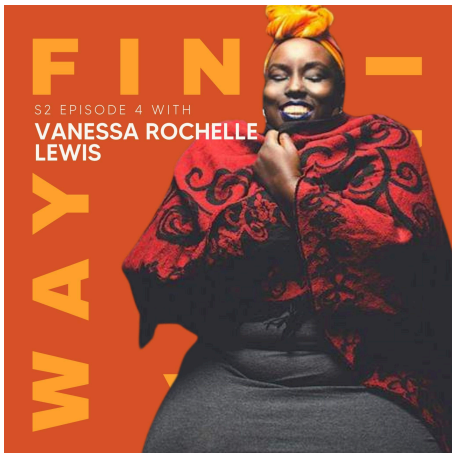
Finding Our Way Podcast

hosted by Prentis Hemphill with guest Vanessa Rochelle Lewis



Published May 10th 2021
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Legend:
[actions]
mhhmm other speaker talking at the same time.

Prentis: [inaudible] Who do you become when there's nothing to hide when there's no part of you that deserves to be covered up or shrouded in shame when everything that you are can be accepted. And more than that loved who do we become? And we do that for each other. Shame motivates so many of our actions. It's a socializing force. One where we're taught to shape ourselves to belong. We're taught to change what is unsightly, and if we can't change hide, and if we can't hide enough parts of ourselves, we can't belong. We enforce the standards of shame on people all around us. We enforce them around complexion, around race, around weight ability, creating more and more others. What Vanessa Rochelle Lewis is proposing in this episode is such a radical shift away from everything that we've come to understand about how we should relate to ourselves and how we should relate to each other. She poses the questions. What part of me doesn't belong, who doesn't deserve love. Vanessa is a fat Black femme performer facilitator, educator writer, activist, healer, and is the author of the upcoming book Reclaiming Ugly. In this episode, Vanessa meditates on ugliness and how we are trained to Uglify ourselves in each other and proposes a new way of relating that is based on abundant, acceptance, and love. It was a joyful, challenging, playful, revelatory time being in conversation with Vanessa. I had so much fun and I hope that you enjoy this episode.

Prentis: So I have so been looking forward to talking to you, Vanessa, like this is truly the highlight of my week to be in conversation with you. So I want to say thank you for saying yes to joining us today. Thank you for being in conversation. I'm so excited that you are here.

Vanessa: I'm so excited to be here too. I am just like kind of squealing in my skin and organs and maybe even my ovaries, like I might be producing like love babies right now. So I'm like, "hell yeah, me! You! Eddie! The love babies. Let's save the world!!!!"

Prentis: So amazing. This is why this is what I mean. So good. So good. So I want to start us off, you know, with, with this podcast, we start in the same place and it's just, um, a little bit of grounding in a way. So from your perspective, from your work, from your vantage point, how do you describe this moment that we're in, it feels so rich and fraught and all of these things, what do you see as happening inside of this moment? How would you describe it?

Vanessa: In this very moment? I think we are witnessing people really hungry for change, hungry for slowness, hungry for compassion, hungry for movement spaces that are soft, that are going to facilitate healing, whether it be healing rage, or spiritual healing, or even the healing of our bodies. People are starting to just understand how harm has like really been internalized beyond the systems, like into our relationships and we're ready for something different. We're ready to feel good. *mmm* And there's a lot of talking and work about how do we feel good in community with each other? And for me that's juicy. So I think this is a very, very juicy moment in time. What about you?

Prentis: Yes, juicy. And what about me? Um, I feel really excited about it being a juicy moment in time. That sounds exactly like what I want it to be. Um, I think for me, yeah, it feels multilayered. It feels rich. It feels like the most promising, exciting unveiling. It feels like scary, overwhelming things too. And they all just feel like they are *yeahhh* mingling together, telling us the truth and asking us to decide who we really are and we really want to be right now. That's what I feel. Thanks for asking that.

Vanessa: I love that. Yeah. And you know who I want to be. I want to be the freest mother-effer alive. [laughing] That's what I'm craving now a lot.

