

Season 2, Episode 15: Emergent Strategy Podcast “Radical Grievance with Malkia Devich Cyril”

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Malkia: (00:00:00) Part of our job is to direct grief into the direction of radical grievance, which I believe turns into transformative governance and to pull it away from the right, pull it away from the right wing that has, uh, attempted to wield grief in the service of reactionary politics.

(00:00:21) Theme Music (“Wolves” - Hurray for the Riff Raff)

Sage: (00:00:40) Greetings and welcome to the Emergent Strategy podcast, hosted by the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute. We're 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 Sage, I'm a cultural strategist and architect at ESII. For those who may be stumbling into this podcast for the first time, um, we wanna let you know that emergent strategy is the way we generate and reshape complex systems and patterns with relatively simple interactions. And this is a podcast of conversations with people we at ESII consider emergent strategists. Today's guest is Malek Devich-Cyril. One of the brilliant minds that helped us understand and build the Media Justice movement, writer, poet, movement strategist organizer, producer of amazing events and gatherings. So many things, so many things I could say about, uh, Malkia Devich-Cyril. And we are so happy that you said yes. Welcome Mac. Welcome to the Emergent Strategy podcast. How are you doing today?

Malkia: (00:01:58) Well, I'm really glad to be here. Today I'm celebrating the anniversary of my mom's death with my family, and this is the only thing that I agreed to do on this very sacred day. So I'm really happy to be here and I love the work y'all do.

Sage: (00:02:14) Well. Thank you so much. We feel really honored to be the activity that you've taken on on the day. And we, given, given what your mother has offered the world in terms of her life as a Panther. And I should have put that in the intro, cuz I know that's important to you. And I always like saying a Panther Cub, you know. <laugh>

Malkia: That's right.

Sage: That's what it's—

Malkia: Yes. Panther Cub, all day.

Sage: (00:02:36) Mac, one of the things that when we develop the podcast, we just started making a list of people like, ‘Ooh, these are people we think are out here in the world, moving in ways that are aligned with emerging strategy principles and, and elements’. And in particular, we were like, um, the elements of resilience, interdependence, the thinking about, um, generating more possibility. I feel like I'm about to list them all.

These are things that, that I see in your work that we, uh, lead us to say, 'Hey, Mac is an emergent strategist'.

Malkia: Mm-hmm.

Sage: Do you accept that premise?

Malkia: (00:03:09) I do. I feel like, you know, one of the things I love about the concept of emergent strategy is that it gives it, it relies very heavily on the, on the agency of the doer, you know? Um, it, it, it allows like, it allows me to make meaning and sense out of whatever is happening at the time, you know? And that's how I like to live. That's how I like to do my work –

Sage: Mm-hmm

Malkia – is in sense-making right at that time. So I love the concept of emergent strategy and I'm happy to be considered an emergent strategist. Yeah. Put the label on me. Go ahead.

Sage: (00:03:48) <laugh> We shall welcome on and we got, we got cards and everything. Just–

Malkia: Thank you.

Sage: (00:03:53) I love what you're saying about it's in the doer. It's not a field of study, right? Like in a, in a sort of like esoteric way. It's like it's, it's in a practice.

Malkia: Right.

Sage: And, um, so I'm curious –

Malkia: Mm-hmm.

Sage: – about how you're thinking about the time we're currently living in, like, how are you making meaning of that and how is emergent strategy supporting you, making meaning of the times we're in right now?

Malkia: (00:04:17) That's a good question. I mean, for me, I feel like I'm a witness to infrastructure collapse. You know, I'm a witness to the natural evolution, destructive evolution of, you know, a very fallible economic system, you know. I'm, I feel like I'm a bearing witness to the kind of like massive grief that's inevitable when you build a system on the backs of people. You know what I'm saying? Like when you build an unequal system that thrives on exploitation and extraction at the end of the day, loss is the inevitable result.

Sage: Mm-hmm.

Malkia: And so I, um, I make sense of this moment in terms of understanding the mass nature of, of, of grief in this moment, you know?

Sage: Mm.

