

(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.

Mikaela Loach is a climate justice activist, a podcaster, a writer, and a fourth-year medical student based in Edinburgh, Scotland. In 2020, Forbes Global Citizen and BBC Woman's Hour named Mikaela as one of the most influential women in the UK climate movement. Her work focuses on making the climate movement more inclusive and focusing on the intersections of the climate crisis with oppressive systems such as white supremacy and migrant injustices. Her activism has been featured in the BBC, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, and *Vice*. She uses her Instagram platform and her podcast, The YIKES Podcast, to communicate the need for system change, climate justice, and dismantling white supremacy.

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and I'm here with a guest that I'm very excited to speak with today. I'm here with Mikaela Loach. Welcome, Mikaela.

Mikaela: Hello. Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited this conversation.

Layla: I am so excited to speak to you. Just before we hit Record, I was saying we've had quite a day here. I know Sarita, our podcast manager, has had quite a day and, you know, knowing that this conversation with you was happening today was the highlight of our day and I'm sure that for so many of our listeners that it's going to be a highlight for them for sure. So, welcome.

Mikaela: Oh, wow, that's like quite a high bar to set. I hope I can try and like meet some of that expectation.

Layla: I'm sure you will. I've been diving deep into some of your interviews and conversations and, of course, your podcast as well and you're just such a thrill to listen to so let's dive right in. Okay, so our first question, who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?

Mikaela: That is such a huge question. And —

Layla: Yes.

Mikaela: — like when I've listened to the podcast before, I'm always like, "What would I say?" and then now I'm here.

Layla: You're here.

Mikaela: Yeah. I think that there are obviously so many people and ancestors who have impacted me in so many ways. Like I think — if you think familially, like my mom is a huge influence on my life in so many ways and we have a really great relationship. And just like the women actually in my life, especially like women in the Jamaican side of my family, like I just see them as such a strong influence in all that I am today. Before we were recording, I even said how I called my mom

when I got the e-mail about coming on this podcast and I called my grandma as well to talk to them about our family and especially the Jamaican side of my family, because I think growing up in the UK in a very white context, I kind of clung to my Jamaican side quite a lot because I didn't really have that many other black people around me or that many other Jamaican people around me. So, I would cling to like my actual family, like my mom and my grandma and things, but also to our history and people like Nanny of the Maroons who was a freedom fighter in Jamaica, like I would really — I'd always like watch documentaries about her and learn about her and I think I see, in Jamaica, there's this — kind of the motto of Jamaica is "Out of many, one people," so I think I look through kind of historical freedom fighters in Jamaica and I see them as my ancestors too and them as connected to me and so I think that I've just been — this is a very broad answer but I think I'm — I've been impacted in so many ways by all of the Jamaican freedom fighters that have come before me but especially like the women in my life a lot, yeah, definitely the women in my family a lot.

Layla: I love that. It kind of reminds me, you're making me think about when Amanda Gorman gave her speech at the inauguration and I went back afterwards and sort of listened to some of her interviews and she talks about a mantra that she says before she does any speaking engagement, any time she stands up in front of a crowd, and she's like, "I'm the daughter of black writers," like, "I come from all of them." She too speaks about her mother and her mother's huge influence in her life, but also recognizing like, "I belong to all of these people," like, "I carry them with me. They're in me, and I'm in them," you know? And that's what you shared made me think about.

Mikaela: Yeah. I think that's something that's always impacted me throughout my life because my parents are very keen for me to be aware of my Jamaican heritage and where I came from and kind of just that whole part of me. And I think, in many ways, I don't know how to describe this that well, but I remember when I was revising for my exams or doing things in life, I'd write down like women that I knew or people that I knew who were my ancestor in some way that were black individuals who were kind of harmed and oppressed by these systems. I'd write — almost like guide the work that I was doing towards them and realize that I was doing that because of these people who came before me for why everything that I have today and I think I grapple a lot with that now because I'm like how much was I like — was I beating like my 12-year-old self up almost about — to be like study because all of these things came before you? But in many ways, it was also like this almost like connection that I felt with these people who came before me as well.

Layla: Yeah. I find that really interesting because, obviously, we have different ethnic backgrounds but I also grew up in the UK, in predominantly, you know, white areas, and the people who I knew who we're from — who we're black basically we're my family, so, obviously, my parents, my brothers, but also a couple of uncles and aunts and cousins and that was about it, right? And so that is the context that you understand and it's so strange, you know, seeing yourself only reflected in a small sector of people but also knowing that you're not really from there or there's this other part of you that's from somewhere else but you don't necessarily know what it's like there or haven't grown up there. You don't have that connection there. And it sounds almost like that was you yearning to like keep that connection alive and know that this is a part of me and, I mean, you just saying like "my 12-year-old self," like putting that much pressure on myself and having those thoughts, but I

also think it's very powerful and probably some people might say, "Oh, you're only 22 years old," like, "You're doing quite a lot, you should be focused on this instead of — leave that to other people," but it's like, no, like this is the path that you're supposed to be on. No one's too young to start to care, right? About the world. But it was probably a foretelling of what was coming, right? That that was so strong in you, that you were so aware and so conscious. And so I'm really interested to know like what were the seeds that were planted that got you thinking in that way? Because I know, where I was even at 22, I was a hot mess. I'm definitely a late bloomer. I was always — I think like you, you talked about, in an interview I saw that you said you were very — always like a goody two shoes, do really well in exams and all of that. That was me too. But I didn't know who I was or what I was doing until much more recently in my life, I would say. So, tell us about your journey.

Mikaela: Yeah. So, I think that a lot of me starting to care really deeply about issues and wanting to do something about it, I definitely think it came from my parents encouraging me to kind of be who I am, if that makes sense? So my dad especially, I remember from a really young age, I'd watch loads of — I think I'd happened to have watched those — the documentaries about Jamaican history and especially about the slave rights in Jamaica and Nanny of the Maroons and all these different kind of people who would rise up against oppression. I remember watching these things and I think I had turned to my dad and I was like, "Can I also do stuff like that now? There's injustice is happening now, like what can I do about it?" and he was just like, "You can do anything that you want to," like, "You should do anything you want to and you should —" And I was like, "Okay, I guess I have to wait until I'm 18." He was like, "Why would you wait? Like you can do things now. What do you see in front of you that is a problem and what could you do about it now?" I think he always — and both my parents

actually always never — well, they never made out to me that there was a limit to how much we could do or how much that we could care or how much — or that we had to be a certain age in order to take action on an issue. So like, for example, when I wanted to go to Calais to volunteer when I saw on the news about the “refugee crisis,” I say refugee crisis in quotation marks because it’s a crisis of empathy rather than the individuals themselves not in crisis, but when I saw that in the news, the first thing that — like people that I had interacted most would be my parents, especially growing up, and they’d just be like, “Hey, so what do you want to do about it? Do you want to go? And if you want to go, how are you gonna make that happen?” and they’d be the ones who kind of were constantly encouraging me to act on these things. They themselves would definitely not identify as activists so don’t —

Layla: I was going to ask like —

Mikaela: Yeah, no —

Layla: — did they have an activist past —

Mikaela: Yeah.

Layla: Right. Wow.

Mikaela: That’s what’s quite funny about this because I think a lot of the other people I know — so I see myself as like a late bloomer in this stuff more because now I’m surrounded by a lot of people who their parents took them to marches when they were super young and they’ve been part of all this stuff for so long, whereas like my mom is a computer scientist and my dad works in finance and stuff, like they’re both very like professional people who have not been involved in activism or protests or things like that. Actually, we, as a family, went to

our first protest as a family in the Black Lives Matter protests in London in the summer during the pandemic and that was a really moving moment because it was my little brother, my mom and my dad and all of us together, and they were like, “We’re glad that we can be part of your life in this way.”

