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(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.*

Savala Nolan is a writer, speaker, and lawyer. Her first book, *Don't Let It Get You Down: Essays on Race, Gender, and the Body*, is our Good Ancestor Book Club Selection for the month of October 2021. Savala is executive director of the Thelton E. Henderson Center for Social Justice at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law. She and her writing have been featured in *Vogue*, *Time*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The New York Times Book Review*, the *Boston Globe*, and more. She served as an advisor on the Peabody-winning podcast, *The Promise*. She lives in the San Francisco Bay area with her family.

*Don't Let It Get You Down* is a powerful collection of 12 memoiristic essays, lyrical and magnetic in their cadence, that

offer poignant reflections on living between society's most charged, politicized, and intractably polar spaces between black and white, rich and poor, thin and fat. Content warning: In the opening of this conversation, Savala shares her connection to her second great grandmother, who has murdered at the hands of racist vigilantes in the 1890s.

(interview)

**Layla:** Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and today, I am speaking with the wonderful Savala Nolan, author of our Good Ancestor Book Club pick for the month of October 2021. Her book is *Don't Let It Get You Down: Essays on Race, Gender, and the Body*. Welcome, Savala.

**Savala:** Thank you, Layla. You know, I am so thrilled to be here and somehow I missed the memo that my book was gonna be part of your book club. I thought we were just doing a podcast, we didn't quite —

**Layla:** No.

**Savala:** — immediately so —

**Layla:** We're here to celebrate it all.

**Savala:** Yeah, I'm overjoyed. Really, really overjoyed.

**Layla:** Yeah, absolutely. This is a book that I'm excited to be introducing to our book club members as well as our podcast audience members as well. It's a book that spans many, many topics through the lens of the body and we're gonna be getting into that in this conversation. But in the meantime, I want to encourage our audience members, if you're not a member of

the book club, head on over to our Patreon page or to [goodancestorbookclub.com](http://goodancestorbookclub.com). Check out what we have an offer there. Each month, we feature a different author and a different book and we have discussions in the Patreon community, as well as at the end of the month, we have discussions with the author themselves. So, let's get into it, Savala. Our very first question that I ask every single guest: Who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, societal or familial, who have influenced you on your journey?

**Savala:** I love this question, Layla, because it changes, you know? I think about my ancestors a lot and have for many years, you know? And depending on where I'm at in my life and like what is top of mind for me or maybe, you know, who's coming through, if that's kind of the lingo that makes sense to you, that answer changes so knowing I was gonna be talking with you, I've been thinking about it the past couple of days and the two that really come to mind or I guess it's a group of people, not a single person, are my great, great grandmother, Laura, on my dad's side, who we don't know much about. We know that her mother was born into slavery, we think in Alabama or Louisiana, and Laura lived in Texas and died in Texas. She was murdered by racist vigilantes in 1898 in Texas and I think about her a lot. Unfortunately, you know, what I think about most with her is her death and how she died and that's what I know most about from her life, you know? That's the story that exists still about her at this time and I'm always aware of the danger of kind of trapping my ancestors, especially my black and brown ancestors, kind of in the ember of trauma, you know? Because I'm descended from enslaved people and there was so much suffering because of that so I'm always aware when I'm thinking about her of how to both honor her suffering and not limit my relationship to her to her suffering. So she's with me a lot right now and really has been since Breonna Taylor was murdered because there were so

many overlaps in Laura's story and Breonna Taylor's story. And the other ancestors that I feel really connected to and are on my mind a lot are not people I'm descended from in terms of genes, you know, but they're spiritual ancestors, they're cultural ancestors, I guess you might say, and those are the three women who were enslaved by the white side of my family who I write about in the book, I wrote about Laura too, but their names or the names they were, you know, called, they may not have been the names they were given, but the names that they were called by my family were Phyllis, Grace, and Peggy. Peggy was a girl and Phyllis and Grace were women, at least according to the property tax ledgers that we have. And, again, with them, I think about the way that I share a lineage, you know, to enslavement with them and how they are the only people whose identity I know who are connected to me through enslavement, you know? And the irony that they're on the white side of my family as opposed to the black side of my family where the actual people were enslaved. So I ponder that mystery of feeling so connected to people that I'm not related to because they share an experience with people I am related to that I don't have access to. And, again, I think about how to honor them and pay homage to them and sort of be on a kind of constant internal pilgrimage for them without reducing them or flattening them to their identity as people that were enslaved. So, yeah, they're with me a lot and they ask a lot of me because, you know, to be in relationship with them is not simple or straightforward. And I feel their grit, you know? I feel their grit. And I suppose I draw from that. So that's my answer right now, you know? It might have been different a year ago or a year from now but those are the people I'm really thinking about a lot right now.

**Layla:** Thank you so much for sharing that and I imagine they're, especially with you having gone through the process of writing them into the book and reckoning with them, being in

reflective conversation with them. You said, “They ask a lot of me.” Can you expand a little bit more on what you mean by that? Because I really felt that when you said that and I wondered their level of courage, integrity, truthfulness, authenticity to which they hold you to be within yourself, both for yourself and for them.

