

Season 2, Episode 7: Emergent Strategy Podcast “The Nonlinearity of Healing with Spenta Kandawalla”

*Please note: these transcripts are intended to increase the accessibility of the podcast; there should be no reprinting or distribution without permission.

Spenta: (00:00:00) But don't weaponize that trauma. That's actually my bigger fear in movement is the ways that it can get unskillfully used against each other, whether that's because we're feeling so undone and unsafe in ourselves, or because we are projecting things on other people or making assessments and not having a lot of room for their stuff.

(00:00:24) Theme Music (“Wolves” - Hurray for the Riff Raff)

adrienne: (00:00:43) Hello and welcome to the Emergent Strategy podcast, hosted by the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute. We are a collective of facilitators, mediators, trainers and curious human beings interested in how we get in right relationship with change. Today, I'll be guiding our interview. I'm adrienne. I am the writer in residence at Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute. And as a reminder, emergent strategy is the way we generate and reshape complex systems and patterns with relatively simple interactions. And we are in our fifth year of the book being in the world. And this podcast in a lot of ways is an experiment and seeing who's out there, who's practicing, what are they practicing, and how does it relate to emergent strategy? And I'm super excited for today's conversation because one of my great teachers and beloved friends is here with us today. Her name is Spenta Kandawalla. I first met Spenta through the generative somatics project process journey group. Um, I got recruited by **Maia Devy?** into what was at that time called Somatics and Social Justice. And I saw Spenta, met Spenta, was like, this person seems cool. And then three years later, I think, so that was 2009. And then in 2012, I saw Spenta again in another course. And what I witnessed felt so transformed in terms of the energy, the presence, the teacherness <laugh>, you know, it was like all of a sudden there was this energy of like, I'm I can run this shit. I can run this room. And I, it was one of the most visceral experiences of transformation that I had witnessed in another person, another adult. It was so thrilling and I was like, I want what she's having. And it really made me double down and deeply commit into the somatic journey, which then was like a decade of my life has been <laugh> learning how to center and keep centering and keep centering and keep centering. So Spenta is also an incredible acupuncturist, a healer organizer for Palestinian rights and so many other things. And we're gonna get to learn all about that with Spenta. So first question to you, Spenta, is how are you right now today?

Spenta: (00:03:06) Oh, that was such a nice <Spenta & adrienne laugh>. That was such a nice and surprising intro.

adrienne: Well, I do swoon for you.

Spenta: (00:03:13) Oh, I, well, you've made me swoon uh, <laugh> I, how am I right now? I'm good. I'm so happy to see you. It's been a long time –

adrienne: Happy to see you too.

Spenta: Yeah. And I, if I'm honest, I'm a little nervous cuz I don't do podcasts, but I do listen to them. I shyly admit and um <adrienne laughs> I feel really honored that y'all asked me to be here and excited to chat with you.

adrienne: (00:03:38) Oh yeah. We were so excited to talk with you. You know, you've touched each of our lives in the collective in different ways. And so many of the lives of people that we care about and love. And one of the aspects of emergent strategy is that of iteration, of a non-linear iterative process, which is, you know, how we believe change happens, what we see in nature. And I would say that you were really one of the people who helped me understand what it meant to iterate, what it meant to practice, what it meant to repeat something over and over again. Even when you weren't sure if it was working, you know, on the faith that that repetition in and of itself would actually bring some new results. Some, something else would be possible on the other side of that practicing. And when I talk about nonlinearity, a lot of what's in my mind is how change happens in the somatic process, you know, in the embodied process, which is not like, oh, I just do this 20 times and then I'm healed. You know, it's like, no, I do this 20 times and something emerges that allows me to go deeper into myself and then I, something else happens and life accumulates and I keep practicing and right. It's just this, you know, Möbius strip of processes and changes. So that's one of the ways that we see you as an emergent strategist. It's also in the realm of creating more possibilities, the work that you do as a healer and as a teacher. First, I wanna say, do you accept that premise? Like, do you see emergent strategy in yourself and your work?

Spenta: (00:05:11) Yes, I would say so. Especially when you say it like that and <adrienne & Spenta laughs> yeah. I feel like particularly this last year, while I've been so immersed in my clinical work with acupuncture and Chinese medicine. You know, eight years into practice, it's really become clear to me, healing both is not linear and it's not quick. You have these moments of relief, discovery, joy, enthusiasm, and then you have these other really much harder places to tread through. And that, that really, that, that really, it all culminates into something bigger and deeper and or more transformed. I guess we might say, I mean, that word is very big, but you know –

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: – that, that culminates into something different, whether that's a body that feels less pain or that's a body that feels more safe in the world.

adrienne: (00:06:13) Oh, I love that. I love that. And I experience that in you. So I'm like, yes, that's true. Like I feel markedly safer in my life because of the practices that I've been in and that you help me. You know, you're the voice I think of when I center –

Spenta: Oh.

adrienne: <laughs> You're, you're the one who, who centers me. I was actually just telling my partner last night cuz she's learning, centering and I was saying, it took me three years to

not just be like, 'what the fuck <laugh> is this?' You know, like why am I going on and on and trying to feel something and I don't, you know, and it, that non-linearity, you know, just like staying in, but we'll get into that a little bit more. I wanna go back a little bit just to understand Spenta, how you, Spenta Kandawalla came to be you. And I think one of the ways to understand that is to think about your political lineage. So I'd love <Spenta laughs> if you could share with us some of the most important parts of your political lineage.

