

Thérèse: What I'm really hoping is a leadership that's based on love, that's based on love and love for ourselves, love for one another, love for the earth, and a leadership that is relational, a leadership that is, "What do I have to offer?" It's not constantly extracting.

(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.

Thérèse Cator is a mother, a trauma-informed embodiment practitioner, a leadership coach, an artist, and the founder of Embodied Black Girl, a global community that stands for the embodied liberation of Black women and femmes and women of color everywhere.

Embodied Black Girl is devoted to creating a safe space for Black women and femmes and women of color to heal from intergenerational trauma, racialized stress, and colonial conditioning in service of our individual and collective liberation and healing.

Her work deeply explores the shadows and gifts of humanity and bridges leadership, spirituality, healing, somatics, mindfulness, decolonization, and social change. Thérèse deeply

believes that healing is both personal and political, spiritual and corporeal.

*In 2020, Thérèse led many healing circles for the Black community, attended by nearly 5,000 people. She also led *Becoming Human*, a series of lessons for white people to dismantle white supremacy for thousands of people. Thérèse's work has been featured in *Forbes*, *Motherly* magazine, *mindbodygreen*, and *Women's Health* magazine.*

(interview)

Layla: Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and I'm here today with the wonderful guest, Thérèse Cator, who is the founder of Embodied Black Girl and somebody who I got to spend some wonderful sister time with pre-pandemic in 2019 in New York, somebody whose smile just lights up the room and whose energy is just, ah, just makes you wanna melt and relax and to tap into yourself. So, welcome to the show, Thérèse.

Thérèse: Thank you so much, Layla, for having me. I'm so glad to be here and having this conversation together. I'm excited.

Layla: I'm excited to be in conversation with you too and we have a lot to talk about. I love the work that you do and it spans — it has great — it spans a lot, but there's also a lot of depth to it but it's essentially healing work and it's healing work for Black women and women of color and Black femme so I'm excited to talk about that in this conversation. But we are gonna kick off with our very first question: Who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?

Thérèse: Yeah, I love that you ask that question on the podcast and I've listened to many interesting answers. And as I was feeling into that, I would have to say, first of all, I have to bring into my heart my dad who passed away a number of years ago, actually it's going to be a decade ago next year. And so he's definitely one of the ancestors that continue to impact me and I feel like our connection, even after his passing, his death, has even been stronger. And he was a healer so there's been messages and medicine that he's given to me or shared with me since that time. I would also have to say Maya Angelou. I absolutely love Maya Angelou. I just remember being in grade school and her poetry and really being moved. And even before Maya Angelou, it has to be Toni Morrison. One of the first books I read also in elementary school was *The Bluest Eye* and it was the first book that opened, that I felt spoke to me about my experience and who I am in the world. And I would also say a couple of other ancestors are Toussaint Louverture. I was actually born in *Ayiti*, which is the indigenous name for Haiti. I came here when I was really small, like only a couple years old, so definitely that revolutionary blood runs through my veins. So, Louverture and also some of the women who were part of the revolution that don't get talked about much, like Suzanne Bélair. And a lot of authors. For example, she's someone who's living but Edwidge Danticat who is an amazing author and writes about the diasporic experience from a Haitian lens. So, those are just a couple of the people who really, really inspire me.

Layla: Oh, that's beautiful. And I love what you shared about your father. Can you tell us a little bit more — you said he's a healer and you've received a lot of messages, I mean, more since he's passed, actually, and it sounds like there's a really strong spiritual connection there. Tell us a little bit about that and how it's influenced your own journey for yourself but also how you show up in the world and your work?

Thérèse: Yeah. I mentioned my dad and, along with him, I have to say my aunt, Renee, who also is an ancestor and she's also a healer as well. But my dad, he was also in accounting and finance and he was also a healer and he's trained and comes from many, many, many generations or hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years of healing tradition. And if people know a little bit about the Haitian culture, basically, it's a mixture of African spirituality as well as, a lot of people don't also recognize, it's also a mixture of Taíno as well. So, a lot of people think, "Oh, the Taíno people weren't there," but that's actually not true. That's actually white supremacy that erases the indigeneity —

Layla: Indigeneity.

Thérèse: Yes, that word. Of Black folks, right? Of Black folks. So, there's a reclamation of that. So, with my dad, so many things. I was experiencing an illness last year and it was literally through dream work that he came and he gave me medicine that I — literal medicine, and I had a series of tests and the doctor was saying, "Oh, you have to go and have an operation right away," and after I did all of the things that he told me to do, when I went back, it was completely gone. Whatever they thought, they were like, "Oh, that's it," and that was in the middle of the pandemic. So, mind you, I had to go to the doctor and all of those things in the middle of pandemic, there was no vaccine, like there was so much things up in the air. So, I definitely believe when we're, you know, connecting and reclaiming those aspects of us, of our roots, especially as Black folks, the medicine is within us and it's about knowing how to tap into that medicine.

Layla: You speak a lot in your work about the decolonial healing work that needs to be done and as I'm hearing you share this

story, I'm thinking about the ways in which that ancestral healing medicine, knowledge, wisdom, for so long and by so many of us, because we've been conditioned that way, has been either rejected as lesser than by ourselves, right? Or appropriated, exoticized by those who are in dominant culture. So, that space of reclamation, how have you seen — because I feel like a lot has happened in terms of our relationships with ourselves and our identities and our backgrounds within a very short time over these last few years. How have you seen how that looks like, especially for your community and your clients, and what are some things that you encourage people to do as they reclaim these — what has been taken as new age but really is old age practices?

