
Yeah. So recently, I've been trying to be like really thoughtful about the fact that my brain doesn't work that way. And try to do little self care things for about 20 to 30 days, and then totally ditch the first one and move to the next one. So like maybe for 20 days, I will really focus on getting enough water. And then maybe the next month, I will really focus on reading some novels that just take me out of myself. And maybe the next month, I'm obsessed with puzzles, and I'll just do a lot of puzzles to give myself time to breathe and think. But when I tried to, like pick a thing and do it forever, that's not, it's not going to work. It's not gonna work for me, because I'm gonna get bored, I'm gonna be like, Oh, I got to do a puzzle, again, and it becomes not self care, where if I like wait for eight months, and then like say like March is going to be puzzle month because it's going to be yucky outside. And then I get like excited and I look forward to it. It really feels like self care. So as I get older, I'm kind of thinking about these sorts of things more intentionally.

E Elle Billing 04:23
That's really cool. I like that a lot. Just even exercising that kind of reflection and self knowledge is a form of self care too because you have to know yourself to be able to take care of yourself.



J Jen Blair 04:34
Yeah,

E Elle Billing 04:35
that's really neat. My sister is actually really into puzzles and reading but never at the same time. So she'll go through and read, you know, 20 books in a very short amount of time. And then she'll get into puzzles and put together these big complicated 1000 piece puzzles and do a bunch of them. When she had spinal surgery a number of years ago, during her recovery, she just couldn't do much. She was sitting at home recovering. So she just did a bunch of puzzles.

J Jen Blair 05:02
I just just recently had surgery myself, I had six weeks that I needed to be down. And that was for sure a puzzle phase so that I didn't lose my mind being trapped.

E Elle Billing 05:10
I just-- I had to laugh a little bit to myself when you said, you know, you'll, you'll focus on water for like a month and then move on to something else. And all I could think of was like, You're reading books, but like really dehydrated.

J Jen Blair 05:23
And it's, it's not funny because it's true.

E Elle Billing 05:26
Or it is funny because it's true. No, I'm the same.

J Jen Blair 05:31
I just, it's not going to it's not going to happen for me. If I try to make like, like, you know, people like healthy people weight loss, people are always like, you pick a goal that you can do for the rest of your life. And I'm like, there's-- that goal doesn't exist. Like that is not how my brain works.

E Elle Billing 05:48
Napping. That's mine. that's the thing I can do for the rest of my life. I will always be able to nap because I am never rested.

J Jen Blair 05:56
Even knowing that about yourself, like mentally in your head be like, Wow, look at me napping. I'm taking such good care of myself.

E Elle Billing 06:02
Yep.

J Jen Blair 06:02
Where someone else might be like I have napped every day this week. I'm such a loser. I'm so lazy -- are those horrible stories we tell ourselves, like knowing that it's self care is like a really great thing for you.

E Elle Billing 06:13
Yeah, like no, naps are so good for you. Way to not grind

J Jen Blair 06:19
to do it and guilt, guilt free.

E Elle Billing 06:20
Yep.

J Jen Blair 06:21
Allows you permission. I love that.

E Elle Billing 06:23
And now it's to the point with my nap routine where I say Well, Mom, I did two things today. And she goes, let me guess it's nap time. I said it sure is. I've done two things. Two things. One of them was showering. And --

J Jen Blair 06:37
sometimes that's the one thing

E Elle Billing 06:38

oh my gosh, it's so much effort. And you think well because I have to wash my hair right? And my I have fibromyalgia and my arms get really fatigued. And so it's like, well, I showered today. That was one thing on the to do list. And now I have to recover. And then I'll do one more thing, and then it'll be naptime.

J Jen Blair 06:55

I think it sounds lovely. Like you've mapped it out perfectly.

E Elle Billing 06:58

Yeah, it works for now. Like it's a workable structure.

J Jen Blair 07:03

I like that. That's all what we're all trying to figure out. Right? Like, what works? How can we make this sustainable?

E Elle Billing 07:08

Yeah, and my dog knows when it's naptime. And she gets all excited in her little wiggles and she's like, Oh, it's nap time.

J Jen Blair 07:14

That's awesome. I tend to like overdo and then underdo then overdo, you know, like putting in the 20 hour days to get something amazing, accomplished and then burnout and do nothing. And I love this like pace of like, do one thing. Take nap do one thing.

E Elle Billing 07:28


I've been the workaholic, perfectionist person, and then I got sick and I just can't do that anymore. So napping is my mantra now.