Spenta: (00:07:14) Mm-hmm you know, I always say organizing was my first healing.

adrienne: Uh-huh.

Spenta: And I stand by that through and through. It took me a long time actually, to even identify as a healer, even when you say it over and over.

adrienne: Mm-hmm.

Spenta: I grew up in, uh, Ohio in a very white suburb and I am a Pakistani. I'm Zoroastrian and you know, pre pretty much stuck out like a sore thumb. I was just telling my mom over the weekend. Yeah. I was bullied, mom. And she's like, 'Oh no'. She was <adrienne & Spenta laugh> my poor mom. My mom was –

adrienne: No.

Spenta: – single in the eighties and an immigrant and you know, working. I was, she's like, 'Why didn't you tell me?' And I said, 'I didn't wanna bother you'.

adrienne: (00:08:01) Oh, Spenta.

Spenta: (00:08:02) I know, but, um –

adrienne: Baby Spenta.

Spenta: – yeah, trying to, trying to do it all, but –

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: – of course it was a really formative experience. And um, and, and the thing was in my organizing, I really came to feminist organizing first and queer organizing first. You know, probably because I went to school in Ohio, still for college and stuff and it just, you know, continued to be a pretty white experience. And so it wasn't until I came out to the Bay Area and really got into racial justice organizing. And I organized with AROC, the Arab Resource and Organizing Center. And I feel, you know, it's my political home. And I feel like it took a long time to find it. And I really, I'm a kind of, we call me a mem, an ally member. We have a few of us because you know, I'm not Muslim and Pakistan is not part of the Arab world. Although there's so much similarity, particularly in the post 9/11 world about who we all are –

adrienne: Mm-hmm.

Spenta: – as, you know, the, the characterization of terrorism and colonialism and all of that. So I feel a real home there. And I also, you know, feel where there's difference. And I feel really proud to be a member of the organization. I feel lucky that they'll accept me and, uh, both a political home because of the strategy and the organizing, and also a home in terms of feeling some sense of belonging.

adrienne: (00:09:39) I love all of that. And you know, what in your life do you think led you to the work of embodiment? The work that might be called healing, the work of acupuncture, like what led you to the body?

Spenta: (00:09:54) I always say my second healing was under, learning about trauma –

adrienne: Uh-huh.

Spenta: – which I did really through learning somatics and trauma. It just put a frame around things. I think I'd understood since I was very young or, you know, seen since I was very young and then suddenly I was like, 'Oh, there's words for that'. And then I'd say my third healing was learning medicine. And in these last couple weeks, I've really come to this place. My dad passed two years ago, two weeks, two, two weeks and two years ago. You know, we had a very complicated relationship, but the thing that we really had in the last decade was that he was a doctor and he was a doctor who had a very strong analysis about how big pharma and big insurance ruined medicine. And he was a doctor who back in Pakistan, ran a clinic where, for poor people where folks lined up all day long and he gave out ginger tinctures and garlic tinctures. And that was the medicine. And, you know, and he was a doctor who always told me, 'No, don't take that medicine'. <adrienne & Spenta laugh> And what I've realized over time but in these last couple weeks, it's just become clear to me. I'm like, 'Oh, I was called to medicine'. I was called to it my whole life. And it might be sometimes why healer doesn't always ring. You know, it's like, what I want is to be the village doctor. <laugh>, it's like, I just want, I want –

adrienne: That's right.

Spenta: – everyone in the movement who needs some health and healing to come and let's do this so that we can all do our roles. But I think that, I think those are all the pieces that I guess were in me. You know, I spent most of my life staying very far outside of my body, but I think that my, the ideas I had always were leading me back towards it.

(00:11:55) Music Break - "Jupiter's Dance" plays. Lyrics: "I'm a keeper of the moon and you'll never be home. Revelations come in two, blowing smoke rings in the dark. I held on to only you."

adrienne: (00:12:21) And I feel, well, I wanna check, not most of your life now –

Spenta: No, sorry. Yeah

adrienne: Most of your life up until. < Spenta laughs> Yeah. Cause I was like, I feel like half your life has been –

Spenta: (00:12:29) I forgot how old I was.

adrienne: (00:12:31) <laugh> [CROSSTALK]

Spenta: (00:12:35) That's right. Half of my life, I guess, has been in my body. <laugh>

adrienne: (00:12:38) That's right. That's right.

Spenta: Totally.

adrienne: A lucky body. And is there a key to the art and practice of transformation?

Spenta: Wow. A key –

adrienne: (00:12:49) Mm-hmm. Or a key, you know, a key chain, a whole loop <Spenta & adrienne laugh> couple of major keys.