Thérèse: Yeah. I mean, one of the things that I was thinking just the other day is that the revolution will not be commodified. And it's all about the commodification of these things for capitalism and part of it is knowing this is medicine that our ancestors used for liberation. This is liberatory medicine. This wasn't for capitalistic gain. We live within capitalism, obviously, so I'm not against — part of capitalism is the desire for Black women to be poor and to be destitute and I'm not for that, because we live — we have to be realistic, we live within the system. But, at the same time, there is the medicine that we have, capitalism commodifies it to be like, oh, this trendy thing, and then they move on to the next, right? At a certain point, they move on to the next thing. But this medicine is actually, ultimately, so that we can be embodied, so that we can stand for liberation, right? And I was just thinking about — we use the word “embodied,” a lot of people use the word “somatics,” and somatics is, again, it's just the commodification of embodiment. And embodiment is our birthright. Embodiment is emancipation. And we all, depending on the person's identity, we have different points of entry of the work that we have to do, like what you were just sharing around with Black

folks, with folks of color, indigenous folks, we internalize that oppression —

Layla: That's right.

Thérèse: — so it's about unpacking that internalized oppression and removing blame, because a lot of it — a lot of what I see is the internalized oppression shows up as blame. Blame of the self, of like, "Oh, the reason why I'm not or I don't have X, Y, Z is because I didn't work hard enough or I didn't...or my parents didn't work hard enough," or all of these external things and, of course, there's always a degree of like what are their choices, but then when our choices are thwarted over and over again so that it's like you're literally like a mouse running on a hamster wheel going nowhere and that's been the experience of so many Black people and folks of color and we have to break that legacy of that experience and it starts, I believe, with like embodiment. It starts with decolonizing our bodies. It starts with decolonizing our leadership. Like you're a leader, right? But the way that leadership has been commodified, capitalized is like —

Layla: That's right. Capitalized —

Thérèse: — right? Is that leadership looks like a white dude, right? It looks like tech bros, which are actually killing the earth. Like let's be real, you know? It's really killing the earth. And I guess this is the time to share this with you. Several months ago, I heard, just like literally just in my meditation, I just heard the words "decolonize or die." Decolonize or die. And it literally stopped me in my tracks and what that really brought forward is that human beings are almost like the enemy to the earth. Right? We're supposed to be in relationship —

Layla: Right. And to ourselves —

Thérèse: Yeah, to ourselves, to one another. But it's that thinking.

Layla: Right. So I wanna, 'cause I love diving deep, but I wanna make sure that, as we're diving deep, everyone is with us, right? We've shared some key terms here that I would love for you to break down from your perspective of how you understand them and what they mean to you. The two terms would be "embodiment," what does embodiment mean to you? And what does "decolonization" mean to you and how have you come to understand it and how they link — how that embodiment and decolonization link together?

Thérèse: So, we're all embodied, right? Embodiment really simply means being in your body. However, depending on our beliefs, depending on how the trauma that we hold and we carry, our embodiments are different, right? The way that we're able to show up, and actually we can show up in a disembodied way. And disembodied, to me, is being connected just simply in your head. Embodiment is when you're connected neck down, right? You're connected in your heart, you're connected into your gut, you're connected in your legs, and so much of white supremacy culture is all right here, right? Everything that happens with the neck up, it's all cognitive. So, embodiment, when I've talked about embodiment, it's moving from just the cognitive, yes, we need the cognitive, to incorporating the rest of our body. And the rest of our body is connected to each other, it's connected to the earth, it's connected to our ancestors, and it's connected to future generations.

Layla: How does disembodied behavior or — how does it manifest? How does it show up? How do we know that we're operating from a disembodied state? Because I think, because

we have this brain, this wonderful, beautiful brain through which we are able to imagine worlds and feel our feelings and all of that, sometimes, we can, I think, convince ourselves that we are embodied, but how do we actually know in our body? What does embodied behavior look like? What does disembodiment look like?

Thérèse: Yeah, it's making decisions that are from a relational space, opposed to an individualistic state, right? Because capitalism and white supremacy, I would say, there's many, many different ways but I feel like one of the first things it's like, are you making decisions and choices from a relational space or are you always looking to extract? I remember years ago, one of my teachers, Michael Bernard Beckwith, he said this culture, everyone is always jockeying and maneuvering and trying, it's like trying to like get into the right position, right? The right position so that we're able to have access and things like that, when — and then we push away. What we do is we push away that relational being, the relation way of being, and we're not honoring our rhythms. That's another way, like if you're not honoring your rhythm or don't know what your rhythm is or don't know what I'm talking about, that's the way to tell you're not operating from an embodied or a holistically embodied place. Because, if we notice, the earth, everything, it's in rhythms. We are in cycles. The birth, rebirth, death, birth, death, rebirth, birth, death, rebirth cycle, but we all have our own unique rhythm. So that's another way. Like there's productivity, if you're just working all the time, which we're indoctrinated to do, that is one way to know, "Okay, I'm operating from that paradigm, from a colonized paradigm of leadership."

