

(Intro)

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

Rebecca Walker is a best-selling author, editor, and cultural critic who's contributed to the global conversation about race, gender, culture, and power for over two decades. She's also the co-founder of the Third Wave Fund, an organization that supports women and transgender youth working for social justice. Lily Diamond is a writer, educator, and advocate working to democratize wellness through storytelling, accessible practices for inner and outer nourishment, and revolutionary acts of self-care in relationship to our earth and human communities. Together, they are the co-authors of the 2020 book, *What's Your Story? A Journal for Everyday Evolution*. The journal consists of more than 150 transformational questions for personal and collective change. In this conversation, I speak with Rebecca and Lily about their personal journeys, their journeys together, and this powerful body of work that they have gifted to the world.

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and today I'm in conversation with two incredible human beings who are the authors, the co-authors of this book, *What's Your Story?* I'm speaking today

with Rebecca Walker and Lily Diamond. Welcome to the show, Rebecca and Lily.

Lily: Thank you.

Rebecca: Thank you so much for having us. We're thrilled to be here.

Layla: I am thrilled to be in conversation with you and it's been a while since I've done a show where I had two guests and, honestly, they're usually my favorite. There's a lot of rich energy, especially between two people who have been in relationship with each other for some time and who worked together on their soul work and I know that this is going to be a very, very rich conversation so thank you for being here.

Lily: It's such a joy.

Rebecca: Yes, we're thrilled.

Layla: We're going to start with our very first question that we ask every single guest and it's up to you whoever wants to answer the question first: Who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?

Rebecca: Lily, you start.

Lily: I knew that was going to happen. But I always want to make sure that, you know, that's the desire. I was thinking — I'm a regular listener of the podcast and so this — I've been sitting with this question for the past few days, just thinking about it and my mother passed away almost 13 years ago and so that's, of course — well, maybe not of course but, for me, certainly feeling her presence as an ancestor in my life and the

many, many ways that she guided me when she was here through my young adulthood and informed my relationship, both to the human world but also to the natural world and to the earth, really spending time reflecting on the ways that my life has been a continued expression of the many seeds of experience and wisdom that she planted while she was here. She was an herbalist and an aroma therapist and someone who spent — she was a writer, spent a lot of time in deep work around understanding her relationship to the earth, to the natural world, and I think often as I move through my life how things would look to her now, what conversations would sound like with her now, and so much of that also informs, I think, the next sort of layer that came up for me around the ancestors that I, you know, seek wisdom from and sit with which, of course, goes — extends into that maternal lineage that came from her which is a Jewish ancestry, an Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry, and really looking into how my maternal ancestors worked with plants in the lands where they lived and worked with that earth and that land in sort of Eastern Europe and then understanding what that means for me to now live on — I'm on occupied native Hawaiian or kānaka maoli land on Maui. This is where I grew up and I've lived in many other places around the world but I'm deeply grateful to be back in the place where I grew up and I think a lot about the ancestors that occupy this land that feel incredibly alive and vital and vibrant in this place, in this space, and what it means for me as the second generation of white settlers within my family to live on this occupied indigenous Hawaiian land and to tend to this earth and to cultivate a relationship to this earth that has its own vitality, its own ancestors, and its own way of living and thriving and finding some way to survive the current mode of colonialist destruction and, you know, hypercapitalist destruction that we're in right now. So I think about those ancestors as well and what my role is in honoring their work and their living work.

Layla: That's powerful.

Lily: And I just lastly, very briefly, want to say that, for me, Rebecca has been an extraordinary living ancestor and mentor and guide and teacher for me in my work as I think about what it means to become a good ancestor and our work together which we'll be exploring so I won't even say that much now but I'm so grateful to be in this conversation sitting with both of you and with somebody who is truly a living good ancestor for me so, thank you, Rebecca.

Rebecca: Wow.

Layla: Love that.

Rebecca: Any time. That was beautiful. Thank you. There are so many ancestors to be grateful for, you know? It's hard to narrow it down. I feel so grateful to have been fed by so many and to be fed by so many now. I think that it's most appropriate to begin with my grandmother, you know, both of my grandmothers. My mother's mother, Minnie Lou Grant Walker, who was a leader in our community, who always, you know, even though she was a sharecropper and then a domestic who took care of white children more than she was able to take care of her own often, was known for planting flowers wherever she went, was respected as a clear thinking, soulful, just wise woman by many in her community in Georgia and who passed down this love of beauty and integrity and a kind of transcendence of circumstance to my mother who passed all those things down to me and I look like her and I, you know, I just — I feel her and I know that without all of the work that she did, I would not be here. And my grandmother on my other side, my father's mother, who graduated from high school, you know, Brooklyn, New York, you know, her parents who had fled the pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe, lived in, you know,

tenements until they could get out, who then worked six days a week supporting her three children alone as a woman in the '40s as a bookkeeper, and who loved me unconditionally, even in the midst of all of the really troubled racial dynamics in my family. She really showed up for me in a very powerful way and I love her and I see myself in her. She was feisty and strong and didn't take any lip from anyone and always made the effort and always sort of championed me and pushed me forward at every moment that, "This is my granddaughter," you know? Anyone who would question our relationship based on race, she wanted to quash that immediately and claim me over and over again and that will to claim and that resistance is something that I bring from her, that, you know, refusal to back down. And her incredible work ethic. Both of my grandparents were incredible. My grandmothers were incredible workers in so many ways in their communities, supporting their children, supporting themselves, so I think I really hold all of that. I think, you know, when we open it up, there are always the creative women. You know, I think right now of June Jordan, the poet who was an incredible supporter of me in my life from a very young age, you know? She was a part of the sisterhood with my mother as an, you know, African American writer and she always encouraged me to write; bell hooks, who is a living ancestor, who was a mentor of mine, who really literally taught me in so many ways how to see, how to see through, how to critique, how to have constructive criticism, how to see criticism as an act of love; and then I think, for my spiritual practice, I really feel all the ancestors who traveled out of Tibet with the Buddhist teachings, the Vajrayana teachings, pressed into their clothing and carried them over mountains, through the snow so that we could have those precious teachings. I think a lot about one of the most powerful teachers for me, who was Queen Indradevi, who was married to Jayavarman in Cambodia and he built — they built together, as real equals, in partnership, Angkor Wat fundamentally and she had a school

