

Layla: I'm Layla Saad, and my life is driven by one burning question: How can I become a good ancestor? How can I create a legacy of healing and liberation for those who are here in this lifetime and those who will come after I'm gone? In my pursuit to answer this question, I'm interviewing change-makers and culture-shapers who are also exploring that question themselves in the way that they live and lead their life. It's my intention that these conversations will help you find your own answers to that question too. Welcome to Good Ancestor Podcast.

Layla: Hi, everybody, and welcome to another episode of Good Ancestor Podcast. Today, I have an incredible conversation with two amazing people, Kerri Kelly from CTZNWELL and Michelle Johnson. I wanted to be able to speak to them both together today, even though each one is doing amazing work in their own right and I know we would have amazing conversation with each of them individually, but the reason why I particularly wanted to speak with them together is they do this work together called Race and Resilience, and I wanted to have a conversation about that and their journey on that as a white woman and a black woman working together, doing work at this intersection of social justice and racism and wellness and yoga, so that is the framework for today's conversation. Let me give you a little bit of an intro to both of them. Michelle Cassandra Johnson is an author, a yoga teacher, a social justice activist, a licensed clinical social worker, and a Dismantling Racism trainer. She approaches her life and work from a place of empowerment, embodiment, and integration. She has been leading anti-racism trainings for 22 years and she has experienced working to dismantle systems of oppression inside corporations, midsized organizations, and small non-profits, including Google, lululemon, the ACLU-WA, and many more. With a deep understanding of trauma and the impact that it has on the mind, body, spirit, and heart, much of her work focuses on helping people better understand how power and privilege operate in their life. Michelle explores how privilege, power, and oppression affects the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and energy body. And then Kerri Kelly is the founder of CTZNWELL and the host of one of my favorite podcasts, CTZNWELL Podcast. CTZNWELL is an emerging movement to mobilize people into a powerful force for the wellbeing of all. Kerri is recognized across communities for her inspired work to bridge transformational practice with social change and politics. She has been instrumental in translating the tools of wellbeing into practical application and social action in the public and private sector. Working in collaboration with community organizers, spiritual leaders, policy makers and corporate executives including William Morris Entertainment, Congressman Tim Ryan, lululemon, Marianne Williamson, People's Action Group, and more. So, without further ado, welcome to Good Ancestor Podcast, Kerri and Michelle.

Kerri: Thank you.

Michelle: Thanks for having us.

Layla: It's incredible to have you both here. Let's start with our very first question and you can decide who goes first, whoever feels inspired to speak first. Who are

some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who've influenced you on your journey?

Michelle: I can start. I love this question, and my grandmother Dorothy is who I wanna call into this space. She's around me all the time and she transitioned in late 2017, and my mom is still alive but she was very sick this spring and almost transitioned and so I wanna call her into this space too, her name is Clara, and both of them definitely have a big influence on my work and me and just everything that I do in the world.

Layla: Beautiful. What about you, Kerri?

Kerri: You know that I struggle with this question.

Layla: We recently had a conversation about this question.

Kerri: I think you called it squirming. I was squirming in this question.

Layla: Yeah.

Kerri: I really struggle. As a white person still unpacking their ancestry and trying to tell the truth about it and reclaim the whole of it, so, you know, on one hand, I know this is called the Good Ancestor Podcast, I feel like there's like the bad ancestor, which I hate to qualify, but I'm a white person, what I know of my ancestry is that they came over in the 1500s from England to Massachusetts and so I have to believe that they were a part of displacement and a participant in establishing and shaping white supremacy in this country, so there's that, and the many people who came after that, right? That has shaped who I am today, I live with that, and I used to like never wanna talk about it but now it feels important to reclaim that as a part of who I am, as a part of my responsibility to this work, and in that process I also have discovered that I have some witches in my line which surprised me and doesn't surprise me. I found an abolitionist called Evelyn Ketchum which was really cool so I can see the radical in me and where that comes from, and the person I always call into this space is my stepdad who is a fireman. He passed on 9/11, and really changed the course of my life and taught me a lot about — or maybe made me really reflect on what I'm willing to risk for other people and for humanity, right? So he really I think seeded that practice with me and I've sort of been unpacking that and reflecting on that and trying to embody that to the best of my ability ever since.

Layla: Thank you for sharing that, Kerri. We spoke about this recently. I primarily interview black people and people of color on this podcast and like I said, sprinkle a few white people here and there throughout, and I noticed a very big difference between when I ask a black person or a person of color this question versus the white person and the white people who I do invite onto this podcast are in this conversation anyway so they're aware of all the different nuances of what it means to be white and to talk about ancestry and it's just an interesting dynamic for me to witness and observe. It's almost like, Michelle, as you were speaking

about your ancestors and I've noticed this in so many of the other guests that I have on, it just rolls out. It's so easy to say it and there are so many people through your lineage and your ancestry who you see how they influence you or you feel their presence around you and it's a real source of energy and strength and pride, whereas when I speak with our white guests, there's this kind of like squirming, but really what it is is reckoning, right? It's that reckoning and trying to figure out how to be with all of it at the same time, and so I'm grateful for everyone who comes on and shares who their ancestors who influenced them are and the reason why I choose to have a small number of white people on this show and the reason why I wanted to bring you on together was because I'm still exploring what does it mean to work across difference and to be able to be with each other in this work because we all have to go together, right? We all have to get to that new world together, but have to do so in a way that is truthful and honest, keeps black, indigenous, people of color safe from racial harm, and while at the same time being able to go to the edge and find new ways of being with each other. So, I would love to learn about how you both came to know each other and why you decided to do this work together.

Michelle: We met, I guess two years ago. It was right before I moved to Portland, Oregon, and now I'm back in North Carolina, at a training that Off the Map was hosting and holding in Durham, North Carolina, and Kerri was one of the facilitators and I was not planning to go to this training but another friend asked me if I would come to it and would assist in some way, and so I went. We'd heard of each other before but never met and that's where we first met and it was like, "Oh, I know you, I see you," like we've known each other forever, it was that kind of feeling, and I think a lot of activation and fire between us and that was the beginning of this work and partnership and recognition and I think practice of working across difference right from the moment we met. I think there was deep intention around how we would be in relationship. And one thing that allowed me to enter into this relationship with Kerry is that I have deep love for her and I trust her. She showed me time and time again that she's not perfect, she's gonna make mistakes, and, Kerri, you're very willing to acknowledge those mistakes and to stay in the fire and I feel like it is easy for white folks to leave the fire because of how privilege operates and I see Kerri show up and step into the fire over and over, and so that's something that I could see right away when I met her and something that I know to be true today, just from our relationship.

