

# Ordained ministry and disability

The Revd Val Plumb

00:00:07

Well, it is really good that we are together.

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And I haven't.

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Had to drive to your place or you to mine.

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I'd love cameras and zoom and thank you for saying you would be interviewed, so let's get straight into it and tell us a little bit about you. Who is vowel context? Life, household, workplace?

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All that stuff.

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Ah, thank you Katie. Hello, my name is Reverend Canon Val Plumb and I currently live in a teeny tiny village called Locker shell with my goddaughter 10 cats, and a little westie dog called Lolly 10 cats.

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OK, carry on.

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I'm single and over 40. That's that's how it goes.

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About me my dad always said that two amazing things happened in 1969. One was that man walked on the moon and the other was that I was born.

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I was the youngest of seven and I was the only member of my family to be born differently.

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Abelt and this meant, of course, that charters was a bit of a challenge, UM.

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And but after completing school I started work at 16 years old and I'd held down several interesting jobs and eventually I ended up working for the social services, specialising in caring for children and adults with our different abilities.

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And it was my final push that I needed for when I got to 25 and I went like that's it.

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I'm going to go.

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For ordained ministry.

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Nice and how was that process of kind of vocations and stuff?

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Yeah, interesting times I.

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Went through the process and I was accepted to train. Actually just down the road in Kutztown. So after completing three years at Dear Kirsten I, I went back home to the Welsh Church where I'd been sent from to do a couple of curacies. I wanted to do both urban and rural to see which way.

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I was going to go and then come after that I where did I go after that?

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Oh, and then I got a job in the Bristol Dioceses as working as a team picker and a Padre across 10 rural churches and an Army base in an RAF base. So that was quite challenging. And then after that I.

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BK got my first rector's post, overseeing several villages down in the heart of.

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Somerset and the guy says the bathroom walls and then that was it. After six years I went. I need to do something different. You know I need to challenge myself.

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Uh, so I I. I decided to look for another job and of course I got one almost seven years ago.

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Today I I came back to Oxford Diocese and took up the post of area Dean for rural Mission and development, which was a new post, and I relished the challenge.

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It was really good and so now as a member of the area team I offer my skills where it's needed. So in the past few years.

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I've looked after a parish in distress, became an interim rural Dean alongside my main job, and I remain on DAC and other dioceses and national bodies, and I enjoy teaching and preaching and mentoring.

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Training UM?

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And I just love reflecting with people.

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On rural ministry where they?

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Yeah, happiness and and it's spare time and we're talking pre COVID because there's a whole different conversation about what we do with our time and COVID times but pre COVID. What were you kind of interests and hobbies away from the dog collar?

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Oh, that's a good one. Unfortunately my.

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Recent problems with my disabilities have taken away a lot of the things that I enjoy.

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And so I've had to learn new things to enjoy.

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And I really love the beach. I love to just sit by the seaside and and I I want to say something like I love soap.

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Doing something really holy, but I love Netflix, you know, and I just love being real and some of the wonderful things I did that kept me going.

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I can't do anymore and so I'm.

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Having to figure.

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Out new ways of doing stuff and I still play the drums, so that's that keeps me going.

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Yeah, you're a drummer, right? That's worth bearing in mind.

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And then can.



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You tell us a bit more about spina bifida and how it affects you.

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Well, shall I tell you? My health history? Would that be helpful?

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That'll be grand, thank you.

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So I gave you a lovely quote from my dad and my mum quote. Was she always said she had seven children, one boy, 5 girls and Valerie because from the moment I was born she knew that I was going to be deaf.

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Front, uh, I was born with Myelomeningocele spina bifida and this led to many longest days in hospital, having surgery first at 18 months again at 16 and again at 21 and the unfortunately the kind of spina bifida that I have leads to tethering of the spinal cord.

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Which often requires urgent neurosurgery and countless other lifelong health complications.

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And I think that didn't help for my life because during my 20s come my late 20s in the second year of Theological College, I collapsed with a brain infection that left me unable to walk off.

