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With Your Host

Kori Linn

Satisfied AF with Kori Linn

This week we're talking about high-demand religion.

The *Satisfied AF* podcast is the place to learn how to create a life and career that's wildly delicious. Want a steamier sex life? We've got you. Want a more satisfying career? We'll cover that too. And you can be sure we'll spend lots of time talking about how to build connected, fun relationships that can handle life's ups and downs. No matter what goals you're working on, this show will help you create a one of a kind life that is just right for you. Join me, life and career coach Kori Linn and each week I'll give you lots of practical tips, tools, and proven strategies to help you create all the satisfaction your heart desires.

Kori: Hello, hello, hello. Happy Wednesday. I have such a fun, special treat for y'all today. My friend and coaching colleague, Sara Bybee Fisk, is joining us today to have a conversation with me about what it's like to leave a high-demand religion. And what it's like to then try to figure out how to create a satisfying AF life, career, et cetera, for yourself when you're coming out of having grown up in this way that really imprinted all these rules on you, even more than the normal social conditioning that we talk about on the podcast all the time.

So Sara is also a coach and a friend of mine, and I'm just so excited to get to share her with y'all this week. Sara, do you want to add anything else about yourself or what you want listeners to know before we jump into the conversation?

Sara: I would love to add that I am a huge Kori Linn fan, I have been since meeting her for the first time. And so this is a real honor for me as well. And not unsurprisingly, maybe, the area that I coach in is people pleasing and perfectionism, which I learned to do really well growing up in a high-demand religion.

Kori: Thank you so much for saying that. That's so sweet of you. And also thank you for giving context about what you coach on, because I totally left that out in my introduction of you. And I think that makes so much sense

and is going to really be relevant for the conversation that we're having today and for everyone getting to know you and what you do.

Okay, so what I talk about on the podcast all the time, or one of the things, is that in order to create a satisfying AF life, we often have to look at the rules that we were taught to live by and then examine if we still want them. Or examine where those rules no longer fit us, or they probably never fit us, or they were never aligned to who we wanted to be as a person or what kind of a life we want to live.

But it might feel kind of painful or scary to step away from those as the guiding principles of our life. So do you want to start by sharing with us some of the rules that you grew up with that you have since let go of or that you are no longer interested in following and why?

Sara: Yes. I mean, we can have an entire podcast episode just about all the rules. So the religious group that I grew up in is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, otherwise known as the Mormons. And Mormons have a lot of rules for everything, everything from how you're supposed to dress, it's supposed to be modest.

There's this kind of vague thread running through all the rules that everything you do, everything you say, is supposed to be indicative of how Jesus would want you to do it or as a representative of Jesus. And so that gets translated a lot of different ways for a lot of different people.

I grew up with parents who are very devout and faithful, but not necessarily orthodox. And so there was a little bit of wiggle room. I remember having a fight with my mom in high school because I had a pair of shorts that she thought were too short. I wore them anyway and loved them. But in other Mormon families, that would not have been allowed.

And so modesty in the way you dress. Modesty in the way you talk. You're not supposed to swear, you're not supposed to drink coffee or tea, but monster drinks and caffeine are totally fine, weirdly enough.

Kori: That is so weird. I did not know that detail. Thank you for sharing that.

Sara: Isn't that so weird? Yeah, coffee and tea is a no, but you can have all the Diet Coke and Red Bulls you want. And then no drugs and alcohol. You're not supposed to date until you're 16. You don't go to dances till you're 14. And then there's really specific rules around intimacy. And in Mormon land, it's called the law of chastity, and it's that your thoughts are supposed to be clean, your actions are supposed to be clean. And again, it just bleeds into all kinds of other areas of your life.

And it's pretty fair to say about my experience that one of the enduring thoughts I had growing up was, am I doing enough? Is it enough? Am I acting like Jesus enough? Am I dressing like Jesus would want me to enough? Am I enough? Is it enough? Is it enough? Is it enough?

Kori: And that's a thought pattern I see with my clients and myself all the time. And I think it probably shows up for even people who didn't grow up in high-demand religions. And it's such an interesting thing because often there is no way to know, right?

