

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Ashlee Marie Preston

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness. And every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. This week, we're rereleasing an Instagram Live conversation recorded in June 2020, it's one of my very favorite conversations of all time, with Ashlee Marie Preston, who has since become a very, very, like, close, close, close, close friend, who I love so much, where I get to ask her: What does Pride mean to you?

Hi, everyone. We are going to have a gorgeous Pride conversation with Ashlee Marie Preston. So Ashlee Marie Preston, if you've been-, not had the pleasure to know who she is, she is an award-winning media personality, commentator, award-winning journalist. She's also is the first open, out trans woman to run for state office. And also, there's, like, one other gorgeous thing that you are besides my friend and person who I just look up to so much. And I'm so excited to see on this gorgeous morning. But also, you started You Are Essential, which is your new organization, which is so important and we're going to talk about all of it. But, first of all, coming from the, like, West Coast at nine in the morning, giving me all this glamor--

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:01:17] What glamor! Listen, I spend most of my day in a scarf and I take that scarf off and I floop her up, and I go. And these hearings are carrying all the weight, trust me.

JVN [00:01:32] Those are so pretty. I'm living for this adornment of shell.

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:01:36] Thank you.

JVN [00:01:39] So this is basically kind of what I wanted to ask you about today on this gorgeous Live, which is kind of what we were texting about yesterday. We, I got to really meet you and get to know you a few weeks ago when we did the New York City Pride kind of virtual fireside chat. And since then, I've gotten to know you more, like, behind the scenes, which has been such a, such a pleasure. But I, I know that for so many people, this Pride, it's, like, we want to celebrate, and celebration is gorgeous and it's fun. Comma: when there is this deluge of things to process as we head into an election, as we head into one of the most pivotal times in our country's history, and every day we turn around, we've lost someone. We have a new, a new law, a new thing coming into kind of, like, just, I feel like you can just take the wind out of a sail, and there's so much-, that just takes such a weight of energy to process.

And I think that for so many people that are new to that, to this aspect of, like, that have awakened in those last months to being, like, wanting to be on the front lines and wanting to be on the fight. It's, like, this isn't, like, a three-week thing. If you thought that things were going to go back to a normal in, like, three or four weeks, like, first of all, like, what was normal and second of all, no. So it's, like, I feel like you are someone who has been in this fight and has been talking about this since it was way before mainstream, way before people were, like, talking about it to the level with which we are now. And I feel like you have, I don't think I've ever heard, like, activism fatigue come out of your mouth. Like, you, like, have, like, you approach this with such joy and you're able to process everything that happens and you still have this joy. And I just wonder: how do you do that? And how can, how can people maintain this Pride energy 365, or 365 days a year?

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:03:32] I think for me, it's the understanding that joy is an act of resistance. It truly, truly, truly, truly, truly, truly is. Like, when you think about what oppression is meant to do, it's meant to break you from the inside out. And so it's meant to crush your dreams, your hopes, your aspirations, any vision of what your future can be, it's meant to destroy you. It's, just, every aspect of who you are. And so the way that you combat that is by reminding yourself constantly who you are, surrounding yourself around others who are willing to pour that light into you, and then also understanding that it's a game of divide and conquer. And it's also meant to divide or conquer your sense of self. And so just reminding yourself of who you are, what you're about, understanding how gaslighting works, understanding that the objective of gaslighting and dismissing the realities of what's happening to you, it's meant to create a sense of psychological warfare. Knowing that joy has to be the core of my being. It has to be my ultimate objective.

JVN [00:04:47] So I think gaslighting is such an important phrase to understand, and I think, it's so hard for people. Can you just give us, like, what is gaslighting?

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:05:00] So gaslighting actually comes from this, like, play, from, like, the late 1800s, I think. And they maybe, like, made a movie about it in the early 1900s. And it was about this man, the movie was called Gaslight. And it was about this man who, I guess he couldn't stand his wife and he wanted to, like, get rid of her. But I guess, like, instead of just killing her, you know, and offing her, you know, like, pulling a Lizzie Borden or something-

JVN [00:05:25] It's not funny but the way that you're recapping this story, just, I'm sorry.

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:05:30] Yeah. So he basically just decided that he was just going to mess with her mind and make her go insane so that he could get rid of her that way. And so he would do things like move things in the house and then make her, like,

second guess: "Wait a minute. That wasn't there." Or, like, "I thought I heard-. Did you hear this, or hear anything?" He would, like, dim the light. This is back when they had gas lamps and they would dim the lights, it would flicker. It would just do these patterns against the wall, things that would literally drive her insane.

And so fast forward, gas lighting became a term to describe the way that our government, our institutions and structures that participate in anti-Blackness or forms of bigotry, they play these tricks on us to make us second guess what we're really seeing, what we're really hearing. And eventually it's meant to break you down from the inside, like I mentioned earlier, so much so that you don't have enough stamina to continue the fight. So that's gaslighting.

JVN [00:06:28] I don't like that term, but I do feel like I like you explaining things gently, like, you are such a good explainer, natural-born explainer.