Malkia: (00:05:14) And that, that, that, that black people understand this in particular, indigenous people understand this in particular, people who've had, who've been the victims of war and other kinds of, uh, dictatorial atrocities understand this in particular, this collective loss, you know, that happens in groups in a particular historical period and what that can leave you with, you know. In South Africa, the, you know, the movement against apartheid was, was suppressed for a decade, you know, and, and, and, and, and the grief that comes with that suppression with the extraction of people from a community, imprisoning them. Like our grief can go one of two ways, you know, in this moment, our grief can make us more reactionary.

Sage: Yeah.

Malkia: It can make us more conservative, you know, it can push us to the right. And the right wing has uses for grief, you know. They have uses that involve gaslighting. They have uses that involve, um, that, that turn grief into resentment, you know, and that build a whole political ideology on top of that resentment –

Sage: Mm-hmm.

Malkia: – you know. Or our grief can make us more radical. Our grief can, uh, turn us toward a progressive, more progressive direction. It can turn us toward community. It can turn us towards transformative governance. You know what I'm saying? Like, we have choice in this moment, but that's kind of how I'm seeing this moment of infrastructure collapse, of political neglect, of economic, you know, exploitation extraction. We are at a point where if we can lean into our grief and allow it to metabolize, there is a great strength we can find inside of that.

Sage: Yeah.

Malkia: To allow us to not only be resilient in this time, but to find solutions, we might not otherwise find.

Sage: (00:07:15) Thank you for that.

Malkia: Mm-hmm.

Sage: I'm curious Mac, there, there's a way in which you place grief in, in a multi-layered political context, which I think is a, well it's radical. It's, it's radical in a very interesting way, because so often grief is related to, and a lot of writing around grief is related to a personal, emotional landscape, right? You are grieving, you are personally grieving and you make this connection that also we should have added fractals to the, to the emergent strategy. Right. You make this connection between, um, personal, um, loss and grief and material conditions in the transformation of the world, right? Like there, there's a through line. Can you talk a little bit about that and like how you see that, that personal landscape and relationship to the shift in material conditions, and I've heard

you use the phrase, uh, grieve like a revolutionary, and, and I wonder if you could kind of tie all that in for us. Like, what does it mean? Not just to grieve personally, of our so many, multiple losses over losses, our losses, but what does that mean about grief is power grieving is a revolutionary and how that pushes forward, uh, the world we really deserve.

Malkia: (00:08:26) Yes. Yeah. So I really like the question that you asked me, you know, and I'm gonna do my best to try to answer it, even though it is something that I'm still thinking about and trying to figure out myself, you know. You know, so we're in a situation where black people die, uh, disproportionate, at a rate that's like disproportionate to our population and at a much higher rate than white people. You know, for example, black people have a 24% higher mortality than white folks in the 30 largest US cities. Um, we suffer on average 74,000 more deaths a year than white people do from 2016 to 2018. So that's, that's the type of, you know, landscape we live in, like black, black maternal mortality is, is, uh, extraordinarily higher and the pandemic has reduced life expectancy for all people, but for black people, most of all. And so first off, I think the first thing to acknowledge is that what Audre Lorde said, 'We cannot live without our lives. Protecting our ability to live is a part of justice movements'. <laugh> You know, dealing with this question of the discrepancy in our mortality must be a goal of justice movements, you know. So that's the first and foremost thing that protecting our ability to live in its world is actually the cornerstone of every sector of every movement for freedom and justice and rights in the world. So it's just unacknowledged as part, as a goal, you know what I mean? But it is inherent to the work. So that's one thing I would say, I would say the other piece is that, you know, grief is considered by quote experts to be every response to loss, any response to loss, right?

Sage: Mm.

Malkia: (00:10:18) And, and while some of us, while we have a personal response to loss, we also have a collective response to loss, you know. Especially losses that are systemic. Losses that are generated as a direct result of the inequalities that we experience in the world, you know. These, the, the machine that we are trying to undermine and transform, it creates loss. It creates an unequal pattern of loss and that unequal pattern produces a racial burden. And so we, you know, and, and so recognizing that loss is inherent in inequality. That liberation requires that we think about loss in a different way. That means that number one, we understand, we have to understand loss to be a collective experience, not just a personal one. Capitalism wants us to make it personal, wants us to make it private, you know. Something that, in fact, we have to shoulder on our own, but it isn't that. That's why my, that's why Emmett Till's mother opened up his casket because she understood that this, that her son's death was part of a pattern of, of, of the lynching and murdering of black people in the South and, and beyond. You know what I mean? Like she opens his casket so that she can have his death spark a movement. You know, the deaths of Trayvon Martin, the deaths of Michael Brown, these deaths, you know, were not just mourned by their parents and families. You know, these deaths, you know, Brianna Taylor, all of the people that we have witnessed or in the media be killed by police. It is actually lost that sparked the movement, uh, against police violence. Right. But we don't think about it as we don't think about the part of it

