

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness 200th Episode Special

SEGMENT ONE

Intro

[00:00:00]

JVN Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness, and today, I am so excited because we're celebrating our 200th episode and five years of the show.

Honestly, I could kind of cry sitting on this chair, saying this. I'm just, I'm so honored and so proud that you all are listening, and that *Getting Curious* is touching your lives, and just, thank you so much for your support and for your listening. I am so grateful to each and every one of you. Every guest, every listener, our producers, our team, thank you so much everyone, I love you so much.

We've interviewed so many amazing guests, we've learned so many invaluable lessons, and gotten way too good at making Taco Bell references for them to not be our sponsors.

We wanted to kick off today's show with an act of care. Here are some of our favorite conversations about how to be our best selves, without becoming what our friend Ashlee Marie Preston calls a self-Karen.

GC 135 - Dr. Doreen Dodgen-Magee

[00:01:02]

JVN We have Dr. Doreen Dodgen-Magee, you are a doctor, you are an academic, you are a researcher. And you're an author, and you're a speaker! So is it really true when people say that, like, our psyches develop between the ages of, like, 0 and 7?

DOREEN DODGEN-MAGEE You know, it's so interesting. Yes, that was the research when I was in graduate school 8,000 years ago. But now we know at literal-, at least with the brain, at least neurologically, we know that new synapses, new neural wiring can happen all the way through age 80.

JVN Ah!

DOREEN DODGEN-MAGEE I know. Isn't that great news?

JVN Yes.

DOREEN DODGEN-MAGEE And neuroplasticity just means that even if we've created some really tricky habits, we can uncreate the neural tendency to engage them.

JVN Okay. So neuroplasticity is?

DOREEN DODGEN-MAGEE Neuroplasticity means that the brain can change its wiring. So, for instance, when we interact a lot with screens, we push the wiring in our brain to a certain region and it's more the left and lower region of the brain, which is kind of this very linear, linguistic, logical, very automatic. But we know that if we change our behavior, so we expose our brain to something new because the brain wires together where it fires together. So if we expose the brain to boredom, then maybe we push the wiring into the other parts of the brain that are more creative.

JVN Oh my god, I love boredom. I miss boredom. I really miss boredom.

DOREEN DODGEN-MAGEE That's my whole new goal is to invite the world to a boredom party.

JVN Yeah, I miss being bored. I used to, boredom used to be part of my self-care.

DOREEN DODGEN-MAGEE You write about it in your book. I mean, I wish I could talk with you about your book this whole time, but you referred many times beautifully to how boredom pushed you to develop kind of this strong sense of self that-

JVN I did.

DOREEN DODGEN-MAGEE I know! I know. No, I, I can't even tell you how much I love your book. And, and that I kept thinking if we only encourage that now. And, you know, when you were growing up, probably you were forced to be bored some of the time. But now children and youth and young adults never, ever have to be. Which means they have to privilege boredom and create opportunities for it. And if they don't have anyone modeling that they don't.

GC 187 - adrienne maree brown

[00:03:18]

JVN I'm so excited to welcome our guest this week, who is the author of *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* and *Emergent Strategy, Shaping Change and Changing Worlds*. Welcome adrienne maree brown! 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 It's, like, for some people, yes.

JVN 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 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 Same.

adrienne maree brown 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 That's what it was! Am I satisfiable!

adrienne maree brown Yes!

JVN OK. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I also am a massive disassociater.

adrienne maree brown Yes.

JVN 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 Yeah.

JVN 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 Yes.

JVN 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 Yeah.

JVN 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 Yeah.

JVN 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 No, you'll never be.

JVN But I'm sure I have helped. I, in fact, I know I have helped folks.

adrienne maree brown 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. If there's some suffering, that is what makes us who we are.

GC 178 - Dr. Edith Eger

[00:08:27]

JVN On this week's episode we have, I mean, honestly, the most incredible guest we've ever had. You are a best selling author. You are a psychologist. You are a Holocaust survivor. Welcome to *Getting Curious*, Dr. Edie Eger. How are you, Dr. Edie?

DR. EDITH EGER Oh, I'm great. I'm so happy that I meet you. I know you do a lot of good. You are such an ambassador for peace, for us to finally form a human family and hold hand in hand. So I'm gonna look at you as the ambassador for peace and goodwill.

JVN I look at you as the ambassador of peace and goodwill, and I'm-. I am. There's, I don't know if there's a word strong enough for how flattered I feel that you would say that and give me your time. So I thank you so much.

You grew up in Hungary amidst the rise of Naziism. You were an aspiring dancer and gymnast on an Olympic trajectory, which if anyone knows anything about me, it's that I am obsessed with the Olympics. Especially gymnastics. So I kind of want to just hear about your-, you know, some of your child, your childhood before, before everything, before you experienced your trauma, and before that happened. I mean, you were an aspiring young girl gymnast.

DR. EDITH EGER And I am an idealist. I am very, very grateful to have the talent. I did not ever think of anything other than, than sing at a Budapest opera house. And I did not ever think, ever, for what was to come. I had no idea. I was very happy. I remembered that I was doing my choreography as I was walking to school. I was constantly thinking about dancing, performing and being a very special child of God. And then there was a knock on my door. And, you know, when I grew up as a third daughter in my family, I also was the runt. And I remember that my sister, Klara, was the, the talented violinist and Magda was playing the piano. Many people didn't even know I existed. I would say I'm Klara's sister. I didn't have a name. But then my mother looked at me very seriously and said, I'm glad that you have brains because you have no looks.

And you know what? It's very important for us to really go back, and the messages that we still carry with us, that they give us a name. You're the responsible one. You're the funny one. Just like Shakespeare, you know, put us on that, on that stage. And I became the runt, and I spent a lot of time alone. And you know what I tell you today? If you're not happy alone, you're never going to be happy with anyone else. So I think it's very, very important, again, to really be congruent, to think where your head is and, and, and see how you have a goal, that you have an arrow that you follow. Because when I came to America from

Germany and there was a big, big storm in the English Channel, the guy took, took us somewhere. I don't know where, but we didn't stay there. So don't get stuck. Don't get stuck right now. Remember, it's temporary. It's temporary. It's not permanent. And you can survive it.

GC 115 - Alok

[00:12:57]

JVN I'm so excited to introduce our beautiful guest ALOK. I've always felt that, like, the things that made me feminine organically are the things that make me the strongest and actually are the most, like, masculine rewarded things because, like, I think, you know, traditionally masculine, you would have to be very brave. You'd have to be able to endure a lot of pain. You'd have to be very strong and have, like, a very strong conviction. I have had to have all those things to express myself the way that I do. As have you. So it's, like, sometimes I feel like the things that make me feminine actually make me the most masculine if you're looking at, like, the qualities that they come along with.

ALOK Totally.

JVN So it's, like, I don't mind if people call me he or him because it's requires me less conversation. It doesn't really like move a hair on my head, like what you need to categorize me as. Because I've always known in my heart that like, I'm not the binary's definition of a man. I've never needed to be.

ALOK Right.

JVN And then but so I feel fine with he/him. I feel fine with she/hers. I feel fine with they/them. But, like, as owning this and stepping into that, like, how does the whole pronoun thing work like how, I mean, because it's, like, like, how do I do it? I just like, because like so many people were like saying it was like in the article like, it could be he/him, it can be whatever, like.

ALOK Yeah.

JVN But there's this, like, expectation that, like, I have to come into a room and like immediately, like, put everyone at ease and tell them, like what my pronouns are. And I am newer on this scene. So it's like, what how what is the rule of this?

ALOK There's so much I want to say. I'll try to be brief. First of all, you're not newer on the scene because you've always been this way. What's new is the language. And I think that's what people get so fixated on the language that they neglect that like there's so many ways of existing in the world that are beyond language. And that's what I believe as an artist, as art, as the place beyond language. And so I think that you can have the sense of imposter syndrome to be like, "OK, how do I represent the community best?" Your obligation is to respect and represent yourself. There's as many ways to be non-binary as

there are non-binary people. And I think what's really dangerous right now in the trans community is we're always thinking about how we put the most respectable, responsible face versus how do I put my face? We can have as many different ways of being trans, as many different ways of being non-binary.

You can use he, they can use they, she can use she. And that should not at all undermine our collective efforts. So it's totally legit and wonderful to be non-binary and to still use he. And then I think the sense of, like, having to put a label on it. I think about that as a compromise actually, because for me gender and sexuality are stories and they can never actually fit into like these static labels or categories who I am, change, I can't even decide what shoes I'm going to wear in one day, like the idea that I have to have a gender for the rest of my life.