**Savala:** Yes. In a word, yes, and sometimes it’s humorous in line at the grocery store being really grumpy about how long it’s taking to buy my cartful of organic produce or something and, you know, I’ll sort of feel them like tap me on the shoulder, you know? As a little bit of a perspective check or a reality check. So there’s this kind of a humorous way in which I feel like your ancestors can ask you to like, you know, get out of your head, get out of your — the limitations of your own perspective a little bit, you know? By remembering some of what they endured. I think that they ask a lot of me, you know, as I said a moment ago in terms of not limiting my perspective of them or my definition of them to their trauma and not seeing them solely through a lens of whiteness, you know, simply because they’re in history and our history is just constantly being funneled through the lens of whiteness. And so, like the question of can I even look at my own history without whiteness kind of lodging itself between me and what I’m trying to observe, and so they ask me to sort of take that lens off my own vision for them and then for my own life, you know? I mean, I think very literally, like they may not have thought of me personally, you know? They may not have imagined this person named Savala living in California at this time in history but certainly they thought of their own progeny and their own children and their own great, great, great grandchildren and so I very literally feel like I bear some responsibility to Laura, in particular, because she was a mother, she had children and I know, because I’m a mother, that she thought about the future of her family. And so whether she

thought about me in a concrete way or just kind of an abstract way, I was on her mind. And I think that just that fact asks me to engage with my role as a mom and a future second great grandmother, you know? And as her descendant. So, yeah, I think if you're gonna be really, really in relationship with your ancestors, it can be rigorous —

**Layla:** Yes.

**Savala:** — you know?

**Layla:** Yes.

**Savala:** And totally nourishing, you know? I do this meditation on the Liberate app, which is an app for people of color of sort of mindfulness meditations for and by people of color, and there's a wonderful one that's about like summoning, you know, the energy, the memory of the female ancestors, spiritual, genetic, however you think about it, and imagining them encircling you and it's incredibly powerful and always, always centers me in a really positive way. So, it's not all rigor, you know? Sometimes it's just humor or joy or comfort but there's rigor there too.

**Layla:** Yeah. Oh, that's beautiful. Thank you, Savala. So —

**Savala:** Yeah.

**Layla:** — in your own words, can you tell us what this book is about and how it came to be? And in particular, the title, because you speak about that in one of the essays, the title, *Don't Let It Get You Down*, how you came upon it.

**Savala:** Yeah, I'm glad you asked because I love that question. Well, you know, the sort of nutshell answer is it's a collection of

12 essays that are deeply personal but also, you know, I hope quite political and very much rooted in my own body and the wisdom and the knowledge of my own body but also I hope universal, like we all have bodies, right? Our bodies are the site of knowledge and epiphany and pain and memory and lies, you know, we all believe things about our bodies that aren't true. So I hope that though I'm using my own body to talk about my life and race and gender and, to an extent, class that people relate, right? Because we all have an embodied experience of these definitional things like race and gender and class in our lives. So it's really a memoir, you know? As you said earlier, I write about lots of different things, from interracial friendships to state violence to, you know, violence against women to dating. I mean, I really kind of cover the gamut from my perspective, as someone who, you know, is black and also mixed, has been in a lot of really wealthy, very elite spaces but is not from money and has pretty abject generational poverty in my family, from my perspective as someone who's been fat and thin over and over, you know, as a woman, in particular, we're so kind of tied to what we look like that it really can powerfully inform your perspective to have a body that's right sometimes and a body that's wrong sometimes. So, I bring this kind of multivalent or multilingual perspective to these issues and I wanted to map that, you know? I just wanted to chart and explore that. And that desire turned into the book. And, yeah, the title, *Don't Let It Get You Down*, it comes from a conversation I had with my hairdresser several years ago and I do tell the story in the book but I'll tell it here too, of course. So I was in the salon, you know, having my hair done and scrolling my phone, you know, as we do. And, let's see, I guess it was six years ago because I remember very distinctly just having a very pleasant lovely day and a lovely time and then sort of running headfirst into the wall of the news on my news app that the cops who shot and killed Tamir Rice were not going to be prosecuted. And Tamir Rice was the young black boy who was

murdered in Ohio and I think the thing that was really salient for people, at least for me, in thinking about that instance of state violence was that the cops, like, you know, there's a video, there's footage of it, and the cops show up at the park and then it's two seconds before they fire their weapons. So like the speed of it was, I don't know, it was shattering how quickly that happened and then it was shattering again to see that there were not going to be any charges. So I went from kind of, you know, happy go lucky in the salon chair to visibly shaken and my hairdresser saw this. He's an older black man. I've been seeing him for years and years. And he saw how upset I was and he said, "What's going on? What's wrong?" And I explained they're not gonna prosecute, and he kinda took a step back and paused and he said, "Don't let it get you down. Don't let it get you down," and he said it twice and he didn't say with any of the like, "Oh, don't let it get you down," like I'm used to hearing that phrase in this kind of like upbeat, peppy way, and he didn't say it like that at all. He said it with so much heaviness and weariness, almost like a very stern warning, and I realized in that moment that an older black person was offering a younger black person some very, very serious advice, like a survival strategy kind of advice. Because in this country, you know, if you're black or, I mean, this is true for marginalized groups across the world, right? But the way we were talking about it was about American blackness so in this country, if you're black, you know, and you let the pain of history and the pain of the status quo and the sort of relentlessness of it get you down, if you let it bring you to your knees in a way that undermines your own sense of dignity and humanity, you may never get up, like it's so relentless.

**Layla:** I think that is the perfect word for it. It is relentless, yeah.



**Savala:** It's relentless and you may never get up, you know? So it's advice, you know, that I have to be really clear, you know, I do not interpret that advice or offer that advice as a way of saying ignore the pain or the problem, you know? It's not, "Don't let it get you down," like, oh, pretend it's not happening, but it's very much about don't let the relentlessness undermine your own sense of self-worth and your own sense of dignity and humanity. Pay attention to it, fight against it, you know? Do all of that stuff, don't ignore it, but do not let it seep so deep into you that it clouds your own vision of who you are, right? So that's the way I offer it as the title of the book, although, I mean, there's another way, Layla, that like I could have put a question mark at the end of that phrase, "Don't let it get you down?" because if I'm talking to people who hold a lot of privilege or to those aspects of myself that are deeply privileged, it's kind of like, well, I don't know, maybe you should let it get you down, maybe you should actually like let it in and let it bring you to your knees and really sit with it a little bit so that you bring a sense of personal investment to the fight, you know? So it's a complex phrase. It's not an upbeat phrase as I'm using it.