that is loss. This is collective, a collective experience of grief. And so we have to think about it that way. The other piece is that it's not just an experience either, even, even as a collective one, it's not just an experience at all. It's also a landscape for struggle. It's a landscape for political practice, you know. Grief isn't something that happens to us.

Malkia: (00:12:34) It's something we make, you know. It, it is, it is a response. It is something we generate and, and, and because we generate it, there's agency in grief. And if we can, if we can really dig into that agency, then we can wield grief in the fight for freedom, in the fight for rights, in the fight for justice. This is a way of actively engaging with grief as part of, of a movement. And I don't know if this is, this is making sense, but, but that's how I understand it. I understand also that, like we're in a moment where like the scale and complexity of the interlocking crises that we're facing doesn't, it doesn't just create a current context of, of traumatic grief. There's also, it's sitting inside a generational context of traumatic grief, right. But it also presents this opportunity that, that we have to deploy new, you know, grief inform, change models, right. That have the power to accelerate fights for racial justice and to strengthen, you know, the movements that are related to it. You know, we, out of grief, we practice mourning, radical mourning. You know what I'm saying? We, we there's work and mourning because, okay, let say this, because there's a relationship between death and democracy. There is clearly a relationship between grief and grievance, between grievance and governance. You understand what I'm saying? So part of our job is to direct grief into the direction of radical grievance, which I believe turns into transformative governance and to pull it away from the right, pull it away from the right wing that has, uh, attempted to wield grief in the service of reactionary politics –

Sage: Mm-hmm.

Malkia: – in the service of domestic terror. You understand what I'm saying? That's, that's part of how I see grief as a, as a, as a part of social movements. It's how I see grief as a tool for our liberation.

(00:14:40) 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."

Sage: (00:15:05) I really appreciate what you're saying around mourning. And the way mourning is a way for us to tell what's important to us. So, as, as someone, I know you, as someone who also thinks very deeply about culture and, and our collective culture, what does that mean about how we move through the world? Like, what are, what are the cultural cues on how to treat each other, how to be in the world together, grief and mourning can help us shape our cultural, uh, um, offerings, help us shape our, our, uh, our ways of being together, because it tells us what's important to us.

Malkia: (00:15:38) That's right. That's right. And the thing is that, you know, the right knows this, you know, the right knows and, and right wing populism has been, uh, doing its work to try to displace the weight of grief, right, with the energies of grievance. You know what I mean? They've been trying to replace grief with rage and resentment. You feel me? And

so, and, and I'm talking about, let me say something about this grief that they're trying to re that they're trying to replace. Okay. We're talking about, uh, the perceived losses by, by white people, you know, and all at all class levels, all levels of class and all parts of the country. Okay. The perceived losses of status, the perceived the, the real losses that everyone is experiencing in this economy. But, but for them, get turned into a form of resentment.

Malkia: (00:16:33) You know what I mean? The thing is, if we can understand that what everyone is experiencing is a kind of grief, they're reacting to losses, both real and perceived. Then that changes how we think about justice. It, it places more, it requires that we place more emphasis in our movements on belonging. You know, it requires that we –

Sage: Mm-hmm.

Malkia: – that we have as much emphasis on belonging and safety as we do on, you know, material change. If that makes sense. Uh that's that, because that's, if grief is really the root cause of resentment and can be the root cause of radicalization, then we, then, then belonging is the medicine.

Sage: (00:17:19) Belonging is the medicine. Vulnerability is the strategy, right? Like, um, you were referencing, um, Mamie Till, and, and what it means to grieve around grief and loss publicly, and anyone who is aware of how you've moved through the world in the last three years has also seen you do that personally.

Malkia: That's right.