J Jen Blair 07:36


I love it.





- E** Elle Billing 07:38
You and I met. I don't even know how long ago it was. But it was in Idaho, and probably through Mama Dragons or something adjacent to it.
- J** Jen Blair 07:45
Originally, we met because you did a TED talk.
- E** Elle Billing 07:49
Oh, it was my TED Talk!
- J** Jen Blair 07:51
And my youngest did a TED talk at that same event. So that's actually when we met
- E** Elle Billing 07:55
right. I'm glad you remembered because I didn't.
- J** Jen Blair 07:58
I remember because you your TED talk was something about like the thumb of my something
- E** Elle Billing 08:03
Thumb of my Leg but
- J** Jen Blair 08:04
yeah, like I was close.
- E** Elle Billing 08:05
Yeah, it was about. Yeah, it was about teaching like trilingual kids at the deaf school.
- J** Jen Blair 08:11
Yeah, like the genius of how linguistics is working in the brains of brilliant little children. I remember.


 08:18
Yes.


 Elle Billing 08:18
Yes. And your your youngest kid's TED talk was about having an an oldest sibling who came out as gay while you guys were active in the LDS church and giving out free hugs.


 Jen Blair 08:30
Yeah, they spoke about at the, at the time, it was about allyship. They've since come out themselves, which would change things a little bit, but at the time, they were eight.

 Elle Billing 08:38
Yeah.

 Jen Blair 08:39
And yeah, we're talking about being an ally like a kid on the playground and stuff and some of the horrible things that they were hearing, and primarily how they felt like all of these little friends of theirs were missing out because they had been introduced to the queer community and they loved it. They loved the people, and the color, enthusiasm, and excitement. And none of these peers of theirs that were saying inaccurate things on the playground, were able to enjoy that same colorful existence that they had been exposed to.

 Elle Billing 09:10
Yeah, I remember greet speaker for eight. I remember that.

 Jen Blair 09:14
Yeah, we don't share it very often anymore because they don't have the same name.

 Elle Billing 09:17
Right? No, I get it. Yeah.

 Jen Blair 09:20

J Jen Blair 09:20

So it's, you know, a little triggery for them to have an old name blasted on everything

E Elle Billing 09:25

so I did mention Mama Dragons because I think it was probably the reverse-- through you I found out who the Mama Dragons were

J Jen Blair 09:33

probably I was the only one in that area at that time.

E Elle Billing 09:36

Yeah, I guess we can do this out of order or in any of two ways you can talk about your family or your personal journey with your your eldest coming out or, and how the Mama Dragons played into that, or you can explain who the Mama Dragons are and then talk about your family in relation to that either either direction you want to talk about it, whatever flows most naturally.

J Jen Blair 09:58

Okay, yeah, our family like, to start with our family, we were pretty conservative and we were living in this conservative, what I would consider a rural town in Idaho. There's obviously smaller towns in Idaho than where we were. But we were homeschooling our kids. And we were very, very active in the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, who most people would recognize more as the Mormons, or the LDS church, and life looked pretty good. We fit into that little bubble, we fit into that little box we have, everything was safe, and predictable, and protective. And all of those sorts of things. Obviously, I'm unable to share the perspective of my kid. But I do have blanket permission to share the story. But everything's coming -- right? -- from the mom's perspective at the time.

E Elle Billing 10:41

Right. And the coming out story is your son's story. So yeah, that's-- that would be his to tell.

J Jen Blair 10:47

Yeah, right. So I'll only speak to my experience. In regard to that story. Basically, he was like a really good kid. Just like nothing rebellious about him. Like I said, we were homeschooling. He was this ideal Big Brother piggybacking his little siblings all over the house, they played hide and seek something intuitive about him was just good. Like, if I went to the grocery store, he wouldn't let me carry in any of the bags, even though he was young, right? Like he was gonna help me with those sorts of things. He was just a good kid. But starting about the age of 12, he