**Layla:** You know what, Savala, I'm glad that you didn't put that question mark because one thing that's really clear throughout the book is that you are at once wrestling with, "How can I write myself and my stories and my experiences and what I think outside of the white gaze while also being truthful about my experiences within the white gaze?" and, you know, that's a hard thing to do and I think it's something that many black authors and authors of color who are very aware of the white gaze and are trying to free themselves and free others of it are in that space of holding both things at the same time. But I'm glad that you didn't put the question mark there because then I know that this book is clearly for me. And I think that's important. I think it's important that it's for people who are

black, for people who are minoritized and racialized to see ourselves. And I'm glad that you took that ownership of that, because, yes, you may have — that's not to say that people who are not black or not people of color shouldn't read this book, everybody should absolutely read it, but I think it's so important to center our gaze.

**Savala:** I think so too and to be honest and upfront about where we see our gaze potentially being muddied, you know, by the impact of whiteness in our own lives or kind of the other isms that have a way of just like worming into our brains and creating static as we're trying to understand our own experiences and trying to carve out self-definition that isn't constantly in reference to the sort of more powerful parts of society, you know? Like, for black people, it's like how do we think about ourselves in a way that doesn't involve whiteness? I don't know. Can we? Like is that even possible in this culture? I'm like, yes, of course it is and there are writers like Toni Morrison who did that so powerfully, you know? She created a world of blackness that was not derivative of whiteness and not sort of constantly defining itself by its status as compared to whiteness and, you know, I wanna say it's magic that she did that, of course, it was also skill and hard work, but I don't have that skill, like I'm not able to create that world but what I am able to do is talk to and for people who are like me, you know? In between and also marginalized, and point out where I think that I am seeing myself in a way that is maybe too heavily tied to my own subjugation, you know? I think I'm able to point out where I think my vision is clouded by the white gaze or the fat phobic gaze or, you know, the male gaze, like take your pick of gazes. And I tried to do that, you know, in the book so that it would be like a mirror for people, somebody used the phrase "a mirror and a hug," you know, for women and brown women and all of that, and I hope for people who don't share those kinds of identities, you know, it still is a mirror in some way,

you know? Maybe more of a revelatory way but, yeah, I want women and black and brown women and fat women to see and feel themselves in this book. I mean, that's the feedback that like really, you know, gets my heart is when I hear from people and they're like, "I saw myself in this book." Oh, my God, you know?

**Layla:** Yeah, so I absolutely did and I shared this with you before we hit record that, even though our experiences are quite different, for many different reasons, there was so much that I read that I was like, "Oh, I recognize myself here," even if it was in a slightly different scenario but I recognized the feelings of otherness. I recognized the feelings of striving to fit in within the white gaze, to be accepted. I recognized the feelings of "I don't quite fit here but I also don't quite fit there and I don't really know where I fit," and it, for a very long time, for me, was a point of shame, not of who I am but that who I am didn't fit in dominant culture. And, of course, I didn't have the words for this for a really long time. I didn't have the understanding of dominant culture and white supremacy and patriarchy and all of these systems of oppression that other us. And so, you know, it was just, "I'm different. This is how the world is supposed to be and I'm different. I don't hate who I am but I wish it fit within this world." And, you know, throughout the years, obviously being on my own journey and coming to an understanding of the purposefulness of that, the purposefulness of these systems and the ways that they other us, minoritize us, I've gained a real sense of pride and appreciation for who I am and where I come from and, you know, what lineage I descend from and the descendants who will come from me. But it's taken quite a while to get to that place and I could see throughout the book you using these memoiristic essays to show us some of that journey for yourself. So, the very first essay is called "On Dating White Guys While Me" and, you know, I opened it up and I went, right, and

I opened it up, that's the first essay and I'm like, "Okay, so this is what we're doing," right?

**Savala:** Welcome to my book.

**Layla:** And it was — I just wanna say thank you for, you know, sharing these stories, because it is a mirror, like you said, and I wonder what it was like for you to look into that mirror now knowing what you know about yourself now, you know? Looking at that past self in the mirror.

**Savala:** Yeah, I mean, I really feel for her, you know? Just to give, I guess, listeners a very, very small snapshot of that essay, for a lot of my life, I mean, I'm talking like decades and decades of my life, I really pursued romantic approval from a certain type of white man because I thought that it would make me legible to the culture and valuable to the culture. I thought, essentially, the approval of a certain type of white guy in the romantic context would like erase my otherness, right? Like I would still be who I am but, somehow, through their approval, it would no longer be an issue because I would be approved of by the gatekeepers. And I do realize, you know, now that, essentially, I was seeking to erase myself through romantic relationships with people and the essay is about how I came to see that and a couple guys in particular, you know, and how it all unfolded, and how I got over that, I should add. Like how I stopped that quest for sort of self-annihilation through their approval. I mean, when I look at that person who, honestly, like I'm not talking about high school, like this was like late 20s, you know, 30s and I'm 41, I feel a lot of sympathy for her, you know? And I still feel confused by some of those men. I'm like, "What —" I still think about their behavior and I'm confused by it. But, mostly, I think I wish that I could have understood sooner that what I was trying to do was actually destroy myself, you know? I thought that what I was trying to do was finally

live, you know, was affirm my worth. But if the only way to affirm your worth is to somehow erase huge aspects of who you are, that's not actually what you're doing. You're not really trying to affirm your worth as who you are, you're trying to costume yourself. And I wish that I could go talk to that person and explain that to her and I can't, you know? The best I can do is write about it or write about it now, you know?

**Layla:** Right, and it's — I imagine, because as I was reading it, I was kind of like, "Oh," you know what I mean? Like it was sort of cringy parts but also like, "Oh, I recognize this," as well, do you know what I mean? Like, oh, I'm cringing also partly for myself, you know what I mean?

**Savala:** Yeah. Oh, yeah, there's cringy stuff, for sure. But I love your — and their behavior, like, you know? Everyone's cringy.

