

Speaker 1: Welcome to Change Making Connections, the podcast where transformative talks on social justice leadership and beyond become more than just words. I'm your host, Beth Barilla. Each month I invite a global change leader to talk with me about the strategies and tactics that they use to cultivate deep transformation in their lives, their communities and their organizations. Tune in to changemaking connections for your monthly dose of inspiration and insight. Let's create a ripple of change together.

Speaker 2: Hi everyone, and welcome back to Changemaking Connections. Today I am so thrilled to talk with Amelia Ortega, LCSW, who currently works as a somatic psychotherapist organizational consultant and professor of social work practice as a non-binary mixed chicanx identified clinician. Amelia's work focuses on healing from racial trauma and gender-based violence. Amelia specializes in trauma conscious facilitation and trauma-informed classroom pedagogies through their role as a senior lecturer at the Columbia University School of Social Work. Amelia's clinical and teaching practices engage healing generational trauma through use of feminist psychotherapy EMDR and their training in the trauma conscious yoga method. In 2019, Amelia was named by Negocios now as one of the New York City's 40 Latinos under 40 for their trauma therapy work within LGBTQ Q2 s Latinx community. They will graduate in May, 2024 with a doctorate in social welfare from SUNY Buffalo. Congratulations. For the last three years, Amelia has worked on creating a culturally tailored community-based group model for healing internalized racial oppression from multiracial adults. They, they're excited to share this liberation centered healing work with the larger community, and I am so excited to connect with you again and hear about the amazing work you've been doing lately.

Speaker 3: Thanks. Thanks for having me. It's good to be here to talk about it.

Speaker 2: Yeah. Yeah, totally. Thank you. Our paths cost many years ago at anti-racist pedagogy across the curriculum workshop that you did. My university, St. Cloud State does this amazing rpac workshop that I'll put in the show notes, and that's where I first encountered your awesome work and then have been following you since then. So I'm excited to talk.

Speaker 3: I'm following you. Yeah,

Speaker 2: Fascinating. It's just so inspiring to see other people bringing together interesting fields and modalities to support racial justice and social justice work in different communities. And so one of the things we were talking about just before we started this recording was really starting with the question about leadership and how you're thinking about leadership these days and the work that you're doing and the communities you work with and in

Speaker 3: For. Yeah, it's a great question. And this work that I've been doing for three years to develop a community-based group model for healing, it's really called upon me to think about my own value system in both as a researcher, as an academic, as a practitioner, as a person who was raised working class, and what it looks like to decide you're going to

take a lead on a new idea for me has meant really getting clear about what my values are and I'm realizing how much in this moment, coming out of these last four years, where as a psychotherapist, our work is already very private, it's confidential. There's a really, I think, spiritual and very protected sense that I maintain around the work and what it has meant during covid. The years of covid where we're all really on a lockdown has meant that how we lead got even it shifted even more.

Speaker 3: And so I've ended up serving, I would say, and supporting a lot more clients who do really public leadership work. And I've been thinking about how therapists have survived as well in parallel alongside with clients, both through the pandemic and also through massive losses in our families, in our communities. So I think right now leadership has meant sort of being with myself in quieter moments and asking what are my values and where do I want to show up? How do I want to show up? And in the one-to-one sessions really noticing how much people who are in the public spotlight are desperate for spaces where they can be told it's okay to take a step back or it's okay to take a pause. It's okay to notice that we have a huge ecology of change here. And so maybe your role in that ecology might be changing.

Speaker 3: So I think leadership right now is also something that's really, it can be iterative, it can be starting to lead a conversation in a different way with a client and realizing that that's about suddenly noticing that you want to be more involved in a different way with maybe the same social justice movement that your client is a part of. And I also think leadership right now really needs to be trauma informed. And so I think that's where, in thinking of the intersectionality here as a trauma therapist, I do think a lot about leadership because we have so many examples right now of how leaders may be really reinstating cycles of trauma and engaging with communities from a place of power with not the most information about what a trauma reenactment is. And so I do hear quite a bit about trauma reenactments in the social justice movements of 2020 through 2024. There's been a lot of reenactments in our communities. So that's the other part about leadership right now is really wanting to be clear about how do we access trauma-informed methods of teaching, leading, speaking, being with each other.

Speaker 2: So many rich things. I want to go, I want to go so many different ways. So intriguing. So let's start with what you started with and then I definitely want to talk about traumatic born leadership. So a couple of things that resonated with me. You talked about really rooting in your values and leadership being iterative. So first of all, do you have practices that you like to go to discern what your values are and how they live and flow through you in ways that shape how you show up?

