

**Sam Fuqua:** Welcome to Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds.

Something different for you on this episode. Instead of an interview with a guest, we have a conversation with the whole Sideways team. If you're a regular listener to this podcast, you know that we often ask our guests to talk about a sideways moment in their life. A time they got into conflict, what happened, how they responded, what they learned. Well, we had one of those moments within our team and we decided to record ourselves talking about it. The conflict arose during final production of our episode with Antonio Williams about the N-word. What happened will be explained here in a moment. All six members of the Sideways team participated in the conversation you're about to hear.

Me, Sam Fuqua, Norma Johnson, Alexis Miles, Jes Rau, Alia Thobani, and Mary Zinn. Mary starts this conversation.

**Mary Zinn:** Um, in early June, Sam was asking for the wording for a, an episode about the N-word, and he sent out an email saying, "How shall we introduce this episode?" And I replied, and I did a number of things I believe in that email that were not helpful, um, that were hurtful, really hurtful. And my teammates let me know it. Thank you. I, um, did not wait for others in the team to respond because I was being efficient. Sam had a timeframe and I was wanting to get my response in efficiently, so I did, but I did not wait for people with more experience to reply. I typed out the N-word in that email, and we'll talk about that. But that's what happened in the email. My suggestion for the intro to the episode to help people not hear the word if they didn't want to hear it suggested we say the word, and it suggested that a white man, Sam, say the word. Those are the things that I have awareness of that started this conversation.

**Sam Fuqua:** So, one thing I thought about is, um, what happened after Mary's email, for me, you know, I saw the suggestion, um, that I say the N-word, the actual word in the intro, and I had immediate reaction like, no way am I doing that. That just feels wrong to me. But I didn't say that. I was gonna type an email and say, uh, no, I'm really uncomfortable doing that. But I said, you know, um, I really don't necessarily wanna be the first person to chime in here. And that's part of my, I guess, work to try to not be always the first person to chime into a conversation. Maybe that's a white male tendency that I've observed in myself over the years and tried hard to check myself on. But then we were having, a few of us were having dinner, uh, a few weeks later. Not everybody. I can't remember who all was there, but Norma was there. Norma, and you said, "You know, but Sam, we really need to hear from you." And that was a important thing you said to me, Norma, because I, I've been thinking like, was that a time when I really should have chimed in immediately, you know, and given my reaction to that suggestion? Anyway, that was sort of the next step in what happened for me was seeing that email, you know, having an immediate reaction, but not sharing that with the team.

**Norma Johnson:** Thanks for sharing that, Sam. Um, because what you described is what I feel is more often than not, what we do around racist stuff is to not engage, uh, or lack of engagement. I felt like when I saw Mary's email, I had so many feelings. And, I did, in my own way, kind of like you did Sam, but on the other side of the page, because for me it's filtered with maintaining comfort for white people because as white people, you have the, the privilege of not addressing it. I knew I was going to address it, but then I had to decide how I was gonna go about it. So for me, it wasn't thinking about myself. It was thinking about how to bring this to this team of very respected people that I highly respect and honor. How am I going to honor

myself and my reaction? How am I going to bring it up? 'Cause I knew I needed to do something. I knew I wanted to do something with it. And so, um, that's when I know I went into research mode and I spent hours researching wherever it took me about the N-word and, um, historical matter, outcomes of using that word, um, its implications on people's lives. Um, I collected a lot of varied material, which I then contributed. And for me, it was just hoping that it could be received and that it, it could deepen not only the conversation, but our relationships because it's something about racism, white privilege, white culture, and this country that we have to keep a veneer on all the time. And, uh, I feel like we're always trying to put cracks in it so that light can get through. And so that was my attempt to do that within, within the, um, established norm of veneer.

**Alexis Miles:** So Norma, I have a question for you. If you were going to raise this as a concern, as something that needed to be put on the table and looked at and explored, um, if you were to raise that without a veneer, what would the question be or how would you express it?

**Norma Johnson:** Literally, "What were you thinking?" And, and truly like, as a question, because I never get to hear that.

**Mary Zinn:** So Norma, are you asking that question? What were you thinking? And am I right that you would be asking me, "Mary, what were you thinking?"

