

## Something Extra EP 039 – Justine Froelker

**Lisa Nichols:** It is my privilege to welcome Justine Froelker on the show today. Justine is an author-speaker and accidental butterfly farmer. Justine I'm so excited. We've been trying to get this on the books for several months now and I'm just so excited to have you here and just sharing all your wisdom, and all your insights, and I just know that your story is going to touch the lives of our listeners. So let's get started, because we've got more things to talk about than we probably have the time to do today. Go back to the beginning and just tell us a little bit about how you grew up.

**Justine Froelker:** So a lot of people are kind of surprised. I grew up in a small town in Iowa. No, stop light. I milked cows for my job, in my senior year of high school. So to me, when I went to Kirksville Missouri for college, Truman State. That was a city. Now St. Louis is a big city for me, so I grew up a small town and I think probably the most defining part of my growing up is I was a dancer. That's what I was supposed to do, I was going to grow up and go to college and dance, and then I started having debilitating pain around the age of 11, and I was mis-diagnosed for about a year and a half until they finally found a broken back and I ended up having two back surgeries, in high school.

The biggest piece being that I spent a year of high school in a body cast it was a small town though, that was such the saving grace a small town that after those back surgeries I was like, Peace out. I'm done, I'm out. And yet, it was the saving grace to that story because my teachers came to my house to teach to get me through. When you look back on your life of what were those... What we would call the hard parts of our story? I no longer call those parts of my story hard. And that's fairly recent. They are the big parts of my story because hard doesn't honor how far I've come. It doesn't glorify God, it doesn't serve the world. When we stay stuck in our heart, and so I try not to like... Yep, I've had two back surgery since a year of my life in high school, it led me into an infertility journey and now I teach people how to rise from the ashes, and write their story.

**Nichols:** Hard his hard, but you know what? So much of our learning and our transformation can come from those hard times, but it is hard when you're going through it. It definitely is a...

Well, you got some funny stories about that, and the body cast had a good friend of yours that helped you. You go do your business.

**Froelker:** My first book ever upward, people, like how do you write a book? And I was like, "Well when you grow up being told you should write a book because you spent to life a year of your life in a body cast. But the most common question I would get... How would you go to the bathroom real or how did you get transport? How do we drive 40 minutes to University of Iowa Hospital? Three times a week because I could not bend at the waist, I was either standing or lying down. The body cast from chin to knees, for six months each surgery, and so we rallied and we got creative and we laughed.

I actually, I just on an Instagram post last week I found a picture from probably right when I started having pain and what I would have told her and how I would have cupped her face in my hands and said, You're all right, and it's going to be okay, and it's going to get so dark and it's okay like you are okay, you are loved, I see you, keep going. But when I was trying to find that picture I couldn't find anything of that time of my life and my parents will say we didn't take pictures, it wasn't a happy time of our lives, it was debilitating, it was hard, we all felt invisible. Doctors would not listen to us. I mean, my first diagnosis is what helped me become a therapist. I was told I had conversion hysteria. That psychosomatically my brain was making up the pain. And that there was nothing physically wrong and they made me go see a sports psychologist, and I was 11 or 12.

I remember thinking what you do is pretty cool. I filed it away. But I'm going to dance, this is going to be fine and no one told me to stop dancing at that point. And then eventually they found the two cracks on a year-old X-ray with grade 4 slippage of the vertebra, so surgery was the only option, but it ultimately it's what led me to where I am... Yeah, it was not in my head and so at all, but it was then when I lost faith in myself, I lost faith that this would be okay. I lost faith in other people. I was really, really alone. Yes, people rallied. And how do you truly understand a girl stuck in a body cast? It's a really hard thing to practice empathy with right? That thread is throughout my whole life, really.

**Nichols:** Well, let's kind of move forward. So you became an accidental butterfly farmer you and your husband Chad.

**Froelker:** The weirdest and coolest hobby ever, let's be honest.

**Nichols:** Well we want to know all about it, and we're all going to want to be butterfly farmers now, after we hear your story. Could you say the lessons that you learn from them monarch butterfly, you go into it in great detail. So tell us a little bit about that and how that even came to be.

**Froelker:** My husband and I ended our infertility journey. We're coming up on seven years of saying enough we're done the money's gone the hearts are broken. And so we chose to end our journey without kids. We had lost three babies in the journey of IVF, we never felt called to adoption. I don't think that that's like a black and white decision. You never know what's going to come in your life, but sure we knew that we were not signing up for that journey. For the tens of thousands of dollars that were already gone.