Prentis: Hmm. Let's talk about that. Cause I feel like so much of your work is about that. It's about feeling free inside of ourselves, but I also feel like your work really. It shouldn't be in a way, but it's so provocative in some ways that it feels immediately for me, like it's freeing something in me to hear you talk about your work and what you do. Um, and you know, I want you to maybe break down for the folks with us, just like, what is it that you're kind of committing to, to showing us in this moment as a, as someone who is shedding light or is guiding us or is doing healing work? Like what is it that you're kind of focused on our offering right now?

Vanessa: Thank you for that question. There's so many things that I want, but I think the thing that I want more than anything is to exist in a kinder world, a world where people not only say that they care about other people and that they care about themselves, but they make choices and actions that are rooted in that care that they practice that care with intentionality. I believe that a lot of us make decisions based off of what we have been socialized to believe as right, as moral as good. This is the way things should be. And a lot of times the way things should be don't actually serve our joy or our capacity to be good to ourselves or other people. And so I want people to be able to slow down, to move away from what they've been taught and connect with, what feels real for them in their heart, what feels gravy for them in their body and to trust and honor like the divinity and the brilliance of their intuition, the brilliance of their desire to feel good.

Vanessa: And I think in that place, when we're looking at, what does it mean to feel good for ourselves? What does it mean to create a world where we're not interfering with

other people's ability to feel good? We're going to experience a lot more peace. We're going to experience the space and the resource to make systemic choices, to make structural choices in our families, in our organizations, in our lives to imagine what to imagine and not only imagined, but also facilitate a world that is less rooted in oppression, less rooted in harm and more rooted in like good loving compassion printers. What I really want is for people to stop being afraid of being perceived as ugly. I want people to be able to reclaim every single part of their identity, their body, their desires, their dreams, their imaginations from like a glove application from being told that they are not enough for being told how to adjust themselves to fit into somebody else's vision for them. You know, I want to see people break that up so they can be in their fullness and enjoy other people's full names.

Prentis: Yes, yes, yes. Let's all. So we're going to have to hang out here for a minute. Cause I think what you're saying is probably impacting so many people that are listening and like what, what does she mean? Can she break that down? So, so much of your work is about kind of clarifying what this uglification processes are and moving in the realm of, um, what we put in the ugly area. So I just want you to break down just kind of what that means. Like what is the, what are we doing to make ourselves ugly or to perceive the world in each other in that way? And what do we get when we let ugly go? Ooh,

Vanessa: I had shivers listening to you. Talk about that. Yes. So, Oh, what is uglification? You know, we all grew up hearing other kids call somebody ugly. Some of us have heard our parents. We are comedians. We hear radio personalities, musicians. Everyone is calling somebody ugly. Ugly is not a status. It is not a actual thing that somebody is ugly is how we choose to perceive people. We choose to look at somebody and decide that what we see is ugly. We choose to learn something about somebody and decide that what we know about them is wrong or is ugly, ugly vacation is these beliefs that we have around who was beautiful and who is not beautiful and why. And then it is the behaviors and the actions and the practices and the laws that we create to punish people for being ugly or to separate or chastise people for being ugly or undesirable or a moral Prentis. Did you know that there were literally ugly laws in this country?

Prentis: No, no, no.

Vanessa: Yes. Yes. There were actual laws in this country that made it so that if somebody who was perceived as unsightly could be given tickets for being out in the street, they could be charged a fine they could be arrested. They could put in circuses and you know who, the folks that they were calling ugly, were?

Prentis: I have a guess.

Vanessa: Disabled people, old people, people of color, immigrants, trans people, non-binary people, people who didn't fit into some standards in norm that is accepted by like the white, cis, hetero, patriarchy blah-blah-blah oppression, et cetera, and more, you know, and those of us who are uglified, those of us who do have bodies that have been deemed as wrong or bad or unattractive often like place those standards on ourselves. We try to get out of them. We try to prove that we are worthy of being treated well by adhering to like beauty standards or changing ourselves to become more beautiful. But in reality -- y'all bodies is bodies. You know, people are people beautiful or not. We are all worthy of respect of love of safety, of freedom, you know? So yeah, uglivication is a thing that we do to ourselves and to other people because of oppression and uglivication justifies oppression.

