

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & adrienne maree brown

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by the writer, editor, activist, and social justice facilitator adrienne maree brown, where I ask her: *Are We Imagining A Better Future Into Existence As We Speak?* Welcome to "Getting Curious." This is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited to welcome our guest this week. We need her. We need her work. We are so excited to welcome adrienne maree brown, who is the author of "Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good" and "Emergent Strategy, Shaping Change and Changing Worlds." You also host a couple of podcasts which we're going to get into you a little later, but on this podcast, we always ask a question, and this is one-

adrienne maree brown [00:00:51] Yes.

JVN [00:00:52] That we need to ask, which is, what future can we imagine into existence? And I think you're an integral person to ask. So welcome adrienne maree brown. How are you?

adrienne maree brown [00:01:05] Thank you so much, Jonathan Van Ness, for having me on your show. It's a pleasure, pleasure, pleasure, to get to talk with you about all these things. And yes, I love this as an opening question for me, because my work is all rooted in the legacy of the prophet, Octavia Butler. And I think all about the future and, both the dystopian and utopian, all the things. And in terms of the future we can imagine into existence. I don't think there's anything off limits. I think that we can imagine a future into existence in which each of us gets to have easy access to all the pleasure that is our birthright, that we all get to have easy access to belonging. And I consider myself a scholar of belonging. I'm always thinking, how do we get in right relationship with each other? How do we get back into a relationship of belonging to this planet? That is our home, that wants to nourish and feed us and care for us and gives us total abundance, which so far we have not made good use of. And I think we can imagine, you know, one of the things that I was taught by a friend of mine, Terry Marsha with Intelligent Mischief, is that the world we live in right now is someone else's imagination that we are living inside of someone else's imagination.

That told us white is superior, men are superior, able bodies are superior, that being straight is superior. And we are in imagination battles when we choose to live our own truths which go against those constructs which we, you know, you and I. Right? Are definitely living examples of deconstructing those concepts in our lives, in how we love and

how we interact with other people. We're already imagining the future into existence with every choice we make that is about being our whole unbridled, unfettered and post oppressed selves. Right? I always tell people we didn't begin with our trauma, right? We began as these miraculous beings made of stardust. And then trauma comes along and tries to make us constrict ourselves into being lesser, into being cogs inside of someone else's economic system, someone else's system of power in which they get to have it all and we don't get to have any. And then here we go, imagining a future in which we don't need those kind of competitive models of being with each other because we live on an abundant planetary system. Right?

We live in a world that, again, I say this all the time, it wants to provide us nothing but goodness and wholeness and everything we need. And our bodies are wired for pleasure. I don't think that's an accident. I don't think you accidentally end up with an orgasmic potential in a body. I think there's a reason for it. So the future, I imagine, we feel good, everything tastes good, we have enough, and our lives are not constructed by how we've been oppressed and what we're battling against. But constructed by what we are creating, where we are traveling, the spiritual adventures we get to go on, like, living the life that I think we are intended to live here.

JVN [00:04:12] Yes. OK, so this is part of why, this is part of what I'm really curious about, and I'm so excited that you're here because I wrote down when you were saying that, "abundance versus scarcity."

adrienne maree brown [00:04:24] Yes.

JVN [00:04:24] And I've always been, like, the law of abundance I think is fascinating. And I also think, and I've said this a lot on this podcast. But, like, if I did 10 amazing haircuts in a week, I feel like those 10 positive Yelp reviews, they go right out my-, like, I don't remember the good ones. The one that's like, "They took my fringe too short or the color wasn't right," that, the negative or, you know, the scarcity, the threat-.

adrienne maree brown [00:04:51] Yes.

JVN [00:04:51] That is what sticks with me. And that is something that bothers-.

adrienne maree brown [00:04:53] That is because you've been trained. Right?

JVN [00:04:56] And that bothers me.

adrienne maree brown [00:04:57] Yes.

JVN [00:04:57] And I want to unlearn that.

adrienne maree brown [00:04:59] Yes.

JVN [00:04:59] And I want to, I want to be more in the abundance and less in the anxiety of the fear of the not enough. And since that is so your wheelhouse, I was like, I need to learn more from her. I need to glean more of what she has got going on. And so I think, that's kind of, I just, your work is fascinating. And the way that you come into the world is so fascinating. And that's what I want. So what is emergent strategy? Who is this Octavia Butler? Tell us everything about-.

adrienne maree brown [00:05:31] Great. Everything I know. OK. I love it. Well, first of all, also, I wanted to say I was so excited, you know, your existence has been such a positive light, a bright light, a beam of light. And so, so exciting to get to crossbeam with you. Right? To be like, OK, let's shine together. Let's see what we can do. And I'm so excited that your podcast is about getting curious, because I actually think that is the key to abundance. That's one of the keys to living a life that is focused on what can be rather than what is not. Right? It's when you start to get curious and be like what we were given, that's not the way the world started. That's not the way things always have been. We're in a very specific set of circumstances in this moment, and there are circumstances that are designed to numb our curiosity. And so a lot of emergent strategy, a lot of what Octavia Butler taught was actually about that. Can we get curious about what is and then what could be?

So I'll start with Octavia. Octavia Butler was a Black science fiction writer. She was the first Black science fiction writer to start getting major awards for her work. She won the MacArthur Genius Award. And she wrote 12 novels, a collection of short stories and then a bunch of other texts that's unpublished or has been published that's living at the Huntington Library in California. And when she passed away, she, she left us this sort of legacy because her work was very much science fiction that all felt very palpable. And particularly, there's a series called the "Parable of the Sower" and the "Parable of the Talents." And there's a third unpublished text, the "Parable of the Trickster." But we got the first two texts and it's about this time period that we're living in. So it starts in 2024. And there's a president who's come into office, off the slogan, "Make America Great Again," who is like a white demagog fascist who has all these people like in-.

JVN [00:07:24] Wait, when did she write this?

adrienne maree brown [00:07:26] Yes. So she wrote this in the 80s. OK? So she wrote this in the 80s. And, and she was foreseeing. Right? Reagan, but she was also foreseeing this

moment that we're in right now. And what I think is so important about the, the work that she did, what she foretold. Here's what comes if we don't shift our behavior on climate. And here's what comes if we don't actually address race. And here's what comes if we don't address capitalism and the haves and the have nots. And the way that it produces so much danger in our system, if there's always a small number of people who have all the resources and the majority of us are fighting to survive outside of those walls. So, but the fact that she was writing this in the 80s and able to predict something was happening now gives us all, right, the potential of like, oh, we could be predicting, we could be seeing the future. We could understand. And if we can understand the future, if we can start to see it, we can start to shape it.

And one of her, her big lessons to us was this belief system written throughout her books called "Earthseed." And Earthseed is the destiny of humans is to take root among the stars. And she teaches us all that you touch, you change, all that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change. So in order to shape the future, you have to be able to shape change and understand that everything is constantly changing. Even the worst moments of our existence are temporary moments, nothing lasts. The best moments are also temporary. We can't get too comfortable in them. We constantly have to be engaging in the dynamic nature of the world we are a part of.

So, I am doing my social justice organizing and my facilitation while secretly reading Octavia Butler for the first, like decade of my career. And just reading her and being like she's onto something that I think we all need to be on to. We need to be looking at what is our relationship to taking and harnessing control of change, not letting change just happen to us, not just being victims of what other people have decided will be the conditions of our world, but actually getting our hands dirty, getting in the game and figuring out what is our adaptive potential? What is our interdependent practice? How do we decentralize power so that more of us have it and more of us get to make decisions about our own lives? So I'm reading her work, reading her work, and she sends me sort of down this path of emergence and starting to understand that there is a whole natural modality of the world that is absolutely beautiful and emergence, the sort of simplest definition of it, emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of relatively simple interactions.

