

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: KIMI WERNER: LIFE IN THE DEEP

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From the moment I'm in the water, I just—the first thing that comes over me is just, I'm absolutely present. Um ... and that's just such a rare thing. I think a lot of times, we're just battling these voices in our head and whatnot, and the minute my face is in the water, everything goes quiet, and I'm only focused on what's in front of me. Then I spend a good amount of time on the surface just relaxing, just totally talking to all parts of my body, from my toes all the way up, and making sure that my body is completely relaxed. Um, and I just take one really deep breath of air, and kick pretty strongly, and just start kicking down. And when you hit about sixty feet or so, you can become negatively buoyant, and you just drop down. And the whole time, I'm just kinda telling myself, Just relax, just relax. Because the most relaxed you are, the more you're gonna conserve oxygen, and all you have is that one breath of air.

The lessons from her underwater experiences are at the heart of much of what Kimi Werner does, be it on land as an artist, a culinary expert or a public speaker, or in the ocean, hunting fish or even swimming with sharks. Kimi Werner next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawai'i's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Kimberley Maile Reiko Werner, better known as Kimi, started her relationship with the ocean when she was five years old, living in Haiku, Maui. She tagged along with her father when he went spearfishing, at first staying on the surface of the water as she tried to keep up with him. She didn't know it at the time, but he was teaching her everything she would need to know when she grew up and decided that she, too, wanted to hunt fish underwater.

Would you take us through what it's like to take a breath, one breath, and hold it while you hunt fish, and come back with dinner?

Sure. So, I mean, basically, from the moment ... from the moment I'm in the water, I just—the first thing that comes over me is just, I'm absolutely present. And even uh, starting just to swim, you're already hunting, because you're observing that world so presently. And—and I'm watching the little bait fish, and they're telling me things, you know. And I'm looking at the bottom and the structure, and the reef, and that's like a

roadmap of itself, you know. And all of it, when it comes to hunting, every single thing that you're looking at, it's like a little clue or a little sign telling you where you need to go. And um, and it just feels like—you know, it's like going to a store to get groceries. Like, you know what you're hunting for, you know what you want to come home with, and now, you're reading all this information in front of you to lead you there. And when I finally do find the fish that I'm looking for, or I find the habitat where it looks like this fish will be, then I spend a good amount of time on the surface just relaxing, just totally talking to all parts of my body, from my toes all the way up, and making sure that my body is completely relaxed. Um, and I just take one really deep breath of air, and kick pretty strongly, and just start kicking down. And when you hit about sixty feet or so, you can become negatively buoyant, and you just drop down. And the whole time, I'm just kinda telling myself, Just relax, just relax. Because the more relaxed you are, the more you're gonna conserve oxygen, and all you have is that one breath of air to

So, there's not—

--to do this.

--a ton of adrenalin running? I'm gonna get a fish, I'm gonna go after him, I got this one breath. Nothing like that?

For me, those are always the things I have to shut off. Because they—it—it's right there, especially when you do come across, you know, that prize fish that you want to eat for dinner. It's exciting, and it's nerve-wracking. You already put in all this work, you don't want to blow it. And there can be so much adrenalin running through you, and that can just suck up that oxygen so quickly if you let it. So, um, so I'll even like, go the point of checking myself. Or if I see a really nice fish, I'll tell myself, I'm not going down there for the fish; I'm going down there to take a nap. Like, I'll really say that to myself in my brain. And I'll just take a drop and get down there, and I'll just kind of lay down and just really try and tell myself that, like, I'm just here to relax. And instantly, that'll—

All in the space of a couple of minutes.

Right; yes. An—and that's, I think, what really triggers the curiosity of the fish. I'm not somebody who I aggressively chase after fish. I use techniques that I've learned over the years that will allow the fish to come to me.

And that's different from how other spearfishers pursue fish?

A lot of times when I go diving with other people, um, yeah, you definitely see just the aggression come through, and the adrenalin come through, and people are chasing down their fish. But um, in my opinion, I mean, you—you can't out-swim a fish; right? So, um, it just makes so much more sense to think of techniques that are gonna bring them right to me.

