

[Theme music: upbeat electronica plays in the background as Katie speaks.]

Katie Axelson: Welcome to Have Hope; Will Travel, the show where we get to know people who are different than we are, we hear diverse perspectives, and we better understand other stories. We allow the world to become a smaller place as we stand with people instead of just having opinions on issues. I'm your host Katie Axelson. October is Book Month and we're celebrating with bookstagrammer Marla Taviano of White Girl Learning. You may remember Marla from Episode {76} - we got to hear pieces of her story. We talked about deconstruction, we talked about being a missionary, we talked about divorce. And this episode, we're talking about race. We're two white women talking about our journeys to learning about diversity and inclusion and to becoming anti-racist. There are a lot of phenomenal resources mentioned in this episode, so I'll take a minute to remind you that every single episode is transcribed. So if you miss an author's name or a recommendation, feel free to check out the transcript at KatieAxelson.com. It's also available in the show notes on the apps that are inclusive and support transcripts. So, let's bring in Marla.

[Katie stops speaking and the theme music: upbeat electronica ends.]

Katie Axelson: So I would love to just start at the beginning: what made you interested in hearing other stories and then starting White Girl Learning?

Marla Taviano: Okay, well so it's always a challenge for me. Where do I start my story? And since we are talking about WhiteGirlLearning, I won't go all the way back. I will just say I grew up in a very white environment, a very sheltered environment. Actually, my parents grew up in this really small town in Ohio. My maiden name is Yoder, which I later found out is literally the whitest name in the whole entire country. Like ninety-nine point something something percent of Yoders are white. And they were born in this small town and then moved to a slightly bigger town/city and that's where I grew up for a while until I was getting ready to start junior high. And was gonna go from this small elementary school to this massive junior high and I think my parents – it's not the only reason they moved back – but that really intimidated them. They thought “Let's maybe raise our family in the small town we grew up in, rather than this area we live in now.” So in sixth grade we moved back to this small town and that's where my parents still live, and that's where I grew up. And like I said, just really really white. I also found out later I think it's what is called a Sundown Town which is a town historically, that Black people knew to avoid after the sun went down because their lives were going to be in danger.

KA: Wow.

MT: I've also learned a lot - I mean so much that I've learned. There's a reason why towns are all the way white. It's not just “Oh, it just so happens that only white people live here.” There's almost always a reason. So we went from my high school to a small Christian college that was also very white. And from there, just a lot of different things happened. But I did my student teaching in Okinawa, Japan so that was my first experience where I was in the minority and I was learning from people who are very different from me. And I had always loved stories of missionaries growing up, my aunt and uncle were missionaries in Indonesia. That's another trail that I can go down later if we talk about that, but so much that I've learned and so much has

changed in how I feel about that as well. Because growing up I just thought, "These people needed Jesus and we needed to go tell them and how would they go to Heaven without us?" and very much a white savior complex that I didn't have the wording for. But, so I went to Japan, came back, got married. So 1997 is when I was in Japan. 1998 is when I got married. Had three daughters and in 2000, 2002 and 2006. And just always really had a curiosity about the world, but I'd only ever been to Japan for those three months. And then in 2008 and – I see now how the story kind of fits into the whole thing, but I didn't realize it at the time – we started going to zoos around the country. I wanted to see the world, we didn't have the money to see the world, so I thought, "We can see animals from around the world!" That would be one way to introduce our kids to different countries. And a lot - again, zoos are another thing that I change my mind about, but a lot of it is good. They are learning about animals, learning how to conserve animals in their natural habitats, just like anything in life - it's not all good, not all bad. So there are people doing good things in zoos and of course terrible things. So this turned into this adventure where we tried to go to fifty-two zoos in fifty-two weeks.

KA: Wow!

MT: Starting in - and we did it. From August first, 2008 to August first, 2009. And we stayed with - so we literally had very, very little money. My husband was self-employed, I was writing Christian books for women at the time and it did not bring in a lot of money. In one of my, my youngest was - oh no, none of them were homeschooled at the time. They were in school, and we just went on - we didn't go to one zoo per week, we went like, we'd go to like six in a row on the East Coast.

KA: Sure!

MT: So long story short, we did all of that. We stayed with thirty-one, thirty-three families maybe? Seventeen of them, we had never met before, so we met online. We did all that. And we came back from that and one of our friends who was a Black Pastor he wanted to start an interracial Church where it was like multi-ethnic and so we helped do that. And that was around 2009. And then, so I continued writing in this time which is another story but last year I published – for the first time in a while – I self-published a book called *Unbelieve: Poems on the Journey to Becoming a Heretic*, and I talk in this book and I talk in this book. And actually I'm going to read this one poem-

KA: Please!

MT: Because it has to do with it. It's called: #Trayvon Martin

[Marla reads her poem.]

*Why aren't my white friends talking
about this?* A Black friend asked

in her Feb. 2012 facebook post
taken aback / I didn't know

Trayvon Martin, a Black teen
murdered / he was just 17

another senseless unjust death
of someone unarmed and Black

by a man taking the "law"
into his own damn hands

I began to look / to read
to learn / heartsick, broken

his death was my catalyst
changed me, changed everything

but his mama doesn't have
her baby and never will

Trayvon you woke me up
and you'll never wake up

and everything in the world
is wrong wrong wrong with that

[Marla stops reading.]

KA: Wow.

MT: And that's what happened. So I was in this church, meeting new friends, my friend circle had gone from mostly white to a lot of Black friends, and that just hit me in the chest, because my new friend had said "Why aren't my white friends talking about Trayvon Martin?" and I'm thinking, 'Wait, what?'

KA: "Who? What?"