Layla: Prior to meeting each other, Michelle, was working with a white person something that you had thought about or was it something that just organically happened as a result of your relationship with each other?

Michelle: Well, I worked with a group called Dismantling Racism Works which is a training group. We had six trainers, three trainers of color and three white trainers, so I did that for 20 years. Right before meeting Kerri, I was getting ready to move so that group transitioned and I was trained up working with a white trainer when I led anti-racism training, so for the most part, that's my background, my training is that we'd always have a white trainer and we'd always have a trainer of color in our Dismantling Racism Works and I was in a conversation with someone recently

about this, a person of color who is questioning that, and I was like, “Well, that’s just how I was trained up,” and I actually really at times like having a white trainer there so that they can attend to whiteness in the room and so I’m not expending as much emotional labor, and I think white folks listen to white folks too, there’s that dynamic as well so there’s a role for white folks to play in this work, and Kerri and I have been working with that and figuring out what that means for us.

Layla: Kerri, tell us about your experience of sort of your work before meeting Michelle and what this work has been like for you.

Kerri: Well, it’s funny because this work has been — I don’t wanna say has always been central because as a white person, I’m constantly becoming and becoming more conscious virtually and socially and unlearning a lot of my conditioning and indoctrination, but when I got into the work of CTZNWELL, we were really trying to throw down politically to remove the systemic barriers that were in the way of people being well and people’s wholeness and very quickly we realized that the biggest barrier to that was white supremacy, so we couldn’t not center dismantling white supremacy in our work, and so started to lean into that but I think even reflecting on that during what you said, Michelle, like really cautiously, like a lot of tiptoeing and maneuvering and we have a great relationship with Reverend angel who I think brought us along fiercely into accountability and action and other incredible allies who work with us and we were also doing a lot of work at the time in labor, with SEIU, around Fight for 15 which was a black-led movement, so we got schooled. I think we stepped in and we got schooled and we made a shit ton of mistakes and just kept getting up and doing the work of learning and repairing and letting ourselves be held accountable and starting over and falling down and starting over again and falling down and starting over again, so what I remember of meeting Michelle in fact is that training was really hard. It was really fierce, it was really messy, and I remember when I met her, she was so down for the mess, like she was like, “Let’s talk about this, let’s get into this, let’s unpack this, let’s figure out how to do this well and how to navigate these waters better,” and I was like thank God and so right away we just got real with each other, and we got right into the meat of the issue, like how do we do this work across lines of difference, how do we our best to reduce harm while we do this work? And I think the big lesson for me in working with Michelle over the last two and a half, three years has been learning how to be in relationship, which I didn’t understand I think before our work together. I think I was trying to be like an ally and do my part and it was very like robotic and transactional and I was so attached to being a good white person, like so attached to that moniker, and I just really learned how to be human inside of our relationship and also how to play my role. Like I have a specific role and responsibility in this work but also in how we work together and that’s really helped me I think just more fully step in, like courageously and deliberately and also, as Michelle said, make mistakes and not be perfect all the time, right? I have so much work to do and I feel so humbled and privileged to be in this conversation, and also so absolutely committed to walking the walk.

Layla:

Thank you for sharing that. It's so key what you said, something that I wanna call out from that is what you said around "I learned how to be in relationship as opposed to being this ally and being robotic" and that just feels so key for me personally in coming to understand for myself because I remember in my own awakening, realizing I've basically just surrounded myself with white people and they are completely unaware, just as I was or just had my — I was just shut down to it, right? So I wake up and I'm surrounded by spiritual white women and so that was the start of my journey with my viral article and then having to go on this journey of understanding what it meant to be black and be in relationship with white people and at first it was just messy. It was just so messy because I didn't know how to protect myself, I didn't know what I needed, I was going through the grief and the anger and everything of coming into that awakening and it was very messy for me, but what I have learned on this journey and I think so many of my — I know so many of my friends, my personal friends, have learned this as well, is that it really is about that relationship building, right? It really is about that trust that is earned in being in relationship with each other and that it seems that that's what you've really cultivated between each other, with each other, that you, first and foremost, have the strong foundation. Before you were going out and doing this work out in the world, that you have this strong foundation with each other which I can imagine is really important when you're standing up in front of a group of people talking about racism and there's going to be all kinds of responses in the room because you have all different kinds of people in the room with different levels of experience. It strikes me that the foundation of your relationship with each other must be very important.

Michelle:

It is and we took time with it before we started doing the work together as you named, and one thing that is true about me is I have boundaries for sure and I don't cancel people. I just don't. And I think it's my spiritual practice and wanting to be aligned that makes me not cancel people. Again, boundary, that doesn't mean I'll take abuse and harm over and over, right? But I know whiteness messes up white people and so I understand that when I'm entering into a relationship with a white person, in particular if we're gonna work together to do anti-racism work, and so I think there are moments where I just extend grace to white folks and that's part of my practice, and I understand not all black folks are gonna do that or in a position to do that, right? I'm not saying this is the prescription, we need to do this. It's just how I am though and so it lends itself, my way of being, to then being in a relationship with white folks as I'm doing this work when that makes sense. I don't always work with white folks. Sometimes, I'm just working with folks of color. I want to name that. That's part of the foundation, it's like this extension of grace and understanding that whiteness has messed us up in so many ways, people of color and white folks.

Layla:

Yeah. I love that you said the word "grace" because that was top of mind as we've been having this conversation and that has been the place in which I have landed through doing my — because it was trauma that I was waking up to and it was like who do I see is responsible? Those people out there. So I need to sort of emote that outwards in doing my own inner work so I have been healing a lot of that within myself and sort of learning how to fill myself up so that I do have the

bandwidth to be able to extend grace, empathy, compassion, and, like you said, not every black person is gonna see it that way or interpret it that way or be able to respond in that way, but as we know we're not a monolith and each one of us is on our own journey and has our own values, as you said. It seems that something that's common between the two of you are your values and your spiritual grounding and that is the root from which all of this extends. Michelle, you have your book, *Skill in Action*, which is about — well, I'll let you explain it but it's the intersection of social justice and yoga. Can you tell us a little bit about what this book is about, how it came to be, and why it comes from that root?

