

(Intro)

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: Welcome, good ancestors. Today I'm speaking with advocate, storyteller, minimalist, and modern-day Renaissance woman Christine Platt. Christine is the author of more than two dozen children's books, including the brilliant Anna and Andrew series and stories of trailblazers like Martin Luther King Jr. and Harriet Tubman. Christine's literature is centered around teaching race, equity, diversity, and inclusion to people of all ages. She's a strong believer in the power of storytelling as a tool for social change. Christine is also passionate about intentional living. She's known as the Afrominimalist on social media and her first adult title, due out in 2021, is titled *The Afrominimalist Guide to Living with Less*. I recently purchased Christine's first book, *The Truth About Awiti*, which I cannot wait to dive into and I'm really looking forward to the release of her *Afrominimalist Guide*. Christine and I talk about how this first book came to be as we explore the journey of her career into writing, advocacy, and minimalism. Christine holds a BA in Africana Studies, MA in African-American Studies, and a JD in general law. She's currently the managing director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University.

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to another episode of Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm here with my dear friend and big sister, I really think of you as a big sister, Christine Platt. Welcome, Christine.

Christine: Thank you, thank you. So happy to be here. And so good to see you.

Layla: I know.

Christine: So good to see your face.

Layla: So, it's really strange because we've — we only met this year. We met as part of my book tour. We got the chance to be in conversation with one another and I didn't know anything about you up until that point and meeting you for the first time, I was like I feel like I've known this person my whole life. Felt instantly comfortable with you and you just glow with this energy. Yeah, you absolutely —

Christine: Thank you. Thank you.

Layla: — glow with this energy. So, I was super looking forward to this conversation. And it's been a long time since we've touched base, you know.

Christine: It has.

Layla: The last time, the world was a different place.

Christine: It was a different place and we could hug and have all of these wonderful conversations in person and, you know, I thank you for your kind words. I felt the same way meeting you. I was like clearly I've known her all my life. We're just finally meeting in person. But, yeah, I love those divine connections like that and just so proud of you and your work and the change that you're bringing to this world. So, happy to be here.

Layla: Thank you. I'm happy you're here and I'm happy that I get to interview you this time. So let's start with our first question.

Christine: Sure.

Layla: Who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?

Christine: Yes, yes. You know, lately, I found myself sort of tapping into those ancestors, the few ancestors actually that I can call by name, women who I've never met Earth-side but just feel such a connection to them. I feel that I know them and I think, more importantly, I can feel their presence in my life. And so one of those women is Doris Daily and she is my maternal grandmother and she died when my mother was a

young woman but, you know, I have a few stories about her and I just — there are moments in my life when I always feel that she is there. And then also Mary Fenton and Josephine Fenton who were matriarchs in our family who helped guide and protect my mother during that transitional moment in her life and I feel them and have experienced them many times. And so, yeah, Doris, Mary, and Josephine are the good ancestors I would like to name.

Layla: And how do you experience them? How do you feel their presence?

Christine: You know, I don't want to get all woo-woo on here.

Layla: No, we need to get woo-woo. I'm happy to get woo-woo.

Christine: I have this whole feeling of sounding woo-woo but, you know, I think there are moments in your life where you experience certain things, even when you don't have a name for it, even when it's outside of the realm of everything that you've been taught or that you've read about or shown and ever since I wrote my first novel, I had a chance to just experience some serious spiritual, divine encounters. As you know, I was writing about the transatlantic slave trade and was just really in a place where I wanted to capture these stories, stories that we'd never been told, like I felt like we kept hearing the same narratives over and over and over again and so I opened myself up and they showed up. And the way that I experienced them as a writer, especially when I'm writing historical fiction, sometimes that shows up through what writers call channeling. That's me — it means, you know, essentially, someone has been waiting for you to tell their story and so there are chapters in that book that I wrote them but literally the words just flowed from my hand. There were also moments, particularly with the fore-mothers that I just mentioned, where I just had some really low points and there would be like these towering women that I would either dream about or I would feel their presence in my room and I remember telling my mom about this one encounter that I had and I was just like, "This woman was not easy on me," you know? Like I know them more now but at the time it was like my first introduction to Josephine, in particular, and, you know, Doris is very sweet, she's just so encouraging and kind and Josephine, this woman, you know, I was trying to write a new story and I was just like, you know, ancestors, you gave me the stories last time, I don't

understand why you won't show up for me, you know, I was just in the space, right? And, honey, the dream that I had that night, Josephine was just like, you know, "Look at how you're taking care of yourself. Like we can't even trust you with yourself, how can we trust you with our stories?" And it was so like —

Layla: Wow.

Christine: I woke up hurt and I, you know, I told my mom, I said, "I dreamt about these women and one of them was just so..." and she was like, "Oh, that sounds like Josephine." And I said, "Well, who is Josephine?" Right? And that's how I got the story. So, yeah, I feel like they show up for me in just very divine ways that cannot be denied, right? Like — and I say woo-woo because I don't claim to know anything about the spiritual ancestral realm. I think it's best that we have limited information, right? Because we'll probably screw it up if we knew more but I do know it exists and I'm thankful and I'm grateful for the ancestral presences that are in my life. Yeah.

Layla: That is beautiful. Thank you for sharing that.

Christine: You're welcome.

Layla: That's so powerful. And it's interesting because I'd seen — so I hadn't made the connection when I had met you earlier this year that you had written the book, *The Truth About Awiti*, which is on my list of books to read because it's not under Christine Platt. It's not authored by Christine Platt, it's a different name. Tell us a little bit about what that book is about and why you chose to use a different name.

Christine: It's so funny. So, at the time, I was married, and my ex-husband is still a dear friend, by the way, so let that be encouraging to anyone who may be going through that transitional period in your life. But at the time, I was married when I wrote that novel. I was working as a senior policy advisor at the Department of — I had this whole other legal policy life, right? And, I mean, I wrote the novel as part of National Novel Writing Month. I never intended it to launch my literary career and it literally did, and I'll explain that as I tell the story, but, yeah, so my pen name was C. P. Patrick which was Christine Platt was the C. P. and then Patrick.

Layla: Right. I have to say when I saw it, my mind did that thing just like J. K. Rowling where I assumed it was a man who wrote it.

Christine: Ah, yes, yes. That was also one of the things that was also very helpful to me too, right? I also just wanted this like ambiguous sort of name. But, yeah, and so I was working as a senior policy advisor at the time, had been doing Energy and Environmental Law, specifically working in environmental justice for years. And, you know, be honest, I was bored out of my mind and I had a dear friend who also loved writing and she was like, "We should do National Novel Writing Month," and I was like, "What's that?" She was like, "Oh, every November, people around the world commit to writing 50,000 words in one month." And I was like, "Yes, let's do it." This is the craziest, randomest story ever, I'm just gonna just tell you that now. So, it's 2014. And so, you know, I had this whole policy advisor job by day, the most exciting part was which I was working under the Obama administration. But I was like — the highlight was like we get a memo from the White House and I'd be like, "Ahh," right? But like, otherwise, I was like, "Oh, my gosh, I've done this a million times." So, anyway, and then, you know, I would come home, I would wife and I would mother and then I would go down to my office, which in our old house was in the basement, and I would literally work on the story for National Novel Writing Month. And so the story that I chose was based on this premise that I had heard in grad school which was that the spirits of slaves were not at rest and that they were embodied in the winds of hurricanes and the reason that theory came about is because a lot of hurricane winds start off the coast of West Africa, gain momentum as they cross the Atlantic, and hit mostly the southern slaveholding states. You know, I was — I grew up in South Florida, you know, lived through Hurricane Andrew and so I had always just been fascinated by that theory and so I was like, you know, I'm gonna look at the top 10 hurricanes and see if there are any corresponding moments in history. I'm sorry for laughing as I say this aloud because it's wild to think that 5 years ago, I did this and my life has completely changed. But, anyway, so I said, you know, I'm going to look at the top 10 hurricanes and I'm going to see if there are any corresponding moments in black history that would justify the rage of a hurricane and the only caveat that I gave myself was that I cannot use a narrative that I've heard before or that is traditionally known. Now, as

you know, I have a bachelor's and master's in Black Studies and so I've virtually heard every narrative —

Layla: Every story.