Sara: There's no way to know.

Kori: There's no point at which you're like, okay, I did it. I checked all the boxes. And one of the things I work with my clients on, and maybe you work with yours on, is sitting down together on a call and deciding like, okay, let's just choose what's going to be enough for you to do in your workday today. Let's just choose what's going to be enough for you to give in that relationship. Let's just choose and define it so that you can get out of this loop of that stress and anxiety of no amount ever being enough.

Sara: Yeah, and the weird thing when you're in a religious paradigm is like, what might be enough for me is one thing, but is it enough for God?

Kori: Right, and we can't fact check that, right? And especially like, then it's also, it's God, but it's God through the lens of like leaders of the church, which from my limited understanding of the Mormon church is men, right?

So there's also a patriarchal angle to this, like, women are being told what to do and how to behave and how to think, feel, and act. Not just in relation to like, what would be enough for God, but in relation to what would be enough for this select leadership group of men who are then imposing those values.

Sara: I mean, 80% white octogenarians is not an overstatement of what that is like. And I remember doing an intensive certification in feminist coaching with our friend Kara Loewentheil and just realizing that what the Mormon church so successfully did was take patriarchy and put it in God's mouth.

And now God wants these traditional gender roles for you. And God wants you as a woman to behave in this certain way. And God is telling me that the highest and best use of my body is for having children and taking care of them. And that I should defer to what my husband wants and just how fucked up that felt and how enraging.

But then the other thing that I just want to add to what a lot of high-demand religions do is they tie your behavior and your faithfulness to your status in the church or your access to special ritual type things. Like Mormons, if you know anything about us, we think that Jesus wants us to build these multi-million dollar temples all over. And that's where Mormons get married and other kinds of sacred ritual things happen there.

Nothing too extraordinarily weird, but you cannot get into the temple unless you have what is called a temple recommend, which is a little card that a white man stamps for you that says you're obeying all the rules, literally.

Kori: So how were you able to, first of all, just decide you did not want to be part of this community anymore and that the rules that they were teaching you were not aligned with who you were and who you wanted to be? And also then, how were you able to unlearn them?

How were you able to separate yourself from this amount and intensity of social conditioning? Especially, like we were saying, not just social

conditioning of this is what a good girl is in the eyes of your parents, but this is what a good girl is in the eyes of the Almighty.

Sara: It happened slowly. One of the things that I didn't realize would play such a strong role in me leaving the church was how seriously and devotedly I believed in Jesus as love and social justice. I mean, I really believed what I was taught about who he was in the Bible. Somebody who cared about poor people, who went to the vulnerable, who ate with sinners, who encouraged the ruling class of the time to see these vulnerable poor people as worthy of the same things that they had.

Kori: Someone who was friends with sex workers.

Sara: Right. Yeah. And so I did not realize at the time how my deep belief in him as that type of person would eventually lead me away from a church that I felt didn't match that anymore.

Kori: You are not the only person I have heard this point of view from, actually.

Sara: It's something that – There were two kinds of big schism moments. My brother-in-law is gay and he came out to my husband and I in like 1999. We were all attending Brigham Young University, which is the university that is run by the Mormon church. And for like a decade, I just grappled with he's gay, I know he's not choosing this. I love him. He's valuable and worthy. And yet this church that I am attending says that there is something wrong with him.

And it just kind of bounced around in my mind, creating all kinds of little moments of like, huh, this just doesn't match. This doesn't work.

Kori: I think that really speaks to how deeply the enculturation went, that it took a decade of that bouncing around to really be like, something isn't adding up here. Because it's like, here's a person I love who's obviously worthy of love and belonging. The church says they're bad and wrong. That doesn't seem to check out.

But that enculturation, especially when you grow up in a community, whether it's your family of origin or a religion or other kind of social group, from babyhood, from when you're in utero being taught and instructed in a certain set of beliefs, it can be so hard and so terrifying to step away from them. And yet you did.

Sara: Terror was the feeling that I felt. I can remember a specific day sitting in my house and coming to my own personal conclusion, I think the church is wrong about this. It was terrifying. And also, I had no context for, does anybody else think this?