Spenta: (00:12:57) Yeah. Mm-hmm. Let's see. Well, I think we can't do it alone. I mean, we can, people do amazing things, but I think it's best not to do alone.

adrienne: Mmm.

Spenta: You know, I think part of, part of humans, humans as beings, it's we need each other, we need connection to survive. I think that a lot of what I've been thinking about lately is understanding our trauma is really important, but so is understanding not just our resilience, but actually I think also understanding the places that we were loved, wanted, cherished, lifted up. Like it's not just understanding our trauma and our resilience, but really, you know, trauma tells us lies about ourselves. It tells us that we're unlovable, unworthy, not good enough. And I just have really started to see the importance of also we find our way back to the stories that told us other things about ourselves. You know, that we were worthy, that we were good enough, that we tried hard, that we did our best. That being a human is hard. That being probably anybody alive, any, any organism alive on this plain, it's probably hard <laugh>. And, uh, and it, it, you know, something about like transformation is about wholeness. It's not just about wounds getting healed. It's a, it's really, actually much more about, I don't even know if it's who we are becoming or if it's just refining who we were always meant to be.

adrienne: Mmm.

Spenta: So I think that's a key and I think a key is making sure we don't take ourselves too seriously all the time. And just finding life on life's terms every day, all the time, you know, and sometimes that's mundane. Sometimes that's silly. Sometimes that's very serious, but that it's, that it's all real. Sometimes when we get into the work of transformation, we can get very serious. <laughs>

adrienne: (00:15:14) So serious.

Spenta: (00:15:15) So serious and –

adrienne: (00:15:17) So serious. And also, so like, I must fix this –

Spenta: Yeah.

adrienne: – you know, like there's a serious, like I must fix myself.

Spenta: Yeah.

adrienne: I am broken.

Spenta: (00:15:24) Yes. Yeah, yeah. And that was always, and you know, this, that was always my favorite thing. The thing that helped me as a practitioner was always to say, 'There is nothing to fix. There's nothing –

adrienne: Yup.

Spenta: – to solve. There's nothing to figure out. I think my friend Morgan Bassichis told me that one and it just, I just remind myself all the time, whether that's about myself or mostly about working with other people. It's like, this is not something to fix in front of me. This is someone to be with.

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: Who's on their own –

adrienne: Yes.

Spenta: They've got their own destiny ahead of them. You know, mm-hmm.

adrienne: (00:16:01) Yes. That has changed my dating life. <Spenta & adrienne laugh> You know, changed my, my relationship with myself. There's, yeah. I think of you saying, 'There is nothing to fix here' and also like try saying 'I'm good' –

Spenta: Mm-hmm.

adrienne: – and meaning it.

Spenta: Mm-hmm.

adrienne: And what would, what would have to happen in your life for that to be a true answer. And I, I feel like I spent a good year –

Spenta: Mm-hmm.

adrienne: (00:16:22) – just on that practice of like, ‘I’m good. Huh? That’s not true, but I’m good. That’s somewhat true’. <adrienne laughs> you know, <Spenta laughs> So, you know, there’s so many aspects of my own self, you know, identity and so many others that I know they’re shaped in the language now that you and GS, you and generative somatics work to proliferate. You know, a language and a body of practice for movement around embodiment and trauma and healing. And I wanna ask you, what is the value of shared language and what does that collective awareness of trauma and the possibility of healing and, and what’s possible in the body? What does that make possible for the collective?

Spenta: (00:17:09) Ooh, I’m in a lot of reflections about all of this.

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: (00:17:13) You know, my honest, first answer is I don’t know about the shared language piece. I feel a little wary of it more and more.

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: And I, I understand it. I understood it. It gives us right. It gives us, um, it, when we are in practice, it gives us a sense of what we are kind of all working with and a, and a shorthand to work with. And I think it can be both of course, exclusive, but also sometimes almost too much of a shorthand and take us away from just kind of being real people in real life. And –

adrienne: (00:17:53) Mmm. And also the complexity. I, something that’s coming up right now that I wanna throw in here. Yesterday, I was talking to a crew, that we call ourselves Grace Lee Boggs’s grandkids she never had, but we’re all students of hers. And she would say, ‘I think in paragraphs.’ She would get so frustrated when people tried to shorthand her ideas down to a sentence or –

Spenta: Mm-hmm.

adrienne: – like a catchphrase, you know, cause it was like, ‘Transform yourself to transform the world’. There’s so much more –

Spenta: Yeah.

adrienne: – to that, that you, you know, um, that gets missed in the –

Spenta: Yeah.

adrienne: – in the brevity. Um, anyway, I just wanted to throw that in there.

