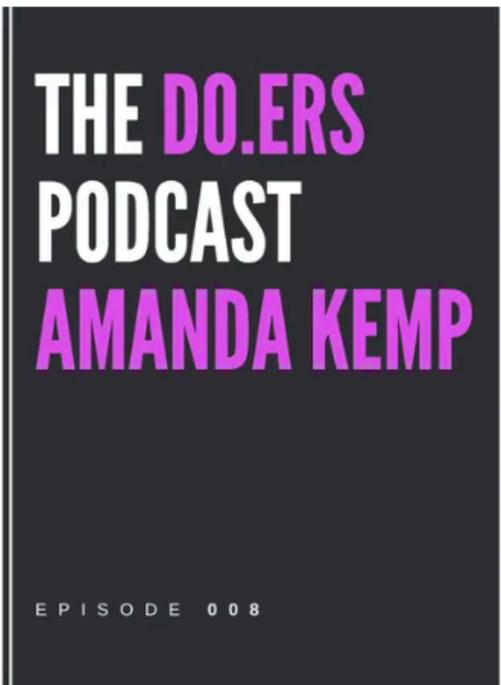


# Why I Put Racial Justice and Mindful Self-Compassion in the Same Lane--

*Every so often I have a conversation where I get to share how and why I'm a racial justice and mindfulness mentor and a theatre artist. Below is an interview with the Doers Podcast Host Jason Mundok where we get to discuss the difference between mentoring and coaching; pivoting between being an artist and racial justice expert, and what it takes to keep dancing even while we work to make the world a better place.*



## INTRODUCTION

Jason Mundok: I'm Jason Mundok. Today on the program it's Dr. Amanda Kemp, a racial justice and mindfulness mentor and the founder of Theatre for Transformation, a professional performing arts company that looks to heal the world through the performing arts. After years of intense racial justice advocacy and the need to take a break from touring her Theatre for

Transformation productions led Amanda to mindfulness practices,

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Mindfulness, the tools of self compassion and mindfulness gave me a way to stand for racial justice with less wear and tear on my being.

Jason Mundok: She spent a few years working alongside one of her own racial justice mentors before deciding to break out on her own and become a mentor to others. Her work combines her lifelong experiences as an advocate for inclusion and equality along with the mindfulness and self care practices that give her the energy to continue that work. For Amanda being a mentor to someone is a two way relationship, walking beside each other and working together.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: What I promise you as a mentor is that I'm going to be honest and I'm going to investigate my failures and share them with you ... so I'm promising to be constantly learning.

Jason Mundok: And she offers a variety of resources on our website for you to continue to learn and become involved with a growing movement of those who stand for justice. You can learn all about the important work that Amanda is doing at [DrAmandaKemp.com](http://DrAmandaKemp.com) and keep up with her work in the arts at [theatrefortransformation.org](http://theatrefortransformation.org)

Jason Mundok: Okay. Oh cool. Awesome. This is the doers podcast brought to you by the candy factory coworking in Lancaster.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: When I first talked to you seven years ago, Jason, we were talking about Theatre for Transformation because I was cultivating my primary identity as an artist, right? And as an artist for social change, right? And as a poet and a theater producer. And so since then, I've pivoted to making racial justice and mindfulness the main thing that I do in terms of earning a living. And I still work with Theatre for Transformation. We're still performing and traveling, but to a lesser extent.

Jason Mundok: I don't often hear those two things together. Racial justice and, and mindfulness. So let's, let's pick that apart.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Well I put racial justice and mindfulness in the same lane. Okay. So typically when we think about mindfulness, it's a way to deal with stress. It kinda, I mean if, I don't know who you pictured when you pictured mindfulness, but I pictured somebody white, is kinda middle-class and, you know, is just kind of walking a little bit of a Buddhist thing.

Jason Mundok: There's a, there's a stereotype of a woman in white linen pants on the beach with her back to the camera and the sunset.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Gotcha. That's your mindfulness pictures white and typically blonde. Yes.

Jason Mundok: Yeah. It's like that, that quintessential stock photo of

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Yes. Okay.

Jason Mundok: The, you know, the East meets West.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Right, right. Well, in our case, in my case, mindfulness, the tools of self compassion and mindfulness gave me a way to stand for racial justice with less wear and tear on my being... Because when you stand for racial justice, you're in the midst of, you're immediately in conflict, right? But conflict is wearing, right? So we live in a society where I am constantly encountering data that rubs me the wrong way to put it in a brief, right? Or that causes me pain or discomfort. And so what self compassion and mindfulness did, and I put the two together, is they gave me a way to cultivate a ways of being within myself so that that data is less powerful in acting on my system. And so that I'm more mindful, conscious of what data I'm taking in and what I'm expanding on in my thinking.