So, you look harmless and relaxing.

I'll do things. I'll—I'll mimic what, like, a ray looks like when it's feeding in the bottom. And I'll—I'll definitely just do things to imitate other creatures, and it will pique the curiosity of the fish and bring them in. They'll warily come in, and the whole time, your ... your time is ticking, 'cause you have to go soon. Um, and—but when the fish does come in close enough, I'll always then just make sure that, you know, I'm in range, it's a close shot, that I know where I'm aiming, and that I know I can pull it off. And ... yeah. And then, you—you hit your target, an—and after that, it just depends if it's a big fish, it could be a really big fight, it could be a really big struggle. Um, my goal is always to kind of make the best shot right through the brain, so it just rolls over instantly. But you don't always get that, you know.

Do you still use three-prong spears?

I do; I do. I use—I use uh, both a spear gun and a three-prong pole spear. So, it all depends. These days, I like to just use a three-prong a lot more, just um ...

Even though you have to pull back?

Yeah. I really—I really enjoy it. I—I enjoy both very much when it comes to freediving, as opposed to scuba diving, um, you know, the—I kind of feel there's a lot less rules. Um, you don't have to worry about going up slow, anything like that. That breath is never gonna expand be more than the breath it was when you took it at the surface. You're a lot more limited, you may have to work a lot harder, um, but at the same time, I do feel like a—you know, less goes wrong. And um, and the same with the equipment used. I mean, obviously, there's more efficient ways to hunt.

I have to admit that as you talk, I just feel a lot of fear for you. I fear blood from fish that you've speared attracting sharks in a frenzy. I fear you not realizing that your breath is up, and you black out underwater.

M-hm.

How do you deal with all of these things as a professional in that way?

Um, those things are all very real fears to have. I um ... with sharks and whatnot, I think it just ... it took repetition. I mean, after having to—to be in the water with so many sharks, you finally start getting used to it. In the beginning, uh, when—you know, I remember the first time a tiger shark just came and stole my fish, and I was just so freaked out that I just—

Did you think the shark was coming for you?

I totally thought so. I thought, like, come back and want to eat me. And I just wanted to leave everything and get to shore. Um, and ... you know, and every time I'd see a shark, it was kinda my reaction, like, Oh, let's get out of here. And—

Take my fish.

Yeah; take anything you want. You know, just don't take me. Um, and—and then, there was just this one day where um ... I don't know; I think I had just gotten more comfortable over time and I was fighting with this fish, and this Galapagos shark came up, coming in hot to steal my fish, and just this hunter's instinct took over me where I was just like, No, I'm sick of this. And I just grabbed my fish and pulled it in even closer to me, grabbed the fish, and just like, faced off with the shark. And as soon as I did, that shark turned and wanted nothing to do with me. And I'm not saying like, oh, everyone should do this, but I have just noticed that um, since then, like that is what I learned about sharks, is that if you ... if you show them that you are the dominant predator, then they're gonna treat you like that. And—and every single time I did the, Oh, take the fish and leave me alone, it would only get the sharks more interested in me. It would only make them that much punchier. And so—so, once I saw that—you know, and that was, like I said, just an instinct that took over, um, I let that instinct take over a lot more. And every single time a shark came around, whether I had a fish on or not, I would just really stop and see what type of energy the shark has. Are they swimming totally erratic and fast, and you know, and coming in like, with aggression, and if so, that would mean that I'd have to raise my aggression to that level. And I'm not gonna back away from it, I'm not gonna curl up and be small, because that just kind of symbolizes prey. And so, instead, if I make myself big, if I face them off, if I—

How do you make yourself big?

I mean, it's just—mainly, it's all body language. It really is. Uh, if a—you know, this one time, this tiger shark was coming straight at me from the surface, and I was like, Oh, god, I don't want to do this right now, but I know from experience it's the safest thing to do. So, I just faced off, and just swam straight at the tiger shark. And it's like playing Chicken, and um, an—and sure enough, it just turned at the last minute and was uninterested. Um, and it's just the same—it's just mainly your body language, um ... and—and just the direction of which you're swimming. You know, prey usually isn't gonna swim directly at the predator. And so, so—

So, you're notifying the shark that you're not prey.