Christine: — or so I had thought at the time, right? So I thought I was really — I was like, this is gonna be a real challenge and, you know, what I found, obviously, every single time able to find a corresponding moment but even more importantly were so many of our stories across the diaspora that had never been told and so I started in the 1400s with the Portuguese entering Africa and the novel ended with the onset of Hurricane Katrina.

Layla: Wow.

Christine: I know. It was one of the most spiritual, emotional, life-changing experiences I've ever had in my life. There are no words for the stories that were told to me. It was so powerful.

Layla: Can you give us an example of one of the stories that you wrote about that isn't talked about, isn't something that we are aware of or isn't mainstream?

Christine: Let's see, there are so many. I wrote about the German Coast uprising which happened, I believe, in 1811 which was one of the largest slave revolts and uprisings to take place in the United States but one of the revolts that we hear about the most is Nat Turner, right? And so I knew I wanted to write about a slave revolt but I was like, obviously, I can't write about Nat Turner because that's on this list of stories that we've heard a million times and came across the German Coast uprising and I feel like that was also one of the chapters where that story was given to me and so when I do the research, especially when I'm in the 1800s, 17 — well, can't really go back on microfiche to the 1700s but sometimes there's some data there but I was looking at microfiche and I was able to find all the names of some of the enslaved people who were actually murdered as part of this revolt.

Layla: Wow.

Christine: And so one of — Yeah, one of those names was Petit Lindor and I said, “I'm going to tell Petit's story,” and I didn't even have to look up Petit. And the story that he wanted me to tell was something that would have never been in writing anyway, which was his love for another enslaved woman and how they had feared running away before and how he felt, just in that brief moment during that slave revolt, what it felt like to be free and that even though he knew he was gonna die, it was worth that brief moment of freedom.

Layla: Wow.

Christine: I still get chills when I think about it and, you know, I think what is even more powerful is that, you know, I independently published that book, and went on with my life.

Layla: Right.

Christine: Yeah, waiting for memos from Barack Obama —

Layla: Right.

Christine: — and I just remember, like my friends were — they would — you know, I'd get these messages and they'd be like, “Oh, my gosh, this book is amazing,” and I would be like, “Really? You think so?” You know, and it's your friends —

Layla: Right.

Christine: — that's what they're supposed to say —

Layla: Just hyping you up, right.

Christine: I wanted to believe them. And then I started hearing from strangers. And then I started hearing from professors.

Layla: Wow.

Christine: Yeah. I mean, the book just, again, they were waiting for me to tell these stories and so the book just took on a life of its own. Awiti is a

very stubborn protagonist. She is still around and still leaving her mark and teaching history.

Layla: Right.

Christine: Yeah. And that's the book that got me my agent.

Layla: Amazing. I love this story. And —

Christine: Yeah.

Layla: — one of the things that I was really struck by as I was reading about, you know, *Awiti* is how it's used in schools and I was like, “Look at this good ancestor who channeled this book,” and it is — will continue to have this life beyond the life it had with you.

Christine: It is amazing, Layla. And, as you know, I've been doing anti-racism work for a long time, I've seen it change its name so many times, anti-blackness, DEI, now everyone's, you know, stuck on the anti-racism, and like one of the things that I have learned is that my lane is bringing about social change through storytelling. I have this big thing about storytelling as a tool for social change and it's one of the reasons why I love your work so much. I feel like you're a natural storyteller. And writing about this work isn't easy. Trying to change hearts and minds through this work isn't easy. And, for me, I've found that literature is more effective than any position I can hold in an anti-racism center, any workshop I can give, any training, like, for me, that is my lane, is using the power of storytelling to bring about social change and so when I hear from college students or even like I remember hearing from like an 80-something-year-old white woman who, I don't even know how she found me on Facebook because, as you know, like once you start, you know, you don't plan for your life to all of a sudden become so public and then you're like, “Oh, my God, I want to hide,” right? So I would have like all these restrictions, like how did they find me under C. P. Patrick? But, anyway, she had sent me just this most beautiful note about how she learned so much about history reading this novel, and because each chapter is told in a different voice and from a different perspective, you're not just hearing like this —

Layla: Right.

Christine: — one character's journey, right? Like you're able to really get an expansive view and historical overview of the transatlantic slave trade. And then, you know, at the time, there was really nothing like that for educators to use, especially college educators.

Layla: Yeah.

Christine: And so I, you know, would visit college students on campus. I had students cry, I had students express their anger because, you know, there was always this part of them that was missing that they didn't — I mean, so, again, for me, literature is so powerful —

Layla: And you're a prolific children's book author, so I'm wondering is it both storytelling but also speaking to youth that really sparks it for you?

Christine: So, again, you know, I'm gonna tell you another wild, wild story that aligns with that. So, after I wrote *The Truth About Awiti* and I had an agent, you know, I was ready to write the next story. Only now, I was ready to write the next story to make money.

Layla: Right.

Christine: I was like, “Oh, I know how to write now. The ancestors are going to tell me everything I need to know. I'm about to be rich,” right? So, I'd come across all these different narratives while researching for *The Truth About Awiti*, some of which were just way too powerful to be a chapter and I felt that they could be standalone works and one of those stories was the fate of Afro-Germans during the Holocaust.

Layla: Wow. Yes, a story that isn't told.

Christine: No. It is one of the most unbelievable stories ever. Even I, as a historian, having studied black history, of course, my focus was on the transatlantic slave trade but still you come across historical footnotes and information and I had never heard this story in any, like anyone I said, a historian, readers because I would do book clubs and readers would always ask, “Well, what are you working on next?” No one had ever heard about it. So, anyway, my agent and I, you know, we tell this editor at St. Martin's Press about it, just my little synopsis and my

synopsis was fire, by the way. It was beautiful. And I was so proud and I was so ready and she was like, "I want this book." Now, because I had done National Novel Writing Month, even now, I'm still conditioned to like producing a lot of words very quickly, right? And so I wrote the novel in 3 months and I'll just tell you really quickly, in the early 1900s, there were a number of French-African soldiers that were sent to Rhineland, Germany, because the French had won part of the Rhineland in the war. And so they sent a number of their French-African soldiers there, a lot of Senegalese Tirailleurs were sent there and, you know, obviously, the sentiment, there was just pure anger. Now, France said they sent the French-African soldiers because they needed their sons at home, but historians and many of the Germans at the time felt that it was just like the ultimate insult to send them there, like we're sending these black people to watch over and guard, you know, our new land. So, anyway —

Layla: Wow. The layers of that.