MT: Yeah! So it's a – as people know, who have woken up to racism and all these things – the fact that there's this, everything is going on in the world and you are somehow oblivious and then you realize why you're oblivious. It's because you don't have to know. It doesn't affect you. Your children aren't Black and so they're not in immediate danger at any time they go outside in a hoodie. And so that kind of snowballed from there. So I can look back now in my journals and things and see like snippets of waking up, but that's what it took, was this this big event. And like I said, I hate that it was a boy's death, like it took that to wake me up. So, let's see that was 2012 we're still at this church and just learning a whole bunch of things and getting together and talking about racism. We had these - it was pretty heated discussions, we'd have people who got so angry about us bringing up race and then we would, like different people would say, "Wait I thought you joined this church knowing..." and they had joined the church wanting to do

church with Black people but not wanting to get into all of the, you know, the whatever. So that has been a big thing for me. That I - I really push back on anyone who wants "racial reconciliation" or wants us all to be friends or even have a Beloved Community like Martin Luther King Jr. call it. Those things are great, those things are ideal. But we don't get to - as white people - try to put everything from the past under the rug to start fresh. Like imagine, this is off the top of my head, maybe not a great example but someone abuses you or does all these horrible things to you and then just comes to you and says, "Let's just put all of that aside and let's start here." You don't get to do that. You have to admit to all the things, you have to heal from the things, and at least for me, I had to learn about all the things. I didn't even know what the history was! And so anyone who comes to me and wants to be anti-racist without learning all the history and having a reckoning with that history, and especially people in the church, because if you look back in U.S. history, Christians were not the good guys. They were complicit or leading the charge in all of these things, like lynchings and slavery. I mean, the enslavers were, I don't know the percentages, but many to most of them were Christians. There's even something called a Slave Bible where they would have a preacher come in and preach to their enslaved people, but they wouldn't - they would cut out any parts that talked about like the Exodus story where the Israelites got freedom, or anywhere where Paul talks about freedom or anything like that. It was a literal Bible like, chopped up, blacked out and this is the safe thing that you can preach. So Christians are right in there. So another part of my story is a kind of deconstructing of my faith and seeing Christians not want to talk about racism, or not want to talk about the LGBTQ community, or not all these different things, and me thinking "Wait a second: how is this all going to work?" So that's what my book is about. White Girl Learning came about because I learned to read when I was four and I have - I read constantly. I'm forty-six. I've been reading every day since then. And I realized that almost every book I was reading was by a white author. And I've since had arguments with people who say "Well I don't care about the color of the author's skin, I just read good books." And I'm here to say that: if you're not intentional in finding books that are written by Black authors, indigenous authors or other authors of color, by default you're going to read white authors. Because those are the ones we hear about, those are the ones that get the big book contracts, those are - and so here's again, me waking up to Toni Morrison and Alice Walker and Octavia Butler, these Black women who had been writing fiction for decades and I never knew about it. I read Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry by Mildred Taylor in seventh grade, and to my recollection, it might not be that good but I don't remember another Black author. Like we read "Classics" but never by Black authors. So I decided I'm going to be intentional. I'm going to start reading books by people who are not white. And I started that and I didn't know "bookstagram" was a thing. Like I learned from someone, I saw one of my friends was posting books in these interesting setups, like she'd put little things around the book to take a photo and talk about the book. And I was like, "Woah!" And then I saw that a bunch of people were doing that and I thought "Well I can do this, but I can do it just with books by Black, Indigenous, authors of colors." So I decided to call White Girl Learning because Jacqueline Woodson who was a Black queer writer, who I absolutely love, she has a book - it's for kids but it's one of my favorites. And it's called Brown Girl Dreaming and it's a story about her life growing up, and how she wanted to be a writer and so that's where White Girl Learning, the name, came from. And we were living in Cambodia at the time, so that's another part of my story. In 2015, we moved to Cambodia, kinda as missionaries, kind of as

humanitarians. And that's another whole thing but it's 2017 in December, so coming up on five years. And I just started posting books, I just started meeting people, and reading more and more and more and more and it's - it's been like, one of the best things that has ever happened to me.

KA: Cool.

MT: In my life.

KA: Let's talk about why, does it matter to have a more diverse perspective? Like why does it matter to be having conversations about race, to be having conversations about, say George Floyd or Ahmaud Aubrey or Brianna Taylor and the people who have unfortunately have lost their lives in innocent situations?

MT: Yeah it matters ultimately because like you said, these people died. And they should still be alive. And they did not die by accident, and that as part of a pattern, and it's a pattern that can be traced back really, really far. I am not a historian or an expert and sometimes I'm like, "Okay let me make sure I got all my facts straight," or whatever but I can offer general knowledge, and people can then go explore themselves. But the history of policing in this country, police were - the creator, that job position was created to make sure that enslaved people did not escape and if they did, they were returned to their owners, to their enslavers. So that's how it started. So policing started as a way to protect white people's property and to make sure that Black people had no freedom. Now I don't, again, I don't know the whole history. I don't know how this changed and again, it's a thing where - is every policeman or woman a bad racist? No. Is the system as a whole corrupt? It actually is. Are there a good - could your city possibly be one of the good precincts or have one of the good-

KA: No. I live in Minneapolis. [Katie and Marla laugh.]