**Norma Johnson:** Yes.

**Mary Zinn:** Okay. Well, after we've heard from everybody, I'd be so happy to come back to that.

**Alexis Miles:** And, and I wanna add something to the question. So Norma, the way you presented it was as genuine interest and curiosity about 'what were you thinking?' Because frequently, when I hear people say that, it's an attack. It's like, what the fuck were you thinking? You know, it's a, it's, and what I hear from you is, I wanna know this, I wanna hear that. So, am, am I right that that's, that's how you are asking?

**Norma Johnson:** That's absolutely how I'm asking. Mm-hmm. Because that's the, that's the piece that I don't have. I'm on the end of the reactions, but I don't get the insight of how people are actually thinking about this, these things. And it is curiosity.

**Jes Rau:** So, I was sitting on my couch jumping into my personal emails, which I don't always have time to do, um, as much as I'd like, just because of how work is panning out. And so, jumped in to, to do some just quick checking in sideways pod things. Had some tea. It was like just, kind of, settled on the couch, and had an immediate visceral reaction and kind of exclaimed, "Oh no! We need to have some conversations within, within the team." And then I went, my brain, my amygdala did the thing and started going like my heart rate increased and my palms got sweaty. And I started to feel like how similarly, what to, I think, kind of, what you were talking about Norma of how do I want to respond to this and how am I going to respond to this? Trying to tap into what, what feels the most productive in terms of how to support a conversation and also to call attention to what needs attention.

And so, I actually chose to wait a little bit, um, and not respond. And to think a little bit and to just talk about my physical reaction, like what was my physical response, rather than launching into a, a long email

that may not have been able, may not have captured really what, what I wanted to capture. It was just a reactionary email. So I, I paused for a second before responding. And tried to take the lessons of like, let's embody not just think about this, like let's feel it. And so, I was tap, trying to tap into empathy of feeling for Norma and Alexis and Alia. Trying to tap into the feeling of worry that I had for the impact on our team, trying to resist the urge that the oldest child of folks who have been in trauma a lot tries to fix things and package things up and tries to like manage and control and fix. So, I was resisting that urge a lot as well, so that we could all go through a process together, not one that was a managed process or orchestrated process. So, there was a lot going on for me in that space. But my initial reaction was like a literal outward, like, "Oh no!"

**Norma Johnson:** Yeah. And I, I have to say I really appreciated that emotional response that you contributed because I felt like I couldn't do that. And, um, it meant a lot that you just offered that without any fixing, just that there was emotion evolved. I appreciated that you were holding that peace.

**Alexis Miles:** Can I add to that, just that importance of hearing an emotional response from a white person. I've been in so many settings when things have happened that land so differently on white people and then on the people of color in the room. And so, sometimes we're sitting with this big emotional response and then the white people in the room don't have that response. Or if they have an emotional response, it's muted. Um, or they don't feel it, they're not in touch with it or something. And I'm generalizing in this instance to be conceptual or watered down. It's like witnessing somebody get their arm cut off and just saying, "Oh yeah, you know, I had a scratch when I was a kid, you know, on my arm." I mean, that's what it feels like. The response feels like. So Jes, thank you for saying that. It feels like really being in touch with the experience and humanity of someone who, um, does not look like you.

**Mary Zinn:** And Alexis, just the way you described that, um, really points out, and this may answer Norma's question about what were you thinking, the thoughtlessness. And I'm not going to say that I represent all white people or what they were thinking or what they would've done. I wanna be really clear that I can only speak for my own experience and ignorance that to suggest that a white man say that, Sam, I so much appreciate your initial reaction. I'm not doing that. You kidding? And so it, it went to the depth of my ignorance and I thank Norma and Jes so much for their responses that sent me into a pretty horrible spiral of shame, embarrassment, realizing that this mistake was big, huge. So Norma, I can't say I was thinking well. I responded quickly. I addressed the task at hand. And I'm so fortunate to have people in my life who will call me in and say, "Mary, this isn't okay. Do you have any idea what you've done?" 'Cause I didn't.

**Norma Johnson:** Thanks for sharing that, Mary. It was good to listen to your process with it because it's so different from mine. And, it makes me think because the N-word is so, so much, I get to see because to me it's so obvious, and it's so plagued with eons of time and outcomes that I still live with. And to actually get to hear that it's not anything like that for you is just something I'm sitting with. And it was good to listen.