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:06:37] Too academic I feel. I think that's the other disconnect and missed opportunity. Don't get me wrong, I will hop on CNN and give them very much Elle Woods, Harvard campus, whatever. But the thing is that that's not really going to reach people. So when we talk about these issues, we have to make it accessible for everybody.

JVN [00:06:56] Yeah we do. So, speaking of accessibility for everyone, I feel like there is such a, I guess I want to be, well, I don't *guess* I want to be, I'm gonna be really transparent. So I feel like I kind of have my own experience with coming to terms with, like, what my complicity and, like, role and privilege was in, like, 2016 and '17 when I started hearing about some of these, some of the, what these ideas were. And I had such a knee-jerk reaction to it and such a classic, like, Karen sort of way. Like, just really feeling like, like, I knew these terms and I knew that these sort of things happen. And we do need to change our education. But like, it's just, like, I was very much one of those people that was like, "If you just explained it, like, more calm, like, I feel like I would be able to have it better."

And it really took me, like, months of that before I finally realized I was, like, "What if every single time I see something on the news that affects me as a queer person was, like, because of the color of my skin and equal to the way that I feel like when I see queer people attacked, but, like, the way that Black people are attacked." And then I was like, "I would be, like, literally breaking chairs out the window." And then I was like, "Oh my God." Like, I like.

And then that's when I kind of realized what the privilege really was of, like, you cannot, you cannot, you are not allowed to tell people that are actively being oppressed how to express themselves in, in their oppression. However they want to come at it, that is. And it is only my job to support and elevate. But I, but it, but I had such an uncomfortable reaction for months and months. I really, I mean, there were people I unfollowed on Instagram that we're talking about this sort of things, like, '16, '17, like, over time before I was like before I really realized like by myself, like, you know what it was because but that is it's not meant to be comfortable. And you talk about that a lot, like, how much comfort are you willing to sacrifice? And it's not so it's literally not meant to be comfortable.

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:09:05] Yeah.

JVN [00:09:06] So when dealing with that, I guess I just feel like there's such a knee jerk reaction to, for people to dismiss and to, like, not give people space to, like, find, find the truth, and I feel like you have been dealing with this, or, I mean, you've dealt with, like, the spectrum of everybody in your time in the public, like, all the things that you've done. You've run for office. You've been the editor in chief of a magazine, like, you've done it all. So, like, I feel like you've really dealt with the spectrum of Karens, this is how for people that are newly into this thing like that or learning and really trying to get people, like, into and be like, "No, no, come on, this is really messed up. You need to know about that."

And then, like you're talking to like, you know, some version of a Karen who is, like, maybe like a member of your family or like maybe just, like, some nightmare like. To the question, I swear to God, is it better to just, like, cut them off and talk to people who are willing and then let them come around on their own? Or do you, like, try to talk to people?

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:10:06] It's a little bit of all of the above, right. Like, there are some people that they subscribe to the epistemology of ignorance, which I've talked about that before. And what that means for those who may not know is those people who aggressively and militantly bypass their cultural analysis of what's happening with Black people, trans people, LGBTQ folks, all of that, because they're afraid that if you hold up a mirror to them, they'll see themselves in a way that disrupts their beliefs into what it means to be a good person.

So no matter what you say to those individuals, they're never going to sign on to anything that you're saying. However, I have made a lot of amazing friends now who were of the variety, of the 2017 JVN variety who were kind of just like, "You know, why don't you just be positive for this? And it's all light, and we all, love is love." And I think that I have this gift. And again, I would not expect this from every Black person or a person who's been

historically marginalized in America. It's not everyone's calling, but I have an ability to hold people accountable and hold them at the same time.

So I truly understand that, again, going back to white supremacy and divide and conquer, the objective is to get people at odds with one another. And so one of the things that I know is that the biggest stab, like, the biggest stab to white supremacy, the biggest slash to its throat is when you can convince another white person, or a white person to betray white supremacy. That, it becomes weak, and it's literally on its deathbed when you can do that. And so I am able to tell people the truth unapologetically. But I'm also able to explain that you are a part of a system. So when we talk about white supremacy, even, we're not attempting to character assassinate. We're not attempting to, you know, stain your hands with blood or or pin anything on you.

What we're saying is that there is this inherent racism that you were born into because you benefit from the system, whether you ask for it or not. No one is judging you for not understanding inherent racism. You're only being judged when you refuse the education and the call to help dismantle those systems. And for some reason, I think I'm able to get through to people in that way, because I really do think that when people hear "whiteness," it's almost like it's become, like, a derogatory word. So, like, "Oh my God, it's not about color. I don't see it as, like..." But that's the problem. You don't see color. You don't see the way that these systems are operating.

And someone else's liberation feels like oppression to you when you've been brought up and rooted in privilege. And the girls aren't ready for that. They don't expect that because they think that it's just going to be, like, "You did..." and you can talk about the ways in which there was a space that I had to go through. Again, I don't subscribe to these angry Black woman tropes. Like you said, we need to be able to express ourselves how we see fit. However, I do also come from a place of where I've just been emotionally detached from some of this stuff. So just being matter of fact about my style of communication.