So if you see a flock of starlings. Right? You call it a murmuration, they're moving and they seem to move as one body. And it's like three hundred small birds. It's like, how do they do that? There's not one bird being like, left, right, up, down. Avoid predation. No. They each are responsible for being in right relationship to seven other birds right around them and to both listening and following and leading and adapting and being in right relationship with change. And it's the simple interactions between them that lead to this potential of a

complex and beautiful movement. And I asked myself, what would it look like if human movements for social justice could murmurate like starlings? Right? Or move like a school of fish because we are in a state of predation. People are trying to take from us, right? What would it look like to move like that? And then I just kept digging further and further. And I was egged on by Grace Lee Boggs, who was a Detroit based organizer, who was like, "Transform yourself to transform the world." And Terry Hicks, who was a Detroit organizer, said, "Way to love."

There are all these people who are like, you know, you think about the white rabbit, right? Follow the white rabbit. Like, for me, the white rabbit was, like, all these seeds of people who were like, we could be in right relationship with each other. We could be in right relationship with the planet. But we have to get in right relationship with change. We have to stop being terrified of it or waiting for it to come. We have to get in and start to shape it. So fundamentally, emergent strategy is how do we get in right relationship with change? And it means everything that small matters because changes start small before they can get big. And we have huge visions for what we want to change in the world.

But so often people are like, "I have this massive vision and now nothing happened." And it's like, "Yeah, you have a massive vision. You had to figure out the smallest thing that you can start to do that would begin the snowball of that change." Right? That's how nature works. That's what we learn, it's like, can I get it right in one relationship? I always say this to people. We want a big visionary democracy. Do you practice democracy in your personal life? Do you practice democracy with your family? Do you practice democracy on your block? Right? If we're not practicing something on a small scale, we don't build up the muscle, the skill to change at a big level. So that's a little bit. How's that landing with you? Does that-?

JVN [00:12:31] Amazing. Yes.

adrienne maree brown [00:12:32] OK.

JVN [00:12:32] So I have a couple of questions that came up when you were explaining to me because I am obsessed.

adrienne maree brown [00:12:37] Great.

JVN [00:12:37] So what happens if. Because obviously we can, I think, theoretically, like, only control ourselves.

adrienne maree brown [00:12:44] Yes. Which by the way, that's a whole liberation. Right? Like, a lot of people don't understand that basic fundamental thing. You can control yourself. You cannot control other people. Right? So, yes. Good. That's some really awesome stuff.

JVN [00:12:57] So what happens if, because OK. So what, as you were saying, like, you know, the only thing that we can consistently rely upon is change. So we really need to get in, we need to get in, in a good relationship with change.

adrienne maree brown [00:13:10] Yes.

JVN [00:13:11] Then if I think about it politically.

adrienne maree brown [00:13:13] Yes.

JVN [00:13:15] Yes. We're always changing. So much of what 45 has made his whole, you know, money on and his, it's like this fear mongering thing. So he's really in on the scarcity and he's really into this idea of, like, well, "We've got to fight change. We don't want change. The suburbs are changing," which is obviously so much, like, coded racist, crazy fuckin' language.

adrienne maree brown [00:13:35] Yeah. Or it's trained. Right? Like, one of the things, I say this all the time is, is we get trained, we get taught, we don't come out the womb like, I can't wait to be a racist. Right? Like if you look at very young babies, you know, moving towards and away from people, we get trained away from our natural desire to connect with each other. And our natural desire to move towards and to be with because our natural desire doesn't have all the constructs around it. Right? We're not born like, "I have this vagina and I have this race," so, you know, we don't know all that. We're just like, I'm here. And then we get trained away from our, our interconnected, interdependent nature. So that and I say that because it's the one thing that helps me have compassion for adults who have been so thoroughly trained that they are completely disconnected with their own humanity. And I look at that and I'm like, oh, racism, which I think of as an insecurity, racism has been trained into your system. You don't believe that you are worthy unless you are putting down someone else. You don't believe that you matter unless you're dominating someone else. All that's trained behavior. That's not our human nature. So a lot of this is like how to return to our nature. But you're saying, the question you were going to ask. I'm sorry.

JVN [00:14:47] Well, no, not at all. It's like, it was basically like if you're dealing with someone who is very fear-based and they're, like, and so the dog whistle of, like, "Oh, well,

I saved your suburbs." Well, that is a very, like, scarcity, racist based thing because you're basically saying, like, "Well, other people besides classic white rich people are coming into the suburbs, so do you really want that change? Or is it, if it's not classically rich white people? Is it just people of different economic backgrounds are coming out into these suburbs? Aren't you scared of that?" So what about people who don't want to engage in change? Like what? How do we interact with folks who don't want to engage in change? I mean, sometimes people will come into my DMs, like, saying really, like, they don't know how racist it is, they don't know how, you know, trained they are. And I, sometimes I feel tired. But you know, I am going to take time to tell you why you're such an asshole. And then I, and then I do it. But then I don't feel, I don't feel great about it. And I don't, and sometimes I don't know if-. So, but, so for those people that, it's like, do we do? Are we not supposed to change people that aren't curious about changing within themselves?

adrienne maree brown [00:15:55] That's great. I love this question because I think part of it is everyone is cut out for different kinds of work. Everyone is cut out for different kinds of work. And for years, I did do work where I was directly front line and engaging with people who were like terrified of change. And that was something I was like, I'm good at this. Like, I can get in there with you and I can have compassion. 'Cause I'm like, I know that the fear is trained into you and that fear of scarcity, it's really hard to push back against when we live in a capitalist nation where almost every message we're receiving is "you are not good enough. You are not doing enough. You are not producing enough. And because of that, you will not get enough." And it's only by overdoing everything and changing your face and changing your hair and buying everything that we're trying to sell you. That's the only way that you might, might, might be good enough.

That's constant from the time we're young, until we get older. And then if you are, you know, I think if you have the burden of a privilege and I think of it this way, because the older I get, the more I see that privilege disconnects you from your humanity. It disconnects you from all the miraculous things about being alive. Right? So if you have the privilege of whiteness, for instance, you've been trained then on top of that, like, oh, you have something that other people want and you have to protect it at all cost and no one else, there's not enough for everyone else to have it. If you're a man, then it gets added onto, and it gets added onto, and gets added onto. And one of the things I do often is just sit down with people and try to get up under that, right? Is what are you so afraid of? Have you actually experienced that? So often when you get under it with people, they realize that they've been told a story that doesn't actually gel with any real life experiences they've had.

Right? So, again, this is where the imagination takes hold, is you look at so many the police killings, for instance, that have happened, Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Renisha McBride,

Sandra Bland. We look at these killings and the killings were able to happen because the police imagined they were in danger. That fear was ruling their behavior and that fear gets upheld in the court system. Right? They get off with impunity for acting in response to that fear. When you get up under that fear, none of those people were a threat to the police officers. They weren't a threat to anyone else. Right? The majority of us are actually not operating as threat to each other. We are trying to survive. We are moving through the world. Right? But that narrative becomes stronger than our lived experience.

So one of the practices I've been in for the past decade has been learning the practice of somatics, which is really getting people to drop in and feel again because we get, we get really brought into our brains and we're trying to just loop around in our brains and figure everything out. That's, like, actually our whole bodies are telling us things, giving us data. So even if our brains have been looped into a fear narrative. If you can get people to drop into their felt sense and sit face to face, heart to heart with someone that they've been told is supposed to terrify them. When they drop in and are in that circumstance, they can overcome. They can feel more data that says, "There's nothing actually to be afraid of here." And then you have to start to, this is where I get curious, who benefits from my fear? Who benefits from my scarcity thinking? Who benefits from me thinking that someone else is a danger to me who's actually not a danger to me?