Layla: Right. And so thank you for that. I love what you said about are you operating from a relational way of being versus an individualistic way of being and how we know that is part of

white supremacist culture and the ways that white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, ableism, all of them are linked together to keep us focused on production, production, cost, power, right? At a detriment to ourselves and benefit to a very small group of humanity. It's hard, I think, to — it's helpful, I think, to hear this because so much of the way that the world is set up and life is set up is that paradigm so if we're just going along with the way things are, it is the norm, everyone else is doing it. When we see someone resting, we may say, "Oh, they're lazy," or, "They're so privileged," or, "They don't care to hustle," or to, you know, "They don't care about success," or so on and so forth, but, in many ways, and I know you've spoken about this and so many others I love, The Nap Ministry who speaks about this a lot, the importance of rest. Resting as a practice of liberation as well. So I'm gonna park that because I wanna talk about that, but I wanna come back to what is your personal definition of what decolonization means?

Thérèse: Yeah, thank you. I was just thinking about that. So, for me, decolonization, I know that's like a buzzword in some ways, like a lot of people use that word. However, decolonization is something that is rooted in culture, right? That is rooted, especially depending on certain BIPOC cultures, it's rooted in that. So, decolonization, that's a word that I grew up with. That's what my mom would talk about, because, actually, Haiti, *Ayiti*, is the first nation, Black nation and Latin American nation, that decolonized, right? And their definition of decolonization was freedom from colonial powers, right? Independence from colonial powers, from the white French folks. And — however, there's another level of decolonization that means, okay, sure, you get your freedom. Now, you don't want to operate in the same way and do the same things that were done to you. So, decolonization, there's another aspect of reclaiming our cultures, reclaiming our roots, reclaiming our practices, reclaiming being in a cyclical way of being and operating. And, I

have to say, there's many, many people who have spoken about decolonization, that have written about it. But, for me, I don't want to — and this is another way that I feel like the cognitive always like tries to trump oral history, this is oral history that has gone back hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years in my family around decolonization, it's really being embodied, it's really saying, "I am free, I am free in my body, I am free in my thoughts and my actions, and I'm also not going to do what you have done to me." So, and I also have to say, decolonization is something that is BIPOC-led, because if you look it up, you can't find the etymology, you can't find, you know, a lot — it's BIPOC-led, so I say that, because I think it's really important to name that of who is supposed to be leading the conversations around it.

Layla: Absolutely, absolutely. Thank you for sharing that. So, rest as a liberatory practice, talk to us about that, and your own journey, I wanna hear about your journey with rest. Is it something that you were taught by, you know, your family and so it has always been a practice? Or is it something that you've had to slowly give yourself more and more permission for over time?

Thérèse: That's interesting you asked that. My mom, we would always have to take naps, growing up, and I hated it. I was like, "I don't wanna nap. I don't wanna nap." I mean, I'm talking about even in elementary school, she'd be like, "Oh, rest, you know, it's like summer break, rest," like she would always be telling us to rest and it was actually annoying. It was actually annoying for me because I was like, oh, in order to, at that time, like I was indoctrinated, I'm like in order to succeed, you can't rest. So even though my mom, I grew up with activists in my family and my mom taking me, it was still something within me that I learned, okay, in order to be successful, I have to work hard and I don't have time to rest. So, for me, the practice

of resting really became important after I experienced illness when I was in college, right? And I had to get my gallbladder taken out. And I remember at the time, my doctor was like, “Oh, this is not something that you see in young folks at your age, like you would — this would be something that if you were 50s or 60s, even older than that —

Layla: Oh, wow.

Thérèse: However, it’s really common. So, for me, that started this like asking myself a lot of questions and it was really taking on more of an Americanized way of being, and when I say “Americanized,” I’m talking about like eat at McDonald’s or, you know, not taking care of myself in those ways. And I have to also name that, for many people, you don’t have a choice to do that, like I grew up poor —

Layla: That’s right.

Thérèse: — right? I grew up poor, so food scarcity is real. Is real. So that is what a lot of folks sometimes what we had to eat, but part of it was really interrogating those things and interrogating like, “Okay, why was I running around?” and it took me many more years to embody that, to really unpack what was going on and letting go. A big part of it has been letting go for me of what success looks like, not defining it through the lens of white supremacy and defining it through the lens of how am I being in the world? Who am I impacting? Who did I help today? Did I take a moment to thank the earth? Did I take a moment to just be with you here? What did I do? How am I being opposed to like what am I doing all the time?

Layla: Right.

Thérèse: So, it's been a journey and — but rest is definitely a practice. Right before I came on here, I actually took like a 30-minute meditation, resting period before I came on because that's what we have to do, especially as Black folks who have a myriad, like layered upon oppression and marginalization.

Layla: That moment that you described of taking time to meditate, and I know you are a long-time meditator, but you have something on your website where you talk about rooting deep to rise high and that's what I imagine those practices are for you, a time to, like you said, be, to sink deeply into that being. So, when we are used to operating from a mentality and a paradigm of doing, doing, doing, and that's what my humanity is here for, I'm here to do, I'm not here to be, what have you seen happens when we make that shift? Not so much what are the positive things that happen but what are the things that we need to release in order to relax into being? Because being is the very opposite of doing. You don't do being, you be being, right? But I think so many of us try to, okay, like I need to become more embodied and I need to be more. Okay, what are the things that I need to do in order to be? Do you get what I'm saying? What do you see people do as they try to make that journey towards being more?