JVN [00:13:29] Yeah, I feel like, I. There's, like, a few things on the last thing, it's, like, I feel my own version of non-binary, queer empathy with that. Because when you see so many people being, you do get a numbness, too, because it's like if you took in every single one, you couldn't keep going and keep the passion. You can't keep the energy if, like, you, because I feel like for empathetic and creative people, it's very, like, it can just be. It is, it's hurtful, but whatever. But back to the first thing of how we deal with the epistemology of ignorance. And so basically, I feel like what's happening with that is that-, because that was my thing, like I didn't want to believe that.

Like I remember I interviewed W. Kamau Bell on Getting Curious in the first season and he was telling me about what white privilege was. And I was like, "But I hate that." I was like, "I don't want to have white privilege." Like, and he was, like, "That's like Superman saying that they don't want to use their superpowers," because, like, his. And so basically what I was saying back then is, like, "I don't want to get, I don't want to be comfortable with this idea," like, that there's this whole thing existing, like, as we speak.

And I think that that mass delusion on, like, but it's, like, on a national scale, right. And I think that for me, a lot of where it started was is that, in education, like, it is literally back in school, we don't learn about this stuff correctly in school, like, what happened in the United States in, from its inception all the way to now, is, it's really brutal. But when you think about some of the things that happen, we do not learn that in school, and we have to learn that so early, and we have to be so, just, matter of fact about the things that really happen. And I think that that's until, right now, we have, like, Betsy DeVos, who is, like, the head of the education system, the United States. One thing that I learned on, on Getting Curious, too, is, like, how actually in Manhattan, like, they have some of the most segregated schools in Manhattan than they do in the whole country.

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:15:30] That's so funny, so yeah, usually you wouldn't-

JVN [00:15:34] But you, just, you don't think that, coming from, like, you know, being, like, a midwestern queen, you just don't, like, myself, like, you just don't think you think that, like, on the coasts, like, everyone gets it and that, you know, it's, but, it's so, I guess, it's really just this idea of having to hold up the mirror and like, "Oh, I'm a part of this thing." It's. That, that thing on an individual level is actually spread across the entire country and it's an actual intersectional feeling because a lot of people have, I mean, women can have a role in this, like, lots of different people have a role in, in kind of keeping these systems of oppression really, like, in the cycle. I mean, obviously, more white people, but there is an intersectional, an intersectionalness to, like, the willing ignorance. And so, you know, does that, I guess-?

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:16:18] No, I understand. And I was just thinking about we were talking about the bigger cities like, "Oh my gosh, it's so shocking that big cities, aren't it, that they're still segregated." And I think that the biggest grift that I've seen in a long time in our social politics are in big cities because they use capitalism as a shield to, you know, hide their, their racism and sexism and transphobia, homophobia, all of that, because it's marketable. It's marketable in big cities. So the difference is that in these other places, where it's a smaller town, it's more rural, you know, there's, like, Bible scriptures made out of corn, and fields that stretch for miles long and, like, those places, you know what I mean, they don't, there's no need for us, you know what I mean? So they can just

say what they feel. But in the bigger cities like New York and L.A., and they're making money off of it. So it's like also understanding that that's when we get into which I don't want to go too far off track. But when we get into visibility as this remedy, visibility isn't always the remedy. Visibility is sometimes the vehicle through which they exploit us, you know.

JVN [00:17:30] Hmm. Hmm. Hm. So, one thing I was thinking about last night when I was like, I follow this one guy on Instagram, he was talking about this, like, super duper fucking, like, "All Lives Matter," like, white gay porn guy. And then I, like, went into this like. Nether world of gay men, white gay men who don't, like, who don't understand and what a lot of them were saying, it's bringing me, I'm making a point, it's bringing me back to the education, because so many of them, just, like, literally, like, the facts are so wrong, like, not even close. And they're like, you know, like some stuff like, "Oh, well, some of these things happened four hundred years ago."

That's one that really pisses me off because actually, no, it was less than, like, 140 years ago, you know, it was, like, 1865 that was, like, 180 years or something? Like, like, I said and I'm like, I'm not good at math. But when you think about that Black women did not have the right to vote until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But between the between, after slavery and then the Voting Rights Act in 1965, which is now been completely gutted, in 2013, you had polling taxes, you had literacy taxes. There was like, like, white people, like, made it so hard and disenfranchised so many people, like, Black people specifically and people living in poverty, that could not vote.

And our country was established on the idea of no taxation without representation. That's, like, it goes back to the idea of, like, voting and being represented, and Black people and people of color and women were never represented in this country with the right to vote until, like, literally in the last, like, in an all of our lives, like it's the level of time. And then when we think about the fact that, like, all of these laws were voted and made without people's voices and these laws governing people. So to say that these are things that happened four hundred years ago and you don't bear responsibility in that is so incorrect. And if we don't teach people history in schools--

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:19:30] That's gaslighting, though. Education is important, but that's gaslighting at work. We still have Black men hanging from trees in 2020. We had three Black men who were found hanging from trees a couple of weeks ago, and they were tied to Ferguson, to that big moment in Ferguson. They were activists and tied to activism. So when people come like that, that's, yeah, those are the things that, like, we're talking about on Black Twitter and other places and in the news. And they're mentioning it briefly,

but they've literally found people hanging from trees and Google it for those who are dead.