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Straight for almost a year.

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Which clearly had nothing to do with the college gin stock.

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And and and in my first year of Curacy, I had emergency service service surgery after becoming really jaundiced with with an infected gallbladder that that just really took hold of my.

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Body and the following year I developed lifelong asthma and at the time I was working in the industrial area of South Wales and I can remember my parishioners saying to me well Val, you're not one of us until you've got a.

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Chest on you.

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My love as we all sat there with our inhalers together, you know and I think.

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And then the.

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Following year, things were no better and it really took a downturn. I come, I got rheumatoid arthritis and it was a quite challenging disease.

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Uhm, I.

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I guess.

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Can I take your moment?

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You can indeed. We're going to put the kettle on. We'll have a.

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Bit of.

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Cake and we'll come back in a minute.

00:07:04

Right?

00:07:04

I'm ready.

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OK, here we go. The following year was not so good either because I.

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I was struck down with rheumatoid arthritis and I literally went from riding my bike around the parish to not even being able to get out of my bed.

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And, uh.

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It's rheumatoid, it is worse is dreadfully painful. It's a terribly deforming disease, and I spent most of that summer determined to find a new way to exist because everything had changed.

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But after taking numerous impressive immuno impressive immunosuppressive medications or the following year, I was back conform app sailing down the church Spire. Fortunately you know much to the horror of my neuro surgeon.

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But my personality was still up and running, but The thing is, with both these disorders they get worse with age and being immunosuppressed really complicates everything.

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Especially for me, most of the time I can fight infection really well.

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But other times I have to deal with.

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The terror of sepsis which is.

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Just a little bit too much.

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And then when I came up here, finally true to form, I began my time in the Oxford diocese having two lots of unexpected major surgery and my third in the first six months.

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And my first one was was actually Christmas Eve and I'm forever grateful to Alan Wilson for covering my Christmas Day services.

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A last minute. Although the parishes involved did have a bit of a shock the next morning, seeing the Bishop of Buckingham rocking up first thing in the morning, but you know, things did settle down for a little while, and then as often happens with these disorders randomly 2 years ago.

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My body decided that rheumatoid was going to redesign it, and I went once again had extremely painful swollen joints and it totally deformed my hands and thumb. And the worst thing is in rare cases it can affect your eyes too.

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Ah, this one is really hard to.

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Talk about just just a moment.

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OK, have some more cake.

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Having some more cake.



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So in rare cases it can affect the eye.

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And causing extreme pain and sometimes blindness.

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And the only way to save my eyes from that was to be pumped through of high dose steroids.

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And then six weeks later I developed super steroid induced super fast growing cataracts in both my eyes leaving me completely blind in one eye and just with a tiny amount of vision in the other eye.

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And I couldn't have surgery on them until the eyes were stable enough, and that took probably.

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About a year.

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So with such complex health issues, I've had to remain shielding.

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Since the pandemic began thanks to the magic of zoom and teams, I have been able to continue my work full time and I'm so glad to to have a Bishop and an Archdeacon that completely understands this. Making a super effort to keep me in the picture.

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Literally literally on screen there you are. Which also means that we can do this and have a conference without risking people health because we can do it by technology and.

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So quite often.

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When I'm talking to people and with people about disability and ministries or ordained ministry and authorised ministry, well, misread any form really.

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Uhm, I seem to get the impression.

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And that.

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Were either overly treasured or isn't it wonderful? You're so inspiring and disability must be such a gift.

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Or we're tragic? Oh, it's really awfully all disabled. 'cause if only you weren't, then you'd be better at whatever.

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So there's this kind of tension between disability being a treasured gift and disability. Being a tragic story. How do you? How do you marry together disability and?

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Umm, this is something that I've thought about many times and.

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You know, I speak as someone who was born with both come warm weather condition and then acquired one halfway through life and and regarding the spina bifida, you know and and and all the complications I have known nothing else.

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That's how God made me.

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But the rheumatoid has been a little bit more challenging.