MT: Okay. Yours we know that. That is established, yes. But historically, and when you take that thread and look back, police officers are there to protect white people. And do some police officers or most, or many, also protect Black people? I'm sure they do. I'm sure. But again, studies have shown that in the heat of the moment, if you are scared then it's like these - I forget what the tests are called, like the Bias Test or something - where you're gonna pull a trigger on a Black person before you would a white person. And we can see this playing out now when we see a young white man go into a church and kill nine people, and he is brought out, given a hamburger to eat, is sitting in handcuffs and he is alive. And then we see a Black man that doesn't even have a gun, and is shot down forty bullets. And again, is it every single time? Is every single Black man this? No! But the pattern is obvious, and just like I didn't know about a pattern when my friend first said that about Trayvon Martin, a lot of people don't know about the pattern. So they think when they hear something like, "Well let's just wait and find out," or "Let's hear, this couldn't be," and I think sometimes - like when I was growing up, no I was an adult. But I had voted for George Bush for president and I just thought he was this wonderful man. And again this is not about him or whatever. But I watched this documentary that was talking about the Bush family and some things they had with oil companies, and some things they had done that were suspect. And that cognitive dissonance for me I was like, "This can't be true. This can't be true, what I know about this and what you're telling me now, can't be true." So for

people who grew up and the policemen are protecting them and they are kind and they're public servants and they're laying their lives on the line, and then you want to say that police officers will often shoot unarmed Black people - and you're like "No, no, no, no." I can't, I won't, I can't believe that, that can't be true." So the more we open up to the idea that something we believe could possibly not be true, the easier it becomes but I try to remind myself of how terrifying it was at the beginning for me to first start questioning things. And that's how it was with my Christian faith. I had been taught that what I believed was absolutely correct and true and what other people believed was false. And the whole idea was to build up this case, build up this armor, don't let anybody's false teachings get in. And so that's what I did. And I think that's what we all do when we all want to be proud of our country and we have this narrative that we believe, that we came here for freedom and we were pioneers and it was beautiful and wonderful and we worked so hard and now we have what we have. And we don't want people coming along and telling us that we actually used slave labor to build what we have.

KA: Right, yeah.

MT: Or all of the different - and the lynchings. I didn't know about lynching. All the Black people over a period of fifty, seventy years, that were just killed by a mob. Like, kind of like a Ahmaud Arbury. These men took it into their own hands, they decided they didn't like what he was doing and where he was at, and "we're going to kill him." And again and it's a pattern. It's been going on for so long. I honestly don't remember, I can't blame my teachers. I don't know if they taught me about stuff, I don't remember most of what I learned in school. But I feel like some of these things but I'm learning now in my forties I would have remembered. If I would have heard that and - I actually collect old history books, and Christian history books.

KA: Yeah, oh boy.

MT: And I haven't looked through a whole lot of them but I do know like, there's a book that says just a small section on slavery in elementary book - history book for a Christian. And it says something to the effect of "The weather was warm, and the slaves were happy." Like it's just making this, "Oh it's okay, this is just how it was. We had the plantation and they did the work." And yeah, it's just - so there's so much to learn. It can be so overwhelming. And I try - I used to when I first started learning - I was like, just putting everything out there and people got offended that I was shaming people. I'm better about that now. And it's - I don't exactly know where the line is, I don't exactly know and maybe nobody does. But how you can educate people without coddling them I guess. Like we don't want to hurt people's feelings, but Black people are dying. So which is more important? My feelings or your life?

KA: Their lives! Yeah.

MT: Yeah. So, yeah. I don't remember your question. [Marla laughs.]

KA: That's okay. Do you have any tips on finding that fine line between shaming and coddling?

MT: [Marla sighs.] I just read a book, *All the White Friends I Couldn't Keep* by Andre Henry, I think is it. And he talks a lot about how when he first started waking up - so what I have realized is many of my Black friends and many Black authors also had a time of waking up. They had been, I mean they all have different stories obviously but many of them had to assimilate into

their white culture, their white neighborhood, their white church. And so just like I wasn't paying attention to Black people being gunned down in the streets, neither were they. Because their communities were all white, because that's where they could find belonging, success. And they all started waking up too. And he talks about how at the beginning he wanted to sit down with people who were actually very racist, and try to change their minds and over the course of time he realized "I'm not - those - I can't reach those people. They are so determined that they're going to argue with me, fight with me, they don't want to listen. So that's kind of my philosophy now too. I'm not going after the people who have zero desire to listen. My people are the ones who, they're curious, they're asking questions, they're scared, and so those are the people that I, that I want to kind of help through that. So as far as the coddling and the shaming, I don't shame. But coddling, I just try to be honest. I say "Listen, this is going to be hard, you're going to learn some things." And it's overwhelming. And it is - it can almost be a full-time job to try to learn all these things.

KA: Oh yeah.

MT: And people go "I just have too much going on. I can't do this." And I say, someone said to me once, "Learning about all of this is exhausting." And then she said right after, "I suppose you're going to tell me that racism is exhausting for Black people." And I was like, "Yeah that's what I'm going to tell you." [Marla laughs.] "See you know!" And that's kind of the deal. We have the privilege of putting it aside and coming back to it when we have time or mental energy or the space to process. And I think that's what happened in 2020, when George Floyd was murdered. And I don't know how that particular death blew up into all of these white people listening and learning. I mean, I do have an idea. It came on the heels of for years of a presidential, like a president who white people and evangelical Christians voted for and then thought, "Oh. Oh dear." Like, what is going on? So all of that, like the accumulative effects of all of these deaths that started to be in the news. And then a pandemic.

KA: Right.

MT: So we're all sitting at home. So I have some Black friends and authors who I follow who are like, "My book is on the New York Times bestseller list after two years of being out and no one cared about it and here it is," and everyone is buying these books and learning and everything. And then what happens? This compassion fatigue or learning fatigue or whatever. And so now even two years later, you'll see a lot of – at least I do – see a lot of people saying "Oh that was really nice, that nice little gesture that you had there for a little while. Now you can go back to not caring."

KA: Right.