there, Ta Prohm, where she invited all kinds of students of Dharma, of Buddhism to study and protected them in the process and was a real teacher. And so I really, you know, when I went and visited the ruins of her school, I just wept because I...I still feel connected to that lineage and the same kind of devotion to trying to teach what it means to be compassionate and skillful and open and committed to non-dualism. And you. You, Layla, are a beautiful living — the work that you're doing is truly the work of a warrior.

Layla: Thank you, Rebecca.

Rebecca: And you inspire support, you know, the work that we're doing, that I do so I think that's a good —

Layla: Yeah.

Rebecca: — for the moment.

Layla: Thank you.

Rebecca: You know? And my mother —

Layla: No, you didn't. We gotta say your mother.

Rebecca: She's everything. I mean, you know, every day she amazes me with her buoyancy, even in the midst of all of what's happening in the world right now. My mother will send a photograph of a tree, of a child's smile, of, you know, a book that has brought her joy, you know, the way that she is able to remain upright in the midst of the onslaught and to be committed to joy as a spiritual practice, as a way to survive, and it's really inspiring to me.

Layla: Wow. Yes, your mum.

Rebecca: My mama.

Layla: I love what you've both shared because it reminds me that, in this question, it reminds us that we're not just standing alone. We're not just people who just arrived here with no roots, no history, no culture, no pain as well as joy, no lessons, no blessings, right? We are so held and I think that, particularly in the times that we are in now where so many of us feel like we are literally in survival mode, because we are, it's important to remember just how deep we go and how deep we are. So, thank you for how you both so beautifully shared from, you know, family members to teachers to the land itself and the histories that come with it all. Thank you so much. Beautiful, beautiful answers. Thank you.

Rebecca: Yes.

Layla: So, in the intro, I will have shared about, you know, just sort of the official buyers, right? The information about you both, but I would love to hear about your separate journeys and how they came to intersect and I'm particularly interested in how both your personal journeys as Lily and Rebecca met but also the work that you do and how it just seems to be that you've been able to do this work, the *What's Your Story?* work and the work that you do with such beauty and such rigor which is hard to do when it's with another person so there must be a lot that's in common there and almost like a soul that I knew before in another lifetime kind of thing, but I would love to hear it from your perspectives.

Lily: Yeah. I am happy to start and just give a bit of background and then Rebecca can continue on from her side. I met Rebecca in 2009 and I was living here on Maui and I was at a sort of pivotal juncture in my life where I was ready to transition out of

a period, a quite long period of study and teaching in yoga and meditation and I had decided that I was going to take three months off and it was also I was coming out of a deep moment of grief in my life. My mother had passed away. I had come out of a very intense romantic relationship that I sort of thought was going to be *the* romantic relationship of my life that was also tied up in my identity around teaching and the kind of spiritual studentship that I was engaged in at the time and everything had sort of fallen apart. My family felt like it was falling apart because my mother had died and also the kind of fabric of how I knew the world because my mother was such an incredible healer and such an amazing sort of like pillar of health, both for our family but also in our community and her becoming very sick, she had endometrial cancer and it was diagnosed very late stage and had already spread into her lymph system, it really shook up everything that I thought I knew about like the stories that I held around who am I? What is the right way to live? What is the right way to be? What is the right way to take care of myself? What is the right way to view the world around me? And in the collapse of all of that, I realized that I no longer felt comfortable sort of espousing a lot of the beliefs that I thought I held and that I thought were absolutely true for me and I realized I needed to take a step back from holding this role, both for myself and in the community of students that I had created around me, and I took this time off and I knew I wanted to go back to the one thing that had always been central for me, which was writing, and I got an e-mail from the Yale alumni club about — on Maui about Rebecca's masterclass, *The Art of Memoir*, and it turned out it was starting the day after I was — that was like my last day of teaching for this three-month period.

Layla: Wow.

Lily: Yeah. And the e-mail, it also said, you know, like at that juncture, I wasn't familiar with Rebecca's work and it said that her work focused on questions of race and gender and identity and sexuality and immediately I was like, "I'm interested in all of those. Yes," like those are the things that I wanted to be talking about, that I spend my time thinking about. And so I e-mailed her — Oh, I forgot. The classic like, you know, whatever, but this club, the Yale club, they hadn't VCC'd anyone on the e-mail and so everyone's e-mail addresses were just there —

Layla: Oh, wow.

Lily: — and I e-mailed Rebecca and then after I hit send, I Googled her and as soon as I Googled her, I was like, "Oh, my God. What did I just do?" I was like I could not believe that I just sent — I mean, there was nothing wrong with the e-mail. It was very respectful and still to this day I think there's something actually that I'm glad I sent that e-mail, obviously.

Layla: Yes. Do you think you would have sent it if you had Googled her before —

Lily: No.

Layla: — sending it? Do you think you —

Lily: No.

Layla: Right.

Lily: I would have spent like days thinking about it and composing it, you know, because I would have been like, oh, it could only be like three sentences and each one has to be the absolutely perfect distillation of everything that I want to say and who am I to, you know, e-mail this person and... Now, I

know that this is incredibly unusual but Rebecca herself wrote back to me within five minutes.

Layla: I love it.