**Mary Zinn:** Norma, as you say that, I'm curious to know, clearly I missed it. I'm sure it was taught to me, and how did I miss it? So, I would love to know perhaps from others who got it, who get it, and now I think I'm getting it, when did you first learn, or how did you come to know that this word held as much as is being described here for people who are not black? How did you, where did you learn that? Because it may be important for us to recognize the missed learnings and what's available. I just don't know how I didn't get it. Or was I just thoughtlessly moving too fast? I don't know. But I would ask Sam and, and Jes in particular, I guess. Alia, maybe if you know. Where did you learn it? Where did you get it?

**Alia Thobani:** My perspective is a little different in that I did not grow up in the United States. I was first introduced to the N-word, I believe, as I was growing up in Kenya in the eighties and nineties through television where the N-word was used in American programs. At the time, American hip hop culture was gaining popularity and influence here locally through music, movies, TV shows, even dress code and language. Unfortunately, the N-word became a cool term to use in social circles between black people and even between non-black people. Personally, I didn't use the term, but I didn't think much of it either when it was used around me, mainly because like many people at the time, I did not have the historical context, uh, behind the word, and it's use in mo, uh, modern times. However, as I grew older, I came to understand that the N-word wasn't appropriate, but it wasn't until I came to the United States for college in the 2000s that I understood the gravity of that word and the history behind it and its impact. This is a great lesson on how language is used within different cultures and in different places. Uh, there are derogatory terms that exist for various groups of people here in Kenya, but if you don't know the local cultures and societal norms, you can unintentionally and unknowingly use such terms out of context. I mean, this can also happen in a case like ours where a mistake happened despite knowing the history and meaning behind the N-word. So, having open and honest conversations like this is important. We normalize a lot of things, including negative things. And so, why not normalize having constructive dialogue on difficult matters, uh, like we're doing.

**Sam Fuqua:** Thanks, Alia. Um, Mary, I wanna make sure I'm understanding what you're asking. Could you just help me one more time with the question?

**Mary Zinn:** Yes, happy to, Sam. What Alia had just said helped me remember that I need to clarify even before I pose this question again, I knew never to say the N-word. I never do that. That I knew. How it didn't translate into writing it in that email, I don't know. But I want to acknowledge that in my learning, I knew never to say it. And so, I understood to some extent how horrible using it is. And then Sam, my question was, as a white person, when and how did you learn about the N-word that you, that you know what's appropriate and what isn't?

**Sam Fuqua:** Uh, my experience of it was as a derogatory term, not, uh, through a pop culture lens. Um, you know, older than, uh, Alia and I grew up in an all white suburb of Detroit. Lived in Detroit when we were little, and my parents were part of the, the white flight as it was called in the 1960s. And we moved to a, a white suburb adjoining Detroit, and I can remember at least one specific incident when I was a teenager, being in a car, uh, full of teenage boys from the suburb going downtown, you know, and the driver of the car, uh, he just did a quick lane change and cut off a motorcycle cop. Detroit motorcycle cop. And the cop actually went down. But got back up, put on his siren, pulled over the car, and gave the driver a ticket, right? So this is, I'm in this car with these teenage boys and, uh, African American police officer, and you know, "Did you see what you were doing?" "No, sorry." Got the ticket, and then the driver of the car cursed after the interaction was over. Cursed the cop and used the N-word.

And of course, I knew exactly what that usage was about. That was a derogatory term used by an angry white male teenager. And, but I didn't say anything, you know, and I think back about that and I feel guilt and shame about that, about not speaking out, saying, "Hey, that is a terrible thing to say." But I didn't say it. So, that's just an example that I think of from my youth. I, I don't know if it answers your question, but it, it certainly is an example of how I understood the term, and I, I think I understood, uh, its usage in that context as a, a term of, of violence and hate. So, I definitely grew up knowing that that was a derogatory term because I saw it used by, you know, some of the kids that, that I hung out with, and I didn't speak up.

Uh, you know, I was raised in the church and I knew, you know, I hope a basic moral compass from that and from my mother, but, you know, it didn't translate into right action to me.

**Jes Rau:** Yeah, I'm trying to think. I don't, I don't know fully, uh, where that learning came. I know I have a small handful of memories from kindergarten. I had to change schools in the middle of kindergarten. And of the two memories I had at, at one school, it, the single only from kindergarten through high school. The only black teacher I had was at my kindergarten class at Lumberg Elementary, which is one of the lower socioeconomic elementary schools in my area. I have a distinct memory of learning about the *I have a Dream* speech in that class and being really both upset and having a lot of, like being inspired, and we did like an art project around it. So, that was like my first memory of being taught about, like formally taught about racism in general. Then in high school, we, we read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and I was told when we get to this word, don't say it out loud. So, I know that. I'm just trying to piece together the little spots. I don't know. What I do think too is that over the last probably 10 or 15 years as anti-racism work has moved from a very like intellectual thing for me and within lots of white communities that are trying to do anti-racism work, that moving from this, like stuck in my head learning about the words that I should and shouldn't say, and those kind of things has moved more toward an embodied, mindful, like visceral approach.