It's like unambitious. Not really what's happening. What I love about fashion and style is I can change it up all the time. And that's the same thing with gender and sexuality. We're fluid, we shift, we change. That's dynamic. And so oftentimes the reason that we've been pressured to give language is because of a heteronormative straight society that will look at anyone else and be like, you're different. What is your name? Let me categorize that. I understand that right now we need language because we have to give visibility. We have to say that there are these rights that are being restricted. But the world that I'm fighting for is when you're just JVN and I'm just ALOK. You know? And we don't actually need to say, "This is non-binary, this is whatever." I think categories are important, they're necessary. But I don't think that that's the end goal.

GC 130 - Tara Foley

[00:16:24]

JVN Welcome back to *Getting Curious*, this is Jonathan Van Ness. We have Tara Foley. You're, like, a clean beauty skin care advocate. And you're also the inventor of Follain, which is a?

TARA FOLEY Clean beauty retailer, we have the best of clean beauty by over 80 brands and a growing, actually, assortment from our own brand as well. And we vet for safety, but also for performance. We know that women have to have high performing beauty products 'cause that's the benefit of beauty.

JVN Really? I think people. Have to.

TARA FOLEY Yes.

JVN Yes. But yes, people need high-performance beauty rn.

TARA FOLEY Yes.

JVN They can't help it but that we do. You know, because we want nontoxic ingredients. We want ingredients that work. But actually, I do think that there has been some clean beauty things that were high-performance, like, because I think, like, Aveda, like, was?

TARA FOLEY Back in the day when Horst Rechelbacher was still involved.

JVN Yes. 'Cause my mom was that shammy and the, and the glass bottles.

TARA FOLEY Yeah.

JVN And I was 9 and I was, like, wow.

TARA FOLEY That, your mom was so ahead of the time.

JVN She was, she went to this, she went to the Frontenac Mall in St. Lewis and she went to the Aveda store there, honey, and they really educated her. But-.

TARA FOLEY You're lucky.

JVN But how did you get into this? Because you started blogging about clean beauty, like, before there?

TARA FOLEY Before it was called clean beauty.

JVN Right?

TARA FOLEY Before it was a thing.

JVN Yeah. Why?

TARA FOLEY Because, so, I was a public policy major. I've always been an activist at heart. I always wanted to do something where I could make an impact. And basically, I was in a job that I did not like, working at a law firm in marketing, studying for my LSATs at night. And I started to focus on my own health and wellness for the very first time because I did not grow up in an organic household like you, I wasn't so lucky.

JVN I didn't either.

TARA FOLEY I didn't know about that stuff.

JVN I mean, I didn't know Aveda was, like, OK, first of all, I should say, like, I was chugging Diet Pepsi and shoving Pop-Tarts down my throat and, like, we were by no means an organic household. My mom just, like, walked past, like, an aggressive salesperson.

TARA FOLEY Yeah. She fell for it.

JVN Outside of an Aveda store, and she was like, takenable. Yeah. But I mean, I that was how I was introduced into sustainability. And the idea of sustainability or, like, organic ingredients in any capacity really was from that interaction. So in that term or in that way, I am lucky. But we are by no means, like, a super organic house.

TARA FOLEY So you came into it through beauty?

JVN Yes.

TARA FOLEY But most people come into it through food. So I was one of the, I-. So I basically was so focused on, you know, food and fitness and everything. And in researching how to take care of myself in that way, I started reading little things about how there's no regulation of the beauty industry in the U.S. and how basically all of my beloved beauty

prod-, because I love beauty products, I always have. All of my beloved beauty products were filled with a bunch of toxic crap. And specifically here in the U.S., I just got so fired up, I felt like, I felt like we were being disrespected, basically. And here I was trying to get into advocacy or trying to get into something where I could make impact. And I was, like, man, is that going to be through lipsticks?

JVN Yeah, maybe so.

TARA FOLEY And it was.

GC 126 - Hannah Shaw

[00:19:21]

JVN Welcome to *Getting Curious* Hannah Shaw. Author, advocate, cat advocate, people advocate, person I'm obsessed with, thank you so much for coming Hannah! Hi!

HANNAH SHAW Hi! Thank you so much for having me.

JVN So Coco was a little tiny baby.

HANNAH SHAW Yeah, she was a little baby and, you know, she became my best friend. She works in my lap with me every single day while I'm doing this. And she was the kitten that made me realize when other people find these cats outside, these baby kittens outside, I want to be the friend to them that I wished I had had because I didn't have somebody I could call and ask, what do I do? And not just how do I do this, but how do you do it well? And how do you go through kind of the emotions that you go through with this, because, I know you and I have talked a bit about how emotional it can be when you're working with a vulnerable animal. You know, there's not a guide for that. Now, there is. It's called *Tiny But Mighty*.

JVN Yes.

HANNAH SHAW But there, I had no, no idea what to do.

JVN Yeah, adopting a sick baby cat is like, whoa.

HANNAH SHAW Yeah.

JVN I didn't know either.

HANNAH SHAW And you deal with that when you have, when you have kittens, they're very immunocompromised. These guys can get sick very easily. They're falling asleep now. They look so angelic. This is like the one thing where a podcast really-, you're missing the visuals of two baby kittens falling asleep in Jonathan's arms. So cute. And she's, like, holding hands with you. Your jaw is just dropped.

JVN OK. So, um, wow. OK. Oh, my God, they really, he just, yeah, let it go. You don't have to hold on anymore. Take your little nap. Take your little nap. You're a little baby. This has got to be the most annoying episode for people to listen to, but I don't care. 'Cause I can't focus.

HANNAH SHAW You can share some photos.

JVN So it is not the most annoying episode, it's the best one I've ever done.

GC 34 - Mary Winters

[00:21:14]

JVN So welcome, Mary Winters, my mom.

MARY WINTERS Good morning, Jonathan.

JVN So my nickname all growing up was Jack. And I don't like it. And my mom would, has a hard time because she called me Jack for 17 years. Once I started doing hair is when I switched to Jonathan. So my mom is in recovery of calling me Jack, and I'm very proud of her for just saying Jonathan. And she did, and she wanted to tell that story, but I just stole her thunder and told it instead because I needed to be in power of what my name is.

MARY WINTERS Well, I'm three days sober on calling you Jonathan.

JVN Mmhmm.

MARY WINTERS So.

JVN We love, we love recovery talk.

MARY WINTERS Yeah.

JVN Here in "Getting Curious." So what do you want to tell people about me, Mom?

MARY WINTERS Well, I think the first thing is that we don't have enough time. But I would say that you are true to the name of your podcast. You are extremely curious and you have a laser focus like no one I've ever met before, because once you get curious about something, you go kind of balls to the wall until you figure it out or master it or find somebody who can tell you everything. And I think that's such a gift. I really, really like that about you.

GC 136 - Tan France

[00:22:36]

JVN Welcome to *Getting Curious*, this is Jonathan Van Ness and we have an incredibly exciting guest who I am the president of the Fan Club for, the Vice President, the scribe, and I'm basically I'm the, I lead all of it, because I will not let anyone else in the club because I'm, I'm too obsessed. Don't you say anything before I'm ready. The first question I have and it's the most important one is this.

TAN FRANCE Yeah.

JVN Is: How in the world-. In fact, I'll say this. Is it true, Tanny?

TAN FRANCE It is true. You're the number one fan.

JVN No, not that. Is it true what they say?

TAN FRANCE It is. My hair is naturally gray.

JVN No, it's that you're a Tanny Bananny.

TAN FRANCE Bananny.

JVN No, you're a little Bananny. Tanny Bananny. Is it true that you're a little Bananny?

TAN FRANCE It is.

JVN How old were you when you knew you were a little Tanny Bananny?

TAN FRANCE My mom used to call me "Tanny Bananny."

JVN Did she?

TAN FRANCE Of course she did not.

JVN Oh. Did anyone ever call you Tanny Bananny before me, Tan?

TAN FRANCE You were the first person.

JVN Really?

TAN FRANCE Yeah. Now that I'm in a privileged position to be able to have this conversation, to then pass on that message to others, I simply want them to know: remind your children, remind your siblings that the color that they are is perfect just the way they are. Yes, there is a version of beauty that the beauty industry suggests is the most attractive, but there are also many others that are attractive just in a different way. And you need to find the pocket of community, of people that are going to love and respect you for exactly who you are.

You having dark skin will not hinder your success in this world. It absolutely will not as long as you have strength of self and you know just how beautiful your skin tone is and stop looking to those influencers that so massively encourage you. If you are finding that a lot of your Instagram, a lot of your Facebook, whatever, is, is stuff that's encouraging a certain kind of beauty. Stop clicking on that stuff. It's going to change your algorithm. And you don't need to be reminded constantly that your skin tone isn't right. And so there are ways of working with your tools around you to stop thinking the way you're thinking to start to encourage a different mentality by surrounding yourself with people who will love you for just who you are.

GC 107 - Rayka Zehtabchi

[00:24:49]

JVN Welcome to the podcast. Rayka Zehtabchi.