I just knew that it was wrong because in the Mormon church, when you feel something, but the church teaches something else, you're the one who's wrong. You're the one who is not being faithful, not being righteous enough. You're the one who's being led astray.

And so it's this weird tension between we want you to know Jesus and love him and follow him. But if he tells you anything that is against what the church teaches, you're wrong.

Kori: You have somehow managed to misinterpret him, which is so funny because he's quite clear, actually. He's quite clear.

Sara: Yeah.

Kori: And it is amazing, the gymnastics folks will go through to pretend that – And I'm not Christian, but I did spend some time when I was younger as a Catholic.

Story for another time, but I converted in and was a hardcore Catholic for about three years. And then converted out very fast also, because I was like, oh, this isn't working and it was too strict. And instead of staying in and being like, I'll just only follow the rules I want to follow, I was just like, I'm either all in or all out, which is also very indicative of the black and white thinking I had as a younger person.

But in any event, I do think that's something that's quite common, is that churches will say be like Jesus or know Jesus. And then you study and then you are, and then they're like, not like that, right?

Sara: It's totally true.

Kori: Like they're the authority on how to interpret.

Sara: Well, they're the authority and they hold the literal purse strings. They hold the cards. When I started to speak up more, like, hey, I think we're getting this gay thing wrong. Look at how Jesus treated these people and these people and these people. Don't you think – I was actually "punished," in that I lost standing in the church. I lost the ability to do certain jobs and lost the ability to go into the temples because they took away my little card.

Kori: They took away your little card.

Sara: They took away my little card, and at the time I still really, really loved the church. It was devastating and it taught me that I was not going to be successful. They showed me clearly, if you stay and continue to advocate like this, this is what you're going to do. You're going to be on the fringes of this organization and that's how we're going to treat you.

And so that had already begun to happen when my own daughter came out. And that was really the time when I knew we could not stay. For a while I struggled with knowing that my child is gay, and we did continue to attend for a little bit longer. I just have to look back and be gracious with myself and know that I did what I needed to do as fast as I could do it.

Kori: I'm really glad you said that because something a lot of my clients struggle with, and I also sometimes struggle with because obviously I struggle with the same things they struggle with, which is why I became so obsessed with personal growth as to make it my entire career.

But that thing of like, you know, also our friend and colleague Maggie Reyes, who's a marriage coach says you can only move as fast as your

slowest part. I've heard her say that a few times. It might be someone else's quote, but in my head and heart, I always hear it in her voice.

And I think that was probably true of you. And that's what's so often true of my clients and myself. Like I love to move fast. My clients love to move fast. We want to have things yesterday. And sometimes we're just not able to move at that speed.

And sometimes, oftentimes the only way to create a sustainable change, a change that you can carry on and feel good about and live with instead of power through, is to move at this slower pace that another part of yourself may have judgments about.

Sara: Yeah, and things are clear to me now that weren't clear then in a way that just happens because we're human and we're alive. But I don't have any regrets because I feel like I did go as fast as I was able to. I spoke up.

I mean the second kind of big schism, I was already well on my way out of the church, but when Trump was embraced by so many members of my religion, I just could not make it make sense.

Kori: Yeah.

Sara: And I was contacted by somebody who knew about my beliefs, and I did an interview with CBS that was supposed to be like a local news segment, but I'd ended up being on one of their Friday or Saturday night news segments. And the number of DMs that I got questioning my faith, the number of DMs that I got questioning my belief in Jesus if I was not going to vote for this despicable man, I just couldn't make it make sense.

Like he is the antithesis of Jesus and this is who my religion is going to embrace? It just, I couldn't make it make sense.

Kori: Yeah, I feel you on that. And I think having that internal sense of what makes sense and what doesn't is something so many of us get punished for when we're younger, whether we grew up in, like I said, just a family unit

or some kind of social group or a religion, high-demand or otherwise. And also I think it's one of the most useful skills for then going on to design a life that is wildly delicious to you.

So let's transition out of what we've been talking about and into like, how did you go on from that to create your satisfying AF life? And, specifically, how were you able to figure out what you actually wanted and distinguish that from what you had been taught to want?

