

Layla: Monique Melton is an anti-racism educator, published author, international speaker, coach and host of the Shine Brighter Together podcast. She's also the founder of Shine Brighter Together, a community dedicated to healthy relationships and diverse unity. Monique travels the world speaking at conferences and events on topics related to anti-racism, personal growth, diversity and relationships. She's been published in magazines, featured in blogs and podcast, and has touched the lives of people all over the world. Monique is a natural big ball dreamer and a deeply rooted woman of faith. She's a proud navy wife to her high school sweetheart, the loving mother to two little ones. She has a BA in Social Science with an emphasis in Sociology and Psychology and two years of graduate school education and clinical counseling from John Hopkins University. She believes it's not all about your comfort but it's about your growth.

Hello everybody and welcome back to Good Ancestor podcast. I'm your host Layla Saad and today I am here with my friend, Monique Melton. This beautiful ray of sunshine who is doing the hard work of anti-racism education. I'm so excited to have this conversation with you, Monique. Welcome to the show.

Monique: Thank you so much. I am so excited like this has been the highlight of my like day, my week, just getting here. Thank you so much for having me Layla. You know, I love you so much.

Layla: I love you too and one of the highlights of my year was getting to meet you in person. It feels like it was so long ago but it was actually just February time, right?

Monique: Yeah.

Layla: Yeah.

Monique: February, was it?

Layla: It's February and we are recording this right now in April, so it wasn't that long ago but with the global pandemic time seems to have completely changed and one of the things that you gifted me was this beautiful poster that has the words Good Ancestor written in calligraphy and it's actually here right in front of me.

Monique: Yay.

Layla: So, I'm pointing to those listening from the audio, there is a poster right in front of me that says Good Ancestor and then around it are four posters of four literary good ancestors who influenced me.

Monique: Wow.

Layla: Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde.

Monique: Of course.

Layla: Maya Angelou and of course Octavia Butler.

Monique: All of the classic.

Layla: All of here looking down on me.

Monique: Yes, yes.

Layla: So, I got to remember you every day because I come into my office and the beautiful plaque is there.

Monique: Oh, my goodness. I love that. I love that so much. And you know what, we actually met at a conference for all the black women.

Layla: Yeah. Of course that was the first time, right.

Monique: That was the first time.

Layla: Yes.

Monique: That was first time.

Layla: Yes.

Monique: I'll think about it.

Layla: Yes. Yes.

Monique: Yeah, I love that. I had that drawn for you over a year ago actually. It was like I was gonna mail it and then I forgot to bring it to the conference and then I'm like, okay, I'm bringing it to the book sign because I don't know when I'll see her again, so yeah. I was so excited to have that made.

Layla: Oh, I love this full circle moment and for us to have this conversation. Also with that being said let's start with our opening question. Who are some of the ancestors living or transitioned, familial or societal who have influenced you on your journey?

Monique: I love that question first of all. I love it so much. I love hearing what your other guest have to say and so for me there are a couple when I was thinking about this question. One very first person who I can think of is my dad. My dad is still living, thank God although I am very concerned with this Covid and he's still working. And so I'm so concerned about that, but my dad, oh my goodness, I have always been a daddy's girl. My dad every single moment that has been significant in my childhood and young adult life, my dad has been a part of it. And he taught me how to flip a pancake. He taught me how to ride a bike. He taught me how to change the oil in a car and I have always felt this unwavering, unconditional love from my dad like I know for a fact that there is absolutely nothing that I could ever do, ever say that would make my dad retract or withdraw his love for me. And I felt that even as a young girl and it's funny because when I got married, I married my high school sweetheart and one of my things my dad will say about boys coming to the house and all that was his goal was to try to get them to run away. And so if he could get them to run away they weren't any good for you.

Layla: Mm-hmm.

Monique: And my husband clearly didn't run away. He kept coming around and my dad will tease and he's like, oh he's just keep coming around. But when we got married, I was sometimes have dreams of something really scary happening, it was my dad initially who would always be the one to come and protect me. And my husband would be so frustrated like why not me? I'm supposed to be that for you. And I'm like Chris my entire life, my dad has been this for me. Yes, you're my husband. Yes, you can do that but it's so deeply ingrained in me and we have a very special bond. I can tell my dad anything. And so I just love him dearly. And I believe why he is ancestor who has really impacted who I am is that knowing that you can be who you are like I don't need to change, I don't need to edit myself, I don't need to alter who I am like knowing that you can just be authentic to who you are in a relationship with someone and to know that they will be there for you no matter what. And my dad has been there for me no matter what is a great thing to experience but it's also something that I wish to also model for my own children.

Layla: Well, I was about to say, you know, you've had that poured into you it seems only natural that it would pour out of you to your children as well.

Monique: And my kids know it. They know I have their back. They know that I will always be there for them and they know that. And I want them to know that. I want them to feel really confident in that. So my dad is one and I also love the story of Esther in the Bible.

Layla: Okay. I'm not familiar with that story so tell me.

Monique: Okay. So, Esther basically was just a regular ordinary person and she basically risk her own life to save her people and there's a particular scripture, Esther 4:14 that she's being told that she is called for such a time as this.

Layla: I know that. I know that line, yes.

Monique: Esther 4:14, yes. And that has stuck with me so much because she literally saved her people. She went into the King's court where you could, you know, if you weren't summoned you could be murdered. She went there to petition for her people and she got her sisters together to pray for her and to fast, fast and pray.

So that she could petition to save her people and she did and so I think a lot about her when I first started doing this work because almost probably 13, 14 years ago I was at church and I was prophesied over by a guest minister who didn't know me, I was at the alter and the prophecy was that I would bridge the gap between black and white.

Layla: Wow.

Monique: My husband would operate as a support role. And at that time, honestly, we didn't had branch like it wasn't something that really shook me, you know, like I didn't feel like, whoa. But as I began to really step into this work, I recalled that and then I begin to think about Esther and how she was called for such a time as this and that's really what helps ground me and my work and to stay focus. So, Esther for sure, my dad and I also think about Malcolm X. He's one of my favorites actually and you know how he is vilified and that is just violent, out for blood, radical, activist of sorts and you know, enemy of the state and he is often pitted against Martin Luther King and I think a lot about him especially how he didn't start out on his life journey. He wasn't like a little young Malcolm pro-black.

Layla: Right. Right.

Monique: Like he was very much the opposite in terms of just assimilating the white culture and you know, straightening his hair and dating white women which that was considered like, you don't do that, what are you doing? If you are pro-black, why would you do that? And I think about his transition and his awakening and then also how his own people that he had his experiences awakening with were actually some of the ones who were to his demise likened my own journey a little bit to his and he was murdered and he was taken from us far too soon. But even like in his last day, in his last you know, living it was just grief and heaviness and pain and suffering. But I think like, wow, even though the mist of that, he still continue to be unwavering and speaking his truth and standing for what he believed even in the mist of all of the lost and all of the fears being materialize in many ways and so I'm encouraged. I'm definitely encouraged and I'm saddened too because so many of our great leaders have experienced so much pain and suffering for our own benefit and for their own benefit as well. I definitely think about him and then there's another who is a part of my life now, her name is Lolita and I met her when my husband was in the military. She is a lactation consultant or former OB nurse and she came in our life because when I had my son, my husband was in military and so she was a part of like the support system that you could rely on to help you get familiar with being a new mom and all that.

And when I had my son, I called her literally an angel because when I had my son, I had a very traumatic birth experience with him. We almost lost him and the entire time while I'm in the hospital, I was trying to get him to nurse and this is my first so breastfeeding for the first time, your first time and the baby first time is hard.

Layla: It's a whole mess. It such a mess.