**Layla:** Absolutely. Right, absolutely, but it was — what you just said about, "I can't go back and change it," right? "But I can try and understand it now," and I think it's so important that we not make ourselves wrong, like past versions of ourselves wrong for the understanding that we did not have, you know, at an earlier time, but really try and understand where that came from and what I was trying to do. It's so powerful what you said about, "What I realized I was trying to do was trying to destroy myself," and that is one of the really sneaky ways that white supremacy operates, which is not the — I mean, you have the story, you have one of the stories in your book, you talk about a group of skinheads coming through the front door, I think, of your home or a family home during a birthday party, right? White supremacy is not just the white skinheads coming in through the front door but it's also the subversive acts of self-annihilation through something as innocent seeming as pursuing romantic relationships.

**Savala:** Yes. And, you know, it's not to say that you can't be a person of color dating a white person, you know? It's not to say that —

**Layla:** No.

**Savala:** — can't be healthy, right?

**Layla:** Just full disclosure— you give the full disclosure that you are married to a white man, right? But it's —

**Savala:** Full disclosure, I did marry a white man, a very different kind of white man, you know, who I met when I was in a different place in my life but —

**Layla:** And who you put through quite a rigorous — you put through quite a rigorous amount of questioning and sort of, yeah —

**Savala:** I did. I did, because I — rather than wanting to escape my blackness, you know, which I was sort of trying to do with the previous dudes, by the time I met the guy who became my husband, I wanted — I did not want that. I did not want to have to put on some costume, you know, of acceptability, you know, racial acceptability in order to fit into his world, you know? So I did, I grilled him about like what he knew about natural hair and like what — you know, just how many black friends he had, not that that is a litmus test but, you know, like at least a black friend, you know? Like as opposed to some of the other guys, you know, that I was interested in who were really insulated in a very segregated kind of whiteness. Yeah —

**Layla:** You asked the question that, you know, have you dated black men — sorry, have you dated black women? Do you only date black women, right? Because it's both and, right?

**Savala:** Yeah, I didn't want to feel, you know, like I was somehow a racial fetish. And, again, it's not to say that you can't have a history where you've only dated black women and you are not black and it's therefore a fetish. That's not what I mean. But with him, I was trying to understand whether that might be the case, right? And, you know, it wasn't, you know? And he was — he was very patient and like good-natured about the constant grilling in the early weeks and months. Yeah, you know, and, of course, we still bump up against that stuff from time to time. I think any interracial relationship of any kind, you know, you're gonna have to bump up against that stuff and work it out or suffer the consequences. But he was game in the beginning, let's put it that way.

**Layla:** I love that. So, yeah, that was the first essay so that got me hooked in. I was like, "I'm with you, Savala," you know? You talk a lot about your own racial background. You are the daughter of a white mother and a black and Mexican father who come from very different, obviously, racial backgrounds but also very different class backgrounds. But you were raised primarily by your mother. Tell us about how you came to understand yourself through the years, childhood into teenagehood into now adulthood, through these two very different perspectives in a marriage where, you know, they were not together. How did you come to understand yourself over the years and how did you, because you talk about this book being you being the sort of cartographer and creating this map, how do you map yourself now? Where do you place yourself?

**Savala:** You know, I think as a kid, the two things that I was really trying to understand were racially how I fit into the world and how I fit in in terms of the size and shape of my body, which was kind of an anomaly in the white side of my family,

which, as you said, is the side that I was most around, although I did spend a lot of time with my dad, you know? So I'll tackle the body stuff, the body size stuff first because it kinda flows into the race stuff too. You know, my dad's side of the family is mostly fat and I use that word as a descriptor, not with like a moral or value attachment to it, and big, they're just large, like my dad was six four, you know, 300 pounds. He was just a big guy. And that's pretty common on his side of the family and that's what I inherited as sort of my genetic blueprint. My mom's side of the family is very different. They're sort of culturally a little bit more like New England waspy influence, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant influence. They happen to be kind of small, sometimes, like by force. There's a very long history of multi-generational dieting in my mom's family so sort of forced and enforced smallness as a way of demonstrating self-control and restraint and good taste and, of course, you know, as a way of performing whiteness, right? So I was like sort of — I just stuck out. I just did not have the body that I "should have had" to fit into the family that was raising me because I was big. I was big and I was sometimes fat. You know, I started chronic dieting with my mom when I was about four years old so sometimes I was fat as a kid and sometimes I was thin and, you know, I really struggled to feel anything other than horrible and confused about my body, you know? It's incredibly damaging to be a little kid and be told that your body is wrong and it's your fault because you are eating too much or whatever, you know? I mean what does a four- or five-year-old do with that? Like — so I certainly struggled to understand if I could even be on the map of like who gets to — and belong in the culture and sort of the circle of human concern like was there anywhere I could be as this sort of fat kid, you know, who literally people blamed for my body, you know, erroneously but they did it and I should mention, you know, my mom had good intentions. She thought that she was protecting me from a lifetime of pain, you know, if she had allowed me to just be a



chubby or fat person because that was the education she received from her mother who has a chronic dieter, you know, and so on and so forth. So she thought she was doing the right thing even though she wasn't. Racially, I also felt, you know, a bit lost often. I don't remember having a very clear sense of racially being — of being black when I was a little kid, you know? I had a very clear sense of being mixed, I think, because I lived with my white mom and seeing and understanding myself as mixed and black came later in my life, you know, as I began the process of self-definition and, you know, that includes racial self-definition. I think because my dad was black, you know, I had a model for blackness and I understood that I wasn't white, like I understood that I had blackness in me very clearly because of my dad and because of his body which is so like my body and I think as a young kid, like body is our kind of the easiest way to understand race, you know? As I'm teaching my daughter about race, it's like she can understand like skin color, she doesn't get all the more intricate mental and emotional stuff, but because I had my dad, I had a foothold in blackness that was internal but, you know, I still wasn't "as black" as some of the black people who were around me, I think, because I was growing up in a white family. And so that was somewhat confusing too, you know? I'm really lucky that I had a white mom who understood that she had to be proactive about giving me connections to blackness. I think it's not uncommon for white parents raising kids who are not white to not understand that and she did understand that, like, you know, she didn't get it right all the time but she made the effort to give me some sense of like black politics, black taste, black culture, you know, black aesthetics, black history, like she tried and I thank her for that. I think that, you know, I didn't really come into defining myself for myself and less like defining myself in opposition to the more powerful norms of the culture, honestly, like fully and, of course, it's always unfolding but until I stopped dieting, which was when I was 35, because