Speaker 3: Yeah. I do have a regular practice. Every week I meet with someone and we talk about basically how to observe when I feel like my body is not in alignment with maybe the context of my life. So how do I know what are some of the somatic symptoms I would call them of being not in alignment? And a healer I worked with a while ago said to me, you will know when you are in alignment, when you feel like you are living a joy beam. And I thought, oh my gosh, that's exactly right. When I can tell that how I feel somatically is really seeded in a place of centeredness and not sort of feeling like I'm

confused or foggy. And I think meeting with this person regularly, being able to talk about where did I feel I compromised my values, really reflecting once a year around new, I always do a sort of, it's not a vision board, but it's really like what do I want to see possible for myself?

Speaker 3: And a lot of that is about values. How do I know what my values are? Who am I in alignment with socially? Am I doing things every day that actually are compromising my values? And I think there's all of us compromise our values daily. We have to live under ci hetero white patriarchy. It's inevitable that we are, and I think what I mean is I'm really looking at my practices as a therapist, how I run the business. It is a business. So starting to get a lot clearer and more vocal about how I've decided to keep the practice small, what my fee ecology is, how I situate myself in capitalism really is starting to matter to me. And then from there, really thinking about centering value based living with clients. And that is actually at the core of this project I've been working on for three years.

Speaker 3: It is a mindfulness and value-based living project that asks us to say where we feel really like we are most oppressed. How can we get clear about our values and take committed action from there? And that looks different for everybody, but for me, it's looked like being really more clear in the last few years about a business model for therapy in a swiftly changing healthcare system that clearly does not center equity and the barriers to mental healthcare have just grown tenfold in the last three years. So for me, those practices are looking at capitalism and my place was in it and then also asking my body to tell me, am I well, am I not well? How do I know?

Speaker 2: That seems so important in terms of using your values to inform your business, your model, how you work, bringing that analysis in and recognizing that it's something that I really thought about a lot because financial accessibility is super important to me. I don't want to support capitalism, and yet we also need to make a living. And so that living those contradictions while being as informed by my value system as possible. Can you share a little bit about the project that you've been doing and what you've been finding?

Speaker 3: Yeah, I would love to. Yay. Yeah. So this work is really at the intersection of doing a lot of facilitation work for the last 20 years for different racial equity projects. But really the leadership has been within what we call racial affinity spaces. So bringing people together with a shared identity. So typically we saw that in the early aughts, it looked like a white affinity group and a bipoc affinity group would get together separately to talk about whatever the community's dilemmas were around racial justice, racial equity oppression. And I noticed as a mixed person early on, how complicated it felt to make a decision about what space to join. And through my clinical practice, I work with a lot of multiracial folks. So I started realizing and thinking about the lack of accessibility actually of mixed race spaces for mixed race folks to get together and had the really beautiful opportunity here in California for about four years of leading some multiracial affinity spaces at some different nonprofits.

Speaker 3: So all that to say, this project for three years has been developing a culturally tailored, so really culturally adapted model of a modality of treatment, which is called acceptance

and commitment therapy. And that's a mindfulness based treatment method, and it has historically really only centered white participants. So majority of the research really shows that this has only been piloted or used with white participants. And so I thought, well, this is interesting. We have a huge gap in literature, even documenting healing. As a bipoc practitioner, I can turn and find hundreds of articles on the harms and the psychological and the physiological harms of racism on the body and the mind, but it's really actually pretty difficult to Google or go into any databases and say, what are some healing modalities? If I was a therapist suddenly working with a bunch of different mixed race folks, how would I know what some best practices are?

Speaker 3: And it turns out there really hasn't been work done in this area. I did a series of interviews with very well-respected, known leaders of racial justice work for mixed people. And they all said individually across the country, oh, I don't really have anything. There's never been a model or a manual or even a best practice I've come across. So I've spent these years developing this new model, and then I was able to pilot it. It was really exciting. I piloted it this year, and what I was really interested in was looking at belonging. So social isolation during Covid also has been, these pandemic years have left many of us more isolated than we ever thought we would be. And on top of that, in a monoracial society, multiracial folks are very much historically have been considered illegal, essentially like under anti miscegenation laws, the most recent, which was repealed in 2000 in Alabama,

Speaker 2: That is not that long ago.

Speaker 3: No rendered multiracial families, essentially unseen by the law, and also really left outside an idea of a monoracial category. So the byproduct of mixed parenting often or mixed children. And we see that mixed kids throughout the last three generations have been sort of left without a lot of language or support to understand who am I? Can I belong? And so in racial justice spaces, when we don't even create this third space, we're really reifying this idea that you have to choose and that there's a binary. And so this project has really centered a primary research question, which is after coming through a group model, really doing this in community, do we see multiracial adults report a greater sense of self or a greater sense of belonging to community? And because I worked mostly with therapists, do we also see any correlation with increased capacity to show up for racial justice movements?