Lily: And in my e-mail I had said to her, “I also went to Yale,” so I realized that that’s not evident but I guess maybe in the alumni thing, but we both went to Yale at different times and so I just said, you know, “I’m from class of ’05 and I am really interested in this course and I would love to know more about your work,” and she wrote back with the best possible response, which was like, “Read one of my books.” And she didn’t say it like that but that was the essence of what was communicated and so I did. I went out and I got *Black, White & Jewish* and I read it in an afternoon and I was so — you know, I’ve always been really drawn to understand this kind of like melancholy of fractured selfhood that I have felt in myself from the time that I was very young and I think there was something in *Black, White & Jewish* that I was just like — I mean, obviously, I don’t have any valence to understand what it’s like to be in a black body but to be living in a place where the way that I look immediately reads as a whole number of things around my identity, which, of course, is true for all of us. In Hawaii, whiteness is, you know, unique in the way that it communicates itself. And so I just felt immediately very connected to the work and deeply interested in, you know, wanting to learn and so, anyway, I took the Art of Memoir course and I do think, yeah, from the moment that we met and that I began to learn from Rebecca, I think I felt both that deep kind of kinship that that you’re talking about but also, being in the space of the Art of Memoir course, I recognized, you know, I have been very fortunate to sit with many extraordinary spiritual teachers from many different backgrounds, significantly from the Buddhist tradition, in my life and I felt like I was experiencing in that space a teacher who was able to

really meet people's minds in a way that is extraordinarily rare and to watch how people were able to dig into their stories, which, of course, is at the heart of the work that we now do together with *What's Your Story?* but to really see someone, Rebecca, as this guide allowing people to get both to the heart of their story and to their truth but also to understanding the spaces where we all have been holding on to stories that have kept us from being free. And so experiencing that, it was a transforming, a deeply transformative moment in time for me and for the path that I think my life would then take and, coming out of it over the next couple of years, I was a student of Rebecca's and we worked together in many different capacities and I assisted the Art of Memoir workshop and then, you know, this idea came forward of like, well, how do we really give people the tools that we all want and need to be able to be deeply honest with ourselves in such a way that allows us to do this transformative work, which, obviously, you know, in creating the workbook, the *Me and White Supremacy* workbook, is the same question that you held and we're asking and bringing forth into the world. And so *What's Your Story?* came out of that space and out of that desire to give people the tangible questions that can point them to the freedom to see the stories that we all hold, that shape and define our sense of self, and then liberate ourselves from them as we create new stories for both ourselves and the world.

Layla: Wow. Thank you for sharing that, Lily. I'm curious, Rebecca, you must have seen many students coming through the Art of Memoir class.

Rebecca: Yes.

Layla: I guess — Yes, where were you at that point in your life but what was it in particular about Lily?

Rebecca: Yeah, very important question. I have been writing memoirs and personal essays and working through the process of facing my own history, my own story, and the pain of it and the joy of it, but the complex sort of knots of it. I had been writing my way through those knots to achieve a level of liberation from the knots and to write a new story that was wholly mine instead of the story I had parroted from my family, from the culture, be that about being multiracial, being a mother, all different kinds of things that the culture had told me I needed to be. So I had gone through this process of doing this work and, also, I was living on Maui. I was 10 or 12 years into a very profound Buddhist studentship myself and had really come to the understanding that, in order to be truly free, I had to let go of all of the stories that I held, including the conceptual idea that stories themselves were important, you know? That I had to get to a place where everything was fundamentally empty, the understanding that the mind is really writing the story on all of these things that we're seeing in our world and so I was at a place where I was ready to teach, you know, because I had gotten there after so many years of holding. So, I started to teach in this way in the workshop because I felt called to do that and Lily appeared in the workshop and there was something about her openness that really struck me. Her openness, her curiosity, her desire to struggle with the stories that she was holding, her longing to be free. You know, in our tradition, the Vajrayana tradition, we always talk about the approach of the student —

Layla: Yeah.

Rebecca: — so how a student approaches a teacher is very, very important. The student who's ready engages in a process of reciprocity. They understand that they are taking from the teacher and that they have to give in a commensurate way. They come with a profound respect and appreciation. They ask

all the right questions, you know? So there are different ways that we describe it. It's right time, right teacher, right student, right teachings, and I felt at that moment that I had the right teachings for her, that she was the right student, and that it was the right time and that's something that is not in the human realm of logical thinking and yet it was very true and I recognized her. Now, then we started to work very deeply together, not just on writing but on helping her to evolve and it was a very intimate relationship, as teacher-student relationships often are, and I think one of the things that's important to talk about here is how challenging it is as a teacher of color to work with white students often, because you really — your dream as a teacher of color, especially with women of color, I think mine is and continues to be, your aspiration, is that you are able to transmit and support to other women of color and other people of color because that is it. And so when a white student approaches, there is something there and that needed to be worked through and I had to put my teaching on it, my practice on it, and understand that, once again, if the student approaches, you cannot get hung up on race and, at the same time, when a white student approaches a teacher of color, they must hold the space of understanding their need to engage in white supremacy, in their own whiteness, and take responsibility for it and I think that that was one of the things that allowed me, fundamentally, to move into such deep relationship with Lily because I felt that she was ready to do that work as well. And if she hadn't been, I think that the dynamic would have been much different and the depth of our togetherness and the longevity of our work together would not have been possible.

Layla: Right.

Rebecca: And as a teacher, and I'm sure you — many people listening to this and the two of you certainly know this, as a

teacher, you are always looking at students and thinking about the energy that you have to put into them and you want to make sure that you are choosing students who are going to take what you give and then spread it into the world in the most powerful way possible. So you don't want to teach a student necessarily who doesn't have the capacity to take the teachings wide and thrive in a meaningful way because your energy is finite in this world so you have to be very, very careful. That's the teaching for teachers. And my sense of Lily right away was that she was going to use whatever it was that I gave her to serve people beyond herself, whether it was the earth, whether it was an understanding of sovereignty on the island and beyond, and so all of that together facilitated, from my perspective, you know, from my — where I was sitting, our relationship.