JVN [00:20:08] And they had, that, they had connections to BL-, to activism.

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:20:11] And yeah, they, they most of the activists, some of the prominent activists or their children, they've been found either hanging from trees or they've been shot and burned up in their cars. And there is this as clear as day out in the open. And so when I'm having these conversations with people about like timelines and all of this, it's like I think I love what you did. For those who don't know, Jane Elliott is an anti-racist activist. And the term "anti-racism" came from Angela Davis. When she was in the interview, she said, "In a racist society, it's not enough to be non-racist. We must be anti-racist," which non-racism just says, "There's nothing wrong with me. I'm just this, this blob of light that's just hovering over this dark world and it doesn't assume any responsibility for dismantling anti-Blackness."

And so Jane Elliott is a white woman who would have these huge classes at universities and on campus. And she did this exercise one time. And she said, "If you would like to be treated like a Black person in America, please stand up." And so there is a room of, like, hundreds of white students and no one stood up. She said, "Maybe you didn't hear me. If you would like to be treated in the way that a Black person in America is treated, please stand up." No one stood up, and so she concluded in that moment, "If you know at your core that you would never want to be treated the way that a Black person is treated in America, how could you stand by and allow others to be treated that way?"

And so every day, I feel like at every white person's core, if they're being completely honest with themselves, you know, that Black people, brown people are seen as, as inferior. If you know that, when you grow up, you see white Barbies, you see these, like, models on TV, in magazines, you see that the girl that all the guys want in the movie, she's either white or she's very Eurocentric, you know what I mean? And so the thing is that, again, that's part of the epistemology of ignorance at work, is that blocking of these truths that we know, like, you've never, you know, when we say Black Lives Matter, we're not saying that other lives don't. We're saying that Black lives matter, too, because we live in a society that hasn't reflected that to us.

You know, even the fact that we're just getting a Black president after all this time, even the fact that we're just getting some of these historical moments, even though most of the events, the inventions like the stoplight and all these other things, they were invented by Black people. And yet America has always centered white people. And so I love Jane Elliott for that, because that's really what it's about. It's about recognizing that no one is

changing you for your whiteness or no one is shaming you for being born into inherent racism. They're just asking you to be intentional about dismantling these systems. And if you're pretending that it doesn't exist, it's because you're afraid that you will find out truths that you can't look away from.

JVN [00:23:40] So I think, you know, at the beginning I said of this conversation, like, "How do we keep going and keep this energy 365 days a year?" And then it's, like, well, if you are still here and listening to this and, like, you, then, you know, then this is 30 minutes of processing of all this stuff going on. Right. So this is the thing.

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:23:59] I love that you brought up momentum, and so what I have found, I think that this is probably in my lifetime the third or fourth movement, major movement that I've seen try to take off. And the thing that happens is that people get bored and they get distracted and they're ready to move on to the next thing. And so what I want to identify and name is that there is a certain type of people-, so let me just say this. When we talk about self care, I see people use self-care as a form of escapism, OK? And self-care should remedy fatigue associated with dismantling systems of oppression around the clock. It shouldn't be a shield to avoid being enlisted into fighting anti-Blackness.

So there's a difference between self-care and self-Karen: K-A-R-E-N. So self-Karen is the lip plumping aficionado slash Instagram who would rather blog about Burkin bags, pumpkin spice lattes, hashtagable moments in Joshua Tree and Kundalini yoga retreat off the coast of Malibu. Self-Karen is probably the most dangerous one of them all, because when we think about, I like that you separate bigotry and hate, because sometimes hate is informed. Often bigotry is informed by hate, but it isn't always at the core. Self-Karen's motivated by feelings of fear and inadequacy. And so when we think about self-Karen and the way that she shows up, she's that shiny object that society uses to divert its focus away from the ghastly presence of anti-Blackness in America.

And so people look to self-Karen as an excuse, or as a justification for why they aren't plugging in and really putting it all on the line. And so that has been, in my honest observation, what has continued to be an impediment to most major movements and their ability to thrive and grow is society's boredom and distraction and willingness to look over here, look over there, look for anything except for what's in front of them, which is the social responsibility to dismantle those systems instead of continuously benefiting from them. And so what happens is that self-Karen gets back text from her ex, you know, white supremacy, and white supremacy's on the other end of the line, like, "No, honey, we're both tired, we're exhausted, enslaved. I'm sure we both have things that we really didn't

mean. Just come home." And self-care is the Uber that drops her off on white supremacy's doorstep.

And so we have to, if we're ever going to keep up this momentum around Black rights, brown, Indigenous, immigrant, undocumented, disabled, reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, all of these different communities who have been historically oppressed. We have to be consistent. We have to be consistent. And the other piece, really quickly, is understanding that they will use your rights and the thing that you want the most to make you complicit in the oppression of other people. It's the game of whack-a-mole.

So let me give you an example. We know that when marriage equality became a thing, when they signed it into the law of the land, that same session they voted, they gutted, the Voting Rights Act, which we know that, that disproportionately impacts Black Americans. In the same way when they added LGBTQ workplace protections as an extension of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, we know that in that same section, they refused to hear cases and arguments about qualified immunity, which would hold corrupt law enforcement accountable for the egregious things that they're doing in communities all across America. No one, no one heard that because it was drowned out by victory and celebration of the LGBT community's win.