Speaker 3: Which was kind of the other primary path that led here, which was are we losing a lot of mixed race folks in bigger conversations or more public leadership around racism? And are we doing that because we don't actually know if we can show up there? By and large, my needs assessment said yes. People said, oh, absolutely. If I knew that I could belong, I would show up. So this is to answer your question about leadership, I think it's also about leadership is about starting with the self, and it's about saying, what are the wounds within me that I might need to heal? How might I need to grapple with my own transgenerational traumas to be able to say, I know who I am, I know what my values are, I can show up here in a way that has integrity in a way that feels right for me and actually have a voice in racial justice work.

Speaker 3: So that's really what led to the project. And the project itself was a four week long group. And I did find, and it's exciting, I did find that two of the primary areas of belonging there was significance. So when I ran the data, there was, so I found that there was a statistically significant decrease in the core belief that folks had of, because I'm multiracial, I do not have a strong sense of who I am. So folks came in reporting higher rates of not knowing who they were and leaving with a stronger sense of self, and also a decrease in this idea of I feel the need to prove my racial identity to others. So coming in folks feeling like I have to prove who I am to be long or to have a voice and to lead and leaving with, oh, I actually don't need to prove that as much. So I think those were really exciting results. And it's promising and it's a pilot, but it's promising.

Speaker 2: Yeah, that's very promising. And both in terms of filling the need and the support that it sounds like your model can offer to support people's more empowering and somatically rooted and healing voice, which movements need communities need. Just that I understand the pilot group that you did, was it for therapists? Yes. Or for clients?

Speaker 3: Yeah, so it is for therapists, and I think, again, to come back to the initial question, which seems like the central path here, this has a lot to do with leadership because I do think that therapists are leading often behind the scenes around racial trauma healing. We're the ones sitting in the room and hearing the narratives and working collaboratively to try to move toward healing. And one of the bigger questions that's come out of the work is what do mixed therapists need to be able to have a stronger and creative use of self in that work? And also to decide to take on racial trauma work. So I think that centering therapists as the recipients of healing is actually something that we may need to see more of in the field if we want to sustain the work. And I haven't looked at that data yet, but I'm actually really curious to see if there's a correlation there.

Speaker 3: I know that these therapists came in and many of the participants said, I've never had a space like this where I had other mixed folks to talk to. And I think it's really liberatory to look around a room and say, none of our stories are the same, but we know there's some threads in here where we're going to find those. And one of the primary topics of this group is telling our stories and finding each other. And that was reported in the focus group to be some of the more impactful components of the work. Just being able to say who you are and tell those stories really shifted people's capacity to imagine doing this in other places.

Speaker 2: Yeah. Oh, that sounds so beautiful. Yeah, when you were talking, I was thinking it was reminding me of a training I did a while back with track for movements where they talked about frontline responders to major social crises or even activist spaces that are responding to major social crises. What kind of support then do they need? And then what kind of support do those people need? So it's layers of support and therapists, they might be on the front lines dealing with the immediate crisis, or they might be supporting the people who are on the front lines or supporting the people who are supporting the people. And yet we need all of that. And it is all leadership, or I think about leading as a process and as a community, and that we all play different roles

Speaker 2: And that all of our stories are needed as well as a reflection of the current power dynamics between those stories and how we might hold each other's stories differently In this world we want to co-create. And so one of the things that really made my heart sing as you were talking is that it's important to be able to understand the impacts of racial trauma and racial oppression or any other forms of oppression, but we don't have to stay in that narrative. We also need the healing journeys. That's right. That's right. That don't erase the oppression and the impacts, but that also suggests there are other ways. There are ways we can hear we're not stuck in the harm. That's

Speaker 3: Right. And I want to just really bring the names into this space. Dr. Kira Banks and Dr. Jennifer Payne are two black women who've piloted community-based act interventions, specifically with black community as black providers to see if act had any impact on internalized racial oppression within the black community that they were serving. And both did find that both of these studies really are the foundation from which I was able to launch this project. And I think that it speaks to the need both for more documented healing projects, but also the reality is that a lot of the institutions who would probably back that research haven't historically. We know that's because of the structures within those institutions. And so there's actually, there is a real gap in how we document healing. And for this work, I've had to be really careful because I really want to honor that it's been a part of an academic project, but actually this really is a bias for us project, and it's really meant to go back to the very people who it will impact the most, which is other therapists who are looking for their own spaces to lead.