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Using the ability to do as I said earlier, do all the things that you love really hurts you know.

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I can't.

00:11:53

I I did a lot of this in my ministry. I can't play the piano anymore. Can't play the guitar, can't play the banjo as my hands are now stuck in a sort of permanent claw apart from 2 fingers and a thumb which is really good because it's not all bad news 'cause we still play the drums and I'll make sure we play them \*\*\*\*\* But in all truth.

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I never expected my disabilities to play such an integral part of my ministry.

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It just kind of.

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Happened and I guess I often think of those powerful words by honouring now. And you know who once declared who can take away suffering.

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You know, without entering it in it, and the great illusion of leadership is to think that a man can lead another out of a desert without actually being there.

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And those words have meant an awful lot to me, and I'll give you an example.

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I can remember in my first curacy.

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Going to visit somebody in hospital and the moment I stuck my head round the door she said, oh goodness, I'm so glad it's you Val. I know you understand.

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So she knew.

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That I knew.

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You and.

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Uhm, I guess she knew that. What I really knew was what it really felt like to be in hospital.

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Frightened, being away for weeks on end, not in your right bed. Food wasn't so good and the fact that I knew gave her this extraordinary comfort.

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And it was that I can remember the very moment right at the beginning of my ministry, and I realised, no matter what I'd learned in college, no matter what theological doctrines I understood in that very moment, the only thing that really, really mattered.

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Was that I knew.

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And that was enough to Minister to her.

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And I think it's so important for people to see priests vulnerable being authentic and real. Lets people see that God is accessible.

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Ah, and most importantly, that God blesses all people, no matter what shape you know they come in.

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Uhm, I was just thinking then about, uh, there's. There's a book called Statue of Waiting by Vanstone. And in it he describes Jesus life and ministry as being divided into like 2 phases. One is the all powerful transcendental rain from heaven and that other one is actually a completely basic.

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Human experience that offers an all powerful form of ministering, actually through brokenness and people. Forget that this understanding has been so critical for my ministry.

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Believing that disabilities.

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It's actually all part of the divine plan.

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It helps me realise that God has prepared me for his work, blessing me with certain experiences, good and bad, with but providing with with knowledge that allows me to understand.

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The real, I guess, fragility of humanity exposing.

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Our painful bits like we do, I believe is the sole purpose of ministering to others in a way that offers a profoundly beautiful statement of love.

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And through my experience of disability, I believe that actually my faith has grown stronger. My heart has opened bigger, my pastoral care reaches further.

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And I am blessed with a constant sense of how precious life is a man and I I like to bring that energy, bring that love, bring that hope.

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In fact, I might even go as far as to say that it is my superpower.

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Uh, I guess.

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Seeing life from the sharpest end has encouraged me to live life to the fullest, bringing out a sense of freedom to be kind of exactly who I am. And it has shown in my ministry all the way along.

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I was thinking of the emotional times when I've sang a song and played the banjo at the grave of a man whose dying wish was to leave his family with laughter or the time I baptised a baby who was terrified of water with a special game with Smarties and puppets. You know these blocks of of.

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Of holiness that only happened because we can let that fire burn freely.

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And finally, it's typically priestly. We always go the long way about these things, but.

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Your question.

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Whether our this kind of chronic illness and disability is a a kind of treasurable tragedy, I want to leave the last words with a former Archbishop called Doctor Rowan Williams who.

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When in conversation with me about illness said this, he said foul.

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He said I want you to always remember that God never ever waste anything.

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And in your suffering you will learn new skills and he will direct way where and when that you will use them.



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00:17:10

And here's the thing. Guess what he was right.

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Well about we are for the sake of the recording. Gonna stop there. 'cause that was powerful and I need to go.

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And ponder that for.

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Me and and I'm guessing people are going to want to ponder that for themselves too. So before I hit the button that.

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Right?

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Says stop recording.

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I'm going to say thank you 'cause you're awesome and your story is awesome.

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We've only just touched on tiny bits of it and keep being who you're called to be.



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