was getting kind of angsty, kind of pouty and heavy. Like, he was always like, kind of moping around and trumping for lack of better word. And we were dumb, naive, you know, first time parents or whatever, and we would talk to each other like, hope that's that teenage thinks we've heard about and stuff, you know, what you kind of adore and he will say things like, I wish I didn't even have to be alive. And we were genuinely too naive to even hear what he was telling us. Right? We just kept blaming it on like, oh, that's how teenagers talk. And teenagers are moody. And we just have to fight, like fight to keep loving him for a few more years. And he'll outgrow it or whatever. And by the time he was 16, it was almost like two people like he was this good, totally just like happy, helpful, loving, good kid. But there was always like this undercurrent of like, like we were homeschooling, but he was doing college level courses. And when I would try to talk to him about, like, Hey, you're taking calculus and quantum physics, maybe you could take those at the local university and get credit for it. And he'd be like, there's no reason to even care about the future. There's no reason to talk about college. So it's kind of like this dichotomy all the time that we just blamed on hormones. But I think most parents would relate when you get those like instinctual moments at the at the time, I would have referred to it as inspiration to like, head on up to his room and have a conversation. It was time for the mom talk. So I trumped up I honestly thought I was being inspired to talk to him about his video game playing. Because he played a lot of video games. And so I plopped it down on his floor, leaned up against the wall, and I was just kind of shooting in the dark trying to figure out what I needed to talk to him about. And he was uncharacteristically, like angsty, he was pacing around, even though I was seated on the floor, he was pacing back and forth, and back and forth. And finally, I said something like, it feels like you want to do something, like something bad or naughty or whatever. But you don't want the consequences of doing that. And he told me, yeah, you're exactly right. I do. And out of nowhere, out of my mouth, it didn't stop in my brain first,

E

Elle Billing 10:59

it just erupted.

J

Jen Blair 11:49

Right? So I must have known on some level, but never consciously out of my mouth. I asked, Are you gay? And then the thoughts did come to my brain after and I thought, what sort of a mother would ask their child this question. It wasn't like, I thought it was some sort of an insult. Or he wasn't stereotypical. Like, I wasn't insulting his mannerisms or whatever. I just did not know where it came from. Except now I'm like, it's because moms know, like, I was on some on some sort of level. I knew.

E

Elle Billing 14:01

Well, right. And now and now, you know, that like being gay isn't insulting, but in the culture that you were living in? Little Mormon bubble

J

Jen Blair 14:10

right

right.

E

Elle Billing 14:10

Like, where did this come from?

J

Jen Blair 14:12

Yeah, like I like I felt like it was asking him like, Are you a pedophile? Or, you know, some horrible insult like that, like, what, what sort of a mom would ask that, but he froze. And he stared at me. These big giant eyes and his eyes filled up with tears. And he didn't say anything. Like, he just stared at me with these big giant eyes. And I said, you know, this is this isn't the sort of thing I can guess at. I'm gonna need you to answer that question. And, but he couldn't talk. So like there just weren't any words he had been holding it in for so long. so he crawled over to his desk and scrawled the word yes, on this little corner scrap of paper and handed it to me and honestly, wasn't legible. Nobody could have read that piece of paper, but I knew. Like I knew what it said. And the part that's most vivid in my own memory with my own experience. He was, he was tall, he was over six feet tall. And he only weighed maybe 110 pounds, just this long, skinny, 16 year old kid. He was kneeling up on his knees, and I went over and I hugged him. And I said, I, I honestly don't even know what this means. I don't know what we're gonna do about this. But I love you, like intensely, and whatever happens. We're on the same team. We're going to work, we're going to work it out together. And we spent the next couple hours with his head on my lap, I went back and sat on the floor with my back against the wall, and he put his head on my lap. And for about two hours, I just played with his hair. And he sobbed, and his whole body just kind of was like shaking, like, like he had just completed this intense workout. And I just kept trying to keep breathing. And I had no idea what to do. I had no concept in my head. I kept thinking like, all I could think of was Anderson Cooper, Ellen DeGeneres, Anderson Cooper, Ellen DeGeneres that's it

E

Elle Billing 16:02


high profile, high profile famous gay people.


J


Jen Blair 16:06


I had nobody to like I just was in this world where it just didn't even exist in my world. I wasn't campaigning politically against gay people. He had had a teacher that we were pretty sure was gay back in second grade-- best teacher ever, loved him. I just had, I had no, I had nothing. There was so much ignorance. I didn't know what to do with it. But the turning point for me was the next morning. And I watched I was in the kitchen. He had three younger siblings. And that was in the kitchen making breakfast. And he skipped through the kitchen like, like skipped. And he'd been so sullen and grumpy for like four years. And the morning after, tell you what, and then we told his dad after that. But the morning after he he skipped, like he was so-- I don't even notice that he noticed he was skipping, he was just so light, like in his whole body. And I realized how heavy it had been for him. And how freeing it was to just simply know that we like loved him. So that's kind of the coming out story. And that's when I started hunting. He was not


ready to be out publicly. So I was stuck trying to find anything that looked like resources to raise this kid. And, and there wasn't anything. I ended up on the -- this is embarrassing -- but the Huffington Post had a gay voices section.