RAYKA ZEHTABCHI I feel like I'm a kid and I feel like I'm constantly on the outside looking in, like, throughout this whole Oscars process too. Like, two years ago, I was, like, driving for Uber and eating McDonald's every day because I was, like, trying to find a way to, like, pay my student loans and pay rent.

JVN And McDonald's is bomb. That's like-.

RAYKA ZEHTABCHI McDonald's saved me.

JVN Yeah.

RAYKA ZEHTABCHI In a lot of ways.

JVN And Taco Bell for me, like, I really, like, kept me, it kept nutrition in me when I couldn't afford it and like it also-.

RAYKA ZEHTABCHI And don't forget Wendy's.

JVN Oh my God. Actually, no, 'cause in high school I lived next, on a corner next to Wendy's.

RAYKA ZEHTABCHI Yeah.

JVN And that dollar menu, like, I ate, like, five nuggets and that bacon cheeseburger and, and the cup of chili like.

RAYKA ZEHTABCHI You have to stop.

JVN I could never do it again.

RAYKA ZEHTABCHI I'm, like, salivating right now.

JVN No, because Wendy's I can't do it anymore because I actually ate it so much, like, I ate, it, even a frosty, I can't do any more.

RAYKA ZEHTABCHI You're sick of it now.

JVN I can't. But Taco Bell, I don't think that could ever happen to me. But so anyway. So I identify with this experience, with certain-

RAYKA ZAHTABCHI Yeah, and now I have an Oscar. But, you know, it's not like it's all that different, but it's, it's.

JVN But it is.

RAYKA ZAHTABCHI I mean, it is because there is, you know, a future in that, you know. And I think the coolest thing about being in that place in your life is, is kind of being fearless when it comes to the projects that you do.

SEGMENT TWO

Intro

[00:26:10]

JVN Over 200 episodes of Getting Curious, we've learned so many ways to get involved in our communities and build a world where everyone feels validated, or to "Get In This Fight," as Elizabeth Warren would say. Here are some excerpts from conversations that inspired us to do just that:

GC 140 - Elizabeth Warren

[00:26:27]

JVN Every episode of "Getting Curious" is, like, a question. And so the one that I was, like, okay, if I ever was blessed to get the time to get to have a chance to talk to Senator Warren, I will eventually-.

ELIZABETH WARREN Elizabeth. If you don't stop this.

JVN Ok fine.

ELIZABETH WARREN Ok.

JVN It's gonna be, I respect you so much, it's like hard to call you by your first name, but I'm gonna be comfortable with it now.

ELIZABETH WARREN If you start out rich, this is a great, great economy for you, because you can just get richer and richer and richer and richer. And it really is about who government works for. Let me tell you a quick story about government.

JVN Yes.

ELIZABETH WARREN Yep. So back long, long time ago. Back the 70s. I'm a young mom, right? And toaster ovens could start fires. And here's how it worked. Those little toaster ovens with the slide out trays, they didn't have automatic shut off switches. So you could put four slices of bread in it, stick the thing in, turn it on, go off and do something else, come back. And the flames would be leaping up like eight inches in the air. You could catch the kitchen curtains on fire. You could catch cabinets on fire. Ask me how I know.

JVN Yeah.

ELIZABETH WARREN Yes, you got it. My daddy for Christmas, one year, along in there, bought me a fire extinguisher. So Consumer Product Safety Commission comes along and says, "Enough, you're not doing that anymore. You can't sell toasters that could have a one in five chance of burning down your house." Bang. They put a safety switch on it. We're done. That's government that works for the people.

JVN Yes.

ELIZABETH WARREN So by the early 2000s, this is the time you're starting to talk about earl-, but earlier, what's happening is mortgages have gotten so complex and dangerous in America. You ready for this? They had a 1 in 5 chance of costing people their homes. Not obviously from fire, but from foreclosure. Only this time the government was deep in the pocket of the big banks, so they let them keep selling it until they crashed the whole economy in 2008. So there's government on one side, government on the other. So I go to Washington. I'm not in, I'm not an elected official. I go and I say, "I've got this idea for this consumer agency, kind of like the one on toasters. You shouldn't be able to sell mortgages, and credit cards, and payday loans that cheat people. Student loans, shouldn't be able to do that." And people in Washington told me two things. The first one is, "That it's a really great idea. You could make a real difference, structural change." Second thing they tell me, "Don't even try. Because Wall Street will be against you and the big money will be against you and Democrats will be up against-, some of the Democrats. All the Republicans will be against you. So don't even try."

Change is hard. And I get it. Big structural change is hard, but it was the right thing to do. So I got in that fight, got others into it. We took on Wall Street, we took on the big banks. And in 2010, Barack Obama signed that agency into law. And it has already forced big banks to return more than \$12 billion dollars to people they cheated. It's handled a million and a half complaints. That's how you can make structural change.

GC 144 - Wendy Davis

[00:29:42]

JVN Senator Wendy Davis from Texas. You may remember her from doing one of the most epic filibusters to help save people's rights to reproductive health care in Texas. I wanted to ask you about, I mean, I gotta ask you about filibusters.

WENDY DAVIS Yes.

JVN And, what are they? What's a filibuster?

WENDY DAVIS It's such a good question. They're different in Texas than they are in the U.S. Senate. In the U.S. Senate, a filibuster can happen at any time that a bill is up for a vote. And basically, it's an opportunity for a senator to talk a bill for hours and hours and hours and try to forestall a vote being taken. In Texas, you can only filibuster a bill, meaning you talk for hours on a bill. You can only do that if you're on the very end of a legislative session and you're trying to run out the clock. So in Texas, every legislative session ends almost six months after it starts and we only meet every two years and we have literally the clock strikes midnight and the session is over. On the last day.

JVN Wait, so the state senate of Texas only meets every two years?

WENDY DAVIS Every two years for six months, essentially. From January through mid-May.

JVN So, and then, for mid-May through December?

WENDY DAVIS And then the whole next year, no legislative session. Thank God most people say.

JVN But so how does that work for like the laws of Texas if, like, so that means every other year-.

WENDY DAVIS Things have to wait.

JVN Things just have to wait. Is that how it is in every state or is that specific to Texas?

WENDY DAVIS Some states, but very few. Texas is one of the few. Yes.

JVN Do we know why that is? Is that like a-

WENDY DAVIS You know, I think the idea always was that if you were elected to serve in Texas, that you were also going to have this other full-time job somewhere. Right? And so this was supposed to be a part-time legislature. And the problem with that, of course, is that it does become a full time job. Even when you're not in session, you're working so hard for your constituents and in preparation for the next session and of course, trying to raise your money for reelection. And the bad part of it is that in Texas, people aren't paid to serve. And so what that means is that if you have a full-time job now of being in the legislature, even those it was meant to be a part-time job, if you don't have financial resources, you can't serve, so-

JVN So it's, like, people are making bad deals behind the scenes?

WENDY DAVIS Yeah. It just means that you're cutting out a whole group of people from being able to be in these decision-making bodies whose experiences need to be there. Right? People who are working for a living and who are the ones who are facing the real struggles that need solutions. But they can't be in a legislative body because they can't afford to be there.

GC 118 - Alicia Garza

[00:32:36]

JVN Alicia Garza, welcome.

ALICIA GARZA And so here's my thing. When I think about ideas that people get scared or nervous about, what it shows me is that we are not yet comfortable taking and holding power. So, for example, in a situation like the one you just described, where in your school districts there was a tax that was failing over and over again, even though your school is crumbling. That is ridiculous to me. You deserve to go to a school that is not crumbling around you. And yet there are these values, right? That we are told that, like, anything that comes from the government or anything that is forced by the government, which is how people think about taxes.

JVN Yep.

ALICIA GARZA Is bad, even though at the same time, right? We do still have to figure out how do we make sure that everybody gets the things that they need. And unfortunately, it's the people who are poor. It's the people who are of color. It's the people who are queer, who get the short end of the stick when people are deciding where money goes.

JVN Right.

ALICIA GARZA Right? If we want to change that, the notion isn't just to act like that's not a thing. And I think that's the issue that people have with the Democratic Party. And even looking at it from a neutral-ish perspective, 'cause I don't consider myself a Democrat. But I know what I need to do to get the things I need.

JVN Do you like, I mean, not that you have to identify, are you like an independent or something?

ALICIA GARZA I'm not an independent. I vote Democrat, but I don't, I don't see the Democratic Party as my party.

JVN Are you like a gorgeous libertarian or something?

ALICIA GARZA I'm definitely not a libertarian.

JVN What are we? Like I want to join your party, queen.

ALICIA GARZA I'm somebody who believes that the only way to make change is by figuring out how to make the impossible possible. Now, when Nancy Pelosi started in politics, nobody thought that there was gonna be funding for HIV and AIDS. And if all we had done was talk to people who were, like, "Well, I want it for like white middle class people who have AIDS, but not black and Latino and Asian people who have AIDS," we actually wouldn't have gotten that far right. People didn't like the idea of interracial marriage for a very long time, but because people pushed people's minds and their values changed.