Monique: It's a whole thing. Your hormones are out of whack. I had emergency C-section after doing 29 hours of labor like it was a really traumatic experience but he wouldn't nurse. He just wouldn't latch on. All the specialist and one nurse told me, it was a white woman, I'll never forget, she's like "I've never seen a baby like this". And I just saw even more, I'm just like, oh, my gosh, so out of all these people who tried to help me, we could not give my baby to nurse. She came to my house, Lolita, came to my house and I'm not even kidding, the very first time, mind you, there had been at least 10 different people who tried to help me, the very first time my baby nursed. She helped me, she grabbed my boob and she put the boob in the baby's mouth and I never had a problem after that. Never, never had a problem with latching.

Layla: Wow.

Monique: And she's still part of my life like we just talked a few days ago, she has shown up for me in so many moments where I felt alone, I felt dark, I felt scared, I had really had postpartum depression and anxiety and she has always just been this warm, nurturing, sincere, loving, compassionate person and she didn't know me prior to this like this was just our interaction first time coming in and I'm so inspired by her because she was unwavering in her love and compassion. And she felt very called to the work that she was doing for me and serving women like me and she was unrelenting. You know, she would just really show up and that inspires me and it makes me almost feeling emotional like that inspires me to be the same for other people, show up for people who are hurting, who are afraid, who needs the one to just let them know that I'm here, I'm listening, I see you.

Layla: Yeah. Yeah.

Monique: And that's what she has always been for me and my family and I'm just so inspired to be that for myself, to be that for my children, to be that for people who may be I just meet or just getting to know and just really letting folks know that your

heart matters, what you're going through matters. Your hurt and your pain is real and I'm gonna sit here with you and I'm gonna be here. And that's what she's always been. She's just wonderful.

Layla: It's so beautiful. I love each of the stories that you've just shared of those really influential ancestors and especially with Esther, Malcolm X and Lolita, you know, this theme keeps coming up around calling that they've been called to do this work. This is the work that has called them. And so what I'm really curious about is what called you and where we are preface all of this conversation is is to kind of give people an understanding of how you and I know each other. You and I were introduced to each other through a mutual friend [Inaudible] [15:01] and I remember she said to me you should really meet my friend Monique. You would really like her. And I was like, oh, okay. And I fell in love with you. You are amazing. But at that time, neither of us were doing anti-racism work that I recall, right? I was a life coach. I think you were a life coach.

Monique: I was doing marketing and life coaching.

Layla: Right. Nothing at all were about race, anti-racism, the words white supremacy had never been written by me and it's really interesting because we both been on this journey of this evolution of where our work started and how it's now evolved to. So, I would love to know two things I guess. One of them is what called you into this work? For me, it was the Charlottesville rally. That was the cooking over moment for me where I was like, I have to speak. So that was the first question. And then the second one is something that I've noticed is that even though your work has massively changed in terms of what you do, who you serve and how you serve, the brand of it, how it looks, the essence or the energy of it is the same and that always fascinated me because this work is so heavy.

Monique: Yes.

Layla: Right? And so intense and you are this ray of sunshine literally that having very direct Malcolm X type conversations with people.

Monique: Wow, in sequence.

Layla: Right. What called you into this work and how have you navigated staying in that same energy throughout going from that sense of, for me it was innocence. I was really innocent before I entered this work.

Monique: Mm-hmm.

Layla: And that innocence meaning, oh, I thought we were all the same here.

Monique: Yeah.

Layla: You know what I mean? Into the grief, the sadness, the anger, the everything and then that journey through that to where I am now in it.

Monique: I love these questions. This is why I was so excited like this makes my heart race. So, prior to being a brand strategist/coach because what was happening as I was doing brand strategy is I was really getting to know people and pulling out their personal connection to their brand and then all of the layering was coming in with that, the relationships, so I started doing both. But prior to this, in college, my major in college was sociology, social science, psychology and then when I went to graduate school, I studied clinical counseling. And I remember in college I've wrote a paper on white privilege. And I wish that I could find that paper to see what I had to say, what my perspective was, I remember in college there was this campus wide forum where this white girl wanted to know why do we have historically black sororities and fraternities and how that was racist and we ended up having this camps and so conversations about race were happening for me but it was never a direct service that I offered. I would intermingle it when I was working with clients on their brand and making sure that they were being more inclusive. I would mention and say and all of that but it wasn't until and let me go back a little bit. When I was in high school and middle school, prior to those years, my surroundings were very black. My neighborhood was very black. My school was very black. My family black. Everything was black even the cat was black. We had a black cat.

Layla: Can I live here?

Monique: It was, it was black. And I remember as a kid my parents would have conversations and they would say things like, you know, you can't trust white



people, this and that. And I would always be advocating for white people. I'd be like, nuh-uh, not all of them. Not all white people are this and that and I was so naive and so it wasn't until I went to middle school and it was primarily white. For middle school on up, middle school, high school, college, post college, I went to John Hopkins like all of that stuff was very white. And it wasn't until I went to middle school where there was brutally awakening of, woah, this is what it's like to actually be aware of my blackness and that is something that makes people uncomfortable. Because I was never uncomfortable with my blackness.

Layla: No.

Monique: But I wasn't, I never knew what it felt like to be around people. I wasn't aware at least to be around people who are uncomfortable with my blackness. And so I would be teased every single day on the bus for being black and I had to experience the racism every single day on the bus. And I had several racist encounters in school, in high school I remember some of my white peers I would hang out with them sometimes and they would tell me, oh, you're not like the rest of them. And one time they told me I was their slave and I was like what the hell. This is not, no, we stopped being friends after that.

Layla: Yeah.

Monique: But believe it or not I was still very naive about whiteness and that there are some white folks out here who just are the exception. I had that belief because for the most part even though I had those painful experiences, for the most part, most of the white people in my life were nice to me. And so I equated niceness with being faith in my blackness like I could be fully who I was not realizing that I actually was showing up and I had to compartmentalize myself. People wanted to accept and see parts of me but not all of me. Certainly not the part of me that was black. And so most of my closest friends were white and I say were because I'll get to that like I lost a lot, you know.

Layla: Oh, girl.

Monique: Most of them were white, Layla. They were just, oh, white and it wasn't until I became a mom and my son was about three and so I had my daughter at this point and it was the couple years of where we were hearing back to back to back of these shootings of unarmed men and they were very publicized, shootings of

unarmed black men and women that I looked at my son and for the first time the target on his back became so undeniable. He wasn't just a cute little toddler. He was, wow, this could be my son. Now mind you, I've been black all my life. I've had black men in my life. My husband is black. My dad is black. But it was something about becoming a mother and seeing that I could carry that grief that I saw on the screen of these black women. I could carry that. And it really does comment we carry it anyway like it is a part of that generational trauma but to know it, to touch it, to feel it, to taste it like that could be me, woah, that woke me up. I remember just weeping, crying, and so then I started to look in my life like, oh wait, are these white people? Are they safe like are they gonna be advocating for my son? Would they march with me? Would they? And when I started talking about race and questioning and I became painfully aware of just how much I was not safe. And that process unfolded over a couple year timespan but it really materialized actually just in 2019 as I really decided that this was gonna be the only work that I focus on because I started doing anti-racism and still was coaching like doing it and it wasn't my focus all while still very called to it and I would argue with God like no, I'm not doing it. This is too scary. I'm gonna lose everything. I'm gonna lose my family. I'm gonna lose my friends. And also on a business side like how I'm gonna make money doing this? You know, like I was making money just fine doing coaching like I knew that white people would pay me extra amount of money to help them make their business that that for them was ROI that they are willing to make an investment in. But for white folks to invest and pay to learn about how to not be racist I was like, they're not gonna to do that. So I also was looking at it from a practical matter.

Layla: Right. Because it's not just about the kind of tag in your heart, right? It's if I commit myself to this like, you know, I posted today that anti-racism is a lifelong practice, right?

Monique: Mm-hmm.

Layla: Being in an anti-racism education work is not a thing that you just do as a thing for a while and then decide you're not going to do it anymore like it's a calling thing.

Monique: It is.

Layla: Right. And so I definitely had that experience of, oh, I don't really wanna do it or I'll try and I sort of would go and then I would come back.

Monique: Yup.