 Elle Billing 17:30
Yep.


 Jen Blair 17:31
And I was like in the comment section under a fake name, just trying to ask questions. But I was so ignorant that I was just offending people. Like there wasn't there wasn't a way for me to be like, well, what if he still wants to marry a girl? Without me getting pummeled? Right, because what a horrible question. But I didn't care. Like I took all the shots and all like, I just didn't care. I just needed some information. And then, shortly after, he still had not come out publicly yet. But I found the Mama Dragons on Facebook, there were about 20 of them. And they had just opened a Facebook group. And that was so pivotal for me to have that support. Up to that I just didn't even we just loved him. And we didn't know what else to do.

 18:17
And

 Elle Billing 18:17
And to me, that seems like such a no brainer. Like, oh, like your kid is still your kid after they come out.

 Jen Blair 18:23
Right.

 Elle Billing 18:23
That's still the same person. And in fact, your son was happier.

 Jen Blair 18:29
Oh, yeah, he was fine.

 Elle Billing 18:30

After he came out like he was. He was healthier the next day than he was the night before. And probably, by all accounts for the previous four years.

J Jen Blair 18:40
Oh, 100%. Yes.

E Elle Billing 18:43
I didn't come out publicly till I was 31. But I had been coming out to various people since I was 19. So like, it was a process.

J Jen Blair 18:52
Yeah.

E Elle Billing 18:52
And just not having to hide and not having to worry about who knew and who didn't. And trying to remember who I'd already told like, and like being free from that anxiety and that fear and that hiding is so liberating.

J Jen Blair 19:07
So he was doing awesome. And we have no problems with him. Like, instantly I knew all of the weird conceptions I had in my head were wrong. Like instantly. I just didn't know what else there was like, I knew I needed to have the mom talk with him about safe sex. I had no idea what that would look like.

E Elle Billing 19:24
I mean, you need to have that talk with your kids anyway, you just didn't have the context.

J Jen Blair 19:29
Yeah, the wrong one for all those years.

E Elle Billing 19:32
Right.

J Jen Blair 19:32

And I didn't know it's interesting when I think backwards because you don't think of yourself as ignorant in any given moment. But I was so absolutely ignorant. I had like all these like fears in my head of like senators in airport bathrooms with young boys and like,

E Elle Billing 19:51

well, the senator, the rep you just made a reference to it was an Idaho senator.

J Jen Blair 19:55

Oh, I didn't even know that.

E Elle Billing 19:57

Yes. The one in the in the Minneapolis Airport bathroom, that whole scandal.

J Jen Blair 20:01

I knew it was in the Midwest, but I didn't.

E Elle Billing 20:03

Yeah. So it wasn't Idaho Senator, I didn't know that who got arrested in in the Minneapolis Airport for soliciting sex in a bathroom.

J Jen Blair 20:13

Yeah, those those, those were the things I thought I knew about.

E Elle Billing 20:17

Right.

J Jen Blair 20:18

And I had heard, like really badly interpreted stories of like Matthew Shepard, where he was kind of vilified. And, you know, he was kind of asking for it or whatever, and taking deep dives into the actual story behind those things. And having to absorb how dangerous the world might actually be for my kid. Those were the kinds of things that I needed help and support for, he

was fine, he was perfect. We just didn't know how to change the world. That's what I needed was the entire world to change, especially in this little Mormon bubble that you referenced. Like, like I brought up Matthew Shepard. And when I learned that the people who had actually treated him so brutally. And so inhuman, it was, like, just disgusting and repulsive. Those were members of my church. They, they belonged. They, we shared a faith, and their community that stood behind them. Those were members of my faith, which just skyrocketed my fear to outer space for how our community, everything that had felt that I mentioned before was like safe and beautiful and comfortable. I knew was not going to be safe and beautiful and comfortable for this kid.

E Elle Billing 21:29

Right. So that's, that's kind of where the mama Dragons come in. Because that started as a group of mothers from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

J Jen Blair 21:40

Yeah, originally, everybody was actively participating in the Mormon church.