So I guess my thing is, one of the things I worry about in this moment, moving into 2020, where everything is actually possible, is that if we kind of hold onto this notion that we only have to talk to the, to the people in the center, because that's where the country is. I think that's wrong. I think that actually we're talking about two different things, which is that the middle of the country has been ignored by politics for a very long time. They have not been ignored by the right. So the people who tell us that government is encroaching on your life, the people who tell us that business should not be regulated. The people who tell us that at the same time, they tell us government is encroaching on your life. They also tell us that they don't want a separation between church and state.

JVN Yeah. And they want to regulate marijuana, regulate people's bodies.

ALICIA GARZA All the things, all the things. But they don't want to be regulated.

JVN Right.

ALICIA GARZA Right?

JVN Yeah.

ALICIA GARZA Those people are winning the info war. Right? But yet at the same time, we're not countering with anything different. We're just saying, "Well, let's just meet in the middle." And actually for a majority of the country, people need different things. There's more schools crumbling now than they were when you were coming up. Right? And there are more and more people who, literally entire towns that have been decimated. And I guarantee you, if there was organizing infrastructure in those towns, people's values are actually much more closely aligned to what people say is, like, the radical flank. These aren't radical ideas. They're just radical in relationship to the extreme right.

JVN Yeah.

ALICIA GARZA So let me give you an example. My friend George, who is from Medora, Indiana, which is like a town, sounds like the town you're from, has been doing this project where he's deeply engaging and investing in white working class people in rural areas and bringing them together with working class people of color in rural areas.

GC 185 - George Goehl

[00:37:06]

JVN I'm so excited for our guest this week. We have George Goehl. He is the director of People's Action, one of the largest multiracial, poor, and working class people's organizations in the country. He's also from Medora, Indiana. So we're state neighbors. When you're meeting with people on the front porch and we're hearing of people's concerns, like, what has worked? Is it just listening?

GEORGE GOEHL Yeah. Well, I'd say one of the most exciting things that's working and it really gets to what you're talking about is this idea of deep canvassing. So I described earlier where we were. We went and listened. We worked on the issues. People were starting to bridge together and have tough conversations. But then we started to run into some people who were all in. And people, I would say that very moderate and conflicted political views, but we're waking around anti-Black racism and maybe how they'd been a part of that. It was beautiful. But then they would kind of confide in us things like, "You know what? The way you all think about immigration is just like a bridge too far for me. I just can't get my head wrapped around it." So we started to test this deep canvassing model in North Carolina, Michigan and Pennsylvania, where we went on, on the doors in rural and small town areas to talk to people about immigration and deep canvassing came out of the LGBT rights movement and really in California and then spread first around marriage equality and then around transgender issues like going up on people's front porches and having these conversations.

But there, a few things about them. They're longform. They're, like, 15 to 20 minutes. They are nonjudgmental, like and they're kind of grounded in a radical empathy. We're not concerned with where the person on the door starts in terms of their beliefs. And then we engage people, we get them. I'll just, the one we did in those three states was around immigration. And we would ask people, "How do you feel about universal healthcare?" And people would be like, and even a lot of right wing people or conservative people would say like, "Ah, that sounds pretty good once you describe it. Like I need that, I don't have it right now." So they'd rate themselves an 8 and, then, well, "How would you feel about that being including undocumented immigrants?"

And then people's, you know, score would go down and then we move into a conversation. We'd do two things. We'd ask people to, like, locate some immigration story in their life. It could be from their family's history, a neighbor, somebody at work. And then we'd share one and then we'd ask people for a time they really needed help in their life. And even the toughest 6'5 cammo wearing dude would actually go there with us. And, you

know, this was a really hard thing for me, and then we'd share one, and something in that space magically opens up.

GC 170 - Ben O'Keefe

[00:39:41]

JVN Ben O'Keefe is our guest this week. He is a former senior aide to Elizabeth Warren's presidential campaign and he's the founder of Give a Damn. Did you have a time in your life where you were like, "OK, like, I am going to go from watching "The West Wing" and fantasizing about being involved in politics to like I'm going to do this?" Did, did you have a defining moment?

BEN O'KEEFE First of all, I also watched "The West Wing" and I was inspired by it, right? Because of the action, because of the power that I saw that folks had. You know, after I started that Abercrombie and Fitch campaign, I started, I worked as an intern at MoveOn.org, which is the largest progressive nonprofit in the country. And within a year of working there, I was actually on the leadership's team. I was the youngest person ever to work for the organization. When I got a taste of it, boy, I just, I say, like, we started winning and I really liked winning. I really liked making that change and at MoveOn, we were working, I was running campaigns that affected real folks locally. For example, in Jefferson County, kids were fighting their school board because they were whitewashing their AP U.S. history books. There was you know, Richard Glossip was a man who was sentenced to death. And the evidence showed that he did not commit the crime that he committed. And I worked with Susan Sarandon and Sister Helen Prejean to, to literally save his life.

When I started to see that I had power, myself, as an individual, to make an impact on someone else's life, that was the best drug because it felt good. And, you know, there's a certain conversation I have about activism, which is we have to remove our ego from it. We have to be willing to do it selflessly. But I also say that in thinking that I was helping to heal someone else, I was actually helping to heal myself. I was fighting for my life and fighting for my traumas and reclaiming my power. And it was addictive, you know? And when you start to see that you've been lied to, you've been told that your vote doesn't matter, that your voice doesn't matter, that your story doesn't matter. That your experience, your pain, your love in some cases, doesn't matter. That to me was what drove me to get involved. When I started to realize that I was fighting for myself and fighting for others. And that's a, that's a place that a lot of people can get involved. When they start to see, like, this isn't just talking about someone else's life now, especially now.

GC 167 - Stacey Abrams

[00:42:03]

JVN I'm so excited that our guest is here, so welcome to "Getting Curious," Stacey Abrams. How are you?

STACEY ABRAMS I am well, thank you so much, Jonathan, for having me. We think about voter suppression like the 1960s, the scenes we saw in "Eyes on the Prize." But today it looks like someone just quietly taking your name off the list, not telling you about it or sending you a postcard that looks like it could have come from Publisher's Clearinghouse. And because you throw it away with the rest of the junk mail, you don't know that you've just thrown away your right to vote in the next election.

So one of the things that happened in Georgia, for example, is there was a, there's a law that Brian Kemp put in place, I mentioned the 53,000 people he, whose voter registration he held hostage. This is what you should think about. Because of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, in 2009, Karen Handel tried to use this rule. It's called Exact Match. Where any, any information about your, your name or information about you that goes into the voting process has to match exactly another document, another database. So Jonathan Van Ness, if they put your name in, if you spell your name V-a-n space N-e-s-s, but when the person typing it up pushes it together, what you would get back from Georgia is a letter saying you have not been successful in registering to vote, but it never tells you why. And so you send back in all your information exactly the same way. And if they make the mistake again, it happens and worse in Georgia, because in the state of Georgia, the Department of Driver Services, our version of DMV, which is one of the databases they use, it does not allow spaces in the last name. So your last name is V-a-n space N-e-s-s, but you will be caught in this constant loop of having your, your application rejected because the database doesn't recognize your name as being yours. And so they accuse you of not actually being able to vote. And they never tell you why.

JVN I just, I just feel like we weren't paying attention or something, like-!

STACEY ABRAMS The system is designed to be so fractured and so complicated that the minute you hear about what happens, each person of good intention and good conscience says, oh my God, why didn't I know? You didn't know because it was designed for you not to know. You didn't, you weren't able to stop it because it was designed for you not stop it. But the most insidious part is it's designed to make you feel responsible instead of holding the people who did it responsible. And so the work I do on voter suppression is to say we need to stop blaming ourselves for what people are doing to us.

GC 142 - Celeste Watkins-Hayes

[00:44:36]

JVN Dr. Celeste Watkins-Hayes. Tell people what your book is-.

CELESTE WATKINS-HAYES Oh, sure.

JVN Yeah.

CELESTE WATKINS-HAYES So I interviewed 200 people around the-, of just about 200 people around the HIV epidemic. So I interviewed over 100 women living with HIV in Chicago. So women of diverse racial and class backgrounds in the city of Chicago who talked about this movement that they experienced from dying from to living with to thriving despite. And then I introdu-, and then I interviewed the activists and policymakers and service providers who were part of the building of the HIV safety net. Because I needed to understand, like, what is this entity that women pla-, kind of plug into? And that proves to be transformative for them. You know, when they talk about, the first line of my book is kind of controversial. I say I quote a woman named Dawn who tells me: "If it weren't for HIV, I'd probably be dead."

JVN I feel like that, too, sometimes.

CELESTE WATKINS-HAYES And why do you feel like that? I bet it's why she feels like that.