Spenta: (00:18:30) That's great. Yeah, exactly. Yeah. I think, right. It can become reductionist, right. It can, it can, it has the possibility to kind of minimize. I hear like, um, when we talk about someone's shape –

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: – you know, and well, that's like, that's a term that is used in somatics. I'm sure it's used in other modalities too, but a shape. And it's like a shape is so complex. And, and if we go, 'Oh, that person's shape or my shape' and I go, we have to be careful –

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: – not to reduce it. I remember sitting in training rooms with people and all, and really trying to remind myself that who I see is a slice of who they are. And I would get the most reminded of that when I would see somebody in a room who was so quiet, so shy. And then I would see them out in the street on a microphone, you know, just like projecting their whole essence into whatever, you know, fight was happening for whatever campaign or action. And I would be like, 'Right. That, that is, uh, this is also real about this person'. So, I am in question of the usefulness of some of the language, honestly. Um, and actually go, how would we, how would we do things to speak just in kind of more of the ways we know how to talk. But do I think a trauma analysis is important? That I do. I, or has, has it been important for our movements? I think it has. I think it's allowed, I, I don't know, uh, how do I say it? You know, we're pulling the wool off of our own eyes and we're talking about the impacts of oppression in different ways, in new ways. And I imagine that, that I, I had haven't thought about this much, but just even the emergence of so many women of color, queer people of color, non-binary people of color in leadership in part is because that, that denial of trauma is the, there's light on it now. And that means different things. And that means that people get to not only, you know, get clear, but also, you know, I think what it does, right, it's in trauma healing that then it's allowed folks to own bolder leadership, to have space. Like having space for the dialogue means having space for different people. I wouldn't say there's not also, there's challenges to talking about trauma more in our movements. There's big challenges, you know, when you've unleashed it. It's unleashed <laugh> and it can. Yeah. But, I would say those are some of the positive, the important impacts of it, the significance of it.

adrienne: (00:21:28) Yeah. You know, it makes me think that it takes things from like the 2d realm of statistics on a page to the 3d realm of like lives being lived. You know, that's, it's like to hear about oppression to hear about the kinds of things that happen to us is one thing. And it's like, that should not happen, but you know, it happens to whatever percentage of people, but then it's different when you're sitting face to face with someone and it's like, oh, it happened to you. And it happened to me. So it makes me think of that 2d to 3d, you know, it's like, there's something about the, the knowing that like, 'Oh, you have trauma and I have trauma and we're healing' in this lifetime to return to that inviolate place that Maya Angelou spoke about. You know, that's like, there's a place that's deeper than that trauma. That is also you, that is a you that you can return to. And I also see the <laugh> that there are challenges. I think that challenge of language, you know,

shared language where it's like, everyone has a language that doesn't mean they know what it means. Sometimes people wanna run with that language and be like, I can teach this. Now I can do this now. And it's like, wait, wait, wait, uh, you know, how, how do we balance being able to teach what we are just learning ourselves, you know? Um, and so I'd love to ask you about practices. Like, you know, when I met you, it felt like your core practice was teaching. That many, many times a year, you were running courses, um, where you were teaching people. And then I got to witness you transition to being more of a full-time acupuncturist and medicine worker. And so then, you know, your practice is in that realm. And I wonder, what are you practicing now? Like what feels like your practices now? And, you know, again, do you see emergent strategies showing up in those practices, by whatever names it may show up? <Spenta & adrienne laughs> like –

Spenta: (00:23:20) You said, so many things I have so many thoughts about. Oh, that –

adrienne: (00:23:24) Think all of them out loud.

Spenta: (00:23:26) Okay. Well, just to go back to that piece about other people practicing, you know, I really, it really shifted over time. I mean, you know, I was thinking in coming to do this, I was like, 'What is there to say?' I mean, I thought I'll be so sure about my thoughts for years. And then suddenly I'm like, 'Oh no, I don't think that anymore'. You know, it's so, and you know, I'm an Aries, I can be really sure about my thoughts. <Spenta & adrienne laugh>

adrienne: (00:23:56) Aries rising

Spenta: Oh, wow.

adrienne: I know.

Spenta: (00:23:58) But, you know, so partly I go, I kind of love that people try things out now in practice and, you know, I mean, yes, there is the risk, there's the risk, you'll open something that is really pretty hard to hold. If you don't have a –

adrienne: I do.

Spenta: – lot of time –

adrienne: (00:24:14) I'm like, do it. <laughs>

Spenta: (00:24:15) – you know, um, being with trauma. And at the same time, I'd say all frontline organizers know how to be with trauma. That's all you do –

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: – all day long is listen to members and what's happening. And people who have been good friends to people know how to listen to trauma, you know?

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: It's, it's not, not in us, so go forth and practice, but also, but don't weaponize that trauma. That's actually my bigger fear and movement is the ways that it can get unskillfully used against each other. Whether that's because we're feeling so undone and unsafe in ourselves, or because we are projecting things onto other people or making assessments and not having a lot of room for their stuff. You know, it's not that people, people should be held accountable to their impacts. Of course. And there should be consequences that I'm very clear about, but man, sometimes we're tearing each other down, particularly as we have so much BIPOC leadership now, like that's the place that I'm just like, 'Ooh'. We need to be discerning with each other and, and careful with each other cuz you, you know, we have to remember what it took even for us to be in this moment of movement. That we're so much about so much emphasis is on racial justice and so many organizations are being led by people of color by Black and Brown people. And just that we wanna hold that as new, precious and it was hard to get here. <laugh>

adrienne: (00:25:47) It was hard <adrienne & Spenta laugh>

Spenta: Yeah.

adrienne: I think that it was hard and I, I also think it's hard and the people we're fighting for are each other.