Christine: Layers and layers. A number of French-African soldiers fell in love with German women and by the time Hitler was coming into power and Germany was very quickly shifting to Nazi Germany, a lot of these children had reached the age of puberty and so Hitler issued a secret mandate to have all children in the Rhineland who were, you know, the offspring of French-African soldiers to be castrated. Now, you can look this up, this information is readily available. I do believe Germany did try and do a little bit of peace and reconciliation surrounding some of the survivors of that a few years ago but it is just such a powerful story and I think coupling that is that in what is now modern-day Namibia, the first Holocaust took place by the Germans in the Herero wars and so I connected those two stories as part of this novel. Anyway, as you can imagine, I was ready to be rich, as I said, and so I was like, oh, I can totally do this in 3 months. The ancestors are gonna tell me everything I need to know —

Layla: Right.

Christine: — and I said I just cannot wait to tell Shio's story. Shio was one of the few names that I could find of the original Herero people and so that is why I named that character that and then the German woman that he fell in love with, her name was Petra. And so the editor said, "I

really think this story should be told from Petra's point of view, the white woman's point of view."

Layla: Oh, wow. Okay.

Christine: Now, let me just be very clear, and this is all gonna lead into the children's stuff, okay? I just want —

Layla: Because I need to understand what's going on right now.

Christine: — especially to folks who are listening, yes, to folks who are listening, and so, in my heart, I knew that I wanted to tell Shito's story but in my pocket, I said, "Well, if they want Petra's story, that's the story I'm going to write." And I wrote it but it was not the story that was supposed to be told and so the deal ended up falling through. You know, the editor loved it because that's what she wanted but her team felt like, "Oh, we couldn't connect to the characters," which I couldn't connect to the main —

Layla: Right, exactly.

Christine: Whatever, right? Like I'm just writing what you want so I can be rich, right?

Layla: Right, right.

Christine: And so what ended up happening was that just destroyed me creatively. Like just destroyed me. I had already quit my job because I was like I'm about to be the next whatever. I don't know who I thought I was gonna be.

Layla: What were some of the thoughts that were running through your mind that you were sort of wrestling with as a result of that?

Christine: Oh, just everything. I felt so guilty, you know? I felt like here I was being entrusted with my ancestors' stories and I — dang, Layla, like I didn't even wait until the fifth novel to sell out, like I sold out at the first opportunity, right? Like I just — oh my god, I felt like it was a test and I had failed. And, you know, like what was I thinking? *Awiti* was a one-hit wonder, you know? I felt like, "You didn't even write the stories in *Awiti*,

they were given to you, what made you think you could write a novel?" you know? Once you start on that —

Layla: Right, and it just starts cascading, right?

Christine: Yeah, it went crazy and so I went through that for about a year. I kept trying to rewrite it. I told Shiotto, "I'm so sorry. If you tell me the story now, I'll write it." Shiotto was done with me so I could I could not produce anything.

Layla: Shiotto was like, "Girl, bye."

Christine: He was like, "Girl, you failed, okay?" So, I remember receiving an e-mail from my agent and she said, "I know you said you don't write for children," because I've always had this thing like I can't write for kids, I mean, I can't curse, there's a limited word count, like what am I supposed to tell these young people? And she said, "I know you said you don't write for children but this wonderful opportunity has come across my desk and it is an opportunity to write a short chapter book series that teaches the history and culture of the African diaspora to young people," and I said, "How young?" and she was like, "Oh, these are early readers." I was like — Nala was so past early readers by that point and so I said, "Well, how many words is that?" She was like, "Oh, you know, it's usually between 900 to 1,000 words," and I was like well, I can't write novels, obviously, so let me try that, you know? I was such a Debbie Downer. But, anyways, so I come up with this idea of Anna and Andrew and, by the way, these were IP stories, which is like work for hire, right? And, I mean, it was like \$1,500 a book. It was nothing compared to like what a traditional publishing contract would be but this idea that like, gosh, I remember I was looking for diverse children's stories when my daughter was younger, like she's a teenager and like we're still doing this? Like let me write some of these stories, right? The publisher ended up loving the concept that I pitched and Anna and Andrew were born.

Layla: Oh, I love that.

Christine: And, as you know, we are now on, oh, my gosh, I think like book 14 or something of that series and it has just been the most beautiful and miraculous journey. And, again, that was an opportunity

where obviously if I had looked at the dollar amount, I would have said, “What?” Right?

Layla: Right.

Christine: But that's what ended up launching my career was this, again, this idea that there's a need, right? And so with *Awiti*, it was this need to tell the history of the transatlantic slave trade and these stories that had never been told and particularly because in our work, I feel so many people are missing that history piece.

Layla: Yes.

Christine: Right? So I would go to do these trainings, I will go to do these workshops and I would say like one historical fact and they would be like, “What? Bacon's Rebellion? I've never heard of Bacon's —” and I would be like, you know? But, again, I'm a historian, but I kept finding like, I'm like, wow, people are really missing the connection between the lasting implications of the transatlantic slave trade, right? And so like we just didn't arrive here —

Layla: Yeah.

Christine: — at this moment of racial reckoning in our country, like this started in the 1400s, right? And this is why it is a systemic issue around the world and not really isolated in one particular place, right? Any country that participated and benefited from the transatlantic slave trade has and will continue to experience these challenges, right? And so that is why I wrote *The Truth About Awiti*, indie published it, right? Just hoping that whatever readers needed or were looking for something like this, they would find it. And so I think the lesson there, which is why I told, you know, I also think it's so important to talk about our “failures” because so many people just see success and I want people to know like very few people don't have a story that either helped propel them, taught them a lesson, like no one is just always like, right?

Layla: Right, right. And I'm thinking about — so, when we first met, we were introduced to each other, I started following you on Instagram, and so your name was The Afrominimalist, and I was like, oh, okay, my brain, because minimalism, it's so associated with whiteness, I hadn't made the

connection that, oh, she actually practices minimalism. I thought it was just — I thought it was just a name and then you show up and I'm like this isn't how I think minimalism looks so it's just a name, right? Come to find out, no, minimalism is a huge part of Christine's life.

Christine: It is.

Layla: But it's really interesting hearing you talk about like striving to get rich and striving to focus on the material when I know you as such an intentional person.

Christine: But I had to hit rock bottom —

Layla: That's right.

Christine: — to learn that lesson, right?