Jason Mundok: So does that allow you to disassociate, maybe a little bit, from the, from the meaning behind that data so that you can see it

more objectively like T to, to not personalize it? I don't know where I'm kind of going with this.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Yeah. Well, it, okay.

Jason Mundok: I mean my experience with mindfulness is the it's the awareness or the acknowledgement of the egoic mind and the stories that the ego creates to, to satisfy itself, right? So that would be my perception of it. So if I'm, if I'm going to be more mindful, I'm aware of the story, I'm aware of the thinking or the thoughts that are wearing me down or are stressing me out. Right. In the case that you're talking about. And because there's an awareness of those thoughts, I am not the thoughts, I am the awareness that knows that the thoughts are happening. Therefore I can just, I can disassociate. And so that's the context of my comment.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Yeah, I understand. So, so the, the term disassociation and disassociate, I'm going to not use those words because they, to me, they have other meanings that are like the opposite of mindfulness. So so you talked about being able to witness or see something and not be the thing that you're witnessing or seeing... So I would agree with that. And for me, mindfulness, the mindfulness that I practice incorporate self-compassion are very deliberate investigation, not just of my thoughts, which is mindfulness, but of my feelings and of, of, and of my my body sensations. So my emotions and my body sensations and seeking to give loving care, loving kindness to my nervous system, to my physical body, to the hurt, afraid self, that's reactive in the moment. You know what I mean?

Jason Mundok: Yeah. So when you're experiencing this information, are you, are you open to then experiencing the reaction of that information?

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Yes. So because I'm having a reaction, right? So to be self-compassionate with it is to pay attention to it and to see if there's something that I need or is there some way in which I

am extending my suffering? Ah, are there expectations I'm having of myself or of other people that are exasperating or ... exacerbating the negativity of the situation, you know, so, mindful self compassion is a way to be counter-cultural. It's a way to cultivate loving kindness inside of myself as I stand for something I call justice. ...The problem with only standing for justice, as I see it, is that there is no comfort in there, and our nervous systems can get worn down or distorted because we're always in fight or flight or frozen. If we're to stand in a place of restfulness, to even deliberately cultivate restfulness as a legitimate need and desire for someone who also stands for justice is unusual, which is why you don't hear those two in the same lane. But that's what I'm interested in.

Jason Mundok: That makes a lot of sense. Take that then further to the word mentor. So it's one thing for you to practice mindfulness and self compassion when you're dealing with racial justice issues, how then are you mentoring others?

Dr. Amanda Kemp: So for me, mentoring, like how I distinguish it from coaching. So you know how in athletics there's a coach and there's an athlete, and the athlete is on the court or on the ice and the coach is on the side, right? Mentoring is I'm on the court too. Ah, I'm also at risk. I am failing as well as succeeding. And what I promise you as a mentor is that I'm going to be honest and I'm going to investigate my failures and share them with you. So I'm promising to be constantly learning. And, maybe I'm a little bit ahead of you. I think everybody should have somebody who's a little bit ahead of them. But I am, I'm human, and I don't pretend to be perfect at that, which I am practicing.

Jason Mundok: Sure. And I understand the difference. It's the, it's the senior player at, to stay with the sports analogy. It's the quarterback, the veteran quarterback and the young wide receiver can be mentoring because they're in the, in the game together. They're actually participating together. Whereas the coach is a

separate entity. It really is playing really playing a different, different role in that, in that game.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Yeah. Yeah. It is a little more peer, like. And being a mentor is interesting because, so as a profession, to be a mentor means that there's an energetic and a monetary exchange between me and people who want to be mentored by me. But you can also have mentors who don't even know that they're mentoring you because you read their books; you go to all, you listen to all their stuff online; or you go to all their courses. I love having mentors, people whom I actively seek out for their advice or who I actively follow a little bit, you know?

Jason Mundok: Yeah. How does one engage with you then from a mentee perspective? Like what, what are the services that you offer that would allow me to count you as a mentor?

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Well, you have to, you know, get in my world. Read my book or, you know, go on YouTube and check out all those videos. So you can just do it through all the freebie routes. And then if you decide, wow, I want to make a commitment, because the other thing about, well, when I'm your mentor is that it's a mutual commitment. So we're committing to each other for three to six months to really be in a honest and deliberate investigation of your hidden biases or wherever it is that you're stuck. Because the promise of, of when I work with you is that you're going to have a breakthrough and whatever you have said you want to have a breakthrough in and that I say, yes, I can help you do that. Once we make that commitment to each other, then we're on the roll. I mean like we're on, we're in a game for a very specific purpose. We want to win Wimbledon.