Sage: (00:17:43) Around the, the, the public vulnerability of grief and loss in your own life. And, and so this conversation is, I hope in offering for folks to understand the relationship between your political positionality and your personal lives and, and the ways in which you can be fighting against, uh, uh, um, pushing back against racialized capitalism, and you pushing back against white supremacy by opening your, your most vulnerable spaces to others as a strategy for us to feel grief. Like the idea that, that, that you said earlier, capitalism wants to make these things private and shameful, right? Like in so many ways that, that we feel that we actually feel, right, is something that we're supposed to like, pretend we don't, you just, that happens over there. That happens at home, that happens in a closet, but what does it mean to bring those things out full front feels like it's part of a, part of what it means when I hear you say grieve like a revolutionary, like, what is the revolutionary act of, of leaning into the transformative nature of grief?

Malkia: (00:18:52) I mean, I, you know, I lost my wife, my wife, Alana three years ago, and today is the anniversary of my mom's death. She died in 2005 from sickle cell anemia. My life died from cancer. You know, I've, I've cared for a number of people, uh, who through, through their, through their journey towards death. Um, and you know, I've been, I've been at the, at the bedside. I've been the person caring for folk in hospice, and I've lost maybe 15 people in the last three and a half years. And so it it's become, you know, and,

and not just that, not just the individuals that I love that have died, but I also watched the impact of the destruction of the Black Panther party by COINTELPRO, by the counterintelligence program of the FBI, and seeing, witnessing what the, um, imprisonment, the criminalization and imprisonment of so many radicals did to that particular organization and to all the families connected to that organization.

Malkia: (00:20:06) That was another, that layered my understanding of my own personal experience of grief. That there was a political experience of loss and grief that is woven into my personal experience of loss and grief. And that that experience was collective. You know, when you fight for political prisoners, your whole life, people who have been when, when people are imprisoned as a direct result of their political, um, activity, particularly Black people, particularly those radicals fighting for, for revolutionary social change. They do hard time. They don't just do time. You know, they, they get placed in isolation, you know, for decades sometimes like the kind of, the kind of traumatic loss that that represents for their children. And for all of us who are basically, we're all their children, you know, in that movement, it makes grief. I think for, for, for that community grief becomes a way of life, you know, and, and I don't think it's just for that community. I think Black people carrying ancestral grief, Black people carrying the weight of mass incarceration, Black people carrying the reality of the racial wealth gap and the, and the kind of poverty we experience. Black people carrying the collective awareness of police murders. Like this is something where grief becomes woven into our bones, you know, and it's not just something we experienced one time when somebody dies. It's there always, it's a part of who we are as a people and not just us either. I believe that's true for Indigenous communities. You know, I think that, um, you know, whether, whether our, our grief is disenfranchised and, and pushed to the side and neglected by the state, by the economy and, and by ourselves. Whether it's criminalized, you know, where, when we protest in response to our grief, when we rise up, we get criminalized and we, we, we go to jail. Um, we get beaten. Or whether it's ambiguous, like we have situations where we don't know what happened to our people. Um, even as we look back on the family line and slavery, and we don't know what happened. You know, we don't know some, where some of our people are. Our immigrant communities, they leave home and, you know, don't know what happened to their family. Maybe their family members died, maybe they didn't –

Sage: Mm-hmm.

Malkia: – but they don't know. So we are, we are, and instead of being crushed under the weight of this grief, we turn it into something beautiful and useful, right. We do the mourning work, you know? And so that's, I, I, I believe that, that this, that the personal experience of grief for every person is, is a, is a point of radicalization, is the place at which we can become radicalized. It's the, it's the place that every organizer hopes to tap into. Whenever you go to the doors to speak to someone, you hope to engage with them around what they really feel and turn that into something that they will really do.

Sage: (00:23:27) Wow. Thank you. That's leading me to ask you about, about this turning towards, we take our mourning and we turn it towards, we take the feeling and we turn it towards the doing, what are you practicing right now?

Malkia: I mean, I have a few things that are my practice. Um, number one, I practiced the concept of Solvitur Ambulando, it is solved by walking. I walk.

Sage: Oh, say that again. Sol, sol.

Malkia: (00:23:56) Solvitur Ambulando is Latin, "it is solved by walking".

Sage: Mm.