Prentis: Ah, okay.

Vanessa: And then I want answer that other question. The other question you asked about, why do we embrace ugly? We embrace ugly to be free of those standards, that limit and hurt us. We embrace ugly so that we can get to know who we really are, what we really want and all that is radically and magically possible within ourselves, within our relationships, within our community, within our art and work. When we're not trying to fit into some standard of beauty or social norms, ugliness is freedom from all that check.

Prentis: Wow. So many things happen when you share that. Um, cause I feel like it's a, it's a message we never hear. It's it's almost like an option that feels impossible for us to take, to be like, "no, I'm going to take it all. I I'm gonna, I'm gonna refuse to reject parts of myself." And that, that the piece you said in the beginning about the ugly-making is a, it's a choice that we make. It's something we engage in to reject parts of ourselves and parts of other people. And to imagine that anybody is unworthy *mmhmm* is such a powerful, powerful, um, offering that you're making.

Vanessa: Thank you.

Prentis: So what you're offering is so rich because in some of the work that I do, I talk about letting goodness go, cause goodness, our concept of goodness or rightness, or not trying to be ugly, like all these things get in the way of *yeaaaah* actually being with ourselves of us actually healing. And I, I just wonder, cause I know you also are a practitioner. What are your thoughts about the relationship between healing and all of this? Like what, what comes up for you?

Vanessa: Ooh, healing is everything. Um, so the work that I do with Reclaim Ugly, our, our idea is that healing comes first. First and foremost. Before we organize for community, before we serve community, we're making sure that we are taking care of ourselves. We are healing what uglification has done to us. We have scars all of us. I don't care how privileged you are. I don't care how beautiful the world tells you you are. We have all been treated unfairly. We have all been raised to believe some fucked up ideas about other people. I don't know if I can cuss. Can I cuss?

Prentis: Of course.

Vanessa: Thank you. We've all been [laughing] raised to think negatively about ourselves and other people to judge ourselves and other people. And that creates chasms inside of us. That creates scars. That really need to be nurtured to be taken care of in order for us to imagine a world where we can be free and safe in order for us to imagine a world where we can truly cherish and care about other people and show up in service for other people, we got to heal the parts of ourselves that are traumatized. And we also have to heal the parts of ourselves that are inclined to harm people. *mmm. mmm** And we have that inclination to hurt people. Is there when we get hurt, when someone says something cruel to us, we want to lash out. When we see injustice happening, when we see, um, you know, privilege happening, we want to lash out. And there's so many different ways to create change. And because of like the harm because of capitalism and lack of time we go to a few go-to ways, but if we're taking care of our spirits. If we're resting. If we're surrounding ourselves with people that see our fullness, our wholeness, that care about us, we have a little bit more capacity to lean into our brilliance and think about the ways that we can impact, change and get what we want. Um, which is to feel good, right? Isn't that why we move into social justice worlds? Because we know what it's like to be hurt. We know what it's like to be disenfranchised and we want to feel better. You know? And I think that's the thing like in our movement spaces sometimes where like racism and white supremacy and transphobia and these things need to be talked

about, but also why are we talking about it? Why do we care about these things? Because we want to feel better. You know? So yes, healing first and foremost. And the other thing I want to say about that is, especially for those of us who do, um, who are practitioners and who are movement workers, we need to remember that we are the people we serve. We are not disconnected *mmmhmm* from the folks we're working for. We are the folks we're working for. So we gotta take care of our healing.

New Speaker: And I really love what you're saying, Prentis about like right and wrong. Um, you know, a quick personal story, my partner and I were in couples therapy. We like each other, you know, couples therapy is a good thing. It's a good thing. And one of the things that we're exploring is communication. Sometimes my partner will not speak their feelings because they don't want to hurt my feelings. Right. And I'm like, baby, I need you to not worry about hurting my feelings right now. They don't want to say the wrong thing. I'm like, don't worry about what's wrong. Just speak. I have compassion for myself in you so that we can really understand what the other person is trying to say. I need you to be willing to be wrong, have compassion for yourself so that we can get to what feels good. And that's different from what's right. What feels good is different from right?