Jason Mundok: Got it. Yeah. We're all about sports that I know. I love it because I'm really, you know, I'm not exactly an athlete. So is that determined right away? Like if eh, the thing that needs broken through or is that something that maybe emerges? Well, I'll, I'll bet that sometimes people think they

know what it is, but it turns out to be something completely different. That would be my guess.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Isn't that interesting? Yeah. So we go in with some specific, like one common goal that people will have when they want me as a mentor, if they're European American, is how do I break out of this white bubble? You know, it's wherever I live or my work or somehow my daily routines I have, I'm living a segregated life. Yeah. So that takes some deliberate thinking. But also a deliberate feeling about what have you, how have you unconsciously created this segregation in your life? What were you trying to protect yourself from or what had you unconsciously accepted as good or as safe or as ideal or desirable? You see what I mean? So in some ways people say, Oh, help me break out of the white bubble. I want to have more relationships, significant authentic relationships with people of color. And, but what we first have to get to is what are those internalized biases that you have that have helped you create your life as it is? So you've got to get through that before you get to the other thing.

Jason Mundok: This is the doers podcast. Visit us [online@coworkingandlancaster.com](mailto:online@coworkingandlancaster.com). Home of the candy factory, a coworking space in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Dr. Amanda Kemp:

Jason Mundok: Yeah. I'd like to touch on some of your, your journey because you mentioned Theatre for Transformation. And that's what you were deeply involved with when we met. So if you could share a little bit about what Theatre for Transformation is today and then let's go back and walk the journey to how you got to this point from those days.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Yeah. So Theatre for Transformation is a professional performing company and what we do, our performances based on poetry and music and our themes are historical and contemporary. And by contemporary, I mean, we are very

concerned with issues of you know, the killing of unarmed black men and boys by the police, the criminalization of black people as a whole, making black life matter more. We're also concerned with relationships and solidarity across race lines, especially with other people of color and with struggles for our environment and stuff like that. So that's where we are right now. And in that ensemble, my now husband, who's European American, who's a violinist who was trained in a whole European, you know, Western concert music tradition, a saxophone is who's Chinese American base in Chinatown in San Francisco who comes out of a jazz training. And what he calls a music vernacular and his own Chinese American cultural heritage. And our drummer, who is a West African master drummer from Liberia, who a woman who had to fight to play the drum rather than play the instruments that were thought to be fit for women. So that's like the core of that ensemble. So as you can hear a lot of musicians and then Amanda, who's out there as a spoken word artist.

Jason Mundok: it's a great melting pot. I mean that's the, that is just, you know, such a diverse cast and diverse traditions.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: And our focus still is on telling African American stories, but we're interested in how African-American stories intersect with other stories. So, for example, one of the pieces that we did was called, "I Remember Tiananmen 1989," which is about the uprising in Tiananmen square. And here we are on the anniversary of the People's Republic of China. So back in 1989, like 100,000 people occupied that square until they were removed by army troops and tanks. Right. And the one man with the shopping bags in his hand standing in front of them, dancing, I call it dancing. So I wrote a poem about that because the students there held signs that said we shall overcome. So they were connecting their movement to the black freedom movement. So the poem I wrote, "I Remember Tiananmen 1989" was saying that I remember this even though it's not in the official history of China, like it's not in their official history except maybe in Hong Kong.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: I remember, and I remember that you wore t-shirts saying, we shall overcome, that you wanted to connect it with me and the movement that I am a product of. And then musically, what happens in that piece is, and this is really Francis Wong's creation. He has the spiritual, "We Shall Overcome" intersecting with this very Chinese patriotic song called, you know, "The Flag of Bloodstained Glory." But he's put in a whole jazz vernacular. So it's like this crazy mix of, of, of traditions and sounds. And what we're doing with that is trying to show that the African American, you know, spiritual and the black freedom struggle has affected people all over the world. So that's what we, that's the kind of thing we do now in our current incarnation.

Jason Mundok: Right. That's awesome. So I know that that was a really big part of your life. I'm going back a few years. So talk me through the pivot to the racial justice mentoring from Theatre for Transformation. How did you make that connection or that leap.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: I made the connection by, it was like forced, I would say. So before we moved into our current iteration, which is poetry and music, which is like far simpler to produce than a play. Plays are, they take years of cultivation, you know, and they're, they're complex things to produce, to tour and they're super labor intensive and you have to be in the same room together to produce, to create a play, you know? And basically I got burnt out. Doing all the art, the producing, the fundraising, you know, performing on stage more times than not. And trying to build an organization was just, I just got tired.