Thérèse: Well, one of the big things that ends up needing to be released is the desire for proximity to whiteness and what that means, right? And it takes a lot to be on that wheel constantly going. So releasing that.

Layla: Speak a little bit more about — I think I know what you mean by that but can you tell us more about what that means, that desire to get that proximity to whiteness? What does that mean?

Thérèse: Well, that proximity to whiteness, what does it represent for many people? They might not recognize but proximity to whiteness represents safety. Proximity to — and safety comes through access of resources, whether those resources are tangible or intangible. Those resources can be a phone call that can lead you to this opportunity. Those resources could be financial resources. I know at the time that we're speaking, a few days ago, there's been a lot of backlash about that show, that CBS show, *The Activist*, that's coming out, right? It's the commodification of activism. But then what is — there's something else at the core. Its proximity to those who have power. Why don't you just write a check? Its proximity to those who have power because they can get access and resources for their organizations or their causes. So, I think especially for BIPOC, for Black folks, Black women, Black femmes, it's like interrogating that proximity to whiteness and recognizing the antidote to that is community because whiteness is not community, right? We know how to do community. Like I'm only here talking to you not because of like all the education and all — it's actually because of community, because even though I grew up poor, we had folks bring us food, like we were never without. There was a community that would help one another and we would scaffold one another.

Layla: Yeah, yeah.

Thérèse: And whiteness kinda orients us towards, "You don't need community, you need to get close to this person," or, "You need to get close to this institution or this thing." But in actuality, what we need is community, for many different reasons, but — one of the things I say is community is the medicine, but we need community for many different reasons. So it's orienting ourselves towards that and releasing proximity to whiteness, white culture, and all that it says it will give you.

Layla: I'm smiling because I love that you used the word "scaffold." We scaffold each other. You know, my community is — I mean, I have a global community of sisters and friends around the world but my community that I see every day is my family, you know, which includes my parents who I'm very close with, and my children have this experience of being raised by us, their parents, but also by my parents. And that is a very indigenously African way of being, even though we don't live there. That is how we carry ourselves throughout the world. And I'm so grateful every day and I sort of — I couldn't imagine not having that and not being able to do that. But I know that, like you said, whiteness and, by that, we're talking about white culture, white supremacist culture, is the very antithesis of that. It's very individualistic. It's very much about, "What can I get for me? How can I get to the top?" And like you said, "Who can I get close to?" But you struck on something really interesting when you said, "We know how to do community," and I thought, yes, we do, and, as I was preparing for this interview, it got me thinking about this essay by Audre Lorde, I'm not sure if you know it, I put it next to me just in case I wanted to share it during the conversation, but I think it really speaks to the healing work that is needed within the community itself around that internalized oppression, even outside of the white gaze. So the essay is called "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," and Audre Lorde basically takes time to investigate her own relationship with herself as a Black woman but also her relationship with other Black women. And she talks about the hatred that she finds herself directing to other Black women and that Black women direct to her, but really interrogating where that comes from, right? And how white supremacy has really caused her to hate herself, right? From a very young age, because, "Why am I being treated differently? I must be the cause," right? "I must be the cause why I'm treated this way." And then in seeing other Black women, thinking, "You are the part of me that I've been taught

to hate and I have nowhere else to direct this hate so I'm gonna direct it at you," and she talks about anger, right? And how that has to be reformed into something else. And she says, "Other Black women are not the root cause nor the source of that pool of anger. I know this, no matter what the particular situation may be between me and another Black woman at the moment. Then why does that anger unleash itself most tellingly against another Black woman at the least excuse? Why do I judge her in a more critical light than any other, becoming enraged when she does not measure up? And if behind the object of my attack should lie the face of my own self, unaccepted, then what could possibly quench a fire fueled by such reciprocating passions?" So I wanted to talk to you about this because you are the founder of Embodied Black Girl, this wonderful, amazing space that is so needed. We need that safe space to be ourselves, to share all of the things that we experience, to do the healing work that we need to do outside of the white gaze but then, even within that space, like you said, right? It's this deconstructing of the colonial mindset that we need to do and the work that we need to do within community. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this and how we can move through this without judging ourselves or judging other people, you know? Being compassionate towards ourselves as we move towards this healing.

Thérèse: Yeah, thank you for reading that. That's so powerful. And, you know, I've read many essays that Audrey Lorde had spoken about that relationship between Black women and Black femmes and what I think — what comes to mind is that we have to stop serving white supremacy and turn it into serving ourselves and one another. And that's how the system gets stronger, right? When we're in-fighting and fighting one another. And I know, I'm sure you've had your experience and I've surely had my experiences, where I have felt that heat come from other Black women, and it's another level of pain.

It's another level of pain. However, one of the things that I have tried to do is it's not about not — because there is accountability but recognizing —

Layla: Absolutely.

Thérèse: Yeah, there's accountability, but recognizing that they've been taught or we've been taught, just making it really personal. We have been taught. I have been taught.

Layla: I have been...