E Elle Billing 21:43

Okay. So can you tell us a little bit about the mama dragons and who they are and what they have done for you and what they do for other people? Yeah, so we're, we're a decade later, right? So things are more developed. But the mission of the organization itself is to support educate and empower the mothers of LGBTQ kids. So at this point, probably, this is a random guess I haven't looked at numbers for a long time, but probably about 30% of the group is associated actually with LDS or Mormon church in any way. But our roots definitely started there. And so the assumption from the start was that you have-- telling moms, right, just love your kid. It's such a ridiculous statement, because that's not the problem. They already do. We just have all these weird... So when you hear about kids getting kicked out, or whatever, which is very real, and very horrible. It isn't a lack of love, that's kicking those kids out to the street. It's like this weird culture that we grew up in, in the 80s, with tough love, where being gay is a choice. And if you want your kid to choose something better, you can't enable their bad choices. Where if you think about being a lesbian, as being like a heroin addict, and apply those same principles that you would for someone you deeply loved. And so it's like, literally just a lack of education that's causing the majority of these problems. If that makes any sense. Yeah. I mean, it doesn't.

J Jen Blair 23:15

It's completely backwards.

E Elle Billing 23:16

Like, yes, I hear what you're saying. And I understand your words. But no, it doesn't make sense. It's completely backwards.

sense. it's completely bonkers.

J Jen Blair 23:23

Yeah. Because you can't you can't bully someone into not being gay anymore, right? Like that.

E Elle Billing 23:28

You can't bully someone into not being an addict, either.

J Jen Blair 23:31

No.

E Elle Billing 23:32

But like, that also doesn't work.

J Jen Blair 23:35

the whole tough love thing from the 80s.

E Elle Billing 23:37

Yeah, yeah,

J Jen Blair 23:38

I'm figuring out that those things don't work. Like that's where a lot of us are coming from. So the majority of our moms in Mama Dragons are coming from conservative cultures, whether it's conservative religion, or just conservative areas of the country, where they have heard horrible lies and misconceptions about queer people their whole lives, and they become terrified that their child is going to turn in to those lies and misconceptions. Right. So like, we could look at Jackson. And he was like, the perfect kid in my eyes, right? And I didn't worry about that. Because the chances of him harming another person, never gonna happen. Like, I just knew this kid so deeply. So that's why all those misconceptions fell apart for me, like in that single moment. But we know statistically that a lot of queer kids who are closeted, that are deeply struggling, because being closeted as miserable,

E Elle Billing 24:33

agreed.

J Jen Blair 24:34

Their mental health is suffering, they start participating in self harming, and self damaging activities. So by the time some of these kids are coming out, they have been experimenting with drugs. They have been engaging in risky sexual behaviors that are like, with wild age differences or potentially even getting paid for such things. There's this idea that they're inside themselves that they've internalized that their disgusting themselves that way. So then by the time these kids come out to their parents, for the parents, it's just one more bad choice, right that the kid has made. And I can see how parents are thinking this, even though they're so desperately wrong about, you know, like the, the self harming behavior didn't cause the gay.

E Elle Billing 25:22

Right

J Jen Blair 25:23

Like, it's backwards. And so we try really hard to teach what good parents actually do, and what actually takes our kids out of those spaces.

E Elle Billing 25:34

Right. And I attended a PFLAG meeting that you were leading, specifically about what accepting and rejecting behavior looks like from the perspective of a developing teenage brain.

J Jen Blair 25:46


yeah, because

E Elle Billing 25:47

and that was so powerful, because at the time I was teaching middle school and high school, and to read some of those behaviors, like the things that parents think are, of course, I accept my kid, but because teenagers, their brains are different than adult brains, things that parents think are accepting can --are often perceived as rejecting behaviors by teenagers. And when you think about a kid who's already angsty, because of hormones, and their brain developing, and then on top of it, they're coming out or they are closeted, and they're wrestling with all of this, and then you add the teenage egocentrism and everybody hates me, Everyone's looking at me. Why? Why is everything so hard? And you add a parental comment or behavior on top of it, that was meant to be one thing, but is perceived another way, because of all of that very teenage developmentally normal baggage.