And every time I ask that question, the circle of who's benefiting is a small circle that overlaps from every answer to the question. It's a small group of very wealthy people who are totally benefiting from all the terror that they are whipping up amongst us. And the president is a great example of this. He is someone who has very few skills in actually developing, producing, building, making anything good. The thing that he's great at is producing fear and then benefitting from the thing that he has produced. And for so many of the people who follow him, who pay attention to him. I think the question for them is, like, "Why am I so excited by the fear that this person gives me? How could I shift so that I would find pleasure from connection? Pleasure from community? Pleasure from actually getting to know people?" And I think a big question for us as a species is can we find as much pleasure in connecting and community as we currently get from punishing and fearing each other?

JVN [00:20:24] Well, I think what's so attractive to people that support him is this idea that he is helping to, it's weird because he kind of argues it on both sides.

adrienne maree brown [00:20:35] He's very inconsistent. Yes.

JVN [00:20:37] Like he wants to fight the idea of change. But then, on the other hand, he wants to change everything because he says everything has, like, always been broken and,

like, he alone can fix it. But then it's, like, so really that does paint him into such, it's so, to me, it feels so clearly racist.

adrienne maree brown [00:20:55] But I think the thing that's so important with him is that he is a symptom of multiple systems that function in contradiction. Right? So he, in and of himself, is not the most dangerous thing. But he takes up a lot of space. He knows how to be an entertainer. So we have, you know, I've been saying this, we have farce as politics. Right? He doesn't have a platform. He doesn't have a clear agenda. He is using, he doesn't even, I don't think necessary align with racists. Right? He just knows that he can use that to get himself more staunchly and clearly into power.

Which is what has happened so many times over the years, because he's able to easily play off of systems that are contradictory in their nature. Patriarchy, capitalism and white supremacy. He's able to stack these systems so they lean against each other and move. But the thing I think that we all have to be paying attention to is how those systems are moving. Right? The systems themselves are in a shaky and precarious place. And because they're in a precarious place, they are putting up all their defenses. And someone as bombastic and over-the-top as him is a defense mechanism, more than he's a person, more than he's a politic. He's defending white supremacy, defending capitalism, and defending patriarchy.

And those systems need to be defended because our movements have been so effective against them. Me Too called it out. Black Lives Matter called it out. Occupy Wall Street called it out. We are in this moment where all these movements came up and did major damage to these systems. And so the systems went into hyper defense mode. And we can't mistake that hyper defense mode for a clear politic. It's not. Right? Just like when, when someone attacks us, most of us are, ah! You know, sort of flailing. Right? You're flailing, trying to defend yourself, trying to stay alive. And well what we have to do is continue to push, continue to say, actually, we reject the whole system. It's not about this one person. It's not about even his administration. We reject all the systems that have supported this kind of rampant, dehumanizing way of governance, and we are ready to claim governance. And I think that makes it a very exciting time.

I think so many more people now at a fundamental basic level, understand, "I can't not engage. I have to engage, *and*." Right? So I'm like, you have to engage, do your basic voting duty because you're a citizen who pays taxes, and the vote is the way you determine how those taxes get spent. That's the basic level. And I also have to do other things on top of that. I think that makes this a very exciting time.

JVN [00:23:37] There's always an "and," honey. I always wished that there was an "or," but it seems like there's always an "and," so there's going to be and more with us, right after this break. Welcome back to "Getting Curious." This is Jonathan Van Ness. We have adrienne maree brown. So, yes, election. Yes, times have changed. And I love what we were saying earlier when you said that we all have a different role to play in imagining change.

adrienne maree brown [00:24:01] Yes.

JVN [00:24:02] And sometimes folks are going to be on the front line of dealing with people that are, like, you know, scared of change. Other times people are going to be helping like the activists that have been out there doing that. I mean, we're all going to be, like, in different roles and all have like a different lane to occupy. I think that for me, I personally have two issues with, with my role that I kind of have in activism and I think that other people will either identify or kind of not identify with that. And then I would love to ask these two kinds of things and then hear your answer and then to get into like all of your things, because this is not fucking about me. This is about you. But I do have a question.

adrienne maree brown [00:24:40] I mean, but it's your podcast, right? I mean, I, like, do my podcast and I'm like, this is what I want to talk about, so.

JVN [00:24:45] But I also want to use your expertise to, like, ask two of my questions, because I, because I just, I feel like it's all kind of like intersected with a lot of your work. So-.

adrienne maree brown [00:24:52] Good.

JVN [00:24:53] You know, I have Black Lives Matter in my, like, little bio on my Instagram. And I also have, like, "fund community, defund police" in my bio.

adrienne maree brown [00:25:01] Yes, yes.

JVN [00:25:02] There's a lot of people that have been, like, informed by a lot of, like, fear-based stuff on all sides. And it's like Ashlee Marie Preston says, like spiritual bypassing. Like you have to do so much spiritual, bypassing to like not understand, like, when when you hear the plight of Black Lives Matter. And then you, if your instinct is to say, "What about this? What about that?"

adrienne maree brown [00:25:23] Yes.

JVN [00:25:23] "What about whatever?" There's a lot of spiritual bypassing that has to go into that. And so if you have been brought into the path of someone who does not align with you, does not support, you know, "fund community, defund police," wants to push back on the idea of Black Lives Matter. That does create some amount of trauma. It's-.

adrienne maree brown [00:25:45] Absolutely.

JVN [00:25:45] I, I even notice my nervous system coming up, just trying to explain it. and I'm a white person, so if you're a Black person that's in that fight and you've been brought into contact with someone railing against Black Lives Matter, Do we even try to deal with people like that that are spiritually bypassing? And actually what about-ing and trying to fight something that, you know, to be morally false?

adrienne maree brown [00:26:06] Yeah.

JVN [00:26:07] Like is it worth the trauma? Like do, so do we stay in that fight with those types of people or do we, or do we walk away because it's like, and try to actually deal with people who want to learn and are capable of change? It's like eight questions in one, but-.

adrienne maree brown [00:26:20] No. But I think that, I think I have some things that I can offer back. So one is I really think that this is. I think it's really intimate and personal decision and I think it's intimate and personal work. And I really believe that the best work around changing hearts and minds happens in relationship, which doesn't mean, it's only, like, you're only responsible if you're friends. But I do think you have to be willing to get in a relationship where both people will be changed rather than, you know, what I think happens a lot, especially on the Internet and social media, where it's like someone says something and you're like, "I'm gonna yell you down, like I'm not going to try to connect you, with you. I'm not going to try to learn from you. I have no interest in what you're saying at all. I'm just going to scream you down until I'm blue in the face and then I block you." Right? Like, that has become a very common interaction. And, and I'm all for the block button. You know, I don't even mess around with it.

JVN [00:27:14] I struggle with that, adrienne. I do, I do.

adrienne maree brown [00:27:18] Because I really don't play. I'm just like, you know what? If, I'm very clear about what I'm trying to do in the social media realm and I block people very quickly, if I pick up on. I'm like, "You're not here for a conversation. You're not starting this with a question. You're going straight into a racist diatribe or a patriarchal diatribe or

something. I'm going to block you because you're not actually here to connect." But I think it's very different when I have interacted and people come to my events and other things and they'll ask the question where there's some racism in it or something else in it, but I can also feel their humanity or an actual curiosity or an actual like, because in the same way that I will sit here and be like, "I don't understand how you could think that." I know that there are other people who in their training are like and I don't understand how you could think what you think. Right?