I mean, we've talked a little bit about how your initial inklings were like, well, the church says terrible things about gay people, but I don't want to feel that way towards gay people. I want to love and embrace them. But then I'm sure there were other things as well that you kind of either grappled with, or maybe even had an instinctive immediate like, oh yeah, if I'm leaving the church, I'm ready to shuck off this other stuff. So can you speak a little bit about that?

Sara: Yeah. The first thing I had to understand, and I was becoming a coach and kind of getting into working with, first, my own people pleasing. It was so apparent that I was so invested in what other people thought of me that I just couldn't even be a successful coach because when you're so worried about what other people are thinking, you don't have a lot of room to just develop your own skills and gifts.

And so I first had to understand how deeply I had been separated from my body. How I had to just squish down all of these feelings of discomfort that I had felt my entire life, but I had been taught to disbelieve my own experience over believing what I was being told to do or believe or say.

And I had to go back to stories that I had told from a very sunny, cheerful perspective and acknowledge some of the sadness and darkness and grief and danger and risk and just the separation that I had had from my own experience and then reconnect to that. And what it meant was really doing a lot of work feeling and understanding what embodiment felt like.

I don't know that I had ever had embodied moments. I don't know, maybe I had. Who knows? But what I do know is that I was so separated from knowing what I wanted in my body, right? Because in our heads, we can talk ourselves into a lot of things, especially when we have a chorus of voices around us telling us what we should want.

But in our bodies, that's where the truth really is. And I had to feel that over and over and over. And I had to disappoint myself. I had to get it wrong. I got it wrong a lot. But coming to know what I wanted and what my desires were was key.

Then I just gave myself permission to try anything I wanted. Because that was the other thing that I would do, is that I would think that I wanted something but try to do the pros and cons of it before trying it. I'm like, no, I'm just going to try it and I'll know, and trusting myself to just know.

And so everything from coffee, which seems so silly now. I love coffee. I tried drinking, I actually don't like alcohol. I don't find it to be beneficial for me at all. It tastes bad, makes my mouth itch, and I don't feel well the next morning. So just letting myself have a lot of the experiences that I thought I never would was amazing.

Kori: Sounds like test and learn, which that's a phrase I learned working in corporate tech, but I talk about it all the time in coaching. You may have also heard about it by its more colloquial name, fuck around and find out, right?

Sara: I love it.

Kori: It's just giving yourself permission to try things without judgment. Like, okay, I tried alcohol and not for me. That's Sara's perspective. Obviously, anyone who listens regularly knows that I love me some wine. But also just giving yourself – There's a lot of alcohol I don't love that I used to when I was younger. And giving yourself permission to change your mind and giving yourself just the permission for experimentation.

And it's so interesting because I talk to so many people who can't or won't or aren't able to give themselves just permission to experiment because it's so emotionally painful if they "get it wrong." I just come across so many people who have this idea that they should already know everything and be able to do everything.

And listen, if we could have that experience, that would maybe be super fun. But I think it might also be kind of boring, right? And I think there can be so much deliciousness to testing and learning, to fucking around and finding out, to just giving yourself permission to try things and see what happens when we're able to remove the judgment and the shame and the criticism of not knowing everything.

Sara: Yeah. There's a big component of fear that is baked into disobedience, right? Disobeying the commandments or disobeying church leaders. There's an element of fear that you're taught from a very young age inside Mormon land where if you stray, if you go outside these lines, bad things can happen.

And it's such a simplistic world view because bad things do happen. And when bad things do happen in Mormon land, then we have to say, oh, well, God must have wanted it that way. So just even separating out this fear of bad things happen to everyone all the time, no matter what religion they are. And if this is just part of it, then I don't even have to blame God. God's not even a part of this anymore. This is just the way the world works, just the way being human works.

And so this fear of bad things happening, that it's somehow a punishment from God, but somehow it happens anyway and that's God's will and so it's my job to just get through it, I can just get rid of all that. I don't even have to have this complex Rube Goldberg machine of parts.

Kori: Why did the bad thing happen? Where did the bad thing come from?

Sara: Yeah.