Then, they were like, "OK, they're really getting carried away with this Black Lives Matter stuff. So we have to make sure that we keep people divided and disconnected." So then they were, like, "Oh, congratulations, DACA." I marched for DACA, for the protection of DACA and dreamers for three years. I was happy about that when I also saw what they did. And then we know that down in Louisiana, they're like, "You know what? We're squashing this whole abortion ban thing, we're going to..." So look at what they did in a couple of weeks, they just essentially turned the LGBTQ community, the immigrant community and Dreamers, and probably feminists who are into, like, reproductive rights and everyone else who supports reproductive rights against Black people by giving them this temporary win so that they would become disengaged from the larger movement, because if we're being honest with ourselves, most of the people that are, that are screaming "Black Lives Matter," in some sense, have been made to feel that they haven't either.

And so they know that by riding the coattails of this momentum and this wave, that when the most vulnerable among us are liberated, everyone will be. And so but if you give them their rights, it's like a game of whack-a-mole. So we come up for air. You hit over the head, they come up, kick them over the head. They go down, they come up. But what would happen if all the moles rose at one time? And so when we get these wins, we have to make sure that we're not distracted, because right now, it's not a win. You're leasing your dignity. You don't own your dignity, you rent your dignity. And so true dignity and freedom looks

like not only fighting for your own interest and cause, but it looks like showing up for everyone else, because united is the only way that we're ever going to completely defeat white supremacy. Otherwise, we're just buying time.

JVN [00:30:19] And that's, okay, one thing that, yes, another thing that comes up for me and hearing that is the law of scarcity vs. the law of abundance. And I think that white supremacy and the whole thing that this rests upon is the idea that, like, everyone gets their rights and everyone gets and everyone really gets free, if everything really gets Even Steven so that everyone can thrive, then that takes away from the white people. There is enough for everyone to really thrive. And that kind of to me supports the whole idea of, like, no one's really, truly free and everyone's free. And I could not agree any more about the idea that here the Supreme Court has pacified the LGBTQ community in a certain way. They helped, you know, abortion rights in a certain way.

And that reminds me of what Masha Gessen told me on Getting Curious a few weeks ago, which is when it's in terms of, like, when you're looking for, like, the rule of an autocracy, do not be fooled by acts, like, by normal acts of humanity. Right. You should not, like, of course, we shouldn't be fired for being gay and trans. Of course, there shouldn't be these outrageous encroachments on abortion. That's the law of the land. Like, don't be fooled by these things that are "normal." This is how it should be. Like there's a separation of church and state. You shouldn't have gay and trans people getting fired for that. You shouldn't have these states like Louisiana and Texas and states in the South constantly taking away people's rights to, to, to produce, for reproductive rights. Do not be fooled by these normal act. But in that same time, we've enabled the police and the system that is supposed to regulate the police, which is the, well, the Supreme Court's not meant to regulate the police, but the court is supposed to strike down stuff that is unconstitutional. And where is it that in our Constitution, it says that there is a force of people who are allowed to just go around killing people like, like?

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:32:10] But that's what they were tasked with doing, even that, going back to the education piece. The police were slave catchers. That was what their role was in American history after slaves were free, temporarily, whatever, "free" is very subjective under that context. But when slaves were freed, white people were terrified that they were about to get the clapback of the century. And so they had slave catchers at that time that were responsible for catching slaves, committing crimes. And then they were sentenced to chain gangs, which is where the prison industrial complex was born. They were called chain gangs. And so they were still doing work for free, doing all this labor. Essentially, they were still slaves.

Those families who were the, who enlisted the slave catchers later became dynasties, which later became corporations. Law enforcement went through a major rebrand, had shiny uniforms, you know, all these different things. And then those corporations who many people look at as apolitical, they bought the government. The government is bought and paid for. And so when you look at, which is why people care more about the destruction of property than why people are protesting, and the fact that they're conflating protesters with looters and all of this, they've completely made it clear that capitalism is of the utmost importance. And so police officers are doing what they were created to do, which is inflict state-sponsored terrorism on Black and brown communities which, to keep them from latching on to white wealth and privilege and all these other things.

JVN [00:33:59] So these systems that were-, the country was established on, really never went away. They've only just changed this whole time. So I feel like earlier, the, the self-Karen is one of the funniest things I've ever heard, but great way to explain it. Yes. But I think your organization is a really good, that is self-care, like, that is, that is, like, you are caring, because, right, like, right? Like, You Are Essential, honey, like, I feel like that's, because, I bet you probably do all sorts of, like, you know, gorgeous brain chemicals from helping dismantle white supremacy and helping people, like, that probably create some great endorphins and helps you help people. And you basically created You Are Essential, like, that started as a response to coronavirus, correct?