Layla: Yeah.

Rebecca: And I'm happy to say that my assessment was correct, you know? Because often, in the middle of it, you hope that your assessment is correct but you're not 100 percent sure. But Lily has continued to do the work of understanding what whiteness is and privilege and white supremacy in all of its guises and to be a real living ancestor herself. She has really aspired and manifested very important work in the face of the resistance that so many white people get when they do that. And so I feel very, very good about the decision that we made together and, specifically, the decision that I made, I feel that my energy was well spent.

Layla: Right.

Rebecca: And she's given me a tremendous amount so that's, again, the reciprocity which is so important to the teacher relationship.

Layla: I love that you've shared this, Rebecca. Thank you so much for really going there and sharing the many nuances because, you know, you're speaking about the kind of — the soul-to-soul connection, right? As well as your own inner sense of intuition, inner knowing that this is someone who it's not just going to be a one-time encounter, there's something deeper here and, at the same time, very, very conscious and aware of the tension of the power that race and race privilege plays in that beautiful encounter together and I think that's so important for us to name because while we may be speaking here about the relationship between a teacher and a student, the same is true between the relationship between, you know, a parent and a child, partner to partner, friend to friend, whatever it is, people that we care about where race is there and love is also there at the same time and that both are there and that it's about really moving at the speed of trust, knowing that it's — from both sides, there has to be a movement together and, to a certain extent, and I love that you said, Rebecca, "I'm glad that my assessment was correct," right? Because you didn't know how it's going to turn out. You hope, you see, you're, you know, you're making some assessments based on what you see and what you feel inside but really, it is up to Lily and it is up to people who have white privilege to really hold that and say, "I am actually going to do the work and I'm going to stay in the work and that's what it requires," so I love that you've spoken about this because I think it's important just for the relationship between you two with each other and I'm grateful that you shared that but also the depth of the work that you do in *What's Your Story?* as well. I feel that really reflected there, as well. So, let's move on to talking about that. So, *What's Your Story? A Journal for Your Everyday Evolution*.

Rebecca: Sure.

Layla: I was going to say “revolution” and I think that could be correct as well, right?

Lily: We went in many directions with the title.

Layla: Really?

Lily: That was one of them.

Layla: Yes. I love it. I love the “Everyday Evolution” for the alliteration. I’m teaching my son, he’s six years old so they’re learning a lot about alliteration at the moment so I love it for that. Before we kind of dive into the format of the book and the kind of intention behind it, I just want to pull it back a bit more because you both have kind of touched on this in what you’ve shared in your stories. What is story and why is it so important to us as human beings, regardless of whether we’re writers. You’re both writers, I’m a writer, we don’t have to be writers to have a story, to engage with story. So what is story and why is it so fundamental to our sense of our humanity?

Lily: On my way here, I was listening to an interview with the writer, Hanif Abdurraqib, and he was talking about his self as a collection of selves and as I was listening, I was thinking, yeah, we are each individually a collection of selves but we’re also all each individually a collection of stories and I think what that means when we think about story in relationship to selfhood and to identity, when I think about it, it’s a way of understanding that we kind of imagine ourselves into being. We find ways to draw from the culture around us, from our families, from our parents, you know, from the earliest input that we get about who we are, you know, who we’re supposed to be, how we’re supposed to dress or look or talk or what we’re supposed to do with our lives. We stitch all of this input

together to create a sort of fabric of the narrative of who we are, of who I am as Lily, you know? I'm somebody who lives on Maui. I have this melancholy that I talked about earlier or, you know, I'm a white settler on occupied native Hawaiian land. I am somebody who is well educated or I'm a writer or whatever it may be that contributes to this story of self that we then begin to live out. And what happens often, for me, and I think that we want to share with the work of *What's Your Story?* is that those stories can become fixed and rather than understanding the fluidity of collective selves and collective stories that we have the capacity to share and to occupy within the span of a single day, we start to get fixed within the rigidity of, "No, this is who I am. This is the singular story that I occupy and this is what defines me and, therefore, I have to behave in x, y, z ways. I have to relate to people in x, y, z ways. I have to see my body as something that has its own story," and so we've taken this space with the book to give people doorways into each of the distinct arenas of life where we tell stories and where we hold stories and examine them and kind of mine them for the fluidity that we hope to instill for people and for ourselves.

Rebecca: Yes. I mean, I think, fundamentally, what we're saying and this is, you know, Lily just said it but I'm going to reiterate a little bit, that, as human beings, we are constantly making a story of every experience, anything that happens to us. Our minds are interpretive. Our minds, they are designed in such a way, we have been trained in such a way to place ourselves as a singular "I" in the midst of everything going on and then write a story about our experience based on that, based on what we see, based on what we touch, based on what we taste, based on what we have learned. In every situation, we are writing a story, right? Of what's happening. So I'm writing a story right now about doing this podcast, right? With you, and what it means and how we are to present and what we hope it is going

to do and, I mean, I'm writing a story. And I think that this is something that people are not quite conscious of because they are taught to do this story writing from the time they are born practically, when they are assigned a gender, when they are assigned a race, when they are assigned a class, when they are assigned an expectation from their families, they're given a story to perform for the rest of their lives and unless they wake up to the reality that the story is — can be completely dissipated with the right intention and the right teaching and that we have the will and the power to write a different story for ourselves that is more in alignment with who we feel authentically to be and who we want to be in the world. Unless we wake up and realize we have that power —

Layla: Right.

Rebecca: — we are fundamentally enslaved to old stories and that is personal and that is global. So, we are enmeshed in a story, as you well know, of white supremacy, for one. That is one big story. And it is manifested and facilitated and abetted by narratives that have been written, inculcated, taught, adopted by all of us who are walking around performing our role in the context of the play that has been written called white supremacy.