Layla: Wow.

Mikaela: And it was really kind of a moving thing. But I do think that like it was just more like I’d see something in the news and my parents — and I’d say like — and I’d be really moved by it and then they’d just kind of be like, “So what are you gonna do about it?” And that would be whether I was six years old and did a bake sale at school to raise money for a natural disaster that happened or whether it was a different time in my life when I was at school and I’d give speeches and be labeled as this weirdo who cared too much about stuff. It was all these different things but I definitely think it was my parents who encouraged me a lot and didn’t restrict me and just kind of let me be who I was. Yeah, ’cause I think at school, all of us are kind of taught that oppression is something of the past and, thankfully, everyone else fought these battles and won them for us and we don’t need to do anything —

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: — but I think I was just very aware of how that was just not true and how there was still — there were still things that we could fight for now. And, yeah, I think it’s a mix of things of — there was a time in my life when I was quite young that I remember, it was really strange, I don’t think I’ve talked about this before but I felt weirdly almost guilty that other people had had to fight these fights for black liberation before me and that I was able to experience many freedoms now, like I felt — I remember being quite young and feeling really

genuinely guilty about it because I was like I haven't done anything to deserve the space where I'm in now.

Layla: Wow.

Mikaela: And then I think I reflected a lot and I was like, one, you don't have to deserve freedom and happiness, like that shouldn't be something that you have to fight for. But, two, there are still things you can fight for now and you can be part of liberation still and that can be a beautiful kind of — I think of it as this like kind of history of passing down struggle and liberation and fighting for that together and that's almost this like generational, beautiful thing that you can do. So, yeah, I think it's like — it's been a mix of things but I do think that my parents, where they themselves were not activists and where they have not — don't really good to marches and things like that, yeah.

Layla: I think it's amazing though. I think it's so amazing. And it's — I mean, as a parent, I also find it really inspiring, because, you know, I don't personally identify as an activist. I am a writer and I teach and speak, but I know that I talk about these issues a lot to my children and I had never thought what if one day my kids say, "I want to go do something," and I think, you know, I'm just sort of processing this out loud but I think my parent instinct would kick in and be like, "Oh, no, no, no, I have to protect you from that. When you're older, you can do that," but I see how amazing it is that your parents didn't do that and while obviously still, you know, being your parents and taking care of you but they encouraged you to be thinking about, you know, the voice that you do have, the acts that you can do, like the power that you can use, and I think that's really amazing. So, I just wanna say thank you to your parents for that lesson —

Mikaela: And I think the parenting way they would do it is they'd be like, "Do it with some friends."

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: But the way they communicate that to me was like, "Imagine if you brought friends with you and that would make it even better and you'd reach more people," and I realize now like that was them just being like don't let her do this alone or it'd be like my mom came to Calais with me the first time I went to volunteer, which was actually really lovely as well, and then my whole family went out to Calais together to volunteer. I think sometimes they would be like, "Do these things but do it with other people," which actually was really nice.

Layla: And this work of being in social justice work isn't about being the lone person doing it alone, right? It is about community, it is about togetherness. Talk a little bit about that, you know, because this journey is very tough. I've heard you talk in another interview about the sense of sort of anxiety that you felt at climate change, climate injustice, the refugee crisis in commerce. Talk a little bit about the anxiety and how community has helped you with that.

Mikaela: Yeah, I think that bringing people with you is the most important part of doing kind of any social change work and doing it in community is the most important part. And this is something that I've been really finding really difficult during the pandemic and I'm sure that other people have found this difficult because we're all kind of separate from each other in many ways and what I really miss is that togetherness of doing things together because the reality is, while social media and whilst the press and the media and everything would be like, "Oh, look at this one amazing person who's created change," that's just not the reality. It's like change is created by a lot of

people doing stuff. It's not about one leader or one person. I often think that leaders are very problematic in the way that if you are putting all of your movement onto one person and it's all about that one person, that one person is a human being, they are — like they're not infallible, they're going to make mistakes, and that means that our movements will be as fragile as that one individual is if we put all the kind of emphasis on that. Whereas if you put — if a movement is about individuals, it's about a huge amount of individuals together as a collective, then it's much harder to break that down. That's not as fragile, like that's a way that we can support each other. That's a way that we can have longevity as well. I just think that kind of collectivism is so important and it's important that we focus on that in this age of individualism, in this age of glorifying and putting on a pedestal one person. And I'm definitely included in that. I really worry sometimes about how my work, on social media especially, might feed into this idea of individualism and it being about me when actually it shouldn't be about me, it should be about the movement and especially when it comes to something as important as climate justice and something as important as racial justice and all the different things that are — the issues that we need to be able to fight for the long haul. We can't have that be about an individual at all and kind of when we're in the collective, when we're in community, that's when I also see hope which is why I really miss being together because there's a quote by Arundhati Roy that I will be paraphrasing here because sometimes I'm gonna be wrong but it's basically saying that "another world is on her way and on a quiet day, I can hear her breathing," and that's something that I kind of hold really close to my heart, that kind of quote from Arundhati Roy, who's an amazing intellectual and thinker and resistor and just an amazing human being. Whilst not trying to grow over her, I think the way that she communicates things is really beautiful. But I hold that close to me to be because I try and think when can I hear this new world breathe, because I

think that we see glimpses of this new world that we're moving towards, this future that we want to be better and, for me, I hear that new world breathe not when there's like one amazing individual who seems to be succeeding in things or whatever, I hear that new world breathe when we're in communities together and we're allowed to be fully human and fully human means supporting each other and fully human means not being perfect and it also — but it just means loving each other enough to want to move towards this future together —

Layla: Yeah.

Mikaela: — and that's why I think that we need to really move away from this individualism or this individual idea or this idea of exceptional individuals being the cause for change because even if we look through history, yeah, the news or the history books might tell us that, for example, the civil rights movement was just Martin Luther King, Jr. or it was just Malcolm X or things like that, but actually, it was about so many individuals who we will never know their names ever —

Layla: That's right.

Mikaela: — who really put their, like their lives on the line, names of people who have lost their lives who we will never know, and when I apply this to the climate crisis, I always like think about indigenous communities who are protecting the majority of the world and the biodiversity of the world for us. They're protecting for the whole of humanity because they have no choice and these are people who are doing much more climate work than I am or much more climate work than any of these names that you might know and people who have lost their lives. And yet you might not know their names and you will never probably know a lot of these people's names and that doesn't mean that their work isn't valuable and so I think

that's why we need to kind of move away from this glorification of an individual and instead be like be in community, how can we support each other in community and how can we have a collective struggle rather than an individual kind of struggle.

Layla: Thank you for that, because that's incredibly humbling, especially what you said about majority of the people who are doing the work, that will be the work that, you know, is the bulk of what the environment protects the planet, we may not know their names, we may never see them on Instagram, right? But they are doing the work. And I think that there is — and this is something that I really struggle with, with social media, which is why I'm continuing to evolve my relationship with it, sort of exploring digital minimalism and other ways of sort of decentering myself as a person that people look to, as one of those people, one of those public figures, and really trying to just push the work forward and let the work speak for itself. But I think that we, as a collective, with capitalism is this very individualistic philosophy, has this very individualistic way of being, and I think sometimes we want to name certain people as our "heroes" because it kind of excuses us from having to do the work. If we can just say, "Well, she's taking care of that. Well, that's what they do so I don't need to do it," it kind of excuses us from having to take responsibility and do our part and our part doesn't have to be stand up and give a speech, be on TV, it doesn't have to be that but there are things that can be done that need to be done and we don't get to be excused out of them just because someone else is more public doing it. What do you think of that? What are your thoughts on that?

