

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 change, making connections for your monthly dose of inspiration and insight. Let's create a ripple of change together.

Speaker 2: Hello and welcome back to Change Making Connections. Today I am so excited to work with colleague Njeri Clement, who is the director of Cultural Fluency, equity and Inclusion at St. Cloud's Technical and Community College. She's also an adjunct faculty member at St. Cloud State University in the Department of Gender and Women's Studies. Njeri is a certified human rights consultants with the US Institute of Diplomacy and Human Rights, a recipient of the Martin Luther King Jr. Humanitarian Award, a Humphrey Public Policy Fellow, and a Harvard Business School's Young American Leader Program fellow Njeri's a scholar deeply committed to advancing gender leadership, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Her interdisciplinary research work explores these areas to promote transnational and equity change across all sectors of society. As a director, she leads programming, community building strategic planning, and shapes policy around equity and inclusion processes, particularly helping support and develop innovative programs that serve marginalized groups. I'm so excited to work with you and talk with you today. Njeri, nice to see you again.

Speaker 3: Thank you Dr. Berila, and thank you for having me today.

Speaker 2: Of course, of course. So tell me a little bit about the work you're currently doing, what you're excited about, and how that helps you think about leadership.

Speaker 3: Yeah, so as you have mentioned, I am currently the director of cultural Fluency, equity and Inclusion at Local Community Technical and Community College. And so part of my responsibility is to lead programming and also do equity and inclusion work here on campus. So advising our leadership on equity policies and so forth. One of our goals here at the center is to prepare our students to be global citizens. And so I lead programming in terms of inviting speakers to come and talk about different diverse social justice issues again so that our students can be exposed to what is happening across borders. I am also in my position, a liaison between the campus and community. And so creating that collaboration, a partnership with our community so that our students can be able to know who their future employers and also our community members to invest in students.

Speaker 3: Part of my work also, especially talking about women empowerment, is instilling leadership skills to young girls in high school and middle school. So we launched a new initiative this semester called Rising Stars, and this is an initiative that allows our high school and middle school girls to come and we have a session on leadership and then we expose them to the STEM fields, so science, technology, engineering, and math fields. And so that has been such a satisfying experience for me personally when I see these young girls who have never thought of doing welding because society has always shaped

us as women to go or focus more in the nurturing fields or social sciences fields. So that has been one of my highlights this semester is preparing these girls of what is possible in the community. Yeah,

Speaker 2: That's really exciting. I'm excited to hear that. I hadn't heard about that new initiative. That's fantastic.

Speaker 3: Yes, so we are graduating our first cohort in May. We have been having about 15 to 20 young girls come monthly and do a leadership session with me. What does leadership look like? And these are bipoc young girls. So also given my experiences as a woman, a black woman, an immigrant woman in a leadership position, what are my challenges? How do I view leadership and so forth. So it has just been an exciting time for me.

Speaker 2: Yeah, absolutely. And great role modeling. I know you inspire me every day, so I'm sure they must be really starstruck.

Speaker 3: Yeah. Well,

Speaker 2: Can you tell me a little bit about how you think about leadership and for the listeners, Jerry also teaches a leadership class for us, our general women's studies program at St. Cloud State, but she has been very influential in over the years. Thank you. So can you tell us a little bit about how you think about leadership?

Speaker 3: Yeah, that's a really good question. And I have been thinking lately about that question more so because I'm in the dissertation phase, I'm also doing my doctorate program in leadership studies. So I've been thinking about what is leadership? And behind me you cannot see it, but I have a picture of an African woman heading home where the background is kind of like an African sunset and she has a pot of water on her head. And for me, I will use the metaphor of a journey that leadership is a journey. And when I think about this woman, African woman, I recall fetching water, how women fetch water back at home, the path that they use is not a smooth path. It has rocks. They may find a flower beside the road or the footpath. There could be valleys, there could be hills. And so for me, I equate leadership as a journey that is full of good times and not so good times.