Layla: Because it's heavy and it's hard.

Monique: It is very heavy.

Layla: Yeah. There's so many considerations and the cost that is paid and how do I show up in my full humanity while doing this work.

Monique: Yes.

Layla: When I'm with my family how am I with them? So many things that you have to kinda navigate.

Monique: So many things.

Layla: Yes. So I feel you.

Monique: So many things because we carry like when I think about doing business coaching. If someone didn't want to work with me that was their loss like it was like you know what, it wasn't about me. I didn't feel a personal attack. I didn't feel it just didn't. I didn't carry it like that. But when someone says no to anti-racism, a white person, no to an imitation to read an article. I'm not even talking about no to a class where you got some money, I'm talking about you won't even read the article. You won't even listen to the podcast. You won't even talk to me. You won't even have a conversation with me.

Layla: And this is people that you know. You're not talking about strangers even.

Monique: No. I'm not even talking about the strangers out there. Like that's a whole another thing. I'm talking about people who were in my life. I'm talking about people as close to me as in the room when I gave birth to my children that wouldn't really

go deep and want me to then just kinda like go back to who I was like we didn't sign up for this. We've been friends all this time and you never really brought it up like why now? And so when it was a no to that, it felt like a no to my humanity. And I refuse to negotiate my humanity with anyone. I won't exchange or compromise that. I didn't realize I was making those compromises before. I didn't realize I was making those concessions. I didn't realize that I was just assimilating and trying to be when I think because I've reflected on this so much. I think that I was trying to somehow convince myself that I could be good enough for white folks to love and to accept. Like I could be the one that they felt comfortable with and that they could really want. And it felt almost like I had achieved something like there was this like sense of pride that I had all these white friends.

Layla: And internalized oppression is such a trip because, you know, until you had a mirror held up to you to see that you are actually a self-betraying, you are actually compromising your humanity. Last week in my mentoring session with my mentor, Dr. Frantonia, I do a lot of work on it on my internalized oppression and one of the things that I realized was I am an agent of white supremacy to myself. When I doubt myself...

Monique: Stab you in the heart.

Layla: Right? When I doubt myself, when I hold myself back, when I tell myself I can't have X, Y, Z, all of those things that's me doing the job that I'm asking white people not to do, I'm doing it to myself when nobody even noticed, it's so heartbreaking.

Monique: It is.

Layla: Having these realizations but at the same time it's so freeing.

Monique: Let me tell you, this past year has definitely been a very much, so you asked me what called me, so there was this awakening with my son but then also I got to take it back a little bit when I gave birth to my son, so I've always been a very spiritual connected to God even as a kid, as a young child, I see it in my son a lot too. But I remember very vividly when I was battling postpartum depression and God spoke to me to write about it. And I was like, no way I'm going to write about, no, no, no. And so there was this book in me, now I wrote a book, but that was a different book. But there was this book in me that for the past 10 years I was

running from writing because every time I would try to start writing that book, it would tear me to shreds. And so when I finally decided in 2018 that I would sit down and write this book and not stop because I would start and end up in therapy. Start the book, end up in therapy. Start the book, fall apart like it just did so much because in the book God gave me this very divine down low of this journey, this process of unraveling and really uncovering your true authentic self and that process is painful. It's excruciating. It's excavating. And so I wrote the book, finish the book and I said I'm not publishing this book. I'm not ready to put this book out because in the process of writing the book, I did the work that I was calling people to do in the book. I said I won't put one thing in this book that I won't be willing to do myself. And so when I did that there was an another level of awakening within me and transformation as I was unraveling these threads and unraveling this process, this bandage that I was really being held back on who I was and who I allowed myself to be, who I believe myself to be and the thoughts and all those things and so that process was really happening for me really a lot last year. And that has just fueled me even more to do the work because I feel more liberated in who I am.

Layla: Yeah.

Monique: And a lot of who I was and what I thought with things that are really important to me and how I define myself are no longer. And it's very, very disorienting. You know, friends and religion and I even started cussing. I was like, you know what, I'm gonna start cussing. I had tried it before and I didn't like it and then I came back to it and I'm almost like I like this. You know, but there was a lot of religion tied around that.

Layla: Right.

Monique: You know and patriarchy and does not a lady, you know, talk like that. No, my kids don't like it because they are not used to it. They are like, mom, you don't say adult word. So it was my son and then it was writing this book.

Layla: And is this book available? Can we get it?

Monique: It will be.

Layla: Okay.

Monique: It's a very powerful experience for sure. And it will be.

Layla: I'll be the first to share it.

Monique: I will tell you because I think for me I had to do it first. And I think that was important part of the work for God to really bring me through that.

Layla: I think this is so key as well because I feel the same way about being the author of Me and White Supremacy so I'm asking people to do very intense work.

Monique: It is.

Layla: Very important for me to be an integrity, to be having someone who hold me accountable to doing my own work. I think that's really, really important. I think that in order for me to just being an integrity with myself when I say, hey, you go out there and pull your like turn yourself inside out, unravel your entire identity and I'm just gonna sit here not do anything.

Monique: Right.

Layla: That would be completely out of integrity for me but also what I know is that well two things, I know that it gives me a greatest sense of empathy and understanding for what the possibilities actually like.

Monique: That is true.

Layla: It gives me a huge sense of empathy and understanding for what this process is like and also that the thing that I would hate to happen is I put this work into the world and help so many people who have white privilege liberate themselves from the conditioning of white supremacy and I never liberated myself from it.

Monique: It would be the biggest heartbreak.

Layla: Yes. Yeah.

Monique: That's what this work does like when you really get into this work and that's why I appreciate and admire you for so many reasons and that's one of the things because I've watched your evolution. I watched your journey. That's one of the things about doing this work is I questioned myself. I asked myself. In doing that, you uncover things that don't feel good. It's like, woah.

Layla: Yeah.

Monique: And you wanna get defensive and run and in the book I talked about like the running and how you wanna run and you dig and you run, you dig and you run but you get tired of running and you just learned to just sit. What's heartbreaking for me too and I'll get to your other question, what's heartbreaking for me too though is seeing so many other black women in particular being where I was and not being interested or willing to be curious about being in the space. I don't recall a black woman coming to me and trying to help me liberate myself. I can't really recall. There may have been instances although my parents tell me you can't trust white people. I can't recall that but when I have tried to have this conversation with people, with other black women, they are not going well.

Layla: I'm curious how you think would have been if you were in that situation, so if you were back in that space.

Monique: I will probably have the same response there.

Layla: Right. Right.

Monique: You know, you can't see what you can't see like you can't see it. You don't see it.

Layla: You can't see it until you see it and then...

Monique: Until you see it and then you like it. I heard there's no going back like woah.

Layla: It's that matrix moment, right? Of taking the red pill.

Monique: I mean you can't I sometimes wish that I could just not free this much.

Layla: I had moments of that in the beginning as well. I was like, oh, this is like it was so much easier before.

Monique: Because it's everywhere, you're like it's kinda like there's a certain time of day where my house, the sun comes in and I can see the dust that I can't normally see. And I'm like, uh-huh let's just—get dark again I'll get to that base board later. But it's still there whether I wanna see it or not, it's still there. But how did I maintain the energy and the essence of, you know, who I am...

Layla: Yeah, because it's not just I wanna be clear, it's not just about brand colors and fonts and things like that. That's not what I'm seeing. What I'm seeing is I know for myself this journey took me from somebody who is very optimistic, hopeful, very positive to having the awakening, being basically consumed by anger and grief and that was the energy that you got from me. Layla was gone like I see pictures of myself, you know, in those early months of doing this work. The Layla that I know was not there. And you know, now with the support and just the length of the journey and the learnings and the lessons, you know, I found a place back to myself not the self that I was because I don't actually wanna go back to her, I love her but I don't wanna go back to her but a place of such peace, grace, joy even within myself that I couldn't have imagined before. It's not that I haven't seen you go through that, I've just seen you navigate it differently.