Mikaela: Yeah, I think that's a really interesting way to put it as well, because I actually haven't thought of it that way, that people will almost excuse themselves from having to do the work themselves because they'll see someone else. I also think that another part of it is that people don't feel like they can do

the work because they're like, "Oh, the work is only public facing stuff. The work is only —

Layla: Yes.

Mikaela: — like being able to be a good public speaker or the work is only doing TV interviews or things like that," when actually that's such a small, tiny, tiny, tiny percentage of the work and —

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: — and so many other things are so important. And this is another issue I think I see with this kind of — with as much as I think — I obviously think social media can be a good thing, otherwise, I wouldn't use it.

Layla: Right. And we wouldn't know each other, if not —

Mikaela: Yeah, exactly, and there are so like wonderful, wonderful things that have come out of social media. There's so many movements that I've learned about and been able to support and things like that through social media. I think that it can be really useful, but I think we just make sure we're taking a critical like eye to it and realize everything, this is just like a surface level of stuff because when — the actual work, a lot of it is really boring. It's like — I think it's boring but beautiful how you have a three-hour long Zoom call with people who you've never met, maybe, and you'll be chatting to them about how can we push this movement forward, how can we do this, this and this, and you'll be delegating tasks, and it's like a lot of the work sometimes. I have tried to tell people that activism or organizing, it's kind of like if you want to run an event, say that you want to run a garden or something, you need some people who just print off posters and that's all their job is, is just to

make sure they have — they take a couple hours to print off little posters. There's some people who put up the posters, there's some people who are like the emotional support for people who are doing a lot of the work and like someone who support people that way. There are the speakers and the educators and those kind of more public facing people, but there are people that also just get other people to do stuff, like they're really good at organizing people or they're people who work out the finances to make this event happen. Like there are all these different jobs that come into making a movement, but people only focus on like the really public facing stuff —

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: — when actually, whoever you are, whoever you are listening to this, you will have skills that are really useful to social change and for movements and they don't have to be glamorous or exciting. They could just be whatever you're good at and then that will be useful in some way, whether you're creative or you're just good with like money or things like that, like there are loads of different jobs that I think people just don't see. And then they think, "Well, I'm not an MLK, I'm not an Angela Davis, therefore, I can't do any of these things," when actually, we need as many people as possible to care and to do stuff.

Layla: Absolutely. Oh, I love this discussion. Thank you, Mikaela. I think this is so helpful to so many people. You know, when I write to our readers, I talk a lot about like when I say good ancestor what I actually mean, and, you know, yes, there are those figures that we've identified, yes, and even the people that we interview on this podcast who are public figures or who are recognized publicly, but all of us will be ancestors, right? All of us are living ancestors and all of us will have an impact in the world and we get to choose what that impact will be and it

doesn't have to be this huge, big thing, but we don't realize I think the ripple effect that things that we take for granted, like our natural skills, right? So you use the example of someone who may be very creative, right? So maybe they do the social media or the website, right? Or the posters or whatever it is, but they don't realize the ripple effect that something that just comes so easy to them can have for so many people. And so it's so important for us not to be sort of looking around comparing ourselves to other people and saying, you know, I was saying when I was 22, I was a hot mess, right? Like, okay, that's my journey, right? And that's not to say Mikaela is not a hot mess —

Mikaela: Yeah, exactly.

Layla: I don't know, right? I don't feel like you are but, you know —

Mikaela: No, no, no, no, I think this is realistic because social media is like, obviously, anyone that you're following, you're seeing the curated parts of someone's life —

Layla: That's right.

Mikaela: Like I'm not —

Layla: And when I was 22, we didn't have social media, right?

Mikaela: Because I always think that 'cause people are always like, "Wow, you just have it all together," and I like have burst out laughing sometimes, like it's — because I'm just like, "No, I don't." You don't see like the times when my period makes me just cry about videos of pigs and random stuff and then I can't do anything for a day because I'm like, "The pig was too cute." Like I can't — I'm just like also just a huge mess of a human

being, but I just — I'm not gonna put out all the messy bits because —

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: — otherwise I wouldn't be able to create as much change as I think I can because everyone would be like, "Whoa, what's going on?"

Layla: "What is all of this? What's happening?"

Mikaela: Like, "What is this?"

Layla: No, but you're right. And so we don't need to be comparing ourselves to anybody else. We don't need to be thinking, "Oh, my activism or my advocacy work needs to look like this, it needs to be packaged like that," because then, again, it becomes about the individual and not about the work, the movement. And I just — I know you're so passionate about that. I've seen you — I believe you received some awards. Was it last year?

Mikaela: Yeah, which I found so weird.

Layla: Yeah. So tell us about that. Tell us what the awards are and how it made you feel.

Mikaela: So, I got nominated for a Global Citizen UK Hero Award, which I was like, "What?" And then I was on the BBC Woman's Hour's Power List as well and there are a few other things that actually now I can't remember which is quite bad, but I remember when I got them through, I was like really excited because I was like, "Wow, how do these people even know who I am?" But also then I was like, "But I'm not doing the most work at all," and I kind of felt a bit weirdly guilty again

because I was like, “Oh, dear, I’m taking up too much space,” like the fact that me as an individual is being given these opportunities or these different things, I was like, “Oh, gosh, I’m taking up too much space, I’m definitely not doing the most work,” and then I realized that like these kind of awards, they’re just symbolic and I am also in myself, I’m also just like — I just see that as I am representing every women of color or every black woman who does this work and they may be like, “Oh, we’re giving this to Mikaela Loach,” but all that means is that I am just representing these kind of other people who are doing this work as well. It’s not just about me. And, actually, for the Woman’s Hour one, I hope that Farmana wouldn’t mind me saying this, but Farmana Yamin, who is an amazing like climate scientist and lawyer and just — maybe she’s not a scientist, she’s a climate advocacy person and amazing lawyer who’s been in the climate movement for so, so long and she was also nominated for this. She was also put on this Woman’s Hour Power List as well, it’s a climate list, and as part of it, we had a conversation and I talked to her about this, I was like, “I actually feel kind of conflicted because there are so many other people who have done this work,” and she said kind of the same thing to me, she was like we’re just kind of representing all these other women of color who have been doing this work for so long. It’s not just about us, but it’s about seeing women like us in the movement and giving people like us visibility in the movement. I think I just need to make sure I check myself a lot on these things and check my ego all the time because when I did get some of these things through, I’m not gonna lie, like part of my brain was like, “Wow, I am amazing.”

Layla: “I am the best activist in the world.”

Mikaela: Yeah, and like how cringe to even think like the best activist in the world, like I think part — like, immediately, your brain’s response —

Layla: Oh, absolutely.

Mikaela: — is just to be like —

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: — “I am great,” but then if — we can’t like allow ego to come into these spaces because then we’re never going to be able to create the best change ever because if I start thinking that I am the best and I know how to do everything in the best way, then I’m not gonna be able to listen to other people’s voices in the same way, like the way that I create solutions or do my work, I won’t be being influenced in the way that I need to be by people who have very different lived experiences than me, by people who have different intersectional oppressions than me because I recognize that whilst I am racialized as a black woman in the UK, I’m also a mixed race so I’m very light skinned and I also have privilege in so many different ways, like I have light skinned privilege, I’m in higher education, that’s privilege. I have loads of different privileges. And so I think I just need to make sure, and I do try and make sure that I am checking myself because, I mean, this kind of feeds into online things as well because you can end up going down this rabbit hole and losing yourself, I feel, with these kind of things and this is something that I — actually recently this weekend, I made a big decision about a thing, it’s like kind of some paid work that I was being offered and it was a lot of money for me, it’s more than I’ve ever been offered for something, and I was so close to doing it and then I checked myself on the weekend and I was like the only reason I would have been doing it was just for the money and, actually, if I was being realistic to myself, it was a greenwashing campaign completely. And whilst it would be like easy work and whilst it wouldn’t be “that bad” and whilst a lot of my friends were like,

“No one would blame you for doing it,” and blah, blah, blah, I was like, this isn’t what I got into this work for, this really isn’t why I got into this work for and me doing this would be me losing a part of myself, I think, and would be me really giving into capitalism.