Layla: That's right. So take us through that trajectory from that Christine who sold out Shio to —

Christine: Oh, sold Shio to out. So sorry. He'll never forgive me. No, he's forgiven me. He's forgiven me. Yeah. So, from the Christine who sold out Shio to in the hopes of getting a book and movie deal to the Christine who was like "I'm leaving this big house and I, you know, I now live in 630 square feet." So, as I sold out Shio to and thought I was going to be wealthy, I quit my wonderful six-figure job working in the government. You know, the Obama administration was — they were getting ready to transition, it was very clear that there was going to be a transition, so many of us who had come to serve under his administration, other political appointees, and that sort of thing, a lot of people were transitioning, and so I just did not want to go back to big law, right? Like, although government wasn't as fulfilling intellectually and challenging as I needed it to be, neither were billable hours, right? I also didn't want that life again and I said, "Wow, like you have been working and just really pushing since you graduated law school and now here's an opportunity for you to focus on your writing, you know, writing *Awiti*, reawaken this love for storytelling, you have this opportunity with St. Martin's Press to be rich, why don't you just take some time off to write full time?" And so I'd left my job and one of the things that I quickly realized is being home all day, we had so much house that we didn't use,

right? And not only did we have so much house that we didn't use, we had so many things that we didn't use, but I never really had to sit with it and address it because I was always at work, right? So, you know, I would be gone all day, I would come home, who doesn't want to come home to a nice, wonderful home that's filled with lovely things, you know? Like you can rationalize it, just justify a lot of different things until you're forced to sit with it and I was just like this is kind of ridiculous and, again, like that guilt set in and I said, you know, I'm gonna be a minimalist and, again, here, ascribing to a title rather than a practice and a purpose, right? Which is what that whole — even now I never write for money and it drives my agent crazy sometimes. But I'm like — she was like, "I don't think this project is gonna pay enough." And I'll be like, "It doesn't matter. The people that it's gonna reach," right? And she's just like, "But I want us to make money," right? And I'm like, "Well, I learned a hard lesson about that," so, yeah, even now, and I tell these stories because I feel like all of these — every moment in our life serves a purpose and is intentional for some reason, right? And so I needed to learn that lesson early on, before my career became the career that you know today, right? Like, God, heaven forbid, had I been that woman, that writer, in this moment in my life, I would make such poor choices that are not intentional in advancing the work that I want to do which is the storytelling through social change. And so, anyway, I had all this free time to write but I also had a lot of free time to look around and see just how wasteful and how I was not being a conscious consumer and I think even more so having a background in environmental law, you know, I could do like heat mapping and all this like —

Layla: Right.

Christine: — and all these stuff.

Layla: Used to analyzing, right.

Christine: Yeah, like using the heat map and I'm like, oh, my god, we're being just awful, right? Our footprint was just awful. And so I was like I'm gonna be a minimalist. I can do it. And I started like looking up minimalism and as you said, minimalism is a very, very white space and I was like there has to be people of color out here doing this. I think Marie Kondo was probably in progress. I don't even think her book was published around that time. And so I literally had not a single person of

color to look to for guidance and so I said I'm going to begin chronicling my journey as the afrominimalist and, that way, if there's anyone who is ever out there looking to just a different approach to minimalism, something that isn't all white and barren, and just — it just didn't work for me and so what ended up happening is I was chronicling my writing and minimalist journey, there was all these people reaching out saying, “Oh, my gosh, I never thought I could be a minimalist because I thought I couldn't use color,” right? Or, “Oh, my goodness, I never thought I could be a minimalist because I thought it had to look like this or it had to look like that,” right?

Layla: Right.

Christine: It can be a very narcissistic, showy —

Layla: Yes.

Christine: — space, right?

Layla: Right.

Christine: It's conspicuous consumption, right? Like, “Look at what little I have —

Layla: Right. Right.

Christine: — Don't you want this \$10,000 minimalist bed?” right? You know? It's like, oh, my gosh, right? Or you read these essays and it would —the essay would start out “When so and so and so and so moved into their 5,000 square foot farmhouse by the sea, they never imagined that...” you know? And there would be like one table and a chair and a picture and so I think I had gotten so caught up in the aesthetics of minimalism that it took me a minute to focus on the practice, right?

Layla: Right.

Christine: And the practice is really living with intention, and anyone could live with intention and it will look differently for everyone, as it should, right? And so it's so funny because if I had even known that nugget then, I probably would not have chosen the moniker

“Afrominimalist.” I don't know how “Afrointentionalist” would have sounded, but — and so, yes, I've learned a lot about the practice of living with intention and I tell people all the time like there's no one way. Like it can't just start in your closet and then not trickle into every area of your life, right?

Layla: Yeah. So I wanted to talk about, I guess, as black people and for people of color who are also may be listening, I'm thinking about how having things is a way that many of us have been taught, because of the things that have been deprived of us, have been taught as a way to create security, to create prestige, to create a sense of success —

Christine: Absolutely.

Layla: — to feel like we are claiming what was not given to our ancestors or what was not available to our ancestors —

Christine: Yes.

Layla: — so how do we square those two things of being intentional with what we own and giving ourselves the gift?

Christine: I so love that you said this because what's so important is everything that you just named, which is why minimalism is often a “struggle” for people of color, right? So I would get these messages and, you know, I'm not arguing about —

Layla: No, you don't.

Christine: — not being honest, right? Like you can't even get me to argue, you know, like are cats better or dogs, like I'm not arguing about anything, okay? So I would get all of these — before people knew that, I would get all of these like tags of being challenged by people that were like, “I love having a lot of stuff,” right? And, “No one can tell me, you know, I've worked so hard for this, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, you know, Afrominimalist, if you want to talk about it, let's talk about it,” right? And I would just — I would say like as long as you're happy, good for you, right? Like I'm not here to try and convince you to be a minimalist, right? But so what ends up happening is, culturally, our lives are so very different, right? And it's why there are certain things that we will hold on

to that someone else who is more, I guess on the traditional side, they would say like, "Oh, you can't have more than a hundred things," or, "You can't have x, y, and z," right? Or I think even Marie Kondo was like, "No more than 20 books," right? I'm like —

Layla: What?

Christine: — I'm gonna fold my socks like you say 'cause that's really helpful but I'm gonna have more than 20 books, right? And so things that aren't important to us are not important on a traditional mainstream level, right? Grandmother's Bible, if I have two Bibles, if I have the Bible that I read, or you read the Quran, right?

Layla: Yes, yeah.

Christine: Yes, right? Like having a copy of my grandmother's, right, spiritual texts and my own spiritual texts, that's powerful for me, right? I'm holding my grandmother's spiritual text when I need to feel empowered or I need to feel hopeful or I want to look at some of the passages that she highlighted, right? And I have my own spiritual texts to like take with me and pour through or, you know, whatever I want to do, right? Whereas someone would come in and say, "You have two Bibles? Why would you have two Bibles? Get rid of one."

Layla: Right.

Christine: You say what I'm saying?

Layla: It's about the utility of it as opposed to the deeper meaning behind it, yeah.

Christine: Yeah. And, you know, I had this, you know, I'm dear friends with Jason Reynolds and we had this conversation about minimalism and why it may be like just such a struggle for some people and not a struggle for others and he said, "You know, it's so important to notice that, for black people in particular, home is defined by what we are still holding on to," right? And so because we are such a displaced people, home for us is not necessarily the structure but it's what's in our home which aligns with what you said, right? And so, home may be when your grandmother's Bible is placed on that table, or home may be when you

hang up that photograph of, you know, your great, great grandmother, right?

Layla: I smiled because I've got my grandparents —

Christine: Yeah.

Layla: Yes.