Monique: Yeah. And that's exactly really what it has been honestly. There's a lot of crying behind the scenes.

Layla: Because I know we've chatted and we've had, yes.

Monique: Yes. There's a lot of despair behind the scenes. There's a lot of anguish agony especially this past year, it was a really tough, but I would say having wrote that



book and really having a framework that felt so divine to help ground me through it, the process has helped me remain centered, but I've gotten offline.

Layla: But you come back. This is what I've seen about you Monique is that when I met you at the Follow Back Women Conference for the first time, I'm like, oh, she's even more of what I thought she would be. She's just like...

Monique: I had on sequence too.

Layla: She did. She was twerking.

Monique: I forgot about the twerk. I will twerk at any moment.

Layla: And for me, it's very inspiring because I was able to see somebody who is like I said having these, doing these deep work and I wanna talk about some of the work that you do and how you do it, but one of your products is called the Shine Box like that sounds like something I wanna do. I don't even know what it is, right? I don't expect the tag lines to be anti-racism work.

Monique: This is like this is juxtaposition, right?

Layla: Yes.

Monique: And I feel like that's always who I have been. So I call myself a unicorn a lot of times because, you know, sometimes people can be either really analytical, really strategic and break things down, detail by detail and then you can have people who are very visionary, they can come up with the idea but they are not the ones to come up with how they can do it, I'm both. I can dream big, break it all down, wrap it all up, put it in a document and get it done. And it's just really how I'm wired. It is how I have been and it's not something that I always realized. It was a skill until I actually started working with clients and helping them do that process. But for me, one of the things that I really wanted to do in this work if I wanted to prove to myself that I would not allow whiteness to dictate how I live and navigate. And so if I wanna feel good, I wanna feel happy, I wanna do my thing.

Layla: I wanna wear sequence and twerk.

Monique: I wanna wear sequence, you about to get all of that and you about to get this anti-racism lessons.

Layla: Yes.

Monique: Like you are about to get both like I don't have to be one. You know, I don't have to be and if I'm angry, I'm angry, but I won't. I refused. I refused to allow my emotions to control me and to dictate my choices. And that's coming from my training and clinical counseling and how, you know, we do get to influence how we allow our emotions to navigate and to show up in our lives and materialize, yes, I'm a big person that believes in feeling what you feel without judgement and so that was also helpful in going through this process when there was deep grief and sadness. I let myself weep. I let myself grieve. I remember telling my husband, I'm like something would happen, I'm like I'm grieving and I don't want you to try to fix me, I just need to feel, I need to feel it. There are times where I would have to cancel meetings because I just needed to get myself together and I'm okay with that. One thing I refused also to do is I refused to allow this work to dehumanize me like the whole part is like I can't let this work engulf me to the point where I'm not good for me or my family. I'm doing it for me and for them too.

Layla: And when I talk about being an agent of white supremacy that's one of the ways that we can do that is, you know, in those early months of doing this work, I realized I had to really sacrifice myself so that people with white privilege could learn. I do actually dehumanize myself in the hopes that people would learn and a decision that I have to make was not to do that anymore and then a practice that I had to cultivate within myself was not to do that anymore because in reality that's what white supremacy condition is into-

Monique: Absolutely.

Layla: -self-sacrifice and self-dehumanization. We again in my mentoring had to see that I bought into the lie that I was inferior. And I may not have consciously realized that but my actions tell me that that's true.

Monique: Exactly.

Layla: Right? And so the kind of unlearning that we talk about, you know, that we offer to other people space for that unlearning, we are doing it within ourselves too.

Monique: Absolutely.

Layla: And I think, well, I know for myself being able to reclaim that joy, that peace, that centeredness came from the choice that I would do this hard work but I would do it my way. And my way of doing it would be about me honoring my full humanity.

Monique: Absolutely.

Layla: When you talked about the juxtaposition of the Shine Box that is anti-racism work like that's not something that's weird or wrong, it's actually you honoring the fullness of your humanity that you are this multilayered amazing black woman who is sparkly, fun, joyful but also dead serious about the liberation of black people.

Monique: Absolutely. Without a doubt. I will not waiver on that. And those for me shine is very much has spiritual connection because I believe we all have a light within us, we all are created in the light and image of God. And so it is the conditioning of white supremacy, it is the pain, it is the violence that dims that light within us. It is that where we can't even connect with who we are, our humanity. And so for me, Shine Brighter Together, Shine Box, there's always this references to light because this work is about reconnecting with that light and allowing that light to shine within us and then we come together just when you think about a house, if there's one light on, sure you can see a little bit but when all the lights are on, when all the lights are shining, you can see so much more and as much brighter. But it's not this fluffy process of love and light.

Layla: No, no, no.

Monique: It's not that. We are going to dig deep. We are going to go deep. And it's going to hurt. It's going to be hard. It's going to feel impossible. You're gonna feel discouraged. It's gonna feel all these things, but the alternative is that we continue to be in darkness and to suffer and to pain and I am not willing to

surrender to the alternative. I won't. My ancestors didn't. And I know I won't. I can't. That's not an option for me.

Layla: Not an option.

Monique: You know, I'll take breaks, I'll do, but like you said, I'll do it my way. And my way means also I have to be good with me. I'm with me everywhere I go. I don't leave me at the house when I go to the gym. I'm with me at the gym. I'm with me everywhere and so I need to be good with me and that's one of the things that we even my husband in our marriage, we said we ain't getting out of this alive. We are in this forever.

Layla: It's me and you until, you know, whoever pops off first.

Monique: Right. But we are not about to be miserable though. We are not about to just be just together. And so then you approach the relationship very differently. And I'm in a relationship with myself. And I need to be mindful of how I treat myself, how I prioritize myself, how I talked to myself, how I feed and nourish myself and I refused to surrender myself, put myself on the alter and I feel like a lot of Christianity and I'm speaking for all of you with experiences.

Layla: And that's what I wanted to talk about next, yes, let's go into it.

Monique: It's a big thing.

Layla: Your spiritual journey has been like this, right? Like lock and key with your journey as an anti-racism educator. We have had private conversations about you navigating some of the hypocrisy that you were seeing I believe, right? In the spaces that you are in. So, I'm gonna hand over to you and you tell us about how has your faith, your spirituality evolve over this last few years?

Monique: Oh, my goodness. I didn't realize amongst many things with white supremacy how much the westernized Christianity, Christian faith is in bed with rooted in foundation of white supremacy. I didn't realize that so much and when I read this book which is a really great book, it's written by a black Christian historian, it's

called the color of compromise and it documents like account after account at the history, historical fact after another of all the times the church has sided with white supremacy and so while that was happening while reading that book and doing my process and uncovering, most of the people I experience the most backlash from were white Christian women. The same folks who would pray and wanna fast with me. Same folks who I would do Bible studies with told me that it was wrong for me to talk about diversity. They would argue with me when I would talk about what it was like to be a black mother, being pregnant and one of the experiences that I had and they would argue and tell me horrible things, they ask me horrible things and I'm like, wow, how is it that the same people who wanna talk about love and God and all this are the same people who refused to see the injustice that is happening right here in front of their eyes, right here in front of you with your friend, your own relationships and I wasn't aware of how much and how often and this is my own experiences, Christian folks will weaponize the Bible, weaponize the faith to justify, to make black folks concede, to be quiet, to stop talking about this. And there are so many black folks, I remember I listened to Austin Jenny's book and I felt like, oh my goodness, I couldn't...

Layla: I love her book.

Monique: I mean she has taken it by heart. I'm like, girl.

Layla: Yeah.

Monique: And the process for me what the result was that I don't identify as a Christian woman anymore. And a lot of people know that.

Layla: Right.

Monique: And you getting here breaking news.

Layla: Breaking news. And can I just say this is so huge because this is not just something that, you know, you opted into and then you opted out. This was a core part of your identity.