Michelle: Well, I started practicing yoga I think probably over two decades ago and this is definitely where Kerri and I align and it definitely is part of the root. I was entering into spiritual spaces or wellness spaces and not seeing myself reflected in those spaces and also not hearing a conversation about suffering that was happening in the world outside of that room and the connection between the suffering outside of that room and the suffering happening inside. There wasn't a container to hold a conversation about how yoga was connected to the collective and the harm that we experience and the suffering we perpetuate, and I saw that and experienced it over and over and over, the absence of that conversation and really yearned for it and longed for it, and so the book came out of — *Skill in Action* is from the Bhagavad Gita which is about a warrior who needs to fight, that's his dharma, his duty in the world. It's about many things but the essence is about what is your work in the world and what practices do you engage to actually live into your dharma and so that really spoke to me when I learned about the Gita and I thought if people in the yoga spaces aren't gonna have this conversation, I'm gonna start the conversation. Now, I'm not the original person who started this conversation about justice and yoga, but I didn't see anybody in my community having the conversation, and now I see many more people are having this conversation in wellness beyond access to wellness, like if we're spiritual practitioners, what does that actually mean as we live during these times with everything that's going on, so the book emerged from that space of really wanting to move the conversation forward and to transform wellness spaces and raise consciousness inside of wellness spaces so that we can be different as we leave those spaces in the world, navigating the world. That's where it came from.

Layla: And, Kerri, tell us about your journey with wellness and yoga and social justice.

Kerri: Well, I found yoga after 9/11, so, for me, yoga was always deeply political, like it was always tied to this bigger thing, but it's funny the more I got into yoga and then I did the like move across the country, quit my job, become a yoga teacher kinda thing, the deeper I got into my practice, the more cognitive dissonance I developed. I just was cultivating more and more resistance to it and I couldn't understand why and it was exactly what Michelle was naming was I didn't see the way in which the practice on the mat was connecting with the practice out in the world, it's just there wasn't a clear connection or relationship, and even like around the obsession in our wellness community with self-awareness, I couldn't understand how people wouldn't get that that connects to self-awareness, about social location and white supremacy and how systems like those things are not

separate, and yoga is about not separation so the whole thing started to kind of like make my head spin and that's really what pushed me to working at the intersection of yoga and meditation and mindfulness and social change, community organizing, social justice, eventually politics and all of that led me really to working with Michelle, but I think you're right. I mean, I think there is a fundamental world view that underpins this work. Now that I understand how systems work, how culture works, how ideologies work to sort of infect us with a disease, it's so clear to me that that world view really helped me see clearly through the fog and really pushed me to find my way forward and not kinda get stuck in that bubble, and I think that world view is exactly sort of what Michelle was naming, it's the connection of all things. It's interdependence. It's we are not separate, and it's relationship, right? It's like deep relationship with ourselves, deep relationship with one another, deep relationship with the earth, and either we believe that or we don't believe that, but when we don't believe that, it's really easy to exploit the earth or to exploit one another or to cause harm and not feel the need to repair, so it does feel really values based, and I think the gift of spiritual practices, it calls us to reckon with our values. What do we really believe? What do we really want for ourselves and one another? And if that's what you want, you need to live with that, or there might be another way.

Layla:

I know for myself, so I am a Muslim woman and my Islamic spiritual beliefs are a huge part of my identity and what makes me me and I'm also a spiritual seeker and so I have read and studied outside of my religion as well and I pulled from it what aligns for me in my own understanding of my relationship with God, but what I have found for so many people who are on this path of doing work in this realm is that there is often this rich, fertile ground from which we are pulling from or grounding our work from, whether you're looking at people who are now in this time living ancestors doing this work, or we look to the change-makers and the activists and the authors of the past who, whether they were Christian or Muslim or had their own sort of spiritual practice that they made up that those values were underpinning everything, right? And I, like you, Kerri, when I had my awakening, could not understand why these things that we say we believe are not being translated in this way. Why are they in this bubble by themselves but they don't apply to the rest of the world? Like you said, Michelle, sort of within the yoga class but not out in the world. Well, I'd like to hear from you actually what you both feel about why is it hard for people to make that connection and that bridge? So much time and energy is spent for so many people on their spiritual practice, meditation, wellness retreats, yoga, just so much time and energy and money spent on their spiritual practice and this desire to reach some sort of enlightenment or transcendence or something of that level but they're not able to connect that bridge to the rest of the world and their life in the world. Why do you think that is? What do you think are some of the barriers?

Michelle:

I think, or I know, like cultural conditioning is strong and so we're conditioned not to think about, not to see what's happening, not to dissect or diagnose the suffering around us and just generalizing that that's what dominant culture does and that applies to spiritual spaces and I always talk about the distinction between the industry of yoga and the practice of yoga. The practice of yoga calls

us into understanding how all things are connected, as all three of us have named. The industry of yoga is like capitalism plus whiteness plus wellness which conditions us not to see our connection and creates a lot of fragmentation so I think people spend money on retreats and show up to yoga four times a day and have their spiritual teachers because they feel that fragmentation that culture's created for them and they're seeking wholeness and I don't think there's a way for us to be whole unless we have this conversation and I don't think we're practicing yoga or really deep spiritual practice without talking about the connection between all things and where we're located as Kerri said so how our identity has placed us or positioned us and where we have privilege and power and where we're experiencing marginalization and what all of that means and also how we cause harm based on our privilege and how we're being harmed and what we internalize from that, so I think it's on purpose when we think about the industry of yoga, again, which is very different than the practice of yoga and I think if we know about the lineage of yoga, I feel like it was practiced in such a different way than it is mainly practiced in the US and that's where I'm located so then it is practiced here in the US because of capitalism and the business of yoga.