Christine: It's so important, right? And so the things that are important to us and that we want to have spaces and places for differ very differently from what is displayed aesthetically and is considered minimalism, right? And so one of the things that I really love to show people is like how to reclaim your space and you can still be a conscious consumer, you can still be a minimalist, if that's what you want to call yourself. I, again, you know, now aspire to say live with intention, right? Like you can still live with intention and your space is not going to look like what you're aesthetically seeing online, but you will feel a deeper sense of purpose and connection and a deeper level of accountability, right?

Layla: Can you speak on that, that deeper level of accountability? What does that mean to you?

Christine: Oh, absolutely. So, for me, it means ensuring that my space feels and reflects my life's work, right? Which is the history and culture of the African diaspora, right? My bedroom, as you can see, has very muted colors because, obviously, I sleep in here, but my living room is bright, there's mud cloth, there's Ankara, there's like all of this like just cultural legacy and richness that helps my home and helps me feel grounded, right? And so that deeper level of accountability means now that I know better, now that I've gone through all the phases of decluttering and like realizing that I have like 30 pairs of jeans even though I wear the same two, like, girl, I've been through all of that, right? Now I have a deeper level of accountability to never do that again, right? To always be a conscious consumer, to always have the tough conversations with young people because so many of us, I mean I was the first six-figure income earner in my family, right?

Layla: Yes.

Christine: So there was no one to tell me what to do with six figures.

Layla: Right.

Christine: Right? Like the idea, especially here in America, is I mean, you get to six figures, you have arrived and you spend the six figures and you live this life that reflects your prosperity —

Layla: That you have made it, right.

Christine: Yes, right? And so having conversations with young people, especially first gens who may find themselves in that space and saying, “Listen, I did all that. I bought all the handbags, I bought all the shoes, I bought all of that, right? None of that is going to bring you the joy that you are so desperately seeking. None of that is going to help you become this best version of yourself,” right? So I feel like the level of accountability is not just personal accountability, it's also community accountability, right? And like also teaching people to extend themselves some grace because when I was sitting in all of that that I did not need, again, there was just this guilt, there was the shame, you know, you start calculating all the dollars in your head, right? And I just had to extend myself some grace and learn to forgive myself —

Layla: Right.

Christine: — for what I didn't know. But once you know, right, and this goes with everything, once you know, you're accountable —

Layla: Yeah.

Christine: — right? And so that's what I speak to when I say the deeper level of accountability.

Layla: Do you feel that in changing the external things that were there in your space, that, I guess I'm trying to ask like which came first, the chicken or the egg? Like was it changing the outside that changed that feeling of self-worth on the inside or was it a feeling of healing self-worth on the inside that caused you to change your outside or was it both at the same time?

Christine: Yeah, they're both at the same time. You know, again, learning my lessons, right? Like I was so — like I have to get this title, I have to be a minimalist, right?

Layla: Right.

Christine: Which I feel is what we're seeing right now in the anti-racism space, I have to be anti-racist, right? And it's like, it's action, people, but, anyway, you know, I didn't know, right? You don't know what you don't know. So, I was so intent on getting this title that that's what started my journey and then when I was in the journey was when I had all of these deeper, deeper, deeper lessons, right? And so I think that the two were working together. That's why I tell people, you know, they'll reach out to me and they'll say, "Oh, my gosh, I went through my closet and I just cried the entire..." and I'm like good, like you have to — just as we tell people, lean into the emotions, right? Like you have to lean into the emotions because it is a very, very painful and personal journey for a lot of people, right? So much of it is rooted in our childhood. I'm writing *An Afron minimalist Guide to Living with Less* and so I talk about all of this in the guide book but so much of it is rooted in our childhood, whether you grew up with scarcity, whether you grew up with abundance but still felt very empty, what you've heard your parents say about money, what you were unable to buy because the money wasn't there. You know, there are also cultural expectations, right? I hear from a lot of first-gen immigrants who everyone in their family may have like, "We put every dollar on you to get here and to become this doctor, become this teacher," become whatever it is they wanted them to become and now they have just these this weight and cultural expectations that are on their shoulder, right? "I'm supposed to have a big house. I'm supposed to have the nice car. I'm supposed to do this because when my family comes to visit, I don't want them to think x, y, z," right?

Layla: Everything they — right. They poured into —

Christine: Yeah, yeah, and so —

Layla: Yeah.

Christine: — I try and touch on all of that and get people to understand that like your home and ultimately the life that you live, it's such a sacred, sacred, special thing, right? And to cultivate it with the same intention that you do other things that you cultivate, right? And so like the level of attention that, say — or detail that someone may pay to their car, right? Like that is the same way that you should be cultivating and molding and being so intentional in particular about your life. Yeah.

Layla: I love that. It's beautiful. And, Christine, so we've talked about your life as a writer, we've talked about your passion for minimalism or living with intention. I wanted to talk now, shift gears again, right, and talk about your work as the managing director of the American University's Antiracism Center. Now, you've mentioned that you have an academic background in black studies, you've been doing anti-racism work or whatever form that has been called for a very, very long time.

Christine: Yes, over 20 years, yeah.

Layla: Over 20 years which is incredible. Okay, let's place ourselves where we are right now, this moment in time —

Christine: Yes.

Layla: — right now. What are some of the daily thoughts that are coming front of mind for you at the moment?

Christine: Yeah. I think it's so interesting to not only be looking at this moment in time through a historical lens but, as you know, I'm also a lawyer by trade and so legally, historically, morally, emotionally. I understand that a lot of people are frustrated and angry and afraid and having just all of these different emotions but I have such excitement about this moment, because, as historians, we know this is where social change happens. Social change, there's very few moments, if any, in history where the social change that we're hoping to see happen occurs with everyone just deciding like, you know what, let's just all be good human beings to one another. Let's just link hands and do it, right? Like it never happens. It's always this social or political uprising. There are always just moments where people question their country, their own humanity, their family, their friends, right? Like you can look at this historically over time and so I think, for me, what's so exciting about this

moment is that, you know, here in America, at least, we are finally being forced to confront and reckon with our history of race and racism, right? Again, going back to the transatlantic slave trade. Everything that we are dealing with now, and I think Bryan Stevenson said this, this is symptoms of a larger disease, right?

Layla: That's right.

Christine: Which is the fact that we have never truly dealt with the lasting implications of the transatlantic slave trade and how it impacted our laws, our policies, our behaviors, our practices, our prejudices, right? Like we've never addressed it. We wanted to say slavery has ended or there's a civil rights movement, right? Or Barack Obama became president, right?

Layla: Right.

Christine: There's no way there's racism, we have a black president, how is that even possible, right? And so I think what this moment has come to teach so many of us is that it's time. We can no longer bury our heads in the sand. We can no longer close or turn a blind eye or all these analogies that people like to use, right? Like the time is now. You cannot deny what is happening in this country and how deeply rooted and systemic racism is and how it impacts and affects every area of our lives, right? And so, for me, my daily thoughts aside, I have moments of frustration, I have moments of disenchantment even sometimes with this work because, of course, now that the work is profitable, there are so many people entering this space and I'm just like, "If you all only knew," right?

Layla: Right.

Christine: This is the work of humanity and anyone who enters into this work solely to make money will be very disappointed.

Layla: This is not —

Christine: You are going to be disappointed, let me just tell you, okay? And then also like so much of this work is emotional, mental, and I think sometimes even spiritual labor.