And I think that's helped significantly because I think I can identify with, well, I'm told not to say this word and therefore I won't say it. Like, there's a very clear rule that, that's there and my, my very, like Germanic white brain likes to say yes, there's a very clear rule and I just won't do that. Um, and what can be hard sometimes for me that I have to practice is like, it's not just black and white. Everything is so nuanced and I have to extrapolate and I have to feel and I have to, um, pause and I have to listen, and I have to listen carefully to expand my understanding of whatever it is. So, I know over those like probably ten or so years that that's really been helpful is like the settling and deepening in. But I, I can't pinpoint exact moments. I can pinpoint moments, not necessarily of, of someone in my family using the N-word, but being very racist towards black folks and saying things that were really horrible about black people. But I can't, there wasn't like a moment that I can think of.

**Norma Johnson:** Mary, I'd like to ask you the same question. When and how did you learn about it?

**Mary Zinn:** I'm not sure I can answer it. I don't have those incidents. And I should allow that, in general. I don't have a good memory of my childhood. I just don't have memories of childhood. Somewhere along the way, I certainly learned what Jes was talking about. A rule that you don't do that. And, what it was connected to, but not in this visceral way, Jes, that you're describing. Um, I, I understand that I can't have a black experience. I, I don't, I won't, but I, I certainly want to be able to empathize and connect with people. For many, many emotions, for, for their joy, for their wonderful experiences, and for their horrific experiences, that we're all connected to each other. And, uh, it's my intention and my hope to be part of that. So, what do we do with people as you are calling me in and how do we really get past what they did? I'm, I'm not sure I'm, my, one of my concerns is we won't get past. I know we'll get to a better place, but I don't know if we'll get past, and I'm not in any hurry to do that at this point in this conversation, but it is a, in the back of my head, a concern.

**Jes Rau:** I'm not sure that even the, the goal of past is the one that I, that I, that resonates with me at all. I don't even know that that would be a goal that, that I'd be looking for. It would be, um, how do we move through and what is, what comes after, whatever that is. To me, getting past means like, we're over it. We're, we're done with it. It can live over there. And I actually don't think that that's very helpful for almost

any conflict as we're thinking about conflict resolution, like getting past it, it's moving through and what do we do differently and how do we interact from that point forward more, for me? So, I just know, I was just like, oh, get past, like, I'm not sure that that would be a goal for me at any point.

**Alexis Miles:** I wanna comment on something that's bubbling up in me, and that's how we live in such different worlds. And Mary, I'm not pointing this at you. This is society in general. How can it be that that word carries so much weight for me, that is, is so diminishing for me, and that not be understood by everybody? My parents never sat me down and said, here's this word, and if you hear this word, I knew it! When people hurled that word at me, I knew it was them saying, um, I'm trying to not use profanity today, you are effing inferior. You don't deserve to be on this earth. Go the F back where you came from. I spit on you. You are beneath my notice. There's something appalling, sickening, degraded about you. I mean, that word carries so much weight and no, my parents didn't have to teach me that. I experienced that when people said that word to me. You know, as a child, and adults saying that word to me, and I don't know what was in their heads.

I do believe that, you know, they grew up in a culture where they were taught that. That black people were the lowest of the low. I mean, they were the gum you scrape off your foot. That anything wrong in the community was because of these effing N-word folks. And that was in their bones, that was deeply in their bones. And I, I guess, so it's, just surprises me when people don't understand that weight, when I carry it every day. To me, you know, it's a little bit like sitting in a room, and some people are saying, "Oh my God, I smell smoke. It's so strong. I can barely breathe." And other people are just sitting there sipping their coffee, "I don't smell anything. I don't smell anything." To me, it's like these worlds coexist with each other and I, I know there's so much intersectionality. I know that people who hold other identities have that same feeling. How can people not know how painful it is for me to be called certain words or certain names? It is as if we somewhat co-exist in different worlds.