MT: I don't think it's completely hopeless. I - once you wake up you cannot go back to sleep unless you very, very intentionally decide, "I refuse to hear anything else." So that's a big step, is getting people to wake up. So once they wake up, I think there's more hope there. So how do I know when to coddle? Okay so I never, I don't shame people. Some people may feel shamed. But I try hard not to do that myself. I can't know how my words are going to land on you, like I have, I could have a couple friends and I say something and one friend is like "Thank you for that I really needed to hear it," and the other friend is like "I'm going to unfriend you on

Facebook, I don't want to talk to you ever again.” And I've had several people come back to me four years later. Like someone just recently sent me a message on Instagram and said, “I unfriended, unfollowed you four years ago when you were talking about racism. And I've since woken up and I'm really sorry. Can we be friends again?”

KA: Wow.

MT: And I was like, “Yep, we can.” Because they're just not ready, but again what I say is, like Martin Luther King Jr. and the Birmingham jail in like 1960-something, 1963 maybe. He said that the white moderates and the Christians are like, “Let's just take our time. We can't make all these changes all at once, we can't expect people to change overnight.” That was in the 1960s.

KA: We should have changed some.

MT: And it's 2022. Yeah, so that's not good enough anymore. If people are dying, it's urgent. Now. It's urgent. And so yeah, but I will never run out of things to learn. Like I mean when you - the first Black woman who made a million dollars from her novels, Ann Petry, a novel called *The Street*, which is really good. I think it was published in 1925. So obviously when Black people were enslaved it was illegal for them to read and write. They weren't writing a lot of things. Which again makes me so angry, because I think of all that was stolen from them, like all that they could have written down. So when you've got novels being written from 1925 up to 2022 by Black women and you've got to catch up and there's new ones being written every day. But one thing that I tell people, because I have friends or people I meet online who, like me live in a very - I don't now, but live in a very white place. And their friends circles are white, so they ask, “How do I make a Black friend?” Like, “How do I do this?” And what I tell them, number one: you can't expect a Black person to come along and be your token friend.

KA: Right. Right.

MT: Like that's not a fair ask for someone. And for a Black person to go into a space of white people who don't know anything about anti-racism or Blackness or what it's like to be Black, that is - unless you're paying them a whole lot of money [Marla laughs.] which most people aren't when they just want to find a friend, that's not what you can do. So what I encourage people is to work on yourself right now. Work on becoming a safe friend for a Black person to have. Someone who has read history. I have this book here called *Stamped From the Beginning* by Ibram X Kendi. And it is huge. It goes through the whole entire history of racism in this country. It's like five or six hundred pages long, but the good news is that there is a young person's adaptation.

KA: Nice!

MT: It's called *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*. I encourage people to read that one. Is it for kids? Yes. And also you will get like the cliff notes of this big book. Learn the history. Read novels by Black women. Follow, start following people on wherever you're at Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, who are Black. Just learn and learn and learn and learn. See what's going on, pay attention to the news, start opening your eyes. And it's not - you know we're talking about Black and white here too but in Cambodia, different countries. I have a book called *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States*.

KA: Oh wow.

MT: Written by Erika Lee, who is an Asian-American professor. And there's - it's so overwhelming but you can start somewhere. If you don't like to read, go watch YouTube videos, go listen to podcasts, just start learning. And then yes, try to diversify your circles-

KA: Yeah.

MT: If you live in a very white place, I mean now, everyone, we're all online and then after the pandemic started, we're all on Zoom. And everything happens like that, so you can meet people. But it's an effort, it takes an effort, especially if you've gone, if went as long as I did and you're pretty much starting from scratch in your thirties. But I have friends. I have quite a few friends in their early seventies who are on these anti-racism journeys. I went two - I went to this Legacy Trip which is - I don't know if you know the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama.

KA: No!

MT: I wish every single person in the whole country could go to this museum. Just Mercy, another book I have here, by Bryan Stevenson, it's also a movie, Michael B. Jordan. Bryan Stevenson as a Black man and a lawyer who has given his life to helping inmates - largely Black but not all Black - inmates on death row who are innocent. Because what - if you start digging deeply, what happens is a crime is committed, they can't find who did it, and they just pick someone - and it's usually a Black man - and he goes before this all white jury and they say, "Yep, sounds like you did it," and he's in jail. So I've read multiple stories by men who are in prison like thirty, thirty-five years and then Bryan Stevenson helped get them out because they did not commit it and there's evidence still there it's just hidden. So Bryan Stevenson is this like - he is behind this museum. It's called the Legacy Museum. It is so powerful, it takes you from like the 1400s in our country and when the first enslaved people came over from Africa. It's very visual, you walk through, you see things on TV screens, you see statues, you have these immersive experiences. It's incredible. I went on a trip led by Black women and met two women named Ann who are white women from North Carolina, [Katie coughs in the background.] both in their seventies who are committed to being anti-racist, and then sharing all of this with their friends. Which is a huge encouragement to me because I have some people in my life around that age, who I've kind of given up hope that they might have their eyes opened. But the Anns and some other people have given me a lot of hope.

KA: Sure. Wow, wow. Yeah. I just had jury duty actually this year in Minneapolis.

MT: Wow.

KA: Which was a fascinating experience to be like "I'm in the same building where Derek Chauvin was convicted." Like that could have been me. I had to defer my first jury duty when I first summoned, and I probably would have been on the Kim Potter trial had I not deferred.

MT: Oh my gosh.

KA: Yeah. So it's just mind-blowing for that experience. And so friends who are new to the podcast, I talked about that in episode {67}. And there are some opportunities in the criminal

justice system and I obviously could only talk about my experience and didn't dive deep into like, the history of it or anything, but I am aware of it, that policing came from unfortunately keeping slaves enslaved. But just shared my own experience as a single white woman, and how the criminal justice system and the jury is like - it really felt like they were favoring the white men every time they called someone on the jury. Like I happened to overhear a couple of people who were accepted and who were declined. And the only people I heard who were accepted were white men. The one man of color in the room was declined, two single females were declined. Like it just - I genuinely wanted to be on that jury and I was declined.