J Jen Blair 26:44

Yeah, Caitlyn. Dr. Caitlin Ryan from the San Francisco from San Francisco State University has done some pretty intensive evidence based research. She's won lots of awards for it. And it is genius. And it's so interesting when you look at the behaviors, because you're like no parent would do that. Like that is horrible, these rejecting behaviors. But then in the real world, do you see it happen all the time, like different cultures with high machismo levels, like, culturally, you know, if your kid is acting, your son is acting a little feminine, the way to fix that is to make sure that his brothers are beating him up a lot, because that's going to toughen him up, right? Like, that's like a cultural thing that these families grow up thinking, where, obviously, if your kid is feminine, you should not beat them up. See? What's really, really obvious, or I worked with teens forever, and they would say things like, my parents are super affirming. They just don't want me to act gay. And I'd be like, what, what does that mean to you to act gay. And he's like, you know, like, sometimes I pop my hip out when I'm standing. And I need to not do that. And so these parents are telling their children, unintentionally, the way you exist in society is offensive and problematic. And so you need to fix yourself, when the parents are genuinely trying to say, I do not want you to get beat up. I do not want you to get bullied. Here's what I'm going to do to try to protect you. And it doesn't work. It's it's rock, like, but like you can like when you hear it from the parents perspective and stuff. You can be like, Oh, I get what you were trying to do. And also, let me explain to you why it failed.

 28:18
Yeah,

E Elle Billing 28:18

Yeah, this is what your kid is actually hearing from you.

J Jen Blair 28:20

Yeah. Like, like, if someone was saying to you like, Oh, I really genuinely love you. But the way you smile, awkward, please don't, you know, like, please stop laughing. Like, those messages don't feel like ...


E Elle Billing 28:34


I've actually heard that. your laugh is too loud. Like I know, I'm sorry.


J Jen Blair 28:39


That's just how it comes out.


E Elle Billina 28:41


 Elle Billing 28:11
I'm a theater kid, it happens.


 Jen Blair 28:43
So they start repressing and internalizing these messages that like, all of these characteristics about me, that are just innate, are offensive to other people. And it's really, really damaging, and it's damaging to the parent-child relationship.

 Elle Billing 28:59
So Mama dragons exists to, like, help educate parents on not just you need to love your kids, because parents, in an ideal world inherently love their kids. But like, this is what loving behavior looks like in the situation where you have an LGBTQ child

 Jen Blair 29:16
and learning things. Like, for example, my child is this is not me, but my child is trans and the school policies are really damaging. I don't know what to do. And then you have these 10,000 moms, some of which are attorneys on some of which work with Title IX professionally, some of which are in more liberal locations, and they can all say, here's what the law says, here's what your child is entitled to. This is what you have the very absolute right to demand from the school system on behalf of your child. Sometimes we get in this world of gaslighting, right where they're like, I'm sorry, your child doesn't have any place to go to the bathroom. That's a personal problem. Or whatever when they put it back on the parents and parents don't know You don't know what you can fight for. so a lot of it is that kind of thing? How do I help my kid change their name? How do I deal with this bully situation? What do I do with grandma, who refuses to acknowledge the reality of the new girlfriend in the family, or all of those kinds of things, just getting support. So you're like, wait, it's not me. I'm not crazy. This is real. And this is what we're entitled to expect in the world, you know, common decency and dignity.

 Elle Billing 30:26
Yeah. You mentioned that when you're when your son came out, you were still you were very involved and active in the LDS church.

 Jen Blair 30:34
Oh, yes.

 Elle Billing 30:35
10 years on, what does that look like? Is your family still involved in in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

J Jen Blair 30:41

No. our immediate family resigned from the church, and there's a ton, I could say about the details of that it took us probably a full year, before we stopped participating, of just trying to sort it out. Essentially, I couldn't participate in a space that wasn't able to recognize the full humanity and equality of my child. And I know that that is a space where a lot of members of the Church get defensive. Like, of course we do. Of course we do. But theologically, it's not true, like within the depths of the theology. And I don't know how familiar you are with LDS theology, you lived in Idaho.

E Elle Billing 31:19

Yeah, I lived in Idaho for 13 years. And I have friends who are ex Mormon, for very much the same reasons you are, some who are still, like one foot in one foot out, some who are kind of like trying to change it from the inside, they're like, you this is the faith I grew up with, these are my people, this is my community, I would really like to, like, I believe a lot of this stuff. But I think the way we're doing it as wrong. I know a little bit about theology. I don't know if but I would say I'm well versed, though,

J Jen Blair 31:55

there's this basic, underlying theology, where the goal or the purpose, like the reason for my existence, as a person on the planet, was to birth children. And to make sure all of them got back to the celestial kingdom with me, which is the highest level of heaven, right? That's the only reason I existed, as a human, was to birth children and get them all back to the highest level of heaven. And when I realized I couldn't get my entire family there, like theologically, that was an impossibility. I had a pretty, pretty intense wrestle with God at the time. And I was like, Fine, you know what, we're packing up the whole family. And we're going to a lower level of heaven, where we can be together. Because all of a sudden, I recognize the sad heaven, like I'm in this highest level of heaven with two of my kids are three of my kids. And the other two aren't welcome. Like I just said,


E Elle Billing 32:50

it's a very sad heaven.