Layla: And so what are some of the ways in which people who are maybe hearing this conversation, maybe hearing the things that we're saying for the first time and really beginning to understand it for the first time and they're like, "Oh, I hadn't thought of it that way," so how do I come out of sort of the cultural conditioning of the industry of yoga to really step into living my values? What are some of the skills, the understandings that people need to be moving towards?

Michelle: I can start and I'm sure and I'm sure Kerri has thoughts about this too. Part of what happens with the conditioning is that I think we're distracted and so people are showing up and rolling out their mat to find some quiet time and to escape from what the culture is doing but really the business of yoga is just replicating the culture and a skill is to be curious about that. You all mentioned reckoning related to the beliefs that are being expressed in a class or from a teacher, a teaching that's being offered and then not actually seeing how that applies to what's going on outside of that space. I think spiritual practice asks us to be curious about what that means and why that's happening and so I always invite people into that space of curiosity, into that space of the beginner's mind, and to just see there really is no separation and if I think about in particular yoga spaces, it's gonna require training of yoga teachers, right? It's gonna require us to dismantle this industry of yoga and learn to practice in a different way and in a way that this practice was intended to be, so I think it's gonna be some deprogramming for teachers and practitioners of yoga.

Layla: Yeah, because what I'm hearing you say is that we go into the yoga class and we look to the teacher to guide us and the teacher is not having this reckoning and this level of education and what they are teaching is the perpetuation of the industry, right?

Kerri: Well, and add to that, the teacher's white.



Layla: Oftentimes, right?

Kerri: Yeah, oftentimes, the teacher is white and the studio owned by white people filled by white bodies, white, thin, able bodies, so not only are we replicating it but we continue to build it. We continue to build this system over and over and over again from the inside out of the wellness industry until we stop doing that, and I think one of the things that Michelle has really taught me just in like the skill of how we move people through this work is that we have to see. First, we have to be able to see and I think when you get educated and you start to understand how systems work and how culture works, you do start to see more clearly what's happening around you. It's like the veil is lifted and you're like, oh, shit, something's not quite right here and you feel it in your body so there is something that happens when you kind of engage in the clear seeing and the curiosity around something is not right here and I wanna understand why and then we need to cultivate skills in how we engage with that, 'cause then it's not just like do something because we know how easily we can perpetuate harm and how easily we can replicate, like there is a skill in how we engage with one another and how we take responsibility for our role in our complicities and find the ways in which we can engage and the roles and responsibilities that each one of us uniquely have, given our social location so that we can move forward.

Layla: Yeah, so I'm thinking now about the work that you do together with Race and Resilience and from what I understand, that is in the organizational space, is that right?

Kerri: It's in the organizational space. We also offer workshops and we get a lot of wellness people or yoga practitioners for that so it's not necessarily tied to an organization but we do both.

Michelle: Started in community.

Kerri: Yeah, and then we felt the need to move it organizationally because the community was being harmed by the organization.

Layla: Right. And so what has having these kind of conversations in those kind of spaces, how has that been? What are some of the patterns that you've noticed that constantly emerge as you do this work in those kind of spaces?

Michelle: There's a dynamic that I talk about a lot in Dismantling Racism Work and we talk about it with Race and Resilience which is anti-racism work. There's a tension for folks of color where we're living the experience of racism and living with the impact of white supremacy and white people are learning about it at our expense and I usually name this from the beginning as part of our assumptions, our philosophy and our agenda that we share with people, and it feels like an important tension to name because it does relate to patterns that show up in this space. There is sometimes an expectation from white folks that folks of color are gonna educate them, gonna teach them and that it's our role to do that and that white folks don't have a narrative related to white supremacy when in fact they

actually do. They don't have to rely on my story to understand how whiteness operates. That's part of the conditioning though and —

Layla: Can I just push on that? I feel like you're making a really important here that needs to just — we just need to zoom in a little bit on what you've just said. Can you say that again and then just expand on it a little bit because we have a lot of white listeners on this show, I know, and a lot of them are coming in through work like *Me and White Supremacy* and the work of other anti-racism educators like yourselves and they are, like you said, white supremacy is an issue for you, I'm just here to show up and help and it doesn't impact me in any way so you need to tell me how it does.

Kerri: Yeah, I think that's what whiteness does, right? That's part of the conditioning that racism and white supremacy are people of color's problem and we're gonna dismantle it when in fact people of color, we can dismantle internalized oppression, the ways in which we're taking in toxicity and being traumatized by the culture and then replicating that with other folks of color. That's our work, in my opinion, and it's white people's work to dismantle the system of whiteness because they're benefiting from it and there's no way while I'm an educator, I'm not gonna be the person — I just said this in the training the other day, I'm not gonna be the person to dismantle white supremacy. It's not gonna be me. I will talk to people about it. I will raise consciousness about it, but I don't have social and institutional power. I don't have the backing to dismantle the system, which is tricky because I'm trying to intervene with this in a system that continues to harm me and so the pattern that I was naming is the conditioning can make white folks feel like — and it's nuanced, I think too, I should say that — it can make white folks feel like I need to just show up and listen to folks of color and, yes, deep listening is part of the practice and it's part of building a relationship, but there's also the doing and the acknowledging and the naming, how the conditioning is showing up and how whiteness is showing up and how white people are benefiting from it. There's that work too, and I think it's challenging for white folks to engage in that work, and I also think there's an incentive on a spiritual soul level but there's no incentive if I look at the culture for white folks to actually dismantle the system, like why would they —

Layla: There's no payoff.

Michelle: Right.

Layla: Right, other than you get to live in alignment with your value —

Michelle: Yeah.

Layla: Is the biggest payoff for me.

Kerri: Yeah.

Michelle: Right.