Layla: That's right.

Rebecca: And if we can wake up to that — and it's hurting us, it's hurting every single person. It's not a happy play, it is a tragic play.

Layla: Right.

Rebecca: It's a tragic play. So, our intention is to help people understand that they can actually consider the role they're

playing and change the script. They can rewrite the story. They can be in resistance to white supremacy, for instance. They can be in resistance. They can do so many things. And so our job is to just invite people to understand the ways in which they have been, I don't want to use the word "programmed" but they have been, you know, this script has been embedded in the very synapses of their brains, in the sinew of their bodies, and that they can do surgery themselves and rewire and that it is only through that rewiring and that rewriting of a better story that they will be healthier and happier and their families and their communities and the world. So, it's very similar to the work that you are doing and it's asking people to really take hold of what they can control, which is who they want to be and the story they want to teach and the story they want to give.

Lily: I think something that just in your drawing that comparison to the *Me and White Supremacy* workbook, I think something that comes out so powerfully in that work is offering people, and white people in particular, the language, the technology of language to actually name what is happening.

Rebecca: Yeah.

Lily: To say, "This is what you're seeing, this is what you're engaging in, this is what it is called, here is how you identify it, here's how you name it, and thereby here's how you dismantle it." And in that same way, as we offer these questions to people and, hopefully, you know, take them through this arc of this is a story that I have brought into this space of, you know, whether it's thinking about how we relate to our identity or our race or our bodies or the way we interface with technology or even, you know, all the way through to mortality, this is the story I'm carrying into this space. This is how it does not serve me, this is how it limits me. This is how it's fundamentally

dysfunctional. And then this is the new story that I want to write for myself in this arena, that by being able to actually see and name the old story, that it is only really from that space of naming that we can then choose something different and so, you know, as Rebecca is saying, it's like so many of us, we start off just thinking, "Well, this is the way that it is —

Layla: That's right.

Lily: — This is the way that it is. This is the way that the world looks and works for me," and to just crack open space for people and, we often talk about this, to just imagine something different is, in and of itself, such a tremendous act of resistance.

Layla: Yeah. What's really striking me with what both of you are sharing are two words. Lily used the word "fluidity," right? And so us believing that our story is very like, "This is my story and that's what it is and this is who I am," going from that to having these questions really open you up and also, I think, teach you the skill of asking yourself better questions, wider questions, questions that allow the other word, which was "freedom," more freedom to choose, more freedom to play, more freedom to be, and what I love about it is that it's not about writing a new defined story that now becomes your new box.

Rebecca: Yeah.

Layla: Right? It's not that. It's actually about the gift of knowing within yourself and then knowing how to have the skill of being able to constantly rewrite your story as you grow, as you learn, as you choose new things. That is very, very powerful.

Rebecca: Yes. That is beautiful. I'm so glad that you've clarified because that is what we are going for, the facility. It's a muscle.

It's an ability. So you want the facility to always be able to, in the moment, rewrite the story.

Layla: That's right.

Rebecca: You know, just see in your mind what you're living and just immediately change it. That is the key. That is freedom.

Layla: That's right.

Lily: Yeah. I'm thinking of someone who I know, a friend we share in common, Sinikiwe Dhliwayo, who has been a guest on the podcast as well. Sinikiwe defines wellness as agency and I think, in so many ways, when I think about freedom, I also think of agency, you know? I don't think there's freedom without agency. And so when I think about that fluidity and building that muscle, having the understanding that we have to move out of a kind of nihilism and a sense of defeatedness, which is what white supremacy and what, you know, heteropatriarchal culture wants us to believe that we do not have control, we do not have the ability to choose something different, to move out of that and just say, "No, I have agency to write a new story because I don't want to live in a world where there is horrific, unjust inequity. I'm going to write a new story that dismantles this old paradigm." But it takes a willingness to, you know, for those who have the privilege to do so, to choose to use their agency in that way and to create space for those who do not have that privilege to then have the agency themselves.

Layla: That's right. So I would say *Me and White Supremacy* is not a book that you read, it's a book that you do. *What's Your Story?* is not a book that you read, it's a book that you do. It is specifically a journaling book. It is this — in the same way that I sort of see the *Me and White Supremacy* workbook, like it's

your thing, it's your sacred book that you sit down with and you put pen to paper on and you do the work of really examining your stories, your beliefs, your memories, your choices, and it's also beautifully laid out. I love that you've done it this way. It's beautifully laid out, where it takes you through the course of a single day while also facilitating an examination of some major areas of our lives, you know? Creativity, technology, the body, money, spirituality, so many of these different layers but laid out throughout a single day, which I thought was a really powerful way to take very, very deep work and make it not seem so overwhelming, right? So I love that you made that choice. The other thing that I really love about it is I was walking through it, going through it, was that it felt like a flower bud flowering. As you go through question to question to question, it kind of opens up because it starts with, I want to go to the very first question. I don't know what I expected. I'm always asking myself to like question expectations. I don't know what my expectation of the first question was, but this is what the first question is: "What is your first memory? Did you experience it or did someone tell it to you so many times it came to feel like your own?" And I don't know what it is about this question but it was like, okay, we're going back to day 1 of my story.

Rebecca: Yes.

Layla: Before the, "This is the bad thing that happened to me, this is the pain that I've been through, this is what I'm carrying." It's not a charged question, it's just what is your first memory?

Rebecca: Yeah.

Layla: And I love that you started there. So I'm curious what made you start there?

Rebecca: Well, I think that the foundation of so much of what we believe about ourselves begins with the first memory in some ways and, actually, it's important in the process that we're inviting to begin to understand the difference between your own lived experience and what you have been told is your experience. So, the question is really twofold and, I mean, it is "What is your first memory?" but the more important, I think —

Layla: It's like a layer underneath. Yeah.