Speaker 3: Actually the idea behind the project is people who come through it will then be given the manual and they can culturally adapt it further in their own communities. So this idea of really allowing it to snowball out and become what it needs to be to serve the most immediate need, and I do want to bring those other names into the space because when I was looking for models, those were the only two models I could find. So there is not a lot written about how do we move toward compassion for self? How do we move toward figuring out, I don't know that the structures around us are going to change dramatically. And so how do we cope differently? We don't change the need to be in response or we don't minimize the fact that the harm is happening, but we can get clearer about who we are and how we want to respond to that.

Speaker 3: So what we saw in both of those other studies was moving Dr. Jennifer Payne talks about living life like it's golden. So moving away from being in a fog to really living life like it's golden, even under oppression, how do we continue to feed and produce joy? And the language that I used in this model was claiming our inherited wisdom and taking action with integrity. So how do we claim our inherited wisdom when we've been told for generations that mixed families shouldn't exist or that you don't really have a place to belong? There is no space. You have to choose under monoracial society, some of the greatest harms are what we call forced choice dilemmas. So early in childhood, children being told you are going to be forced to choose. And that we see correlates with a lot of other later in life mental health outcomes like isolation, lack of belonging, a lower sense of self and self-confidence actually, which I thought was really interesting. And so what would it mean actually to say, yeah, you have a lot of inherited wisdom from whatever

multiple backgrounds you carry in you, and you have the right to tap into that to lead you forward.

Speaker 2: And in fact, coming out of emergent strategy, regenerative and other models that I find really inspiring for this current world, we need that wisdom and creativity that can come from reconnecting if we're going to create a more liberatory world. Otherwise we keep recreating the same systems with maybe different people in charge.

Speaker 3: That's right. That's right. Yeah. And there's been some work that's looked at actually leader, I could send it to you later, but leadership of when nonprofits included multiracial folks as leaders in their local political movement work, they found that there were more successes on campaigns. And it speaks to what happens when you bring somebody in the room who has inherently been required to hold nuance in their body, in their identity, and in their presence. What happens is you, and it's similar to I think what one of your other guests was speaking to around queerness in leadership.

Speaker 2: Yes. Dr. Joel Davis Brown. I was just thinking that too. Yeah.

Speaker 3: There's a huge overlap with queerness and this work and with non-binary community. So these places where there's a betwixt between this kind of living in the middle, holding the both, and there's just so much generative and new and creative ways to think about problem solving when multiracial people get together too. And so I think it's all a part of this bigger project of what would happen if we accessed our full inherited wisdom and we didn't think we had to choose just a piece to appease others. And what if then we all to get clear about, well, what are my values around this for folks like myself that have light-skinned privilege? How can I own that and also not erase a very huge part of who I am, which is having Mexican heritage and feeling really connected to that culture? How can those two things exist at once?

Speaker 3: And that's kind of been the project for a lot of folks involved in this group was like, what are the parts of me that I've maybe cut off in the interest of making other people more comfortable? And how might I reclaim that, figure out my values, and then take some action with integrity for myself? And that action doesn't have to be leading a massive movement, but it might be taking action to talk to a family member to say, Hey, that thing you said to me the other day really made me feel not so wonderful about myself. Could we try using this language instead? It might start with those really the relational components of healing too.

Speaker 2: Yeah. You've just mentioned several things that I'm fitting into This is what healing could look like. Like you said, claiming our inherited wisdom. You mentioned living every day, like it's golden. Yeah.

Speaker 3: Yeah.

Speaker 2: You mentioned something else that I think I couldn't write fast enough to catch because for so many good things you're saying, I'm wondering what does healing look like in this

model or feel like or open up possibilities? What does healing even mean in that? Because I'm not sure that the current healthcare system necessarily, and I should be careful, my wife works for the healthcare system, but I'm not sure that more traditional models appealing is what we're talking about here. But I couldn't be wrong. I'm curious if you want to speak a little more to that.

Speaker 3: Yeah, no, I think that's a great question. Because this project is happening in a context of western education, which I've been very vocal about in the program. It's also taking place in a moment in western healthcare that is collapsing. We see it not working for the majority of people. And I think that this model is community-based for a reason. It means that everyone who shows up has something to offer in terms of wisdom. And much like a lot of group models, we create sort of a pseudo family. So if the original wounds that we're seeking to heal, often they're coming from a group. The first group we experience is family generally, however that family is, it may be a community-based family, it might be our school family, but generally we are raised in a group. And that group often is the first place that the harms come in.