Prentis: Isn't it interesting, like the way that our attempts to be safe, to play it safe, to belong, to not stick out so much are the very things that over time limit us all. Starts to narrow, who actually gets to belong here, who actually is valued, where we're so afraid to be ourselves because we're afraid we'll be rejected. We're so afraid to accept other people because we think it will have something to do with our own rejection that we just keep narrowing who gets to be here. And I, and that's what strikes me so much in your work is like actually no there's safety in creating more belonging. There's safety in being more yourself, there's safety and making more room so powerful.

Vanessa: Oh, thank you for seeing that. And it's so true. [laughing] I used to be a teacher, a community college instructor, and I'm the kind of teacher that always has people do skits. I'd rather them do a skit and analyze things than write an essay. [laughing] And so my students are always like, I'm shy. I'm an introvert. Don't make me go in front of the class Ms. Vanessa!" And "I'm like, well, ''why are you afraid of going in front of the class?" *yeah yeah* And eventually it comes out that they're afraid of judging people. And I'm like, "okay, well, what if everyone in this classroom commit to not judging each other? What if you know, you're not going to be judged. They're going to be held with love and care? Are you willing to take a risk?" And people were like, no. And I'm like, "okay, raise your hand. If you can promise not to judge someone else." You know, I think a thing is because we do a glorify people because we do hurt people. And we're conscious of the fact that we do it. We're afraid of being treated the way that we sometimes treat others. And we're afraid of being treated the way we see other people treat each other. And that's why I'm ugly. Stands for uplift. Glorify, love yourself and create a world where other people can as well. This is not some white lady. Self-love where the whole purpose is to like ourselves more. The purpose is to create systems and structures that don't interfere with our ability to like ourselves in each other.

Prentis: You know, for awhile, I was saying in my own practice, I was saying healing. Doesn't make us nice. It doesn't make us cute. It makes us real. But that isn't the goal. And you can tell the way that the wellness gets commodified. It's about how can I get skinnier lighter, this, that, and it's not about becoming yourself. Ultimately, it's not about building compassion for yourself. It's about conforming becoming something that you weren't already, it doesn't mean that we don't change. And it doesn't mean that we don't change intentionally, but if our only orientation to ourselves in each

other is judgment, if we can't even figure out how to just be with another person without judging, it seems like there's so much for us to be learning.

Vanessa: That's real. That's so real Prentis. Can I ask you a question? I know this is your podcast, but can I ask you a question?

Prentis: [laughing] You're so fun. I want you on here every week. Of course.

Vanessa: Okay. So I love, I love where you're coming from. Like there is some deep, beautiful wisdom and brilliance, um, that you're speaking and I know it didn't just come overnight. *mmm* I know there had to be moments, many moments that helped push you to this place of not trying to belong. Of not trying to be nice or good. And I'm curious about like, just one of your messy moments, moving towards freedom, one of your ugly moments moving towards freedom.

Prentis: Wow. That is such a beautiful question. Thank you for asking that. *awwww* I feel really touched by that, *thank you* um,[laughing] let's see. Well, first before that story comes to me, I'll tell a brief story I was just kind of contemplating on before we came together today. I was trying to think through my own relationship with ugly and uglification, and thinking back to the first crush I ever had in the second grade, And I told my friend, I had a crush on this boy and he got on the bus in front of everybody and called me a number of things, including ugly and how traumatizing it was for me, *yeah* how devastating it felt. And that it was like my first time, my heart kind of came open towards somebody in that way. And the public thing, I think, you know, a lot of us have experienced that in a lot of different ways and some of us experience it more than others, but it really touched into a tender place for me to, to feel the way that moment and subsequent moments have really shaped me, and to allow myself to understand that they have shaped me, um, was really big. So one, I thank you for that invitation to reflect.

New Speaker: And honestly, the whole journey has been messy. I mean, it's like, *yeah*, I think at some point, you know, for myself, my own journey was really through a lot of depression and feeling like I never belonged to anywhere. I couldn't be on earth. I was different than everybody else. But then one day it occurred to me that I'm going to figure out a way to say this, but it occurred to me that I was created.