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:34:50] Yeah, that's what it was, is, I'm one of those girls, like, I'm giving you very much Oprah Winfrey from Color Purple. Like, "All my life I had to fight." All my life, I had to fight. And so the thing is, you know, she loves the good scrapple. You know, she loves that. But I'm someone who has asthma and respiratory complications. And we know that even from Chicago, when we saw that report that said 70 percent of the Covid-related deaths were Black people, we know that there are so many things that would make me disproportionately prone to contracting Covid-19.

And so I was, like, "If I'm not here," you know what I mean, like, "How am I helping other people if I'm not even here to help myself?" And so I had to make a very difficult decision and take quarantine seriously. Like, I've been quarantined since March 13th. I only went out one time and that was, like, maybe two weeks ago. And it was, like, really quick, lickety split, then back home. And so the thing is that I was having to get creative about the ways in which I was able to contribute, because I believe everyone has something, whether you're able bodied, disabled, whether you're someone who's connected, who's not that connected, but you have hands, feet, you have an open heart and open mind, there is always something you can do to get involved. Look, I really want to impart that today.

And so for me, it was like, well, I know a lot of famous people. I know a lot of rich people. I know a lot of... What would it look like if we started to, like, mobilize these folks and might pool these resources so that we can get them directly to the communities who have benefited, who would benefit from it the most? Because the truth is that even when we talk about the prison industrial complex, I'm not going to go into this, but there is also a non-profit industrial complex which exploits the narratives of Black and brown indigenous folks, trans people.

And yet they use our stories to raise donor dollars, yet we don't see a single cent of the impact. So they pimp us out for our narratives and then we're still suffering. In fact, dare I even say, it's more beneficial because you always have a cause you're fighting for, and you never really get to the bottom of it, you're able to keep your lights on and keep going and keep that six-figure salary pumped up. And so I didn't want to put more money in the hands of the nonprofit industrial complex. I wanted to put hands, put money in the hands of these grassroots organizations who have always been doing the work because the most vulnerable people continue to do the most honorable work. So *You Are Essential* was born.

We started funding grassroots organizations working with those who have been directly impacted by Covid, but then it hit me. Wait a minute. Actually, these people were already suffering before the pandemic even hit. So what they're experiencing is a race war overlapping with, you know, a pandemic. And so that compounded means that white supremacy is meeting its quota much quicker. And what I also realized a moment ago, which I talked about how it seeks to divide and conquer, "What would it look like if we built cross-cultural collaboration that yielded generational wealth and a sense of full autonomy for each respective community?" That's the goal of liberation. It's being able to take that journey with other communities, making sure that no one is left out.

And so it's a lot easier to bridge that gap when you have a multicultural organization that shares the same values, that has the same objective, and that is able to bridge the gap and bring people together in a way that makes us much more powerful and not not affected by the gaslighting and the tactics to disrupt these movements. And so when we look at institutions and structures and all of these different things, organizations and companies, it's meant to kind of, like, keep us in our lane. And we're just like puppets on strings. And so we're cutting those strings, and we're communicating with one another, one-on-one. And we're having these meaningful conversations that underscore the humanity in each of us. And it's not making us fight for our dignity or, like, take turns.

I don't know where this came from, again, scarcity complex. I call it the single slice ideology, like, "OK, tell you what, JVN, you wait right here. I'm going to go and get my dignity and my rights, and my, and I promise I will come back for you." And then all of a

sudden you look up and you look up in the mansion and I'm up there dancing, you know, like doing my thing. And it's just like we don't come back for each other because we've become the society. "I got mine. Good luck getting yours." You Are Essential is actually trying to embrace all of that, even so much so that the reason why most of these organizations can't collaborate and come together is because the federal government is taking the stale crust of funding and throwing it in the middle of the rain and making them scrap or like wild alley cats. And the thing is that we don't have to do that. There is more than enough to go around. And in fact, we stand to gain more by working together.

JVN [00:40:04] Yes, so a few things so many of you in the comments are saying great things, I, here are some of the things that I've noticed that I don't live for. And I would love for you to just, like, think about that. So many of these comments have said things along the lines of, like, "You know, not all white people." That's kind of what we're talking about, and I just think, you know, one thing that I learned, I love the saying, it's like, "Knowledge is not facts, knowledge is context," right? It's understanding context. We must understand context in order to make informed decisions. And we have a context problem. I think that, not us, but you know, so many people. Well, maybe I have context problems sometimes, whatever focus, the point is.

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:40:59] Well "not all," I just want to say, quickly, "not all white people" is still trying to distance yourself from it, maybe you or someone who came in later in the conversation, but just really quick to step in and recap. What I said was that no one is blaming you or accusing you of being a bad person for being born into an inherent racism or being born into the system of white supremacy, it only becomes an issue when you refuse the education and refuse to help dismantle it. So that's what it is. When we talk about white supremacy, it is not our mission to destroy every white person in our path. We're trying to destroy the systems that continue to oppress Black people, LGBTQ people, brown, Indigenous, immigrants, disabled, the elderly, all of these people.

And so, again, what white supremacy will do is use your guilt and sense of fragility to make you feel victimized and attacked, because if you feel attacked and never, now, you've given yourself permission to disengage. And so the thing is that that disengagement is a privilege, because for Black people and for darn sure Black trans women, we don't get that privilege of saying, "You know what, I can't do this. This isn't right. This isn't..." And not only that, please don't think that racism and transphobia won't directly impact you, because let me tell you something about white supremacy, hunty, she will eat her own young. So when we see poor white people, even in rural areas, poor white people have been the biggest weapon of white supremacy.

