

Mary Louise Kelly on her memoir 'It. Goes. So. Fast. The Year of No Do-Overs'

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[Scott Simon](#)

NPR's Scott Simon and Mary Louise Kelly talk about her new book, "It. Goes. So. Fast. The Year of No Do-Overs." The memoir takes looks at the balance of work and motherhood, intention and memory.

SCOTT SIMON, HOST:

Most parents, mothers especially, have probably gotten a call from a school saying, your child is sick. Come get them. But what if you're boarding a Black Hawk helicopter in Baghdad? Mary Louise Kelly, our esteemed colleague and co-host of a show called All Things Considered, contends with the balance between work and life, anchoring the news and anchoring a family with two teen sons growing up in her new book, "It. Goes. So. Fast.: The Year Of No Do-Overs." And I'm teary just reading the intro.

MARY LOUISE KELLY, BYLINE: (Laughter).

SIMON: Mary Louise Kelly joins us in our studios. Thanks so much for being with us.

KELLY: Thank you, Scott.

SIMON: What was that like to get a call like that?

KELLY: Yeah, we're about to get loaded up into a swarm of Black Hawk helicopters. Phone rings - school nurse telling me, your son is sick. Where are you? Can you come to school? And I'm thinking, lady, if you could see where I am - no, that's not happening. And she started talking more loudly and said, I don't mean to bring him home. I mean, he's really sick. He's struggling to breathe. We need to get him to a doctor or a hospital now. Where are you? And I was trying to answer, and the cellphone died. We lost signal. And I have to get into this helicopter. And I will never forget sitting there in the Black Hawk looking down over the traffic of Baghdad and thinking, what am I doing? I'm good at my job. I worked really hard to get here. I love my work, but my 4-year-old son needs me, and I am halfway around the world. And I hit a wall. When two things that you love and sustain you come into conflict, what do you do?

SIMON: Yeah.

KELLY: Yeah.

SIMON: And let's make plain, your son Alexander is - he was then 4 - healthy and strong now.

KELLY: Yeah.

SIMON: But there's an almost audible clock ticking through some of this memoir. And as you say, you go from counting months to weeks and days.

KELLY: Yeah. I started really thinking about writing this book when it dawned on me that James, my oldest, was about to be a senior in high school. He was going to go out and spread his wings in the world which, of course, is what you want, but I - it suddenly occurred to me, it's finite. You know, the number of nights when my nuclear family is going to be under this roof, they're dwindling. And the example that I just kept circling and coming around to was James has loved soccer since he could walk, and this has been his thing. And he was a starting striker on his high school varsity team. And their games tend to be weekdays around 4 o'clock.

SIMON: I think you have a prior obligation.

KELLY: I have a conflict at 4 o'clock on weekdays, which is that is, to the minute, when All Things Considered goes on the air. And so when there were hundreds of games, it felt relatively easy to say, OK, I'll be there next year. I'll be there next year. And then suddenly, I was out of next years, and I didn't have any more do-overs. And suddenly, I thought, I'd rather cut off my right arm than miss another game.

SIMON: You've got a phrase in here - life is what we choose to see.

KELLY: I ran into - it was a competitor from another news organization who covered the same national security beat as I had. And when I ran into her, I was taking a long spell away from the newsroom to be with my kids, and I looked like it. (Laughter) And I was working like...

SIMON: What? You had banana in your hair or something, right?

KELLY: I had applesauce in my hair.

SIMON: Applesauce. That's right.

KELLY: Thank you for reminding me. Yes. And she looked the way she always had in this killer suit and killer heels. And we chatted for a few minutes. She didn't recognize me, Scott.

SIMON: (Laughter).