Speaker 3: People do their best, but often for mixed race folks, the elders around them didn't have the language or the tools to support a healthy development or real sense of integrated self. So in this model, this idea of integration, really allowing all your parts talk about braiding the self, getting to braid these parts of ourselves together to say we don't have to leave any strands behind can be a huge relief. And this idea of moving toward wholeness, saying mixed people are talked about in percentages, which has also been a tool of colonization and a tool of oppression to the one drop rule. And we have lots of legal evidence of how we've told people they are aren't valid in their personhood. And so a lot of mixed people are used to being told, well, I'm half this or I'm half that. And so what if we leave out these western concepts of quantifying the self and we actually just look at what are the parts of me that need to be held?

Speaker 3: What are the parts of me? They're not bigger or smaller, more or less. They're just actually all there in the room. I've noticed and sensed in a lot of these group spaces just like a relief, oh, I don't have to pretend that I'm not something anymore here. And so I think healing I could read brought some of the inherited wisdom that members shared because I told the group, I said, anytime that we talk about this work, I want to bring as many people with me. And I think that speaks to the piece about what does healing look like in this current medical industrial complex where everything is so individualized. I think healing looks like we bring each other along. We don't do this alone. I bring a lot of people with me. I actually had a psychic healer once I was doing a reading say to me, it's very loud in the room with you.

Speaker 3: And I laughed and I said, what do you mean? She's like, there are a lot of people with you right now. And it, so it felt really a relief for me to hear that because I sometimes feel that way. I unapologetically bring people with me. I'm always that person that's like, there's a dinner party, can I bring these four people? Or it's got me into trouble in the past, but I always want to include, I have a real value around inclusivity that everyone should be able to walk through the door, whether that's a social event or it's in a

academic research setting where I'm like, I'm doing this alone, but I'm not. I'm bringing people with me. And I think for me, that's been healing. It hasn't been structurally recognized in these academic programs, but I think a lot of bipoc researchers, a lot of us doing decolonizing work are bringing our communities with us.

Speaker 3: We're saying, how can I bring you into the room? So healing for this group, some of the things that people left the group saying as their statement, their new statement of value or wisdom, somebody said, sometimes things need to break. Sometimes we need to actually have the crack to let the light in, or sometimes we need to really let something break in ourselves to grieve it, to know that we can put it back together. I think that was really, it's very beautiful thinking about that moment and that someone said, being in this liminal space of a mixed body can be both beautiful and opening, but it's also isolating and destabilizing. So really acknowledging that while maybe they've only ever talked about mixedness as beautiful and expansive, that actually it has also been painful and that they had a space finally to say that somebody said not being afraid to disrupt harmony, for example, correcting someone regarding their assumptions about who I am was a big piece for them.

Speaker 3: And someone else said connection, embracing the expansiveness of being mixed and also welcoming new opportunities for myself to define what that means. So again, moving outside of maybe a previous understanding of themselves. So I think that in any healing space, if we give people the opportunity to just listen deeply within, take some of these mindfulness approaches, and we use a lot of cognitive diffusion in this model because it is an act model, which very simply means hearing a negative thought come through or noticing a core belief that you've held that's not in the service of your own liberation. And learning some mindful strategies of actually getting distance from it and approaching that thought from a wise, compassionate, witnessing stance almost to say, Hey, thought that's not me. That's actually just another thought. Passing through and the power of letting go was really remarkable in this group as well. Again, I think for therapists, we're so used to holding for everybody else, we're used to holding a lot of space all day long, and we can do that skillfully and authentically and with so much love and compassion. But to think about therapists getting together and saying, this is actually for me, I get to offer those same healing components back to myself, I think was really radical here.

Speaker 2: I mean, why wouldn't our healers need healing? Both because we live in a world that is also acts on us. It's not just clients who are impacted by the world that we live in. And then you're holding space for people, which is a big gift, but also a responsibility. And so why wouldn't that be the case? And yet, I love some of the ways you're talking about some of this, and I wonder, you mentioned that a lot of the work on the model focused on predominantly white participants. If I'm remembering correctly. Were there things that you found really helpful to adapt to or transform to the model that you're using?

Speaker 3: Yes. Great question. Yeah, I do want to mention actual a data point here because I think for me, when I found it, it felt like the light was finally coming in. I had worked for so long looking for two years doing this lit review and finding nothing and being told, well just

keep looking. And I kept saying, I am really trying to explain that under white supremacy, this work doesn't exist. It hasn't been supported, it hasn't been funded. It exists in our communities, but I really want, and I really want to dedicate this work back to the clients and community that I serve, and I can't find a mirror for that. And I finally found in 2022, a group of researchers reviewed 12,000 publications. And they specifically, these are mindfulness studies, 12,000 mindfulness studies, and they had three criteria in their review. They were looking to see how inclusive or racially inclusive are these studies.