JVN It's because if I hadn't realized that I was positive, I was going to probably keep doing like self-destructive crazy shit until I would have, like, died of like an overdose or been killed or like HIV was what stopped my downward spiral.

CELESTE WATKINS-HAYES That's what she says, too. So Dawn talks about, you know, she was homeless on the street, in addiction, really struggling. And she got diagnosed in 1985.

JVN Holy shit.

CELESTE WATKINS-HAYES But didn't know what it meant. And the doctors didn't really give her more information, much information. And she ends up kind of living on the streets for about, you know, 15 years and she finally gets in to care and treatment and it's the safety net. She gets access to a community, to health care, to mental health services that she needed because she was a survivor of childhood sexual trauma. She meets her life partner. She gets access to economic resources. And she ends up becoming a very powerful leader in the HIV community. She ends up meeting with Nancy Pelosi. I mean, like

she is doing the thing in terms of local and national HIV leadership. And that's why she's saying that.

Because what you're really saying I think if I'm hearing you correctly, because I notice what she's saying is if it weren't for the HIV community and if it weren't for that moment of: "Are you going to live or are you going to succumb to all of the challenges?" And you need to decide what's it going to be. And in that moment, she decided and you decided, "I'm going to fight like hell and I'm going to live." And it's what I really hope people understand is that alone is not enough. And in our politics, we just assume for so many people who are struggling, "Well, why don't you just get it together?" What we've got to understand and what my book I think really demonstrates is there has to be a safety net to catch you so that when you decide I'm going to do things differently, I'm going to push myself to move from dying, from all of the things that you were dying from, because you were dying from all those things. Right? To living with, there's gotta be a support system, a community to move you along the way and to help you.

JVN And, like, in my case, I had the resources and the privilege to, like, there was a car I could drive. There was someone I could lie, cheat and steal that four grand from to get to California. Like, if you're not in that position to have the computer or to get your hands on the car or to get you-

CELESTE WATKINS-HAYES To leave the state.

JVN To leave the state, to get to-

CELESTE WATKINS-HAYES To go to a higher resource state.

JVN Than you're, than, like, then these things-. That's why some people can't get it together like so-.

CELESTE WATKINS-HAYES And that's why exactly.

JVN 'Cause they are, like, and there are so many layers to this that make it so, that make it so difficult from stigma to racism to cultural pain bodies that make it so difficult for people to get treatment.

CELESTE WATKINS-HAYES Right. Absolutely. Absolutely. And we can't underestimate the power of trauma. Yes. So-.

JVN So then?

CELESTE WATKINS-HAYES So then I publish this book, and I'm on Twitter. Don't let anybody tell you that Twitter is a total waste of time. And I get *The New York Times* and I saw your op ed and I said, "Oh, I need to read that." And I flagged it. And then the next day, it came up again on Twitter. And I said, "OK, let me read it." So I'll never forget it was the day of the Emmys that I read it, and I read your story. And I said, "Oh, my gosh. Jonathan Van Ness could've been in my book." So obviously, you know, I wrote about women in the epidemic, but the story was so similar when I read Alex Hawgood. I hope I'm saying his name correctly. The great reporter. His profile of you, because I saw so many of my women's stories in your story.

In terms of your history of of sexual trauma very early in life, your struggles with addiction and being diagnosed and having to figure out what do I do now? And the importance of the safety net, the way that Planned Parenthood caught you and gave you that diagnosis and the way in which, you know, people in your life, in your community were helpful. And the HIV community ends up being very helpful for you as you move from dying from to living with to thriving despite. So I read it and I said, "Oh, my gosh, basically this is my book." So I immediately go to my computer and I just start typing, and I happen to have a contact at *The New York Times*, a fabulous editor, and wrote to her and said, "I just wrote this op ed. Would you consider it?" Send it to her. And she said, "We'll consider it." And, you know, anybody who's ever tried to publish an op ed anywhere knows it's a very, like, you know, nail-biting experience as your waiting.

That night, the Emmys were on. And Billy Porter won the Emmy for best actor for *Pose*. And I just thought it was so powerful in terms of me reading your story. Me seeing your book in, seeing my book in that story and the synergy and the connection. And then Billy Porter winning that Emmy for "Pose" and the work that *Pose* is doing to also talk about the epidemic in really powerful ways and to show what it was like in the 80s and the 90s for Black and brown people and particularly for trans women and how they were so isolated within, within the epidemic and within the community. So it just kind of all came together. And I'm really grateful that I had the opportunity to, to hear your story. And that so many other people have had that opportunity, because the lives that you're changing that you'll know about, but the lives that you have changed that you will never know about is simply astonishing.

JVN Much emotish. So, yeah, I mean, I think writing the book and the tour, it was, like, I didn't, I guess I, I think I was waiting for, like, I thought I didn't know how I was going to be received. And I was obviously nervous around. And that's what the whole crux of my book is, is like, "Would you still love me if you knew, like, all the fucked up stuff that I've done and all the hard things I've been through?" But really, I think the hardest part of it has been

realizing how many people are still suffering and how many places the social safety net is not.

CELESTE WATKINS-HAYES Yes.

JVN And there's so much work and so much brought to my attention, like, after the book where I'm, like, "Oh my God, like, if I thought writing that book was hard and going through the release of that was challenging, like, honey, get ready for the rest of this journey." 'Cause it's like it, I mean, we've made a lot of strides but like we still have, I still have so much more work to do in increasing awareness and in, in helping expand the safety net as far as I can.

CELESTE WATKINS-HAYES Yeah. And the beauty of the community is you don't have to do it by yourself.

GC 127 - Bill Nye

[00:52:40]

JVN Bill Nye, the literal science guy. I added the literal part, but it's literally you in front of my face. I can't believe it. Growing up I was born in '87, I-

BILL NYE 1987.

JVN 1987. And I remember hearing about global warming as early as first grade. And I remember in first grade, it was 1993, and there was a huge flood in the Mississippi River that year. And I remember back then they're like this is like a once every 500 year flood. We were like sandbagging, which I particularly loved because there was a KFC and a Taco Bell tent by the river when you were sandbagging. So I could eat a lot.

BILL NYE Wow. Cool.

JVN Yeah. You know, I was little-.

BILL NYE Where was this? North and south?

JVN I was in Quincy, Illinois. That's how I was born and raised. So it's kind of right in the middle of Illinois. But it was a really massive flood that year.

BILL NYE And it was still a flood that far north. Wow.

GC 181 - Erin Brockovich

[00:53:27]

JVN You are brilliant, you're a thought leader. You're someone who I've looked up to for years. So welcome back to the podcast, Erin Brockovich.

ERIN BROCKOVICH Here's the thing, Jonathan. I don't understand why we're so afraid of the truth. We can look at it and go, "Yes, we have a problem." But we can also be the solution to it. We can eradicate chemicals. We get more information. Maybe we can find cures. We have to go that way to be sustainable and move forward. We're at that fork in the road. And I just don't understand why so many of our leaders are so terrified of saying the truth. "Yeah, I made a mistake. We need to fix this." "Yeah, I can see this. We have a problem." But they don't want to see it. And then that becomes a bigger problem until it's in their face.

JVN My theory on that is, is that, like, it's easier to shift quick blame and create really, like, easy solutions versus, like, being nuanced and understanding that these are layered issues and that it's, people are always going to, like I compare it to Taco Bell and salad, because like I always want the Taco Bell, it's easy and it's fast. But really, I should make myself a fucking salad. And we are so often going for the quick and easy fixes that.

ERIN BROCKOVICH Yeah.

JVN You know, but also I feel like that kind of demonizes Taco Bell, and the only thing that's wrong with Taco Bell, is the fact that they fucking took the Mexican pizza off the menu this year. As if we hadn't been through enough. They fucking took the Mexican-, have you ever eaten Mexican pizza from Taco Bell?

ERIN BROCKOVICH No.

JVN Do you know what it is?

ERIN BROCKOVICH I haven't. I-.

JVN It was, like, crispy and delicious. Just listen for a second before we get into some serious stuff, because you should, it's a flat taco shell with beans and meat on it with another flat taco shell. And then this, like, red salsa and then like a thick layer of cheese and then like tomatoes, onions, lettuce. It's like a flat pizza taco and it's delicious. And they removed it off the menu effective November something or October 3rd, we're all reeling.

SEGMENT THREE

Intro

[00:55:21]

JVN One of the best parts about centering a show around curiosity is that our journey is boundless. Across 200 episodes, we've gotten in touch with the world around us, taken a tour of worlds far away, and traveled back in time, and looked to the future.

GC 168 - Dr. Jessica Ware

[00:55:39]

JVN There is a lot to digest and a lot to process in the world. And sometimes you just need to get into that science so you can just, like, keep learning. But just give yourself a bit of variety. So with that being said, welcome Dr. Jessica Ware.