Layla: Right, and that's why I'm laughing because, actually, no amount of money can repay the amount of spiritual, psychological, emotional, physical labor that is paid to do this work so that's why I was laughing because I was like —

Christine: Yeah.

Layla: — there actually isn't a sum.

Christine: Oh, there isn't. There isn't, right? And, I mean, I'm sure you know, I mean, there have been opportunities, very lucrative opportunities that I've turned down because I'm just like I don't have the emotional and spiritual labor to give this, right? Like I just did a workshop or I just did x, y, and z, right? And I think at the end of the day what you have to realize is that, like when I show up to do this work, I have an opportunity and this may be the only opportunity that someone gets to hear this message and so I feel like I have to show up fully, right? And so, again, I just, you know, want to let people know, it may feel or seem lucrative in the moment but those of us who've been doing this work a long time know that is not why you get into this work. The most important work may sometimes be the company or organization that doesn't have the budget to pay you. It may be a student group, you know, who says my budget is \$500. I just went through this recently and they were like, "We really would just love to have you speak, like we're talking about this, this, and this," and I was like absolutely, right? And so, again, like I think you have to realize that this is the work of humanity. And so, yeah, for the most part, I would say 99 percent of the time, I feel excitement, I feel enthusiasm, I feel encouraged by the messages that I receive from people, whether it be on social media or from, you know, attendees of workshops or some of the convenings and conversations that we've had and, you know, I also feel that it's important to acknowledge that that 1 or 2 percent that sometimes is like frustration, disappointment —

Layla: Right.

Christine: — anger, like no one who is in this space, you know?

Layla: Right. Right, exactly. You know, I started this conversation by talking about how you just emanate this energy and I'm sure everyone who's listening to this conversation and watching it now knows exactly what I'm talking about. But, as somebody who is in this work of social change and particularly delving into these histories and telling these stories, how do you protect, take care of your joy? How do you ensure that you don't get swallowed alive and consumed by the absolute horror of it all?

Christine: Yes, yes. Well, you know, just as I learned that important lesson about trying to get rich, you know, having Shoto hurt my feelings, you know, it's the same way that I had to learn with this work, right? And I feel and I see it so often, especially with like young activists and advocates, right? Like you just want to give all of yourself —

Layla: Yes.

Christine: — because this work is so important and, you know, like, “I'm gonna stay up until 2 AM and I'm gonna...” you know? And so, I did all that to the point where I wore myself out, right? And I realized I can't be the best advocate, I can't be the best writer, I can't be the best anything if I am not making sure that I also take care of myself. And so protecting my joy looks like obviously not arguing on social media —

Layla: Me and you are the same on that. That's an internal rule that I have.

Christine: Yeah, like we're not.

Layla: You're not gonna find me there.

Christine: Yeah, we're just not doing this, you know, and I know like, you know, there are people, they'll say like, “Oh, this is a teachable moment.” I'm also not —

Layla: Right.

Christine: — teaching here, right? Like I'm not teaching in this comment.

Layla: I wasn't hired to teach here.

Christine: Layla, I have to tell you something that's so funny before I finish talking about joy. It leads me that — what we're talking about just made me think about how I used to, when people would try and argue about anything from anti-racism to minimalism, like people will argue about anything, but I used to say, you know, well, my billable hour is \$350 an hour. I mean, that's how much I used to get paid to argue. So, I mean, I feel like it's only fair, you know, but, anyway, so, for me, joy like, obviously, protecting my mental health and sanity which can be very challenged on social media. It looks like creating a beautiful home and space for myself. You can't see but I have like my favorite candle is burning, right? Like, you know, I have my plants around me, you know? I talk about this mason jar of raw cotton that I keep in my bedroom. It's back there on my nightstand but sometimes I just pick up some of the raw cotton buds and if you've ever held a cotton blossom, you'll know that there are parts of it that are very, very sharp and pointy and those are the — they used to prick our ancestors' fingers, right? To the point where they would bleed as they would pick cotton and I would just — sometimes I just hold some of those blossoms and I say, you know, no matter what I'm going through in this moment, right, like my ancestors have endured and survived so much more and so give me the strength to get through this moment, right? It's tapping into that —

Layla: Yes.

Christine: — ancestral guidance and wisdom. There are so many things that influenced my joy and it's something that I've really fought for and so I hold it very, very sacred, right? Like this is actually the only thing on my agenda today because this was very important to me. I wanted to be able to show up and be very present and open and the best version of myself. And I know me. I know that I couldn't have another meeting right after. I couldn't have a meeting before. I would have showed up like, “Okay, what?” You know what I mean? And so, you know, it's also being very accountable for my time and I'll share this also with you and folks who are watching and listening because this is a tip that has helped a lot of different people who are also thinking about just like, “I want to do better with my time,” right? So, I don't look at my time as an hour in the day, right? I look at each hour as \$1,000, right? And so I wake up and say, “What am I going to do with the \$24,000?” It's a lot easier, I should say, or very — I shouldn't say very easy but much easier to look at time

as hour — I mean, look at time as money and I know it's a very Western, Eurocentric, you know, concept, I get all of that, right? But this is what works for me and so what I say is this is not an hour, this is \$1,000. Am I gonna waste the \$1,000 on playing on Instagram or am I going to spend this \$1,000 working on my book, right? And so that's how I sort of got to really sort of look at my time in that way and understanding that like this is really important. And you can ascribe and put whatever dollar amount that you want, right? Like those times when my daughter is home, that's a different dollar amount, right?

Layla: Right. What I was going to say as well because I'm a very self-reflective person and I'm very intentional also about how I spend my time and I also know my energy, like what I can spend per day, right? So I know that if I have —

Christine: Yes.

Layla: So I record this podcast on Mondays, we don't do any other calls on Mondays, right? Like it's one call per day that I can do because I know how much energy I pour into that call but I also know that I need gaps and spaces to think or to sit or to reflect or to just be or to have a nap and —

Christine: To eat.

Layla: Right, to eat, right?

Christine: I would forget to eat, yeah.

Layla: But I also like this idea of I'm spending \$1,000 to take care of myself.

Christine: Absolutely

Layla: Because I know you mentioned about it's a very Western, capitalistic way of seeing things but I think also, sometimes what happens is people think it has to be all about productivity and using up every single dollar, every single cent, like you'd use it all, right? To create something productive —

Christine: Yes, right?

Layla: Right.

Christine: And, again, everyone that I've ever shared this with, it's like this light bulb goes off, right? Because it's more so to see how you are not being productive or intentional, right?

Layla: Yes.

Christine: And so you have to think, you wake up with this \$24,000, \$8,000 is already gone because you need to sleep, right? You need to eat so you need to subtract a few \$1,000 there, you know, if you're a parent, until you realize like, "Oh, I thought I had \$24,000 but I really only have —"

Layla: No, you really don't. Right, right.

Christine: Right? I really only have \$6,000 and like how am I going to spend that \$6,000, right? I have work to do. I have naps to take, right? There's very little left out of my \$24,000 at the end of each day, right? And that's great because I've been intentional —

Layla: Yeah.

Christine: — with how I've spent it. Now, it's harder for me to do that in an hour, like an hour segment.

Layla: Right.