Speaker 3: There'll be challenging times, there'll be times where nothing is happening is like you're in the wilderness and then there'll be times where you find beautiful flowers along the way. And so that is what I think about leadership. I also think about resilience. That leadership is about resiliency, it's about ambition, it's about indigenous ways of knowing. And that is one of the concepts that I've been relying on recently. And this has come about through thinking about my grandmother because she was very instrumental in raising me up in my early years. And I remember at the end of the day we would sit by the fire and she would tell me these stories that were full of African outages and proverbs. And behind that story there was a meaning to it, there was wisdom to it, either a story about courage or a story about patience. And all these were attributes that are needed for leadership.

Speaker 3: And so I've been looking back at those stories and really now coming to realize, wow, grammar was instilling leadership skills and trait in me that I didn't know at the time. And so for me, I've been going back to those indigenous ways of knowing and using African adages to inform my leadership. So one of the things that I'm using currently, even in my speaking engagements and even in my research is using those adages. So I do have one that I would want to share if that is okay, if that is okay. Yes. And one of it says, and I'll translate here, and I wrote it down and this I even had a book written by Dr. Kamau Wango and he has written this book of Proverbs of the Kikuyu people because I come from the tribe of Kikuyu in Kenya, and one of the adages he says, is about a cow and a cow, the lead a cow.

Igũthua ndongoria itikinyagĩra nyeki.

Ndongoria nĩ ng'ombe ĩrĩa ĩtoongoragia iria ingĩ iroreete rūũru. Ng'ombe ĩno nĩyo ĩmenyaga tũcĩa twa rūũru na ĩngĩthua, ĩremwo nĩ gũthĩĩ kana ĩrũũgame, icio ingĩ nacio irũũgamaga ta yo, na ũgũo ikaaga gũkinyĩra harĩa nyeki ĩrĩ nduru.

When the lead cow limps along, igũthua ndongoria, the rest of the herd fails to reach the designated grazing place, itikinyagĩra nyeki.

When the lead cow is hampered by an injury, it limps and slows down the herd. Whenever it stops to nurse its leg, the whole procession comes to a standstill, and ultimately, the herd fails to reach the pasture.

This proverb is a commentary on leadership and seeks to enlighten people on the need to have strong leaders. In this case, a limping leader is undesirable because he or she will certainly not lead people to prosperity.

Speaker 3: When it limps then it means the rest of the herd does not reach the pasture. So when the lead cow limps along, the rest of the HUD fails to reach the designated grazing place. And so in my mother language, it says, so the lead cow that limbs hinders the rest of the herd to get to the grazing place. And so that is how I view leadership. We as leaders, if we limp, if we do not have a vision, if we do not communicate, if we do not empower followers, then we are not going to reach the grazing pastures or the green pastures. That is how I look at leadership. I also look at leadership as where there's always continuous growth and continuous learning. And that has been one of my focus areas is how can I continue to enrich myself to listen to other leaders who have gone before me?

Speaker 3: I do a lot of reading on diverse topics. I attend conferences and so I'm always looking for opportunity for professional growth. I'm also a believer of stories, narratives, and

especially women's stories. In fact, I call that I women's stories as alternative knowledge because that is their truth. And so for me, providing space for women to share their stories, to tell their stories, to help us understand, for example, what does leadership mean to them and how do they do leadership is enriching for me. And so as I learn this diverse ways of doing leadership, that informs me. I was talking to one of the African women immigrant leaders and she gave me a concept that I still remember today. And she said, for me, leadership is from within. What is leadership from within? And so as I was pondering that she was like, it means that leadership starts from the influences of our parents. And she talked about the mother and how mom created a stable environment, how mom told her to be disciplined. And I reflect back now with my grandmother and my mother and how their parenting and always supporting me has really shaped my leadership style today. So when I think about leadership, that is what comes to mind.