DR. JESSICA WARE You can always impress an entomologist if you say, "Oh, do you study insects or bugs?" And then they're like, "Oh, wow, that's a very good distinction. I can't believe that, you know, the difference between bugs and insects." It's a good, it's a good party trick.

JVN So what are the distinctions? What, what makes one one and then the other?

DR. JESSICA WARE Well, hemiptera all have their mouthparts that are designed for sucking. So most of them suck plant juices, xylem or foam, but some of them actually are modified to suck blood like assassin bugs and things like that. But so their mouthparts are like a little beak. It's called a rostrum and it looks like a little pointy straw and it kind of points down towards their belly and then they just kind of stick it up and poke it into the, to the plant material. Or in the case of things like bed bugs, they stick it into you to get your, your blood.

JVN So a hemiptera is a bug. And then insects are, and then insects are insects?

DR. JESSICA WARE Yeah. So hemiptera are a kind of, hemiptera are a kind of insect.

JVN But they're the only true bugs.

DR. JESSICA WARE Yeah. The only true bugs. Yeah.

JVN So in order to be a bug you have to, like, suck.

DR. JESSICA WARE To be a bug, you gotta suck. Yeah. No you have to, you have these sucking mouthparts with a rostrum. It's a kind of beak with the straw that kind of points downwards towards your belly, your abdomen and, and you suck either, you know, they, they've evolved over time to suck lots of different things. But I think the ancestor, ancestral state is that they were drinking, you know, plant juices.

JVN But your favorite, slash, specialty, is dragonfly, damselflies, cockroaches and who?

DR. JESSICA WARE And termites. So people for a long time thought termites and cockroaches were really different. But it turns out termites are just like a fancy version of cockroaches that are social. So they had kings and queens and workers and soldiers that work together in the colony. But they're really just cockroaches. They're just, like, a specialty version of a cockroach. So it kind of makes sense-.

JVN So cockroaches aren't social?

DR. JESSICA WARE No.

JVN Like, the classic New York City cockroach, like, there's no sort of hierarchy there? They're just all on their own eatin' stuff.

DR. JESSICA WARE Yeah, they're just living their life, you know, mating, eating, dispersing, but with one goal in mind, just passing on their genes. Whereas in, in colonies, like, in the, in things like termites, they have altruism. They have, you know, collective behavior and sharing and, you know, group effort for a common goal and stuff like that, which the average cockroach doesn't do.

GC 50 - Prof. James Nieh

[00:58:27]

JVN Dr. Nieh, welcome to *Getting Curious*. And you guys, it is not Bill Nye, it is gorgeous Dr. Nieh, whose name is James, but we're gonna say Dr. Nieh, because I'm very official. So one of the things that you study that's, like, super duper interesting is, like, how bees communicate and, like, how they interact. And 'cause you, like, so what about that? Like, what are some of the ways that they interact with each other?

DR. JAMES NIEH Right. So the, the main reason why I study bees is because I'm interested in the evolution of animal language. And I was drawn to it because bees turned out to use something called "referential communication." They encode information. They basically can tell each other where to go to find food and other resources. So in this dance that they do, these workers tell each other what distance and direction to go from the colony to find that delicious flower.

JVN How?

DR. JAMES NIEH So, it's encoded in a dance where they are basically telling you the direction in this waggle run where they're wagging their abdomen, relative to the sun. So in other words, if let's say this flower is 100 meters in the direction of the sun, the dance would be pointed with her head straight up inside the nest and it would have an interval of a little bit less than one second. But now let's say it's in the direction of the sun, but one kilometer away, she's pointed straight up inside the nest. But she dances for one second. So what she's basically doing is drawing a little bit of a map with her body in the dance of where you need to go relative to the sun to find that food.

JVN Wow. Which is why, like, the whole disorientation thing is, like, such a big deal because, like, if they don't know where they are relative to the sun, they can't communicate with each other about, like, where to go get food.

DR. JAMES NIEH Right.

JVN Wow. Is there any other ways that they communicate? Like, any other ways?

DR. JAMES NIEH So they also use sounds to communicate and vibrations. That's one of the things that we study. They have something called a "stop signal", which they can use to stop recruitment for a bad food source. Bad meaning there's a predator there. Let's say there's a spider there. They also have other signals that help to coordinate their social

behavior inside the nest. And they also use odors to a great extent. We talked a little bit about the Queen pheromone.

JVN Ooh. So just different odors they use and some different noises. What about the venom? Do like, what is, what does their venom do?

DR. JAMES NIEH So bee venom is actually a complex mixture of different things. It has some compounds that induce pain. Some compounds that induce inflammation. Others that actually induce necrosis, the, you know, decay of your flesh. And all of these together are just designed to provide a potent cocktail that attacks you in multiple ways so that that injury is memorable.

JVN Do any bees kill their prey to eat it?

DR. JAMES NIEH No, but there are, there is a kind of necrophagic bee, meaning bees that eat dead animals. That's not a honeybee. It's a stingless bee. However, it is social and they only find animals that are already dead and they basically regurgitate their saliva, which dissolves the little bits of flesh they carry back and store inside, in their colony, a liquid form.

JVN So there are some stingless bees?

DR. JAMES NIEH There are stingless bees. Yes.

JVN Cute. Love. Interesting. Do they really die after they sting you?

DR. JAMES NIEH So honeybees generally do except for Queen bees.

JVN Well shit. That's kind of devastating. And why does this happen?

DR. JAMES NIEH Well it happens because the honeybee has evolved a stinger that looks a little bit like a harpoon or an arrowhead. And so when the stinger penetrates the flesh, it stays behind. But it's a very clever evolutionary strategy because the poison gland is still alive and it's still pumping the venom into you like a hypodermic needle while the bee flies around you and distracts you. So in essence, the honeybee delivers much more poison into you with this strategy than if she were to just stab you and run.

JVN It's so rude of her.

DR. JAMES NIEH Yes.

CHARLES J. INNIS It's actually a lot simpler in some ways, right?

JVN Well, no, it's not, honey. That's spoken as someone who's never been a bottom. Yeah, yeah. That's a different podcast and I don't want to traumatize you so.

CHARLES J. INNIS Ok. Very well.

JVN Poor turtles.

GC 154 - Matthew Riemer & Leighton Brown

[01:03:47]

JVN Welcome to *Getting Curious*, Matthew Riemer and Leighton Brown. You won't say for sure that Lincoln was gay, but you'll fight someone who says that he wasn't.

LEIGHTON BROWN Right. That's what I mean, we from the start. We don't want to assume either way whether it comes to sexuality or gender or-.

JVN Yeah, because someone was not here to say it for themselves, of course.

MATTHEW RIEMER Well I'll say it. Lincoln was gay. Yeah, I mean, but-.

LEIGHTON BROWN But yeah, right. We, but when there are facts that indicate that, say, Lincoln was in fact gay.

JVN What were the facts? Just, like, gorgeous letters.

MATTHEW RIEMER Well, I mean, it's I mean, yes, those are certainly-. The letters. And so there's this, well, ok. There's a lot. That, he loved Jo-, Joshua Speed's thighs. Joshua Speed was his lover. I mean, that, you know, we have to prove that. But so, you know, he lived. There's this thing where he. So he li-, when he got to Springfield, he lived, shared the same bed with Speed. And Speed, you know, it's everyone says, "Oh, everybody shared beds. It was the circuit back then." Yes. A lot of people lived on the circuit and they shared beds.

JVN What's the circuit?

MATTHEW RIEMER So it's just, you know, people lived in-.

JVN Oh the campaigning circuit?

MATTHEW RIEMER And rooming houses, especially if you were a lawyer.

LEIGHTON BROWN Well, this was earlier than his-.

MATTHEW RIEMER If you were a lawyer and, you know, you go to the circuit courts and that's, a lot, a lot-. So there's a lot of stories of people who just, you know, in rooming houses or otherwise would share beds. Fine. Great. For one thing, just point blank, a lot of

those people who or some of those people who are sharing beds were queer. So it doesn't matter that, that's great.

JVN That was, like, a fun, convenient way to be, like, "Oh, we have to share this bed."

MATTHEW RIEMER Right.

JVN That's like the same thing as, like, when you're still living with your parents in high school and you're like, "Oh, can I have so and so spend the night?" And you're like "Yay!"

MATTHEW RIEMER Yeah, exactly. And they'd be like, "No girls."

LEIGHTON BROWN It'd be uncomfortable.

JVN Yeah.

LEIGHTON BROWN In a sleeping bag on the floor.

MATTHEW RIEMER Right. It just so happened though that Speed was a, ran the general store. He sold beds. So it wasn't a lack of beds. That was the problem. And yeah, in the letters it's, it's the man-. Lincoln loved Speed and he loved him physically and was destroyed when they parted.

JVN Give us examples. I want thigh poetry from the 1800s.