Vanessa: That's right.

New Speaker: That I was here. And whether or not you believe in creator or God or whomever was it occurred to me that I was here. I think I said this, maybe in season one, some version of that, but it also occurred to me that everybody else was just as here. *That's right.* Just as worthy, if that's even a measure of what a human being can be. And it was an overwhelming feeling of like, 'Oh, if I really let my whole self belong to earth and and life, then how could I ever, you know, withhold that from another human being?' you know? So it was a lot of revelation through depression, struggle. You know,

Vanessa: I love that. I love it so much. And you were so earth-seeding me right now. I think that, I think of that. That is so in alignment with what you're saying is the fact that human beings are nature. And we often forget that we are nature. We, yes, that's right. We think of trees as nature. Mountains as nature, oceans and animals as nature, but we are also nature, produced by the earth. Tethered to the earth unless, you know, you're NASA or whoever, you know, we are nature. And what is it mean to revere our humanity in the same way that we revere the earth and we revere the nature? What does it mean to like look at the way that our bodies shift change, grow

and think, "wow, that's a beautiful, that's what the earth made." Yeah, this was nature right here.

Prentis: That's right. *Yeah,* that's right. It just occurred to me. You know, something I've been thinking about, I wonder your thoughts or perspective on it, but I've been thinking about desire and.

Vanessa: [Vanessa makes a purring sound]

Prentis: [laughing] It makes me shy, but I like it. When I listen to my body, there's often desire and so many surprising, wonderful places. And that it's the way that hierarchy or my own shame or the way that we've been trained into uglification comes in and tries to narrow desire. But it's like actually inside of us, there's so much. Yes. I don't know how your work intersects with desire that, but that just occurs to me.

Vanessa: Yes. Oh, I love talking about desire. So I personally self identify as thirsty and greedy. Um, [laughing] I am a thirsty femme. I'm a greedy femme. [laughing] I am indulgent [laughing]

Prentis: Yaaaassss, you better.

Vanessa: Thank you. So I noticed this thing about myself awhile ago. [both giggling] Oh my God. I'm like blushing and I forgot. I was going to say, give me a second. [both laughing] lSo here we go.

Prentis: I'm blushing too.

Vanessa: I love it. I love when Black people blush, yes. [laughing] You feel that heat in your body talk about desire. Like that sensation that tactile right there is soooo good. And when it rushes down your neck and across your, your shoulders. *oooo!* Yeah. So a thing that I've been sitting with is the difference between my attraction to people and my attraction, to how I feel in any given moment. And I have been trying to move away from focusing on what people and what bodies I find beautiful, because I know that I've been taught to perceive beautiful. I've been socialized who to be attracted to. And instead to think about 'what am I feeling in this moment? What am I feeling when I talked to you?' I have found myself wanting to reach out touch, hold, kiss, caress, love, make lov, to so many different types of bodies because it's in response to what's going on in my heart when we interact with each other, you know? *that's right* And it's that feel good. Like it just keeps coming down to feeling good. I really think like, right, like oppression doesn't feel good. It doesn't feel good to hurt people, but it feels so good to love people. It feels so good to explore, like what is going on, what our desires are. And honestly, like, I'll be real. Like it's not only humans that like, make me hot and heavy like food does at thing, to me! [laughing] when somebody is cooking some delicious food or I'm watching it on TV or social media, I like, 'Why am I hungry in my clitoris right now?' [both laughing]

Vanessa: But I'll tell you another, thing right when we talk about like reclaiming our bodies, like another thing that I've learned that I desire is to run. I like running and this is shocking for me because you know, I've been fat my whole life. Um, for people I don't think people can see me. So, um, I'm a woman, who's 300 plus pounds and I was an eight year old that was 150 pounds. So I've been fat my whole life and taking PE classes at school was torture because it meant like I'm being made fun of when I'm running. And I don't know how to run with this kind of body. It's uncomfortable. Um, I grew up in LA where there was a lot of smog in the nineties and I had asthma. So running literally hurt my body and my body learned to hate physical movement. My body learned to hate exercise.