- Layla: Right, but there's no thing that you get and in fact you will, as you do that work, realize places where you need to give up privilege and power.
- Kerri: Right, because it's funny like I think often white folks, and I think you were just naming this, talk about the issue of white supremacy as a moral issue, right? And we have to do the right thing. It's a wholeness issue, actually. Like white people are not whole as long as they exist in this system, even while they benefit from it, right? Even while they get to thrive inside of it, so to speak. I mean, Ruby Sales talks about this a lot, and I just say that because that does feel like an important pivot that white folks need to make that will help them transform from like it being an "other" problem to it being an all of our problem, that we are all unable to realize our full wholeness as long as this system exists. And I think the hard thing for white folks is that what often that means is that we get whole by giving something up, by giving up the illusion of control, by giving up like these so-called privileges and advantages and proximity and acts, like there is something that we have to let go of in order to achieve the wholeness that I think people are so fiercely and desperately seeking and yet can't ever get fully — I mean, it's no wonder, right? Like there's desperation I feel like often in the wellness industry around self-seeking and perfectionism and purity that's never realized and it's no wonder. It's because we're not doing the right work in the right place.
- Layla: So what I'm hearing you say is two things, sort of reinforcing of what Michelle was saying about people showing up, rolling out their yoga mats at the class because they're seeking just a quiet place to just recover essentially from what it means like to live in a capitalist, white supremacist, racist system and also that the wholeness that so many are constantly looking outside of themselves for that it's not out there, the thing that they're trying to get, and I mentioned earlier that so often we see people trying to get to this level of sort of enlightenment and transcendence, almost like if I can just leave and not be in this world, then I will experience the peace that I'm looking for, right? And when that's done by a person who benefits from white privilege is really on the head, you know? And it's that spiritual bypassing of like I don't want to have to really deal with what's going on in the world, I wanna transcend and get out of here while still continuing to benefit from white privilege in their actual real life.
- Kerri: Yeah, it's funny, I don't think that white folks are just going to the mat to recover, I think they're going to get cover, like spiritual actually gives us cover, right? Because we get to be like, no, we're allowed, right? We deserve comfort. We deserve to escape, right? Like it's a great out clause to the harder, more uncomfortable conversation, right? So like it's designed to actually even protect white folks from getting in in its current form.
- Layla: Well, that's sort of what I was going to say in the way that it's practiced, as Michelle said, in the industry because the actual practice I think, whatever your spiritual practice is, is the source of energy and rejuvenation to be able to keep coming back to this well that is infinite because this work is exhausting, right? For all us. It's really physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually exhausting and I feel

like, for myself, as I have been on this journey, I keep returning back to that well so that I don't burn out, so that I don't lose my compassion or so I don't know longer know how to feel grace or offer grace, that when it's done, when we source from that space, like from the actual practice and not from the industry of practice, that it's this rich source of energy.

Kerri: Yeah, that resonates and it also makes me think about how we're practicing it here and it makes me think about cultural appropriation, so when we take something that we do not fully understand and then we have capitalism intersect with that and then people are profiting from it, of course it's not gonna allow people to be in their wholeness and fullness, and that is what we've done and I'm including myself in that because I'm not directly tied to this lineage, right? So that is what we've done with yoga in the US and it feels so deeply harmful and dangerous and I was teaching a workshop the other day and there was a [inaudible 00:41:11] and she talked about the erasure of culture and I think we do — I mean, yoga is just one example of that. We've been culturally appropriating — whiteness has been culturally appropriating since the beginning of this country, right? And so it's been going on and I don't think there's a way for us not to. I do think there's a way for us to work on cultural appreciation and to work on understanding that we're gonna appropriate, but I think we've taken this practice from its original source and repackaged it and so we broke it apart while I find wholeness. When I practice it, when I sit on my cushion and meditate, I just remember that we've taken this from something because whiteness felt entitled to this practice. I don't know that we're truly practicing it in the way it was intended and like the essence of the practice.

Layla: Right.

Michelle: And how easy taking is, right? We're taking a lot of things. White supremacy has taken land, it's taken lives, right? And so like how easy it was for us to just slip into like taking one more thing and declaring it's ours to have.

Layla: And the conversation around yoga which I won't even attempt to dive deep into, first of all, because I don't practice yoga and it's not from my lineage and I don't have the level of experience, but it's, from what I understand, it is a very complex conversation but as are so many things within this sort of larger conversation around white supremacy and racism and cultural appropriation and all of these different facets of white supremacy that you have cultivated and are teaching others to be in the complexity of that gray area of the non-binary, there are no clear answers, and I know that white people really struggle with that because coming out of white supremacy where everything is this is this and this is this and you're either a good person or a bad person and it's either it is cultural appropriation or it isn't cultural appropriation, right? She either did say something racist or she didn't say something racist into actually there are so many nuanced layers to this. I've noticed that as white people sort of do this consciousness work, are grasping for the answers, like just tell me the answers, right? Just can you give me a list? Is there a checkbox? Is there something? As you two do the work

together in community and in organizations with individuals, with companies, what do you notice around that dynamic?

Michelle: The way you described it, I mean I think whiteness has set up this either/or, as you named, you gave a few examples of that, and whiteness makes white folks want a list, right? The ten things they can do to not be racist, right? And that's just not how it works and I love the complexity and I love the messiness, as Kerri named earlier, I'm sitting in it and inviting people into that space because I think growth comes from that space of dissonance for folks, especially white folks when we're talking about the system of white supremacy and it sort of translates into culture too in the organization because a lot of times, white supremacy has infiltrated the culture and tell people that if you have the list, then you'll do the right thing, right? You'll know, like the knowledge comes from the list, not from the experience, not from living through the messiness, not from fracturing relationships and trying to figure out how to repair them, not from raising consciousness, but you have the list or you have the handbook and then you're done and so I think it's very related to organizational culture too and that's part of what we see in spaces and so I think part of the resilience for white people is to let go of the list and learn how to be in the messiness. It's like sitting with that and the discomfort that arises when you don't have a checklist or a ten-point plan about what you need to do to intervene with your racism and your whiteness. I think the work is like the opposite of the list. We don't know how to get out of this mess or we would have, so we're just in it and have to figure out to navigate it and mitigate or reduce harm where we can and acknowledge our location, our privilege, how we're benefiting from this system as well.

Kerri: I feel like it's also about control, like I'm just, you know, I keep going back to relationship and what relationship has taught me about like we're not in control of the other person, right? Like relationships are messy, right? And there are boundaries that are crossed and are not crossed and harm that's done constantly in personal relationship and that's not the culture of organizations and institutions, right? It's about transaction and outcomes always over relationship. It's about profit always over people. You ask what is the thing you go up against all the time, it's always that.