Monique: Oh, yeah. Oh, my gosh like from a kid, I was gonna go to seminary, you know, like I was gonna be a pastor, not a pastor but may be theologian then I mean I was in college leading Bible studies and campus ministry and you know, Christianity even when I started this work I often talk about my faith in God and Christianity and all of that.

Layla: And for you, would you say that because the thing that I find really fascinating about faith and you know, I wrote that letter to spiritual white woman calling out the hypocrisy of this is what you say you believe, but this is what you actually practice and your values are actually like you said they are actually grounded in white supremacy. They are intended to uphold white supremacy. For you though and I think I mean I know for me it's the same thing and I'm guessing it's the same for you, my faith, my religion, my spirituality it actually grounds why I do what I do, right? Whereas for the kind of folks that you were in relationship with, they use that as a reason why you shouldn't do that. You are using it as a reason why you should do that, right?

Monique: Right. It's interesting because I haven't had this conversations with people to say, you know, I really don't identify as a Christian. But I still very much am the same at the core like I still very much I'm connected to God. I believe in God.

Layla: What has replaced that or what has it transformed into? What is your relationship with God now?

Monique: It feels so free, with any religion. This is not just Christianity. It's all still man-made rules. People will get upset and say what they wanna say, but it is still man trying to reckon with life, death, pain, sorrow, try and figure it out. If you go back to any of it, we are all human trying to come up with some type of connection to a bigger thing. You think about, you know, really look a different religions and for me it was like I don't wanna go by anybody's rules. I wanna really have an unfiltered relationship with God. I want one that is not based on what someone or something says that I'm supposed to do in order to feel a connection with God. And so for me like we stop going to church. And I stopped going to church because I feel like I'm suffocating in church. It wasn't just because of Christianity, it was because my white pastor would never call out white supremacy. And when you did have conversations a little bit about it, it turned it to white exceptionalism. And it just felt so gross being there. And then when I tried to have a conversation with my pastor, I was silenced and tone policed. So I remember one time I wrote a post on Facebook and my pastor messaged me and was like is this the right tone basically? There are people in my church who look me right in

the face and say, oh, I'm here for you, I hear you but I'm probably not doing it the way you think I should. And it's like who are these people? So, it felt like I was suffocating. Mind you, the church that we were going to we've always been willing to tithe our money and to somehow get involved in leadership. That's been the place. But when we left, no one, not a one person reached out even just to say are you alive? I'll take that back, there was one person who asked me if I wanted to have a meeting with the pastor, I take that back, correction. But that was it. And so what's replaced that for me is just this real sense of freedom of if I want to pray, I pray. If I wanna sing a song, I sing a song. If I want and I can imagine Christians listening to this who are devout Christians because I can imagine myself back being like, woah, religion isn't about rules and that's not what it is about. It is about faith and it's about this and that. But when you begin to practice religion within a community, organize church, there are rules, there are standards, there are expectations. That's how you govern a space, a community. You have boundaries, you have rules, you have customs. Whether you want to acknowledge that they exist or not, they do.

Layla: And they are also not free. It's not going to be free from the influence, the impact of white supremacy.

Monique: Absolutely not or capitalism. Let's talk about capitalism.

Layla: Right. Right. Patriarchy. Right.

Monique: Homophobia. All of that, all of that, ableism is all there and there's no perfect place obviously but for us our family personally what we decided is that we don't want to be a part of it. I can't be a part of a place where I can't be fully black and I have to make a compromise just so that I can participate and then I can be accepted. There are true consequences by not following the rules within the church. Other people want to acknowledge it or not and I also refused to be in a place where my friends who are LGBTQ can't freely show up as who they are. And so some folks would say what about the black church being you go to the black church. I'm like okay that's fine but that doesn't mean that the black church hasn't been touched by capitalism, hasn't been touched by white supremacy or homophobia and all those other things.

Layla: And really what I'm hearing as well and what I'm resonating with is the bigger invitation and opportunity which is for us to define ourselves for ourselves, for us to choose as individuals and as families what works for us.

Monique: Exactly.

Layla: What feels right and best for us and that, you know, when I asked you what's replaced that, first that came out of your mouth was freedom.

Monique: Yup.

Layla: Freedom and that's what we all want, right? So however that shows up for you and for us as individuals I think it's we all have that right and that permission to seek it out.

Monique: Absolutely.

Layla: By whatever means necessary.

Monique: I think that's the thing about this process it's like I get to choose. I get to decide. For some people going to church feels good. It feels I mean we cannot extract the Christian church from the civil rights movements.

Layla: Right.

Monique: We can't extract like there's no...

Layla: Or erase the origins of Christianity.

Monique: You can't.

Layla: Right?



Monique: So it's not like I'm throwing it all out, I just want to filter out the things that are oppressive for me and that they don't feel free and liberating for me but for folks who still identify with, want to be able, I respect that. I am not trying to convince or persuade otherwise. Religion and faith is such a sacred part of who we see ourselves. And it's not to be trampled on. It's not to be pushed into and all of that. A lot of folks don't know this is where we are in our journey.

Layla: Folks that are listening, they know now.

Monique: They about to know now. And I am not ashamed of it. Part of the reason why I haven't because I don't want to feel like I need to explain myself.

Layla: Or defend.

Monique: Or defend like this is when our processes and our journey and I'm still, this is what's also interesting. If anything I'm doing more called and divine work than I was when I was a part of organized religion. I give more money than when I was a part of organized religion. I served on a bigger level. I surrender and I examined myself even more than I did because I don't feel bound by these rules or expectations and it's different. It's very different. But it feels very free and liberating.

Layla: Well, I honor you on your journey and I'm so happy for you because like I said, you know, you and I did have conversations when you were in the thick of the grief of the understanding that these spaces that I have belonged in all my life I've never been safe and the heartbreak that I'm bringing this conversations to the front end it's like they don't hear me, they don't see me, so who am I and how do I define myself.

Monique: Yes.

Layla: And that journey from being defined by other people to then losing that identity to then rising from the ashes and creating a new identity that you defined for yourself is such a powerful, powerful journey and any time that I see any person doing it especially a black woman, I'm just there like yes because I know how hard it is but also how freeing it is and when we are talking about this idea of being a good ancestor, the ripple effect of that that you are now setting in motion for

your children and the way that they get to define themselves as black people, right? Outside of the confines of well, I didn't say we have to do it like that you know, I get to choose my relationship with God. If I choose to be in the church or not in the church or how that is, right? Like your dad she would love me no matter what and she has fully empowered me to make my own choice because that's what I saw in her growing up and that's how she raised me.

Monique: Exactly.

Layla: Yeah.

Monique: And I won't ever make them feel like they have to follow my path, what I've done, you know, my kids now especially like my daughter was asking me about like what it is to have babies and I was telling her and how it's painful and all that and she's just like if I decided to be a mom...

Layla: It hurts.

Monique: Yeah. She's like if I decided to be the mom, I'm only having one but that's it. I'm like it's your choice. You can do, if you don't have to, you don't have to. And I just want my children to have a choice and I think about my time as a Christian, I wouldn't change that foundation because my faith brought me through some very dark spaces. My faith connected me to some wonderful people. In the church there have been numerous times where there are folks who showed up for my family and times where I was able to serve and to show up for people and so it's just like it feels heartbreaking because there's so much there and that is good and that is wonderful and that is right. But it's so distorted and manipulated and just stripped away of a lot of that because of white supremacy, because of capital, because of patriarchy and all of that. And it just feels like, wow, what a loss. Because at the root when you really study Jesus this is not what Jesus want. Jesus would be overhearing the march with the black lives matter sign.

Layla: Right.

Monique: He wouldn't be telling people that social justice is an issue in the church.

Layla: It's divisive, you know, just focus on being united. So, okay, so this is where I wanna go to next, united, in unity. Your signature program for anti-racism where you are leading people through this cohort's life. It's not a distance learning thing where they are just going through a program, although, you do have those and I know you have e-books and you have the Shine Box and other things but your signature program is called Unity Over Comfort. I wanna know why Unity Over Comfort? Where that name come from for you? What your aims are with the program and what is some of the things that you've been seeing because I've just saw today on your Instagram stories, you were talking about having led, you know, you just finished another cohort and some of the things that you are seeing, the work that was being done, it seems like, yeah, some good work is happening on those spaces.