MATTHEW RIEMER I mean-.

JVN Do you remember anything? On the top of your tongue.

MATTHEW RIEMER Not-.

LEIGHTON BROWN So, but, there actually is a Lincoln poem about gay marriage.

JVN There is?

LEIGHTON BROWN Yeah. Yeah there is. That he-.

JVN What does he say?

LEIGHTON BROWN I mean it's just about two men getting married. I mean it's, it. Yeah. No I mean that-.

JVN What does he say? What?

LEIGHTON BROWN It's just a. No. There's not, he doesn't say anything. It's just a lark about you know, about two men getting married.

JVN Did they have names?

LEIGHTON BROWN Yes. I don't. I can't. Like, I can't.

JVN Honey, we need to get a screenshot of that post that on LGBT_History.

LEIGHTON BROWN Well, those never do very well. But I agree with you.

GC 172 - Aly Raisman

[01:06:27]

JVN So if you are driving a-, you know where I'm from they call it vehicles, vehicles. So if you're in a moving vehicle, I need you to strap yourself in and don't freak out and don't veer off course because we have like literally one of the most prolific guests of "Getting Curious" history ever of all time. And I'm freaking out. So put your hands together and make so much noise for Aly Raisman.

So basically what I wanted to ask is, like, what was your first national? Like, your first national, it was your first P&G year? Your first, I've seen on Instagram a bajillion times, like, this clip of you doing your beam routine from your first nationals. And it's so cute. And you're so cute, but anyway, you have to tell us all about it. Where were you? What was the year, honey? I'm pretty sure your leos were purple that year.

ALY RAISMAN OK, so my first junior national championships at the elite level was in 2009. And I believe it was in Dallas, the national championships. I was so, so nervous. The months leading up to it, I was, I was so scared I'd never competed before at that huge level. I was so excited. But also I couldn't believe it was here because as a little girl, I obviously dreamed of competing at that elite level. And so it goes by so quickly when you can't even believe that it's actually there. And so I ended up competing. There's two days of competition. And so the first day of competition went really well. I was in second place, which was a huge shock to me because I didn't expect to do that well, then the next day, I actually fell on my last event on floor. I stuck my first pass, my Arabian. I stuck the Arabian. I was so excited and so pumped up that I went for my second pass and I did the triple twist and I went literally to my back. My feet barely hit the floor because I was so excited. And I just knew that I was, or I didn't know, but I was hoping I was gonna get top three. It's OK, Jonathan. It's ok, it worked, it's all good. It's all a learning experience. You have to fall and make mistakes.

JVN But I can't believe, that's has to hurts so bad, like when you're doing a triple twist and your feet hit-

ALY RAISMAN I know.

JVN Did you get, did the wind get knocked out of you?

ALY RAISMAN I had so much, I had so much adrenalin. And you go, I just went right back and kept going. I don't really remember. I'm sure it did. I think I was more kind of in shock of I can't believe I just fell because floor was my best event. And it was such a good

learning experience for me because I realized that, you know, before I went, I was, I was really excited and I was like, "Oh my God, this my first Nationals'. And I'm gonna do really well. I'm going to get top three on the podium." And I got so excited that I forgot that you still have to do your job at the competition. Like it doesn't matter how good you are on paper, if you don't perform well, it doesn't matter. And so even with the fall, I was still third, which I was so excited about. But I just, I learned I have to control my nerves a little bit better. And it's interesting because I think in other sports, it's a good thing to get really pumped up and be really excited. But in gymnastics, it's actually not a good thing to be super hyper or, you know, because you want to feel more calm. You just kind of want to feel like it's another day. Otherwise you go flying-.

JVN Yeah.

ALY RAISMAN Off the equipment.

JVN So, OK, wait. So that isn't 2010 your first Worlds?

ALY RAISMAN Yes.

JVN Yes. Literally the next year after your first year at Junior Nationals, you'll make the World team, which is just like not an easy thing to do.

ALY RAISMAN It was, it was so interesting because I feel like I was just so focused my whole entire life. And now that I'm out of it, I just. Do you ever look back at a time when you worked really hard and you're just thinking, "I don't know how I did it?" I just was so focused. And it was just, when I put my mind to something, I wanted to do everything I could to do it.

GC 174 - Kathy Sullivan

[01:10:23]

JVN I'm so excited for this week's episode because we have a scientific triple threat. We have Kathy Sullivan. You are an oceanographer. You're a geologist. You're an astronaut. And also, if people don't know, you are the first person that ever has completed a spacewalk and gone to the deepest part of the ocean known to man. So the question for today is, what is it like to live on that edge? Kathy Sullivan, welcome. So how big is the space station up there? Is there more than one?

KATHY SULLIVAN There's right now just the International Space Station, just Canada and Japan and the United States and Russia and the European Space Agency and other nations timesharing it, if you will. And how big is it? It's got, it's got a wingspan. These big girders that go out to the left and the right to hold the big solar arrays and radiators. Those are, those are longer than a football field from wingtip to wingtip. But that's just-

JVN Each? Or altogether?

KATHY SULLIVAN Altogether, longer than a football field. That's just all open structure out in the vacuum of space. Nobody lives in that. The parts the modules in the center where, where the astronauts live and work. They've got about the same pressurized volume as the inside of a 747 or a, you know, kind of typical sized four bedroom house, probably not a McMansion kind of house. So it's a fair amount of square footage.

JVN But is the house, like, stretched out like a tube or is it like, like up in space, like, is it like? Is it, like? It's not like the shape of a house.

KATHY SULLIVAN No.

JVN Is it more like the shape of, it's more like a 747 shape.

KATHY SULLIVAN It's not at all the shape of an actual house. It's a, it's a, it's a living and working area that's been assembled by connecting cylindrical building blocks. So, so think of a cylinder, usually 50-ish or so feet long, and then 15-ish feet out on the diameter on the outside. And then you connect them end-to-end and you make this, it's kind of a race track. So if you, they connect in an almost sort of a race track together.

JVN Oooh. That's interesting to think about.

GC 123 - Meredith Broussard

[01:12:42]

JVN I'm so excited to introduce to you, Meredith Broussard, our guest this week. How does an algorithm get put in place? Like for any, any, any set of anything?

MEREDITH BROUSSARD Such a good question. OK. So facial recognition runs based on algorithms. An algorithm is basically a recipe. It's a set of steps for completing a computational process.

JVN OK. You said computational like six times. I've been trying to be, like, "You're interviewing a professor. Be fucking cool, Jonathan." What does computational mean? I can ask a question.

MEREDITH BROUSSARD That is a great question. I'm so glad you asked. So one of the things I do in the book is I break down exactly what are we talking about when we talk about using a computer? Because often we talk about things like A.I. or computation without really understanding what we're talking about. So, like, let's talk about what a computer does. A computer literally computes. It just does math. It's a machine for doing math. And actually, I brought a computer with me. Do you want to see it?

JVN Yeah.

MEREDITH BROUSSARD OK. I brought a prop. Maybe we'll, maybe we'll shoot this in the-.

JVN Yes, yes. Yes. It's really good content, it's really good content.

MEREDITH BROUSSARD OK.

JVN But it's in a really fierce bag.

MEREDITH BROUSSARD Thank you.

JVN Yes. Oh, my. Oh, my. What is it? What's in there?

MEREDITH BROUSSARD All right. So here I have a computer. This is a Raspberry Pi computer. I'm going to pass it over to you so you can...

JVN Oh. Is it what's in my phone?

MEREDITH BROUSSARD It is a lot like what's in your phone. So when we actually look at what a computer looks like, it demystifies it a lot. So what I recommend is taking an old computer that you have sitting around your house and, like, pop the case open and look at it and look at the places where the ports go in. So, like, see the, the round bit, right there on the side. That's where the power goes in.

JVN Ooh. Interest.

MEREDITH BROUSSARD Yeah. When you do image recognition on a computer, what you're doing is you're taking, you're taking an image from the real world and it gets translated into a grid. The grid is made up of pixels. So, you know, when you buy a camera. It tells you how many megapixels it is.

JVN Yeah.

MEREDITH BROUSSARD That's what is the resolution. So it's, like, how many pixels.

JVN Like how many little spots can live on that square?

MEREDITH BROUSSARD Exactly. And so when you do image recognition, it's really about looking at that grid and saying, "Does this shape on this grid match more or less, mathematically, the shape in the grid, that is already in my memory?"

JVN So when it comes to facial recognition then it inherently would have to be racist, wouldn't it?

MEREDITH BROUSSARD Exactly. So facial recognition systems generally are better at recognizing light skin, than they are recognizing dark skin, and they're generally better at recognizing men than they are recognizing women. And they also don't take into account non-binary individuals at all. Also, people with, with disabilities often have trouble being recognized as human by facial recognition systems. So, for example, I had a student who had a condition where he didn't, he didn't have eyeballs. And so what the facial recognition systems are looking for is they're looking for shapes that look like conventional eyeballs.