Thérèse: That this is how you operate. But that's not how our ancestors operated. And we can reclaim love, like true love, true love within ourselves and within those relationships, and recognizing — when I say community, I think a lot of people say community, it's like flowers and roses and like happy faces. It's not. Community, also, there can be conflict with community. But if you're invested in community, then you navigate those conflicts. No one is canceled or no one gets thrown out when you're truly in community. There are certain community spaces that might not be the right fit for certain people, depending on where they are and what they need —

Layla: That's right.

Thérèse: — right? I have to say that.

Layla: Yeah.

Thérèse: But we're talking about the greater community. When we're operating community, we're recognizing everyone brings their own set of gifts, their own wisdom, no matter if they're like a little wee baby all the way to an elder. Everyone brings their set of gifts. And I think what we saw, you know, with

COVID, especially with the elders, was how elders, at least in the United States, are not cared for and elders are disposable. And when we're really creating community, elders are not disposable, like I was raised in a multigenerational family household with multiple families so I got to see the way that it operates and, you know, there was conflict and everyone had to navigate those conflicts and work it out. So, that's one piece. I wanna touch upon the other piece that you talked about in regards to anger, because there is sacred rage, right? And I think a lot of the anger that people might be directing towards like Black women or directing towards one another is really anger at the systems.

Layla: That's right.

Thérèse: It's systemic anger —

Layla: That's right. And that's what Audrey Lorde talks about. That's right, yes.

Thérèse: It's the systems. So recognizing, "What are you truly angry about? What's deeper?" Okay, I'm angry at this person. I'm angry at Layla. Okay. Why? You know? Asking yourself why until you get to the root of why it is and then having practices, rituals, ceremony to release that anger, to begin to release that anger. Because — there's a quote by Maya Angelou where she says, you know, "When —" I don't remember it off top my head but she basically says, "When anger festers, it creates bitterness within your body," and anger, like if we're looking at it like now moving into like more of a neurobiological lens, like anger is one of those things like when we don't metabolize our anger, it creates secondary and tertiary illnesses. It's like scientific fact, right? And there's a long list of illnesses where Black women, Black femmes, they are impacted the most. So, finding ways to release that anger and recognizing what are we

truly angry at and when we're able to do that, like once we're able to do those processes, we're able to then channel our energy to change, to change the systems, because, ultimately, that's what we're here for. We're — to really change those systems, to do whatever part that we're here to do in that change process or transformation process.

Layla: I love this so much. I think, you know, what you're talking about, that sort of deeper questioning of where is this really coming from or what is the true source of this anger, is, I think, can be really helped by being in community and by hearing the stories and witnessing of other people who are they themselves also working through these layers as well. That transmutation of that anger, you talked about, you know, releasing it. What are some ways that we can do that? What are some ways that we can tangibly allow ourselves to feel it but then release it as well? I know that you work with a number of modalities, I'd love to hear some of the ones that you work with.

Thérèse: Well, one of the things I would say is like when you're — if you're feeling anger, where is it? What is the somatic or the embodied imprint in your body? So, for me, one of the ways that I know anger works with me is like I feel heat in my body. I literally feel hot. And being with that heat, right? And calling forth a resource, a guide, an ancestor, to help you with that, to help you work through it, or being in community and having a space holder to hold space as you're working through it, but, really, following that river of anger, where is it going to take you. Depending on what it is, it can take you in different ways. Like I know one of the things like, oh, I was feeling anger about not feeling supported, like that's in the past, like not feeling supported. I had so many things to do and I just didn't feel supported. Another really huge things I had to navigate

with anger was, and I know you know about this, was when I was racially profiled by the police a number of years ago.

Layla: I remember you sharing the story with me, yeah.

Thérèse: Yeah, and that was a year, a little over a year after my dad passed away and I was racially profiled and it was a situation where I could have lost my life. And I remember, you know, there was like at least a dozen cop cars and helicopters and it was just a whole big ordeal, right? And I just remember just being on my knees in that moment and looking up and just being like, “If I make it out, God, universe, spirit, use me. Show me what I am to do.” I didn’t feel anger in that moment. The anger came afterwards. Actually, I felt very serene in that moment. I felt I was like — if anything, I felt like all of those years of meditation and prayer, like it was channeled in that moment and it was channeled in that moment so I could survive, right? Or I had a chance to survive, because there are people who are calm and they don’t survive. I had a chance to survive. I said, I was like, they don’t know what they’re doing so I’m asking for a greater spirit, a greater force to come into this moment to assist us because these people don’t know what they’re doing. These cops don’t know what they’re doing. And, fortunately, that prayer in that moment was answered but then I had to reckon with the anger. I was so angry, and rightfully so. Because “I had done all the right things,” right? I had went to school, I did all the right things that white supremacy says “Black people should do,” right? And yet, I was still in that situation because of the color of my skin. So, working with that anger and recognizing that what I was angry at was the system and that was righteous, but then, at the core, at the core, I know that I deserved liberation and that my ancestors didn’t do all the things that they did so that anger could fester in a way that would harm me. So, it was releasing that anger but releasing that anger through honoring of my ancestors because

they didn't get us this far in order for us to die from bitterness or from so many different things that impact us.