Monique: Yeah. Thank you. So Unity Over Comfort, it's funny I was actually being interviewed in a podcast when I was—and I just said it, the phrase. I was talking about something. Then I was like, mmm, I like that name.

Layla: The brand strategies popped out. Let's get the URL.

Monique: We don't have to name this something else because I originally I had named the very first one with Bridge The Gap, but it felt too similar to Be The Bridge which is another anti-racism movement by Latasha Morrison. She's very much in the church. She's wonderful. She's on a lot of great things. So, I was like, mmm that sounds too similar and I don't want to do that. That's not fair to her. That's not fair to other people. So I was like let's change it. So Unity Over Comfort for me it felt like the perfect explanation of really what this ultimately is about because for me the end goal, overall end goal that I wanna see in my lifetime, I'm okay with that. I've already come to terms with that.

Layla: We've made peace with it.

Monique: We made peace with it. But the big, big picture is we can come together as human beings despite what our race is and not even despite but because, you know, we can come together and really embrace our humanity without all these structures that tear us down and tear us a part. But the process to that is not comfortable. The process to that is painful. The process to that is full of a lot of excavating, digging, challenging, and we have to pursue the unity over what feels comfortable. Because we ultimately need to be working towards coming together now. I know some people thought that's fluffy but really though because people

would ask me, this one white girl asked me, "Do you want more white people to be killed by cops but then black?" I'm like, are you serious? Like why do you all think that alternative.

Layla: Why does it have to be, right. I was like black people and people of color being fully in their humanity have to equal the dehumanization of white people.

Monique: I don't understand that. Because that's all I've been ever able to see for themselves that the only way to maintain a position on society is at the expense of another and so you can't imagine otherwise. But for me I can. And for many of us who do this work, we can and that's what we are working towards where...

Layla: And we must. Right.

Monique: We have to. I don't want, I'm not looking for black people to be on top and white people on the bottom. I'm looking for us to have equity. I'm looking for equality. I'm looking for us to be on level playing fields for people to truly be treated with love, respect and dignity that we can come together in unity. It doesn't mean we are gonna agree on everything. It's quite the opposite. Like our differences don't diminish when we come together. In fact, they are more recognized, they are respected, they are acknowledged. So is this world, I know I won't see in my lifetime. But it is one that I believe is possible. Have we seen it? No. We've not seen it. We might see a little glimmers here and there of these moments but for the most part, there's a lot of work to do. You know, there's a lot of work to do and that's what the program is about where I'm taking I think this is just for my own years in academia, I really positioned this similar to a college experience. So when you go to college like a 4-year college, you have your prerequisites that you take. So, let's say you study to be a chef or not a chef, let's say you study to be a doctor and your very basic class is that you need to give you that foundation that you build upon. And that's what the Shine Box is. The Shine Box is these stools that you are introduced to of what they are, what is anti-racism, what it is, what it looks like, the history, the frameworks and all that and then the unity of our comfort is where we take that and we built on that. We began to go into more specific examples. So, for example in the Shine Box, I have an educator who is in LA who teaches a historical framework of how to look at history, present and so then the unity of our comfort, we actually talk about the history and we go over the history of racism within America using that framework. So, it was like all the tool but now we are applying the tool. We talked about what the healing process looks like for this work because white people needs to heal from the dehumanization of white supremacy too.

Layla: I love that you said that because for me, it's not that they need, that I want them to heal for themselves, right? It's that they cannot dismantle white supremacy without their healing.

Monique: Where's the tambourine? Give me a tambourine.

Layla: You can't because right we talked about that seeing that world, right? That world that we know will not happen in our lifetimes but we hold the vision of it and the more that we come back to our humanity so the journeys we have been talking about of coming back to our own humanity learning to honor ourselves, you know, I wrote down today I have been writing about my purpose, my vision, I'm really digging into it and my purpose is to be a self-loving black woman lives in the fullness of her humanity and is a role model and an example to other black women and black girls how they can love themselves and live in the fullness of their humanity. That's my purpose.

Monique: Another tambourine moment.

Layla: That is everything, right? That is pulling me that I'm here to be and in that healing that's how I can hold the vision of the world where there is equity where everyone, people of all races live in the fullness of their humanity. You cannot as someone who has that privilege work to creating that world without you getting your healing.

Monique: Not a way. And that's why I will always say, you don't use privilege for good because that means that there is still a system that gives you that privilege. There means that there is still a structure in place that you benefit from at the expense of another and so people are like, woah, but people can use their money. I'm like well, no, we wanna re-frame that. We can say you can use your resources. You can use your opportunities but realize that when you say you use your privilege there's a threshold that you're going to reach that you won't go any further if you are still trying to uphold the very system that gave you that privilege. And so we got to break it down. And we do, we break it down Layla in the classes, so I've done this four rounds, every round is different. The same curriculum but it's different people, so obviously it's going to be different.

Layla: Different energy, right. And you are different each time.

Monique: I'm like, woah, I want the first round to come back. I've got more to say and another thing I'd said this last round I started it with I am not here to be your friend. This is not about being friend. This is not building a friendship. And it's interesting because two of the people who are in that round were actually friends of mine before this process. And so there was this fierce boundary in place of when I'm in educator role, I'm in educator role. You are not the exception. You're never the exception but certainly not now in this place because we are friends.

Layla: And if anything I expect more from you because you are my friend.

Monique: Exactly. And after when I'm not an educator role, which they were very good in maintaining a boundary of, not thinking that we can slide in extra session or that never happened, but I know it was because of a fierce boundary that I set in the beginning. I set very clear ground rules in the beginning. But I have to uphold them and one of the ground rules that I said is that I will call you out at any time. And when we are talking, one of the common things that comes up multiple times is white exceptionalism. So when we are talking about white supremacy and I'm asking them to explain to me, you know, why because there's a lot of interaction why is this is and they will go into saying well because white people this and that like oh, no, no, no. You mean we. You mean we, you mean I.

Layla: What do you mean we? You mean me, you mean I.

Monique: And we had a moment where the girl in the class, one of the girls in class was very visibly upset, crying and I refused to acknowledge it because I said in the beginning, this is not a place to process your feelings about this work. You can feel your feelings and I actually gave them a framework for how to process their feelings but I said this is not, you don't do it in the class. That's not where we do that. And so we end up talking, I said, and another girl started trying to like explain, I said, no, we don't do that either. You're not getting ready to cuddle her, so I have to like I'm teaching the things but I'm also in life correcting the things that I'm teaching them how to not do like I'm pulling it out. And that part feels heavy. It does.

Layla: And can I ask and I know I think I could literally talk to you forever. But I wanna know as somebody who has yet but, you know, this is something that I'm

definitely looking into entering is doing that live teaching for reasons of my own self-care and setting my boundaries and learning how to navigate this work, you know, there are certain that writing a book is a boundary.

Monique: It is.

Layla: It's a boundary. Doing the classes and selling them is a boundary, right?

Monique: Yeah.

Layla: What you are doing is a lot of heavy lifting.

Monique: It is.

Layla: And I do feel that as I am continuing on this journey because I've learned so many of these practices and they are coming more naturally to me now, this is something that I will be looking to doing as we move forward but what are your self-care practices. How do you make sure because in the process, yes, like you have the boundaries, you are very, very clear, but it is a lot of energy needed.

Monique: It is.

Layla: Yeah. How did you take care of yourself, pre, during and post?

Monique: Yeah. I'm so glad you said that and acknowledge that because it is. It is a lot. And writing the book is no easy feed. You are amazing. You are amazing.

Layla: I always say thank you. I always say I did my emotional labor upfront. I didn't do it in the room. I do it upfront and then afterwards when I'm talking about it, it's done. That sounds so joyful as I'm talking about my book.