**Norma Johnson:** Thank you for sharing that, Alexis. I'd like to answer you, the question you put out as well, Mary. About how did I learn? It was in my body. I don't remember ever not hearing the word. Interestingly, a whole lot of it came from within the culture because that's what internalized racism does. It gets used with a different energy, but it's still from the same root. I also grew up in a very multicultural environment, people from many different countries. And, as a kid, one of the first things you learn in the other languages are the derogatory words. So, there were N-words for everybody. But, I always, everybody in fact, understood that black people in America were seen as what Alexis talked about, the lowest of the lowest. So, no matter what group came in, if they were not black, some of them already had that concept when they came. That's how prolific the understanding of that concept was globally. And if they didn't have that understanding, they quickly learned it. And so, I felt that around me as well. But it was just in my body, the knowing of what that word is. As we were talking, I kept seeing those images, some of those famous photographs, uh, during the civil rights era where people are carrying their signs or, uh, especially that big banner hanging from the NAACP office, *A Man Was Lynched Today*, and in, in my household, we had like all the black periodicals. We had all the black magazines and the newspapers and everything.

And as a child, I grew up knowing and reading the stories of people still being lynched in my lifetime. It wasn't in the white news at that point, but I knew about it. And I knew that word was connected with those people hanging from trees, those people having unimaginable violence perpetrated on them and their families and their communities. And, even though I grew up in the north in fairly integrated environment, there were places I knew I could not go. There were whole communities I knew not to travel through. And,

all roads literally led back to that word. It represented the incredible violent experience of my black ancestors. And, the people around me, the adults around me, every single one of them had escaped some violence that was being perpetrated and lived to tell about it. So, I grew up with the stories of people's real experiences. And I also, you know, as I'm listening to all the sharings here, it's almost like an unexplainable, starkness, indifference of experience, as Alexis was alluding to. I don't even have a way to consider not considering it. It just doesn't even exist for me to have that choice. It's, it's just in my bones.

**Alexis Miles:** And, and for me, it's not just historical, but a day-to-day reality. When I look at the composition of the, uh, the prison system, for example, and just the disproportionate number of people of color, and then the dis, dis, disproportionate number of black folks. I have friends, some of my white friends, feel safer when they see police officers. I feel fear. What's gonna happen here? What should my demeanor be, you know, when they stop me? And those kinds of things. And just the whole thing about race, how it sits differently with us. I know that so many of my white friends don't have an experience of their whiteness. And now it's easier for them to say, okay, yes, I, I, I am white. I am a white person. Before, it was hard for people to even say that because they would say to me, "When I look in the mirror, I just see a person. You know, that, that's what I see. I see a person." And they were being honest. They didn't see or feel the weight of their skin color. And it does have a weight. Other people feel the weight, you know, even if you don't feel it. And I try to understand it by trying to find analogies in my own life. What is it I don't see because it's not my day-to-day experience or because I don't know the history and all of that. But it is still hard to grasp that other people don't feel the weight the way I feel the weight of race, you know?

**Mary Zinn:** Alexis, thank you, and Norma, thank you, for, um, reminding us that we are in these parallel existences. We're not sharing the same experience. We didn't share the same experience growing up. And thank you to everybody for going back over how you came to know about the N-word. Thank you for that. I, I guess our podcast is really all about our living these lives that kind of look similar, but they're not really at all. They're these spaces that we don't really share. And so, these things happen out of ignorance or efficiency or whatever the cause is. These things happen that are so devastating to people who have a different experience. And how do we manage together as best we can and love each other wholly? I'm wondering how this hurt since we're talking about a specific thing that happened. And Jes, you point out it isn't over, it doesn't end. I appreciated that. It's not past. It's something that will carry with us going forward. What do we do with it, I guess is my question to the team members?

**Norma Johnson:** My response to that is first just believe it. Period. Without needing to transform it into anything else. Or to get to a solution. Or to do anything. I wanna share a poem. It's called, *I Can't Believe It*. And this was written in, uh, 2020, a very explosive year in response to the series of police murders of black unarmed men, women and children. Michael Brown. Tamir Rice. Sandra Bland. Eric Garner. Philando Castile. George Floyd. Breanna Taylor. And, and, and, and... May you rest in peace.