Spenta: Yeah.

adrienne: Like each of us is precious and each of us is this thing we're trying to protect from being destroyed by the world. And how could we then turn on each other? <laugh>

Spenta: Yeah.

adrienne: You know, I feel this all the time. That I'm like, we are saying that none of us is disposable, we are saying, we want assistance beyond prisons. We're saying that we believe people can transform and, and change and that our people can do that. Um, yeah. And I long for that, the, the softness or gentleness or the fierce love –

Spenta: Yeah.

adrienne: (00:26:27) – that backs up that belief, that value. I love what you just said about also the like being so sure of things and then being like, 'Well, I dunno' <laugh> you know.

Spenta: Uh-huh.

adrienne: I think there's dialectical humanism inside of that, you know, that there is a way that it's like you give yourself completely to learning and experiencing and being in a practice and then you grow, you know, and in that growth, other things become visible and possible. I think that's a major thing happening for a lot of us who've been in movement for a while now, is it's like, 'Okay, you know. My questions have been, I'm like, 'how is

movement avoiding self sabotage and how is movement avoiding manipulation patterns?' And you know, really in some questions around like, 'how do we really honor the divinity of all these lives we're organizing?' Was there more, you, you said there were many directions of thoughts that popped up in you. I wanna make sure we got 'em.

Spenta: (00:27:31) Well, first I'll say also just on this piece, is that to me also with the infusion of a, a trauma discourse into movement, I think that the, the piece, you know, when I say organizing was my first healing, it's like, I always wanna say, and material safety is still number one.

adrienne: Mmm.

Spenta: I mean, emotional safety is also number one, but we can sometimes in our spaces start to prioritize emotional safety and we're, we're we're we might be moving away from, or not paying attention to why we're organizing.

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: Which is that the material safety of most of the world is in total dire straits. And so just that I, I think because so much of healing is about where you put your attention is where your energy goes. And so, you know, I want us to, I want as someone who was leading this discourse over the last decade, not to, I, I want us to make sure that we prioritize material safety.

(00:28:51) Music Break: "KiN" instrumental plays.

adrienne: (00:29:13) I really love this. And I think just to make it plain for people, right. That I think about this often, because I'm like, we are on this planet, which is designed so beautifully for us and we for it, and this planet is in crisis right now. That, that we have sparked and so there's all these people who are like in a regular basis in a climate catastrophe, um, who are also regularly in an economic catastrophe. And we are meant to be support, you know, like as you develop an analysis, it's like, 'okay, we have to attend to that'. And there's ways that our emotional processes, especially with each other, interpersonal processes can become the center of our world. And I especially notice this in the, now in this era of social media where we can spend a whole day that could have been spent, you know, organizing to change material conditions instead having a conversation, you know, basically tearing someone apart that is a stranger online, over ideas that you are not changing in them or in anyone who's witnessing the conversation. I think about this all the time, you know, that I'm like, 'Oof', like how do we re harness that? I think of that, that positive oppositional energy. That's like, we see these systems and we're gonna fight them and we're gonna do better. Um, so I love that you're, I love that you said that. I love that you're clarifying that. And it feels almost like generationally responsible for those of us who are in our forties now to, to be like, 'Wait', <adrienne & Spenta laugh> y'all, you know, like don't overlook this or don't, don't move away from the center of how we create change, which is in that organizing work with each other. You know, we're all constantly changing. And I know that as you've gone through different kinds of work or different kinds of roles, like you also have been changing, I

would love to hear what feel like the important changes for you. Like the, you know, recent changes. Maybe you mentioned your father's passing. I remember that, you know, being a, a big shift, a big shift in your energy, your vulnerability. Yeah. Anything you wanna speak to there maybe changes have emerged at, with the pandemic or other things, but what's changing in you?

Spenta: (00:31:32) Well, I think that this, this real coming to – it's not coming to terms, cuz it feels great, but just really going, 'Oh, my calling is medicine'.

adrienne: That's huge.

Spenta: And uh –

adrienne: (00:31:44) Dr. Kandawalla.

Spenta: (00:31:45) Yeah.<laugh> And uh, so you had asked about my practices, you know, and what I spend most of my time practicing is herbal medicine and acupuncture. And then I think a lot about, um, of course about how that relates really in a much bigger way. You know, that this is, this is not, these aren't just, these are tools and these are also part of a system of medicine that's 5,000 years old. And I've spent a lot of the pandemic, both inspired and –

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: – in total grief that I believe this medicine had so much to offer. I think it could have prevented many, many deaths. And I think the discourse in the West is horrific. Uh, about, you know, that, uh, even to call it alternative medicine is just a farce. You know, it is a system of medicine, like many old systems of medicine, like many ancient systems of medicine that have now been, um, reduced and yeah. And, um, or supplemental or relaxation. I mean, one, let's be clear if you relax someone's nervous system, a lot's gonna change in their whole ability to function. So it's not actually small, but that isn't what I do on a daily basis.