Speaker 2: Wow, that was so rich, Njeri. I think we could just spend the whole rest of the time unpacking. That was so rich. Thank you for that. Yeah. One of the things I've always admired about you is how you do go out there and explore professional development opportunities and find ways to make them happen and get support for them so that you can grow and learn and share that knowledge with others and the ways in which you also uplift other people's stories. I love that you answered this through story and just how, especially the stories of people who have been missing from sort of dominant frames of leadership and kind of who tends to get the platform and kind of expand it. Yes. I'm curious. I loved the adage and the way that you talked about it, and I'm wondering if we could explore the concept of the cow limping a little bit.

Speaker 2: What does that mean? You mentioned not having a vision. You also, I think in some of the work you teach, you also talk a little bit about the role about our ability and then you think about our stories and depending on people's lived experience, they might not feel like their story is received well or safe to tell it or valid based on what kind of knowledge is considered real knowledge. And yet often one of the feminist principles that we, I think both of us live by is the people most impacted by the issues are the ones who actually have the most expertise.

Speaker 3: Yes.

Speaker 2: So what's the relationship between limping and vulnerability or limping and risk taking or just how do you think about that? Well,

Speaker 3: For one, to be a good leader and an effective leader, there has to be that aspect of vulnerability because that is how you connect with those who are following you because it puts the humanity in you. You cannot always be perfect. And then vulnerability also allows diverse voices. You cannot always be the one having answers. It gives you, allows you to step back so that you hear what others' contribution into this matter that we are dealing with at the moment. One of motivational speakers I listened to said actually to be an effective leader, don't be the first one to speak during a meeting. Allow others to have that conversation and then be the last one to speak because the moment you

speaking, you being a leader, then you kind of shape the conversation to what really you are thinking. And so that is a form of vulnerability right there when you allow yourself to step back and hear about others' ideas and they may be better than the idea that you came with then.

Speaker 3: So for me, when I think about the cow in the adage coming from a tribe where we are farmers, this really hit home because we do a lot of farming and keeping cattle and keeping goats. And so a cow is a treasured animal in the Kikuyu tribe because it provides milk and it provides beef and so forth. So when it limps, that's a big disadvantage or it's a big blow to the owner of the how. And so they're treasured and taken care of because of the value that they bring to the family. And that's why I talked about indigenous knowledge because I can relate to farming because I grew up seeing my parents having cows and my grandma and people in the village having cows. And so I know when one doesn't have a cow or the cow dies or the cow is sick, that really has an effect not just on the farmer but even the family.

Speaker 3: And so that vulnerability kind of shows that it is okay not to know everything. It is okay at times to show your weak spots as a leader. And as you're showing your weak spots, you have created a space where your followers or your teammates know that you're not coming at this because you do not know, but you're creating this space for dialogue and you're creating space for diverse ideas. And so what I have seen in my team with my team members here is when I say I do not know, and when I empower them to say, you know what? I would want to hear your ideas that really makes them think. I work with student workers here at the center. And when I hired them, one of the first things I told them is that you are all directors at the multicultural center. So when you are coming with me with an issue, I want you to have thought about it. What would you do as a director? And so that later on in our one-on-one meetings, they gave me the feedback on, nobody ever told me that. Nobody ever told me that I am a director. And so for me, that vulnerability saying I also trust in you to make right decisions really is a form of empowerment, especially for these students. So that is how I would kind of relate vulnerability and the cow.

Speaker 2: I love that. Thank you for that. And it struck me as you were talking, and I've seen this in higher ed and in other spaces where people are trying to bring collaborative and feminist more inclusive leadership models, and they might do things like not speak right away. And that's intentional, right? There's a reason behind doing that, and it's because the model of leadership values other people's voices and values a kind of collective process to get to a decision. But traditional models of leadership often are like, what? You don't know. Why are you so quiet? How come you didn't speak first? How come? So-and-so who is a leader isn't speaking. And they see that sometimes as a weakness instead of as an intentional effort to build community, to get the investment of the people. Because if you just hand somebody a decision, they may or may not buy in. But if they're a part of shaping the decision, they have an investment. And as you said, it might be wiser because there's more input.