Layla: It’s almost like a sense of complicity, right?

Mikaela: Yeah.

Layla: And that — I want to say that it’s so important what you’re talking about. I think for young people — like I’m not that old, right? I’m like super aging myself. I’m really not. I’m 37 but it’s true, when I was 22, we didn’t have social media so I have a different experience of being publicly seen than you do. My life was at a different stage than yours is now. My brain was developed differently than yours is now, right? There’s so much that’s different and it makes me think a lot about — especially when you’re in work that puts you in the public light and people are sort of putting you on a pedestal and calling you the one, right? And sort of really dehumanizing you because they’re not seeing you as this fallible, imperfect person but as this icon of activism, you know, what that does to the self and how so often that trajectory of, let’s say “visibility,” that trajectory of visibility is very fast oftentimes, especially now, right? Because of the times we’re in, the conversations around anti-racism, climate justice, Black Lives Matter, everything, right? That it’s suddenly, “Okay, you’re in the spotlight now. Do you know what you’re doing?” Right? Everyone’s looking to you, and it can be hard to do that check-in or to even know that it’s necessary to do so. So, how do you — I mean, obviously, it sounds like you’re an incredibly self-reflective person and integrity sounds like it’s a huge value of yours. But how you can have those, I guess, structures or things around you to make sure that you don’t lose yourself, like what do you put in place?

Mikaela: Yeah. I think it's really difficult because even with myself, there's this fine line that I think I tread between self-reflection and self-deprecation, which I think is quite difficult, that sometimes I will, and this is part of being so visible, that I'll beat myself up so much about kind of not being perfect enough, because, with social media, people have access to you like they haven't had access to you in the past. So, if someone really doesn't like what I'm saying, they can literally send me a message to tell me that like immediately and they might not have thought about it or reflected that much or they might not see me as a whole human, and as silly as it is, I will sometimes reflect on the bad messages so much more than I will the lovely nice ones that are encouraging and so I think that, in the times I think I'm feeling a bit too anxious and maybe getting to the like self-deprecation and beating myself up, I just take myself away from social media completely. I do not read my DMs. I take some time away. I drink some very calming tea. I like just go offline for a while and remember who I am and kind of remind myself of those kind of things. And in those times, I find that reflecting on the good things that can be done is really important. But on the times when I think I can sometimes — it's always actually I think in both times when I'm also, maybe my ego is going a bit too high, I also am like maybe I need to take myself away from social media because I'm caring too much about like, "Oh my gosh, my photo got 10,000 likes, wow, I'm so cool." Like —

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: — and then like that's not something that I actually value and that I actually deeply value. I think I'm just really blessed that I also have people in my life who really hold me to my values in a really loving way. I think that's so important. So, Jo Becker, who co-hosts the YIKES Podcast with me, she is just

such a wonderful, wonderful friend who holds me accountable in the most loving way, but also is the person who I need to be when I — if I need to call her and be like, “I think I’m having an existential crisis, like social media, it might be terrible,” she will have like being able to have like a real proper conversation where I know that she will always, always tell me the truth and always be honest but always be loving and encouraging and that she has the same goals in life that I do in the way of what we want to do with our lives and how we want to impact the world and so I think that having people around me is something that — who really get it and like get what I want to do is important. But then reminding — also, always reminding myself of who I am and why I’m doing these things in the first place because, like even the decision I made recently, that that was more me saying that rather than anyone else and me reflecting on that rather than anyone else and I think that these are things like sometimes I just write down like what are my values and why am I doing these different things and I have that as a list and so I can check back sometimes if I’m trying to make a difficult decision and I’ll be like, “Does this conflict with my values and how I actually see myself and will this make me see myself differently because that’s something that I don’t really want to do?” because that’s where I think I’d be losing myself. Because I think just like having these solid values and solid friends and people around you who love you and who also care about climate justice and racial justice as well, that’s been like completely centered in my life.

Layla: I feel like this is such a masterclass for so many people, because, again, there is a lot, like the planet is like — there’s crises, all sorts of crises, right? And people who are becoming called to, inspired to step into some form of activism and are becoming more public about it and, again, like if you don’t know who you are and if you don’t have these practices of checking in and knowing what your values are or having key

people in your life because we can feel like we're super connected to everyone on social media but do you have key people in your life who, you know, can call you on your BS or can tell you, "Actually, no, you do need to appreciate yourself for this," right? Like you need to stop self-deprecating and appreciate the work that you're doing. Having things like that are so important. So, I hope people are taking notes because I think these things apply regardless of age and regardless of where you are, sort of where you're entering into any kind of work to do with social change. It's very, very important to stay centered, I think, and that's what I'm hearing from you.

Mikaela: And also I think a big thing as well is I was really blessed that I was in therapy when my account kind of started to blow up because I think that was something that I found to be really, really essential to have a space where I could really talk about how this was making me feel and the impact of becoming quite visible was making me feel because I think social media is a tricky place in many ways and for many reasons, and being so visible is something that I think not enough people maybe check in on their mental health a lot, because it is actually like something that does impact you if you're thinking there are literally thousands of people who look at me and think things and if you think about that too much, then you like —

Layla: Oh, yeah. You'd lose your mind, right?

Mikaela: Yeah, literally.

Layla: It's funny because, you know, today and, you know, I'll wrap this part up and we'll continue on, but it's funny because today, I was just finalizing a newsletter that I'd sent out today and it's really interesting that even though I write this newsletter every week and have written a book that's a

bestseller and all of that, every time I go to share something with someone, there's this little voice that comes and goes, "Nobody cares what you have to say. Nobody cares about what you have to write about, people think you're an idiot," right? And it's like, oh, that's still there. No, no, that's still there, right? And if you think about, especially as, you know, your account does blow up, you know, there are more people who have their eyeballs on you, I mean, the likelihood of that is true, that there is a large group of people who think you're an idiot —

Mikaela: Yeah, yeah, exactly. And I think it's just making peace with that and just being like, yeah, that's cool.

Layla: Yeah. Exactly. All right. So, we've talked about social media extensively but I think it's a really valuable conversation but it is the platform where I found you and you talk about many important issues on there. So, talk to us about some of the issues that you talk about through social media and sort of make the link between them —

Mikaela: Yeah.

Layla: — as well because there's a number of things that you're very, very passionate about and people may say, "Oh, she does this," right? And that's over there and this is over there and that's over there, but they're super hyper connected. So, talk about that.

Mikaela: Yeah, I think that's — when I've had meetings about — so people have been like, "So what's your message? What's the core message?" I'm always like the core message is that all these issues are linked and that's what I want to do is show that all these different issues are linked. So, I talk principally I

think about climate justice and racial justice, but I see like racial justice as climate justice —

Layla: Yeah.