Christine: I personally am unable to make those same sort of choices when I'm looking at it in an hour. I'm like, "Oh, it's just a phone call, I'll talk to her for 30 minutes," right? Or, "Oh, it's just this," right? And then you look up and it's the same concept as billable hours, right? And you learn it very quickly as a lawyer. You've been in the office all day and you're like, "Oh, let me go ahead and calculate my billable — 2 hours? I only billed 2 hours? I've been here all day," or you went on a 2-hour lunch, there was that office meeting that is non-billable but you needed to attend because it was mandatory, right? So like it's that same concept, yeah.

Layla: Yeah, and I wonder, because I know both of us are self-employed and employed in the work that we choose to do, I know that many of our listeners are in a job and may or may not love that job, you know, and a lot of their hours are spent at that job. How can they view this in a way where, you know, they are showing up for that work because it's work that they have to do to be able to make money, to be able to take care of, you know, themselves and their families —

Christine: Oh, yes. I would tell them I know exactly the place that they're in, Layla.

Layla: Yeah?

Christine: I know the place —

Layla: Is it different?

Christine: No, it's not. It's not at all, right? I mean, as you know, I mean, I returned to the center in an interim role. My dear friend and colleague, Ibrahim, left to go found a new center in Boston and there was really no one else who could just jump right in and pick back up and now I knew that I have, as you know, this full, very full life of writing and mothering and living and I said, "Wow, if I go back, it's going to be a lot," right? But look at this moment that we're in. I couldn't imagine like letting the center just fall by the wayside, right? And so I said, "How am I going to manage all of this?" Right? If you are working in a job, whether you love it or — I love the work that I do at the center, right?

Layla: Yeah.

Christine: Whether you love it or hate it, it's still the same \$8,000, right? That's all they get. You working an 8-hour day. All of that bringing work home, doing stuff later, like the center gets \$8,000 a day and not a penny more. Sometimes a penny less, right? But never a penny more, you know? And so I think it's even more important that if you are working, and especially if your true passions and pursuits are elsewhere, that you hold true to the time that you're allotted to do that work, right? So often we give and give and give of ourselves to employers and I know the work feels important, I know you feel important, but I can assure

you, if something happens where that company needs to make a decision, if you're lucky. initials on a paper, you're probably just a number, right?

Layla: Yeah. My dad always says no one is irreplaceable.

Christine: No one. And I was just gonna say you can be assured that if something happens to you, that, you know, your colleagues will grieve and mourn and then there will be a position description put up for your role, right? And so I think always remembering that we are not our work when we are in, when we are employed by others is so, so important. And so that is what I would tell people who are working.

Layla: I love that. Thank you so much. Thank you.

Christine: You're welcome.

Layla: All right. Before I ask you my final question, I wanted to ask you about your trip to West Africa. And, first of all, was it the first time that you'd ever been and —

Christine: It was my first home going.

Layla: Wow.

Christine: It was my first home going, which was very shocking to people who had read *The Truth About Awiti* because everyone just assumed that I wrote that book, especially the beginning of that book, in Africa. And I did not. I mean, I've been mothering for the past 17 years and, as you know, that leaves you very little wiggle room to travel and pursue some of the things that you really want to in the way that you want to, I should say. And so this was the first time that I not only felt comfortable traveling, you know, literally across the world in the timeframe that I wanted, to do the research that I wanted to, have the experiences that I wanted to have. It was just everything, right? Everything from the sense of seeing pieces of my friends and family on the faces and bodies of other people —

Layla: And which countries did you go to?

Christine: Oh, yes. So I went to Togo, Benin, and Ghana. And so I talked about this home going as returning to a home where I know it's my home, I can feel that it's home, but it's a home where I have no residence, right? I have no way to go to the actual land of my ancestors and honor them, right? I have no tribe. I have none of that. And so there's a part of that that is so heartbreaking and painful but there was a part of it that was just so beautiful because I was so welcome and embraced by any community that I went to, right? They're like, "You are our sister, come home," right? And I go to Benin, "You are our sister, come home." And it was just so beautiful and powerful. I think anyone who has a chance to visit Cape Coast dungeon should definitely go. Being in actual — uhh, it makes me emotional just thinking about it. Being in what is touted on TripAdvisor and all these other places as Cape Coast Castle, Slave Castle, by the locals, it's called a slave dungeon and that is what it was. Underground. I think the folks who were on our tour, there couldn't have been more than 35 or 40 of us in the first room that we went into which held males who had been enslaved and there was plenty of room for us to move around and still we were sweating. We couldn't have been in there for 5 minutes and we were sweating. So I couldn't even imagine the space being packed with bodies. Two, the floor was — it looked like black marble and our guide said, "I want you to look at the floor," and he said, "What that is, your ancestors' blood, sweat, tears, waste that has hardened over time," and to be able to put my hand on that and thank them and honor them for surviving, right? I think that's always what I like to remind myself when I think about my ancestors and the fact that I'm here is knowing that I come from the best, the brightest, the most resilient, right? Because as you go on the last walk and as you go on these tours, you come across gravesites for so many who did not make it, right? So to be able to put my hand on that and honor them, to be able to leave flowers where the women and young girls were held, to be able to put my feet in the water where many of our ancestors last were able to put their feet in the water and say like all they wanted to do was return home and I had the opportunity to return home for them. It was just — uhh, Layla, just the most beautiful experience of my life and I will always go home, even in the midst of COVID, I am self-isolating and hopeful that the trip that I have planned for December through early January will still be able to happen. That is something that I want to do every December. It's how I want to bring in the New Year. There's something so powerful about

being in a space where I never have to think about, deal with, encounter, justify whiteness —

Layla: That's right.

Christine: — ever. I had no idea how unbelievably liberating that would feel. You know, anytime you visit my family, I also have family from the Caribbean, you can visit the Caribbean and you feel it, you know, a little but it's also a tourist destination, right? And so there are still always these encounters, right, of whiteness all the time and it was the first time — I mean, I would go days, literally days without seeing a white person. I would go days without having to talk about whiteness and anti-racism and white supremacy culture. I had days of not, you know, not having to explain and justify —

Layla: Right.

Christine: — oh, my gosh, Layla, you know, I was probably one of the older, there was one woman in our group who was older than me, but, oh, my goodness, I had already told the young folks, I was like, “You know, you guys, I'm gonna have to take my naps and I'm not gonna be able to go out with you all so I just want you to know like, you know, respect the fact that I'm in my 40s.” Girl, I was in the club. I was dancing at 3 AM in the morning and I was like, “I don't know how I have all this energy,” like oh, I know why, right? Like I don't have to deal with the weighted burden of being black in America and it was just so powerful and beautiful on so many levels.

Layla: I love that for you. I love everyone who gets to have that experience because I think it's so important and I know that there's a lot of complex emotions that come along with it.

Christine: Yeah.

Layla: Right? From the grief and the anger to the joy and that feeling of homecoming.

Christine: Yeah, so much joy.

Layla: Yeah. When you came back to the US, did you feel different —

Christine: Oh my gosh.

Layla: — as you walked in the same spaces?

Christine: Listen, we started feeling sad before, like, it was like the day before our flight was, you know, we all just started dreading reentry, right? This idea that like, “Oh, my God, we have to go back there,” right? And like now we have gotten this feeling of who we are, why we do some of the things that we do, especially some of the things that are culturally looked down upon or despised here in America, laughing loud, talking loud, you know?