**Nichols:** You said that your bank account was depleted. You had no money for adoption.

**Froelker:** Well, because a lot of people don't understand how expensive IVF is or how common it is. One in eight couple struggles to conceive, one in four pregnancies end in a loss, and one in 160 pregnancies, or deliveries end with a child born still, and a lot of that one in four and one, in six end up going into the infertility journey because they have trouble conceiving again. And so when we're looking at infertility treatments we're looking at 8000 to 15000 per round. Not everyone has the ability to take out loans for that, or to get a grant. So adoption is really very much the same financial journey along with the loss journey. And so I talk a lot about the advocacy of adoption is not a fix to infertility. Stopping our journey and saying, "We're done, was also not a fix to it because it's just grief, and I believe we all have a grief.

No one's life has turned out, how they hope dreamed and planned. And I'd like to meet the person who says that it did. Yes, because I'm going to therapize them a little bit. I can kind of say, "Oh what's really happening? What's going on? Are you just powering through? But when we ended our infertility journey, I had to dig my way out of the hole I had to dig my way out of grief and so I really started to practice what I had been teaching to my clients for the last 12 years because I've been in private practice as a licensed professional counselor, back then, and I started with self-care. Started digging my way out just taking care of the actual vessel of the body. But then I also knew the data. People who have hobbies are happier people. And on top of that, to add to it, couples who learn a hobby together are happier couples. Learn the hobby not necessarily have one person teach it to the other. Learning it together.

**Nichols:** I am reminded of that adage that says, couples that play together stay together, couples that pray together, stay together but having something that you're doing together, like that, whatever it might be. So you and Chad had never been butterfly farmers before and you decide, let's go on this journey.

**Froelker:** We live on a whole acre in Creve Coeur which is such a blessing. And so people often when they hear that we raise monarch butterflies, they're like... I used to see those everywhere you don't anymore, because we've lost 90% of the population in the last 25 years and St. Louis, Missouri especially, is on the monarch highway of where they migrate from Canada all the way down to Mexico, so we're right along their migration pathway. So it was kind of like, Okay, we have all this land, let's plant milkweed, which is what they eat. And it's a weed it's total weed and it will spread, it's beautiful smell the flowers are smells so good, but that's what the caterpillars eat and you can't treat it. There's no chemicals, because that's also what's destroying the monarchs.

What's destroying the monarchs are clearing of land, and then really pesticides, and so we're like, "Let's just plant a garden. Let's learn about how to do this, let's till the land up together, let's bury some of the parts of our hard story that needs to die so that the new can grow. And so we plant this garden and actually four gardens, now and it was a whole year that pass until we finally saw a monarch in our garden, and she laid eggs right in front of us, and it was just a couple of searches on Instagram and YouTube and Google that I realized that only one to five out of every 100 monarch eggs laid in the wild makes it to butterfly because they have so many predators. Humans being probably the top one, but they also have a lot of natural predators.

So, when you are bringing them inside I really have a 80 to 90% success rate where I am able to bring them inside. I refill the milkweed leaves every day I clean up a lot of Caterpillar poop and they literally emerge on my kitchen counter and then I let them go. And so, we average 200 to 400 monarchs, a year. But people love it? Like I post a lot of it on social media because they're so resilient.

**Nichols:** Yeah, so resilient and just such a process. The metamorphous that takes place much like us, right, and you and continue. Hopefully, if we have a high growth quotient, we're going to continue to transform and just get a better version of ourselves right?

**Froelker:** Well, and in order to grow one of my favorite lessons from the monarch and I write about this in my next book. When they're caterpillars, they walk out of their old skin four times,

it's called molting. You have to get uncomfortable, you have to do the work to grow and learn new lessons and the grossest and coolest part about it is then they turn around and eat their skin because you cannot get rid of your past, you cannot get rid of your failures and your mistakes, it is your job, it's part of you. And it's our job to make them work for us. So whether or not in business or our family life learn your lessons open your eyes when you are on the bottom of the arena floor when you are in the ashes of a failure and learn the lessons and make it work for you and not against you. That's resilience. So that's just one of the many. It's kind of ridiculous.