Vanessa: My brain learned to detest the word ''exercise,' but I think that's been happening. The more I spend time like outside, I've noticed that sometimes my body wants to be fast. My body wants to sprint. My body, wants to run up that hill. And I might not be able to run a mile. I might only be able to run a block or two blocks, but it feels good. And that is a desire *yes* And tapping into that desire and not caring about what some randomass mutha-fuckas think about what my body looks like as I run means that I am getting to enjoy and indulge in all that I am like our bodies, our oracles for pleasure. You know, oracle's for experience that is desire. *come on* Like just tapping into what feels good in the moment and being present with yourself enough to know that you want something.

Prentis: Uh that's so.. It just offers so much for every aspect of our lives. Like exercise. I stopped saying exercise. I move sometimes and I feel compelled and my body hates running, but I like lifting heavy things and putting them down.

Vanessa: One of the sweetest moments that I ever had, I, I dated this person once and, you know, we ended up bad. Um, but I it's important to me. One of the ways that I reclaim ugly is to remember like the things that I love about every single person who's entered my life and all the ways that those people blessed me. And so this person that I dated was an athlete and a dancer. And I remember one day I was at their house and I was so sad and they were like, 'come sit on my lap.' And I was like, 'what? Nobody asked me to sit on their lap ever.' They're like, 'come sit in my lap.' And I was like, okay. And so, you know, I went and sat on their lap and they were like kissing my forehead. Like I was a sweet little princess. And then they wrapped their arms around me and picked me up and carried me to the wall and pushed me against the wall and kissed me while my legs were still in the air. And it changed my relationship to my body in such an amazing, *wow* like, I just, I didn't know that it was possible, you know? And I know it won't be possible for everybody. This person was an athlete, but it, it, it did something to me. It it's something really decadent about having somebody meet you in your desires, especially desires that you didn't know was accessible.

Prentis: That's right. That's right. That's so good. Wooooh. Okay. I just have a couple more questions here. Cause I don't know. It's hot in here. [laughing] I want to ask you how you got here. Like you asked me that question about my own journey and struggles to this point. How did you get here? How did you arrive to this place? Because a lot of us don't get to this point of reflection.

Vanessa: I do have a story and it's going to be, it's going to be a little long, you know? So if I move too slow, you can just let me know.

Prentis: Okay.

New Speaker: So I've been bullied most of my childhood, if not my whole childhood, at least starting at five, my first day of kindergarten, you know? And I, and let me slow down, I'm an Aries and I'm an optimist. So I assume that everyone's going to love me. I believe that I'm the bomb.com. And when someone doesn't love me, I'm like, 'what's going on? [laughing] Why are you making such a mistake?' So I'm five and I'm going into elementary school thinking that life is going to be amazing and everyone is going to love me. And the first thing I hear when I stepped into my class is 'Damn, that girl is so black. Oh my God. She looks like a tar spot." And then people were calling me and African booty scratcher and telling me how ugly I was. And that led, that facilitated my entire young adult experience from five to about 21, 22 years old. *Yeah*, that's what it was like every school I went to, as soon as I met people, they were like, 'why do you look the way do you look?' 'Why are you so dark skin? You are

ugly'. Boys love to be like, 'Hey, my homie got a crush on you. Shut up n***a'. Dah, dah, dah, dah. Like that was childhood. And by the time I reached eighth grade, it was so painful. Um, people were throwing pieces of paper at me in between classes, throwing sticks at me when we had like whole meetings, sticks and pencils and erasers. Um, and eventually the school decided to have a security officer follow me from class to class to make sure that I was safe.