Layla: Right.

Kerri: And so it helps I think to bring this conversation for people who are so attached to controlling the circumstances, controlling their ally-ship, controlling their learning and their comfort, to remember that engaging in this work is engaging in relationship and you're not in control and it's gonna be messy and complex and you just have to lean in and feel into it.

Layla: I feel like in organizations and companies that word "control" is even more heightened, right? Because any kind of transformation work, just as individuals, is hard. We resist. It's out of our comfort zone. It's unfamiliar. We don't know who we're gonna be on the other side. Will I survive it? Like most of us are not conditioned to run towards that, right? It's not safe, we don't know, we're really

comfortable where we are, but it's just us as an individual, right? When you're talking about a company, an organization, I get lots of inquiries from organizations, companies, non-profits, community groups who are wanting to do *Me and White Supremacy* work and circle with each other and I understand basically they've come to this point because a lot of harm has been done and they're finally ready to have the conversation and that wanting to have the conversation is like the smallest first step, right? But when you get into the work, there are so many other factors at play, just sort of controlling the company image, right? Controlling the company image. What if things are gonna have to change massively in our leadership? It means that we're gonna have to have different policies to protect the people of color in this company. There are so many things that are actually going to have to change beyond just, "Let's have a conversation of this. Yes, it's not very nice. Yes, we'll try our best to do it differently." Things have to actually change.

Kerri: Totally.

Layla: Right? And so I can imagine that level of resistance is even greater. Is that something that you have experienced?

Kerri: Yes, for sure, and I think it's tied to whiteness. I also think it's tied to the intention or motivation behind the work and so sometimes people want us to come in and it will look good for the company to do the work, or there's been a crisis and now it's time to do the work and the work means a two-day training, which is not transformation, that's raising consciousness.

Layla: Right, that's just information.

Kerri: And so people are interested, the motivation is like we will have these people come in, we can say we did this, it will look really good for human resources, it will satisfy something, some policy, and we'll check the box. Well, that's not the work that we do and that's not the work we're interested in doing at all. It is like a long-term commitment to this and there's non-closure, like this work is ongoing.

Layla: That's right.

Kerri: Even after a year-long relationship with Race and Resilience, there's still work for that organization to do. The work isn't gonna stop because whiteness is persisting and racism is still happening and it's gonna be happening in a year, right? It's gonna be happening in ten years, and so transformation is gonna take time and we're gonna make mistakes along the way and I think that's the other pattern because of the control and the perfectionism and how whiteness shows up in organizational culture, often there isn't space for people to make mistakes and to acknowledge and recover from that mistake, and so that's something else that I think will define how people engage with this work, and, again, it will shape their intentions and their motivation to doing the work.

Michelle: And I think it's possible that like if companies are only committed to the training and not creating the conditions for transformation, people are gonna get more harmed, right? Sometimes it's like opening up a Pandora's box, right? And then the conditions don't exist for there to be like real conversation and talk about structural shifts and policy change and what happens when harm is done, like how do we deal with — like when companies don't wanna go that far and they only wanna just open the consciousness around structural racism and white supremacy, then people are left hanging and it can be really harmful.

Layla: Yeah. You both talked about the difference between you've mentioned transformational versus transactional. Can you make that distinction for us? What do you mean by transactional and what do you mean by transformational?

Michelle: Transactional is how I've been conditioned in this culture, so I pay for something or give something and I get something and it's not about relationship at all. It's not about the person, it's not about the people that made the thing I'm purchasing, it's not about where the thing is from. I have money or energy, resources of some kind, I'm gonna use those resources to get something and there's no connection between the person I'm getting it from and where the thing is from, and so that's how I think capitalism conditions us. I think all systems of power condition us in that way, and transformational is what we've named about the messiness, the mistake making, the conditions in place for everyone to thrive, that this is long-term work so people need to sign up for the long haul. It is about centering relationship and prioritizing relationship, above anything else, like that's the most important thing which, you know, whiteness doesn't have time for relationship. It's not about relationship, it's not about wholeness as we named. It is about that transaction. I own something, I control something, I get something. I mean, that's what it's based in, not about how I'm actually impacting that person and what I'm taking and how I'm harming groups of people because of the transaction. So transformation, I think it's about personal growth and institutional, organizational growth and shifting cultural norms and the way we are which can't happen in a transaction. It can only happen inside a transformation.

Layla: I love that.

Kerri: You had me thinking also about attachment and how there's always attachment in transaction, like attachment to the outcome, attachment to the terms, attachment to who's in control of that interaction, whereas I think transformation demands non-attachment, right? It's like on your own terms. It's you're not in control. No strings attached to relationship and I think of ally-ship in that orientation too, like so many white folks wanna be allies with attachment of getting recognized or attachment of feeling good about themselves or attachment to seeing urgent results and I think companies sort of often stand in that place when they wanna get into this work, they're like they have an attachment to change which can actually threaten the transformation of this work, because it can get in the way of relationship. It can often advance and make things too urgent, so I just reflect on that, I reflect on that in my own relationships and in my

own work, like where am I attached to the terms, right? Where am I attached to the outcome? Where am I attached to the timing, you know, like urgency is such a weapon of white supremacy that has just wreaked havoc on our lives, and so I just think that sometimes maybe like that too is a differentiator between the two.

Layla:

I love you both. Making my brain like, you know — thank you for this conversation. From Michelle, what you just spoke about, one word that really struck me was relationship and then from Kerri was the attachment, right, which seems to be like two things that are in opposition to each other but they're actually not because what I'm hearing is there needs to be a level of relationship where, as we said earlier, you know that you can trust each other, you know that that foundational work has been done, you know that I can rely on this person to show up in this way because that's what they have shown me again and again over the course of our relationship, and, at the same time, there isn't a sense of codependency or the attachment to I need them to show up this way and if they don't show up this way, then I'm not gonna be okay. I love that that's what came out of the way that you both sort of answered that question.