Mikaela: — so climate justice is a principle that basically sees that people and planet are connected and how systems of oppression impact people is also exacerbated by the climate crisis and, therefore, the climate crisis and tackling the climate crisis is also a social justice issue. So, under that, we see racial injustice through environmental racism and things like that and how solutions to the climate crisis can also kind of tackle racism systemically and interpersonally and in so many different ways. Then we can move on to like migrant rights and obviously that's also connected to racial injustice in so many ways. But we can also improve migrant rights through a lens of climate justice if we try and create solutions to the climate crisis that also include migrants and also include asylum seekers and refugees. And we also realize that the climate crisis will exacerbate what we're seeing is current displacement and we will see it's going to be the biggest driver of forced migration that the world's ever seen and how I got into all of these things was actually through the lens of migrant rights and migrant justice which is how I then got into climate justice things and all these other things. And then you can see these other issues that — and I feel like I talk about a lot of different things, like a wide range of different things. I talk about fast fashion as well and I guess feminism under fast fashion, but the reality is that all of these issues are completely connected through the climate crisis and tackling all of these issues can be connected if we take the climate justice lens. Also, I'm a medic and I'm currently studying medicine. I'm on my clinical placement —

Layla: Oh, yeah, we didn't mention that, right.

Mikaela: I'm always forgetting —

Layla: So she's also a fourth-year medical student.

Mikaela: But I always forget it, like even just then, I was saying all these things and I was like, oh, what else should I talk about, and I was like, oh, my literal decree that I spend most of my time doing. But through kind of this medical lens is how I've come to understand climate justice even better, I think, because when we look at everything through a health lens and through how health impacts people's lives, health is inherently obviously a social justice issue. There's social determinants on health by a scholar called Hilary Graham who says that social inequalities become written on the body as health inequalities and that's something that I always kind of come back to because the way in which people are oppressed through systems of oppression, whether that's racism or transphobia or ableism or through how xenophobia towards migrants and things like that, how people are impacted by these different systems of oppression also impacts their health and it also manifests itself in the health of different individuals and we see that through the health experienced by refugees and asylum seekers who have worse health outcomes, we see that through black women's maternal mortality rates which are like ridiculously, like, say in the UK, you're five times more likely to die in childbirth if you're a black woman, whereas in — and in the US, you're three times more likely to die in childbirth if you're a black woman and I did some research around that in my Global Health Policy degree last year in which I focused on climate justice and I think that we just need to see all of these issues as connected and that's caring about all of these issues and kind of, yeah, being moved by all of them. It doesn't have to dilute any of our movements at all. I think if anything, it strengthens them. There's a quote by Audrey Lorde which says that we can't have single-issue struggles because we don't live

single-issue lives and that's something that I always come back to as well, because, yeah, I think sometimes it can be — people can say like, "You just need one clear message," like one clear thing that you're talking about, you should only care about one thing, like the climate crisis is bad enough, we can't care about racial injustice or we can't care about migrant rights, but actually caring about all these things and being aware of them will only ever strengthen our work and it will only ever make our work better for all people and so why would we ever avoid that and why do we keep away from that? I think it's just — like if we're not aware of oppression, then we're not going to be able to resist it. We'll just be upholding it. And so that's why I think through — yeah, I'll talk about like trans rights issues in the UK and I'll talk about migrant rights issues and I'll talk about racial injustice a lot and my own experiences of medical racism and the climate crisis because all of these things are linked. And I know that even saying that, that might even sound quite overwhelming to people who have like, "Oh, my gosh, there's so many things going on in the world," but it's actually really hopeful because in the way that if we tackle things through this lens of climate justice, we do have the possibility of making a better world. In The Lancet, in their climate change and health report, in their earlier one, they said that the climate crisis is the greatest global health threat, but then they changed it in 2015 to say that the climate crisis is the greatest global health opportunity because if we tackle it in a way that centers social justice and centers climate justice, then the co-benefits that arise also tackle all these other social determinants of health. So, they also tackle racial injustice, they also tackle the injustice faced by migrants and all these different things. And I was just like — I remember reading that report and I was like, oh, this is so hopeful and actually wonderful that if we do look at all these things as connected, that's how we can create a better world for all of us.

Layla: That's amazing. I had never heard that before. And, you know, obviously, you talk about how all of these systems are connected but this is the first time I've heard about how actually tackling the climate crisis will sort of open this big door to all the other systems. So, what are the solutions? Like I think oftentimes we hear about, "Oh, here's the things that you do as an individual," right? Don't buy from fast fashion or recycle or, you know, those kind of things. But what actually is required for real change and how can just everyday people be a part of that?

Mikaela: Yeah, I think it just requires us to be active citizens. So, I see being an activist — I know that there's a lot of conversation about "What does it mean to be an activist?" but I just see being an activist as just being an active citizen, so you don't have to call yourself an activist, you just have to be actively involved in the world around us. So, that means being aware of these kind of different issues that exist and especially when it comes to the climate crisis, look around your area and see how you see environmental impact in your community, even just directly around you. Things that have co-benefits, so things like increased green spaces so that's also a climate solution is having increased access to green spaces and that improves people's health in so many different ways. So maybe someone who's listening lives in an area that has access to green spaces and you know that the area next to you doesn't have green spaces, you could be involved in like even campaigning in your local council to try and have access to green spaces there. Maybe it's — I think I just want to move away from this idea of just it being by individual action, because I feel like anyone who's listening will know the kind of individual action things. They'll be like, "Oh, maybe we should have more of a plant-based diet, maybe I should cycle to work," and people know these things already, I kind of think. People know that fast fashion isn't ideal at all for human rights or for

the environment. But we all need to move away from it just being about us as an individual and think of it as like a systems problem and how can we influence systems and how can we have an impact on those and that means, yeah, coming together and whether it is like rallying within our local councils or if it's just putting pressure on these bigger institutions and these big businesses because businesses like the fossil fuel companies that have caused this crisis and known that this crisis has been happening for a really, really long time and if people want to listen more about that, the Drilled Podcast, it's a true crime podcast about the climate crisis which kind of shows how much the fossil fuel industry has known for a really long time —

Layla: Is that the Drill?

Mikaela: Drilled. It's called Drilled —

Layla: Yes.

Mikaela: — with Amy Westervelt —

Layla: Okay.

Mikaela: — and it's really, really great. But the fossil fuel industry want you to think it's your problem as you as an individual in it and they want you to waste your time, I'm not saying all of this is a waste of time, they want you to waste your time maybe driving to 10 different stores to get plastic-free groceries rather than maybe using some of that same time to write to your government or rally against corporations or work together in community to organize —

Layla: Yes.

Mikaela: — so I think that that's why I think organizing is so important and getting involved with people in your community to put pressure on like — and I think the campaigns can be so vast and so creative, like there are so many different campaigns that I've been able to support and things like that but there's a campaign, just as an example, now, these three black and Latinx and — just black and Latinx in the UK who are basically suing the UK government under right to life so they're saying that the UK government is kind of preventing their right to life and their right to family life of their family who still live in countries that are going to be more impacted by the climate crisis and they're doing it through this kind of legal lens of like how could we try and set a precedent to be able to take legal action against a government around these different things. But part of that campaign is also like how do we reach the black community? How do we reach communities of color in the UK? How do we show people that this is our issue too? And I think that's like a different way that I hadn't actually thought of approaching these issues before. But the main thing I'm trying to say is just organize, join with people. Organizing just means people coming together and like rallying together behind a cause, so we all have so much power to do that and maybe if you're using your energies right now to like make loads of different oat milk, like spending loads of time on things that do take quite a long time, I'm not trying to completely discourage people from doing that but I also think that there's just too much focus on that and, actually, we only have a limited amount of energy in this world and we need to think about how can we use that in the best way and how can we direct our energy towards the kind of best solutions or to creating more solutions as well.

Layla: Yeah. Wow, that's really great and I think, you know, sometimes I think those individual things that we've heard about, know about as sort of easy to do, right? Like they're,

okay, I know how to do this or that's easy, it's convenient for me to do, but it's inconvenient. I mean, even outside of, say we weren't in a global pandemic and we could all meet together publicly, you know, we won't necessarily, right? Because it's inconvenient. And the inconvenience, I think, is also that these solutions or these ideas or these actions aren't guaranteed to give that instant feeling of gratification that we've achieved something, right? Like I remember I watched a really powerful video of you at the Extinction Rebellion protests in London. Do you want to tell our listeners about that? You had chained yourself —

Mikaela: Yeah.