**Nichols:** Oh, my goodness, who would have thought? I love it. So Justine, you wrote the complicated gray and I've read most of that book, and I told you that there are times where I was laughing and then seriously, there were times where I was weeping. And one of the things that really just cause me to weep is when... You would talk about being in a room full of girlfriends, girlfriends, that you've known for a very long time, and nothing against them, you know but they're talking about their children, they're talking about feeding schedules, they're talking about how all of this... And you said you felt invisible. You were the invisible one at the table and I remember you saying you came home, you talked to Chad and you were just, you were a mess. That broke my heart. Because I know there are a lot of people that feel invisible.

**Froelker:** Infertile or not.

**Nichols:** It doesn't have to be infertility, there are people, and we've talked about this, the thing that we're all trying to do is the buzz is diversity and inclusion, but there are two different things. So tell us, tell the listening audience. How can we build more empathy into our vernacular? How can we build that more into our DNA? And again, sometimes we have a special needs child and I remember when she was born, now, people would say things that were really hurtful. Like, "I'm sorry and I'm like, "Oh no, no, no, there's nothing to be sorry about." She is perfectly and wonderfully made, but sometimes, it is not what I want to say. It's not being malicious with people it's not that at all. Sometimes it is education, sometimes it is just building the awareness into people. I think it's sometimes better to not say anything than to say something that can be so hurtful. So you've said people would say things.

**Froelker:** Oh yeah, absolutely. I'm almost a 40-year-old woman. And so, first question I get everywhere I go. How many kids do you have? And because I'm an advocate for unspoken shame and breaking the silence, I will say we tried really hard to have kids, we can't have kids. And I work and receive other ways to parent in this world because it is one of my big values and

so I usually get one or two responses. Why don't you just try another round of IVF, or just adopt so I want to put the quick fix on it. I want to take away someone's pain because their pain is making me uncomfortable. So we put a simple answer out there, we fix it and we all do this. It's not malicious, it's just our discomfort with vulnerability. Or I get the... Oh, you poor thing, I just can't imagine. So, that's sympathy. And so, I can even tie this back all the way to my back surgery is like I didn't need anyone to fix it.

There's nothing that they could have said to fix it. Yes, there's nothing that you can say that would bring my three babies here, and I would know who they would be at seven years old. There's nothing you can say. I just need you to sit beside me and say this sucks, this is hard. I don't know what to say, I'm here but we've been really trained in our society to have simple answers quick fixes, Band-Aids or to feel pity because that's actually what we think people want and need in all of those things. Those are armors. Those are actually disconnection no one feels seen, when you say "I'm so sorry I just can't imagine". They are sitting by themselves even more alone in their struggle. This is in depth. This is what the diagnosis this is with infertility, this is with the failure at work, whatever it might be. They feel even more alone and healing and growth and innovation will never, ever take place in disconnection it only takes place in connection and empathy is required of that.

**Nichols:** Very good. Well, I tell you what, I am so excited about doing a deeper dive with this when we come back.

**AD:** We'll be back with Justine Froelker.

**Nichols:** So Justine, I want to do a deeper dive because we had talked about it a little bit before, and I said, the thing that really brought my heart is when you were talking about people you feeling invisible and feeling not included. And I want to do a deeper dive on that. So I think empathy is one of those things that we're lacking a lot of... And I want you to talk a little bit more how can we do better, how can we do better in our families, in our work places in our community, wherever if we're out with friends, how can we do better?

**Froelker:** So I think a lot of people will say, "Well I'm just not empathic, I'm not very empathic person, but what we know, especially from Brenne's research from this work that I teach the dare to lead work, we know that this is a skill that we can teach. It's also measurable and observable, and when it comes to empathy. So at first, let's define it. If you're human being, you have feelings if you don't have feelings. That's socio-pathology. We'll hook you up with a good

referral list. But we have feelings, if you have felt sad, mad, and grief, angry, you are equipped and can learn the skill of empathy. 100%, you don't get to say "No just not my thing, I don't know how". You're equipped for it, but a lot of times we just struggle to lean into it because it is uncomfortable, it requires you to get vulnerable. So sympathy. I feel for you, I feel sorry for you, disconnection, empathy, I feel with you, it's connection.