MT: It is a mess. That could be ten more podcasts, but it really is a mess. And I would encourage people to watch the movie Just Mercy, it's really well done if you don't want to read the book. But it just again wakes you up to: oh, so you mean justice doesn't mean fair, because it's not fair. And we just assume that it is, right? We assume that they must be doing things fairly. They are not. And people are dying.

KA: Absolutely. So you've mentioned a lot of different books and movie resources. You mentioned podcasts. Do you have any good podcasts to recommend?

MT: Oh wow, that is a good question. I just listened to one. We had to listen to this podcast for, before we went on that trip, the Legacy Trip. And it's called Seeing White. And it's actually a white man that does it but he brings in a lot of Black professors and other people, so that's a good one I think.

KA: Okay.

MT: It's just, he goes through different scenarios, like situations and things that happened in history in the U.S. and talks about them and just introduces you to a lot of things.

KA: A lot of the books that you've read, you've posted online on White Girl Learning. So where can we find you online if we want to learn more from the breadth of knowledge that you are?

MT: Yes so it's @WhiteGirlLearning on Instagram, that's where I post. And I have, I was posting like three days a week, then I went up to every other day, now I've been posting everyday for quite a long time. My niece who is twelve and my neighbor here in South Carolina, she posts every Monday middle grade books by authors of color. And she's amazing. Her reviews are really great. So I try to do - I try to be pretty diverse about it where I do picture books, middle grade books, young adult books, non-fiction, fiction. My favorite is nonfiction. I'm just trying to learn all the time. And then I'll do Six Stacks, Sunday Six Stack which is usually, I mean sometimes I'll group them by color with flowers, like it's just something visually pleasing but other times it'll be like six books on this specific topic. Or six books by this author, or six books if you want to learn more about XYZ. So that's White Girl Learning on Instagram, and I'm also @MarlaTaviano on Instagram. And this has been tricky for me because I want to separate, because I am also a writer, I'm writing my own things. I don't want to make money off of anti-racism work, that's a thing that I decided quite a while ago.

KA: Hmm, yeah.

MT: But then I spend so much time there on that platform. And then I used to be an author – I mean I'm still an author – but I had traditionally published books back in the day, did some self-publishing, and so now I'm trying to get that back up and going.

KA: Sure.

MT: But I don't really promote my stuff on the White Girl Learning which is why I have all of the followers, so I'm always looking for new people to hang out with me on @MarlaTaviano. And Twitter is also at @MarlaTaviano. Twitter I have found to be an amazing space, like you can go - if you go to White Girl Learning on Instagram, I am - everybody I follow is a person of color. So if you are looking for people to follow, you can go through there. And like I was saying, I didn't want to separate it, so on my @MarlaTaviano I follow some of those same people, not all of them, but go there too. And then Twitter, I've just learned so much, from so many Black authors, Black preachers, activists, and that's another great place. Like I said, just who are you listening to? Like if you look through your social media - and I get it if it's just, if you only follow your friends, if it's just a friend thing for you, but if you're following influencers or people you like to read, just check and see, and look at your bookshelf. Look if you are a reader, look and see how many of the authors are white. I guarantee you, it's going to be a lot. If you are white and you read a lot, and you've never intentionally read books by people of color. Then yeah. And then I have a website: ItsMeMarla.com.

KA: Okay.

MT: It's a new one, I haven't done a lot there but yeah. And then my book that just came out, its first birthday, her first birthday is coming up at the end of September. I don't know when this will air, but it's called Unbelieve: Poems on the Journey to Becoming a Heretic. It's really the word "heretic" is really scary to put in the title but I am a heretic by many people's definitions. I went from a zealous evangelical Christian girl to "Hmm, I don't know how I feel about all this." And I'm still working through that. And there's sections in the book, like the poem I read about Trevon, there's a section about white supremacy and racism, the LGBTQ community. I write an apology letter to them for the many, many years that I thought that they were living in sin. There's stuff about waking up to the patriarchy, and feminism and all of the different things. So my day job is writing for other people and business people, but my dream is to write all my own stuff. We'll see how long that takes.

KA: I love it, I love it. And I love books. Like we had talked about like, ways to travel when you don't have the funds to travel. Books are another easy way to do it, like zoos are an idea, but then books are an easy way to do it. I think it was probably before the pandemic, 'cause the pandemic I had a pretty good reading list, but – and I wasn't going into stores – but I didn't, I had just graduated from grad school so I didn't have any money to travel, had just bought a house so really didn't have any money, and would walk in the bookstores and just be like "Recommend me something international," and I would just walk around and like pick up all the international books that I could find it looked half appealing, and then once my arms were loaded, I would narrow it down and decide which ones I was actually buying. But getting to travel internationally - so one of my bookshelves downstairs is actually organized by geography

MT: Oh I love it!

KA: Yeah I have an English degree right? And my advisor and I spent a lot of time in the American lit space, so I've got a lot of American literature, though one of my classes was African-American lit so I have actually a pretty decent selection of Black authors which is nice. All a little bit older at this point, obviously I've updated it but then looking at my world shelf unfortunately, just so much of it like I had American, European, and then the rest of the world fit on the shelf and a half. And I was like, "maybe we should be able to split out the world a little bit better," so we split Latin America and Asia.

MT: Well I love it you do that because honestly, I think that we tend to overestimate how much we know or how much we've read, but then you put it out there and you're seeing, "Oh!" So really, so it's this country that I live in and this country were my ancestors are from, and then the whole entire rest of the world is right here.