Right. And then, it's the same like when I s—talk about hunting the fish. You know, when I—when I ... I'm hunting the fish, I notice that it doesn't help me if I'm gonna swim at the fish. Because that's just saying I'm a predator, and the fish run away.

Kimi Werner became such an accomplished free diver that she decided to test her skills on a national level. She started winning competitions and soon discovered that it created a very different relationship with the fish that she had previously hunted for food.

You were a sensation on the free diving tour competition. But then ... and it looked like—I mean, you were just winning, and you were just—everyone was talking about you. And then, you dropped out of it.

M-hm.

What happened?

Well, that was ... that was all um ... the spearfishing competitions that I was doing, and which started off as such a beautiful thing for me. I had um ... fallen into the hands of some really great mentors that just helped me so much, and before I knew it, you know, I just um, was becoming really good at spearfishing. And ... and then, I heard of, you know, all these tournaments and stuff, and I definitely wanted to see how I measured up with other divers, and um, yeah, entered the national championships, and won that. And just went on this—

I think you won every category you—

I did.

--entered.

Yeah.

Championship in Rhode Island.

Right; yes. And that—that was—that will always be such a special time for me. Because I set a goal, and I really wanted to go there and represent Hawaii, and just see where all of these passions, you know, could take me. And um, and everything came into play during that tournament. Everything I learned from my dad, everything I learned from other mentors, all the canoe paddling I had done. I mean, it was a kayak competition where you have six hours. And I just remember, you know, how good it felt to be on a kayak and just like ... knowing my way on the ocean surface, and knowing my way underneath. And even if I wasn't—it was my first time ever diving outside of Hawaii. It was so different, and it definitely didn't come without struggle in my days of trying to figure it out. But on—on tournament day, everything worked out, and I ended up winning just, yeah, across the board.

And you continued to compete, and then you were done with it.

I did; I continued to compete for a while. And um ... you know, that first tournament, that first national championships, that was really special. And coming back home to Hawaii was just the best feeling in the world, because Hawaii is just the most supportive, loyal, wonderful hometown, I think, that anyone could ever ask for, in my opinion. And um, the way that people supported me was something that I just was so grateful for. But um, but I think after that, it was never quite the same, because I almost just felt like ... I just always had a title to defend, you know, or like after—you know, I—I did continue to win in competing, but it was just never as fulfilling to me. And um ... and I noticed that even when I would go diving, you know, on my own just for food, all I was thinking about was competition, and all—you know, I started to think of fish as points, rather than even as food. And once I realized that, I didn't—I didn't like it. I just realized it's changing me. You know, it's changing this—this thing that's so sacred to me. It's something that my parents, you know, taught me these values through this. And um ... and it's not about these values anymore; it's really about trophies and winning, and recognition, and um ... and ... this was the thing that really made my life fulfilling again. Am I really gonna do this to it? Am I gonna take it to a level where it's all about, you know, chasing—chasing titles? Like, I—I—I didn't like that. And um, so just for those own personal reasons of—of how I found it affecting me, um, I did walk away from competition.

I saw you do a TEDx talk, and—

M-hm.

--you said that even though you knew it was the right thing to do, it didn't mean that other people weren't very disappointed—

M-hm.

--in you, and that you felt really bad about it, too.

Oh, definitely. I mean, it was—it was one of the toughest things I've done, because it was right in ... you know, the peak of what I thought what could have been my career. You know, I had sponsors now, and um ... you know, people that believed in me, people that looked up to me, and um, and all of a sudden, I was just gonna walk away from it. And um, it—it—it let down a lot of people, and um, definitely disappointed people. And—and for myself too, I mean, I—I did feel—I did feel a sense of, you know, confusion, because I felt so lost. I didn't—I didn't really know who I was without—without that. I—it had become so the tunnel vision of my life, and pretty much, you know, everything that was confident-building seemed to come from that department. It was the first time where, you know, my art started to sell more, because my name was

out there more. And it just seemed like it was something that was causing so much personal gain that for me to turn and walk away from it, um, I definitely felt like a loser. You know, I felt like a waste of talent, and I felt um ... I felt like I didn't quite know ... if I would like ... you know. I didn't know the effects it was gonna have. I didn't know if it was—you know, how much it would bum people out, or if I would just never be really supported again, really.