Kori: I think that's a really interesting point too, because I think sometimes that also almost alleviates or removes the urge to do something. Because if you as a person see something bad happen, you might want to do something. You might want to interrupt. You might want to engage. But if you have in your head this idea that if that's happening, either they did something bad to deserve it or it's God's will, that would add a layer of complexity that would probably keep you from stepping in.

Whereas who knows what the cosmos involves or anything, or if there is a God, or what happens when we die? I don't know, obviously, any of that. I just feel like anyone who says they do, I'm like, that's interesting that you know. Not that I have anything against faith. I have my own faith, I have my own ideas, but I don't really know.

But I do think there's something beautiful about taking responsibility and ownership for ourselves in any moment and saying, here's what's happening that's outside of my control, whether it's inside of someone else's control, or no one controls it, or it's the weather, or whatever. Then who do I want to be? How do I want to behave? How do I want to show up? What kind of influence do I want to exert? Versus trying to do some really intense calculus about if this was "supposed" to happen.

Sara: It just takes away all of the thinking, and analyzing, and worrying, and trying to contextualize and figure it out, and to just deal with what's happening in the best way that I can and not overthink or worry at all. That has probably been one of the most satisfying parts of leaving the church. All of that thinking is just gone.

Kori: Yeah, although I will say, I think for some people there can be pain in that too. Because when we have an infrastructure of, well, this is what happens, and this is what's supposed to happen, and this is how I'm supposed to feel, that can be very suffocating. And getting rid of that can be so delightful and enlivening. But I think also, some people really find safety in that.

So stepping away from something like a high-demand religion with really clear codes, or stepping away from their social conditioning of this is how you are a good person and live a good life, can also create – It's like what you were talking about before, the terror of like, wait, so now it's just me and I have to make the choices, and I have to figure out who I want to be, and I have to figure out what kind of life I want to live?

This happens to me actually all the time in business. There was so much in working a job in a corporate career that I chafed against, and I wanted the flexibility, and I wanted the freedom. But sometimes having all the freedom and being my own boss, and being the one who makes all the calls, I'm like, oh no, who's in charge? It's me. Why is it me?

But at the end of the day, I choose the freedom and the terror versus choosing the constriction and drudgery and the lack of choice that I experienced. And not that having a career has to be all of those things. And there's pluses and minuses to everything. And I coach a lot of people who stay in their jobs, and you can have a much better experience of a job through coaching.

I'm just saying, for me, I really do embrace the terror and the freedom. Although that doesn't mean I'm always having a great time. Sometimes it's scary as fuck.

Sara: The terror and the freedom, I think, is a beautiful way to say that because my biggest fear when I was leaving the church actually was that I would never fully be able to leave. That there would always be some part of my heart that was still there. Or that I would be worrying that I was mistaken, I made a wrong choice, I'm screwing up my kids, I'm fucking over my eternal happiness, right?

I always just worried that there would be some hook in it for me. And to have literally nothing, nothing, I feel nothing. I drive past Mormon church buildings, there's no longing, there's no confusion, there's no, did I, you know, wondering. It is just so peaceful. And I would rather be in this terror

and freedom because it's just so beautiful, than to have all the answers, all the certainty, which I understand –

Like my parents are still very active. I want them to have that because it's what they want. I don't begrudge them that. I'm not mad at them because their brains don't work like mine, they don't see the things that I see, because I'm just so busy enjoying what I have.

Kori: I love that. I think that's a really, first of all, fascinating and beautiful place to be able to get to of you're so squarely in your own satisfaction and your own design that you are unoffended by other people's choices in what they prefer for themselves. There's such a groundedness and solidness in that. I think it's a really beautiful and extremely rare thing.

Sara: I mean, it took some doing because although I don't begrudge, I did have to put up some boundaries around how we talk about gay people. There were a couple of times when my daughter first came out that my mom expressed some disappointment in her. I said, if you ever say anything like that again, you're just not going to be invited over anymore.

I think for a lot of us, we can really identify with how difficult it is to disappoint our parents. That was a moment of real growth and clarity for me. But it also just floored me because I grew up as a Mormon, thinking that loving my family and serving them and that being a mother to my children was the best thing I could do. And so of course I'm going to pick her over the church. Of course I'm going to defend her no matter who comes for her.