for me, dieting, you know, which I've been doing since before kindergarten against my will, obviously, you know, as a kid, I wasn't choosing it, I didn't consent, but, for me, dieting was always a way of trying to erase bigness and blackness in my body because there's a way in which the things we associate with fatness that are negative we also associate with blackness, you know? Like too much appetite, lack of control, lack of intelligence, laziness, you know? There's this way that fatness and blackness are really interwoven and, culturally, an anti-fat bias and anti-black racism are also interwoven. So dieting, for me, was a way of trying to perform racial acceptability and gendered acceptability. And when I stopped doing that, I really freed myself up to kind of blossom and like have myself bear fruit, you know, internally with the feeling of wholeness around my racial identity and the size and shape of my body. This is a long, meandering answer to your question, Layla —

**Layla:** No —

**Savala:** — you might be rolling your eyes 'cause I'm not answering it —

**Layla:** No, absolutely not. No, you are answering it because what I'm thinking about, especially as you talk about making the choice to no longer diet, to no longer participate in diet culture, that is something that obviously women of all races can come to that decision for themselves and can talk about their history with dieting and what it meant for them, but particularly when it comes to black women and women of color, I think the pursuit of thinness can't be unstuck from the pursuit of whiteness or proximity to whiteness? That in us trying to remold our body into a thinner body, I think we're also trying to remold it into one that is whiter, even if it doesn't look white, right?

**Savala:** Yeah, 100 percent.

**Layla:** And so it makes total sense to me that actually your sense of racial definition came along with your decision to no longer participate in dieting and diet culture. So, yeah, thank you for sharing that. So what happened then? When that stopped, how did this defining myself for myself then begin to emerge?

**Savala:** Well, you know, one of the things that really made me angry in a way that was really generative and productive as I was kind of, you know, hurtling into this wilderness of what it's like to be a woman who's not constantly engaged and trying to control her body was the realization that a lot of the fear that I had around being fat was actually more specific than that. It was really fear about being a fat black woman. And fat black women in this culture are just like — if you see them at all, like they're being denigrated, you know? When I say "if you see them," I don't mean, you know, across the dinner table, I mean, like in the sort of cultural field of vision of books and movies and television and music videos, you know, all of that. There is a really persistent erasure of fat black women, and then when they're allowed to be seen, they're seen in an incredibly flattened way that has all kinds of racist tropes stapled to it, you know, from the kind of mammy character to the like sassy, you know, real sassy one. I mean, they're just — it's so problematic and so when I realized that it wasn't just for me about being thinner, it was also about being whiter, that was so disgusting for me, like that realization was just — it was nauseating, you know? I mean, I had been doing a lot of kinda like race work or whatever since I was in high school, you know? And think I was in an all-white private school and I was forced to really sort of develop my own vocabulary around race and stuff from a fairly early age, you know? But I never really put the two together, even though through my whole life, they

were operating together. So, I never consciously put them together until my 30s, even though they had been, you know, play cousins throughout my entire life. So once I saw that and then could start to kind of peel it away, you know, the interesting thing about this process of self-definition outside of the confines of anti-black racism and anti-fat bias is that I felt a lot less pressure to define myself, interestingly enough, right?

**Layla:** Yes.

**Savala:** You know, like Toni Morrison talks about how like the very serious function of racism is to distract you and to kind of keep you constantly like in the hustle of contending with it, as opposed to, I think she means, as opposed to self-actualization that isn't like a constant hustle to appear valid to some outside observer. That's how I interpret it. I'm not a Morrison scholar but that's how I interpret it. And I would read that quote of hers and like kind of get it but like not really get it. Until I stopped dieting, I understood how much dieting had been around trying to — it had been me acting out the denigration of blackness on my own body, you know?

**Layla:** Right.

**Savala:** And once I began the process of letting go of that, it was like, I actually don't have to define myself for these motherfuckers.

**Layla:** Right.

**Savala:** I can explore myself for myself and I can speak for myself, you know? It's not to say that the process of self-exploration and sort of self-understanding lost its value. I mean, it became even more valuable and interesting, but I felt

much less of a need to define myself with external markers or —

**Layla:** Yes, with the perimeter that — Right.

**Savala:** Yeah, exactly. So, you know, I guess you could say the process of self-definition became much more internal and less for me about definition and more about feeling, like feeling myself, feeling myself in a positive way but also like literally feeling what I am and who I am. And if definition comes with that, great, but I'm way less interested in being something or someone that is legible to the dominant culture and more interested in doing my own thing, I guess you could say.

**Layla:** I mean, I'm shining because it feels like what liberation feels like. It feels — I'm glowing, do you know what I mean? It feels like what freedom feels like, expansiveness feels like, humanity, right? Like I'm not just one thing, I'm this multi-dimensional being who is just scratching the surface of all of the multitudes that I contain and I'm glowing because so much of what we see in the public discourse around what blackness is is flattened into this 2D, you know, really reductive picture of blackness that's linked to trauma, that's linked to pain, that's linked to suffering, and even, you know, strength and resilience but even that comes as a response to dealing with whiteness. And so, you know, this is — it's really just liberating to hear. Obviously, I know, you know, you're not at nirvana, right? I know that you're still on your journey, as we all are, but I think getting to touch those moments or getting to pull down one wall that's just been standing in the way of this incredible vision, right? That is accessible to us, that is something worth celebrating. So thank you for sharing that because it just lit me all up.