Speaker 3: They said, look, we will count studies that have 75% representation of bipoc community in the sample. We'll also count any kind of mindfulness study that offered a culturally tailored intervention. So they included something that used the language of the community or representation of the community, or the study maybe did a comparison of effectiveness between let's say a bipoc group and a white group. And in those 12,000 publications, which represent the majority of what's currently published, they found 12 that fit that criteria. So their study kind of became another foundation stone here of it's 0.02% of all these mindfulness studies were inclusive. And so I actually, I think what's great about that is it gave me a lot of room to be really playful and to also go to the community and say, what language is being used? How do you talk about healing? When you run your racial affinity groups, what have you found to be the most impactful?

Speaker 3: And so the language that I used to tailor this came from a lot of interviews and reading what mixed folks in my own networks are doing, how we're talking about the work and what we're doing. So what I found the most helpful, I think, was going again, back to other people and saying, help me think about how we could make this represent us. And one of the keys to that was really leaving language pretty open. So really expansive, like contact with each other. Just being in a room with each other is actually really revolutionary for a lot of folks. Representation matters, telling our truths, finding connections in our stories that these become the psychologically flexible places where we can say, oh, wait, maybe it's not just me. Maybe I have a new idea here about the fact that I might've thought it was just me in this experience, but suddenly I'm realizing it's not.

Speaker 3: So I think that what's been most useful is actually allowing there to be room to try this out and to not feel like as a lifelong learner, I mean, all of this is just the beginning of something bigger and not feeling like I have to participate in this idea of getting it right and those kinds of rigidities that white supremacy culture makes a claim to. So when you look at very traditional research on act, it is very exacting. It's like, this is the way to do it. And I thought, well, let's make it really open. Let's use a lot of open interpretive language that participants can find themselves in instead of feeling like they have to be fit to the model.

Speaker 2: What I'm loving, besides being really inspired and can't wait to learn more about this work, what I'm loving is how much I see your values, at least what I know about you and what you've said here and how you're doing the research, how you're conceptualizing, how you're serving your community, how you're putting your research out there. And that from the feminist social justice work that I've been rooted in, process matters. How

you get there matters. And when you lead, act, relate, be B from those values that you're talking about, it manifests differently than in the current systems. And I see you enacting that at every layer that you can. Even while within an exacting systems, PhDs are exacting and there are certain performance metrics and healthcare systems have. So it even speaks back to what you were talking about healing in the now, even within the systems. That's right. To the degree that we can, where's the wiggle room? And as we do that, I imagine I just got this visual of communities, people, hearts taking their light, expanding so much that the systems crack or break apart because it can't hold that liberatory vision anymore. Yeah,

Speaker 3: That's interesting. That vision. That's one of the grounding of mindful visualizations that I facilitated was imagining the light in your center and that arc of light touching down with people who couldn't be in the room, both present and past, and actually trying to feel that light energy come into the room. And so from the very beginning, bringing folks together and saying, you don't come alone either. We all are bringing so many people with us. So I love that image you've just described, essentially how I've been seeing this. And we started the group that way to say, who are we bringing with us? And who needs to be here for this? Because we haven't ever had this before for the folks who participated in the pilot. It had not happened before in this way. And so I loved knowing that it was new for me, that it was healing for me, and that I got to also be honest about that and say, this is a part of my healing journey to dedicate these years to this kind of work and to feel transformed by it too. I'm not this researcher up in a high tower looking down and saying, let me study my people, but really actually think we're all here together as peers, and we're doing this collaboratively. Yeah,

Speaker 2: Decolonizing research.

Speaker 3: That's right.

Speaker 2: Yes. I want to make sure we have time to go back to what you were talking about in terms of trauma-informed leadership, if that Yeah. Great. Seems like it would be Okay,

Speaker 3: This is how we first met, I think, you and I. Yes.

Speaker 2: So what does that mean? What does that look like? Why does leadership have to be trauma informed, particularly in terms of social justice contexts?

Speaker 3: Yeah, I mean, I was looking at the book you recently published and thinking about this institute that I also founded an institute a few years ago called the Trauma Conscious Practice Institute. And really what we do is we train folks who are facilitating or leading in group spaces how to be trauma conscious in those rooms. And that is really based in somatics, which I think you'll appreciate, which is that when we're in a group, again, groups being pseudo families, groups being, we're wired for groups, we're social animals. So we find ourselves in groups a lot. And what happens in a group is we can very quickly take on and start to reenact very familiar roles that we were raised with. And those, oh,

Speaker 2: I never do that, Amelia. I

Speaker 3: Don't either. I mean, come on. Never My 16-year-old burn it all down. Self doesn't show up ever. Burn it all down. Let's just get over with it. Right? Yeah. I mean, this is real and lived and very wired. So I've been in so many spaces, especially I'm in my mid forties and I started this work in my twenties, and so I'm looking back going, oh my gosh, even these bootcamp models that we used to be a part of or I used to lead, and where you're going to have everyone just really go for the hardest stuff. I mean, there's just too much neuroscience now. And as an EMDR provider, most of what I do is considered adaptive integrative work where we're working on how can we integrate these memories and experiences and produce something that's what we'd call healed, or maybe it's a new story from an old story.