They intentionally starved a faction of their own community just to add a barrier against people that would say, like, "Oh, white supremacy is doing this," they're, like, "Well, I'm white and I'm poor, I don't have privilege, I don't have..." and it's, like, honey, it's because you, too, can be white and still be a victim of white supremacy. That's how it works. And so when we're talking about these things, please understand, sugar, whoever asked that question. We're not saying that you're a terrible person and that by saying "white," it necessarily means that you-, but the thing is that you have to divorce yourself from this notion of what it means to be a good person, because it's a form of virtue signaling and there is no "good person," nor even to the Black people being murdered and whether they did something or did do something, does that mean that they deserve to be murdered?

Law enforcement are not the judge, jury, and executioner. So, again, going back to this notion of what it means to be a good person, when you can remove yourself from that, when you can understand that it's much bigger than you, it's much bigger than me, it's much bigger than all of us. We've inherited this thing. And so if we are truly intentional about making the world a better place, we could be the generation that actually dismantles it and starts to build a much brighter, more beautiful legacy. And that's up to you. And whether you want to continue to feel victimized by the idea that you are being accused of being a racist or whether you choose to embrace the truth that you are part of a racist system that continues to oppress and that it will continue to do what it's always done unless you intervene.

JVN [00:44:32] Yes, queen, that that was good. I feel, like, that was good. So, I think just, like, one other little baby last thing that I just want to think about for a second. So, like, I think one thing in my life that I've learned is that, like, when dealing with tragedy, when dealing with something really, really difficult, having, like, some sort of joy-filled something for some amount of time is important. And I think that it doesn't mean, like, you're, like, I guess I just feel like right now, like, whether you are a Black person, whether you're a person of color, whether you are an LGBTQ person and you've been under some version of receiving end of oppression, but especially if you've been on, like, every version of it, like, I'm looking at Black trans people.

I'm looking at people like really been all up in the oppression. Or you're a person who happens to be white as a man or as Amanda Seales says, which I think is a great way to think about it. And, like, you do need, like, cause, like, the self-Karen is the one who is, like, willfully ignorant. "We are not looking at it." One thing that I've really gotten into randomly, because I think of a mixture of quarantine and needing to exercise some version of new health care is, like, I kind of got into gardening, but I realized that this is a privilege to be able to have the space to buy the soil, to get the seeds, to put it in the sun. But that

is like it's like a 20 minute day in the morning that I can, like, do. And then I feel like. Right. I'm going to learn. I'm going to interview. I'm going to book. I'm going to do my thing, like, going to, going to do the dismantling. And I think that where you just do need to be aware that you need to earn your self-care and that, you, like...

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:46:15] That's what I was saying earlier when I said that self-care is meant to remedy fatigue associated with dismantling these systems around the clock, not as a heal for the spiritually sedentary or the folks that are just standing there just rooted in their own false beliefs, you know what I mean? So, totally. And really quick, what I love about that is that I love that you mentioned that it's something that you do in concert with doing the work. Right. Because as Black people, we will never have that moment for self-care if we could only access self-care when things pipe down or if we had to hit or stop because it never we don't have a pause button. We don't have, it's not like one of those 1985 boomboxes. Like, you can just press the last button to pause and it's just like, "OK, now it's quiet. Let me think about this." We never get that. We haven't gotten that since the inception of this country. And so we have to do those in concert with one another.

And I think the opportunity that I want people to also think about. So you have that garden, right? And you're like, "Yes, I get to do this. I have planned to do this. It feels great. I love it." What would it look like if we started using even our moments of self-care as an opportunity to advocate for Black lives and build up on that Black joy? Because for those of you who've been here the whole time, I said joy is an act of resistance because oppression is meant to crush you from the inside out. And so if we know that the antithesis of oppression's goal is to build up joy and to build resilience and resistance, sharing your self-care, your methodology of self-care is a way of uplifting Black lives.

So what would it look like to have a community garden in some of these neighborhoods that have been disproportionately impacted by state-sponsored violence and terrorism, i.e. the law enforcement, and all of that? What would it look like if your thing is-, even, I talked about self caring and being like a little monkey aficionado. What would it look like if you actually went and got homeless women who have been beaten down by this system, who have been survivors of violence, all these things that-, gave them a makeover, help them get grounded, help them get into, like, a job or a hobby, or you help economically empower them.

No matter who you are or what gives you joy, you always have the opportunity to pour that light into somebody else's life. And so that's more than anything what I want to-, nobody's saying that you shouldn't feel bad about those things, we're just asking that you share, because I think that we're all tapped into an infinite source. The universe is infinite. And so thinking about this storehouse that we have that has everything you could possibly imagine

or ever want, you will feel like such an amazing person and be tapped into the universe in a way that you've never been when you're able to learn how to share those moments with someone else, because you're also dismantling the notion of scarcity and the way that it's been exacerbated through capitalism, the way that it's been exacerbated. Even when we think about most of the world's walls, it comes from a place of fear, and it's always the fear that we will never have enough or that we will never be enough.