And I have the blessing slash curse of having a wide range of political beliefs in my family, including I have white family who are Trump voters. Right? And I grew up going to visit them, I know these people. I know that they don't actually benefit that much from a Trump presidency. And yet they've been bought into that narrative. And so I'm, like, I see the whole range. And one of the things I think is really important is to figure out what is my right work and what do I have capacity to do in this moment. I think it's totally fair if you're like, I actually can't take it on because it is, it is a "spiritual darkness." You know, I think that are, actually, I've been saying a "spiritual paleness" because I've been really trying to flip even these things on their head.

JVN [00:28:50] Yes, I love that.

adrienne maree brown [00:28:51] It's a spiritual paleness or it's a spiritual blankness. Right? That exists in someone who is so disconnected from humanity that they really believe that, that any group of people could all be the same based on something as arbitrary as skin color or which vagina you were born out of or whatever else. Right? Like, that's such a random thing to then decide, I can assign a whole set of characteristics and I can, I can decide to be terrified. You know, I think it's one of the most interesting things to live in a country where what happened, you know, from my ancestors was we were brought we were snatched up from another place where we were home and had our own cultures and practices. We were all thrown in together, brought to another place, made to work tirelessly in that place for no pay for centuries, you know, like literally, then, it still hasn't really ended. And then had to fight for every small right.

But then the white people say, "We're scared of you. We're scared of you." Right? It is baffling, right? That it's like, so we have been terrorized and victimized by white people the entire time. And then for white people to turn around and be like, and we're scared of you. And you are dangerous. It's, it, that to me, right? It's like, whoa, I can't understand it. And I'm like, and that's how deep that training goes. That's how deep the white supremacist project goes, is that you can be causing harm while asking someone while they-, why are they harming you, why they could harm you. And one of the things we have to understand is if you don't see it as systems, it won't ever make sense.

So when I see someone, you know, I never think of it as a one to one interaction. I'm always looking at, here is a human being, what systems have influenced them? Are there systems they are still caught up in? And I ask that not as someone who thinks I am liberated from those systems. I don't think of myself as free from capitalism, free from white supremacy, free from patriarchy, free from ableism. I think of myself as trying to get free from those systems, which I was also trained into, which I'm trying to unlearn. And maybe I'm further in the journey of that unlearning, but I'm not completely free because I think if I was completely free, I would literally live in some other place, like, maybe in outer space or something. I'm just, I'm not sure that's, you know, possible to live in the United States and pay taxes in the United States and call yourself free of any of those systems.

So when I'm in a conversation, I'm like, here you and I are in the system and you're at the location where you deeply hold this fear and scarcity modality. How can I connect with your humanity in that place? And I will say I give myself permission to disengage if I don't feel like I can connect with that humanity. I don't think that that is then my work. I want to uplift the work of SURJ, Showing Up for Racial Justice, the work of the Catalyst Project, the work of White Noise, the work of groups who are, and I have, on my blog, I have a piece that's really specifically about white people, it's for white people. And I have a piece called "Relinquishing the Patriarchy," that's specifically for men. And both of them linked to long lists of resources of people who are available, who specifically focus on the decolonization and education work it takes to begin the unlearning process from those locations.

Because I'm a limited teacher. Right? I don't know what it's like to be a man or have a masculine experience. I don't know what it's like to be a white person or have that experience. I'm a Black queer woman. I'm fat. I got, I usually wear glasses. Right? Like, I know the experiences I know. And I can speak from those. And I think that in the identity politics realm, I think it's actually really important to be like, the experience I know is of being harmed by these systems. I don't know what the experiences of being uplifted within these systems and then having to give them up. I do know what it's like to be in a system of proximity. Right? I'm light skinned. I have a college education. There are aspects in which I have proximity to these privileges.

So that's been my work is, I try to get really specific with, you know, and I said this before, where we are born into privilege, our work is dismantling the systems where we have been born into oppression. Our work is reclaiming our power and actually reclaiming our right to exist within these systems. And I say this, you know, I think there are a lot of people in the white realm, that will listen to you, that wouldn't listen to me. And so I think it is important that you figure out how much of this can I take on? How can I use my platform to, you know, uplift, you know, lessons and decolonizing things? And how can I be in my own

practices? But you're not solely responsible for everyone, right? You have to figure out who can I touch, who can I be in an authentic engagement with? Who can I mobilize into different behaviors? And I think it's hugely important that you're asking the questions. Because asking the question is how we start to get to a new belief system, a new paradigm, a new way of operating with each other.

JVN [00:34:04] So it's intuition. It's using our intuition when we're working with folks to understand, like, where is the humanity in? And-

adrienne maree brown [00:34:11] Yes.

JVN [00:34:11] Like. And I think for anyone looking at a DM, it's probably, well, sometimes I can tell. When the DM is-

adrienne maree brown [00:34:19] Yes.

JVN [00:34:19] But I think a lot of times it is probably and, and it is OK to kind of disengage too, because another thing I've learned from Ashlee Marie Preston is like we do want to be a self Karen,.

adrienne maree brown [00:34:30] Yes.

JVN [00:34:30] Because like a self Karen is someone who is like, "I don't want, I want, I would rather get, like, a mani." And sometimes we do legit need a mani to do the self care. But if you're like doing the mani and like not doing the donating of the time and not donating like your energy. You're, like, trying to, to, to uplift and relinquish power and decentralize the power. Like we, you know, don't want to be tapping out of that all the time. I think so much of what you said is just, well, actually all of what you said is so freaking fascinating and just absolutely like, it's like it's important to know what you don't know and try to help to educate, like, based off of that. And, and kind of know, you know, where your lane is to inspire change, which is-

adrienne maree brown [00:35:15] Yes.

JVN [00:35:15] Also very fascinating. I think that another thing that so many people deal with when you talk about proximity to systems of power. So this is kind of a twofold thing.

adrienne maree brown [00:35:26] OK.

JVN [00:35:27] It's like, it's, like, the guilt. It's like the guilt that people will find from either. But I feel like sometimes your guilt is probably your intuition being, like, "You should probably be doing more," like, so...

adrienne maree brown [00:35:41] Yes.

JVN [00:35:41] I feel like sometimes the guilt is probably like a good thing. But then there's like what? How is that? How am I really trying to ask that question? It's like. How do? Well, because there's a difference between, like guilt and then there's a difference between shame.

adrienne maree brown [00:36:01] Yes.

JVN [00:36:02] So, and I guess it's just how do you get someone to, like, engage if they just don't want to engage or?

adrienne maree brown [00:36:10] Well, I will say this. You know, I think there's so many, there's so many layers to this question, actually, because I think there's a lot of reasons that people don't want to engage. Both people who, like, are actually causing harm. Right? So there's people, like, "I'm putting my energy out and I'm putting it out in a destructive way." And then there's a much, much larger portion of people who are not engaged at all and who don't believe that anything can change, who don't think they can get clear. They don't, they don't see a way forward.

And one of the ways that I have been very interested in creating change is by creating compelling paths for people to walk on. And, by making it feel good, by making it a pleasure to be a part of something, by making it, I think one of the biggest mistakes we make, even though I understand because we are so angry and we have the right to be angry, but that often we put our anger right at the forefront of our engagement with people who are potential, you know, agents of change or potential allies or potentially on our side.