Did you have a sense of what you would do to replace the competitions?

All I just told myself is, I want diving to always give me that feeling that I had of bringing home those little fish, you know, on that first dive, and knowing my heart that I was happy and proud of that, and that I felt satisfied with that. And that's the feeling that I wanted. I didn't quite know what type of path that would take me on, and how it would affect my career, um, but I just knew I wanted that back. I wanted to go in the water and not have the pressure of competition on my shoulders, and not look at a fish and calculate how many points it would be worth. I wanted that gone.

What happened, then?

I—it took me a while, actually. Uh, it was probably a year um, where a lot of times I would go out diving, and ... all of a sudden, it wasn't the same happy place it used to be, you know, when I say I'm totally present in the moment, and those voices in my head go quiet. It—it wasn't happening; these voices were just telling me that I was a loser, and I was failure, and you know, what are you doing, like why are you quitting. Um, and ... it was still, you know, looking at the fish as points, and so then, I'd have to get out of the water with no fish. And then, I really would beat myself up. Like, I'm not even good at this anymore, I don't even—can't even dive 'cause my mind's all messed up. And um ... and I got pretty depressed, but um ... but—but you know, but through that, you know, I just kinda took some breaks from diving and whatnot. And then this one day, um, couple friends of mine like said, You need to get back in the water. Like, let's go. And so, we all went out on our kayaks, and again, my brain was just still—still fighting itself, and I—I just felt like I wasn't diving the way I dive; I didn't have anymore. And um ... and so, I'm like, Let's just pack it up and go, guys. I know what you're trying to do, and I know you're trying to bring me back, but it's just not fun for me anymore, and there's nothing worse than the feeling of actually being out here and it not being fun anymore, so I just want to go home. And they said, Okay, let's go. But then, I said, You know what? Let me just take one last drop. And I put my spear gun on my kayak, didn't even take it down with me, and I just took a dive. And I had my two buddies, you know, spotting me from the surface, so it was safe. But I just took a dive, and um, didn't even tell them what—uh, you know, just took—told them to watch me, you know, took a dive. And I got down to the bottom, and I just laid in the sand. I just crossed my arms and I put my face in the sand. And—and I laid there, and I let every single ... critic come through my head. Every single voice, every single thing that I had beat myself up about, like, I just let it come, and I listened to every single, you know, put-down, worry,

concern, fear. And they all came, one after another, and I just waited, and I just ... still waited, held my breath. Okay, what else you got; give it to me. You know, I just waited, and waited, and waited until there was nothing left. And when there was nothing left, there was not one more voice that could say anything, you know, that—that I, you know, hadn't already heard. Like, it just went quiet. And as soon as it went quiet, I opened my eyes and I'm on the bottom of the ocean, and I was just back.

I'm thinking of your buddies watching you from above, and thinking, She's down there a really long time.

With her face in the sand.

M-hm.

But they let you be.

They did; they did. And then, um, as soon as I picked my head up, I just realized like, the feeling's back. You know, that feeling is back. Like—because before, to me, it was never truly about like, oh, that moment when you spear your fish. But it was the feeling that I felt when I would take a drop, and just the serenity that would come over me, and just this feeling of welcome home. And—and when everything just turned quiet, and I was still there holding my breath, and I looked up and I just saw my two friends, and I saw the sun just sparkling through the ocean surface, and I just looked at the beautiful ocean and hear the noise, you know, the sounds of the ocean, and that was it. Um, I was like, that's the feeling; that's the feeling that satisfies me. And soon as I came up, I—I didn't even have to say anything; they knew. They knew exactly what had happened, they knew exactly. And I smiled at them, and they were just like, You're back. And I'm like, I'm back. And that was that. And after that, then I just started um, diving for food again, and just realizing like that's something sacred to me, and I'm going to protect it with everything that I have. I'm gonna do everything I can to—to keep this pure. Even if it means no success comes from this, this is mine.