Speaker 3: Yes,

Speaker 2: You can address potential concerns or pushback in the process of making the decision instead of after the right. So I've seen some leaders be kind of undermined by a traditional model of leadership because people think they're not doing this. This is intentional, this is a vision of leadership, there's a reason I'm not speaking first, that sort of thing.

Speaker 3: Yes. And as feminist leaders, Dr. Berila, we are always talking about collaboration. We are always talking about community. We are always, as women, we always come together, how do you think about this? So it's never an individual decision, especially for people who come all view leadership through a feminist lens. And it's always about giving the person or the ground that voice because they know the issue better than you who is at a leadership position. And so I am very keen and also very intentional in creating those spaces. And for an individual to be quiet, it doesn't mean that they don't have something to say because we all have various forms of communication. There are those people who just speak one word, but it's one powerful word that makes you think twice. And so creating that space to know that everybody's voice is welcome and that we are not suppressing other voices really creates rich atmosphere here on campus. And even I believe in spaces where the idea of collaboration is key.

Speaker 2: So Director Clement, based on some of what you've been saying, I'm curious because you have experience in transnational context, you've done a lot of work with African immigrant women and your research and your community work. You've participated in a nonprofit around that. You've done the human rights certification. So what do you think systems, what do you think we need to get when it comes to applying some of these concepts to transnational feminist issues and concerns?

Speaker 3: I think we need to have a change of mindset and change of mindset is looking at the world that we live in today. We are in a global village and whatever happens in the US has ripple effects across borders and vice versa. And so we cannot be in a bubble anymore. I was reading a book 2030 that talks about the trends that will be coming, and the author is talking about that by 2030. He's talking about the mid-level economies and that is Africa and Asia will surpass the west. And so when I read, I was like, okay, so what are we going to do? Or what am I going to do? What are my students going to do to be able to be better prepared if the countries in Asia and Africa will be the rising economies? And I always challenge my students, you have so much knowledge, you have so much potential, and I don't want you to look at just the same cloud area or where you come from.

Speaker 3: I want you to be picking globally because that is a world that we are living in. So I would say changing of systems will require fast a change of mindset. It'll require hiring people who look like the communities that we serve. And so that is one of the key things we are doing here, especially on campus, is being intentional in who we are hiring. Do we have enough faculty members that look like our students? And I would say, for example, for me as an African immigrant woman, there are not many women in that leadership position that I can look up to as role models. And so at times it's very lonely at the top

when you do not have those role models who look like you. There are times I walk in spaces and I'm the only either person of color or even immigrant woman.

Speaker 3: And so that has been one of my intentions to really groom our students and prepare as students to start serving even though it's in small capacities in either committees or volunteering into the community so that they put themselves out there because we need them. There are future workforce, they are activists for tomorrow. And so it will require also supporting and encouraging and empowering our youth to step up. I was in a conference not so long ago in town and one session was high schoolers, and they have started a movement of bringing awareness in the ST Cloud area about FGM genital mutilation because they realize some of their friends are having this procedure done to them. And so these are youth who are talking about FGM in central Minnesota. I was so excited about it. So it is such shifting of thought of conversation of ideas that will need to be able to change systems and also bring the transnational care what is happening abroad. Why would a mother, for example, allow their daughter to go through such processes? There has to be a reason why. So also looking from that cultural lens, why is this so important for this mother to do this? And then having those dialogues, medical dialogues, what are the repercussions of having such procedures done and so forth?

Speaker 2: Thank you. And yeah, given that we live in such a global world also, I think it's a misconception that the global is only out there rather than interconnected with everything that we do.

Speaker 3: Yes. And we cannot live in that world anymore. I mean, when we open our social media, when you open turn on our tv, we are having news about what is happening globally. Even our local channels, they're still mentioning about diverse issues that are affecting all of us globally. So it's about time that we need to change and we need to change for the common good. We need to change to be able to shape this world to be a better place for our children and for the future generations.