And we start with the anger. We start with the beratement. We start with the bombardment because we're so angry, because the systems have been causing harm for such a long time. And then I'm like, OK, well, that's not a place that is an invitation and, you know, you can only invite for so long. So I think that one of the things we have to do is figure out where can I be a compelling invitation to invite people to begin this journey? And then how can I make sure people are doing the right first steps? So this is part of what, you know, I'm like, I know that my job is not to, for instance, be a police liaison and try to go up to police and be an invitation, a compelling invitation for them to lay down

their arms and, and recognize that they are part of a system that has, you know, my friend Mariame Kaba, who you should also totally talk to if you haven't yet. She's like one of the most brilliant thinkers.

JVN [00:38:02] We're obsessed. We love.

adrienne maree brown [00:38:03] OK. So-.

JVN [00:38:03] But she was saying on Twitter to like, but she was saying on Twitter, like, I'm getting fucking sick of explaining this shit to people, so we're like we're not going to reach out right now.

adrienne maree brown [00:38:11] Yes.

JVN [00:38:11] She's fucking busy right now.

adrienne maree brown [00:38:12] No, I mean, she says that. And she also is like one of the best at why abolition, why abolition now, what defund the police means? But one of things I love that she talks about is the policing system and the punitive justice system that we have in place now has had 250 years of well-funded experimentation time. And it has not made us safer. It has not reduced harm. It has not stopped rape. It is not, like, actually handled any problems. And I love that she makes that point because I'm like, OK, so I'm too angry with the police and I'm too upset with most of what the police do to be the person on the front line to engage them. But there is someone, there are people out there who that is the thing that they're called to. Is to be like, "Oh, I interface with that system."

And then there's other places where, you know, often I think of myself as someone who's like, I prepare the front line or I support the front line. I support people who then are going to go and do some of that more direct interfacing. I want to make sure that they can access their whole selves. I want to make sure that they can feel their whole selves. I can make sure that they're in right relationship with change because they're going to go out and try to make it. I think that if you're in a circumstance where you're like, I actually can't handle being in this conversation. That's the time to get curious. Right? Why can't I handle it? Can I not handle it? Because it's going to mean that I have to relinquish my power? If that's why, I actually need to stay in this conversation. If I can't handle it because I'm overextending and I've already given so much to these people who are oppressing me, then that's a place where you can draw a boundary. Right?

JVN [00:39:51] That's where it is for me, it's, like, "I've explained that!" It's like I feel like that.

adrienne maree brown [00:39:54] Yeah.

JVN [00:39:55] When I would, when it comes to like transphobia.

adrienne maree brown [00:39:57] Yes.

JVN [00:39:57] Racism. Homophobia, specifically. Like from, I feel like it's like I've explained it so many times and the information's there. It's like I don't, like that's what I, it's like, it's not that I'm relinquishing, it's like,

adrienne maree brown [00:40:08] Well, just really quickly I want to say on that piece, that that's why I made the resource list. Right? From, in my life, because I was like, I literally can't say this to you anymore. And I'm tired, you know, because I'm like, so you're telling me that, and this is again, how supremacy works. And I'm like, so you're telling me that rather than Google, rather than going and using a search engine to be like, where are some resources on this? You want to take up my personal time in my DMs or on the street or whatever to figure out this thing that I'm like, but this thing is literally everywhere. There's a million books on it, like it's everywhere. The analysis is out there. The practices are out there. There's a billion podcasts. You know, I'm like, and you, you're unwilling to do that. And so that's why I was like, here's the resource list. Don't ask me anymore. Don't ask me a, like in that way. Right?

JVN [00:40:54] Yeah.

adrienne maree brown [00:40:55] I'm just like you're asking me to do 101, but like I'm already at 301, I'm trying to build a different thing.

JVN [00:41:00] A graduate.

adrienne maree brown [00:41:01] Yes. Exactly.

JVN [00:41:02] I'm making a doctorate at university for people right now.

adrienne maree brown [00:41:04] Exactly. Exactly. Right? Or, and I'm also in my own unlearning of other things. Right? And I think that's the other part is we put people on these pedestals of expertise. And if, I want to make sure that no one gets them to those pedestal and stops their own unlearning. Right? So to me, I'm like, oh, when I clock. I'm like, oh, you're at a 101. But you're interested in, in changing. I know where to send you. For people who are like, I'm actively still trying to cause harm. I'm actively still trying to

damage you. I think right now the best move is to have those clear boundaries. Right? And I don't think those boundaries in, include engaging with that kind of troll behavior on the Internet. So for me, I'm very boundaried about that. I'm like, I'm not getting into a Twitter battle or something in my comments or whatever with people who are clearly just trying to distract me from my own life path.

And I'm like, that's what you're trying to do when you want to drag me into a conversation that A, I've had before. And B, is an illegitimate conversation. You. It's an illegitimate conversation if you're asking me to explain why my life is worth as much as your life. That's an illegitimate conversation I will not engage in. Right? But there's someone who will talk to you. And, and for me, moving myself into the right positions allows for the other people who are meant to do that work, to also be in the right positions. And I mean, I literally can't think of the last time I didn't interview, where I wasn't, like, Catalyst, search, like, I'm like, white folks, there are literally structures designed to support your decolonization. If you really care about it, there's a place to go.

JVN [00:42:41] So, yes. And then we're going to take a really quick break, we'll be right back with more after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious," this is Jonathan Van Ness. I will not lose my train of thought right now. So, yes.

adrienne maree brown [00:42:56] Great.

JVN [00:42:56] So that allows you to be into where you're kind of place to work is, and some of what I read about your work that I'm obsessed with in, in working with Octavia Butler, science fiction writer. And then how you say that, like, really all activism is science fiction in the sense that we're, we're imagining and literally creating a better future as we speak. We are imagining a better future into existence as we speak. We've been, people have been at it forever. But there's been a, definitely, like, a build in that energy, I think in 2020, which as uncomfortable as 2020 has been in a lot of aspects, there's also been a lot of growth and awareness and beauty that's happened here.

And I didn't mean to commandeer like 20 minutes of that to talk about my own fucking issues, because really what I want to hear about is how, 'cause when I think of activism, the word I don't think of in front of it is "pleasure." And the fact that you have created this pleasure activism space and really that's part of why couldn't figure out how to ask my question earlier about, like, guilt and shame, because so often I think that it's, like, especially now, I feel like I have for me and I think for a lot of folks. You don't put those things together because it's like you feel guilty about, like, experiencing any pleasure, like you want to like work, like I'm trying to, like, help people. Like I finally got a roof over my head. I don't have to be ADep, NHF for my HIV medication anymore.

adrienne maree brown [00:44:15] Yes.

JVN [00:44:16] Like I got health insurance. So like, like my, I'm not putting out as many, like personal fires. So now it's, like, if I want to go garden or if I want to, like, watch Gardeners' World or whatever, like I'm feeling kind of shitty about that. Like I have some guilt about that. And other people, I know I'm not the only one. I know that like that's for tons of people that it's like of every gender, race, ideology, like, well, the good ones anyway, like, you know, cool people that are like good, like not fuckin' assholes. But I think that that is kind of an issue, so how did you come up with this idea of, like, bringing like pleasure and activism together?

adrienne maree brown [00:44:46] Beautiful. Well, in the same way that Octavia Butler is the lineage for emergent strategy, Audre Lorde is really the lineage for pleasure activism. And one of things I always say is none of my ideas. I don't come up with these things. I just read and listen and observe and like, "Oh." So pleasure activism is really rooted in a lot of the work of Audre Lorde, particularly this essay, which you can, you can look it up and you can hear her reading it in her own voice. It's called "The Uses of the Erotic As Power." And it talks about how when we have felt the erotic aliveness run all the way through us, of something that makes us fully alive and say, yes, that it becomes impossible to settle for self-negation, it becomes impossible to settle for self-denial. And that's just one of the core concepts of it.