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: You know, what I do is treat mostly long term chronic illness and autoimmune disease which I really see as the, I really see as an intersection of trauma conditions, environment, stress, inflammation, the gut, and you know, that they manifest, they manifest primarily in, uh, people born female. And they, uh, that doesn't seem like a surprise and that they are not treated. The Western medicine just has no answers, sorry. They don't have no answers. They have very few answers. And what I mean is I completely, I'm not a purist. I believe in Western medicine and integrative medicine, I believe it has a place. (00:34:08) I believe there's a lot of science that's very helpful and interventions that are very helpful and there are places that it is not, but it will not give up its reign. So when you ask some of the, one of the changes that happened to me is five months, I think before my dad's passing, I got diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. You know, you know, I've had, I've struggled with chronic pain for most of my adult life,

but the year before I was diagnosed, I was just in hell that I had never experienced. And I got diagnosed. And of course the answer to the diagnosis was to just suppress my whole immune system. And so I said to the rheumatologist, I need a couple months just gimme a couple months to see what I can do. And my dad, it really feels like it was a blessing that he hadn't died yet <laugh> because he said to me, 'Promise me, you won't take the drugs'.

adrienne: (00:35:07) Oh.

Spenta: And I just, I was like, 'Well, you know, I mean, this is your medicine'.

adrienne: That gives me chills.

Spenta: He was good –

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: – that way. He did lots of ridiculous things in my life, but he was really good that way. Um, I might have to strike that. So that was such a buoy.

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: And, um, you know, I did various things too around whatever, around my diet, around supplements, around herbs, around acupuncture, around a lot of things. And you know, it's two and a half years later, I'm not on meds. I'm not in excruciating pain. You know, I live and it's been lots of ups and downs, but I didn't have a suppressed immune system when COVID was happening. And that to me is a really big deal. And I just want people to know that there are other answers out there and that, you know, what we call long COVID ultimately will be treated the same way as autoimmune diseases. You know, it's like there are ways to treat it. There are ways to get better, there's ways to decrease suffering. I mean, that's mostly how I think about all practice of healing is decrease suffering, increase life and vitality. But I think that this will be, I don't feel ready to take on any big expeditions <laugh> for a while, but I do think over the next whatever span of life I have, I think this is probably a big part of the calling is really how to, how, how to change, keep, keep helping to shift healthcare so that people get real healthcare and healing.

adrienne: (00:36:56) Yeah. I mean, I have really gotten into, you know, functional medicine and integrative medicine. And, um, also, you know, was diagnosed with an autoimmune disorder this year and blown away by, you know, the variety of paths, you know, the paths that are like, listen to the body and adjust and reduce inflammation in the body. And all of that is there's, you know how, it's it, there's known ways to do it that are somehow mystified in the medical process, which blows me away. But I've also been, you know, I'm a pattern per-, you know, I really pay attention. I look at patterns and I think we'll look back on this period as one where the emerging patterns were really clear messages, I think from the earth, you know, from the earth, from all that lives <laugh>. But I, it's like, there's really clear messaging to me that the earth is like reduced meat,

reduce travel, reduce, you know, eating things that are not from the area that you're in and that you can grow in and, and be in. It just feels like there's these messages that are like localize and <laugh> eat there and eat in ways that honor what is sentient and, and all that.

adrienne: (00:38:13) And that, that doesn't mean I'm ready to hear all those patterns or ready to make those adaptations yet. But I think between cancer and autoimmune disorders, there's this clear messaging. And I, I do agree. I think COVID will, fits into that very much. You know, COVID is also like, and also stop flying everywhere. Also, you don't need to do these massive anythings. Life needs to be at a smaller relational scale. So I'm grateful for the healers because I feel like the patterns operate kind of in a Meridian way. <laugh> You know, it's like, there's the interventions you can make seem small, but impact everything. So I wanna ask you, this is just emerging for me now, but I wanna ask you, like, as an acupuncturist, as someone who's working with herbal medicine, how do you know that the medicine is working for people? Like how, cuz it does feel like dis, different <laugh> from, you know, when you do Western medicine where it's like, I just, this surgery or I, you know, shut everything down inside myself. What does it look like to watch someone experience a transformation through the process of herb medicine and, and acupuncture?

Spenta: (00:39:23) You know, I mean there is very clearly like you have night sweats now you don't have night sweats.

adrienne: Yes.

Spenta: You know, just like Western medicine, right. There is very clearly symptom reduction. But I would say that there's also almost like, um, a couple things, uh, it's easier to be in the world.

adrienne: Um.

Spenta: It's, you have more energy to move towards the things that you want to, which I would always hope was, would be organizing <adrienne & Spenta laugh> and um, that's really how I got into acupuncture. I saw an acupuncturist and I had, was so exhausted and I had my first treatment and I was like, 'Oh my God'.

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: (00:40:08) 'I feel like I could, you know, do so many things now'. And I thought, wow, what if we all had –

adrienne: Yes.