Vanessa: It was really intense. It's really intense. Like even I was getting jumped. My hair was being, so it was really bad. And then this thing happened in the eighth grade where I not only was, I was suicidal for a while, but I became homicidal. I started to fantasize about killing the people that were hurting me. My father was a probation officer. We had guns at home. I brought a gun to school *mmm* in the eighth grade with the plan of using it. And I told one of my two friends and they reported me and thank all of the gods in the world that they reported me. *yeah* And because the people at my school knew that I was being bullied in the way that I was, they didn't call the police. They call it my parents. *that's great* "Yeah. I was very lucky. They call it my parents and my mom was like, "Alright, I can no longer tell my daughter to stand up for herself. Cause this is not what's working. I need to help my child." And so my mom signed me up for therapy and therapy was not working for me. It wasn't working for me. And this again, this is like the late nineties. This is like 97, 96. And therapy was very different. But as a child, my therapist at the time thought that it was my homosexuality, that had me feeling depressed and not the way that people were treating me in the world. And so she outed me to my mom and suggested that I get some help for my queerness. And my mom was like, 'Oh hell no, absolutely not. It is not your job to tell me something. My daughter did not give you permission to do. There is nothing wrong with my child's sexuality. *wow* There's nothing wrong with being queer." Like my daughter, my mom is a Christian and she was like, you know, "my God made my child perfect." And so she pulled me out of therapy and then took me to this theater program, ran by a bunch of gay Black people in downtown LA. And so suddenly I'm around other children who are no longer making fun of me, but who are excited to connect with me and build with me. And this is when I also, I was a 13 in eighth grade and I got my first girlfriend and my first boyfriend, we were a polyamorous triad, which was real juicy. [laughing] That's, that's a whole other story. But that first thing, that is the first thing being around people that saw my beauty, that supported it, that nurtured it. *yes* And that allowed me to be free. Right? So that's step one, but I'm still being made fun of at school. However, because I now have this new like foundation, I have more confidence and more willing to connect with people.

Vanessa: So I'm starting to make more friends, more and more friends, but I still don't believe that people will think that I'm beautiful. I still don't believe that people will think that I'm desirable. *yeah* And as a result, I've also made some really hard choices when I was 18 in 2002, this movie 8 Mile came out with Eminem and I'm sitting in the movie theaters with like some of my close friends, including the woman who would become my girlfriend in a couple of years, convinced that no one would ever think that I'm desirable. And some man sits next to me, an older white man sits next to me. And I noticed that he's rubbing my thighs and I'm thinking, 'Oh my God, touch. I want touch.' And I'm not believing that anyone will actually want to touch me. And so I'm like a part of me is like, 'this is gross. This strange man is touching me without permission or consent. Like, I don't know what's happening here'. And the other part of me is like, maybe this is the best that I can get. And I let this man feel me up for a while until eventually I was like, "no, I'm really disgusted by this. I need to stop." But it was like my lack of imagination, my lack of belief that somebody would want me that put me in this situation, even though I was sitting right next to a woman who had a crush on me for years, my internalized uglification kept me from seeing that

and kept me from dreaming of myself, having safe, healthy, sexual connections. And so I noted that. I noted that something was happening.

Vanessa: and I'm going to fast forward a little bit further. So I entered this relationship with this woman finally at 21. And it's really sweet. It's really cute. She's coming into her Blackness. I'm coming into my wild feral femmeness, you know, and just being free and beautiful. And the more confident I become, the more angry and resentful she becomes, the more possessive she becomes. And from that place of possession and resentment, she started to become physically violent. And her physical violence *mmm* was an attempt to control and dominate me so that I could continue to be hers. And she could continue to feel secure in our relationship. And a thing that she would say to me would be one Vanessa, you know, and, and just put it out there, I have bipolar disorder. So she'd be like, "Vanessa, you're crazy. You are not attractive. You are fat. Most people who, most people are not going to want you. You're very lucky to have me. I want you, so you need to stay in this relationship." And to an extent, I believed her because I had been getting these messages, my whole life, that people wouldn't want me, even my own parents would tell me that I needed to lose weight so that people will want me. *mmhmm* So I stayed in this relationship with this person who hurt me. And eventually after a night of incredulous violence, I was just like, 'I can't live like this. I would rather die than be in this relationship and I don't want to die. So I need to go." And I left that relationship and that was the beginning of everything. I fell apart, Prentis. I suffered Prentis. I had this long, like long dreadlocks down to here. I cut them all off. I cried every day. Like it was so intense, but in that pain, I started to shed some messages. In that pain, I started to decide eventually that this is not how I wanted to feel.