**Savala:** Yeah. I mean, it's real, you know? Like to be in a place where you understand that you are your touchstone, you know? It's not outside of you, it's incredible. It only took 40 years to get here, you know? And as you said, of course, it's a process, you know? I mean, gosh, it's a long process and it's ongoing but I'd never go back, you know? I'd never go back to the sort of sense I had that I defined myself in relation to these other people who had already defined me, you know? And my job was to somehow either fit or constantly fight against their parameters for me. Yeah, not for love or money would I go back to that mindset.

**Layla:** Beautiful. Savala, in this book, you also talk about your relationships, you talk about interracial relationships as well as interracial friendships, right? And you have this essay called "Dear White Sister" where you talk about an incident where a now former friend shared an Instagram picture of them, I guess, doing roller derby or getting into roller derby and the caption was a lyric from Beyoncé's song, "Freedom," with that song having a very — like that song is very specifically about like something, right? It's a song that's very specifically written about something but your friend who is white used it in the context of her own, you know, I guess self-exploration or something that she was exploring for herself that made her feel free. And you talk about wrestling with, "How do I have this conversation with her? Am I right to even have this conversation with her? This doesn't sit right with me." Can you tell us about that? Because as I read it, I was like there have been so many of us who have done this back and forth with ourselves. Am I imagining it or is this not right for them to use this? Who am I to claim something that's in the public, a Beyoncé song, anyone can love that song, right? Versus, you know, the meaning of it being — feeling like the meaning belongs to you but it's being taken away. Can you tell us about that essay?

**Savala:** Yeah, and that essay like really, really hit a chord or struck a chord. I mean, in case your listeners don't know, "Freedom" is a track off the iconic *Lemonade* album and it is very, very much about black freedom struggle in America and it's ongoingness and the strength it takes to sort of keep up the pursuit of freedom and this sort of ingenuity and the diligence and the discipline of never quitting in that pursuit for freedom. So the lyric is "I'ma keep running 'cause a winner don't quit on themselves," and that was the lyric that my friend used in the caption of this Instagram post of her rollerblading as she was getting into roller derby and she used the hashtag #freedom. So I saw this Instagram post and immediately felt despair and a sense of like wanting to just cover myself with something protective and anger, like a theft had occurred, you know? I felt —

**Layla:** And this was someone that you've been friends with for decades. This wasn't someone that you just met, been friends with for a couple of years.

**Savala:** No, no, this was someone I was really good friends with for 20 years and someone who is white but has a pretty high level of racial consciousness and, you know, someone I was very close to. Very close to. You know, I lived with this person, like, you know, they held my newborn daughter, this was someone I had a close relationship with. And the feeling that I had, you know, as I got sort of through the feeling part of it and then started to be able to verbalize what I was experiencing to myself was that, you know, my friend who is, as I've said, pretty savvy about race stuff, you know, especially for someone who is white, she had taken this incredibly important lyric out of this song that is so deeply rooted in black history and it almost functions like a hymn, this song.

**Layla:** I mean, it's very — it reminds me of black church, that's what that song reminds me of. Like it's not just —

**Savala:** Absolutely.

**Layla:** Yeah, yeah, it's a very powerful song.

**Savala:** It's very powerful and she had sort of plucked it out of its really powerful, meaningful history and sort of stapled it on to something that's quite banal and, you know, meaningless by comparison, which is the fact that she's getting into roller derby. So not that that can't be really important for someone's personal journey but it doesn't compare to the history of the black freedom struggle and the present of the black freedom struggle in this country. Like starting with chattel slavery, you know? It just doesn't compare. It's a misuse, right? And a pretty gross misuse, you know? And I felt the feelings I had and the first part of, you know, what happened was just sort of wrestling with those feelings and then, you know, very quickly, I started to get caught in this kind of like never-ending sort of hamster wheel of whether I had the right to express my feelings to her, you know? What would happen if I expressed my feelings to her? Would she get upset? Would she say I was overreacting? Was I overreacting, you know? Talk about the function of racism is distraction. Like, I was — I mean, I spent weeks like unsure of whether I could, how I would, you know, whether I had a right to be so upset and to bring it up to a white person. I'm like, this is me. I mean, my line of work is for like critical race theory, like I'm — you know, this is like —

**Layla:** And this is something that I feel like — it struck a chord with me because it's something that I feel like any one of my black women friends would reach out to me or I would reach out to them to say, "Is it just me or is this not okay?" right? Like —



**Savala:** Yeah.

**Layla:** — we would have to validate each other —

**Savala:** You workshop it.

**Layla:** Right. We'd have to have, like, Emma, is this okay? You know, how do I go about having — I've been wrestling with this thing and we would have to get, as you said, workshop it. And that —

**Savala:** I'm like, how do I —

**Layla:** — so much energy, yes.

**Savala:** What word do I use? How do I do it so she doesn't explode, you know? So I did this for weeks. And then I brought it up and I think because we've been friends for so long and because she was coming from this place of sort of progressive whiteness in a very earnest way, it kept us in the room and, you know, we tried to talk it out but, ultimately, we could not get through it and, ultimately, she kinda dug her heels in and, eventually, I just decided, well, I'm not gonna debate anymore whether this theft occurred and, you know, I watched it happen and I'm not gonna debate whether the song "Freedom," public though it may be, is ultimately for black people and deserves a certain type of respect because of the nature of the song and if the price that I have to pay for this certainty and sovereignty within myself is this friendship, it's a heavy price, you know, I still love this person, but it's one that, ultimately, I'm willing to pay because, I mean, talk about freedom, if I have to debate what I know to be true racially and I have to kind of exist with this like undressed or unacknowledged wound in the relationship, like that's not gonna work for me, you know? Not

anymore, not at this point in my life, you know? So, yeah, unfortunately, I'm not friends with this person anymore. She's still a good person, you know? She tried her best in the moment but, yeah, we did not manage to work this one out together.