Monique: Yes. Seeing you in person at the book signing was like, wow, she's so silly like I love it. Like it's just the always thing.

Layla: I wasn't like that in the library when I'm sitting at my laptop writing my book.

Monique: I know you was like in another thing. You good. You're about to get this lesson today. And just so many people asking me because people ask me of things. They'll tell me they are reading a book. I'm like, good, read it. Yes, I highly recommend it. I can't tell how many times I've told people that but my self-care practices going into one of the things which is why with COVID-19 is so tough is I love physical exercise like I love lifting weights and just feeling strong and not strong in the sense of like dehumanizing strong black women because I don't, not that. But just physically doing something that's hard, that's tough but I did it. And each time like, oh, this is tough, this is heavy, so like in a very physical sense I love doing that type of work. And so it leads to the spiritual aspect of doing heavy lifting hardwork, it's like you breathe in between. You take breaks. You listen to your body when it's feeling it and it's aching. So the spiritual sense for me a lot of it is being really in tune with my feelings and what's happening. There's been times I think in the past two sessions where I've actually cried while teaching. One was when there was the shooting of the young lady, her name is skipping me right now. She was playing with her nephew a videogame and the cop came in and shot her. It ain't just happened and then we have class.

Layla: Wow.

Monique: And I had let it go. I had to cry. I had to feel that. And then another time I was talking about experience with my grandmother and it just came out. So, what I have done for myself is I have allowed myself to feel, you know, I don't become something different when I'm teaching. I'm still a human. This is still real things. These are still painful things and I don't feel like I need to "get myself together". I don't feel like I need to be professional. All those types of things like I'm myself.

Layla: It's just so coded in coded language.

Monique: You know it.

Layla: For a white standard way of being, right.



Monique: Oh my gosh, my classes like I don't wear makeup. I cuss if I feel like cussing. I crack joke which is another part of the juxtaposition because like we are talking about this heavy thing, but then I'll bring in a joke somehow. Not about the thing itself but just how maybe I'm explaining it. So self-care for me going into it like I said like the physical part and then relating that to the spiritual but then really just like a practical part of it is I talk to my husband, you know, we talk, we talk, we talk. We go over things. I share things with him. And I also really, really, really believe in prayer. I'm not that good at meditating. I wanna get good at meditating.

Layla: Meditating has been saving my life during this pandemic.

Monique: Can you teach me?

Layla: I wanna say shoutout to Justin Michael Williams, the author of the book Stay Woke and love the tag line. This is the book, just shoutout to Justin Michael Williams because the tag line is A Meditation Guide for the Rest of Us.

Monique: Good.

Layla: Yes. And one of the things, the reason I'm shouting out this book and I talk to him I've interviewed him for the podcast, one of the things that he gave me permission to do was to keep my meditation super, super short.

Monique: Mmm, okay.

Layla: So, yeah.

Monique: Yeah, okay. I will do that.

Layla: Just a few minutes every day just sitting with myself, it has been revolutionary.

Monique: Okay, so maybe I don't understand meditation because I will sit, since the girl will sit with self, I will talk to self, I will reflect with self, I'm extremely introspective. I guess I think of meditation like, you know, close my eyes and just like clear my mind.

Layla: No, you know. I can't wait to share this conversation he guided me through a process that it's in the book. I've coming up with my mantra word and that I just repeat that word for like 15 minutes.

Monique: I need the book.

Layla: And even that it's a lot, 15 minutes, you good do 5 minutes, 10 minutes like, yeah.

Monique: Okay. Well, now that's clear. Now we solved that issue. You know, another thing I do self-care for me is I really enjoy dancing and singing.

Layla: I know you do. Yes.

Monique: I sing. I will belt out like in my body I can somethings just feel the goosebumps, you know, coming out. So, singing, dancing, exercise, reading, prayer, and enjoy my family. Also enjoying my husband in multiple ways. So, that is a form of self-care.

Layla: I love you so much. And I'm so happy I got to meet your husband and I met him and I went to shake hands. He's like, no, we're not doing that. We are doing hugs. It's what we are doing.

Monique: And I told him I said, Chris, you should have asked for consent.

Layla: No, no, I'm so happy because my husband would have done me exact same thing.

Monique: Okay, good.

Layla: And when I met him I was like, oh, he just remind me of me and Sam, my husband.

Monique: I love it. I love it.

Layla: You know, we are this very public black women doing this big work in a very confrontational way and they are our behind the scenes support and without him I mean there's...

Monique: No. My husband is so like he's not like a, oh, I wanna be a spotlight, like he's...

Layla: No, my husband doesn't like being in the spotlight.

Monique: Back in the day when I was a makeup artist, my husband will go with me and clean my brushes and he would carry my makeup and will get me extra tips because the brides' moms thought it was the cutest thing. My navy guy was here cleaning brushes. He's always been a support role. He's always been just really comfortable with who he is and just really wanting to see me shine. And that's such a beautiful thing to find.

Layla: It is so beautiful. I'm so glad I met him. Yeah, I just love you all. Monique this has been such a wonderful conversation. I mean literally there's like five more questions I wanna ask you but we have to wrap it up because...

Monique: What? Are we at the time?

Layla: We are like so past the time.

Monique: Okay. Ask me one more. I think I need one more. I think I feel a half a one.

Layla: Okay, okay. So, we have a lot in common even though we actually have very different personalities, I think you are very extroverted, right?

Monique: Extremely extroverted.

Layla: Very, very extroverted. I'm very, very introverted. But we have a lot in common, our spirituality, our calling to this work, our relationships with our husbands. The other thing that we have in common is that we are both mothers. We both have a girl and a boy.

Monique: I know. We are the same person basically.

Layla: But for the ages, mine are 10 and 5, yours are a little bit older. How old are they?

Monique: Yeah, 6 and 9.

Layla: 6 and 9, so not too far actually.

Monique: I told you we are the same.

Layla: Yeah, we are the same. I got to meet them too. They are adorable. But I know that a huge driver for me in how I show up in the world anyway but also especially how I show up in this work, you know, they are in Me and White Supremacy and the dedication in the front, you know, I dedicate this work to my children and my husband like I do this work for them. I want them to have a better world. I never want you talked about being bullied, right? On the school bus every day, you never want your daughters to ever experience that. You wanted to have the tools and the language and the self-permission to be able to say, hey, you don't get to dehumanize me, right? So, as you have been navigating this journey in becoming an anti-racism educator, becoming one who is very, very good at it and giving yourself and your children permission to show up in your full humanity, what changes have you seen in your children throughout this process? I just watched in IG stories where you are showing that you ask your daughter what to say if somebody calls you ugly and she said, "You don't get to call me that, I'm black girl with magic." And I was like, yes.

Monique: Because two years prior she had a little white girl called her ugly and we did the same thing like I told her we have a little video over doing it like but you know,

what I'm beautiful, black are magic. And I want my kids to be confident in who they are. I think a lot of parents want that for their children. But the change that I have seen more so in my son, I really feel like he's going to be a black panther of some sort may be. I might really get the movement, I don't know like he, woah, he's very, very much like aware of racism.

Layla: And he's the elder one, right?

Monique: He's the eldest.

Layla: Yeah.

Monique: I was nervous that it will somehow rub their joy because, you know, racism tries to rub us of our joy, our humanity.

Layla: Right.

Monique: And there's still a very much happy go lucky kid, very wonderful but they are deep thinkers. My daughter will be like mommy I got a deep question, you know, they are deep thinkers and they are deep feelers and we facilitate especially now in COVID but any other time like how did it end your day? What was the low point, high point? So, we really encouraged that and I see the difference is that my son feels more comfortable whereas talking about race where a lot of times black folks talk like trying to be powerful for white folks, you know, don't make up too much noise and all that. It felt taboo to even just acknowledge race or white or whatever like even that felt taboo. And so my son, he's...