Speaker 3: And I think when we lead in groups, we have an opportunity to create a new story about what being in a group is. And when we are not trauma conscious, we run a very high risk of asking everyone in that room to just stay in their reenactments. So the kid who gets really quiet, the person who has to fix the person who's going to be the performer, everyone in mixed spaces tends to be pretty nervous about belonging. So I think the tenets of this work for me has been about leading with the understanding that most adults are pretty insecure in a group and wondering, who here is going to tell me I don't fit in or I don't belong? So if we can come in knowing that we can come in with compassion, we can come in with an attunement, we can be watching. So I think that we need to be trauma informed or trauma conscious because we also need to get a little bit better at reading somatics.

Speaker 3: What are some of the signs in a group that the group is shutting down or that the group is really activated? What does that mean then for how our thinking brain can take in new information If we want someone to learn something new and feel really connected to it, we have to create an environment where that can happen. And I do see in education, especially higher ed, we're getting a lot more training and a lot more information on what is a trauma conscious pedagogy or what is an anti-oppressive pedagogy that includes acknowledgement of generational trauma, but outside academic settings, I think we're starting to catch up in the last couple of years. Again, you're talking about emergent strategies, and there's been a lot of beautiful work coming out that's looking at how do we take care of each other? How does community care really need to lead what we're doing together if we want to see greater change? So I mean, being aware of intergenerational trauma and also these trauma reenactments is becoming more and more important.

Speaker 2: You mentioned, I can't find them in my notes right now, but you mentioned something about even in social justice work right now, there can be trauma reenactments and how we lead, and that this kind of work you're doing, and it makes sense, the issues are urgent. We all bring our patterns. That's right. We're up against intractable systems that only recognize certain performances as leadership. That's, and we need, in some ways, we have to balance how to work within the system enough to get some gains with pushing against the system pretty radically, because the system itself isn't going to lead

to liberation in their current form. So how would we do really anything else? It makes sense that it would be there, but then how do we lead differently?

Speaker 3: Right?

Speaker 2: Yeah. Any answers? Yeah.

Speaker 3: Well, and I think there's a lot of beautiful examples, at least in the queer and trans community. I think we are getting it right. Our bodies are the thing that's often being argued about. So there's an embodied understanding of what it means to be the subject of violence. And I also think there's a new and really gorgeous complex narrative in a lot of leadership within the queer community about what does it mean to heal together? And that starts with learning about somatics and neuroscience. I am seeing a lot more community leaders learning about the vagus nerve and what's happening when we're out of our window of tolerance. What does it mean that I'm with a coworker who's activated and in a hyperactivated state and they can't stay safe and need to actually be the eyes and ears for both of us because they're really activated and they've disassociated this kind of language.

Speaker 3: We're seeing a lot more used around movement making. But I do think the way forward, at least for the little pockets of the world that I exist in, it is about being more honest about our own vulnerabilities too. I have found myself being a lot more comfortable in the last few years talking about where I feel really vulnerable in my work, where I feel a lack of confidence in talking about it. It opens up space for other people to say, oh, well, actually I'm feeling the same way. And we start to realize that might be a part of what's holding back a certain kind of leadership that we all want to take. And so I do think when we create environments that are expansive, we leave room for people to be more honest about all their parts. And in doing that, we might see some transformation in how we lead with an understanding of trauma in the room that we don't have to perform okayness as much right now. And I think that's also shifted during the pandemic. So being a little bit messy is okay.

Speaker 2: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, how can we be otherwise? And also, some serious beauty can come out of messiness. Yes, yes. Sometimes things have to get messy before they get Yes. Non messy again,

Speaker 3: Or as this participant said, sometimes things have to break.

Speaker 2: Yes. Sometimes things have to break. They do.

Speaker 3: Yeah. So I don't know that I have a perfectly articulate, brilliant, deep, perfect answer, but I do think the more that question gets asked, I think it's a great question just to keep asking as many people as we can. I think the fabric we weave of everyone's responses becomes the answer.