Layla: Right, yes.

Christine: Again, that concept of time, right? Like when you first get there, so many of us, you know, they say, “Oh, the tour is leaving at 9,” we're there at 8:55. The tour leaves at 10, right? And it's like the tour leaves when everyone shows up, right?

Layla: That's right.

Christine: And so like having just — and there's such a freedom and joy that comes with that, right? Like this idea, I remember like frantically trying to get down, then like, you know, a few days and your body just naturally transitions, but just even a few days later saying like, “Oh, it's 9:05,” you're like, okay, let me just make sure I have everything I need, they will wait for me, right? Like, oh, my goodness, the freedom and joy that comes with not frantically rushing —

Layla: Right.

Christine: — to try and do anything is so powerful. But, yeah, you know, reentry, we were dreading reentry. And it was tough. But I will say I came back, I mean, I definitely came back a different woman and came back with a sense of pride and joy that can never be taken away from me. So even when I'm in those spaces, I just move differently, I feel very differently, and I understand that the joy that I'm looking for, the peace and comfort that I'm hoping to have, you know, that I would be striving

for here is it's never going to be what I want it to be. What I wanted it to be was how I felt when I was in —

Layla: Yeah.

Christine: — West Africa. Now, I can do what I can to make my situation and my life as joyful and as free and as wonderful as possible but we don't operate under the same conditions here and that's just the reality, right? So there are things that I could hold on to and implement and there are things that, when it's feeling uncomfortable or when I'm feeling uncomfortable, I can now say you feel uncomfortable because this is very foreign to you, right? And within your DNA —

Layla: Yes.

Christine: — and I talk about blood memory and resiliency and all of these things all the time. It is uncomfortable because this is not natural, right? When you were home, it felt very natural, right? I just naturally fell into this rhythm and people said, “Oh, like your sleep is going to be messed up and this...” Nothing. Right? And we have to remember that like, ancestrally and generationally, it's not like I'm hundreds of generations removed from these people. These are my people, right? There are some people who can still trace their ancestry through enslavement, right? So it's not that long ago and so I just feel very grounded, even here, especially when I'm there. But even when I'm here, there is something that cannot be taken away from me in that regard, ancestrally knowing what my people survived, ancestrally knowing that a lot of the things that I do were either based on survival, right?

Layla: Right.

Christine: I did a workshop the other day and we were talking about code switching, you know, it's a lot of what we do, our survival mechanisms that are woven into our ancestral DNA because this is what our ancestors had to do to survive, right? And so I try and tap into more of the generational resiliency rather than the generational trauma. That's something that I also talked about with people is like the same way we always hear about generational trauma and all the terrible

things that are woven into your DNA and who you are, but they survived —

Layla: Yes.

Christine: — and so also within you and even stronger within you is generational resiliency. And so that is what I tap into and I think going home allowed me to really see what that generational resiliency looked like, right? Because not only were the best and brightest and strongest taken, what was left behind were the elderly and young people, right? And children, right? And so seeing that even my ancestors were able to be resilient and survive, right? Without their king, without their queen, without warriors, right? Like they still found a way to survive and they're happy, right? Like I also — I went back with this whole like, “Oh, the poor people who were left behind,” and they're looking at me like, “Oh, you poor person going to America,” you know?

Layla: Right, right.

Christine: So, yeah, it was amazing. It was beautiful. It was beautiful.

Layla: Well, thank you for sharing that with us and I'm really gonna take that away about, you know, this feels uncomfortable because it's foreign to me —

Christine: It's foreign to you.

Layla: I think that —

Christine: Yeah.

Layla: — is a huge takeaway. Thank you for sharing that.

Christine: Yeah, it's so huge. Yeah, and you will just — you deal with it very differently, whatever it is, right? Instead of like trying to fight or trying to conform or I'm just like, “This is foreign. That's why, I mean, this is not innately who I am,” right? And so to try and make it a part of who I am, it's never gonna fit. It's never gonna work. Right? And so, yeah, I'm glad you took that away.

Layla: Thank you, Christine. Thank you.

Christine: You're welcome.

Layla: Before I ask you my closing question, I just want to say a huge thank you for this conversation.

Christine: Thank you.

Layla: I feel like I learned so much about you and I really appreciate especially how you shared with us these "failures" or the "mistakes" that you've made, because I absolutely agree that we don't want to show that part to people but, actually, those are those defining moments that are the reason —

Christine: So defining.

Layla: — why we show up in the world the way that we do. And —

Christine: So defining, and so, I should say, even to — you're welcome, and also just meant to align you with where you're supposed to be, right? I have this big thing about divine alignment and so I had to have all of those moments to be aligned to do the work that I've been called to do, right?

Layla: Absolutely.

Christine: And to do it well.

Layla: Yes.

Christine: And so like looking at what we call failures or setbacks or disappointments, it just helps you look at it very differently and saying all of this is aligning me for the journey that I'm supposed to be on.

Layla: Amazing. Thank you, Christine.

Christine: You're welcome.

Layla: Okay, my love, our final question, what does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Christine: I pray that I am seen as a good ancestor.

Layla: Oh, you already —

Christine: Before I even answer your question, I just want to say, first of all, thank you but then also I really love how you have challenged me and so many of us to look at ancestry and being an ancestor in the present moment and not something in the future and so that was always a big thing for me. I was always like, “When I become an ancestor...,” right? “Ma'am, you're alive now,” right? Like, “What are you doing now?” So thank you for challenging me to think of my work in that way, not just in the distant future but also in the present moment. And so I would say I think to be a good ancestor, to me, means knowing that I played a role in changing and influencing and inspiring the lives of others, no matter how big, no matter how small, and, you know, to leave a lasting legacy of that change and influence and inspiration and all of these different things because, you know, I hope that it exists even after I transition, right? And I think that's one of the things that I try to do and hope to do with my literature, understanding just the power of storytelling to teach empathy and compassion and history, right? And so, yeah, I mean, I think that's what it means for me to be a good ancestor, using storytelling and the gifts that I have been given and granted and blessed with wisely as a tool for social change. Yeah.

Layla: That's beautiful, thank you, and you are so doing it and I —

Christine: Oh, thank you.

Layla: — so appreciate you're being in the world and I also particularly just want to close by thanking you as a mother for providing books for children, for young people —

Christine: Thank you.

Layla: — that they can see themselves in, that they can learn from, and that they can build that sense of understanding of who they are, what

the world is, but also what it can become based on how they want to show up in it. So thank you so much.

Christine: Young people keep me hopeful, thank you. They keep me hopeful. They will indeed change the world and I consider it a true honor to have been given the divine appointment to write for them and it is something that I hold very dear to my heart, so thank you for that.

Layla: Thank you.

(Outro)

This is Layla Saad and you've been listening to Good Ancestor Podcast. I hope this episode has helped you find deeper answers on what being a good ancestor means to you. We'd love to have you join the Good Ancestor Podcast family over on Patreon where subscribers get early access to new episodes, Patreon-only content and discussions, and special bonuses. Join us now at Patreon.com/GoodAncestorPodcast. Thank you for listening and thank you for being a Good Ancestor.