But it struck me and I started reading this essay and it's one of those things where I kept coming back and being like, "Wait a second." Like I thought self-negation and self-denial were just like how you're a good person. You know, just, like, "I'm nothing. I don't deserve anything. I just must work until I'm 63." Or whatever. And instead, it was like, no, all of that. That's the [inaudible] of oppression. That's the shaping of oppression is to make you feel bad if you feel good, to make you feel like your dreams don't matter and you should be in some subservient role to making someone else's dreams come true, to making someone else's imagination viable, to nursing someone else's child instead of spending quality time raising your own, to literally having your body only be for the pleasure of someone else who has more power over you.

And reading that essay and then also reading Octavia, a lot of Octavia's future imagined communities are very symbiotic and pleasure is at the center of them. And there's something compelling about the relationships that makes people want to stay and do the hard work of community, because community is always hard work. It's getting in, having to be vulnerable, having to be honest and having to do like the stuff that no one wants to do. Like, no one, you know, wakes up and just like, ah, I really want to be the person who's,

like, organizing all the, like, dirty recycling things they all put together. But it's like, OK, that does need to happen and we need to take out the trash.

And we need, you know, I'm a Virgo, so I like I kind of love cleaning things and organizing things. And yet even for me, there's stuff that I'm like, oh, ugh, you know, there's aspects of community work that I struggle with. I'm also more introverted. I'm like a loud introvert. Right? So I'm like, I really need so much more privacy. I never want to like, knock on doors. Like, it's just there's certain aspects of community work that are hard for me. So reading that work, it gave me some huge permission to be like, how do I actually move towards the things that reconstitute my wholeness and put me in right relationship with community.

So one of the big things about pleasure activism is it's not an individual activism. It's not just, like, "I go take baths and then everything's better." It's really like, you know, I want to make sure that everyone has access to hot water, good baths, good showers. I want to make sure that everyone has access to time off, has access to flexible schedules, has access to a living wage. I want to make sure that everyone knows that they're enough and that they can have enough. And I want to make sure that everyone has the skills of boundaries. So those are some of the core aspects of pleasure activism. And one of the things that happened as I was pulling it together is I started to really look in the realms of sex and drugs. And I started my political work in the harm reduction coalition. So the first thing I learned was harm reduction principles, like actually the user has to be the one who decides if they want to, you know, abstain or if they want to reduce their harm. You can't force that on someone. People have to choose it themselves.

That has shaped everything about how I engage community. So I'm like, oh, I'm not going to force anyone to control anyone or manipulate anyone into their own freedom journey. I have to make freedom compelling. But they're the ones who are going to have to decide if they want to come towards it. And that is such a humbling truth to live inside of. But the pleasure that comes from focusing on making sure I am as free as I can be and then that I am making it as available as I can to as many people as I can. It's a pleasure. I live a very pleasurable life. The kind of messages I often get from people are here are the ways I got more free today. Here's the way I loved myself today. Here's the way, I un-, you know, I think about the decolonization practice. Here's how I decolonized from the idea that my life was only as worthwhile as capitalism deemed to be. Right?

Here's how I decolonized and reclaimed that my life is valuable because of the care that I gave to my parents. My life is valuable because of how much I loved my queer partner. My life is valuable because I exist, because I exist. And getting more people to understand that, you know, especially the people who are, we don't look to as like, "Oh, your life matters as much as everyone else's." And this is why, I was just listening to your interview

with the Alicia, because I'm, I'm talking to her later this week about her new book, "The Purpose of Power." And I was so excited that you were talking to her specifically about domestic workers, because that's also for me, a part of the vision from me, for the future, is that every kind of job, no matter what you're doing, part of the way you know, you're valued is that your life has space in it for pleasure. That your life has space in it to be honored as a person who deserves pleasure.

And by pleasure, I really mean happiness, contentment, joy, satisfaction. Right? That you get to be satisfied. And I often ask people this too, is like, "Are you satisfiable?" Which is something I learned in somatics, is like, do we even know what it looks like to have our needs met? Would we understand it? I think this is actually really important for organizers and activists as we are making demands and as we are shaping the world. We also need to know that we are satisfiable. That we can construct something that would meet our needs. That that doesn't feel impossible. Because if it does, then we're constantly reaching, reaching, reaching, and we never get to rest in the work that we've done and celebrate it.

So some of the tangible things I bring to my facilitation, to the work I do in movements is where do we increase our, our capacity to celebrate ourselves and each other? How do we increase the sustainability of the work that we're doing? So that we're not working ourselves to a point of burnout, working ourselves to death, literally, but actually working in ways that we all get to live very long, beautiful lives where we continue to be radical. I want to be a very old radical person. Right? And show that that's possible. And then where do we do boundary work so that we understand: "This is mine, this is yours?" That it's not all porous and everyone's carrying everybody else's load, but it's like, we lean on each other. Interdependence is such a beautiful thing and it comes from having really good boundaries and really clearly knowing where it is you're trying to get to.

JVN [00:52:05] Wow. I'm going to cry. Interdependence is such a great term that I learned in therapy. Love interdependence.

adrienne maree brown [00:52:14] Yes.

JVN [00:52:14] It means that like, well, correct me if I'm wrong, but it means like that we're all independently stable, but we're also, like, independently, like, really benefited by each other's completeness.

adrienne maree brown [00:52:27] Yes.

JVN [00:52:27] Like we're not completing each other.

adrienne maree brown [00:52:30] Yeah. So I think of it as like, you know, I often think of it literally showing people as like if you're, think if you're leaning on each other. Dependence, co-dependence says when you're leaning so hard on each other that if one person stepped away, the other would fall down and like couldn't exist. Independence, right, is where we're literally kind of leaning away from each other. Like me. I got it all. I don't even need you at all. And interdependence is when we're, like, just in right relationship, or where we're like in conversation, we're touching. And I think of like mycelium underground. They're all woven with each other. They're all interconnected. But each one is up to its own work, up to its own task. And they're in right relationship.

And I look at emergent strategy often for my models of interdependence, because I look at healthy ecosystems and I'm like, if you look at an oak tree that has mushrooms growing along it and a nest in its branches and those little baby birds are being born up there, they are in an interdependent structure. Right? And they all need something from each other and they all provide something to each other. But they're not in a situation where they can't survive without each other. If one part of the system is taken away, they adapt and they figure out other ways to codepend-, to interdependent each, with each other. So I think about that a lot when I'm looking at how is this organization or community or even a family working with each other? Everyone doing their own thing. But can they ask for what they need?

I think one of the core practices and I've been, like, on my Brené Brown trip it's like you have to be able to be in good practice of vulnerability in order to do interdependence well, because it requires literally the opposite of, again, how capitalism, how capitalism is often training us to be like put on a, put on a perfect face. Act like you've got it all together no matter what's happening. You go cry in the bathroom quietly and then pull it all to, get your makeup back together before you come back. And one of the things I'm actually grateful for from the pandemic, as, you know, any time there is these things that are sweeping through and giving us great harm and great pain. There are also ways that it exposes the beauty of our humanity.

And one of the things I'm so grateful for showing is now so many more people are just like I'm at home and shit is not together. And shit is actually a mess. And I have been on so many meetings where you could tell someone had just been crying and we would take them in and be like, are you OK? What's going on? Because that barrier. Right? The barrier of fakeness and being in the office, being fake, is not there. It's like I'm in my house. And like, I'm overwhelmed. My friends who are parents are like, I'm trying to be in a meeting with you while a child climbs over my head and stomps over there and knocks something over. But I love all that because I'm like, can we try on being human beings inside of everything that we're doing? It allows our interdependence to flow.