Michelle:

I love that, what you said and it made me think about when I met Kerri, I was in a big transition, moving across the country, I was separated and getting divorced, I was starting a new job and I'd been freelancing and I'd been working as a therapist, I was just making all these transitions and those transitions happened over the course of a year and then I moved back across the country and I remember talking to Kerri, we were planning a Race and Resilience workshop and I don't know what I said but I was feeling like out of sorts and pretty devastated with all of the changes that were occurring and she said, "I've only known you this way," it made me think about relationship, like I've only known you really since you were in the middle of this transitions, I'm feeling like I wasn't my best self, I was just like this is how I've shown up with all these stuff and it was such a gift to hear that, like "I've only known you this way and I love you and I'm here" so there isn't the expectation in our relationship — we do show up, right? We are consistent and I think we, in our own relationship, work with the messiness that's happening our lives and how that translates to what's showing up in our relationships. We check in about that first before we dive into work and when we're creating agendas. It just reminded me of that gift, Kerri, that you offered to me of complete acceptance of like, "Yeah, this is the way you're showing up right now and I've only known you this way and I love you."

Kerri:

Well, it's so funny 'cause I'm thinking of the time, as you say that, and you're by the way blowing my mind, Layla, too 'cause I'm like I'm doing all of this twelve-step work around control, so I'm even like, oh, I didn't even put those things together, so I'm like thinking about that and how this does feel like a healthy attachment which is really radical and rare for me personally, but I'm just thinking about how relationship holds the possibility of so much more and so Michelle and I, in our partnership, often model like my job is to like rage against the machine and take an ax to the structure and fight and get arrested and blah, blah, blah, and Michelle's job is to do the healing work and self-care and tend to community and to nurture and after the Kavanaugh hearings literally a year ago this week, in fact,



I showed up at Michelle's work literally like rattled. I had been on the hard floor and doing civil disobedience for like a week straight and I was just like — I didn't even know how burned out I was and she forced me to do an entire day of self-care, and I was like, no, my job is not — I don't do self-care because that's not my job. My job is to — she was like, no, you need self-care and I'll never forget we did self-care and I took a nap that afternoon and I've never been more tired and I was like, oh, my God, like I just would never had known and I'll never forget it and so our relationship, the container of our relationship can hold so much more than our right roles even, like we actually get to be more than one thing and more than one role and more than our identity and more than our location. We get to be whole together and that's just like the greatest gift.

Layla:

That's really making me really emotional because, again, like I know from my journey, as I said, I had to really look at my relationships with people of all different races, right? And I'm really grateful that I now am in a part of my life where I have really solid relationships with a number of people. All of them are women of color, not because I won't be friends with white people, I just — it just has happened that way now, but the reason why what you're saying is really giving me chills is I often think about how we're all doing this work together, each one is doing it in their own way, in their own sphere with their talents and their own gifts and what we are trying to do is get to the new world and that there are some of us who are going to be able to model what being in that new world would look like, and what I hear you describing, Kerri, is what that new world would look like, where there is an acknowledgement and a holding of each other's complexities and identities and differences in the ways that you experience the world differently and the ways the world experiences you differently, right? And your roles as well, as you said, and at the same time, you are describing a transcendence of that simultaneously which is just like it's so beautiful to me. That is so beautiful to me because it is my belief that we all have to get to that new world together and all of us have to be whole in that new world together and that means all of us are going to have to do our work as, Michelle, as you said, there is work that we have to do as black people, people of color, indigenous people, on our internalized oppression and so when we get to that new world, I keep describing it that way because I love Octavia Butler and so I see it in sort of this sci-fi kind of way of this actual new world, but there is going to have to be a completely new way of us being in relationship with each other in a way we've not seen before and in a way where all of us are going to have to show up differently than we do now, even those of us who would be very righteous and justified in saying no, like I owe you nothing because this is what I have experienced and I would have to change myself, right?

Kerri:

Definitely.

Layla:

Which I sit with, I understand, and I think that there needs to be a modeling of what it could look like on the other side and so I really am grateful to hear the experience of what your relationship with each other is like and how you have cultivated that with each other and that hasn't come by accident, it's been really intentionally cultivated and it's not a one-and-done thing.

Kerri: Right.

Michelle: The practice.

Layla: It's the practice.

Michelle: The with a capital T in front.

Layla: Right, because Kerri has cultivated this with you, Michelle, that she now has that same relationship with all other black people. That's the relationship she has with you and that's it.

Michelle: Right. That's right.

Layla: Yeah, so thank you for sharing that because it models to me so much of what my own values are and the space in which I'm learning to move towards and wanting to move towards and it means a lot to me for you to share that with us. Thank you. Yeah. I just feel so full right now. So what I was saying was, as I said, you have that relationship with each other, not necessarily with the rest of the world, and I'm sure that there are other people who are listening, we have people [inaudible 01:01:51] who are listening to this conversation and they have all kinds of ways that they will judge or see that, what we're talking about right now, which everyone is entitled to their own experience. How have you experienced people perhaps sort of having assumptions about what your relationship is like with one another? You know, where it's like, "No, you're a black woman, you can't really be in a relationship like that with a white woman," or, as a white woman perhaps, Kerri, you may have had criticisms like, "Oh, you're just sort of trying to by association being in a friendship with a black woman, trying to gain some sort of social wokeness, prize, or something." How do you navigate that?

Michelle: Well, first of all, I think that's real, right? I think we receive feedback or know that people may have issues with our relationship and the work that we do too, right? I think if we had a relationship and we weren't doing anti-racism work which actually would be impossible because we're in a relationship [inaudible 01:02:55] then people wouldn't make noise about it, but we are in a relationship and we're working across difference trying to create a different way of being across race, lives of difference, and so I don't pay attention to a lot of that criticism or noise because I know who we are. I know who I am and I know who we are and so I just come back to that place of like I know Kerri and she knows me and this is what I know to be true about us and our relationship 'cause then in a way this is consuming and people are entitled to their opinion and often it's based on experience, I'm not trying to discount that at all —

Layla: Right, that's what I wanted to make clear as well, that it's not imaginary.

Michelle: It's not, yeah. It helps me to come back to center to remember who I am and who we are, because if I'm — well, I need to be thoughtful about the noise. If I'm consumed by it, then I'm distracted and not doing the work.

Layla: Right, right.

Michelle: And I need to do my work.

Layla: Right.

Michelle: That's how I respond to it.