Layla: — to a stage and it was heartbreaking to watch.

Mikaela: Yeah. I think that was one of the most emotional experiences of my entire life and I think — sometimes, it doesn't feel real that it happened and I watched that video of me, because that video was taken I think at midnight and I'd been crying a lot during that day. So, basically, for context, I think it was two years ago now, in October, I went down to London to join in with the October rebellion, the Extinction Rebellion Scotland which I was involved with then, I was on the media team, I did media and social media stuff for them and spokesperson trainings and things like that and I'd said before going down, "I'm a medical student, I can't get arrested, I definitely can't put myself in that position because I could be really compromising my future," and, basically, when we got there, and I think that day, I had been reading a reading of the IPCC report so that's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and they create reports on what the impacts of warming will be on the world and the 1.5 degrees warming report and it basically talks about the impact of 1.5 degrees of warming post the industrial era, so the impacts of 1.5 degrees

of warming are completely catastrophic. So, I read the part about coral reefs and rising sea levels and I love scuba diving, that's actually like my favorite thing in the world. If we were in a world where there were no issues, I'd be scuba diving all day every day, and reading the bit about coral reefs and just reading about how, within my lifetime, coral reefs will be completely gone if we don't take like really drastic action on climate, it was really moving to me and it was just like a reading of this out loud and we were reading it all day and I remember George Monbiot read after me which I was really honored by, but I started crying like a lot about coral, I was just really crying a lot 'cause I was really moved by it and in that same day, they needed more people to lock on. So, locking on is just like gluing yourself or chaining yourself to infrastructure in the camp so that it stops police from moving the camp on. So, we'd been at our camp for a couple of days. I've been camping in a tent outside of Westminster Abbey in the road for a couple of days and we've managed to keep our camp for quite a long time and we were quite happy about it. And I just got a text from one of my friends, like, "They're trying to demolish the camp, we need someone to lock on. You'd mentioned that you might think about it, are you okay to do it?" And I just remember being like this is such a huge issue and I actually do have privilege and I hold privilege in so many ways and if I can use that privilege to help, to help us keep our camp for a bit longer, to help us carry on talking about this issue and keeping it in the news and in the headlines, then I'm going to do that. And I remember just like turning myself on really, really quickly and it all was just a big blur and it was when I actually locked on and my arm was — I was chained in this, it's like a metal arm tube and with this really, really lovely like elderly man called John who had come down from the Scottish Highlands and we were locked together for like 10 hours so we got to know each other fairly well, that I actually started hysterically crying just because I realized that I wasn't sure if I wanted to have children anymore, not because

of the kind of weird eco-fascisty reasons but because I was like, “Do I want to bring a child into a world where we have to chain ourselves to metal tubes right next to Parliament in order to be listened to about a crisis which is going to impact all of us and which already is killing so many people? Do I want to do that?” And this was like a big thing for me, because I’ve always wanted — I’ve always wanted to have kids, I’m still not sure, but in that moment, I just felt really overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation that we were having to go to almost extremes like this —

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: — in order to be heard. Like it is an extreme, it was a last resort. I didn’t want to chain myself to a tube. I didn’t want to end up in a police court in the middle of the night with a police officer telling me why the police aren’t racist, even though I didn’t ask. I know, I know, it was like — it was a very, like definitely a very traumatizing experience.

Layla: Yeah.

Mikaela: In the end, I didn’t end up getting arrested because I think I was a bit of a mess and they were like — though we’d already lost the site by that point, the police had said to us, they were really manipulative, they did a very like good cop, bad cop kind of thing and we were just like — they were like, “We’re gonna leave you here until 6 AM unless you unlock now,” and it was like, I think it was like midnight or one in the morning and we just made a decision that the site was lost and we unlocked and all of us — it was actually John, the elderly man, another guy, they stayed until six in the morning ’cause they were just like, “We’re gonna make these officers stand here all night if they’re going to be like this with you guys, but you don’t have to stay,” and they got sawn out I think at six.

But it was a really emotional time and that happened two years ago and still we haven't seen drastic action on climate. And it's not just us that have done these actions. These actions have been going on all over the world. And I'm no longer a part of Extinction Rebellion for many reasons, but Extinction Rebellion weren't the people to start direct action on climate. Indigenous youth have been chaining themselves to pipelines for so long, like indigenous people have been literally giving their lives for this fight for so much longer and yet we still haven't seen change and it's kind of like what do we have to do to be listened to about a crisis which is affecting all of us?

Layla: I mean, obviously, that's a very traumatizing thing to have to go through and to have to do that and still not be listened to and two years later, right? Still very little action and knowing that actually people have been doing actions such as yours and even more for so long and still so little headway has been made other than greenwashing campaigns and people giving lip service and that sort of thing. So, what well do you pull from? How do you continue to reinvigorate yourself, refill yourself so that you don't slip into a sense of apathy and helplessness and hopelessness, that you keep moving forward, knowing the reality of this sort of slow progress that's being made?

Mikaela: I think I always looked to the past to learn from and how social media movements have worked in the past, because being a defeatist is as bad as being in denial of these issues and so I can't even let myself get to a point of apathy. I just don't really let myself get there. Because I just realize that, yeah, if you stop caring about something, you're as bad as denying it's there because you're not doing anything either way. So, I think I get really inspired by just looking at old activists, like people who are like much older —

Layla: Yes.

Mikaela: — and have been doing this for a long time. And this is one thing I actually —

Layla: Good ancestors, yes.

Mikaela: Yes. Well, like, I think about how Angela Davis has been doing this work for over 50 years and that's half a century. If she can do this work for half a century and have seen what she has seen and she can carry on going, then so can I too and there must be hope somewhere and I think I just trust in people who've been doing this work for such a long time and haven't given up. I'm like, if they can't lose hope, then how dare I? Like if they can keep going, then how dare I? Like my ancestors, they didn't lose hope even though they went through unimaginable traumas and hardship and they went through unimaginable things and they still kept going and they still — there always was hope then so there must be hope now and there always must be something that we can move towards. Because I think hope is like an active stance, it's choosing to do things —

Layla: I think it's something you choose, right. I think it's something that you choose, not something that you wait for.

Mikaela: No, and that's something I really want people to stop waiting for other people to give them hope and just be the hope yourself and do something. Like I think hope is action. Hope is beautiful in that way in that we can create it ourselves. And that's part of the reason I act is because when I'm acting on things, when I'm acting on the climate crisis, that's when I feel more hope because I am being that hope. In the times when I wasn't doing as — wasn't involved as much in organizing, those were the times when I would be lying awake

in the middle of the night and couldn't move because I was just thinking about the peril of the climate crisis because I was like held in fear then. But, actually, when I started to act, even though I've become more aware of the impacts, I have more hope because I know that I am doing something about it and that I am part of that movement and movements are what create change and that's what I think inspires me so much and keeps me going. And if anyone's looking for hope, you can just be that. You can just do something in order to kind of create that.

Layla: It's amazing. Thank you. Yes, yes, a thousand times, yes. Okay, so I am really curious how you balance being a medical student, of all things, and all of these other incredible things that you do? I mean, we've mentioned a couple of times that you also host a podcast, which, as a podcaster, podcasting is a full-time job and I am constantly looking at how can I do the thing that I love, I love doing it, but give priority to writing, which is my first vocation, right? And so that's two things that I'm trying to balance, right? Writing and podcasting or speaking, and then home life and just giving me my time, Layla time. How do you balance it or what does a practice of balance look like for you?