Rebecca: Yeah. The intention is, okay, start to think about the fact that the stories that you're holding may not even have come from you from the very beginning and your parents or whomever may have had their own agenda in telling you that story again and again and then you may have internalized it and you may have built upon it and you need to really start to find the space between where your own mind and theirs begins or yours begins and theirs — what is happening right there —

Layla: Yeah.

Rebecca: — because that's how you can begin to really own your own truth.

Layla: Yeah.

Rebecca: And, yes, of course, we wanted to go all the way back, you know? All the way back to the beginning because the story begins at the beginning. The story begins before you were even born.

Layla: Yes.

Rebecca: You know, my parents met in the civil rights movement. The story of me as a mixed race child, a movement child, a child who would embody a vision for a different future, my story was already baked in when I was in my mother's womb and so my process of becoming and finding my own story had to include grappling with the story I was given and figuring out what that meant to me and what I wanted my own story to be and how I wanted my story to intersect with that original story.

Layla: Right. And it's easy to think, "This is where I'm at right now. I have these fears." Lily, you use this wording that I really loved and it really struck me because I know that I felt like that for a lot of my life, it's not something I carry now because of the work that I've done, but you said a "melancholy fractured sense of selfhood" and so, you know, let's put me back in 24, 25 years old, definitely, that's where I was at, that's how I would describe myself.

Rebecca: That's when I published that book, *Black, White and Jewish*, which was all of that —

Layla: Wow.

Rebecca: — definitely the time dealing with that. I'm sorry to interrupt.

Layla: Right. No, it's okay. So I'm encountering teachers, such as yourself, works like what you offer but before I go into it, I'm going in thinking, okay, so these are all the things I don't like about myself, right? I don't like that I feel anxious all the time. I carry a sense of sort of lingering depression. I don't really know what my work is that I'm here to do, you know? All of these feelings. I'll just write a new story about who I want to be and I'm going to make her the complete opposite of who I am now,

right? She's going to be confident. She knows who she is, right? She's just always happy, just joyful all the time, right? All of those things to try and run away from the place that I'm at right now. What I love about how you've done it is we are wanting — this is me putting words in your mouth, we're wanting you to be able to have the freedom and the fluidity to write a new story but in order to do that, you have to go back to the beginning and walk through it first.

Lily: Yeah.

Layla: Right? To understand that it's not about running away from yourself.

Rebecca: Yeah.

Layla: It's actually coming face to face and reckoning with yourself.

Rebecca: Yeah.

Lily: Yeah.

Layla: Yeah.

Lily: So much of my work and I think all of our work, certainly in this book and, as you just expressed, there's no spiritual bypassing happening here, you know? Like there's no —

Layla: That's right.

Lily: — this is not a space where we're sit — we're paving over something or we're taking like the freeway to a new identity. This is saying, no, how do we really, really get to the core of what it means to be free and to be able to rewrite our sense of

ourselves and the world that we see around us in such a way that takes into account all of the loss that we've experienced, all of the grief, all of those fractured selves that we may have carried for many, many years, all of the stories that have been poured into us that we no longer want to carry, that we, you know, must liberate ourselves from —

Rebecca: Yeah.

Lily: — and I think refusing that kind of spiritual bypassing is so critical to being able to show up for the kind of world that we want to live in that is inclusive of stories that collectively liberate us rather than keep us with a kind of veil over our eyes of really seeing the pain and the suffering that we're all experiencing.

Rebecca: Yeah. I think it's extremely important for oppressed peoples, for people who have been victimized in many different ways, in any way, I mean, and we all have been —

Layla: Right.

Rebecca: — to really get clear about what has happened to us and what has been done to us and because, unless you really understand why certain things are happening, why you can't get that apartment because of the color of your skin, why you are being given subpar medical care, why you were not allowed to have the education that you should have had, why you feel exhausted at the end of every day when you have to encounter white supremacy at every moment, why — I mean, unless you understand why and how you were wounded —

Layla: That's right.

Rebecca: — and how this systemic situation has created the injury that you are carrying, you blame yourself. You think it's you.

Layla: That's right.

Rebecca: And so people are walking around thinking that there's something wrong with them when, in fact, the entire thing that we are in right now is designed to kill them, basically, and dehumanize all of us and we think we did it. So, in terms of this facing of your story, it's about also facing that you have been injured and so when you are able to articulate that and understand the mechanism that injured you, your story changes instantly.

Layla: That's right.

Rebecca: You go from being someone who doesn't understand why you are this way and thinking that you're a failure to understanding that something has actually been done to you to put you in this position. And if that is true, then someone else needs to be accountable and that it is not about you absorbing —

Layla: That's right.

Rebecca: — you know, I always tell my son, and I know this is a little profane, you know, but people want to throw their shit at you and you must throw it back to them. You cannot carry around people's garbage. That is not your job.

Layla: Right.

Rebecca: You are not a trash receptacle. They have their ideas, they throw them at you, they want you to take that story on. Your job? Throw it back at them. It's not you —

Layla: That's right.

Rebecca: — it's them. And I think that intervention for people who have struggled for so long to wake up to that, I mean, we've known it but we often forget and we think it's us and it's — that is part of what we want to do.

Layla: Yeah.

Rebecca: Restore a sense of wholeness by helping people to recognize that the stories that they're carrying are not the ones that they have written but that are stories that are designed, fundamentally, to disable them, to disable their imagination, to disable their sense of power, to disable their more profound self-determining narrative.

Layla: Right.

Lily: Yeah, and to do so in order to uphold the dominant hegemonic white supremacist narrative, like at the specific cost of keeping that narrative as the primary story.

Layla: Right.