Layla: Especially coming from the environment that you are in, right? The context of being in this white spaces.

Monique: Exactly.

Layla: Exactly. Yeah.

Monique: You don't say that like behind the scene you can say that but not to them. So now he's just more comfortable talking about race and every now and then just last night I asked my kids I said what is racism? And my daughter she kinda fumbled around in my stomach like can I tell her? He's just like it's attitudes and beliefs against black people, brown people that reinforce by systems of power. I'm like what are systems of power? And he's like education system, police system, you know, and so he said it in his words and I'm like okay now break it down even more so your sister can understand. And so I want them to feel empowered with education and knowledge but I also want them to feel good in just who they are and their blackness but we will talk about you know, black history and not just the horrible things that were done to us, but just us being us without the white gaze and you know, I've just seen them being more comfortable. My daughter is very confident.

Layla: She is. I met her and I was like wow she's a little Monique.

Monique: She's so much like me. She's like the me now. As a young child, I wasn't that confident. She's like me as who I am now. And at first they were confused when I will talk about white supremacy and white people and they were confused that I still have white friends. They were like but what about so and so are they racist too? And I'm like yeah. How are you friends like they were really confused. And I let them know they have to be committed to anti-racism for us to be in friendship. There's no way around it like there's no way. So the kids have changed in that way. And when I think about the work that I do and the changes that I see because I forgot to answer that part of the question. The changes are seen for white folks is they show up and learn how to cause less harm and it directly impacts the relationships that they have in their life with black folks and people of color. But it also affects their interactions with people on the environment, on their communities, on the systems that they engage in like a teach a framework called Inside Out where we talk about the different ways to do the work and what that work looks like. And I get to see in real time this awareness of wow there's work for me to do but I actually know how to do it versus oh my gosh, things are so hard, this is impossible, I don't know what to do. I do nothing.

Layla: Right.

Monique: You know, like systems of empowerment as well. I have a voice and I also have an opportunity to do something different than my ancestors and to disrupt this legacy of whiteness. And so I think about my children growing up in a world where you have white folks who are coming into this work and teaching their children

hopefully, it feels like there's a rope perhaps possible that could be a little less violent to us as black folks, people of color.

Layla: Right. And this is the last thing I would say before my final question but one of the questions that I do get ask a lot by white parents is what do you think Layla is the age that I should start talking to my children about racism? You just talked about your son who is 9 years old, right? And has the ability to explain exactly what racism is, how it shows up and you've empowered him to be able to explain to his 6-year-old sister in a way that she would be able to understand it. There is no age too young to begin having these conversations. That's what I say that there's no age too young and that it's not just one off big talk like the sex talk. It is a constant conversation where you are teaching them critical thinking skills, you are teaching them to be able to really notice what's going on in the world not what's being presented to them but what's being said that's not being said directly, right? And empowering them to understand who they are, how people may be perceiving them and what the truth is about who they are.

Monique: Absolutely. And start as young I mean children as young as 3 months begin to recognize differences in and racial differences. And I talk about that, I have a course for kids or parents to teach their kids how to talk about race and you know, a lot of times I was just like this idea of wanting to preserve white innocence and like they are young, they are innocent but there's no innocence in being a white person in the white supremacy society and my child as young as 3 we are talking about how to interact with police and how to be safe with people around.

Layla: Right. So, Audre Lorde is someone, you know, I talk about a lot and her book, she calls it a biomythography. It's like her biography but she called it a biomythography and it's called *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* and she talks about being on the bus with her mom and she's wearing this beautiful kind of winter coat and the white woman sitting next to her is kind of like flicking herself off of as if something dirty is there or she sort of moving to the side as if there is something dirty there and Audre doesn't understand what's going on so she also thinks there is something dirty. So she starts shuffling as well and not understanding it's you she is moving away from. That does happen to very, very small black children.

Monique: Absolutely.

Layla: So when we talk about preserving innocence what about black children's innocence? What about people of color's innocence? What about indigenous children's innocence? And if we are talking about innocence, let's talk about everyone's innocence.

Monique: Exactly and how stripped from even infancy like inside the womb. And my children have experienced racism at school. We've had to go to the school and address it. My children when they are watching TV, they are able to see like why are all the white people in the good roles here. Why are the black people the bad people? They are able to see and pick up all those types of things. And my daughter was like, oh, mommy there's a Dr. Seuss book here, I don't want that book. You know, she's talking about how Dr. Seuss is racist. They are also they are learning and they are applying it in their way of processing at their young age. I'm grateful for that which is really inspiring for me to keep doing my work because I equipped my children.

Layla: Yeah, beautiful. Thank you Monique. This blends so beautifully to our final question that I ask every guest. But before I ask you that question, where can people find you and follow you and what work do you have available especially for people with white privilege where they can engage and learn from you.

Monique: Yes. So I'm on the gram.

Layla: As we are.

Monique: The gram. It's @moemotivate. My family teases me, they're like moe motivate, moe motivate. But yeah, motivate you to get your life. It's M-O-E motivate and not motivates, just motivate. And that's where I'm at and then my website moniquemelton.com. The Unity of a Comfort Program goes in rounds, so depending on when this comes out the next round may be open for enrollment, I'm not sure. But the other things like my shop, I have called Shine Classes, everything somehow shine and they are like one off classes where you can learn about different topics and those are in my shop. You can buy those anytime. The Shine Box, you can enroll in that anytime as a self-pace course. You can enroll in that anytime. And the kids' course, that's also in rounds, that's done in rounds. So it depend on where you are at and the time there's something you can begin and involve in right now.



Layla: And people can come hire you to come talk?

Monique: Yes. Oh, what am I thinking? Yes, I do. I've worked with organizations. I love speaking. I do love speaking. I think my favorite though is teaching, you know, there's definitely a difference.

Layla: Yeah. Well, thank you. I mean this conversation has filled me up so much. I've learned a lot about you, your journey, what motivates you and also I feel even more committed to my own self-healing and showing up in my full humanity just from hearing about how you have navigated that and the way that you are committed, so thank you for that gift from me. I know that there are many black women who listen to this podcast and who have been screaming, yes.

Monique: Yay, I love your podcast. I say though when I'm listening to it, I'm like I love, it's so good. This is like an apple pie.

Layla: My guest are amazing that's why.

Monique: They are. Oh, I love your podcast.

Layla: So, thank you very much and thank you also for the important work that you do in helping to create a better world. I honor you and I acknowledge you and I'm so grateful for you.

Monique: Ah, don't make me cry. I wore mascara for the first time in six weeks. Goodness. Uh, Layla.

Layla: You're amazing.

Monique: I love you.

Layla: Monique, you are a living ancestor to me, what does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Monique: I love that question. To me to be a good ancestor is to acknowledge that my life does not exist in a vacuum that there have been decisions made before I was even here that impact the way that I am able to live and move in this world and this space and that there are decisions that I will make and there will be actions that I will take that will affect the people who come before me. And so to be a good ancestor is acknowledge that I am not just for myself but how I live my life affects other people and that there is an intentionality that needs to exist within how I move and operate in this world to be mindful of how my decisions will impact future generations and how my sacrifices, how my compromise can materialize into the future realities that people are gonna be navigating. So to be a good ancestor is to really be committed to the longevity of this, the longevity of that humanity and that unity that we seek to see which means that I will make decisions in the moment that don't always feel good and they don't make me wanna just jump off for joy because this is just so warm and fussy but that they are for my good and they are for the good of future generations and I feel like I wanna be able to look back on my life and say that I did everything that I could with everything that I had and that's what so important to me.

Layla: I think that's one of my favorite answers to this question so far. Thank you so much. I will always remember my life does not exist in a vacuum. Yes, yes, yes. Thank you so much, Monique.

Monique: Tambourine, tambourine.

Layla: Yes.

Monique: Where are the tambourines, uh, this is stressful.

Layla: Thank you so much, Monique.

Monique: Thank you for having me. This was amazing. Thank you Layla.

Layla: Thank you. Take care.