



Finding Our Way Home:
A Conversation with Ike Sturm

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Transcript



Sara Hayden: Ike, thank you so much for being here with me on the podcast. We have shared a lot of good times together and I just feel so grateful for our friendship and getting to experience the amazing creativity and intention you bring to your life and your work that you share with people.

Ike Sturm: Oh, that's so nice, Sara. I ha- feel the same way about you. I've been so thankful for our connections and projects and friends that we share now and I'm excited to see where that will all lead.

Sara: Amazing. You're very intentional about the way that you gather folks together. And I'm wondering if you could give us just a snippet of why all your work doesn't happen in the same place.

Ike: (laughs) Well, I guess for one, none of it is work. Uh, that's the first thing that occurs to me, but-

Sara: Okay. (laughs)

Ike: ... feels like it's all play. Like, it's all kind of existing, it's all relating. This situation that we have, this ministry we have in New York City with Connect Faith, it's called Finding Our Way Home, that we run at a church in Times Square, it's a funny connection of being in Times Square, this very lively, crazy place, and finding this place of solace and-

Sara: Yeah.

Ike: ... calm in the midst of that has been powerful. But we have this community of really funky, beautiful community of people that have gathered there of all ages and backgrounds and gender identities and faith identities. And my friend reminds me that we don't create community, we welcome community and we discover it.

Sara: Oh.

Ike: That's sh- really been, like, kind of a formative concept for me in that as we're just living and being and welcoming people and trying to be kind to people and trying to in some sense, like, try to mirror the way that Jesus welcomes us in our lives and the way we see Jesus treating other people and the stories that we read and the experiences that we have in our lives. And I think I continue to see in people like you, Sara, in a very real way. When you started this

conversation I thought of a, a time that you wrote to me when I went on a trip and you said, I wish I re- remembered the exact quote but the feeling of it was-

Sara: Hm.

Ike: ... "I wish Jesus would be a friend and guide to you on this trip." And it was a very meaningful trip for me and the entire trip was shaped and colored by that statement that you wrote to me. And it showed me a lot about how you treat people and how you lead people means a lot to me and I try to do that in my own life. And I feel like I'm just collecting these amazing examples and friendships like yours that just come to me and are the greatest blessings in my life and I try to turn around and try to treat people in, like, some kind of similar fashion. And-

Sara: Wow.

Ike: ... and I think that's where the community just really has happened and these musicians we gather are phenomenal and they provide this, like, really humble eh- eh- you know (laughs)-

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: ... they're, like, world-class players but I don't even say that at first because the way that they come to the space is just in that same spirit of, like, "how can I help this person? How can I be here and just be helpful and be resonant?" And, and so we have this gathering that ends up looking like creative writing as a spiritual practice lead by my pastor, my friend Debbie Bronkema, and she brings a lot of really unique ideas to that space and, and she leads in that same spirit of just absolute giving and kindness-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: ... and, and people, it's contagious. Other people come to that space and they go, "Oh, I'm gonna also act that way and I'm gonna also find that in this space." And, and so we've been improvising together and we've been writing together words and music and, 'cause it's something else to see what people can actually create when they let their guard down a little bit and when they feel welcome and they feel like they can be themselves and be the creative people that God has created us to be in God's image. And-

Sara: Yeah.

Ike: ... and everyone, we all feel on some level like we can't do that, we're not supposed to do that. We're supposed to be quiet, we're not supposed to sing, we're not supposed to dance, we're not supposed to write, and we're not good enough to do it and we're not as good as X, Y, Z that we experienced in our childhood or, or in ad- adulthood, for that matter.

Sara: Mm, your spirit is so warm and inviting and it reminds me of there's this little note in the book of Ecclesiastes. You know, Ecclesiastes is sort of like a everything is screwed up in the world kind of great passage and chapter, book to turn to in Scripture when you're feeling, like, the doom. But the end, the writer, the speaker, Kohelet as he calls himself says, "Send out your bread upon the water and in many days it will return to you sevenfold."

And I think about, like, the water, the waves, the vibrations, the sound waves, just this sense of something having an origin point and those who have gathered in that origin point are dispersed at a time when the gathering is finished but they are carrying within them what was experienced in that gathering at its origin point and it's going with them in different directions, in, in countless, infinite directions. In some way it's everything, what we're doing right now and when we think about the preciousness of choosing to welcome, as you said, that, like, "Actually many I can play, I can sing. I can write, I could be creative and alive."

Which is in such a beautiful contrast to what you may have seen that ill-fated iPad commercial that came out (laughs) recently. It was just, like, all these creative things are happening visually in the iPad ad and they get f- the song that's playing is "Crush It," and everything gets crushed into the iPad, like, all the visual beauty, creative pieces. And it says, "This is the thinnest iPad ever. And the most powerful." But everything's, like, smashed into it. And a lot of creatives saw the ad and were like, "Wait a second. Is that (laughs) the end goal is to smash it into something smaller rather than," Seth Godin recreated the ad and he reversed it (laughs) where everything came back out of the iPad and pushed away from the technology into these organic spaces in infinite directions. Like, that the goal is to carry it with us, not to finish it and crush it. (laughs)

Ike: Mm, that's so interesting. That's, like, a never-ending puzzle, 'cause I'm like, "the origin is not in the technology or in iPad," it's, to me, I feel like it's a reflection-

Sara: Yeah.