JVN I just, I'm left speechless from thinking about what it is to live with, with living without eyeballs. Like, I just, I just don't even think about it. It took me that many seconds to get a sentence together. Good for me. I mean, not-

MEREDITH BROUSSARD Yeah. I mean, there's lots of, there's lots of ways of existing in the world. Right? Like, there are all kinds of ways existing that I haven't even thought of, but the creators of these computational systems also have not thought of these different ways of existing in the world. And that's a kind of bias.

GC 183 - Dr. Elizabeth Rule

[01:16:48]

JVN Welcome to "Getting Curious. Dr. Elizabeth Rule. How are you?"

DR. ELIZABETH RULE I'm doing great. Thanks so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

JVN Can you tell us about that gorgeous app?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE Absolutely. So I created the Guide to Indigenous DC and launched the app in July 2019. It is a free, free, publicly accessible IOS mobile application. So translation, if you have an iPhone, you can download it for free right now. And what it does is it highlights 17 sites of indigenous importance across the nation's capital. Of course, there are more than 17. But these are 17 of my favorite. And don't worry, you don't have to be in D.C. to use it. There are virtual features where you can access all the same content, including 360 virtual, on-the-ground imaging. So no matter where you are, you can use it and benefit from it. But if you happen to be in Washington, D.C., you can use the app. It'll geolocate you in relation to these sites of indigenous importance. And you can take a guided tour.

JVN So you're minding your own business this one day and you're just, like, "I am sick of all this fuckin', like, American-centric, like Washington, D.C. bullshit." Like, I mean, I'm putting words in your mouth. But how would I, this is such a cool idea that you had the idea, created an app, made it happen. That is, like, vision, fortitude, resilience with a side of tech. How did you do it?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE Yeah. Thank you. Thank you so much. The idea came to me actually in the classroom. So at GW, I administer what's called the Native American Political Leadership Program, and the Inspire Pre-College Program. I bring Native students from all different tribes all across the country to D.C. for an experiential learning program. And something that I was hearing in the feedback from these students was that they felt like out of place in D.C. Right? There was homesickness. Folks were dealing with the fact that we have this Washington football team mascot that, you know, can be very offensive. Right? When it's in your face, especially if you're not used to seeing caricatures of Native people, like yourself or your family.

And so there was all of this sort of disconnect between these Native students and the work that they were doing as, you know, future ambassadors of their tribe, coming to the capital

to learn the ins and outs of politics and policy. And critically, you know, how to keep that relationship between their tribes and the federal United States alive and functioning and well. And so I created the app to show really two things. First, that D.C. is Indian land. Right? There are people who call D.C. home. Right? And it's their traditional ancestral homelands. And the second thing is to say that there is a very strong historic as well as contemporary and vibrant diasporic indigenous community. So the idea of Native people coming from all over the U.S. to Washington to advocate for Native people has been going on for hundreds of years. Right? And so these students who are really doing the same thing but feeling disconnected, they were feeling that way because they didn't know the history. Right? And so I wanted to do that, that project of illuminating that history for them, to shape their contemporary experience and their contemporary reality.

GC 171 - Audra McDonald

[01:20:34]

JVN Welcome to "Getting Curious," Audra McDonald, who, if you do not know, is a record-breaking, six-time Tony Award winner. She has two Grammys, an Emmy Award, also, like, several other awards, like, it's literally, just to give you an idea, I watched this YouTube video where it took you a combined 23 minutes to accept all of the different awards in this one YouTube video. You have won six times. You're the most, you're the only actor to ever win a Tony for all four acting categories, which I just, like, that is so cool.

AUDRA MCDONALD It's, it's, it's crazy.

JVN Did you ever get less nervous?

AUDRA MCDONALD No.

JVN As you won the sixth?

AUDRA MCDONALD No, no, no, no, no. Because every one has been a shock. Because all my life, all I ever wanted to do was be on Broadway, but I just wanted to be on Broadway. I didn't think, especially as a Black girl growing up in Fresno, California, the dream was just to at least get there and be, like, in the ensemble of something. I just never, I, my dreams were big, but they weren't as big as they could have been and as, certainly not as big as I tell young kids to dream now. I say, you know, I'm gonna grow up and I'm gonna be a eight time Tony award-winning actress. I mean, that's what I tell my, you know, the people that I sort of do masterclasses for now. I like, just dream as big as you possibly can. But my dreams weren't that big. It was just to finally get to Broadway and be in something. So everything that's happened in my career since then has been mind blowing to me. So I don't, it doesn't compute in a way that it's happened to me. It's something that happened to somebody named Audra McDonald. But I'm, in as far as I'm concerned, I'm still me. I'm still completely messy. I'm still completely unorganized. I still have never been able to get my hair to totally look right in the 50 years I've been alive. You know what I mean? It's, nothing has changed as far as who I am. Do you know what I mean?

JVN I object to that last thing though. All that's fine, but like, no, I, I'm sorry. I've, I've had to, I've, well I didn't have to, but I've watched every, I'm pretty sure I've watched, like, most every performance that exists of you on YouTube. And just right now I can see you on Zoom. You have mastered this hair.

AUDRA MCDONALD Well, honey.

JVN This hair is-.

AUDRA MCDONALD It's all good.

JVN A mastery.

AUDRA MCDONALD It's good. You're so sweet. Thank you. But just meaning I'm still, I'm still very much me. Do you know what I mean? So.

JVN Yeah.

AUDRA MCDONALD All this stuff that, and also when you think about the fact that what you do, what I do for a living is just, it's my passion. It's the only thing I've ever wanted to do. And all I ever want to continue to do is just to evolve as an artist. Do you know what I mean? I want to be better. I'm still very critical of myself. I want to be better tomorrow than I am today. I want to have learned more about my craft tomorrow than I have today. And I want to be a better singer, actress, you know, listener, mom, all of that. I'm all about evolution, or trying to evolve and taking big risks and, you know, sometimes falling flat on your face. But that's the whole point, you know, of evolution. You've got to, you've gotta learn. You've got to push yourself forward. So, you have to do it for that and not because I want to win an award, because that's, you can only do your work. You can only do your best work. You can't vote for yourself for a Tony. You can't nominate yourself for a Tony. You know? You can't, you have, you really have nothing to do with any of it. You know, all you can do is your work. So that's where I put it all. I just sort of put that that happened to someone over there. And that's amazing. But it doesn't, it, it doesn't compute for me. You know?

JVN I, I, I, I feel that a little. I always say, like with, in my career, like, I feel, like, I'm kind of in a constant state of shock because like my goal was to just like, live. And like to be getting to do all of this stuff is just like, wow, this is so much more amazing than-. And I feel like for me growing up, I felt like, you know, getting away from my hometown, making it on my own. I felt like that was, like, impossible. And so it made me because I felt, like, in some ways it was, I feel, like, it in some ways it made me work so much harder to, like, prove myself.

OUTRO

[01:24:50]

JVN We couldn't be curious without you, our listeners. Thank you for being part of this exquisite journey we're on. And here's to wherever it will take us next! I love you all and thank you so much!

CG 182 - Sarah E. Bond

[01:25:04]

JVN Without further ado, welcome to the show, Sarah E. Bond, honey!

DR. SARAH E. BOND Vomitoria kind of got out of hand in our modern retelling of this mythical idea of luxury. I think it goes, it goes hand-in-hand with this idea that Romans were luxurious, so luxurious that you could eat, like, a sumptuous meal that might give you gout and then throw it all up and then eat a new one. Right?

JVN A meal could give you gout?

DR. SARAH E. BOND Well, gout comes from too rich of food. Right? So, Henry, the 8th-.

JVN I thought gout was when you got, like, an infected cut?

DR. SARAH E. BOND Oh no, I think that's gangrene.

JVN Yes.

DR. SARAH E. BOND Yeah.

JVN So what's gout?

DR. SARAH E. BOND Gout is, is I mean, Henry the 8th, I believe had gout. And there are lots of instances that in the ancient world, when you eat oftentimes food that is too rich-,

JVN Did I have gout from eating like Taco Bell at, like, 10:45 last night? Because-.

DR. SARAH E. BOND No, it's from long term eating of really rich foods.

JVN Oh.

DR. SARAH E. BOND So let's say you ate pâté every single day for every meal. That's-.

JVN Oh, like, duck fat or something?

DR. SARAH E. BOND Yeah. A lot of hearty, duck fat. But I mean, every now and again, Taco Bell, I don't think will give you gout, but yeah.

JVN Well, I ate, like, four Mexican pizzas last night, because they're discontinuing them. And they've been one of my favorite Taco Bell items forever. And it's, like, they're gone in like two weeks. So I did get four and I ate three. And I don't know what's the matter with me.

CREDITS

[01:26:35]

JVN You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness.

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