It is identifying with the emotions that are underneath the experience. I don't need you to have lost three babies, and gone through infertility or had two back surgeries, to know what grief, sadness, loss the need for forgiveness, bitterness, might feel like you're human, you just need to pull on your experiences, get curious enough to lean into the vulnerability of the emotion, and sit beside me and say, something as simple as that's really hard. That sounds brutal. I don't know what to say right now, which is really vulnerable, right? Not to lay on a quick fix. A simple answer. That's empathy, and what empathy does, why I love my big story that I've been gifted to teach it is that I want to make sure that no one comes into contact with me and walks away feeling unseen, and that is in the skill of empathy. Can you imagine a world where everyone goes to work, and feel seen and heard and known that you actually feel seen in your friend groups, seen in your family? because a lot of us don't even feel seen there. And so I think that's the biggest reason why I'm so passionate about teaching the skill of empathy.

We have to rumble with it almost like our pride and our ego because we have to get willing to get curious lean into the vulnerability. We also have to be willing to feel pretty powerless because it's uncomfortable. If I can slap a quick fix or solution on your problem that makes me feel powerful, that makes me feel like I'm contributing when I have to say or what I need to say "This is hard, this is really hard." You feel seen in that.

**Nichols:** It's not about you at that point, and you feeling like you're making a contribution, it's about thinking about that other person, what they need at that point in time. I mean, really, I've often heard empathy is really putting yourself in the other person's shoes. Yeah, so even if I have not experienced infertility, what I do is I go back into my background and I pull out something that's happened that caused a lot of grief and I go back and jump into that, and then I can feel empathy then.

**Froelker:** Let's sit beside one another and that. Oh man, this did not turn out how I wanted. We all know that feeling. If you don't, I'm going to challenging that you're not being brave enough with your life, and loving wholeheartedly and leading wholeheartedly.

**Nichols:** So I want to jump into one of the things when you talked about, if you're a human being, you have had feelings. If you haven't, then that's a different episode, so... And we have some recommendations for you. But you talk a lot about the permission of the and okay, and I love it because I think I even saw something like where you... You had talked about when you're little, it's like you've got the happy face, you got the fearful face, you've got the sad face, and the angry face maybe, but now you say it's the emoji.

**Froelker:** Yeah. Now, we have all the emojis and it's so funny. My friends always joke and they're like "did you mean to send that emoji?" I was like, "I know I'm a therapist, but I feel like I always literally have to Google what the emojis mean. I don't understand how they're matching up to the emotions". My first TED Talk, the permission of the and. I've even expanded on the concept since, but the complicated gray, the permission of the and. It is this space between, it's the tension that we must live in, it's the muck between what we have been taught as 2 opposing emotions or experiences, I believe in what I have seen throughout these especially last seven years of my life of resilient recovery is when I give myself permission to feel uncomfortable and feel all the feelings it is actually there that my clarity and my healing lie.

That I am happy and sad, I feel grief and joy that I am a mother who doesn't get to parent her kids here and I will work every day to receive ways to parent the world. And so it's the permission of the and when I did that TED talk, we're coming up on two years now. It was more of this place and then I started trickling in and people started using it against me. I'm just in the and I'm just feeling the and, and I was like, "Oh no, no, no, no, this is not a place to stay stuck. This is a tool, this is a tool. Give yourself permission for the and. Identify the struggle with Grace. Cope with it, in an effective way and allow it to move through so you can write the ending to your story. That's resiliency. That's turning your hard parts of your story, your failures, your mess-ups, when you hurt people when you're just human because you're going to be into the big parts of your story and the permission of the and is a tool to help you do that, but it's uncomfortable.

**Nichols:** Yes, I love your wisdom I love your insight and the thing is Justine, if you had not gone through what you went through, you would not have this to share with other people. And people need this, they really do. So let's talk about this is something extra. So I want to talk a little bit more about that. So tell us about the something extra in one of your team members.

**Froelker:** It's been interesting because my businesses are so I was self-employed for so long. I do a network marketing kind of on the side that has funded last year of my life to write and

teach, and I'm doing more speaking and things like that, but there's this piece that as I have retired from seeing individual clients to risk to write the next book to teach more of Brenne's work, work in ministry things like that. I've also had kind of a crumbling of my own team in my side business but there's this piece of ownership that's happening and it's this ownership of, like, I don't have space for this right now, and this is what I can do.

There's this piece. I think I see a lot in business, where people just keep plowing forward and hustling, and hustling, and they're wondering why they're so burnt out or why they crash or why their body gives up, or why they're not inventing new things when in reality, do we need this grace filled permission to struggle and set boundaries and own all the parts of our story, which right now might be a season like I can't do this. How vulnerable is that?