Jason Mundok: Okay, that's fair. It's not the most efficient medium, to get the point across. I don't know how else to say that. It's a ton of work and at the end of the day, an audience is going to come and enjoy it. Versus poetry and music, which is much easier and lighter to produce and the audience is going to come and enjoy it. At the end of those two productions, the audience is

just simply going to enjoy it and walk away and hopefully take something from it. So it was time to move on. It was time to do something different.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: It was time to do it differently. But I had to step away from the organization completely. So I know I stopped serving on the board. I no longer participated in its productions. And actually the organization was about to close and then the then board chair called me back. In deference to you, Amanda, since you founded this, would you like to come back and create a new board around it? And revive it? I thought about it for a couple months, and then I decided yes, but I would do it completely differently. So basically when I pulled away from the organization, which I had devoted like five or six years of my life to, it was like my third child. I grieved, and I was asked to help someone who had created her own startup around racial justice and inclusion in New Haven, Connecticut. She had always been my mentor. She had always been appreciative of me in the various workshops and whatnot, and she asked me to come on board. So after working with her for a few years, I decided that I would do my own thing, and then Theatre for Transformation wouldn't be a main source of my income, but it would be this artistic outlet.

Jason Mundok: This is the doers podcast, conversations with creators, innovators and entrepreneurs from all around central Pennsylvania. I'm Jason Montauk. Talking today with Dr. Amanda Kemp, a racial justice and mindfulness mentor based here in Lancaster. I want to hear some examples of the impact of the, that you've done as a racial justice and mindfulness mentor specifically.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: So I want to tell you about someone who came to me. This is an older European American woman who came to me distraught, exhausted, despairing. She was part of a SURJ, which is Stand Up for Racial Justice in her community. She had been doing Black Lives Matters vigils, and she was very, she felt very spiritually like compelled to take a stand. Right? The

problem was that she was completely getting toasted, you know, there's a lot of opposition in her town in New England and and, and she was like on 24-7 because of something, you know, that had been an incident. And so there's a lot of media coverage and, and she was the person on, and she said to me, I'm so exhausted, but I feel so guilty, Amanda, because I know people of color can never take a break, so I'm not going to take a break.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: And I said, okay, hold up. I said, I recommend that people of color do take a break. And I recommend that you take a break. And by taking a break, I don't mean, you know, zone out and watch nineties TV. I actually mean take care of yourself, right? Do those things that are gonna feed you. It is okay to pause to not take that email right away or that phone call, to pace yourself through this. And so this person, I think first came to me maybe three years ago and today, you know, she's running her own workshops. She's being asked to speak, and she's happy. You know what I mean? This is someone who smiles. The last time I talked to her, you know, it's like, I don't know what happened, but we could see each other visually via zoom. And I was like, you look good. She's like, I feel like good.

Jason Mundok: That's fantastic. The oxygen mask, right? It's the old you got to put yours on first. You can't help the person next to you if you can't breathe.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Right. And who's going to want to be in your revolution if they can't dance?

Jason Mundok: Yeah, right.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Am I going to want to be? If I, if I end up looking like you, you know, if I go to all the meetings? You know, so we have to be that change that we want to see. And by being that I don't mean we have to just be anti-racist or we have to be, you know, coming from a liberation standpoint when I mean is let's

break that down. Do we want kindness? Do we want human connection? Do we want to be seen and loved for who we are? Even with our imperfections. If we want to see that in the society we're building, then it starts with us practicing it, Because we're constantly planting seeds for what the future is by what we do right now. Yeah.

So someone else who came to me was an introvert and she told me she was, she was in a class and she was like, you probably will never hear me speak in this class because I'm an introvert.

It's nothing personal. And soon after she started speaking up in the class. Then she sent me an email, and she said, I just have to let you know, I've been practicing this thing you called "holding space for transformation" in the classroom. And recently (she's a college professor, English, ) I decided to show the film "Moonlight" even though I was afraid to, because it has huge, very strong themes about racism. You know, poverty masculinity, all kinds of stuff-- sexual orientation there's just a lot in that film, you know, and, of course, it won an Academy award. She said I wasn't, I wasn't gonna show it, but after taking your class, I had the courage to show it because you gave me this tool of how to hold space for transformation. So it gave her a way to be in her classroom and a way to communicate with her students to create an environment where people felt safe to say what they were experiencing.