KA: Right, right!

MT: And realizing that we do that. It's like us, and then the rest of the world, and not realizing how unique everything is. Ever since I lived in Cambodia, I love reading novels that are set in Cambodia, by Cambodian authors, Vietnamese authors, Thai authors. It's just, I mean obviously we can't read everything, and all of it. But we can do more than we - and they're so good! That's been one of my biggest takeaways, is how did I miss all of this?

KA: Yes!

MT: Like I missed all of this goodness, and that's another thing. Rather than going the shaming route, I want to go: do you know what you're missing!? That seems to draw in more. They're like, "Oh."

KA: We're missing it 'cause it's hard to find! What one of the things that I have done is – I have not done a great job with this – but I would love to read something for every country before I travel to it. And sometimes it's really hard to find something. And I try to use the criteria of "I want a Cuban author if I'm going to Cuba." I don't want an American writing about Cuba. Or like, I want to actually read something - and sometimes it's really hard to find, or the books are sold out or like you found this book that you're really eager to read and you literally cannot find a copy of it.

MT: Yeah.

KA: And it's hard, but it's worth it. And so you have to keep struggling through it and a lot of times it ends up, I read it once I get back because I finally found a copy, maybe even while I was in country. And books are really expensive in other countries, so I try to avoid that but if that's what I got to do, that's what I got to do right?

MT: Yeah. And the thing is, the reason they're hard to find is because they're not published as much because people don't think that all the white people in the U.S. are going to read them. So that's another thing I've found: the more we buy these books and read these books and talk about these books and share these books, publishers do take notice. They say, "Oh! So you mean..." 'cause it's money to them. So just like in 2020, when publishers saw white people were

actually buying books by Black authors, they were like "Oh, well then let's publish some!" Which they should have been doing all along!

KA: What a concept!

MT: But, so that's is definitely, that's how you can - I know not everyone has bookstagram and talks about their books, you could just post a book in your story at any - you never know who's going to see it. And just like, a small thing that you can do. And as someone who writes books, and is trying really hard to get people to see them, I know - like that's the way I love my neighbor as myself. I would love people to read my books, so I'm going to tell all the people I know about your book. Like that's what I want to do. And I just love reading, so. [Marla laughs.]

KA: I don't share about my books a lot on Instagram, but with this conversation I think I'm going to do that more often.

MT: Yay!

KA: I kind of get stuck in ruts and I'm like, "No one wants to be stuck in this rut," or like - I have an English degree and an M.Div., so I can get really nerdy and I'm like "No one wants to read about my really nerdiness!"

MT: You want to know what? That is not true. That is absolutely not true. There are people out there, they just need to find you, and they don't know that about you until they see your stack of nerdy books.

KA: Valid, valid! But I do log everything I read on Goodreads. And I try to put a one sentence or two sentence review on there. But I also, a lot of the work I do is for a Christian audience, and sometimes I really read things are really not for a Christian audience, so I try to include the disclaimer, "My book club read this," like that's the disclaimer of "Hey, maybe not safe for a Christian audience." [Marla and Katie laugh.] "My book club recommended this."

MT: Right, right. Yeah. Although I do encourage Christians, that was me. I read all Christian fiction all the time, it's another reason why I missed out on all this good stuff. And just telling people, "You know what? You don't have to agree with everything."

KA: Oh yeah, for sure, for sure.

MT: Or like, "These words or whatever, it's okay. You can do it." And again, I know. My mom, I would not be able to convince her. I have convinced her to read a few things but I know my limits. [Marla laughs.] But just saying, "You know this doesn't make you a bad person or a bad Christian to you open your eyes to what other people are writing about." But anyway yeah.

KA: Absolutely. I think it's helpful to read, although sometimes I'm like, okay I need to be - some people do see me as a pastor. I need to be really careful what this pastor is recommending.

MT: Speaking of that, a pastor in my small town – the small white town I was talking about – at a Mennonite church, he and two women, my high school English teacher who was in her seventies and another professor in her seventies, they met in the church library and read my book. Like did a book club of my book together, the book about becoming a heretic!

KA: Wow no way!

MT: They did it and they posted the photo and I'm like, "Okay this is wild!" Because since then I've had people in my small town who want to read it. I did send it to my parents after a while, I have not heard back from them. But yeah so again I'm not saying that you have to be like that pastor I'm just saying, things are changing and sometimes pastors are kind of leading the way. And it depends on how approach it! There's a lot - it's a lot of it is fear based and if you can show "We don't need to be afraid." Like, and I always say "If your beliefs can't survive scrutiny, or you can't read something else and still believe what you believe, then maybe what you believe isn't that great." It should really be able to hold up.

KA: Definitely.

MT: And don't you want to know if it doesn't?

KA: Yeah, yeah.

MT: Like no, we don't! But we should, we should want to know if it really - especially if your beliefs are harming people. That's another thing that I tell people all the time: you can believe differently for me, absolutely. We don't have to believe the same thing. If your belief isn't harmful, hold on to it and we can have different beliefs, but when your beliefs are specifically harming a whole population or whatever. Anyway.

KA: No, that's good.

MT: So we don't all have to agree but we shouldn't be harming people with the things that we believe.

KA: Agreed. And that's part of the show, right? I had to decide very intentionally if I was going to invite diverse perspectives on the show, I couldn't force my belief on them.

MT: Right, right.