JVN [00:49:49] Oh, well, I just love you, and I saw this one coming just a second ago, that kind of pisses me off and I want to talk about it. But I also kind of want to end on that note, because it's so beautiful. But I guess just in a loving way that I could address it, just, like, if you so happen to have a, like, a feeling and some kind of way about, like, the term self-Karen. And it's, like, um, like, women or something, that's like that actually is the white supremacy, honey, because it's, you're going to be, like, "Oh dang, that feels really bad. I feel like I'm being picked on. I'm not going to engage with this because it's making me feel uncomfortable, because you shouldn't be putting-." No one's putting down women.

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:50:31] No, and I'm a woman. Trans women are women too, by the way. So it's that thing where, like, again, just really short that I just literally gave you the symptoms. I just described the symptoms and said that that is an attempt to distance yourself from the realities of what is going on so that you can absolve yourself of any social responsibility for dismantling systems of anti-Blackness. And so white supremacy will look for ways to feel victimized and oppressed so that it can blame the oppressed instead of taking, assuming responsibility and accountability for the ways in which they've been used to serve the oppressors' objectives.

JVN [00:51:15] And so many self, you know, like, a lot of gay men can be self Karens. [CROSSTALK] Like, I have struggled with it, lots of people struggle with it. And I think that's the important thing is, is that, like, we have to be able to have conversations with ourselves that are-, because, like, I was asking Stacey Abrams about this, about, like, how do you talk about people within your, your side? But it's, like, how do we talk to people within our own side, so to speak, on the left when we have difference of opinions on how we're going to go about something.

And something that she said that I thought was really important that reminds me of kind of a similar thing about you're talking about white supremacy, is that she said, you know, "What we do a lot of times is we fight about the crumbs, we fight over the crumbs that white supremacy is throwing us instead of talking about, 'Why don't we have the cake,' 'Why don't we have a slice of the cake.'" And that's really precisely how it's meant to work, because it's so confusing and it's so layered. And we've been pitted against each other in so many different ways. But instead of, like, you know, my therapist always says, like, "You

have to lean into the relationship," like, we all have to lean into the relationship, like, with each other, like, *everyone*.

And I think that that's possible. But I just whenever you have that knee jerk reaction to, like, you know, like, well, you know, "I don't really like the way that they're talking about this," or "I feel attacked by how they're saying self-Karen." And it's also kind of like how Rachael Ray says that I love this analogy, too, as long as I'm just doling out the analogies. She made this really big freezer cake with, like, vanilla ice cream and, like, a, like, and, like, a vanilla cake. But she's like, "If you don't like vanilla ice cream, just replace the flavors and use the technique." So if you feel offended, honey, when you, or you notice yourself feel offended about something and you're, like, "Why am I being offended about crumbs right now? And, like, distracting from the wider issue that like the rest of the cake-"

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:53:01] Where's the rest of the cake? Ask yourself: if you have crumbs, that means that it came from an actual cake. Where is the rest of the cake? Yes. And so that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to follow those crumbs, not take them and make them stretch and and live off of them and pass them down. We're trying to follow the crumbs to the actual cake, and that is the gatekeepers and the patriarchal powers that be that are starving all of us, you know what I mean?

JVN [00:53:31] I just really adore you and your work so much, and I cannot wait to see where you continue to soar. I mean, I think that you're thriving right now, but I just, I think that you are just so someone that is-, the world is going to know Ashlee Marie Preston and I just can't wait for more people to do so. And yeah.

ASHLEE MARIE PRESTON [00:53:54] Thank you so much, that was so sweet. And also thank you again for answering the call to dismantle all of this, because the thing is, the thing about, some people call it allyship. Some people call it being an accomplice. Some people call it being family. But the reality is that it's not meant to be easy. It's not meant to be comfortable. It's not meant to come with a gift card or a ton of followers or a pat on the back or a podcast or-, it's something that we do because we know that our survival is contingent upon the survival and well-being of one another.

And I, again, when we're tapped into that infinite source universe, we understand that. And I think when we look around the world right now and look at all the pain and agony and grief and strife and sickness, and-, all of that has been produced by white supremacy and colonial rule, this need to not be satisfied or grateful or fulfilled by everything that you have, but the need to control and everything. And so when we can break that by opening up our being and ourselves to share light and resources and all of that with other people

and one another, we have the capacity to reverse the clock because right now the earth is dying completely. Everything we see it, when we can change that.

So I want to leave on that note, because now that know that there are something to be hopeful for, there's something for you to still fight for. If you feel that there's nothing, if there is no hope and there is nothing to fight for, then we just lay down in the middle of the road and wait to be steamrolled over. And I think that we still have so much more to achieve and accomplish and celebrate with one another. And I can't wait to do it with you and the girls and the others and the people.

JVN [00:56:01] And I just can't think of a better way to say "Happy Pride" than that. So happy to you and thank you for everything that you do. And yeah. Thank you so much.

You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. This week, we re-released an Instagram Live conversation recorded in June 2020 with Ashlee Marie Preston. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.

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