Rebecca: Yeah. Or it's some other narrative or it's like the narcissist who wants to keep their power. I mean, which we could say is embedded in all of the things that we're talking about but it's every injury, it's every dynamic in which some schism in the mental psychic health of another human being is brought to bear on who you are —

Layla: Yeah.

Rebecca: — and the need to understand that that has been done to you. That it's someone else's story.

Layla: Yeah. The book really walks people through their own relationship with themselves, their relationship with other people, and the relationship with the world at large, with the collective. I was really struck by some of the questions where, Lily, at the beginning, you were talking about your relationship with the land, right? And there are questions in the book about, you know, our relationship with the land and whether we are indigenous to that land and what our responsibilities are to the land and I'm guessing sort of in a bookshop would be shelved under self-help personal development. These are not questions that are often asked. It's often just about the self and your relationship with yourself. Your relationship with your loved ones, possibly, right? The people closest to you and most important to you, but certainly not the world at large, certainly not our relationship with capitalism, with the land, like I said, with activism, and I love that that was done but it felt like this natural extension and this is how I feel about this kind of work is that if we are working within ourselves to do this healing work, it is only natural that it would spill over because we are not just these people living in pods that are not affected by the world and are not affecting the world, right? And so I love that that was thread throughout. What is your hope for people who are picking up this book who maybe are not expecting that, right? Maybe are just looking at, "I just need to sort myself out, like I am a hot mess and I've only got the capacity and bandwidth to deal with myself." What do you want people to know about why it's important to keep spreading out, right? So that flowering that I was talking about, it's not just you, it's the whole world.

Lily: I think that one of our — well, I don't want to speak for Rebecca but one of my favorite chapters and I think ours together is the chapter on being in community and that rests at kind of the center of the book because we have structured it as this natural flow or expression of moving from our own minds and bodies out into the world and then back into reckoning with our own mortality but that central point of understanding, "Oh, okay, I'm part of a community," and being part of a community, it doesn't just mean my friends or the people that I hang out with, it means the entire community of people, you know, within, yes, my immediate family or my neighborhood or my town, the county, the state that I live in, but it's the community of the land that you live on, the health of the sky and the air or the environment, the oxygen that you breathe, the politics of the place around you that is determining what the roads look like on the street to your house that allows you to move freely or not within the public spaces that surround you, and then starting to understand how we do not exist alone in any way, like there is no way in which we exist alone, even if we try to separate ourselves and say, "Okay, I'm going to go and —

Layla: Right.

Lily: — I need to just be alone with myself and take this book and figure out my life. I'm gonna go be in a cabin in the woods and nobody's gonna talk to," well, you've made a community already. You're now in community with the land where you are in this cabin by yourself. You're in a community with, you know, whoever built that cabin, whoever has maintained it so that you can go there and have this peaceful retreat. You are in some kind of relationship with that land there, with the people who came before you who lived on that land, and I think understanding this degree of interconnectedness helps us, helps me to remember that nothing that I do, as you said,

there's nothing that I do that is only relevant or related to myself. Every choice that I make —

Layla: That's right.

Lily: — connects me to some larger community, earth and human, and so my hope when someone picks this up and they start to see, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, this is not what I signed up for," is that it just, again, like cracks open some space for them, for the question of, well, what does it mean that I am feeling this resistance?

Layla: That's right. Yeah, resistance was something I wanted to ask about, actually, because there were some questions that I was like, oh, you know what I mean? Like that initial like I don't want to look at that, right? I'm not ready to go there within myself. But those are always the best questions because they have so much gold there. What do you encourage people to do, Rebecca, in those moments of, "I don't wanna look at this. I wanna go on to the next question that's easier for me to handle"?

Rebecca: Right. I wanted to just follow up on that first question very briefly —

Layla: Yes.

Rebecca: — the last question, because I thought it was so beautiful that you've brought this idea of the opening flower into the conversation and I think that the person who comes in and they're a hot mess and they're like, "Whoa, how do I deal with it?" I think the goal for us is for their flower gradually to open and for that flower to be witnessed by others as something beautiful and sacred and something that inspires

others to develop themselves into flowers and my favorite part of the book is the end where we really talk about —

Layla: I like the end.

Rebecca: Yeah, right? So it's what does it mean to die a good death, number one, and I think to die a good death, you want to have flowered, you know? You want to have opened. You want to be the kind of embodiment of a kind of beauty that comes from a clarity of purpose and a real self-awareness of who you are and how you affect others and that's how you can die a good death. And then, of course, the next part is now that you have a new story, you must recognize that you can let go of all stories and that is the true liberation from this. So, I think that for the person who's just a hot mess and, you know, it's like AA, it's just work the steps, you know? It's just go through it and allow yourself to bloom.

Layla: Yeah.

Rebecca: Which connects to your next question about when you feel those points of resistance. I think that points of resistance are critical and I think that what happens is we need to develop the muscle and the ability to relax into the moment of difficulty and to recognize that the moment of difficulty is not going to destroy us. That feelings, thoughts, you know, I often say to my family here I'm not afraid of any feeling that you have. You can bring me any feeling, you can bring me any thought, I'm not afraid of it. There's no fear. They're going to come, they're going to go, we need to be able to sit with them, look at them all and not shutting them down, pushing them out, thinking that if we acknowledge those naughty moments, we could be destroyed. In fact, it's the opposite. When we really look at them, not only do we realize that we can step into our moments of true terror and survive them, which gives us

incredible strength moving forward because we now know we can survive terror —

Layla: Yeah.

Rebecca: — right? But we find within them the knot that we can loosen. We can loosen, we can —

Layla: Yeah.

Rebecca: — we get more space. So I like the moments of resistance but we do have to learn how to slow down in those moments —

Layla: Yes.