Spenta: – this in our movement work? Cuz we're all understandably exhausted. And um, and I think you have to manage a lot of, I think we, I think we manage a lot of pain discomfort unease every day, all the time. I think a lot of it is probably normalized in us. And I think that what I see with practicing is that that just changes. There's less of that, you know,

and there's less, uh, the symptoms of trauma, like anxiety calms down, depression lifts, nightmares go away, flashbacks reduce. We feel more steady. And to me, you know, it was a, it was a big deal in my own healing too. I think that facing our trauma is really important and it was also a really big deal to cut back my sugar intake <laugh> as you, you know, as you will write about like, it was a big deal. I, you know, I grew up, um, I grew up eating a lot of fast food, a lot of, um, processed food in the Midwest. Uh, you know, I worked at Wendy's in high school and like we would drink like three biggie diet Cokes a day.

adrienne: (00:41:34) I thought you were gonna say eight frosts, but yeah, totally. <laugh> Like, I'm like, like how many frost did you have?

Spenta: (00:41:39) Well, that's a couple Frosties. <laughs>Totally, totally. I know. I was just actually telling people about all our inventions we would do with the frosty –

adrienne: Wow.

Spenta: – and the cookie and the potato oven. And I mean, you know, it was all of that. And uh, I was a mess. I mean, mood swings and PMs for half the month and this and that. And, and so some of that was trauma related of course, and even our, our, how we eat, what we eat, all of that can be related of course, how we even know how to eat or not to eat. But also some very real things like, um, you know, sugar is just toxic and I'm not saying it like cut sugar, you know, I eat sugar. I ate Ben and Jerry's last night. It also makes a difference to healing. Like if we're really talking about healing, if we're talking about feeling better, if we're talking about having less pain or whatever. I, I just, I do see this kind of physiological function. It matters to how we feel in our day. So we can know all about our trauma and if our physiological function hasn't stabilized, we can still really struggle.

(00:42:59) Music Break - “nightqueen” plays. “You know, they call me the night queen, ‘cause I live in the dark. And I don't let nobody near me, and not betray my heart.

adrienne: (00:43:41) That's right. I mean, I really appreciate this. I am just kind of, I think I can safely say coming up from a depressive dip and it was very like, ‘oh, I'm a human being too’. You know, that kind of thing, like all the trauma of this 20 months or whatever we've been in this journey of COVID, um, plus other things, plus other losses, plus climate crisis, it all kind of hit. And I, I wasn't noticing it because we were in a grief. We were doing a lot of grief work in the house. My partners, grandparents both died from COVID within a month. And so we were just, you know, in the house, eating cookies, like cookies is the way to get through this. And that's what we're gonna do is just eat all the cookies, you know, we'll bake a whole dozen and we'll just have them.

adrienne: (00:44:33) And I didn't notice it. That I was like, I'm subsisting on cookies and grief. And suddenly I, I'm, if someone asks me how I am, I'm just crying. And I can't, it's uncontrollable, which for me is like, ‘oh’. <laugh> You know, um, and the connection of the sugar, you know, was like, the first thing I recognized is I was like, oh, I have to reduce this, not to nothingness, but I have to get it back to where the majority of things that I'm

eating are nourishing to my body. And I always think of it like going to, you know, with the dentist, if I'm like, if sugar's doing that to my teeth, um, then I, I imagine that it does that to my whole system, you know? And so like, what is the amount that I can have that doesn't cause cavities <laugh> and I'm like, that's probably the max that any of my body wants of that substance, but it is hard to shift. You know, I, I feel like there's so many of these things that it's like living inside of capitalism and trying to make a shift that is past it is heroic. <laugh> It's a heroic effort that I, I don't think we can do alone. And I do think that politicized healers, you know, people who are like, I have an analysis and you can get on my table and that analysis shows up in how I am with your body and what you'll take from this. I think it's so important. I really am so grateful that you exist and your army of peers <laugh> exist.

Spenta: Hmm.

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: (00:46:02) Thank you. I do wanna say on that too, you know, one of the things that I've really— I had, I had this teacher who said, 'Don't tell somebody to stop eating sugar, get their body to a place where it can do that. That's your job. That's not their job'.

adrienne: That's right.

Spenta: And I really take that to heart.

adrienne: That's right.

Spenta: Like I used to be such a, you have to start this elimination diet, you know, <laugh> and —

adrienne: Yup.

Spenta: — and I think —

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: — in my own practice, just getting to a place where it's like, 'Oh no', you know that we have to, and, and this is a healing principle that I think I understand more so now than I used to, which is just, we have to help make your body vital.

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: Like sugar is just feeding something that is either depressed or exhausted or depleted because of course it is, it's a rush of energy.

adrienne (00:46:57) Yeah.