Mikaela: So I'm not sure if I always balanced this well. So, I just want to preface all of this with that, is that I'm sure that I definitely give myself too much to do a lot of the time and then end up having to reject things but I think a way that's helped me do all of these things is there was one time when I was talking to Jo who I co-host YIKES with and I was saying to her like, "Oh my gosh, this is already overwhelming, loads of other medics just get to do medicine and health stuff and they don't have to anything else I'm doing all these other things and sometimes it can be really overwhelming," and she actually checked me and she was like, "Everything else that you're

doing is health work too. The anti-racism work that you do, that improves health. The climate work that you do, that will improve health in so many more ways,” like probably even more ways than I’ll be able to improve health by practicing medicine as a doctor. “Like all of this work that you’re doing is health work, and so if you see it like that, you are making your patients’ lives and hopefully people you might even never meet lives better by doing this work.”

Layla: Wow.

Mikaela: I think seeing it through that perspective has made me just see that kind of in the same way that I see all these other issues are connected, like my — all these different kind of areas of my work, they’re also connected as well and I think that helps me have the motivation to do everything and it helps me make time for things and prioritize things in a better way, but I definitely do get overwhelmed sometimes. I think that having medicine as an almost side thing, or actually —

Layla: Oh, yeah, and I’m a medical student, right.

Mikaela: But it’s quite nice because I find that when I’m studying about the human body and about medicine and things, it helps me to almost have some sort of escape from the rest of my work because I am focusing on science and just learning things.

Layla: Right. That makes sense.

Mikaela: Yeah.

Layla: Yeah.

Mikaela: And that's actually really nice. Like it's — I think I might actually find all of this stuff more overwhelming if it's all I did, because —

Layla: Yeah.

Mikaela: — then there's almost like a never-ending amount of work that I could do. For example, on the podcast, there's a never-ending amount of preparation that you could —

Layla: That's right.

Mikaela: — podcast episode. There's never like an end to that. Or even with like when I'm writing things, there's a never-ending amount of editing that I could do when I'm doing a speaking event like this. And I think that it's actually helped having medicine as a thing because it helps me say no a lot. I say no to a lot of things and I've learned to say no to a lot because that's a way of kind of retaining some sort of like brain space —

Layla: Yes.

Mikaela: — and I think that it's actually — it's kind of helped during everything that's been going on, so I'll just be like, if someone's being really harassing, I'll just be like, "I'm actually a medical student in a pandemic, like please leave me alone."

Layla: Please leave me alone.

Mikaela: And this makes it a little easy, but it's also been — it's been good to like, yeah, have something else to focus my time on. I also don't really know how I do it but also — I just think my brain goes really, really fast which is — that means that it

can be more stressful when I'm not doing things because my brain just races, so like —

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: — I listen to all my lectures and all my podcasts like on a two-time speed and my friends have sometimes been like, “What are you listening to? I can't even understand that,” and I was just like, “That's the speed of my brain, so I can't, any slower than I can get a bit bored sometimes.” So, I think it's a blessing and a curse that my brain just whizzes and whirs, but it's helpful in this kind of space. But then, at the same time, I've had to really check myself and make sure that I'm not overglorifying being busy and taking on loads of stuff —

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: — as this kind of manifestation of internalized capitalism of being like, “I have to be busy all the time, I have to be productive,” and actually giving myself space to be like, “I need rest too. I need to have time too. I don't need to fill every single hour of my day with a different work thing.”

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: I actually can allow myself rest and to read books that aren't serious as well as books that are very serious.

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: Yeah.

Layla: Oh, my gosh, with the books. I mean, I know I have to like — because I read so much because I interview so many authors and obviously because I write so I research a lot, but it's like,

okay, can I just read like a book that's about, I don't know, a dragon or something, you know?

Mikaela: Yes.

Layla: There's no system of oppression, there's nothing there that makes me think about my work and makes me want to go write some notes or write an Instagram post about it, right? It's very important to create that space.

Mikaela: Yeah, definitely. So, one thing that I do when I'm a bit overwhelmed is read like a not-that-good YA novel.

Layla: Okay.

Mikaela: Because — like a deliberately like quite terrible one, like I would never share to anyone that I'm reading it because I probably get embarrassed. But I was watching — I was reading this one that was like a post-apocalyptic London but it was just so random and weird. It was like about zombies and stuff but it wasn't connected to anything and it wasn't serious in any way and it just made me laugh at how ridiculous some of the storylines were. But that's why I think there's such a place for books that are just like silly.

Layla: There's something for everyone.

Mikaela: Yeah, and just lets you switch off. Like this book was definitely written for like 13-year-old boys, but I loved it. I loved it so much, because I could completely escape. There was nothing to really inspire me to like think about how this connects to all these different other issues. It was just like, this is a bit of a silly book and I'm enjoying reading it.

Layla: Love that. Okay, so as we wrap up, I'm really curious, what are you sort of envisioning or seeing for yourself post your studies? Where do you see yourself going? Obviously, you've said everything is interconnected for you. It's all connected, but where do you see yourself taking it? What would you like to do?

Mikaela: That is a great question. I'm currently grappling with this a lot. We actually had some — today's uni for me was careers advice, which was — I was like, "Oh, dear, I don't know, I'm not sure." And it was talking about the different kind of paths that you can go down through medicine. I think, for me, ideally, I would like to do part-time medicine. So, I still want to get qualified, I would still love to practice medicine because this is something that I've wanted to do my whole life and a big part of that is I want to be kind of the black woman doctor that I wish I'd had and I want to be able to be that for some other little girl who doesn't feel represented or doesn't see themselves in a doctor, like I kind of I want to be that. And I do enjoy medicine, to some extent. And I enjoy the social aspects of medicine so much. I think I'd love to do like part-time general practice where I kind of can get to know a community in some way as part of it. That's the medical side of it. And then I think I would like to write as much as possible. I really love writing, and whilst I was thinking of doing a book thing more recently, I am delaying all of that until post studies because I want to give it the best that I could give it. So, I'm hoping that, post-graduation, I'll write my first book which will be very exciting.

Layla: That is exciting and I can't wait to read it. Yes.

Mikaela: Yeah, so I almost — I almost said yes to book stuff a couple months ago and then I actually — it was a big moment of me choosing myself instead and being like I actually want to

be able to balance my life and I think that adding writing a book on top of everything else right now might be a bit much. So, I'm going to take my time with that and I'm hoping that I could possibly be a part-time doctor, still be able to do speaking work, and still be able to do kind of like the organizing and things that I really love and writing that I really love. But try and balance those things together. And I think that I just see myself in the future as just still being part of community organizing, whatever kind of way that I could be useful, and like trying to support movements and I'm really hoping that we're in a better space with climate justice by that point. We'll still be pushing people on but, hopefully, we'll be in a better place in general in the world. But I don't ever really see myself stopping doing this work. I just can't imagine not doing it and not talking about these things and not working community and not kind of being a part of all of that. But I just want to see how I can balance it. I don't really know, like this is another thing is that I'm also, especially I think the pandemic has taught all of us that you can't plan things that well, like you can't —

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: I can't know where I'm going to be in — when do I graduate? 2023. I've still got a long way to go sadly, it's a long degree, but I just think I'm just taking things as they come and thinking like what would I love to do? Like I would love to be able to write as much as I want and do speaking things and —

Layla: You said something so key though. You said it was when you were receiving I guess book offers or ideas or writing a book, that it was this big moment of choosing yourself. What did you mean by that? Because I found that really resonated with me.

Mikaela: So, I think I have got into this mindset which I think a lot of people who hold marginalized identities do get into, this kind of scarcity mindset of things are only going to be here now and so you've got to take them and you've got to run with them because you don't want to lose out on all these different things.