KELLY: She didn't recognize me. I looked so different from what she'd used to see. And then she gets in a taxi and goes to the White House for an interview. And I stood there stricken on the sidewalk thinking, I'm not sure I recognize myself. And it was only - it was a while before I ran into her again, by which point I had gone back to work - bumped into her on the sidewalk again. She recognized me. We chatted for a few minutes, and as we're turning to go our separate ways, she said, you know, I cried all day after that last time I ran into you. And I said, what? Really? Why? You - 'cause you had it all. You had the whole thing going. And she said, no, you and your son were on your way to the park, and it was this beautiful day. And I had just dropped my own child at day care and I was off to, you know, go do some interview with somebody that I've already forgotten even what the subject was. And I was paying some stranger at day care to take my baby to the park. And I thought, what am I doing with my life? And I looked at her and thought, God, you and me both. We've both been beating ourselves up for not being able to do the impossible. You can't be in two places at once.

SIMON: You point out in the book that you had the advantage of a nanny and, for that matter, a mother. Could you tell us what she told you when you were able to see a soccer game?

KELLY: Oh, it was not just any soccer game. The soccer game in question was James' senior year. It was for the state championship. He scored with a header with three minutes on the clock. It was the goal...

SIMON: Yeah.

KELLY: ...The goal that he will remember, our family will remember, the school will remember - it was fabulous. And as I was driving home, I called my mom to tell her about it and how wonderful it had been, and she listened and listened. And the first thing she said wasn't about James or the team or the soccer. It was for me - you know, for her own baby. And she said, oh, and you got to see it, because she knows how many I've missed and how much it meant to see that goal.

SIMON: Yeah. We should explain - of course, you've done wonderful reporting from Ukraine, but at one point fairly recently, you decided not to go back, right?

KELLY: I was asked to, after my first rotation through Ukraine, to go back through, and - not entirely clear when you're going into a war zone. It's not like you can say, well, as long as I'm out by Tuesday at 9 a.m. And the precise times that they were asking for lined up with James' very last weeks of high school. And the journalist in me was clawing my suitcase off the shelf to pack, and the mom in me thought, yeah, but sadly, there's always going to be a war out there. And there are other journalists who can cover it, but there's nobody else who can be a mom to this boy. And he's only here for a few more weeks. And it's senior prom, and it's exams, and it's the last time. And I thought, yeah, I need to sit this one out.

SIMON: Yeah. A lot of this book is becoming aware of this might be the last time something happens...

KELLY: Yeah.

SIMON: ...When we have children.

KELLY: Yeah.

SIMON: Yes, it's the stuff that maybe you can plan on a calendar, but it's also you don't know when the last time they might crawl into your lap.

KELLY: Yeah, or the last time they're going to call you mama or daddy instead of mom or dad 'cause they get teased at school. And I think about those moments. I remember - I didn't actually write about this, but it pops into my head now. I remember the last time I nursed a baby. I breastfed both my sons. And I remember, you know, as Alexander was, you know, crawling off my lap. And I remember so clearly where we were in the house and where the sun was in the windows and thinking this is the last time. And you can let that break your heart, or you can let it lift it up and think, how beautiful is this? How beautiful is this?

SIMON: Yeah. Your book - I'm sorry.

(LAUGHTER)

SIMON: This is - the two of us in here - hardened journalists.

KELLY: Oh, yeah.

SIMON: I think of Emily Webb in "Our Town." Do any human beings realize life while they live it? Every minute, do they?

KELLY: I don't know that I have found an answer to that, but I will say that this book is part of my attempt to wrestle with it and sit with it. The nature of the work you and I do, Scott, is wonderful, but it's ephemeral. You know, you and I do a show, and there are days when we nail it and days when we don't. And either way, we have to get up and do another one the next time around. And, you know, a show from six months ago might as well be six lifetimes ago. And I wanted to really wrestle with one year in my life

the choices I was making, the deals I was striking with myself and, whether I got it right or wrong, be intentional about it and remember it and let it stick. That's what this book is.

SIMON: Mary Louise Kelly - her book, "It. Goes. So. Fast.: The Year Of No Do-Overs." Thanks so much for being with us.

KELLY: It does go so fast. Thank you, Scott.

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