Speaker 2: Well, yeah. And I mean, for years as a general women's studies professor, I have always assumed trauma is in the room because it always is, whether we're talking sexual assault or relationship violence or class economic violence or racial violence. And then of course, the world has presented a lot of examples in recent years, whether it's the current violence in Gaza, whether it's the war in Ukraine or the violence in Congo, or whether it's the collective trauma of the pandemic. It is in our space. And I think more people than used to are recognizing that. And I mean, I think we have, for me, it's a kind of moving target because I think our states of being adapt as the world changes. And so what trauma looks now might be different than what it will look like in 10 years or what it looked like 10 years ago, or how we meet it as we develop capacities to work with them more, and we work across commonalities and differences in our communities, what it looks like and means to be trauma-informed will change. That's right. And that's a good thing. It'll emerge. It's will become more complicated. That's

Speaker 2: Nuanced, I guess.

Speaker 3: Yes. And as our understanding also of how trauma reverberates, and I think again, to center clinicians in my work feels like the next, for me, it's the next iteration of my sort of dedication to the field is just going to be around providing to providers, because I do think the moral injury, the secondary traumas, there are real components here that we haven't been able to attend to because we were tending to more very frontline issues for the last three years. But I do think this is a moment for healers as more healers are stepping forward, there's sort of this cosmic shift happening, more people stepping into healing work, wanting to figure out what their contribution is going to be. I just think that really noticing that healers deserve spaces too, is going to become a part of the bigger dialogue. So that's kind of my hope in this next five years that that's where I start to shift my mind and feel like I have a lot more spaciousness to contribute to. So

Speaker 2: Yeah, after you finish your PhD in 2024, which is so soon,

Speaker 3: It's DSW in May. Yeah, I'll be done in May. Yeah.

Speaker 2: DSW.

Speaker 3: Wow. Yeah. I know. It's going to be great. Yeah. Yeah.

Speaker 2: So where can people find your work? I imagine a lot of people want to learn more and

Speaker 3: Yeah. Yeah. I'll have a website linked to my practice website where folks can participate. I'll be running community-based act groups for multiracial adults, healing groups starting in the fall of 2024, so you can sign up to participate in that. I'll be presenting at a lot of conferences for therapists, encouraging culturally adapted models within the ACT movement. And also, you can find me on Instagram at Feminist Psychotherapy and on my website, I always update there, and you can sign up for a newsletter. So I am online, but mostly you will find me when I'm not at work in the Woods birdwatching and

- Speaker 2: Playing with my dog with the most adorable puppy.
- Speaker 3: Yes. Playing with my dog, Buggy Pineapple. And one of my values is trying to have more balance. So really finding time to also not be found and to be in the quietude with birds and really kind of in spiritual practice again. So
- Speaker 2: Yeah. That sounds beautiful. And I'll put the links to your information in the show notes. I really,
- Speaker 3: Really appreciate your curiosity and the sharpness of the questions. They're good questions for this moment right now. Yeah.
- Speaker 2: Well, and your research is so needed in this moment, and just your presence, your being, and your approach. Thank you. I feel really life full right now. And full disclosure, I was nervous before talking to you. I always am before the podcast, but yeah, and of course, afterwards I feel like so full of possibility, and yes, we can make this co-created better world. So thank you for bringing that to the table.
- Speaker 3: The feeling is shared, and I love that we also have that sort of kismet moment of the vision of the light, so I appreciate that. Yeah, I'll take that with me.
- Speaker 2: Absolutely. Just usually I end with asking my guests what gives them hope, and so I'll ask you that in a moment as our closing. But for me, one of the things that gives me hope is that I just like that kismet moment where the universe just creates this alignment. I feel like when our healers can access their wholeness, what kind of support does that allow for everybody else that they're working with to access their wholeness, and what can this world look like when we're living from our wholeness? That's right. Wow. So much more becomes possible. Yeah,
- Speaker 3: That's right. Yeah. Yeah.
- Speaker 2: So what gives you hope?
- Speaker 3: That's a big one. I know. I mean, the real answer is there are two things that I've been writing and sort of reflecting on. I mean, one is definitely gender queer and trans kids. Whenever I'm around a gender expansive child, I usually end up crying within that 24 hours. But I also just feel absolute completion, like the things that I experienced as a child, the ways in which I experienced some pretty unfortunate events of the nineties as a teen, they feel further away. There's something that's so hopeful about looking at a seven or 8-year-old who's just so completely unapologetically themselves. That gives me a lot of hope and migration. I'm an avid bird watcher. My life is really committed to birds and outside of humans, and there is something so incredible every year about how migration just continues despite all the things we could name that are not going well for our climate, migration continues. And I think that gives me hope around movement cycles and something about noticing, looking up. And when you see a huge flock of birds go by going, oh my gosh, they're in a group and they're moving in the same direction and

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they're doing it and they're reading each other's body language or something that I deep about watching birds in groups that I love.

Speaker 2: So much possibility there. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today, Amelia.

Speaker 3: Yeah, thank you. This is beautiful.