Layla: That's really powerful, Thérèse, and I'm sure that took time to metabolize over time and is a practice that you have to continue to honor within yourself. I'm just really struck, I'm really struck by those words, around, "They did not get me this far for me to — for anger to take me out," right? For anger to be the thing, anger at them. But you have this — if anyone visits your website, and I really encourage them to do so, the minute you see it, I saw it years ago, I can't even remember how we came across each other but I remember finding your website before you and I actually connected and seeing it and just gasping because it was so beautiful. It has this soft, femme, really open, really — you just wanna melt into this energy of your website. But I think people should not mistake that for you not having this inner fire as well and it's so clear that you have that in the conversation that I've had with you privately, in the conversation that we're here having today, that anger, the bitterness, you took away the bitterness but the fire and the passion, right? To create change, to not just say, "Well, this is the system and this is the way things are." No, I'm gonna do something about it. I'm gonna do my part to do something about it. What is your relationship with that fire now? Because that's how I see it and how do you sort of nurture it but also making sure it doesn't overwhelm you? And I say this knowing everything that we globally experienced, but also specifically within the United States in 2020, with the death of George — the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others, and also the impact that COVID has had, specifically on BIPOC communities, as well as everything that's happened before that as well that can give you every reason to be angry and to sit in anger. How do you take care of that fire?

Thérèse: Yeah, the fire of anger is the fire for change, like anger, when you think about the element of fire, if a fire burns down an entire forest, at the same time, beneath those charred pieces, a new forest already has been birthed. So, recognizing that is the power of like that element, and, definitely, anger is connected to that element, but giving it space in community, like, you know, I was telling you about following it somatically but breathwork, talking about it in the community, having practices, like literally dancing that metabolizes that anger and then recognizing, okay, beneath that anger, is there an action? Is there something that wants to be moved or created? So, for me, you know, I see myself, like the first thing I see myself is as an artist. And so it can be creating art, whether it's writing or some other form, like how does it want to come out? Because some folks are, you know, for example, Audrey Lorde, right? Her gift was through writing. So it's not about it having to look a certain way but honoring how it wants to come forward through me. And one of the things I think is like when this all shuts down, because we're in collapse and we don't know when this is shutting down and it's just the internet is not here, I want to be able to be that person that holds space for folks when they're processing those emotions, when they're going through those traumatic instances, right? So having, I think it's really important for me to have like collapse skills that I can like work on the ground, like if there's a situation. I mean, literally, a couple of weeks ago, we had Ida here and our entire area was flooded. New York City, New Jersey, completely flooded, like completely flooded. It's still a situation that a lot of people are navigating. Our son's room started getting flooded. I mean, it was a situation. And one of the things I would tell people like are you developing skills for these times that we're in? And these skills that we're being asked to develop are ancestral skills, skills that our ancestors had.

Layla: What are some of those skills that you have been developing over this time?

Thérèse: Working with the land. So, my mom — both my mom and my dad, they grew up working with the land, right? Literally, that's what they did. And so, I'm technically the first generation of like growing up in the city. They didn't grow up in the city. So, that's one of the things, working with the land, getting to know the medicine of the land. I remember even being really young and walking around New York City with my mom and she would be pointing out different medicine. And this is what you use for that medicine. Do you know the medicine that is in the land where you are right now? So, getting to know the trees, the medicine, and not just from like, oh, an extractive way or just like a cognitive way, but being in relationship with that medicine. As my mom said, you know, you never go to a plant and just like take it, you actually have a conversation and you get in a relationship with it. You ask for permission. You ask for consent. That's the only way the medicine will actually work.

Layla: Wow, I'm smiling because my mother and her family ancestrally are farmers, they worked with the land also. My mum has always been an avid gardener, always, and I've always felt like I kill plants, like I can't keep them — do you know what I mean? Like they just die. But we moved house and it was a really big move for us and I was really clear that I wanted to have a beautiful garden and I wanted her to help me to build it and to cultivate it. And so when my parents come over to visit us, we visit garden together and, you know, she'll tell me the names of the plants in Swahili and I'll have to Google what is that in English, right? But she tells me, you know, whenever she tells me the name of the plant, she always tells me what it does. You take this when you have this problem. This helps with this ailment. And so I resonate so much with what you're

saying there because I didn't grow up that way, that wasn't ancestrally what — sorry, that wasn't in my own experience what I had even though it was the experience deeply of my mother and her family, and I feel very grateful to be learning, at a much later age, but still able to learn and to glean some of that wisdom now. So thank you for sharing that because it lit me up and it makes me feel very grateful that I can still have those conversations and take those walks, like you said, and learn, learn at the feet of our mothers and our ancestors. What are some of the other ancestral skills? Because I think this conversation is so helpful. I remember when COVID first hit and we were thinking it was, as we all thought, it'd be over in a few weeks, it'd be over in a few months, right? And it didn't. But we kept waiting to return to, okay, it's gonna be over soon, though, it's gonna be over at some point, and I think we've all morphed our understanding of — we've very much expanded and had to accept the fact that we don't have control over anything of what's going to be happening. But that development of self to match the world that we have now and the world that we could be living, you know, in the future, it's not — what I'm hearing from you is it's not develop new skills, it's not join the tech bros and figure out what they're doing, right? It's figure out what our ancestors did in order to survive and to thrive in their time. So, what are some other skills that you think would be very helpful for us to explore and to lean into?