And that's one thing we learned from nature, right? Is that we are nature. We're not separate from nature. We're not some overlords of nature. We are natural beings. We need touch. The pandemic has been heartbreaking for that. I spent three months with zero human contact. Which I'd never had before in my life. I learned so much about the need for touch. We need to be able to be vulnerable. We need everyone to bring whatever healing modalities they have to offer. And earlier you were saying something about spiritual bypass. And one of the things I think about a lot is, this is not a pleasure bypass. So this is not like a hedonistic escape from feeling what's really happening in the world. It's actually really engaging the reality that even amongst our grief, even amongst our suffering, we have a capacity to feel pleasure. And in fact, it's that capacity that often helps us continue to move through.

It's actually a motivating factor for our activism is to feel good for longer and more, and with more people, these are the practices. And now with COVID, it's like if you want to live longer and have more safety, you have to learn these skills. Our interdependence means learning to say, do you have a mask? When was the last time you were tested? Are you in a pod? Right? Are you trying to negotiate the terms of your pod? Like to be in a different set of questions because we still need the pleasures of each other.

JVN [00:56:49] So it was really interesting when I was like, how did you get pleasure and pain to go together, or pleasure and pain, who says that? Pleasure and activism to go together?

adrienne maree brown [00:56:58] It's like for some people, yes.

JVN [00:57:00] Yes, exactly. But it's like, it's like where is your pleasure coming from? And to me, it's like when I asked that, I was thinking like eating a bag of powdered donuts in the basement, watching, like, the 1998, like, World Figure Skating Championships, like after Nagano, because like who was there? I can't remember. I just want to like, you know, I just want to turn off for three hours and just like watch figure skating from the 90s and like not have to think. But is that really pleasure or is that actually like numbing and escaping? And so it's kind of thinking about like, what is it? Isn't pleasure, really helping, helping folks, creating more space? So there's a difference between, like, it just kind of getting more curious, like, well, what does the pleasure look like? You know, to you? Which I think is really important and amazing. And then the other thing that I was thinking of when you were is, as I was taking that in, is that. Oh, my gosh. It was right there, then I got, and then thinking about Michelle Kwan and Nagano got me distracted. It is. Stand by.

adrienne maree brown [00:58:03] Well, I will say, as you find that, I love that you made the distinction between numbing or coping and pleasure. Because for me, so much of it is. You know, the question I ask myself is, like, "I, am I trying to feel more or do I need to feel less right now?" And ultimately, for me, pleasure is about being able to feel more. Like I feel pleasure when I'm like, oh, I'm sober and I'm just paying attention. I'm happy. And I've made good choice and I feel very satisfied by the experience I just had. But sometimes I can't get all that. And I just need to numb myself and I just need to cope. And I just need to get through. And I'm a disassociater. So when you talk about-

JVN [00:58:42] Same.

adrienne maree brown [00:58:42] The donuts in the basement and I'm like, I love that shit. Like, I am so grateful for the gift of dissociation. But I also am grateful that I know the distinction between dissociation, which I used to think was pleasure, and I would do all, you know, I'd get super high. I have tons of sex. Da, da, da, da. And I like it, none of it satisfied, not of it filled the hole. None of it-

JVN [00:59:02] That's what it was! Am I satisfiable!

adrienne maree brown [00:59:04] Yes!

JVN [00:59:05] OK. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I also am a massive disassociater.

adrienne maree brown [00:59:11] Yes.

JVN [00:59:12] Obsessed with it. Learning more and more about it all the time. But really what is pleasure and understanding what is pleasure, what is numbing. Then the other thing is, am I satisfiable? And I think that's, as you were saying that I got, I welled up. And I.

adrienne maree brown [00:59:27] Yeah.

JVN [00:59:28] You know, my goals have always changed. Like, through my life. But from a very young age, I always had this goal of, like, if I can prevent anyone from feeling what I have felt, like, that's what my goal is. And so that has been such a motive-, whether it was surviving abuse, whether it was, you know, being gay, whether it was eating disorder, whether it was drugs, whatever it was.

adrienne maree brown [00:59:51] Yes.

JVN [00:59:52] It's always been like I want to help prevent other people from suffering from this. But at some point, that really sweet intention that comes from a part of me that's really beautiful and like, lovely.

adrienne maree brown [00:59:56] Yeah.

JVN [00:59:57] At some point that transferred from if I can help anyone to if anyone is suffering, I haven't done enough yet. That has really become, like, kind of like a malicious cudgel because it's actually been in me from becoming satisfied. And I think that that's part of why when people, when I do encounter, like, other people's pain and other people's stuff, it's like, I, like my ability to, like, be selectively permeable. It's like it makes me really sad. And whether it's someone's willful, spiritually bypassing of stuff and the frustration that comes from that, or if it's like someone's literally suffering and oppressed from a horrific system that's really unfair. Like, sometimes it's that. And I feel like I can feel equally, like, awful or useless from either one of those things.

adrienne maree brown [01:00:53] Yeah.

JVN [01:00:53] And I think that it's like, am I satisfiable? Like, if the question is, am I going to be capable of, like, alleviating that from folks like collectively? No, girl. And-

adrienne maree brown [01:01:05] No, you'll never be.

JVN [01:01:07] But I'm sure I have helped. I, in fact I know I have helped folks.

adrienne maree brown [01:01:12] Exactly. Exactly. I mean and this, I love this is one of my favorite conundrums that happens for us. It's like my good intention. Right? I want to, I want, you know, like I even think of this just as a big sister. And like, I don't want my sisters to suffer. I don't want anyone to suffer. I don't want them to go through what I went through. And, but, but the beautiful thing about being a human being is we are definitely going to suffer. It's part of the project, right, is part of the thing that shapes us. Is there's some suffering, that is what makes us who we are. There's some suffering. And it's going to change over time, over centuries, over decades, over generations, over belief systems. So what I imagine that people will suffer for, from in 70 years will be different from the suffering that I'm doing now. But there will still be some of that.

And I think some of that is the journey of being a human being is coming out of belonging, and then finding your way back towards it. And I am of the belief that, like coming into life is suppose to teach us something. And then death is a way of finding relief from that lesson. It's like, OK, now I get to come back into the hole. I get to come back into total

interconnectedness. But while I'm apart, I have to be figuring out what it's like to be in this space. How do I still find belonging? How do I still find the beauty? And for me, being satisfiable is in those moments of connection, which I know are also temporary. Right? This is one of the hardest things for me.

Every time I fall in love and I am just like I just want it to be like that first five minutes where you're just like I just want to fully connect with you and then, you know, things change. I'm like, oh, you have other interests than just me all the time? Weird. So then I have to be like, right, how do I be satisfied with my exciting life and your exciting life coexisting? You know, right now I'm in a love experiment like that. Where I'm like, I'm so satisfied by living and loving the person and I'm like, how did I learn to do that? So I think about this, about what, how can I be satisfied inside of the choices I can make? Right? And there's something that I've learned from the semantic work I've done called "conditions of satisfaction," where you articulate here's what I'm longing for. Here's the world I want to create. And then here's who I longed to be inside of that. Right?

'Cause I think that's one of the distinctions I'm always trying to work with people on, like, OK. So you want an abolitionist world inside of that, who would you have to be? Right? I'm like, oh, I would have to be someone who practices transformative justice. I would have to be someone who doesn't try to cancel people when they do harm, but tries to figure out what right relationship and clear boundaries look like. And I have to be someone who believes that people are not their worst day or their worst behavior. I would have to be someone who believed that. I would have to believe that intimately, even in my, in my familial and my intimate and my friend relationships. That's what I would have to practice in order to see an abolitionist future. Right?