Rebecca: — and that's very hard. That's something I have struggled with a lot. Because I — in my life, and I had to really work on it and I still do, I sometimes — I don't want to hear, you know, just...but then I realize, no, I remind myself, no, just calm down and just listen. You'll make it. So that's what I would suggest. Those moments of resistance, to approach them fearlessly, in a way, gently, and to recognize that they can — gently, yeah, and that they have something to give you. And if that thing is just the knowing that you can survive any terrible, scary feeling, thought, that is enough. That is a huge gift to get to the other side.

Layla: I love that you said it's about loosening the knot because, you know, it's not about having this dramatic aha moment or this like sudden about turn where you face the dragon head on and I'm finally going to face my big fear about this particular thing and overcome it and from — when I finish this journaling, right? I'm going to be over that bridge and it will be behind me now. I think a lot of us approach personal development,

personal growth, right? Our own healing, the healing of the world, activism, right? In that way, where it has to be this dramatic, big thing whereas what's actually going on and what I think is more sustainable is the approach that you're talking about, Rebecca, about loosening the knot, being gentle with it, trying to really have a transformation, a real transformation, instead of the performance of a transformation.

Rebecca: Yes. We are all on the mission to help people avoid performances of transformation as opposed to real —

Layla: That's right. That's right.

Rebecca: That is [inaudible]

Lily: Yeah.

Rebecca: That is big right now with all of the virtue signaling and all of the pseudotransformation that seems to be happening. You know, consciousness has to change, and sometimes it's slow but much better to go slow and have it be lasting —

Layla: Yes.

Rebecca: — than to fake it and have it be fundamentally in service of the bigger problem.

Layla: That's right. This has been a really beautiful conversation and powerful for me and I hope for our listeners too because this question that I'm constantly reflecting on and asking myself and sort of sitting in is what does it mean to me to be a good ancestor and I would love for you to both share that in a moment, but story and being able to interrogate our stories, sit with them, rewrite them, be with the stories of the world,

right? Be with people and their stories and write new stories together, that, to me, is a huge part of what it means to be a good ancestor because it's about really being conscious about the way that you live your life and what you want that legacy to be. So, I just want to say thank you to both of you for this really beautiful conversation and for this incredible work and I want to encourage our listeners to go pick up *What's Your Story?* if this is something that you have been looking for, especially in the times that we are in now where there is so much fear, there is so much that is unknown and uncertain but there's also moments of opportunity for rewriting our stories as well and this book also lives beyond this moment, right? This book isn't just relevant now, it would have been relevant to me 10 years from now and I think it's just such a beautiful act of service and I just want to thank you both for it so much. Thank you.

Rebecca: Thank you. That's beautiful.

Lily: Thank you, Layla.

Layla: So, what does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Lily: You know, I had another big shift, a different one from the earlier one I was talking about in my professional life over the past few years, actually, and it came from a deep discomfort, actually, speaking of resistance, a deep resistance and a recognition that I'd created a platform for myself and my work and my writing and I didn't feel I was using it to express the full depth of the work that I wanted to do in my life and that felt incredibly uncomfortable and as I went about the process of revisioning and rewriting the story of what it meant to me to use this space that I had created, what came to me and what's coming to me now as I think about this question is that, you know, I want to tell stories that help people feel more deeply in such a way that we cannot help but recognize our

interconnectedness, because at the heart of our suffering each individually and the hurt that we each feel individually is the reality that we are all experiencing these same kinds of suffering. We're all experiencing in different ways this same reckoning with fractured selfhood and with a need to restore agency and to restore humanity and so I think for me to be able to tell stories in the work that I do, both in human and, you know, earth-centered communities, to instill that deep sense of interconnectedness through the simple recognition that we all feel and hurt in the same ways. That's my hope.

Rebecca: That's beautiful.

Layla: Beautiful. Thank you, Lily.

Rebecca: To be a good ancestor, I know that I have to continue to show up for all the people that I love, that all the people that are in my immediate space that I love and then who extend out into the world, just keep showing up and to keep showing up and doing my work. My work is to love, my work is to evolve, my work is to show that you can speak your truth, that you can live in this world as a whole human being with your full spectrum of your humanity, that that is your birthright. That, to me, is being as a good ancestor, is giving people the modeling, the vision of living free in the midst of incredible forces arrayed against us, against our freedom, and to never give up, you know? Never give up, which is very difficult —

Layla: Yes.

Rebecca: — but that is what we need is for people to understand that you've got to stay in it and even if that means when you're exhausted, resting or withdrawing —

Layla: Yes.

Rebecca: — you know, feeding yourself is also staying in it because it will allow you to come back. It will allow you to survive and staying in it in this world where everybody's, you know, our survival is not the top priority. If we make that our priority, that is staying in it, that is not giving up.

Layla: That's right.

Rebecca: And I want to honor my ancestors. I think that is part of being a good ancestor is understanding that I will be joining a tremendous legacy and group of beings who have given, you know, everything.

Layla: Yeah. That's beautiful. Rebecca Walker, Lily Diamond, thank you so much for this incredible conversation and thank you for being a part of Good Ancestor Podcast.

Rebecca: Thank you so much, Layla, for all that you've done and for having us here today. It's a real joy and we say hello to everyone out there listening and hope that this has been meaningful for you and that we see you at some point, even if it's in our pages only that we see you sometime soon.

Layla: That's right.

Lily: Yeah, thank you. And an invitation, just as a closing note, as well about the book to feel in the same way, you know, that you described, Layla, that the *Me and White Supremacy* book is like this incredible safe space for people to hold their journey and their evolution, that to give yourself permission to create that with the *What's Your Story?* journal, that it can be this private act of revolution for yourself and for your life and we wish that for you.

Rebecca: Yes. And we love you all. As we say in the back —

Layla: We do.

Rebecca: We love you. We love you.

Layla: We do. Thank you.

Rebecca: 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.