Spenta: Right. It's why cocaine feels good to some of us. It's why alcohol feels good too. It's why any of those things feel good —

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: – because they are feeling something in us that our body cannot do. And I do think it is, it's not that at some point in the healing journey a patient might have or somebody might have to make decisions and choices for themselves out of their own volition. And I take it as it's my onus to also help you be vital enough to make those choices easier and to make those choices, like you want those choices, you know, you've done probably, you've done so much healing over the years that you could say, you could see what was happening and you could do that yourself. Right. Yeah.

adrienne: (00:47:46) Exactly. Yeah. I mean, that's what I think Spenta is like, it's the home state in me has shifted enough like that even, even in the depressive state. You know, like when it, when I realized it. You know, and I had a good friend who was like, I, I think maybe you're not okay. And because I was so overextended holding so many things and people up, I didn't notice it. You know, I was like, 'I'm fine. I'm good. I'm well resourced. I'm in the happiest phase of my life. So I can give.' <laugh> That works for a little while.

Spenta: Yeah.

adrienne: But under pressure, you know, this is one of my favorite things I feel like I learned in the journey of understanding embodiment. It's like, what, what comes out under pressure? And so I was able to see it. It's like, oh, under pressure, I'm trying to control and fix everybody. And that runs, you know, there's only so much of that energy and –

Spenta: Mm-hmm.

adrienne: – when it runs out, I turn to the cookies and I get really, really sad and hopeless, but then I could look at it, you know, and I could be like, this is not me. That's a temporary state that is induced by these things. And I actually have tools, including my acupuncturist here that help me to reenter, right. To reorganize myself in my life. It's been amazing to know that, you know, I think back 10 years and I definitely think back 20 years, I'm like, I did not have that. <laugh> I did not have that.

Spenta: <laugh>Yeah.

adrienne: But I think that's important. It's like we still feel pain and we still eat ice cream and we still live our lives, but we are more vital than we've ever been. And we can, I think of that Aikido Morihei Ueshiba quote that's like, 'It's not like you don't come off center, but you're able to return faster and faster'. You know, I could talk to you forever. Um, talk with you forever. I have two last questions. One is what's emerging for you like, do you have a horizon experiment? Like something that you're looking forward to?

Spenta: (00:49:46) Yes. When I came out of school, I had all kinds of ideas about how I wanted to practice and who I wanted to practice with. With the guidance of dear ones, I was told to just put my head down and work. And I said, 'Okay, for 10 years, I'm gonna put my head down and work and I'm gonna become a good doctor'. And I'm past eight years.

adrienne: Wow, Spenta.

Spenta: And I'm – Yeah. <adrienne laughs> And then, God, it took until, anyone out there who has self-doubt, let me just tell you. It took me six and a half, seven years just full of self-doubt all the time about what I was doing.

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: And then it changed –

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: – and I feel really good. I love practice. And so on the, what I hope is emerging is kind of a next phase of clinical work that increases the volume of, um, patients that I can see. And, you know, my big dream really is like to have an acupuncture hospital in the US, like they –

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: – do in China and –

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: – um, and other parts of Asia. And, uh, but you know, so it's kinda eking towards that. That's I think the, the growing the volume while still having the depth and the practice.

adrienne: (00:51:11) I love that I –

Spenta: Thank you!

adrienne: – [WORD/PHRASE UNCLEAR] on that. <laugh> Like, I will –

Spenta: Thank you.

adrienne: (00:51:14) – come there and get [WORD/PHRASE UNCLEAR] <Spenta laughs> And then what feels like the most resonant question for you? Like what feels like I'm still wondering about this and I may never know the answer to this, but this question moves me.

Spenta: (00:51:30) Mm. Many questions. But the one that is coming right now is I've been thinking a lot in these last couple years about impact. And what does it mean to make impact? And as people engaged in liberation struggles, what does impact mean? And I think because so much of my time in GS, the question was always, what's the biggest impact we can make? And I think sometimes that question was good to initiate a project and I don't know that it was sustainable or that it got us exactly where we wanted to go.

adrienne: Ahh.

Spenta: And I think that right now, you know, I work on such a small scale. I see patients, I talk to patients –

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: I do some coaching, it's quiet <laugh> around my, around my insights. And there has been something about being small that has been really good. And I can still see there's contribution. I'm doing something, right. I'm engaged. I get it.

adrienne: Yes.

Spenta: And somebody said to me, who I love said, you know, 'No, Spenta, you're making a huge impact'. And I was just like, 'I don't', I –

adrienne: Mm-hmm.

Spenta: – I don't know if I need that.

adrienne: Mm-hmm.

Spenta: <laugh> You know, like, I, it almost like <adrienne laughs> I think something– So, so I just am in this question, what, what is right sized impact? What does it mean to be right sized –

adrienne: Yeah.

Spenta: – in our impact? Because I think that it's, you know, capitalism, fighting capitalism drives us –

adrienne: That's right.

Spenta: – to be big. I mean, contending for real power –

adrienne: That's right.

Spenta: – in this country, it makes us be big. I deeply admire the movement leaders who are doing that work. And, and so I just have this, like what, you know, what does it mean around the roles that we each play and what's sustainable for us in a real way. And by sustainable, I don't mean self care. I mean, that keeps us in the movement that keeps us until we die, because those are our commitments.

Outro: (00:53:50) This podcast is produced by Natalie Peart. Music for the Emergent Strategy podcast is provided by Hurray for the Riff Raff and their album *Life on Earth*. To support the ongoing work of the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute, please make a donation at alliedmedia.org/esii.