So if I want to do that, then my conditions of satisfaction are, oh, I need to make sure I'm in right relationship with all the people I'm in relationship with. So I have spent the past four years really in a practice of getting in right relationship. Right? Where it's either I know the boundaries or the connection is clear. And I'm in a thousand percent honesty. Right? I'm really in a practice of like, I don't lie. So I either don't say a thing if I can't say it, you know, I can't say the truth and I disengage. I'm like, if this can't be an honest relationship, then it's not a relationship I can be in. And my conditions of satisfaction feel very met by who I am in circle with right now. There's no one in my life right now that I have to lie to or lie about what I want or deny myself in order to be in, in a relationship.

So I, I'm like, get it down, you know, always with whatever big vision you have in the world. What is the way that you can bring it into personal practice in your life on a daily basis and how well you know, you've satisfied your own practice of that? Right? And I think you can have lots of conditions of satisfaction. For you, you know that you're changing lives. You

know that you're changing lives. You know that you have changed some lives. So then I think a good thing is what would be your conditional satisfaction for your life when you die? How many people's lives do you want to have shifted and changed and touched? How do you want to change them? How will you know you've changed them? Is it because they tell you. Is it because of new interactions you're able to have? Like how will you know that you have satisfied that desire, that very sweet and good desire in you to impact the world and change other people?

And I have gotten, it's much smaller, used to be, like, everybody has to be free. Now I'm just like if I am really able to meaningfully impact a hundred people, to have one hundred people in this lifetime look at my work and find something in it that allows them to fully liberate themselves, really fully liberate into their whole selves, I'll be satisfied. And so now I'm figuring out like what is a whole, how do I know that? And I'm really in the question of it. Like, how do I know? You know, I meet people who will say that. They're, like, I read "Emergent Strategy" and it changed everything about how I live my life. I'm like, OK, what does that mean? What does that mean? And how can I let that satisfy me that there's nothing else I have to, you know, I felt that when I finished writing "Emergent Strategy," I was like, maybe I'd never have to write another word because that, it felt so meaningful what I had received from the universe in that text.

And then pleasure activism came and I had that same sense of like, that's it. That could be a whole offer. That could be my whole offer. I may never write another word, although I'm a writer, so I keep writing things. But, but I want to feel that satisfied by what I have put out that I'm like, even if I don't do anything else around this work, just reading it will put people on a path towards their own liberation. I'm really excited about that too. It's like, how do we either ask questions or instigate people towards their own liberation? Because really, that's the fundamentals of harm reduction too. They have to decide themselves to get free. Harriet Tubman told us that. You know?

JVN [01:07:11] That literally leads me to kind of the yogini recess of this of this episode, which is like when we always get to the kind of last thing. But I feel like this is just so critical. And I also think that it's probably what it all like the roads have led to this. So I feel like I've interviewed lots of people. I've had the opportunity to, like, get to do this with so many people. I don't know if I ever felt such the level of, like, self-awareness. Like, I mean, I've had like some part of my body hairs have been on end, like since we started chatting. Like you are-.

adrienne maree brown [01:07:48] Beautiful.

JVN [01:07:49] Just really just so-.

adrienne maree brown [01:07:50] Me too.

JVN [01:07:52] Really?

adrienne maree brown [01:07:52] Yeah. I'm really here with you. I'm like, yeah.

JVN [01:07:55] So I feel though that, like, for, in terms of what future can we imagine into existence. My feeling is, is from the time we spent together. You're like a, like, you're not even just like a doctor of that question, you're like a fuckin' highly skilled surgeon who, like, you started schooling, like you started going to school on this question when you were probably like three and you didn't even know it. Like you got so many fucking degrees.

adrienne maree brown [01:08:24] Yeah.

JVN [01:08:24] So if there's someone listening to this that is, like, just very much lost, like very much having, like, their "Jonathan in 2012," like, they are, doing the, having sex with every, like with every stranger.

adrienne maree brown [01:08:35] Yes.

JVN [01:08:35] "Yes, get in line." Like and they are doing drugs, they are doing the tapping out.

adrienne maree brown [01:08:40] Yes.

JVN [01:08:40] Like they are so far away from knowing how to imagine the future they want to see. Like that just feels so far away from, like, what it's, like, "I'm trying to make the house not get burned down or like, get one more hour."

adrienne maree brown [01:08:53] Yeah.

JVN [01:08:53] "Not putting something in my body."

adrienne maree brown [01:08:55] Yes.

JVN [01:08:55] "That is, probably I don't really want there." What is, how, what is the like first thing that someone would do to start to imagine the future they want into existence? If they are just not even on the beginning of this journey yet? But want to be.

adrienne maree brown [01:09:12] Yeah, I mean, I'll tell you what I did, which is I started writing science fiction. And I really wrote and like I try to write myself into a future that I would want to be a part of, write a self, a version of myself that I would want to be. And when I started writing it, it broke me so far down. It still makes me emotional to think about, like how far I was from that and how impossible it felt. And then I'm 42, and I'm basically there. Right now. And so that's like 20 years of work, you know, spiritual work and political work and other kinds of work. But I'm so happy with my life and it feels like one of the things I wrote was "I want to be a happy Black woman."

Like I want to reclaim the joy that is possible in my life. I don't want to live an entire life that is defined by someone else's imagination of me, that I am only to be in service or only to be a danger. I know that's not true. I know that I'm a being of love and a being of generosity. And I have a direct relationship with the Divine. And I know that all of that is meant to pour through me in this lifetime. And I wrote that down. I wrote a world in which that can be true. And it was a world in which people were in really beautiful, honest relationships with each other. And the world was not less terrifying. Right? The outer world was still doing what it does, which I think it will continue to do. Like I think the human experiment is a long, long, long arc of trying to figure out what it means to just be happy and return to God. But in this moment, I have to be responsible for my own relationship.

And I think of it as the Divine in the way that Octavia says, "God is change." So I am in direct relationship with change, and when I don't like what's happening in my life, I work with other people to figure out how could this change? "I know I'm never by myself," that was the other thing I wrote, which was so terrifying because I was so isolated in my mind. I had people around me, but I didn't know how to actually connect. So all of that fucking and drugging and dancing and there was so much of it that was like, I'm in here, come get me, see me. Like I want to be touched and known for real. And I just had no idea how to, and I just had to break it all down. I mean, I wrote it, I want to be known. And so I think maybe that, maybe write a sci fi story about a version of yourself that is known. And see what happens. Right?

JVN [01:11:50] Yeah, I mean, well I feel like that's just like, yeah. I mean that's just like then the end credits come up. There's like literally like there's nothing I can say to end that. Like that's just-

adrienne maree brown [01:11:59] Yeah.

JVN [01:12:00] I mean, you're just so amazing. adrienne maree brown, thank you so much for your time and your work.

adrienne maree brown [01:12:06] Thank you.

JVN [01:12:06] You're just ah, ah!

adrienne maree brown [01:12:08] Thank you, Jonathan Van Ness.

JVN [01:12:10] Yeah.

adrienne maree brown [01:12:11] This has been-.

JVN [01:12:11] You're amazing.

adrienne maree brown [01:12:12] So beautiful. I think you're amazing as well. I'm so grateful for your existence and that you're doing this work. That you are asking people to get curious again and to be on this path with you is so brilliant. And I love it. And I'm glad I got to be part of it.

JVN [01:12:27] Thank you so much for your time. You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was the writer, editor, activist, and social justice facilitator adrienne maree brown.

You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.

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