Malkia: And I walk. I walk to solve my problems. I walk when I can't solve my problems. I walk because sometimes it's the only thing that I can do to remind myself that I still have agency that I can still move about. Um, no matter what else is happening to me, I have the capacity to change. And sometimes movement is, is the only is, is something that just reminds me of that. It feels strengthening, you know, but also it places me outside. Places me in relationship to the sky and the trees and other people. And all of a sudden I can remember I'm not alone. You know, when I get my mortal fear, because I, I, I live in such fear these days. You know, COVID-19, police, you know, fires. Like I just, my, my own health, you know, I have, I have great fear of, of my own death, but when I walk it, it reminds me that even when I die, I'll still be part of the world. And so that's one practice that I have. Another practice that I have is I gather.

Sage: Mm-hmm.

Malkia: You know, I, I gather with people I care about, I, I I've started something called Pandemic Joy, which you know about, you know, and it, you know, the fact that we gather on Sundays.

Sage: Mm-hmm.

Malkia: That it's a tight knit community. It's a private community, you know, but, that we can sing, that we can hear an inspirational word. You know what I mean? That is a practice for me, you know, that we have done this every Sunday, since March 2020, you know. That's something that I don't take for granted. I'm extraordinarily grateful for. I, I gathered with people in something called the Freedom Cleanse, you know, and that, uh, allows me to spend 10 days out of the month, you know, um, cleansing from any, from the, from the things that get in between me and my liberation. Removing them from my path and then adding into my path, things that bring me closer to my liberation. So sometimes that means giving up sugar. And sometimes that means making sure I'm walking every day. And sometimes that means, you know, cooking. I just choose one or two things that I'm gonna focus on in that, in that 10 days. And that's really, uh, a beautiful practice. Sometimes I meditate in, in an ongoing way. I'm not doing that right now, but I believe in the power of meditation, you know, I believe in that. And I, and I do it from time to time, like, I'll spend a month doing that. And then I'm like, 'Nah'. <Malkia & Sage laugh>

Sage: (00:26:58) Let me go for a walk.

Malkia: (00:26:59) I mean, to keep it real, even though we know that practice is the, is the, is the, is the medicine and mourning is, is a practice. You understand? It's, it's an action. It's hard to engage in long term practice. It requires a level of discipline and focus and, and, and a constant awareness of one's commitment. That it's just, it's not easy to do. And so I have to also give myself love and, and compassion on when I can't can't do it. You know, cause even though I believe that grief can be a, a, a liberatory experience, it also can be a painful one. It can also be a painful one. And, you know, there are many days when I wake up and the first thing I think is 'why, oh my God, you know, why am I here without my wife? You know, why am I here without my mind, without my friends, you know?'

Sage: Yeah.

Malkia: But, and so practice doesn't take that away. What practice does is help me bear it, you know, helped me bear it, helped me expose it so that I'm not sitting with any of it in, in any kind of shame. Do you know how many people, when I would go to my grief groups before the pandemic, how many people lost their jobs in relationship to their grief. Whether they couldn't go to work for longer than the bereavement leave, you know, allotted or whether they got, went to work and got into fights and arguments with people –

Sage: Mm-hmm.

Malkia: – because they just were, they were grieving and they just were short tempered. And, you know, they couldn't handle, you know, stress in that time and they got into stuff or they relapsed.

Sage: Yeah.

Malkia: Because they were grieving. They relapsed in, in addictions and lost their jobs, like so many in so many ways. Like I would say a good half of the people who came to grief group, experienced problems at work, you know. And, and, and so practice, isn't just about some, like, I wanna feel better. Practice is what can enable us to maintain our relationships, maintain our jobs, you know, and keep going through times of crisis.

(00:29:19) Music Break: "KiN" instrumental plays.

Sage: (00:29:40) In listening to you, there seems to be an intimate, inherent relationship between connection, intimacy and liberation. Would you say, is that, can you say that, that's what I feel like I'm hearing. Can you say a little bit more about that?