**Nichols:** Right. And that is a very difficult place to get to, but a mentor of mine years ago, said, "You know, if you build no margin, it's never going to happen because you're just going to continue like you said, plowing forward and you're not going to pull back and take that opportunity to try something new". So, yeah, I love that. So tell us a little bit about a story where you've seen something missing, and you... Have you seen something missing in you?

**Froelker:** For sure. I love this work has changed my life and when I combine it with things like "The Four Agreements" take nothing personally, I need to own my stuff. Own this and of what is in my control and what's not in my control and take nothing personally, it has been one of the most powerful things, especially in the last year building what I'm building in the speaking and the workshops and things like that of getting rejections. Not being the right fit, having contracts changed on me or having people disappoint you and say, like, that's not how I would do it. It's not about you. And for me to kind, it's always this extra piece for me to kind of stop always practicing empathy. I am not in their life that is their life and it's not about me.

My second TED Talk, it's a much funnier and shorter TED talk but I talk about how 99% of your response to someone is about your stuff. It's not about them. Which also means that my response to you is about my stuff and that's responsibility to change our life and it's also freedom to be who we are, but it's the permission for both and that to take ownership for all of it, to stop finger-pointing and blaming? And not taking responsibility and coming alongside people and saying, "This is my part. Can you tell me more about where you're coming from? Help me understand this. Let's sit beside one another. Even if we look different beliefs, different things different and understand one another, but we all have to own our stuff to do that."

**Nichols:** Yeah, there was a situation last week with a workshop that I just sit in I was a little fly on the wall, so I just kind of wanted to see what was happening and they were talking... Well, I walked in right when they were given a scenario and they said, What if you're in a meeting, what if you're in a meeting with a person and one of your team members comes to you after the meeting, and says to you... Every time we're in a meeting together, I feel like you undermine me. And instead of getting defensive they talked about jumping in with empathy and saying, "I'm so sorry I did not mean to make you feel that way. Let's talk about how I can do better."

**Froelker:** Yes, lean in to that curiosity. Can you tell me more about what am I doing, what am I saying? Because so much of it is like our body language our facial expression. Or did you say something with a tone that that was not what was meant? But we all are making up our own story. We have to be willing to be courageous and say "The story-making up is that you don't believe in me, you're dismissing me in front of everyone and it's really hurting my feelings or it's making me mad. Can we talk about this?"

**Nichols:** We need to do part 2 and come up with all kinds of scenarios.

**Froelker:** I know the language of this work is so powerful.

**Nichols:** Yeah, so Justine, what do you believe this is something extra that every leader needs?

**Froelker:** It's the tools and it's the words and its language, it's okay to have a bit of a script to take mantras like, "I give myself permission to struggle and I'm going to be accountable. I'm going to own my stuff". It's the language of the story I'm making up, and I'm going to get curious or I'm going to really kind of stop myself when I want to jump in and rescue someone and say "That sounds really hard. I'm here." It's the language and the tools to show up to be courageous and to live brave, and daring and authentic. Authentic is such a buzz word now, and yet it's become such a buzz word that no one quite knows what it means, but I'm super passionate about teaching you how to do it and the tools and the language, that's what it is.

**Nichols:** Very good, I love it. Well, tell me this, is there anything that's coming up that you want to talk to the audience about? Do you want to talk about complicated gray? I know you've got some workshops that are coming up through AIM. If anyone is a member of AIM or even if you're not in a member, I think you can still go to workshop... Yeah, how would they find those?

**Froelker:** Everything's on my website. <https://www.justinefroelker.com/>. I'm very embarrassingly easy to find on social media, but I use it as the tool it was meant to be, which is to inspire and teach and connect. So I'm easy to find there. Books are always great to sell and be reviewed because that's how people discover me. But what I love teaching the day to lead work and the cool part is is I really can piecemeal it out to whatever somebody wants or needs, whether or not it's the vulnerability lesson. Yeah, but I do have lots of full trainings coming up. because what we offer now is that when you sit for the 16-hour training, no matter how we piece that out, you then get a certificate to be Dare to lead trained and can put that on LinkedIn and things like that, it's just being able to say, I know what the skill sets of courage is. I know how to practice and speak courage and lead from that whole-hearted, and daring, authentic place. I'm good at teaching it, and I love it. So that's really what I really want people to know about, because not a lot of people know about this work yet.

**Nichols:** Well, they will. They will now. Well, Justine this has just been a delight. It's so much fun. I think you and I could sit here for hours as I'm just, I love our conversations. Thank you so much for being with us today, we so appreciate it.