Speaker 2: Absolutely. I just got chills, Njeri. Thank you.

Speaker 2: I was telling my students as we were wrapping up this semester, that part of what feminist social justice education does, and I think feminist leadership is a part of that, is that it teaches you a way of analyzing these complex issues from the perspectives of power differences, what the women and young girls who are going through that process, what their perspective is, and being able to understand, especially if you're not from a culture in which that is an issue, how is your own lens shaping how you're interpreting or deciding policy around certain things? And that ability to analyze the power dynamics and whose voices are included and who's not, what the community's most affected need. That is a skill that is not only transferable to so many different areas but needed in so many different areas because how we lead the values, we enact, how we shall, how we relate to our neighbors, how we vote, all of those things are shaping the world that we're in. So how do we help empower people to be more active agents and recognize that you can and you can be a leader even if you're not in a positional power,

Speaker 2: A position of power in an organization, you can still be a leader.

Speaker 3: Yes. And to your point, actually, one of the things other views I have about leadership is being a leader is also being a servant. And being a servant means you are serving others. You have put the interest of others before your own interest. And that is also vulnerable right there when you say, I have chosen to put your needs first before mine and I'm going to serve you. What are your needs? Can I help you? Can I support you? And so is I think people look at leadership as having maybe an executive office, a corner office, maybe a big title, but it's only maybe a fraction of the time that we really get to glamorize leadership or you get the limelight. But real leadership is the actual groundwork. It's the hard work, it's communicating, it's listening to people. It's trying to figure out where do we move next?

Speaker 3: How do we create sustainability? So it's a lot of that groundwork, hard work. And so when you talk about to your point about leadership, mothers were leaders, grandmothers leaders, leadership doesn't always have to mean that you need to have formal education, for example, to be a good leader, mothering and taking care of your home. That is leadership right there. And as we know, the home is the foundation of our nations, for example. So what women do every day, that is leadership. And that's why I'm passionate about bringing women stories to be had because I was looking at a research that is talking about the soft skills, what women do every day, that those are the skills that companies are actually looking for in hiring processes, those soft skills. So I'm excited. I'm excited about that. And I think being in this advocacy social justice world has really opened my eyes in terms of understanding the leadership from a very different perspective. And I count myself lucky to be able to have experienced leadership from Africa and now I mean the west, so I can be able to see both ends and Dr. Berila women everywhere have the same goal. I want the best for my children. I want to have an opportunity to be able to improve myself. I want to be able to have access to resources. So having this platform and being a voice for the voiceless ignites that fire in me to keep on going.

Speaker 2: Absolutely. And I've seen you keep going and do amazing things. You've just talked about how there are highs and lows in leadership and it can be really hard work to do social justice work. So what's a practice or something you fall back on that you've found particularly helpful in working for social justice, how you've probably faced some challenges, what have you drawn on to move through those

Speaker 3: Challenges? I do travel, and for me, traveling is a form of maintaining that balance for my wellbeing when I have made it a point to visit at least one year every year to visit a place that I've never been before. And it's that idea of just putting myself out there and going to places that will make me uncomfortable because that is how I learn. Last summer actually, I went up north to the Iron Range, and as I was there and talking to community members, they were like, oh, you need to go see the Greyhound Museum in Hibbing. And so I drove through that small town that has an exhibit of the old Greyhound buses since the 1940s. And so the lady at the reception was like, oh, where are you from? I'm

like, I'm from Africa. She's like, from Africa to Hibbing, what made you So we're somewhere on the map?

Speaker 3: I'm like, yeah, you're there on the map. And we really had good conversations. So that is one thing that I do. I also read, and I have different authors that I follow. I'm also keen in looking at President Obama's book list. So every summer he does share on his social media platform the books that he has read. And so I follow that to see what is he reading. That is how I rejuvenate myself. I do have mentors who might share tough situations and they have created that safe space for me to just vent. These are mentors who have been doing this work for a longer time. So those are the spaces that I can go and just be by myself. Recently I attended Faculty of Color women's conference, and that was so uplifting because it was a room full of women of color, and it was not the traditional way of conferences where it's very quiet and silent.