Vanessa: And then it took me another 10 years to be quite honest, Prentis, 10 years of entering initially relationships with people who reminded me of my abusive partner, because I was trying to prove to myself that I, I could be with someone like her or would treat me better, but I was like repeating cycles. And then eventually I was like, I don't need to prove myself to anybody. This is not how I want to live my life. I want to feel good. And so I started to create some processes for myself to help me feel good. *hmm* The first thing that I did, I started to talk to myself like I was the sweetest, ittiest bittiest baby there ever was. I called myself, "sugarhoney." I called myself 'honey darling.' I would journal 'Vanessa, you so cute. Vanessa, I love you. Vanessa you're so sweet'

Vanessa: I started to get into sex magic when I would masterbate.

Prentis: What, what?

Vanessa: Yeah, let's talk about this. I decided I'm not masturbating just to bust a nut. I am masturbating to make love to my body. And when this started, whenever I would fantasize, I always imagined my body is smaller. And I started to like, feel my body as... like, I would like candles. *mmmmm* I play some music for myself. Like some cameras, somebody. And then I would touch my whole body; my shoulders, *yesss* my calves, my feet. I would say sweet things to myself. I would tell myself how fine I was. And pretty soon my body became accustomed to being treated well. My mind became accustomed to hearing kind things. And I was moving through the world, like a person who was accustomed to being treated like a godess and quickly, I found that I would only allow people in my life who treated me the same. They could be lovers. They could be friends. They could be colleagues. I am not committed to anybody, but my pleasure. And if you are somebody who cannot be with me and allow me to be pleasurable, I'm a quit the job. I'm a quit the friendship. I'm a quit the relationship because I know I don't gotta settle! Bam!

Prentis: What a testimony! What a testimony. And what, uh, what, uh, well, it's just the, the honesty, like even the, the honesty that you tell your story with, just reveals to me where you're willing to go and how deep the work has gone. Cause you, you brought in so many things that other people might hide, but I see you unwilling to hide yourself.

Vanessa: You know, as a bullied kid, I strived really hard to be attractive to my classmates. I work to be somebody that they would stop bullying and they kept bullying me, regardless, because again, ugly, it's not about me. It's about how they chose to perceive me *that's right* and how they responded. So I, yeah, I've realized like, actually, like when I step away from all of that, like, I don't experience the world as an ugly person when I'm not around people who are going to see me as ugly. I don't experience lookism. When I'm not people who are practicing racism, I am less likely to experience racism. So if somebody thinks that I'm ugly, if somebody thinks that there's something about me, they don't like, I want them to tell me so I can stay the fuck away from them because that's not the world I want to live in.

Prentis: Vanessa, in thinking about this episode, I thought it's going to be so deliciously uncomfortable for people to confront those places. They try to put away. And every time I engage with your work or hear you speak, I honestly, this is honest, I honestly feel just a little freer, just a little more like something in me gets to be here. And I'm grateful to you for that. I'm really grateful.

Vanessa: Thank you, Prentis. I want you to know, I feel the same way. Like your work has definitely given me even more permission to lean into my body, like period. To be with my body, to think, make decisions based off of how I'm feeling and to slow down enough, to know how I'm feeling. Um, and also just that you're you and your brother are creating these special spaces to lift up voices that are going to help us imagine worlds that actually serve us. *yes* Like that's the kind of pioneer, how, I don't know how to say this word, but that's what I want. I want more of you in this world and I am so grateful for it. I'm so grateful. Thank you.

Prentis: More of you too. More of us! More, more and more, the world needs more! Thank you. Thank you.

Prentis: [music playing] Finding Our Way as co-produced and edited by Eddie Hemphill. Co-production and visual design by devon de Leña. Please make sure to rate, subscribe and review wherever it is that you listen to this podcast. You can also find us on Instagram @findingourwaypodcast or email us with questions, suggestions, or feedback, and findingourwaypod@gmail.com. You can also sustain the podcast by becoming one of our Patreon subscribers. You can find us on Patreon @finding ourwaypodcast. Thank you for listening to Finding Our Way.