*"I can't believe it!" That's what some of my white friends are saying. But, what if you did? Would that begin to change things or might it change you? Your disbelief cost us.*

**Alexis Miles:** Norma, you hit on something there. That thing. I've had friends say stuff like, "Well, if you just approach it differently." Like describing being followed in Target and in Whole Foods when I'm shopping, you know. With credit cards and cash money in my pocket ready to pay these merchants, and I'm being followed. And um, I was telling some white friends about it and one of 'em said, "Are you sure? Maybe it was just a coincidence, you know. Nobody's ever followed me in a store." "Why can't people be more

respectful when the police stop them? You know, if they were more respectful, the police wouldn't get aggressive with them and they, you know, they wouldn't, you know, beat 'em up and all of that stuff." But that, that disbelief that, oh, it must be something that you did, or you must be imagining it because that never happens to me. Norma, when you read that, that's what that brought up for me. My personal experiences of people denying my experience because it never happened to them. And, and not really believing that something could happen just because of this chemical in my system that makes my skin darker.

**Norma Johnson:** Yeah. You know, that piece is part of my collection of poems for my white friends. Right. And, um, when those killings of, um, unarmed black people first became media news, so much was stirred up in me that I knew I wanted to say something. And, for me that, that was trans, translating into, you know, writing something, and nothing came. And then there was another murder, and then there was another. And, you know, what I know is that that one that is publicized represents hundreds. With each one, you know, the emotions were, were building in there, and certainly when I'm in black community, the pot is simmering, violently boiling, and words just didn't come. I just, the words weren't coming. The words weren't coming. It was like I was holding too much, and I couldn't even define it. And then, a white friend said that to me, "I can't believe it!" They kind of said it like that, "I can't believe it!" And then, another white friend would say, "I can't believe it." And then another white friend would say, "I just can't believe it." And then, it was like, this was over and over and over and over and over. And then it came to me. It was like, oh, it's not my words that I need to use. It's theirs. They have the words that I'm looking for to talk about. I was thinking I needed to talk about these murders. I needed to talk about what happens to people that look like me. But then what I got was, no. What I really wanna talk about is the absence of the talk.

**Alexis Miles:** Norma, it seems like a good space to read the original poem, *To My White Friends*. Do you feel like that?

**Norma Johnson:** Sure. Give me a moment to grab it.

**Jes Rau:** As you're looking for that too, a couple of things that have come up for me are around believing and the connection to deeply listening, and that those two things have to go together. Partially because I listened again to the episode, to Antonio Williams episode this morning before this, and I was just com, I, again, I was just like, what? What level are we listening to? If we can listen to that episode and then still utilize the full word in written or spoken context. Like, it feels to me like there might be a surface level listening, but not that deep listening. And without deep listening and believing, kind of going together, I don't, it feels like that's critical. It has to be a deep listening and a believing. So yeah, it was just coming up for me, just around the listening piece and trying to be really aware of how are we listening as you're sharing your poems, as we're listening to the podcast, as folks are telling us the, here's the rules of what to do and what not to do, how are we as white folks listening, and then also believing?

**Alexis Miles:** So Jes, can I ask you, uh, what gives you the capacity to listen so deeply?

**Jes Rau:** I think practice. Like, practice, practice, practice, practice. And it goes back to something you said Alexis too, where you were talking about how sure, there's intersections. Like sure, there are folks who hold various identities who might also feel dehumanization. But, so as a non-binary transgender person, there's terms that can be used. There's things that can happen to me. There's all this stuff. And I know that my

whiteness protects me. And I know that I can tap into that empathy. Like I can tap into, well, I know what it feels like to be dehumanized. And I know that there's a deeper level of dehumanization even beyond what I experience, and I think that's just from listening, believing, observing, connecting. So, I don't know what gives me the capacity other than putting myself in situations where I have to continue to practice and continue to practice.

**Alexis Miles:** Thanks for that, Jes.

**Norma Johnson:** Mm-hmm. Thank you. I, I wanna tag on another question for you, Jes. When you talk about the practice and putting yourself in situations, I have to wonder, because I myself am on the other end of relationships with white people. I'm wondering about, about and if there's connection with you beginning to absorb this level of understanding. Is there a connection with actually being with more people of color and having relationships that expand a greater depth than just the, the other person at work? Or those simple relationships that I find white people think are a lot deeper than they are? Because I know, from my end, when I'm in relationship with white people, where we are having these conversations where we're actually sharing and talking and having exchange, the value of those relationships is way deepened. And another piece I wanna throw into this before you even respond to that, is, something that I think white people generally may not think about or even understand is that for all those that are navigating white supremacy, white culture, whiteness, in response to the negativeness that they receive and experience, we learn to live biculturally.