Speaker 3: I mean, somebody would hear who would scream amen to that, to the preacher, I mean to the speaker. And I'm like, I'm loving the spirit right here. And so it's exposing myself to such spaces that encourages me that I'm not the only one who is going through that. We are a lot of us who are sharing that. And so for example, in that conference we talked about diversity and being leaders as black women. And it's interesting because the same themes kind of kept cropping up. I'm going through this, I'm going through that. And the nice thing was we shared contacts. You're like, you know what? You don't have to go through this. Here's my number. Call me and I'll help you out when you're going through an issue. And so for me, that is how I deal with challenges is surrounding myself with the resources that can inform me to be a better leader.

Speaker 2: That's really rich and I think really helpful for a lot of people listening things that they could reach out and build around for themselves. Yeah, yeah, because a lot of what people are facing are actually structural issues. They're not about the individual though, what they deeply impact the individual. It can help to be like, wow, this isn't just me. This is a system. And probably most of the people in that room know that, right? I think when students first come into my intro to general women's studies class, for instance, sometimes they don't know that it's structural. And so part of the teaching is learning that by the time most people get into careers, they've figured that out, but still having some tools to navigate it while trying to change it.

Speaker 3: And one of the tools that I'll share here that I learned, and this was really profound, one of the leaders who is in kind of higher level administrative position, she was talking about how she presents herself and she's like, when you walk into a space, you need to state how you're showing up. They need to know what is your stance? Like, wow, that is really powerful. And she says, for me, before I start a meeting, I let them know how I'm showing up today. I'm showing up as a director, I'm showing up as a woman's advocate. I'm showing up as somebody who is passionate about X, Y, Z. This is how I'm showing up today. And so that was really powerful because she was saying, first of all, you have set parameters in a framework of how this discussion is going to go. And the discussion also will be based on respect.

Speaker 3: When you claim, set a base on how you're showing up, people will respect that kind of by default. And so I kept and shared that with my students. I learned something that is very profound. It is okay to state how you're showing up today. And if you're not in a good space, it is okay to state that Today I had a hard class, for example, for my students when we have our meetings, I fought with my girlfriend today, so this is how I'm showing up. And it really sets the pace for the meeting that day and also shows that we care about you and that this is a place for you to feel that you belong and we want you to thrive. And so that was really powerful for me.

Speaker 2: That is powerful. And it indicates that we are human beings and we should get to be human beings even in the workplace that if something significant has happened in our last class, in our home, on our way to work, whatever, it's going to be in the room anyway. And it will likely impact the person and possibly the people around them. Or we force people to fragment themselves and somehow try to compartmentalize part of themselves off. And for one thing, I don't think that that is healthy. Secondly, and very much replicates systems of oppression. Thirdly, the solutions to the problems that we are in in this world don't come from compartmentalization. At least that's my perspective on it, that we need the wholeness for people, first of all to heal and have the access to their humanity, which I think everybody deserves. Yes. But we also need the wholeness because in that wholeness lies radical imagination. And we need radical imagination to get ourselves out of the ruts that we are in a society and we need to listen to the people to go back to the stories we started with. We need to listen to the people who are so often not in those rooms for many reasons.

Speaker 3: Really interesting. And to your point too about how you show up, I've now started asking myself is we have set all these structures and maybe in my case staff meetings and one-on-one meetings, and I have to do 1, 2, 3, 4, and I have to check all these boxes. But the question is, does it have to be done that day? Does that need, what is the urgency? Why are we in a hurry to do it? And so when my students claim that they're having a bad day or show up and say, today's not one of those days, I have the capacity to say, you know what? We can postpone this. Whatever is on the agenda today is not that significant. Let us deal with what is going on today. Let's support each other for right now, and this can wait. And I think that goes back also to the changing of mindset. Everything doesn't need to be done today or we don't have to check all the boxes that are times we need to stop and reflect and pause and not kind of work like robots. Because again, as you said, everything is interconnected in our lives here.