Thérèse: Yeah, it depends on where you are, of course, in the world, but depending on where you are, finding out what were those ancestral skills, like there were certain people who worked with hides, like, in my family, it was a lot of it had to do with medicine, plant medicine, so developing those skills, are you — do you know how to cook some of your ancestral foods? Like all of those things, and, actually, just going back to something that we spoke about earlier, when I found out I had

that gallbladder issue, something told me like literally in my intuition, spirit told me to start eating more of my ancestral foods. And, fortunately, I was living in New York City and I was able to get access to them, but that healed my body, just eating the foods that my ancestors ate. So there's like, you know, of course, the kale diet, there's, you know, all these diets, don't eat collard greens and all of those things that we hear, when, in actuality, what we need to do is think about and, of course, I'm not saying — I'm not trying to romanticize our ancestors —

Layla: No.

Thérèse: That's the other thing too —

Layla: No romanticizing or exocitizing, no, we're not —

Thérèse: Yeah, romanticizing it, but there's a lot of skills that they knew, like, for example, my mom, just knowing the moon, right? Knowing the moon and the rhythms of the moon and how that impacts you. That also is how they planted too, based on the moon. And one of the stories that really, really touched me, and this is another ancestor that I love, Harriet Tubman, and Harriet Tubman used the light of the moon. That is how she knew it was time to go, right? So she wasn't going under the dark moon when there was no light, she was going under when the full moon because she was able to see.

Layla: See, right.

Thérèse: So being connected to nature, the more we're connected to nature and the natural world and in a deeper relationship, I was just thinking like, wow, the moon was guiding — was conspiring with Harriet Tubman for freedom, like when you think about that, the moon was conspiring with Harriet Tubman for freedom. And that's what we're, I think, like

when we look at nature in that relational way of like what if nature was a coconspirator for our freedom, for our liberation?

Layla: Wow, I love that, Thérèse. I love it so much. As we round up our conversation, something that I wanna talk about, well, I wanna ask you, what is your vision for Embodied Black Girl and the work that you're doing there? And I wanna talk about leadership, because I think, I mean, you know, the leader in me sees the leader in you but also, we are all leaders in our own way, in our own spheres, own realms of influence and, where we have it, power as well. As people do the work through Embodied Black Girl and that space that you're holding, what new kinds of leadership are you hoping is going to be coming through, especially for the world that we're talking about, the world that we have and the world that's coming?

Thérèse: Yeah. What I'm really hoping is a leadership that's based on love, that's based on love and love for ourselves, love for one another, love for the earth, and a leadership that is relational, a leadership that is, "What do I have to offer?" It's not constantly extracting. And, you know, as you mentioned, with — I think we've moved into like, as you mentioned, with like the tech bros, right? Of like, oh, tech is going to solve our problem —

Layla: Well, they're going to space. They're going to space and they're leaving us behind here.

Thérèse: Yeah, like they're going to colonize space. You can't even get earth right, right? You can't even get here right, you're gonna go colonize the moon or Mars or whatever. So, it's a leadership that is non-extractive, that is rooted in liberation, that is rooted in a culture of nurturance, a culture of nourishment, a culture of care. It's a leadership that recognizes

that we are a global village, like we're interconnected. I think we can see that. COVID knows no borders.

Layla: That's right.

Thérèse: COVID, you know, borders are a creation of colonization, right? So, COVID knows no borders and that's the same way we have to recognize that, all of these systems that we've created, how can we create something where everyone gets to live in dignity? Let's create a world where everyone gets to live in dignity. And white folks, you know, people who identify as white, are invited to support that by doing their own work.

Layla: That's right.

Thérèse: 'Cause they have their work to do. So, by doing their own work and, you know, one of the things I talk about is like embodied solidarity, to really come into embodied solidarity with folks of color, but it's not only about just folks of color, it's really recognizing their own humanity, like embracing their humanity means recognizing and honoring our humanity.

Layla: That's right. You used the term "embodied solidarity" there. I mean, I'm thinking about the complete opposite of that which would be the performative, as you've said, *The Activist* TV show being heavily criticized, and rightly so, right now from CBS. What does embodied solidarity look like? When it's not being performative, when it's not being savioristic, when it's not just what's in the mind, what does an embodied solidarity actually look like?

Thérèse: Yeah, embodied solidarity is really standing next to, right? Not in front. Not in front and leading the charge. It's next to, it's actually asking, it's turning and being like, "Hey, if Layla

is leading an organization, Layla, what do you need?" Or, "I have these ideas. Is this what you need?" It's coming from a space of humility. So there's a lot of, you know, skills, cultural skills that need to be embodied, like humility, coming from a space of humility. It's also knowing how to be with white folks know how to be with their own shame body, the way — because shame, shame, I think, is one of the big things that keeps white folks from really being able to be in solidarity and shame turns into like, "Oh, I'm bad. I'm this..." Again, it's white supremacy because it's about you as the white person. It's not about us, it's about you. "I'm bad." "Oh my God, my ancestors did this." "Oh, I did that," or...no. No, no, no, no. It's turning around, like literally taking off the blinders and looking at others and beginning to work with the shame, because there is real deep shame that comes up and I feel like that shame prevents people from really showing up in true embodied solidarity, in true ally-ship, because it's always about getting some form of recognition or some — cookies, right? It's always about getting some form of recognition or acceptance or, "You're a good white person," or, "You're the non-racist white person." So not wanting or needing anything. Being in complete service.