Malkia: (00:29:58) I feel like there can be no transformation without intimacy. You know, one of the things that I always thought was interesting was like, um, this idea that you wasn't supposed to have big feelings. You know, you, as an organizer, you supposed to worry about everybody else. You're not supposed to be out here talking about yourself or having, you know, big emotions. You're there to cultivate and engage the emotions of other people and the experiences of other people. And this big distinction between the

organizer and the organized, I think actually does us a disservice. It takes the intimacy out of organizing. It, it, it means that it means we can't bring our full and authentic self to the, to the fight, you know? And it also means that what happened, you know, so that, so the organizing was once in the Black church, in the mosque, in the, in the midst of Black spirituality. And then, um, as it became, as it moved into the nonprofit, you know, the spirituality left, but not just the spirituality, the intimacy left, because now it's a job, you know. And now there's rules about how to engage. You can't hire your family, you know, you supposed to do this and that. And it's like, okay. So, and we can't, and, and we are supposed to be professional. And in professional settings, professionalism denies intimacy, you know, by its very nature. And I think this was a killer, this is a killer to our movement actually, because intimacy is how you build trust. And trust is how you build relationships and relationships are what will win the day. Trust and believe that. You feel me. Yeah. So that's, you know, to me, you know, intimacy also entails risk.

Sage: (00:32:06) Ooh, I believe it.

Malkia: You know.

Sage: I believe it.

Malkia: I have shown myself positive and negative to folk, and sometimes I've lost the relationship because of that. And sometimes I've gained relationships because of that. There's always risk in intimacy, but I truly believe that if we can, if we can practice intimacy, meaning it's not just something that happens as a result of boundarylessness, right. But it's a practice. It's something that we are cultivating as a, as a, as a tool for trust building and relationship building. It can create the kind of belonging that church once created. You know, we, we supposed to be, not replacing the functions of the state in terms of service providing, but we are also supposed to say, 'Are you in need? Let me bring you some, let me bring some food to your house'. You know, let me, let. 'Yeah, I'll take your daughter for the day. No worries. You know, you need a break, I take your kids'. You know, like our, our organizing communities are supposed to be more like that. We don't sing in our organizing communities, in large measure. Why is that? We should be singing at the protest. We should be, not just chanting. We should be singing. We should be dancing. And I think that's one of the things that I love about some of what has happened over the last five years is that we have brought more song and dance back into, into the, into the work. But, we need even more. You know, like, um, some of the young organizers have been really, I think doing some, some beautiful things around that, but, but, but culture, isn't just like a show that we are putting on for others. It's like a way that we are actually communicating with one another around our sorrows, around our joys.

Malkia: (00:33:58) You know. If, if we could understand, if we could speak honestly about our losses, we could actually have real conversations, for example, about, um, between, uh, between Latinx folks and Black folk, between Asian folk and Black folk. We could have real conversations across race, about white supremacy, about what it has done to us, about what it has taken from us, you know, and about how it has pointed us in the direction of each other to blame. We could have real conversations about that because

there would be trust there. Without the trust and without the intimacy, the kind of alliance building, the kind of multiracial alliance building we hope to do, the kind of, uh, power we hope to build the democratic organizations we're trying to create. None of that is possible without genuine intimacy.

Sage: (00:34:52) Oh, I love that. I recently saw, um, an internet post that talked about intimacy having two axes. Intimacy is yes, closeness. Like sometimes we think about intimacy in terms of physical proximity, like intimacy and closeness, but the other axis was authenticity. Our ability to share who we are authentically our ability to, to offer ourselves, all of ourselves, um, and to connect with each other. That I see that, um, um, the phrase "In Lak'ech", uh, something, some of my indigenous brothers and sisters have taught me. It's like, 'I am another you' like how do, that our intimacy is about our connection.

Malkia: Mm. I'm writing that down.

Sage: And our deepening our connection. So yeah, intimacy is a function of closeness and authenticity.

Malkia: Mm-hmm.

Sage: And that the more, the, the more you can engage closeness and the more authentic you can be inside that engagement, the higher, the intimacy in, in relationship to that.

Malkia: I'm gonna call that proximity and authenticity.

Sage: Mm-hmm.

Malkia: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, that's it.

Sage: (00:36:01) I know you to be a brilliant cultural strategist in so many ways and thinking a lot about culture and have been for decades. And, and so I think when I listen to you, I'm hearing so much cultural intervention. I'm hearing so much that the organizing that feels, um, really present and maybe most necessary, I won't say most necessary. I believe most necessary, cuz I also am a cultural strategist too, you know, so folks say –

Malkia: Right, right.

Sage: – you know, in this moment is around how we be together. Like how, how we engage each other, how we care. Um, as, as someone who thinks about culture and the role of culture and transformation and revolution, what are some of the practices that are, that, um, feel really exciting to you or things that you wanna offer that we could lean into to build a stronger movement from a cultural perspective, from how we engage each other together?