Speaker 2: As an educator, I have found some of the most utterly profound moments in my teaching career have come when I have thrown out the plan because something is alive in the room that needs to be addressed. Either somebody said something and there's some harm or there's something that has happened in the world and we can't go on business as usual without talking about what it is and its impact, or everybody's just exhausted by what's happening in the semester or whatever. I find that spending the time to nurture community, to create space for people to share their stories, to recognize they're not alone or where the commonalities and the differences are and how people might be experiencing something, show support for one another, and then generate whatever

comes from that conversation is inevitably richer and a deeper learning experience than if I had tried to go along with my lesson plan. And often I find that when we do return to the lesson plan, the community is deeper. People are in a different place and better able to learn whatever it was that we were going to talk about. And usually it's not unconnected to whatever had just been in the room, but if I had just been like, no, we have to do this, that I would've missed the needs

Speaker 2: Of the humans that are in the space.

Speaker 3: And also trust. Trust is built between your students and you because they're like, well, this faculty really understands me and understands us. And especially in the classes that we teach where we discuss about very sensitive issues. One of the things that I also do in my classes is healing circles for my students at the start of the semester. And I ask them to bring something that is sentimental to them, and we share what that means to them in relation to leadership. And through that we say this is a safe and brave space to share thoughts and our emotions. And after that you can sense it changes completely. And students are even eager to go and look at assignments or go look at other issues that are happening somewhere because we have already created that ground already in the first class of the semester. So it's a healing. And there also that connections, even after the semester is done, students kind of keep those relationships even as they move on into the other classes. So trust is a big thing. When we create those spaces, they are

Speaker 2: Absolutely. So can I ask a question? I think I have a sense of what the answer is, but I'm curious about what you would say. I've been in those circles and I've seen you facilitate them. What do you think makes them healing? I think they are, yes. What do you think leads to that?

Speaker 3: Just the art of sharing it. That it's out there. You have shared it, you have named it. Healing comes from first naming what the problem is. The second one that I would say is, and most of the times there are tears that are involved. And for me, tears is a form of a language. We may not put words to it, but those tears is a language. And so we understand each other when we see those tears flowing down our cheeks, we understand the pain. We may not name it, but we understand it. And so that is an unseen form of communication and that heals. So for me, having those healing circles where that people have taken the time to listen to what I'm going through or to listen to my experiences, and then second of all that I have named what I'm going through and thought of all there are tears or there's even anger related to it. So I'm releasing that, and that is the start of the healing journey. That's

Speaker 2: Beautiful, beautiful. And I think I read somewhere, or maybe I learned this from you, that you put it in the center. So whatever you're experiencing is in the center of the space so that it's collectively held and that the community deepens because of the witnessing, the listening and the receiving as well as the sharing. And it speaks again to that we're not alone.

Speaker 3: We are not alone. And at the center actually is I do bring a candle, no. To symbolize that regardless of what we have gone through, regardless of the dark side, we have experienced, there's that. There's flame, there's light that is coming out of this. I remember a story that my mom said of a grandmother in rural Africa who knew that my mom was coming abroad. And she said, you're going to the US and I know you're going to read all these books when you go to the university, but I want you to remember that we women here in the village like this. And she held a little kind of like a lump made of tin, like what you'd use when you go camping. And it had kerosene in there and it had a little wig. And he said, we are like this light, this tin, and all we need is somebody with a matchstick to come and light that weak. We have the kerosene, meaning we have the power. We know who we are. We just need somebody to just come and light that weak for us. And so for me, when I'm creating these spaces for students, I'm lighting that weak. I'm lighting that flame that will keep on burning that has been dead or not burning. It has been, they have been in the dark. So I'm lighting that fire for them.

Speaker 2: That's beautiful. That's beautiful. I'm sure that many of them will years later reflect back to Director Clement and all of her influence. I think it's college, being in college spaces is beautiful in that way, but then you also do it in community both in St Cloud and internationally.