Ike: ... like, it's up on the wall and you look up at it and you go, "Oh, how lovely. Look at that mirror of, like, all the creative stuff that's," so that's a fun kinda thing to play with actually. That's a very cool model. I like that. I didn't know about that, so I'll have to check it out.

Sara: Oh, yeah. (laughs)

Ike: Um, yeah.

Sara: Hopefully it's accurate enough, but what you're saying of, like, "Here we are in Times Square," that most of us can imagine, whether we've been there physically or not, the frenzy, the energy, the intersectionality of lights and sound and traffic and in some ways it's a place you want to go and stand in and say you've been there, you've been to Times Square. And here are these amazing musicians that have gathered to peel away things, maybe? I don't know if you, you feel that you're setting aside certain things in that space when you gather.

Ike: Yeah, absolutely.

Sara: Or maybe picking up things.

Ike: All of the above. I come from this background of being a music director at a church for many years, almost 20 years, and I wrote a lot of music and continue to do a lot of that. I love that, but it's very easy to find your identity in producing or in measuring up to a certain standard and some kind of intellectual process. And somewhere along the way, I had this experience that was kinda humbling, which was bringing musicians in with a Psalm and improvising and singing. And ih- you know, at the previous week, I had very carefully written out and composed some kind of piece for that context and what happened in the space was this very connected, very vulnerable, very present, in-the-moment music that was really, like, goosebumpy, (laughs) you know? Like, really made-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: ... some things happen in the space. And I said, "What just happened?" Like, and actually had this experience with some-

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: ... people in my band where they literally asked me in the liturgy, they were like, "What just happened?"

You know, and I was like, "Boy, that's a really good question. Why don't we talk about (laughs) that. Why don't we think about that," you know?

Sara: Wow.

Ike: Now, uh- fast-forward many years later, we're really embracing, I don't even wanna to say it like that. I actually think that we, we continue to be encountered by this idea of improvising and being open to God's Spirit and God's Spirit finding us. Whatever we try to do and however badly we try to mess it up, God's Spirit continues to find us in these spaces and connect us. And it's like I have goosebumps right now talking about it because it's incredible to see, like, creatively the things that have happened are just, like, really wild.

Um, your question, (laughs) which I still haven't answered is, "Why do you find yourself-

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: ... "In all these spaces?" And I think that God just keep finding us in all these different spaces and-

Sara: Aw.

Ike: ... the intentionality is not mine. The intentionality, I feel like, is this way of God orchestrating things and saying, "Oh, you have all these disparate parts of your life that might not make sense, check this out. Like, this element is emerging in all of them. I invite you to pay attention to it." (laughs) You know? It's, like, so I'm just trying to, like, take that in, you know?

Sara: Wow. What a rich feast. Would you talk a little bit, like, about you seek out, in your Endless Field band and in your recordings themselves, I'd love to ask you about this because you, you're c- recording in very intentional spaces and some of them are very uncharacteristic (laughs) and unwieldy, such as the Alaskan wilderness. Is that an appropriate question to talk about, like, why you went there, w- how the Spirit led you to that place, and, like, the interactions s- and the ways you were being formed by what and who was present with you beyond the members of your band?

Ike: Yeah. I'm smiling so much 'cause I have so many great memories about these trips and I love your question about what it's inviting me into around. I actually do wanna say I, I, we have been intentional about this and so I do understand that but I also am just marveling at how God and life kinda has this way of, like, spinning things out and if we're open to it, you do see this thread, this connective thread that makes sense of a lot of different things that might not on their own or might not make sense in isolation. And, but what happens is as I go back a ways, it comes down to friendship, once again. Like-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: ... what we talk about with our fellowship. And one of my dearest friends, Jesse Lewis who's my band mate, we're this duo of guitar and bass.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Ike: We just became friends years ago when we both moved to New York and we ended up playing in a lot of the same projects, we like the same music, we both got kicked out of the same band. We (laughs) had all these, like-

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: ... formative experiences. We did. We kinda laugh about it because we actually were-

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: ... like, taking these left turns that weren't right for this particular bad, but we were having a blast and we were finding each other in that sort of wayward motion and he's such an amazing musician. And we listened to all the same music growing up, kinda weirdly so. Like, very bizarre, off-the-wall stuff that we were both listening to at the same times in our lives and so we really became good friends and we just, at a certain point, we were playing on so many other projects

for other people and we said, "What would it look like if we actually leaned into the things that God is putting in our lives or our hearts right now?"

Sara: Mm.

Ike: So we were intentional. We went up and set some time aside and went up into the mountains and, like, really dug into music, like, listened, played, like, worked for 15, 16 hours in a day and, like, playing music and transcribing and figuring out what each other was doing. And we came out with, like, the origin point, actually, of our project Endless Field. And even the name of that was kinda fun. I was reading an article, an interview with Steve Martin and he talked about the creative process as being an endless field.