J Jen Blair 32:51

Yeah, like, I was like that I'd rather go to the lower heaven myself where at least we can be together. And like, I was like, you're almost all of a sudden, your heaven doesn't make any sense to me. I'm not even interested in going there anymore. And so I kind of started with those ideas. And, and then the younger siblings were coming home in tears, the youngest was eight at the time. And then number two was 16. And they were coming home with messages from church, the eight year old would come home and cry and say things like, why don't they

think that Jackson can go to heaven with us? And I would have to launch into this, this whole thing about like, sometimes people are just wrong. And, you know, like, and I was like, this is actually harming This is more harmful than helpful. But we did study it out for about a year. And there's a lot of nuance, like if the church fully accepted queer people, 1,000% we wouldn't go back. Yeah, this point. Like, it's been a long time. And we have other reasons. On top of our reasons. Yeah. Yeah. It's become a once you move outside of a bubble, when you look back into the bubble, it's a little bit more objective than maybe when you were originally inside.

 34:01
I

 Elle Billing 34:01

I mean, I imagine that was a really difficult year, though, because oh, I mean, you went to you went to BYU. I mean, you and your husband met there. I mean, you grew up in Utah, as a member of the church. I mean, that was your whole life.

 Jen Blair 34:15

Right. So my husband and I didn't actually meet at BYU.

 Elle Billing 34:18

Oh, okay.

 Jen Blair 34:19

it's worse. We met in seminary in high school.

 Elle Billing 34:23

Okay.

 Jen Blair 34:25

And then we attended BYU and we actually graduated together the same day, okay, with our two year old on our hips.

 Elle Billing 34:32

Okay, so like, did he like leave on his mission and then come back and then you got married

and Oh, so you did one of those. Okay.

J Jen Blair 34:39

Yes, yes, we did. The whole kit and caboodle and it worked for us. We had moved we've lived in five different states. Up to this point and the LDS community does, the Mormons do so many things like within community so well, and we just have this built in family as we traveled around the world and our kids have these built in friends-- or not the world sorry, the country. Yeah, and our kids had these built in friends. And my husband's education and career were quite time consuming. And I have these built in babysitters and the support network, I would say that the majority of my identity was only two things: like mom and Mormon. There, I didn't really have any other personal identity outside of those two things. And essentially, I was, I felt forced to choose between those two identities. I couldn't be a good mom and continue to be a Mormon. I had to pick. And so I lost half of my identity. And that was old that was way too old.

E Elle Billing 35:39

To have to rebuild who you were

J Jen Blair 35:41

Yeah, yeah, because I was 40 And Tom's like, like, everything in my head. Like, I was like, do I even do eyes and like music? Do I? Did I even want to get married? Did it like everything in my whole life suddenly had to be reevaluated. Because half of my existence didn't exist anymore. It was absolutely the hardest hands down thing that has ever ever been I've ever gone through. There's a reason there's support groups for people who leave high demand religion.

E Elle Billing 36:08

Yeah, no kidding. Wow, that was really illuminating. Especially like you going on the Huffing? Like thinking back to you being on going on the Huffington Post with a fake name and asking questions. It definitely helps me understand how you are so patient with people online now who ask questions and possibly in bad faith, and how you engage with people so thoughtfully and kindly and patiently

J Jen Blair 36:35

oh, how could I fault someone for Ignorance when I was so amazingly ignorant,

E Elle Billing 36:39

like, I was like, oh, that's how she does it.

J Jen Blair 36:42

Because they're like, I've every time I'm arguing with someone who's asking these just ridiculous questions. I'm like, Oh, you're just me. 10 years ago, I wasn't a bad person. I wasn't cruel. I was just completely undereducated.

E Elle Billing 36:53

Yeah. So at the beginning, I asked how you received care this week, and you were talking about like, your month of your month long delves into various forms of self care, during the time when you were re evaluating your identity, and then continuing to now, how do you practice self but also community care?

J Jen Blair 37:15

Well, at the beginning, I blocked we lost our community.