KA: Like I remember sitting in an episode listening to someone talk about their personal experience and their personal belief, and not a word of it did I believe. And I had to decide in that moment, do I like, try to correct him? and I was like, no! Like, you invited them on this show to share their perspective. And I still have to use discernment in that, like I think - I call it "slant theology" where it sounds like it's true but it's not quite true. That I actually have a harder time with then the far out, there is absolutely no way Katie is a Christian believes this. But it's not about what I believe, it's about them sharing, creating space for that. And so getting to learn from them, I get to learn that their beliefs are very different than mine, but here's the common ground, here's what I can learn from them, and this is a concept that I can borrow myself. When you talk about like, I had this experience or I used to be in this all white community, I used to support Christian missions, those types of things. How did you change your mind? Like what advice do you have for someone who's in the process of changing their mind and adjusting what they believe?

MT: Okay so for me it literally was books. Like I have a poem in this book it's "I was this Christian girl with all the answers. I knew everything, it was great. And then something happened." And then the next poem is: Books Happened. Because that, I did start - now for me

it was the multi-ethnic church plant that we were with. You cannot change your mind unless you open your mind. If you go into something and you are determined that this thing that I believe, I will be holding firm no matter what I this person says. So then everything that comes to you from that person, you are figuring out ways that you can push it away. Opening your mind is not as simple as me just saying, "Just open your mind." [Marla laughs.]

KA: Yeah.

MT: We cannot. It's not an open and close. We have brain grooves and I don't know the science behind it all, but there are literal grooves in our brain that are worn by us repeating the same thing over and over again. And I realized that I read the Bible through like ten, fifteen times starting when I was little. I journaled every single day. I'm listening to the same things over and over again. Do you know how deep my brain grooves were? I was like, enforcing it. I was reinforcing it by writing it down every single day. Like, and even memorizing scripture is a way of making these certain brain grooves. Not that you can't memorize scripture! But things that we believe and repeat, over and over and over - that's deep. It's not "Open your mind," it's "How are we going to change these grooves?" So just saying like I said before, just being open: is it possible that what I believe about this particular thing is not the whole truth? Is it possible there is another perspective? It's just like when you're on a jury. The side that you hear first, you're like, "Yeah that sounds really like, legit." And then the side that you hear next, you're like "Ohh." But you have to hear both sides. And if you grew up hearing one side for thirty-five years, and you don't hear the other side until you're thirty-six - that's a whole lot of years to decide that this side is the right side. Like, opening your mind and reading diverse perspectives - and again, you're not going to find a book that you agree with every single thing that the author said. My dad had a book, accidentally that was sent to him instead of to me, and he told me he read it. And I was shocked and I was like, "Oh what did you think?" because a friend of mine wrote it. And he's like, "I disagreed with it." And I said, "Well which parts?" and he said "All of it!"

KA: All of it.

MT: [Marla laughs.] I'm like, that's not possible!

KA: It's not, yeah!

MT: You can't disagree - it's a book about the myth of the American Dream. And I was like, "No, that's not how this works." But just being open to hearing people's perspectives and here's the thing about what's so great about what you're doing is that, it's really hard to argue with someone's story. If I say to you, "This happened to me." Now maybe my interpretation, you don't agree with how I interpreted what happened to me, but if I tell you this story and you can't just say, "Well that's wrong, that's false." No, it happened, that's what happened to me. And so that's the danger, when you don't know people who believe different things from you, you don't know their story, you don't know. If you have not talked to a Black man who has had an encounter with the policeman, like our pastor who is Black was pulled over like all these different times, he was pulled over. And you're like, "Well that shouldn't happen to a Black pastor, that only happens to someone who's doing something wrong."

KA: No.

MT: No. It happens to anyone whose skin is Black.

KA: Yeah.

MT: So - but you have to talk to the people, and you have to listen to people, and you don't have people in your personal circle that are willing to share with you, then you need to go looking for people that you can listen to. How do you know who to trust? Well that's a tricky one. How do any of us know? You can find someone that you do trust, and then find someone that they trust. That's kind of the thing, just like book recommendations. If someone I trust recommends a book to me, I'll pretty much buy it immediately. Just because I trust this person. So you just got - you have to go in with as open a mind as you possibly can. And it will hurt at first. It will be hard. The cognitive dissonance will just, it will make you feel sick. But if you keep going through it, you will finally get to a place where you're like, what else can I learn? What else do I believe it's wrong? And it's actually freeing! And for me, who was constantly worried about how can I make sure that no one shakes my faith, now it's like, who else can I learn from that might have a challenge to this? And I'm not worried. And people do worry, especially evangelical Christians that one little chink in the armor and the whole thing crumbles and it's a slippery slope and it is. It actually is. But not everybody ends up in this terrible space. You can break down the pieces, and then rebuild them up. You're not stuck in the - you don't have to become an atheist. So yeah just being as open as you can, learning from people whose stories are different, like you're already doing. So people can actually just listen to your podcast as a start.

KA: Valid.

MT: Especially people who know you and trust you. That you are going to, yeah.

KA: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

MT: That's my advice. But I just encourage people, it can be scary, you can lose friends. They might come back, they might not. It shakes up a lot of stuff. But it's - I would not trade it for anything in the world. It's beautiful, it's freeing.

KA: And the other thing I would say is, you're never going to feel like you know it all.

MT: Oh my gosh.

KA: There's always going to be more to learn, you're always going to be learning from your own mistakes. That's the biggest thing is being willing to be called out, and be like "Hey that wasn't very nice." [Katie's next words sound sheepish.] "Sorry, I didn't mean it that way."

MT: Yeah. It still hurts.

KA: "This was what I was thinking, I was clearly wrong."