Meaning, we can be in our kind of native culture, but worldly wise, we're engaged with white culture all the time. And also, for those of us that have been here a long time, generationally, we've learned how to engage with white culture. Uh, largely, because that's what keeps us safe. And so, we understand a lot of things about white culture, where a lot of times white people don't even understand it because that's of course how the system works. So, I'm, I'm just throwing that piece in too to help broaden out our conversation. This bicultural understanding that we know how to be white as well as be whatever our culture, our native kind of culture is. And that's an advantage in a lot of ways when we're looking at something like race.

**Jes Rau:** Yeah. I a hundred percent think that relationships, connections, deepening relationships are the key factor. Like, that is the key to the evolving learning that I've, that I have and continue to have, I think. Absolutely. I think the, the ability to not equate, but tap into empathy around my own identities is another piece that has been helpful. Deep relationships, deep listening, tapping into the, and not equating, but, but extrapolating, like and understanding, um, through empathy of i, of identities. And yes, like exposure to what whiteness means and what it is, like understanding what whiteness is, and then being able to say, wait a second, that is absolutely a piece of whiteness ideology or white culture, like having that veil pulled away or having that, um, curtain seen behind that curtain is another key, key part of it, for sure. And then, not taking that personally. Not thinking therefore, like that means I am bad and evil and wrong and, because that's a whiteness thing, right? A mistake means you're a bad person, and that's not true. That's a, that's a whiteness framework. And so, I think the, again, practicing and being with folks who are willing to, to dive deep into that has been really helpful.

**Mary Zinn:** I would like to pose, um, the question, does it seem ingenuous to try and reach out and get to know people who are not like me? Does it have this sense of, oh, she's just doing that for whatever reason,

when proximity is so valuable and so important and that is how you get to know other, other cultures, other ways of being, other experiences. And how do we keep from being seen as superficial in that?

**Jes Rau:** Just not being superficial in it, I think can help. Like, it, it's not, it doesn't need to be complex in those ways.

**Norma Johnson:** And I, I'd like to say something to that from someone who's, especially in the DEI spaces and things that I'm, that I roll in, the equity spaces. When white people are well-intentioned, intentioned in reaching out and so forth, I'd say, I'm not speaking for all black people, I'd say that it's always a good thing and, and this is a big and, my day is filled with race. And depending on what and how much I've been dealing with that day, that week, depending on how I'm feeling in the moment, all of those things are part of my response to someone with good intentions reaching out in that way. And that's just a fact. And, I say that so that that's a part of the understanding. Doesn't mean kind of like, Jes like you're saying, that you're a bad person or don't ever do that again, or it doesn't mean any of those things. This means I have an experience of race all the time. White people are experiencing race too, but just very differently. So, there may not be just right answers. But as Jes was sharing, continual practice is important. And I'm so glad that we're having this conversation. Okay, Alexis requested the, *I Didn't Tell You* poem. So, this was the first poem I wrote in the series of poems for my white friends, and it's called, *I Didn't Tell You*.

*I didn't tell you about my real life. The one that haunts me most days. It comes in moments at a time, triggered by a look, an attitude, a sensing of superiority, of blatant ignorance, of good meaning, intention, dripping crap down my face.*

*I didn't tell you about the look they gave me when I opened my door and they saw black me standing there. Their mouths agape. Their thoughts running loudly through my head.*

*I didn't tell you about being followed through the store and how I obediently kept my hands and my bag in plain sight. I didn't tell you how quickly they look away when I catch them staring at me in the restaurant or standing in the supermarket line. I didn't tell you how the clerk pretended the white woman had been standing at the counter before I had and waited on her first.*

*I didn't tell you how I have to take a really deep, long breath every time before I walk into a room full of white people. I didn't tell you that in the meeting, the classroom, and the workshop, when the subject of diversity comes up, they all look at me as if I am the spokesperson for the whole nation of people of color. And I didn't tell you that when diversity isn't mentioned and needs to be, I am too often the one who has to point it out.*

*I didn't tell you how many times white people say to me, in one way or another, "You're different!" Because they felt comfortable with me, and that didn't fit their mold of what they figured a black person was like.*

*I didn't tell you how disappointed that white man was when after eagerly questioning me, found out that I was not the exotic Nubian he had fantasized, but just another negro girl from New Jersey.*

*I didn't tell you about the white woman, a stranger who chose out of all the white people around us to sit next to me and proceed to tell me all about her favorite black performers and her black friends, and how this country needs to take integration to the next level. So I could see how her life is an example of that.*