Kimi Werner became a freediving ambassador for Patagonia, a company whose mission is to protect the land and ocean. She had an opportunity to swim with a great white shark, not to sensationalize such an encounter, but to show the beauty of the interaction of species.

Basically, my dive partner just started shaking my arm and screaming. And I put my face back in the water, there was great white literally like, from me to you. And I just instantly like—I heard myself scream, but it wasn't a scream of fear; it was more like ... the scream that you have when you're like, catching a wave. Like, it was like a squeal. Here goes, you know.

M-hm.

And so, I just swam right at that shark, and as soon as I did, she veered off, thankfully. And um, and I just think it was one of those situations where had I reacted by backing away, swimming away, like trying to scramble for the boat, I might not be here right now. And um, but as soon as I swam at her, she just kinda backed off, and then I watched the way that she was swimming.

Why do you say, she?

Oh, because you could tell um—

--yeah, it was a female shark. Yeah; they have these claspers by their tail, and um, yeah, you can tell. But—which I only learned later. Once she backed off, then I just observed her, and I just saw that she was really mellow. That she was coming up out of curiosity, but there was nothing about her body language that said aggression. I mean, her fins were completely out. When sharks get aggressive, their fins come down, they arch their back.

But remember, you're on the floor of the reef, curling up, but you are aggressive. So—

Right.

Can't sharks play the same game?

They can. I don't think that animals are quite as manipulative as humans. I think a lot of times with animals, what you see is what you get. Um, maybe that's why I like them so much. And um ... and so ... so, yeah; in watching her body language, it just became apparent that she was moving really slow, and granted, yes, she mostly definitely could have switched and eaten me at any second. Um, but again, she didn't leave the area, so it didn't really make sense for me to scramble back to the boat. Instead, I just kept an eye on her, and she was going down, and like doing circles, but she would come up. But every time she came up, I just knew, okay, I have to swim down, I have to show that I'm just as interested in her. But this one time, she just slowed down, and she leveled off right in front of me. And I had hit that negative buoyancy point where I was already sinking, no matter what, so at this point, I had two options. And it was, I could make a drastic turn and kick back up, which I'd have to kick back up to the surface, which didn't sound like a good idea, or basically, I was going to cross the path of the shark. And so, once I realized I was, I'm like, Well, whatever you do, just make it smooth. And as soon as she came under me, I just reached out, let her know I'm right here, touched her dorsal fin, and we just went for a swim together.

And it was fine with the shark.

It was crazy how fine it was. I mean, if that animal, a seventeen-foot great white shark didn't want me touching her on her back, I'm sure she'd let me know. But um, but it was amazing. I just felt her, and this huge animal, you could just feel this calm energy. And she just even slowed down even more, to the point where her tail was barely moving, and we were just gliding together.

Well, if the shark recognized you as another predator, wouldn't you be considered competition for food, same food?

You definitely can be, and I've seen uh, some sharks be territorial. And again, it's just one of those times where it's like, you need to just hold your ground until you can get to a safer place. Um, but in this case, no, I don't think this—this big lady had any problem with getting her own food, and so, I don't think that it was anything territorial or anything competitive. I think we were just two predators swimming together.

Kimi Werner travels around the world working on film projects, speaking, diving and meeting people who, like her, are living sustainably and thriving in nature.

Mahalo to Kimi Werner of Waialua for sharing your love of the ocean with us and thank you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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I think a lot of times, we go into jobs because we're so passionate about our craft, and then before we know it, um ... you know, we're—we're just—we're not really enjoying it anymore, and we're going through the motions because we're trying to—we're trying to hit these certain marks of society, whether it's financial success, or I need that house, or I need that car, and before you know it, your own beautiful passion that kinda becomes this vehicle for living unauthentically, and um ... and doing things based on expectations that were never really yours to begin with.

[END]