Layla: Right. And that we can like carry it all, right? Like we're the super people who can just do it all and not break.

Mikaela: Yeah, exactly, and I think when I was offered book things and talking to different agents and publishers and things, I was very much in this mindset of "I can just add that into my life as it is now," like I can just remove the time that I currently use to rest and sleep and I can just write a book. And I think that, in me saying, yeah, in me saying no to that, I was saying yes to myself in the way that I was saying I value being happy and content and I'm finding joy, I value that as much as I do maybe this kind of like exterior success of having written a book at a young age or those kind of things. Like I actually value my own timeline more than I do the timeline of other people that are trying to kind of dictate that to me, and I also trust in God a lot, that God's gonna be like, you know what, that I'll know deep in my soul when it's the right time to do things because the Lord will just tell me that it is.

Layla: Yes.

Mikaela: And I think that that's kind of, in that situation, it's really hard to do because like, obviously, people in my family were just like —

Layla: Take it, do it, do it.

Mikaela: Yeah, take it, yeah. Yeah, like this could be the start of so many different things. But I just think I'm trying to step into this like mindset of abundance rather than scarcity and being like things will always be there if you want them to be and if they're the right thing, they'll always be there and not rushing into things and not compromising my joy. Like I don't think I should have to compromise my joy for "success," like that's not — and I'm defining success myself and success to me means being like happy and feeling joy, not just these kind of external markers of having done this or monetary wealth or these kind of things. So I'm trying to define it myself, which sometimes is scary, because that means like resisting a lot of the things that you were taught a lot, but I'm just trying to trust myself a lot and value myself enough to trust my own advice as well.

Layla: You know, I'm a huge fan of Audrey Lorde and I think that she would be super proud hearing that, because she talked about, you know, we have to define ourselves for ourselves and that we have to know like what it is that we want to do because if we don't, other people have plans for us, right? And often, those plans are to their benefit and to our detriment. And so, if we're not clear on, you said, you know, what my timeline is, I want it to be on my timeline, not what other people's timelines are, and having that trust in a higher power, you know, I think is very powerful and also in yourself, right? If I want to write a book, I can write a book. I just don't have to do it right now.

Mikaela: Yeah, exactly, because I think that part of me — when I was turning it down, part of it was I was saying to myself like, "Am I turning it down because I don't think I can do it?" And I was like no, I can write a great book. Like I know I could do that. And it's not about me not thinking I can do it, it's about me choosing when I want to do it.

Layla: That's right.

Mikaela: I'm choosing my own joy and that's something that I talked to my friends at the time actually who, especially — I talked to Jo so many times 'cause she's a great pal but —

Layla: She sounds amazing. I think everyone who's listening to this wants to be her friend now.

Mikaela: She is literally the best, and she was saying, she was like, "You know you could write a great book. You know it'd be amazing," but she was like, "But if this doesn't feel completely right for you, then you got to listen to yourself and you've got to do like what you think is right." And I think having someone also be like supportive in that way and kind of echo back what I thought I believed was really kind of useful as well. And, yes, remembering that things will be here if they're meant to be —

Layla: Right.

Mikaela: — and I also want to be here and I also want to be here as a whole and healthy human through all of this.

Layla: Yeah, not with your joy completely depleted and your sense of — yeah, just wholeness and wellness, 'cause writing a book is hard.

Mikaela: Yeah. And I think what you're saying about being for someone else's benefit, because a lot of people that I spoke to in publishing and things like that, they were really keen to get it out quickly because people suddenly care about racism and they suddenly care about —

Layla: That's right.

Mikaela: — the climate stuff. It was like, get it out quickly, get a big deal, and blah, blah, blah, and I realized like, actually, I want to take my time with this, like this is something that I think requires and deserves time and so, instead, I'm going to write this on my own time, like I'm going to write — obviously, I write all the time but I'm just going to keep writing for myself and when it feels like, okay, this is the time to put this out there and this is the time, then that'll be okay. Rather than it being because something has happened in the world that means people suddenly care, it should be more about like how do I feel about this instead?

Layla: And we'll sort of close on this point, but this is something that I feel very strongly about, because, you know, post the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests and the sudden catapulting of people into anti-racism work, or at least an interest in it, that was something that I was super aware of, was the ways in which the media and publishing companies and just companies would want to latch on to black people and say, "Now we're gonna offer you all of these things, but give it to us next month," right?

Mikaela: Yeah, literally, yeah.

Layla: And it's incredible. I mean, it's still wanting, it's tokenism, it's performative ally-ship, it's white saviorism, it's all of those things that people think are ally-ship or think as being part of this movement for change, but they're actually just replicating, you know, oppression over and over again, and I just want to say this to any companies, publishers, media, you know, people listening, like we are clocked on to you. We are very aware of the game and we're also very aware of our value. And, you know, for any black people, indigenous people, people of color, I want to remind them, be aware of your value. And like Mikaela has said, right, like you can do anything you want.

Anything you want. You are brilliant. You can do anything you want. Do it on your timeline and do it from a place of feeling whole and feeling well and feeling like your joy is there.

Mikaela, you're such an amazing example of that and I just want to say thank you because those decisions made in private, right? Nobody knows that these are things that you are thinking about. They matter. They really, really matter. Not selling ourselves out, not selling ourselves short, and staying true to our own values and to the values of true change is so important. So, thank you.

Mikaela: Thank you so much. Sorry, I don't know what to say. I was like there's so many lovely things that has just been said and I don't know how to react.

Layla: All right, well, we're gonna — first of all, I just want to say just to, you know, again, pile on compliments and thank yous, but this has been such a great conversation. I really think this has been a masterclass for so many people and I just can't wait to see how you continue on your journey. Like it's amazing and thank you for the issues that you are bringing to light for those of us who are not in that area of work or who are not, you know, that well versed in what's happening, but also in just how you hold yourself as well. It's a real example. And I know you do it for you, you don't do it for other people but, you know, you talked about how you look to how other older activists, how they go on their journey and it mattered to you and so you matter to people who are looking at you too, so thank you.

Mikaela: Thank you, Layla. That's honestly — I feel like gonna cry. I'm really emotional. I just, honestly, I've loved this conversation so much and I will think about this a lot as well as I go through the rest of the week, like this has been a complete blessing.

Layla: Thank you. Okay, so our final question, Mikaela, and then we'll finish up. What does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Mikaela: So, I think it just means many things but it means checking in on where the actions of my ancestors have caused like good in the world and how I can learn from that, but also learning, looking at how my ancestors might have caused harm in the world and how I might be upholding that harm. And how can I honor not only those who have kind of come before me but those who will come after me in how I present myself and how I hold myself in the world and how I direct my heart in this world and how I direct my actions. And just constantly checking myself on these things and constantly reminding myself of these things. And constantly just holding space for how I see the world to be completely challenged because if I look at how the world that my ancestors lived in, it was completely different from the world it is today so I wonder what the world would be in however long from now and I hope that whoever comes after me will be able to look back and think that I've learned from things and that they can learn from me in some different ways. And that we can all learn from each other and be moved by each other. I think being a good ancestor is also just like allowing yourself to be soft and being soft is so many different things. It means being soft to be able to be moved by other people's actions, but also being soft with yourself and realizing that we can't know everything and we'll never know everything and all we can do is as much as we can and take rest and allow ourselves to be like soft within that. And that reminded me of — I wrote this poem called Soft Black Girl which I really love and that's what I try and see myself as. I'm just like I'm just a soft black girl and I'm just trying to do my best.

Layla: I love that. That's beautiful. Thank you, Mikaela.

Mikaela: No worries. Thank you so much for having me.

(Outro)

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