And so it was a moment of, again, seeing how what was happening was that I so deeply believed that my responsibility as a mother trumped everything else, even my relationship with my parents, even my relationship with the church, that it was one of the things that led me out.

Kori: Well, it sounds like you also chose that, right? They said this is important, and you said, I agree, this is important. And it's actually so important to me that you are less important, right? Because that was

probably not their intention in teaching you that. But that is interesting, sometimes it's like the problems can hold the seeds to their own solutions, and sometimes prisons can hold the seeds to your liberation.

And it sounds like that was for you. But there was still, I think, I don't know, maybe you didn't even see this, but there was a moment in there when you made a choice and you created your own priorities because the church gave you priorities and you took some of them. And this is an interesting thing too that I actually talk a lot with my clients about. Sometimes your socialization, there are pieces of it that you're like, nope, love and am obsessed with this piece of my socialization, it's just these other pieces that I don't want.

Just because you want to make some changes, just because there's some rules that you were taught that you don't want to live by, it doesn't mean you have to throw everything away, right? Sara left a high-demand religion, and she kept some pieces of what they taught her because those pieces still felt beautiful and delicious to her and still aligned with who she wanted to be. And even those pieces gave her the strength to then say no to some of the other pieces that she didn't want.

There's a really interesting question in there too of what's worth disappointing my parents for? What's worth unlearning my social conditioning for? What is worth the risk? What is worth the pain? What is worth the terror? To me, freedom is worth the terror. And I think that's a beautiful question to leave listeners with.

Thank you so much for joining us for this conversation. Also, as you go about your day, I love my podcast because it's never something lightweight. It's always like, what's worth feeling terrified for? What's worth going through extreme struggle for? It can also be small things like what's worth feeling a little bit uncomfortable, but you know me, I'm like let's go big.

Sara, before we hop off of here, is there anything else you want to share with everybody? Any other final ideas? I didn't mean to end the conversation too early, but I was just like, oh, I love that as a takeaway.

Sara: I love it too. In fact, I just wrote it down because I think that that's a fantastic question. Everything from a slight discomfort to sheer terror, that's the gamut of the human experience. And I love that we've been able to have this conversation because I don't get to have it very often. And what it really helps me do is look at myself with like, wow, you did that. You left everything that you knew. You lost friends. You lost relationships.

And honestly, I would have never, ever, ever, ever, ever guessed that I would leave the Mormon church. I was the most Mormon of all the Mormons, as I like to say. I obeyed all the rules. I did all the things. I loved it. And to find myself here now through this process that felt so real and so authentic and so personal to me is just one of the great joys of my life.

Kori: Okay, I actually think that's an even better place to end because one of the things that I'm personally and professionally obsessed with is celebrations, wins, and delights. When clients come work with me one-on-one or in groups, we often start calls with like, what are your celebrations, wins, and delights? That's a celebration, win, and delight.

And I love that you can be here in this conversation with me and see yourself through the lens of the conversation like, wow, I did that. That's incredible. What an accomplishment. What courage, what commitment, what grit to make those choices and follow through on them and become the person that you are now.

Sara: Thank you. Thanks for letting me have this conversation with you.

Kori: My pleasure. And I'm sure my listeners are all super grateful as well, so I'll go ahead and express their gratitude ahead of time to you. Thank you so much for coming on and for sharing your experiences with us. I know that you are going to help people not just have a more interesting day, but also probably go on to make choices and prioritize things differently and

live their lives more according to their own design and what they want to have, feel, create and be, versus what they were taught was available to them.

So thank you so much, Sara. And for everyone who wants to learn more about Sara, you can check out the show notes. We'll have links to all her stuff and you can follow her and continue to learn from her.

All right, that's what we have for y'all today. Have a lovely week and I will talk to you next time.

Thank you for joining me for this week's episode of *Satisfied AF*. If you are ready to create a wildly delicious life and have way more fun than you ever thought possible, visit <u>www.korilinn.com</u> to see how I can help. See you next week.