Jason Mundok: Interesting. Can you, can you expound on what holding space for transformation is?

Dr. Amanda Kemp: So my, one of my mentors, Niyonu Spann introduced me to it. It's a practice of being unconditional love and unconditional acceptance. So it's a practice of a way of being. So most of us don't know how we're being, we're just being an unknown. All of a sudden people are like, why are you so grumpy today? Oh, was I being grumpy? You don't know what you're being a lot of

times. When you hold space for transformation, you're deliberately cultivating inside of yourself or allowing to flow through you unconditional love and unconditional acceptance. And when you be like that, people tend to open up. Yeah. And when you be like that, you give yourself permission to take chances.

Jason Mundok: Oh, interesting. If, if someone's practicing that, how does that translate to your example where I, maybe I'm in a situation where I'm afraid to do something or I'm afraid to show this thing. How does that work?

Dr. Amanda Kemp: So there's a free meditation that I have, and that she was practicing on her own prior to stepping into the classroom. To get into a being an unconditional love and unconditional acceptance is fairly unusual in our society. You know, we're very critical, Yes. And we're also very critical. We're trained to be as if you're in academia, you're trying to be critical. What's wrong? What's wrong, what's insufficient? So anyway, being unconditional love and unconditional acceptance, takes some practice. I would say practice with yourself first at home before you try to take it out in public, you know? So, and also it's all about getting your feet on the ground, getting connected to your breath. And for some of us it could be putting a hand on your heart center and noticing the beat of the heart, really feeling for it. And then making the declaration or inviting in: I am unconditional love. I am unconditional acceptance. I just repeat that a few times to myself with the awareness of my feet on the ground with an awareness of my breath.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: And then I just made myself ready to be with you in a whole different way. I've slowed everything down, and it's like there's a little smile inside of me. So when you go into a classroom like that and you say, we're going to see this great film today. When you watch his film, I want you to watch for this, and then we're going to discuss it and here's how we're going to discuss it. Each person's going to have a chance to think about what they really feel and what they think, and then we're going to listen

to each other. And I really want us to listen to each other with respect.

Jason Mundok: So you're coming from a space, right? You're, you're, you're building an environment. Yeah, that's right.

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Yes, yes, yes. You're very deliberately dealing with the energy in your room. So she's at the college level. Someone from an elementary school in York used it before her, her elementary kids came in every day and she greeted each kid at the door deliberately holding space for transformation for each kid.

Jason Mundok: That's, yeah, it's huge, right?

Dr. Amanda Kemp: Yes. So in her case, she said that students were amazingly sensitive to each other and she had three male students of color share very vulnerable stuff. And they had never spoken, you know, in the class before, but they felt like, you know, the space was good for them.

Jason Mundok: It's so easy to forget the intentionality of the energy that you're contributing to wherever you are and the reciprocity of that. So easy to just, just forget it. To not, not understand that. That's really fascinating

Dr. Amanda Kemp: And it is a doing. Some people say to me, what can I do? What can I do? Like if you have, if you are someone who gets freaked out when conversations about racism come up, you know, people, a lot of people reach out to me about that. Like they freeze and I tell them,

Dr. Amanda Kemp: breathe. Mmm, Get connected to your feet. You know, get back in your body. Cause when we freak out, literally we go out of our bodies and there is no power there. There's no power. There is when you come back in and you're connected to yourself, you actually have the power to make a connection with someone else.

New Speaker: What's the future impact of your work?

New Speaker: Well, I think the future impact is that we have this, this collective of racial justice and mindfulness mentors and I call my program racial justice from the heart. So all these racial justice from the heart facilitators, teachers and mentors who are working in their communities. So, and what I really want to do is bring those people who have signed up for that kind of role, bring them together, you know, every six months, every year, some were really beautiful so we can nourish ourselves by the water and eat really good food and I don't know. Yeah, have a good time artistically, you know, and then go back out and stand in this unusual place of compassion and justice.

Jason Mundok: It's a, it's great work you're doing. It's really, and it's amazing to to watch you evolve. It's been great. I wish you all the best and thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to share this with me. I really appreciate it.

Jason Mundok: Thank you Jason.

New Speaker: And thanks for what a great idea for a podcast. Doers.

New Speaker: Doers do it. Yes, the doers podcast is produced by Jason Mundok at the candy factory coworking space located in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Find links and show notes for this podcast and all of our episodes online @thecandyfactorywebsite: [coworkinginlancaster.com](http://coworkinginlancaster.com) Subscribe to the show wherever you get your podcasts and keep on doing...