Kerri: Yeah, and I understand why people would feel that way about me, in particular, for all the reasons that you named, right? Like it's precarious for white people to be in relationship with people of color and that's for good reason and so I understand that people might feel that way. I think what feels like messier for me is sometimes people assume I'm like a good white person because we're in relationship and that feels way more harmful. I'm just like another white person trying to fucking figure it out and I get to be in this amazing relationship and I'm willing to do the work and that's it.

Layla: Right.

Kerri: So I just wanted to say that feels like a more harmful characterization, I think, because it's all practice every day and it's messy for us all the time and we're constantly learning and no one relationship, no one training, no one partner, no one organization is the same as the last and so we're just trying to walk through it.

Layla: I love that you named that because I know when I had my very first guest on this podcast, she was white, we had to have a conversation about that with each other that I understand that people might see you on this podcast and assume that I'm somehow saying this is a good white who I have selected as a black woman as being the model of how a white woman should be and I wanted to make that very clear and I do with all my guests and I also try to make that clear to my listeners but without going overboard about it at the same time, like I'm asking all of these questions because of my own experiences of trying to lean into pushing my own edge, right? Pushing my own edge because I know when I have guests on here who are white and it's just me and them in the conversation, that requires a level of mindfulness and energy and paying attention in a way that I don't if it was just — for example, if it was me and you, Kerri, versus me and Michelle.

Kerri: Totally.

Layla: There's a different level of mindfulness and energy expenditure going on, but the reason why those conversations are important to me is because I'm doing this work on *Me and White Supremacy* and I'm talking to white people and people of white privilege and I want to lean into where do we go from here and how do we be with each other in these conversations, so that's why I wanted to have you on

together and why I appreciate the work that you do together and why I'm grateful that you were able not only to sort of explain the other work that you're doing but also the cultivating of your relationship with each other and the honesty around that and, Michelle, I love what you said around I understand where that's coming from because people are actually experiencing that and I'm sure you have experienced it with other white people. So you know what that is. You're not naïve to that, it's not something new to you, and at the same time, you also know who you are and you know what your boundaries are and you know that if Kerri were to violate those boundaries without any sense of remorse or anything, that that would really harm your relationship with each other and you would do what you needed to do in that regard and so each one of us is just like really trying to figure this out for ourselves, and I think that's the grace that we need to extend to ourselves. All of us, of all races, are trying to figure it out together and it's messy as hell but it's also what it means to be human, like that's what I keep coming back to, being human is being messy.

Kerri: Right.

Layla: Yeah, thank you both. So, our closing question is around good ancestor. I see you both as living ancestors, you know? I see everyone who comes on this show as living ancestors who are walking this path in your being, first and foremost, and how you're choosing to intentionally be in the world and then the work that you're doing outside in the external world. What does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Michelle: For me, it means remembering I'm doing the work and it's not my work and what I mean is that I didn't create this work, I did write a book but that doesn't mean I created the ideas in the book, right? It's through experience with other people and then I translated that into a book and what it meant to me and that then furthers my work, so I'm not doing this work on my own and it's not my work so I don't own it. It feels like my ancestors' work, so being a good ancestor is honoring where this is from, right? I am deeply connected to my ancestors and they're speaking through me in this moment, and so I need to honor that connection and remember that connection so when I say I remember who I am, I'm actually talking about I remember my ancestors and what they have done so that I could be here right now talking to you and just really deeply being devoted to them and honoring them and I also think being a good ancestor is listening, because my ancestors talk to me and spirit speaks to me and when I don't listen, things are messier than they need to be. My ancestors are wise. I wanna listen to their wisdom. I mean, I'm gonna make mistakes or do things my own way sometimes but being a good ancestor means deepening that relationship and that connection so that I can clearly hear spirit and my ancestors speaking to me and I can listen to what they are saying because they know more than me.

Layla: Yeah.

Michelle: And the last thing is doing the work and I'll come back to the Gita and Arjuna who's the warrior in the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna resisted the path and the fight, he

didn't wanna fight the war, and eventually engaged with the practice enough that his guide Krishna was teaching him to living to be a warrior and so being a good ancestor is like showing up for me, me showing up and doing the work, whatever the work is in that moment, and, yes, I need rest and self-care and maybe that's the work that day. It's staying committed to the path and my dharma and my duty in the world because I'm alive at this time and it's on purpose that I'm alive now and so I have a duty to respond to what's going on around me.

Kerri: It's funny, my first response, my impulse was I wanna believe that I'll have the courage to throw down and to do whatever is necessary. I wanna believe that about myself to dismantle white supremacy and towards liberation, but after this conversation, I feel like what feels more resonant for me is I want to have strengthened relationship. I want to have strengthened my relationship with myself, which means reclaiming the whole of who I am and where I came from and who I came from, like really correcting that line by claiming that and taking responsibility for my lineage, like I wanna be that person and then stronger relationships in my life, like the ones I get to have and like really hoping that that's my lineage. Like, that relationship is my lineage, like that's the thing I leave behind 'cause I have all sorts of attachment to hard core shit and throwing down and being fierce and getting shit done and making big change, that's easier for me, but can it be enough to just like have cultivated really deep, beautiful whole radical relationships with people? And the last thing I'll just say because this has really been up for me lately is really strengthening my relationship with the earth. I feel like I haven't done enough of that in my life and we're at a crossroads and so I'm just trying to look at that fiercely, like where have I not respected my relationship with earth and what can I do better around that with the time that we have.

Layla: Thank you so much, both of you, for just bringing so much to this conversation and enriching me, you have so enriched me with this conversation and each guest that I get to speak to is just so full of wisdom and experience. This is actually our very last episode of season 2 and so this is a beautiful conversation to end on and I just wanna honor you both for bringing your full selves to this conversation so thank you so much.

Kerri: Thank you.

Michelle: Thanks for having us. Thanks for this work of reminding us, yes, who we can be.

Layla: Thank you.

Layla: I hope that this episode has helped you gain new insights and find deeper answers to what being a good ancestor means to you. We'd love to hear what some of your a-ha moments have been from this conversation. You can follow the podcast on Instagram at @goodancestorpodcast and drop as a comment to let us know what some of your biggest takeaways have been. Thank you for listening, and thank you for being a good ancestor.