MT: Yeah. I haven't gotten used to that. I mean obviously I'm getting better, less mistakes. But what I have also learned, I had a Black friend not too long ago and she emailed me about something but I had said, like a phrase that I used. And I felt terrible and I apologized and I said all the stuff, and she said, "It's only because I love you. I wouldn't normally even bother telling anyone," because it's not worth it to her. She can't go around and tell every single person. But I am a friend of hers and I meant something to her and so she wanted to do that. So if we can

look at it that way - now I mean, not everyone who corrects you is going to be doing it out of love because they're your friend, but sometimes that will happen. And that's actually an honor, not - I mean once you get past the like, injury to your pride.

KA: Right, yeah.

MT: But yeah. And there's no way that we can go through without messing up. And I think that's the fear, but if you think about it, so we're going to do nothing? we're going to learn nothing, just because we're afraid? That's not good. That's not going to work.

KA: Yeah, no. If I can plug my own podcast one more time, episode {61} we talked to Leonard who was like the questions you have about race that you've been afraid to ask. So he was willing to answer all of our like, ridiculous questions, just like from white people to Black people. Like, what's going on here? Why do people want to defund the police? How is that going to help? Why is it okay here and not okay here? And unpacking all of that. So if you're starting this journey, that is a good episode to go back and listen to.

MT: And that is a gift.

KA: Oh, oh for sure.

MT: Like I said, we can't just - you can't just ask people. That's another thing. In 2020, so many Black people, like millions of them, were getting white people in their DMs, "So tell me about racism." Can you imagine that amount of, like it's called emotional labor. It's also time. Who has that kind of time? And they're living it. It's not their job to educate you. So listen to that podcast episode that Katie is talking about because there is someone who has said, "I will take this time, this hour or whatever, and I will answer these question and it's a safe space," and you can find a lot of that. There are a lot of people. And again, you can read their books. They wrote these books, you can pay fifteen dollars. They're getting some money from that, and then you're learning from them and not just expecting them to take an hour out of their day to tell you, this one white person, to catch you up on the last one hundred years plus of history.

KA: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, yeah. I had to go apologize to a friend of color, being like "I'm so sorry I forced you to educate me on all of these things."

MT: Yeah, and again we don't think about that! We're like, "Oh he can tell me," and we're not thinking that. It's another mistake that so many of us make. And so hopefully people that are listening. And that's kind of my thing, I want to help people avoid - mine was a long journey. We don't have that kind of time right now. You can't take ten years to wake up to racism like I did. You gotta to wake up faster. Let's go through how we can do this faster. There's not - it's not like a shortcut that you can do, a formula and here it is, or take one class and there it is. But you can absolutely avoid a ton of mistakes and time, by learning from other people who have already been through it for sure. Yeah.

KA: And if they recommend a resource: watch it, listen to it, read it, whatever it is, because they have taken the time to say "This is good." It saves them the time to have to explain it to you, and you can actually learn.

MT: Yeah, yeah.

KA: And then follow up with them. Be like, "Okay I watched this and didn't understand this bit, can you help me?" That I feel like is acceptable, but you have to take the time to utilize the resource they've recommended.

MT: Right, absolutely.

KA: Marla, this has been so much fun. What have I not asked you that you're dying to talk about?

MT: Yeah, I would love for people to check out my book. It's called Unbelieve, like I said. And I just poured my heart and soul into that. It's very much a faith deconstructing journey but an anti-racism journey, and it's in poems but they are - it's not traditional poetry. Some people have called it un-poetry. It's kind of like poetry and verse. Some of the poems are really short, some are longer but a lot of people are relating to it. Because I've found that there's a lot of people out there on that journey, like you're saying that there aren't nerdy people out there, yeah they are.

KA: I'm sure there are.

MT: We just have to find the people who are on this thing that were on, and it's just really great. Like almost everyday I get a message from someone and they say they resonated with it or it really helped them, and I love it. Like that's what I want to do, that's what you're doing here. You just want to, I don't know, put good in the world, connect people, learn from people, share stories in whatever way that we can do that and writing is how, how I like to do it.

KA: That's awesome. I love that. Thank you so much for sharing your time with us today, for sharing your perspective and the resources, so that we can shift our perspective a little bit to be more aware and continue to learn. It's been super helpful.

MT: And anyone feel free to send me a direct message on Instagram if you have a specific question about a book or you want me to point you in that direction. A lot of times I'll just go through, someone'll ask me and I can just tag them in my post.

KA: Perfect!

MT: I have like, I don't know how many posts. I've been doing this for five years almost every day, so I have got a lot of posts. And I can just show you that and you can just - it's not a ton of work for me, because then they can just go read what I already wrote about it. But it's hard to sort through all of that, all of those photos, and books too figure out what.

KA: I can't imagine promoting a book every single day for years. Like my mind is just blown by that.

MT: I love it. Like I have so many unread books, I've got. [Marla laughs.] It is time consuming but it is a labor of love for me. It's kind of like reparations, I'm giving back. Yeah, I wouldn't - I love it.

KA: What an awesome resource for yourself and the rest of us, so thank you for doing that.

MT: You're welcome.

[Theme music: upbeat electronica plays in the background as Katie speaks.]

KA: I loved getting to chat with Marla. Be sure to check out the rest of our conversation in episode {76} as we hear a few more of her personal stories. Like what it was like to be on the last flight out of Cambodia in March of 2020, and to leave her daughter behind in Cambodia in March of 2020. That story, and so many more, are in episode {76}. I hope you also take advantage of the wealth of knowledge that she is, and some of the book recommendations that she has. You can find those on Instagram at @WhiteGirlLearning. Also connect with her @MarlaTaviano. While you're on Instagram, I'd love to connect as well, I'm @KatieAxelson. Until I see you next, I hope that you are learning something fun, I hope that you've got some new experiences, and I hope you know just how big of an impact you are making on those in your world. We'll see you again in two weeks. Bye.

[Katie stops speaking and the theme music: upbeat electronica ends.]