*I didn't tell you about the anger I stuffed down when that dreadlocked young white boy gave me a high five and called me "Sister."*

*I didn't tell you about the white woman I passed at twilight in the park, who tensed her body, tightened the grip on her purse, and walked a large curved detour past me.*

*I didn't tell you that my stomach clenches when I see a police car. Because it means I may not be safe.*

*I didn't tell you that your world is not mine and that we are virtual worlds apart. I didn't tell you that while you can somehow think of yourself as multi-ethnically expansive because you have a black friend? I, meanwhile, just still stay black.*

*I didn't tell you that while you can walk boldly into any place you choose, I always have to consider where I am, who I'm with, and how I'm going to affect people.*

*I didn't tell you how your liberalism chokes me sometimes as you sit in judgment of someone you don't even know. I didn't tell you that being a good person and being clueless can come in the same package. I didn't tell you about the comments you made that would take a lifetime of explaining how you bought into the system that keeps us all in our place.*

*I didn't tell you about my day because I had been taught not to, and you have been taught not to even consider it. I didn't tell you about my day because then I would have to live it all over again, and I have to save that for tomorrow.*

**Mary Zinn:** Thank you, Norma. Thank you so much. Um, that really helps delineate, clarify those worlds that we live in that are so disconnected that, um, as much as we want to reach out to each other, our experiences are so different. It, um, brings me to the point where I, I don't remember what the line was, that a good person can also be clueless. That's what it was. And it brought it all home. But I think I'm a pretty decent person, but I'm clueless too. So, thank you for that. And when we were in person, not all of us were there. I think Alexis, you were not there in late, I think it was July, and, um, I apologized in person. But I haven't apologized to the group in writing or whatever. And I just need to, as you asked about, needs Alexis, to say, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I wrote the email. I'm sorry for the harm it caused. And boy, if I could take it back, I would. I would not hit the send button again on that one. I'll tell you. I'm grateful for this opportunity that we've had to learn more deeply about the N-word and about each other's experience. I'm grateful that, um, Jes, you just mentioned that making a mistake is not equivalent to being a bad person. I will tell you that it feels like it very deeply to make a mistake feels like a bad person. And since June, I've done a lot of therapy around this incident with the Sideways team, and I'm trying to shift my vocabulary from mistake to learning opportunity because I did make a mistake. And with your help, it's a learning opportunity and I'm gonna make mistakes again. I'm gonna screw up. There's no getting around it. So I, I'm just so grateful and I'm so sorry.

**Alexis Miles:** Thank you, Mary. And, one of my first thoughts, feelings, is when I look at systems, structures, foundational principles, how shame and guilt are used as instruments to keep people from moving forward. So, shame and guilt divert our attention from building deeper relationships, um, in, in my opinion. And, I think there's a deliberate manipulation of those feelings so that we feel that way. I believe it's a divide-and-conquer technique that keeps people from coming together in meaningful ways. I'm not saying that it's wrong to feel those things, I'm just saying that there's a societal way of manipulating those feelings so that we don't take any action. So we, we don't go get therapy. Or, we just get so stuck in that spot that we don't do anything. You said you're grateful for the conversation. I am glad you wrote that email because I don't think we'll be having this conversation right now had that not happened. And for myself, like seeing the Bryan Stevenson, um, video, woke me up to the fact that I have a lot of unprocessed trauma, you know, related to race and being an innocent child, being called that name on, on an almost daily basis. Of choosing to go to a school because I thought I was gonna make friends, an all white school. I thought I was gonna make this boatload of friends, and not having anybody speak to me for my entire eighth grade year in a humane way, except my history teacher, Ms. Bishop, who I love to this day because she was my light. She was my one light every day. Otherwise, nothing but the N-word, KKK posters on my locker, and all of that. But, I'm glad we're having this conversation. So, it's brought up in me some things I need to look at and heal. So, Mary, I am thankful that you wrote that email because it, it opened up something. It, it created a crack, as Norma was saying earlier, for some light to get through.

**Sam Fuqua:** That was Alexis Miles joined by all members of the Sideways team, Mary Zinn, Norma Johnson, Alia Thobani, Jes Rau, and me, Sam Fuqua. You heard an edited version of our conversation. We will also post the complete unedited version on our website, and we welcome any comments you have about this conversation or any of the episodes of this podcast.

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