Layla: Right, which can only come from, like you said, learning to be with the shame body and transmuting, metabolizing what they are carrying, because, you know, it's not "Don't experience shame," it's not "You're wrong for feeling shame," right? I love that you said it's about standing next to, not standing in front, but I also heard in my mind also not standing behind, right? Because that is also creating a situation where we're not seeing each other as humans. We are all humans but when you stand next to and you — but you're standing next to, but like you said, in a position of humility, of turning to and saying, "How may I support you? What do you need? I have these gifts, is this what you need?" That is — I love the imagery

first, as I see it, but also, it's a different stance to what we're used to. It's either we're ahead or we're behind and not we're next to.

Thérèse: Yeah, and that's where we need to be if we're going to create a world where everyone has dignity. So also, when you think about —

Layla: Everyone.

Thérèse: Everyone has dignity, like when you think about like standing behind, it's also, okay, you're standing behind because there are many other reasons beneath that. It could be like, "Oh, well, I don't know what to do. I don't really wanna take responsibility, I wanna hide behind you. I want to just learn, I want to extract," and also giving up, like literally finding many ways to give up that privilege, to give up that privilege and uncoupling anti-racism from capitalism —

Layla: That's right.

Thérèse: — right? Because I personally have been in situations where I felt like I was used as social capital by white folks, right? So racism shows up in many, many, many different ways. So I think also an understanding of how, like Audrey Lorde talks about it and bell hooks talks about it, how racism, white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, all of those are interwoven. And if you are for the dignity of all, the liberation of all, the healing of all, you can't kind of, "Oh, I'm gonna hold on to this one. I'm gonna hold on to this, you know, this little privilege over here." You gotta let it all go. Find ways to give. Give it away.

Layla: That's right. Thank you. And that's some of the work that white people need to do. I wanna remind folks that Thérèse's

work puts Black women and femmes and women of color in the center. You really are centering us, centering our healing, our safety, us processing our racial trauma, intergenerational trauma, you know, relationships, everything. Understanding ourselves as these embodied beings and stepping into a new visionary leadership and it makes my heart sing. I love the work that you do and I love the way in which you do it and I love your uncompromising stance of being true to your values and the way that you show up as well because I know that you operate within a space, the healing space, the wellness space, that is, like so many other places, inundated by whiteness, dominated by whiteness, and so your continuous commitment to yourself and to us, when I say us, again, Black women, women of color, is just so inspiring to me and I just love it so much. Thank you for the work that you do.

Thérèse: Yeah, thank you so much, Layla. Thank you for the work that you have been doing. You know how much I adore all the things that you have been sharing and it's really been wonderful having this conversation together.

Layla: Thank you, Thérèse. So, before I ask my last question, I do have one more question and I wanna end on this. I wanna ask, what does your hope practice look like right now? How are you practicing hope?

Thérèse: That's such a good question because I've been thinking about actually hope and hopelessness and how being in this system and being in this world can feel hopeless. And there have been moments where I have felt like hopeless and that's when I turned into the medicine of nature, because every spring, flowers bloom, like every spring, flowers bloom. And one of the things that has really helped me is that there is a beyond. I may not know what it is but there is a beyond these systems. Like we're living in this world within the systems of

oppression and marginalization and yet, right here, I'm looking out my window, these trees that have been here for — I've seen some trees that have been here for hundreds and hundreds of years, they've seen a world beyond that. Trees that have been there thousands of years, they're — and they know a world beyond that in their DNA. Also in our DNA, we know a world beyond that. Especially as BIPOC, we know a world beyond that. So, one of my hope — my hope practices really have been connecting with my ancestors, being in prayer, meditation, and also connecting with community and allowing — actually, this morning, you know, I did a grief practice to release grief because there is grief and we have to honor the grief too and that's one of the things with COVID we haven't done. So, honoring the grief is what gives access to hope. Like if I try to bypass the grief, you know? But when I honor the grief, it gives me access to hope because it connects me to my body and my body is connected to the past, the present, the future, the land —

Layla: Everything.

Thérèse: — ancestors, et cetera.

Layla: You have a quote that I read, I think it was on social media, you said, "Make your life a love letter to your 8-year-old self and your 108-year-old self," and so as you just spoke those words, that's what it reminded me of. It's in our DNA, we are all of those things and so much more. Yeah.

Thérèse: Yeah, yeah.

Layla: Beautiful.

Thérèse: For sure.

Layla: All right, our final question, Thérèse, what does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Thérèse: Being a good ancestor, I think I've used that word over and over, is really being in a relationship. In relationship, relational, to others, beyond family members, the community, being in relationship with the earth, being in relationship with my ancestors, and being in relationship with future generations, even though I may never meet them. And cultivating those relationships through the actions that I take every single day, right? And they sometimes — and sometimes those actions are resting —

Layla: That's right.

Thérèse: Sometimes that action is literally just, "Okay, that's what I'm doing today." That's my honoring. And relationship to myself, like honoring myself and what I came here to do and I know this is a conversation you and I have had personally about honoring our calling, what we've been called to do and how sometimes, you know, it's hard to honor your calling, you just don't necessarily wanna do it and those days, you know, you rest, but really honoring the calling, my calling, is honoring my ancestors. It's being a good ancestor.

Layla: Thank you. This was so much good soul medicine and I really appreciated this conversation. Thank you, Thérèse.

Thérèse: Yeah, thank you, Layla. It was beautiful talking to you. Thank you.

(Outro)

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