**Layla:** You know, what really struck me about this as well, Savala, is not so much whether you were right or she was right, but more about that it did hurt you and that you were her friend, right? And so, for me, you know, if somebody is my friend and they say this thing that you did is hurtful to me and it costs me nothing to say I'm sorry and to take it back or to take it down, I don't lose anything other than an Instagram caption, you know, my friendship to that person is so much more valuable than this small thing that I would immediately take it back and it struck me how whiteness is so obsessed with a sort of clinical intellectual parsing of, "Let's debate whether this is right or wrong on the merits," as opposed to the more, "This is — I'm talking to you friend to friend, we're talking about what this carries for me," right? As a person who is black, like, "This is what it carries for me, this is how it hit me when I saw it," and yet we know that when we try to appeal to the emotion side, it almost undermines our argument even more. It actually doesn't bring us closer, it makes it seem like the angry black woman, you know, the irrational black woman who isn't just, you know, having a civilized conversation but bringing her emotions in. That was what frustrated me the most when I got to the end of this essay.

**Savala:** Well, you said it. I mean, I tried every way I could think of, you know? And I don't wanna villainize this person because —

**Layla:** No, absolutely not. Yeah.

**Savala:** — she's a good person and, you know, we were close friends for 20 years but I do think, I mean, Layla, you make such a good point that like whiteness, it really disrupts connection because it has to defend itself, you know? And if you have some aspect of yourself that has to be defended at all costs, there's not a lot of room, you know, there's not a lot of play in the joints, there's not a lot of room for growth through this kind of thing and I think whiteness functions that way, you know, in a lot of people's lives, whether they want to or not, whether they're conscious of it or not, they're compelled to defend it at all costs and it's just, you know, no matter what I tried, I couldn't really get through and, indeed, when I became emotional, you know, then I was sort of hysterical and when we were sort of in a more clinical debate about the definition of appropriation, it's like this isn't really what it's about but that was sort of where it kept going and I think with something that hadn't — so like they hadn't pierced whiteness and like pushed on it so hard, we probably would have been okay, you know? I think we would have — we've had a thousand little tiffs over the years, you know, when you're close friends with someone for decades, you get through it, but this was just not a — we just couldn't get through it and I really think that whiteness is why, you know? Whiteness as a system of habits and beliefs that kind of embeds itself in some people, that's what I mean when I say whiteness. I think that's why and it's unfortunate but, you know, it is what it is.

**Layla:** It is what it is. I know that there are many white women who are listening to this episode, I know that there are many black women and women of color who are listening to this episode who've been on, you know, one side of a situation just like this, I think it's so important for — I felt that it was important for me to read a story like this to know it's not just me, that these things happened to you.

**Savala:** It happened to me the other day, oh, my God, I'm trying to make it after school and I'm walking home and my neighbor stops me, you know, very lovely woman who happens to be white and she's like, "Oh, I'm so glad I ran into you, you know, I was gonna come by the other day because I have a question for you," and I was like, "Oh, okay," you know, and she was like, "I found — we were going through my, you know, an aunt passed away and we were going through her things and we found a bunch of racist memorabilia," and then she catalogs them for me and she said, "What should I do with them?"

**Layla:** What?

**Savala:** Are you kidding? This is highly Googleable, like you don't have to find a black person in your life to ask them this. She meant well, you know, she meant well, she didn't mean anything by it, but, yeah, I mean, you know, this stuff happens all the time.

**Layla:** All the time. All the time.

**Savala:** Yeah.

**Layla:** Thank you for sharing that. I'm sorry that happened to you and it's — things like that that happen and you're like, "Am I on a TV show?" Do you know what I mean? Like what am I supposed to do with this moment?

**Savala:** I know. Well, don't let it get you down —

**Layla:** Don't let it get you down.

**Savala:** Right? That your humanity starts to feel wobbly even to you, like, you know, don't let that happen.

**Layla:** On that note, I wanna bring our incredible conversation to an end and I want to encourage, again, people to join the book club because there are many other topics that this book goes into. You talked about your former obsession with watching SVU and how you internalized this sort of normalcy around seeing violence against women. You talked about your journey through a racialized pregnancy and how you felt when your mother bought your daughter a white doll. You talked about state violence, your father's journey with that, your own understanding with it as well. There's just so many incredible topics in this book so I really wanna encourage folks, if you wanna dive into deeper conversation with us on this and be able to ask Savala herself some questions, do join the Good Ancestor Book Club. But in the meantime, in this conversation, I wanna end this on a high so I'm gonna read a quote from your book where it's this really beautiful page where you're talking about the beauty of black culture and I know that you were talking specifically around black American culture but also around sort of black diasporic culture as well. So you say, "Blackness is the opposite of cultural vacuity; is it ironic that, thinking we were inferior, whiteness banished us to the outskirts only to see us create culture that is arguably more ripe, rich, and dynamic (and borrowed) than any other on earth? Our contributions to humanity are enough to swell us with pride, and they should and they do." And I love that, like I read it several times. It's beautiful.

**Savala:** Thank you.

**Layla:** If we don't wanna let it get us down and by it, it's all of these things, the anti-black racism, the fat phobia, the misogyny, all of the its, right? What do we do instead? Because it's not about, like you said, ignoring it or gaslighting ourselves or — it's not about that but what do we do instead? What are the other ways that we can access healing for ourselves,

change justice, and how we can keep going, not just surviving but also thriving in spite of the many assaults that are constantly visited upon us?