E Elle Billing 37:18

Yeah,

J Jen Blair 37:19

like, suddenly, my girls weren't allowed to play with friends anymore. Some were great. Some friends were great. But there were a lot that were like, you can't really come, my mom says you can't come to our house anymore. The people that I normally went to for advice and comfort, were telling me things that intuitively, I just knew were not true. Things like, you just need to make sure that he stays celibate. Or you just need to make sure you know, there's camps you can send him to, to change him like this was my support network. Obviously, I couldn't turn to them anymore. And I didn't know where to go. So at the beginning, there was no community care. And I did not do well, like full on had a complete and total breakdown, I was medicated beyond medication limits, I lost probably 40 pounds in a couple of months. Like it just was not going well. Which is probably why finding these Mama Dragons a year later was so essential for me, because then I could ask questions like, I'd be like, I feel like I know what they need to do for this kid. But what if I'm wrong? What if my choices are sending him to hell? Because I was terrified of that.

E Elle Billing 38:21

Right.

J Jen Blair 38:22

And you know, and then these loving moms who had been on the same path were like, Oh,

you're not wrong. Those instincts that you have are dead on, you're doing it right. And so I built care and community like that. Starting online, they actually had I had been in the group for like, I've only met these moms online for maybe four or five weeks. And a couple of them had decided that they were going to go on a retreat in St. George together. And I was like, Can I come? I'm not a person who invited myself. I was like, Can I come? And they were like, Yeah, we're all paying. I'm just send your money, you know, to Jill. And I was like, great. I write a check. I mail it off. My husband thinks I've lost my mind. But he's like, wait, you just mailed money? To who? I'm like, It's fine to internet Mom. He's like, mailed money your what? And I was like, we're gonna stay together and a house and he was like, he was like, what if the whole fate what if? What if I go, our whole family goes and we could rent a house, and then you could go in the daytime? And then come, like, just like this again? Right? This idea that I was launching myself, money and all into these internet strangers that I had never met. In hindsight, I'm like, oh, yeah, I get why. He was a little bit like, Wait, how much did you spend? But I needed that so desperately and we went for a week. And I cried all day, every day. Literally, all day every day because I finally found people who got it and that need for community and, and sisterhood was so intense. I just I went around to each one of them that were like seventeen people who were there, I went out to each one, I was like, Okay, tell me, tell me your story. Tell me your story. And I would just listen and weep. And then I would find the next one, I stayed up to 4am the first night, just like soaking in. And that's, that's when I started to rebuild community and why I think community is so crazy essential, why the queer community needs a community where they can be safe and away and why the Black community or the Deaf community or the trans community needs people who get it, where you can just let your guard down and be yourself and be surrounded by that community. So that's, like, I have like these passionate ideas about community, community now because I went for like a solid year from having community to losing it and then rebuilding that again.

E Elle Billing 40:48

That is a wonderful note to end on. Thank you so much. Because I agree, I mean, we need our spaces where we can just be

J Jen Blair 40:57
absolutely

E Elle Billing 40:58

and not have to be justifying or defending or having to, like, convince people that we should exist.

J Jen Blair 41:06
Right.

E Elle Billina 41:08

Elle Billing 41:20

So that thank you so much for being here. What is the mama dragons website for people who would like to check them out? Or who potentially need to join?

J Jen Blair 41:17

It's mama dragon dot org. So super simple. The hardest part is getting people to spell mama in the same way. So that's M A M A. Mama dragons,

E Elle Billing 41:26

Mama dragons dot org, that M A M A dragons dot org. Thank you so much for being here.

J Jen Blair 41:32

Yeah, thanks for inviting me.

E Elle Billing 41:36

Thank you for joining us on this episode of Hoorf. To view the complete show notes and all the links mentioned in today's episode, or to get a full transcript of the episode, visit Hoorf podcast.com. That's H O O R F podcast dot com. Before you go, make sure you subscribe to the podcast so you can receive new episodes right when they're released. And if you're enjoying our podcast, I'd love to have you leave us a review in Apple podcasts. Reviews are one of the major ways that Apple ranks their podcasts. So even though it only takes you a few seconds, it really does make a difference for us. Become a patron for \$3 a month you can support the creation of this podcast, pay my editor and join a community of fellow caregivers out here just doing our best. Thank you again for joining me Elle Billing in this episode of Hoorf. Until next time, be excellent to each other. Hoorf is hosted by Elle Billing at elleandwink audio editing by Ricki Cummings at rickiep00h music composed by Ricki Cummings. Hoorf is a production of Elle & Wink Art Studio, all rights reserved. Hoorf podcast can be found on social media channels at Hoorf podcast at H O O R F podcast.