Malkia: (00:36:56) Okay. That's a big question. Let me just say first that I believe that cultural intervention is as important as material intervention. And like not more important, but

certainly not less important. And I think the prob, part of the problem is that it is seen as less important and it's not given the resources, time, energy that it deserves. You know, look in, in generative somatics, we learn that there are basically three, three points of, of core need. One is safety. You know, one is, one is, is, is dignity. And the other is belonging. And safety is, is how, what we're seeking when we make material change, but dignity and belonging, those are things that come as a result of the cultural interventions we're talking about. And there, the cultural interventions have to happen at multiple levels. They have to happen at the level of what are we doing to ensure the cohesion of families. Because I feel like sometimes, and even in the cultural world, we ain't thinking about it like that, you know, that, that families, you know, are, are a unit of belonging.

Sage: Yeah.

Malkia: And that they are also a point of destruction, you know. And, and, and, and so I think for example, it's a mistake to not bring our families into our work.

Sage: Yeah.

Malkia: I think it's a mistake to think that, you know, we, we should just engage the 20 somethings, you know, and, and, and not engage the 80 somethings. You know. I think it's a mistake to when we think about youth organizing that we don't think about the kids that's five years old. You know what I mean? Like I think that revolutionary belonging begins from birth to death, goes from birth to death. And our organization shouldn't include everybody along that spectrum. Our organizations actually should be built on – when I do Pandemic Joy, I encourage people to bring their mamas and daddy.

Sage: Yeah.

Malkia: They babies, they cousins and invite everybody, you know, because that's how that, that is actually how you spread the word, you know. We out here trying to spread it to strangers, but what if we organized our families first and foremost? So that's, that's where peace, you know, organized the family.

Sage: Yeah.

Malkia: I think the second thing is, look, song and poetry are prayer. You know, it's going to church and, and testifying, it's getting up at the podium and making a speech. But we don't, we don't see song and poetry as equivalent to the powerful speech making chanting that we do in the street.

Sage: Mm-hmm.

Malkia: (00:39:48) And yet it's more powerful. You know, poetry has a way of exposing truths that you couldn't say otherwise, you know. Of bringing, of introducing contradictions and new ways of understanding the world that actually open up, open up new, new visions, new solutions. Like we, we have to, we have to support the poets and the songwriters and, and the singers, you know. Like I'm not just talking about the artists, I'm

not, because I think I'm talking about singers don't have to be who sing great. I'm saying people who create, you know, people who create and explore through their creations, that is a practice that we need to lean into. We need to bring poetry and, and songwriting and singing and dancing into the organization, into the building of organization. Um, so I think that's another thing. I think nature, getting us all out into nature. I mean, when I ran the, um, Youth Media Council, we would take the young people out into the woods and we would, um, build, you know, do all the wood-sy things. Build fires and set up tents and shit. And, you know, I'm not really a big camper, you know, I always would tell my wife, like, 'I'm gonna take you camping girl'. And she's like, 'Nah.' <Sage & Malkia laugh> 'I'm not trying to go camping with you', but <laugh> –

Sage: Brooklyn in the house.

Malkia: – but look. Exactly. You know what I'm saying? But my sister is a great camper, so I try to follow in her footsteps, you know, but the point is because we saw that the engaging with nature as of a revolutionary discipline. It's why my sister Salah runs the camp, the Malcolm X Grassroots movement summer camp, you know, every year and does survival work with the children. You know, because being able to engage with nature, it teaches you that you can survive anything. You know, when you take that, that hike in the rain, it teaches you that you can get through anything, you know. And, and so I believe in that, I believe in learning how to, well, I'll get to that. I believe in, in being in nature, you know, as a, as a survive, as a, as a point of building resilience. I'm gonna tell you all the things. I believe in pets. <laugh> I believe that – I'm just keeping it 100. I think that engaging, you know, people say that in healing from trauma, if you can find one thing, whether it's a person you believe in, whether it's nature or whether it's an animal, you know. If you can find one thing to hold, to hold onto you can heal. You know. And so I, I believe in that, and I believe in, in our furry furry friends.

Sage: Mm-hmm.