Sara: Mm.

Ike: And it just, like, hit me over the head. I was like, "That is the coolest naming of the process that I," that really resonated with me. And I emailed it to Jesse-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: ... and we had been in the process of trying to name, whatever I would suggest, he's like, "Oh, that's a terrible name, and th-"

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: ... you know, and then I emailed him that, not even thinking at all about the name context and he said, "That's the name of the band." And, ih- we both knew it. It was like, "Oh, that's so cool." And so ih- that shaped the project and we connected with this National Geographic photographer who also really shaped the project because he took us up to Acadia and we took pictures of air glow, which is like Northern Lights, um, our album is green and it's actually what the sky looked like in Acadia. It's unbelievable. And we went up there and filmed all night. It was, like, 32 degrees, we had our instruments out and we're out, you know. So that was kinda the beginning of this, like, sort of, like, intense adventure, very alive kind of feeling, and one that kept spinning out and it kept playing out in different ways. So we eventually went to Utah and filmed in slot canyons in Utah, which was incredible. And took all our gear and hiked our gear miles up into these canyons and took a solar battery and everything was off-grid and we had these engineers from LA that came out with us.

And it's been, like, an incredible am- adventure but the point about friendship is that we write, like, probably in a weekly basis these friends that go back years now, we're all, like, very connected and we're all in different spheres of, like, the work that we do. But we're really dear friends.

Then from there, we got an email that said, "Come to Alaska," and we started laughing. We're like, "What are you talking about?"

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: A woman, my friend Yngvil wrote and said, "I run this festival in, in Anchorage and I want you guys to come. I got a grant, I want you to come record a new album up in Denali National Park on a glacier."

And we were like, "Are you joking?"

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: Like, "This is unbelievable."

So the last two summers, we've been in, in Alaska scouting and then last year we went and filmed an entire project. The crazy thing about this project is we actually challenged ourselves, I was freaked out to do it, but we actually wrote everything in the moment and in the spaces. So we got to this glacier and we'd have-

Sara: Yeah.

Ike: ... about an hour to set up the gear. We literally wrote all the music for the project in the spaces themselves, like, in 30 to 60 minutes before we actually (laughs) recorded the music. So-

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: ... it was, like, a very raw and, like, it's, like, stuff I'm really proud of and it, to this point about God moving us and-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Ike: ... we were really freaked out to do it but then we're like, "Wow, we have everything that we need. Like, everything is right here and inside us or around us or ..." It was quite an adventure.

Sara: Mm. That's extremely powerful and so counter-cultural for me personal. I mean, when you line up the ingredients, so to speak, of what do you have in that moment and you say, "We expect God to meet us, we know that God is there," there's a sufficiency to that logically speaking, (laughs) if our creator is there with us and we are attuned in this process, then we trust that God will speak to us and we will have sufficiency. But it is a wild idea in our culture to think that we would trust God and the Spirit to provide what we need.

Ike: Yeah. It really was. And I should definitely not pretend like that's how I actually felt in the moment because I really didn't.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Ike: In fact, I actually argued, we have footage of me arguing with my band mate about, like, "Hey, we're not gonna be able to create something that's intellectually challenging enough or the form is not gonna be developed enough or," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

Sara: Yeah, yeah.

Ike: And he just kept pushing me and he was like, "Man, we have to think about what we experienced in Utah. Think about what we experienced at church when we were doing this thing and let's try it. What's the worst (laughs) that could happen?" And it's like-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: ... well, you know, there was a lot on the line, actually. And-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Ike: ... he was right in w- and, you know, we c- of course encourage each other at different times, but I think the process just kept spinning out and kept pulling out and it still is. Like right now we're, after that experience, we came up with this idea of gathering and we created essentially like a adult music camp that's outside and-

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: ... we sort of model our process of taking music outdoors and improvising and songwriting and listening and spiritual practice kind of m- meditating.

And we did an event down in Florida, uh, actually at a Christian retreat center and we've been thinking about doing this at colleges and all sorts of places. And so it's just been interesting to see how for us, the meaningful part of it is that we had such a blast and we have this team of, like, five people that we've had so much fun with, but we're like, "Okay, that's great, but how do we, like, share this in a more tangible way, like, a more experiential way?" And we're starting to, like, get our hands and our heads around what that looks like, where we actually are going to places and, you know, we've got things lined up with students at universities in the fall where we're gonna be able to, like, do this process with students.

And it's cool, for me, it's always a sacred context. Like, this is always a spiritual practice and God is at the center, really, of all music for me, and music that I'm involved in. But the wonderful thing is it's also, like, really open to people that are coming from different parts of life and that, they may be able to encounter it in wherever they are at that time and it can be what it needs to be for them when they get there. So-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: And I feel like this ministry that I've been a part of and learning about, like, through working with you, Sara, and all our amazing friends in 1001 and, uh, these New Worshiping Communities that I'm learning about, I get a lot of ideas from that. That's all part of this adventure too of, like, you know, what else is possible and meeting friends. But it just continues to kind of evolve and spin out and it's really been fun to see that process.