Speaker 3: Yes. Yeah. And I've been honored last year to have been invited to Ukraine, to Romania to talk about the impact of war on Ukrainian women and just having conversations with these women who are really passionate about and very patriotic and seeing the determination and how they want to bring change. And one of the women that I talked to said, just you showing up, making the flight from the US to come and want to support us, that right there means a lot to us. And so I kind of thought about it. Well, for me, I was just doing what I know and what I'm called and passionate about. I never even thought about the simplicity of this woman saying, just you making that flight to come and support us here as women. That already tells a lot. And I think that is where we need to go back, is to go back to the basics of just support and do what we do best as women, which is standing and supporting each other. I love what Dr. Wangari Mathai says when she talks about being a hummingbird. Hummingbird is a very small bird and that you do the best you can with the resources you have. So it's not about the big money, it's not about the big titles. No, it is doing what you can with the resources that you have with you.

Speaker 2: Beautiful. It reminds us that everybody can and is a leader if they claim that.

Speaker 3: Yes, yes, yes, absolutely. So what gives you hope? What gives me hope is looking at the students we have today and the desire for change and the knowledge that they have with them at their fingertips to make change and the boldness that they have, boldness that at least in my generation, we didn't have that. I look at my younger self when I was at their age, and I did not have that courage to be able to speak on platforms. And so that gives me hope that we still have youth who are passionate about making this place the world a better place. We have youth that are keen on doing research and wanting to be a better person. We have youth who are saying, you know what? Maybe I don't need

to have the 2.5 children and a home with a picket fence. If tomorrow I find a job in South Africa, I am out of here that our youth today are that flexible, that they are willing to be anywhere that they're needed again with the aim of just doing good.

Speaker 3: And I've seen that with students here who are eager to just come, for example, at the multicultural center and just want to hear stories from other speakers, from other parts of the world, or even come to my office. I had a student come in like, Njeri, I have a question and I noticed you have an accent. Tell me about where you came from. Tell me about your journey from St. Cloud and one, and this is a student who is in the trades area, and he came from Little Falls. So the boldness of that student coming to my office to just want to hear about my story, that gave me hope right there. And at the end of our conversations like Njeri, this has meant a lot to me because I come from a very small town where there was not much diversity. So coming to college, this is the most I've seen in terms of diversity, and so I'm hungry.

Speaker 3: He said, I'm hungry to learn, and you are the first person that came to mind. And I just wanted to go. I know he just went on and on. So that is what gives me hope. And he shared a little bit about his background. He didn't come from a very loving and nurturing home environment. And so being here and learning about diverse people and diverse and cultures and language has really shifted his mind. And so it's like, now I want to be an advocate. I know I have a long way to go and I know I'm going to make mistakes, but I'm willing to learn. So that willing to learn really fired me up. So that is the hope that I have for the future world.

Speaker 2: Another beautiful exchange. It inspires me to hear that, to see you doing your amazing work in St. Cloud and around the world, because I know people are touched by that. I know it's making change, and that student is an indication of how powerful those interactions can be to create those hummingbird ripple effects of change throughout.

Speaker 3: Yes. And considering that our institution did not have a multicultural center before, so they created this space and hired me for in this position to be able to run the center. So this was a new initiative for our institution and the excitement of students coming to want to learn and want to exchange ideas. And I hear them laugh like, oh, you do that in your culture? Well, we don't do it the exact way, but we do it similarly in a similar way. And so at the end of it all, we are all the same. We are all the same. And so that fires me up and really gives me hope and wants to push for a better tomorrow and a better St Cloud and a better community where everybody feel that they belong and feel that they can be successful.

Speaker 2: Well, that is a powerful note to end on. Thank you, Njeri for taking the time to talk with me and your amazing work in the world. I'm always so inspired by you.

Speaker 3: Thank you, Dr. Berila, and thank you for having me in this podcast.