Malkia: (00:42:52)Um, you know, I think that cultural intervention also has to happen at a systems wide level. You know, I think that we have to deal with disinformation. I think we have to deal with the structure of journalism. I think we have to deal with the fact that our news outlets have been placed on the public on, on the open market, you know, and are now driven by profit instead of practice. You know, I think that this is not just about the individual, these little things that we can do as individuals. This is also about the, the, the cultural systems that need to shift in order for narratives to change at a global, on a global scale. You know, so, so I just wanna be real, you know, like when we talk about like, about culture as a, as a point of intervention, that there are layers to it, you know. There are layers to it and, and that we live in a technocratic society in which, you know, culture is transmitted in at, at a speed unheard of in previous generations with a level of secrecy, we don't even know how, how it happened, you know, um, that was previously unheard of. Um, and at a scale that was previously unheard of. So trying to make an intervention in that context is hard, but it's not impossible. It's not impossible. And, and the fact is that if we can build culturally infused organizations, I believe that we will be more equipped, better equipped to challenge the cultural authority at a higher level. You understand what I'm saying? And, and the cultural norms that exist at a higher

level, but that requires that we infuse our current organizations with the kind of smaller and more personal cultural interventions that we can do in order to fight the big ones that are much harder to fight.

(00:44:49) 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.

Sage: (00:45:32) I love that you, um, connected us to this, this conversation. We've been talking about grief, mourning, intimacy. Um, and, um, the sort of last few things you said also was a reminder that that's not solely person to persons, but –

Malkia: That's right.

Sage: – that it's about our relationship with the land, our relationship with nature. It is about our relationship with all living things. Uh, and so I, I really appreciate you sort of landing there and bringing in the pets and, and, um, um, I think a lot about Sylvia Wynter's writing about beyond humanism and how we are thinking about a revolution that, um, is, is broader than just, what's good for us as human beings. Um –

Malkia: That's right.

Sage: – uh, um, and actually not only broader than, but understands that what is good for all living beings, including ourselves, including, uh, um, the, the soil, including, um, our cat friends that may be a part of our lives and bringing us joy, right? That's –

Malkia: Mm-hmm.

Sage: – that's a part of our cultural strategies and our revolutionary, uh, intentions.

Malkia: That's right.

Sage: (00:46:51) Well, Malkia, I am so grateful for this time.

Malkia: <laugh> Me too. You asking them hard questions though. You know what I mean? Got, got the brain going on a Saturday. You know what I'm saying?

Sage: (00:47:03) Nobody's gonna go to a professional baseball team and throw them softballs. Why would I do that?

Malkia: <laugh>

Sage: (00:47:10) Why would you do that?

Malkia: It's like that tho. [CROSSTALK] My brain is sweating. My brain is sweating family <laugh>.

Sage: Does it make any sense?

Malkia: All right. Alright. I got you. I got you. I got you.

Sage: Yes, yes. So grateful. So grateful.

Malkia: Thank you. I'm grateful too.

Sage: As we, as we wrap up, is there anything you wanna shout out? Anything you wanna let folks know about?

Malkia: (00:47:42) Well, you know, I would be remiss if I didn't lift up my mom, Janet Cyril, you know, a woman of the Black Panther party. I think it's important to say that she ran a breakfast program in, in the New York chapter, the Harlem chapter. I think it's important to say that my mom was one of the places that people could go to when they were in trouble with the police. That she was, uh, uh, that she was, um, ejected from the party, <laugh> many times off of, um, refusing to, um, bow down to certain patriarchal demands, you know, but she remained a Panther through and through throughout it all, you know. And growing up, she taught me everything. She made the Panther community my family, you know, the family for me and my sister, and, and now for my nieces. And we could not be who we are without that Panther family. I just wanna lift her up. You know, she's touched so many lives, so many people have lived in our house. You know what I mean? And I think it's really just important. Like there are all the heroes we know about. And then there are a million people in the rank and file who were heroes that we don't know about.

Sage: Mm-hmm.

Malkia: And my mother was a rank and file Black party, Black Panther party member, a leader. And, um, and I lift her up today on the day of her death.

Sage: (00:49:15) We lift her up. Mama Janet. Yes. Thank you so much for, for sharing her with us, Mac.

Malkia: That's right. That's right. Thank you.

Outro: (00:49:30) 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.