**Savala:** I mean, that's the question. That's the million-dollar question. And I think there are a thousand answers, there's a million answers to it, you know? There's a way in which, you know, the thing that you need to do is whatever lights you up, you know, whatever makes you feel lit from within is the thing that you need to do, whatever that looks like, you know? So I guess, writ large, I wanna encourage people to turn their gaze inward and like to stoke the fire within them without really a ton of regard for the external pressures that are trying to define them and contain them and mold them. I mean, you can't totally disregard those things because we have to live in the world and part of living in the world is sometimes forcing yourself to fit into those contours, you know, for survival, right? Or just to get through a situation. But to the extent that we can counter that necessary set of actions we sometimes have to take by really purposely turning away from the external stuff and turning inward, I think that's really important. I think creation is really incredibly important. Whatever creation looks like for someone, you know, this sounds sort of banal, like, "Oh, create, make art, make poetry, make a podcast," whatever, but it's a way to counter the destructive forces that are sometimes pressing in on us. And if you're purposeful about it, you know, and you, you know, not that everything has to be a sacrament, you know? I'm all for the profane too and, you know, the banal, but if you are able to sort of see that part of your act of creation, whatever that looks like, is a form of resistance and is a form of conversation with your ancestors and your progeny and is a way of sort of being in conversation with the world, I think that can be really powerful, you know? Whatever kind of creativity comes through you or wants to come out of you. The other thing I would say, and this is like simultaneously very

practical but also extremely profound, is stop dieting. I mean, just stop diet— like just stop. And I know it's like, "Oh, you can't just flip a switch," but there are tons and tons and tons of resources out there to help people divest from dieting and to develop a more weight neutral and body neutral approach to their life and I think for women identified people, that's incredibly powerful. There's a quote I love that says, "Dieting is the one way that women demonstrate that they understand their role in society," and the political power of dieting is very, very strong and I think that when women divest from it, a lot of powerful things can happen in their lives and around them. And as we've talked about, Layla, you know, dieting is also a racial performance in this country. It's a way for white women to perform their whiteness and it's a way for women who are not white to perform their internalized self-loathing and their internalized desire to comply with whiteness. So, you know, all of this stuff is connected because, of course, when you stop dieting, you free up a lot of energy on different levels of yourself that can then go toward creating. I mean, you know, it's all connected. But, you know, if I had to offer sort of a prescription, I guess, from my humble standpoint, you know, that would be it.

**Layla:** I love that, and I love what you said around creativity. I think creativity is super powerful. I think it's — I mean, I think it's what makes us human, first of all, just at the very basic level —

**Savala:** Right.

**Layla:** — but I think it's — we are here having this conversation because of creativity. We are alive with ideas about ourselves in the world because of creativity. Creativity is also, I think, the way that we can connect with ourselves and connect with each other. So, you know, I journal most days, just to myself, and

that's a form of creativity, right? And it's the way that I've come to understand myself in the world, but also your book, this podcast, a dance, a song, whatever it is, it's a way —

**Savala:** Yeah, make stuff. Just make stuff.

**Layla:** And like you said, it doesn't have to have a deep meaning in order to create that connection, create that healing experience something other than the it that gets you down.

**Savala:** Exactly. And, you know, creativity is, in some ways, an antidote to consumption and we live in a culture that really wants us to consume, you know? And I'm not talking about food, I'm talking about, you know, capitalism and consumer capitalism and creativity is like a response to consumption that I think is also nourishing and more sustainable. So there's one more plug for making stuff.

**Layla:** Absolutely. This has been such an incredible conversation and before I ask you my final, final question, I just wanna say, once again, you know, thank you for writing this book. It's been such a pleasure to read it. It's been such a pleasure to be in conversation with you. For those who were able to be there in February 2020, Savala and I were together in person at UC Berkeley where she interviewed me about *Me and White Supremacy* while I was on my book tour and it's such a gift to be able to now interview Savala about her book and what it offers. So, yeah, I just love our connection and constant support and I can't wait to see what you do next.

**Savala:** Thank you, Layla. I mean, this is dreamy and you are dreamy and it's really wonderful to come full circle. I mean, it's hard to believe that was right before lockdown —

**Layla:** I know.



**Savala:** — there were hundreds of people in one room, but this is really, really beautiful and I'm so thankful that you invited me into your community, this sacred space that you hold. It really feels like a privilege and really wonderful.

**Layla:** Thank you. Thank you, Savala. Okay, our final question: What does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

**Savala:** It's hard for me to think about this question without thinking about motherhood, even though when I personally think of ancestors, you know, I tend to cast my mind back, you know, generations and generations, something about the word "ancestor" for me is like going hundreds of years back in my mind. But, of course, it doesn't have to be that far, right? And so when I think about myself as an ancestor, I cannot help but think of myself as a mother and so the question for me kind of naturally becomes, you know, what does it mean to be a good mother? And the first thing I think is the pressure mothers experience to perform 10 out of 10 all the time and I'm very much a fan of the like good enough school of motherhood, you know? Like good enough is great. So, that being said, because I don't wanna put pressure on myself or any other moms out there to bat 1000 in the ancestry ballpark, like we're allowed to make mistakes, but when I think about my daughter and who I wanna be for her, you know, and the fact that she will view me as an ancestor and her children, if she has them, you know, and so on will see me as an ancestor, what it means to me to be a good ancestor is to be someone who is really, in my own life, balanced between the past and the future. And what I mean by that is someone who lives my life with an awareness and a reverence for the people who came before me, you know? The people without whom I wouldn't exist and a thoughtfulness about my relationship to them and someone who's thinking about what comes after me, you know, when I've died and my

daughter or my daughter and her kids look back at me and what I gave or took from the world. If I can keep kind of both of those parts of time in my awareness, it really, for me, informs who I am in the present moment and so I make decisions with both like some conscientiousness about the future impact and some thoughtfulness and awareness about the debt that I may owe to the past and the joy that my existence represents to people from the past. It's a way of keeping me, I guess, you could say, kind of morally centered, to have like one eye on what came before me and one eye on what's gonna come after me. And so, to me, being a good ancestor means living my life purposefully in a way that continues the link, right? That acknowledges that I am a link between the past and the present, and sets that up for my daughter so that she feels like she is a link, right? That's what it means to me, awareness of the fact that I'm part of a chain and being really thoughtful and proud and humble because of that.

**Layla:** Beautiful. Thank you, Savala.

(Outro)

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