



Episode 33: Building Bridges and Radical Belonging with Ben McBride

Transcript *(lightly edited for readability)*

Roxy Manning 00:17

Hi, I'm Roxy Manning

Sarah Peyton 00:19

And I'm Sarah Peyton. We're the hosts of the Fierce Compassion Podcast. In this episode of Fierce Compassion, we speak with Ben McBride, a visionary community builder and author of *Troubling the Water: The Urgent Work of Radical Belonging*.

Roxy Manning 00:35

Ben shares his remarkable journey from growing up in San Francisco, experiencing both the profound love of his Black community and the daily realities of systemic racism. To his groundbreaking work fostering dialog between law enforcement and communities impacted by violence. Through his innovative approach in Salem, Oregon and beyond, Ben demonstrates how bringing diverse voices to the table can create lasting change.

Sarah Peyton 01:03

We explore Ben's powerful framework of bridging versus breaking, discovering how gentle curiosity about those different from us can transform societal divisions. Drawing from his experiences in community violence intervention, faith communities and social justice movements, Ben shares practical insights for building belonging in our lives and our communities,

Roxy Manning 01:29

And in this particularly timely conversation, Ben offers wisdom about moving beyond political polarization to a genuine human connection. Join us as we learn how practicing self-compassion while reaching across divides can help us co-create the beloved community that we all long for.

Roxy Manning 02:03

We're delighted, Ben.

Ben McBride 02:05

Great to be with you all.

Roxy Manning 02:08

Well, we like to start off with every guest with the same question, which is, how do you define self-compassion, and what's the role that it's played in your work and in your life?

Ben McBride 02:18

You know, when I think about self-compassion. What comes to the top for me is the practice of being gentle with myself, particularly because of the limitations I have within my physical, emotional, spiritual, humanness. And so to be gentle with myself, knowing that I have things to contribute, but I also have real limitations that are found in what it means to be human, and so I shouldn't judge myself so harsh for being human, for the ability to be brave or to be courageous, or even at times, to be empathetic, to hold the notion that as a human, I've got a certain amount of bandwidth, and practicing acceptance and grace and gentleness with myself is probably the best way I can show up for myself and for others.

Sarah Peyton 03:11

What's your life journey been like? How did you get from being a little person to being where you are now?

Ben McBride 03:20

Well, I am the son of James and Loretta. My father grew up in a little southern town in North Carolina called Goldsboro, and my mother grew up in San Francisco, California, the third child of six, and my father's younger brother married my mother's younger sister, and so we have double grandparents and double cousins. They had nine children. So there's 15 of us who, who look like siblings, and lived life in deep relationship with one another across community and place.

So I come out of a strong culture of family and connection. And at the same time, while that was my journey growing up in San Francisco, I also grew up in a space where, because my mother wanted to give us the opportunities that private school education could offer, she took a job at a very white fundamentalist Christian school that myself and my two older siblings went to school at that had a lot of racism embedded in the school, a lot of othering embedded in the school. And interestingly enough, I somewhat grew up in this world of being able to be proximate to people who are investing into my life, who, at the same time, had parts of themselves that were very violent to my body and my story.

And so I think as I've progressed through life, there was built inside me this understanding that no one is just one thing. And so I think coming school and coming through high school and young adulthood, and subsequently into becoming a husband and a father. I think all of that led me to not always consciously recognizing that people are very complex, that I am complex, and that I might have some truths inside me and then also have some things about me that are in conflict with the truths that I do hold.

But my upbringing also was rooted in a lot of spirituality and a lot of religious practice, which also brought a lot of benefits and also brought a lot of harm, right? So I think you see this rhythm in my life of experiencing and being formed by people who were very good hearted people, and at the same time have parts about themselves that were problematic and not always as far along as in retrospect, I would have hoped they would have been. And you know, I think that led me through my life to some of the choices I ended up making as an adult and as a professional. But you know, lastly, I would say my upbringing, what I love about it most was that I was deeply loved by Black people. I was deeply loved by the Black religious experience and tradition, the older Black mothers in my storefront church who hugged me and gave personhood to me. It was such a critical resource to get I didn't know how powerful it was then. Life has taught me how powerful it is now.

Roxy Manning 06:43

Wow. Then as I hear that, I'm reminded of, I remember watching this video about a Latino man talking about his grandmother and the importance of her just loving him up, and that every day she would say a prayer over them to just love them up as a buffer for the kinds of contradictions you're talking about that as you're making your way through the world, through the school that's meant to lift you up, but that is also causing harm, that it's having this buffer of just love all around you.

Ben McBride 07:12

Yeah, and you know, I think, interestingly enough, while growing up in, you know, somewhat a bastion of liberalism and a sense of progressive ideals in San Francisco, I yet was also being racially profiled from the time that I was able to drive. The only gun I've stared down in my life is that of a police officer when I was 18 years old who told me to put my, excuse my language, fucking hands up, or I was - you know - he was going to shoot me, all the way to experiencing life with people who would have said, as it related to passing laws, that we were aligned and that they were in solidarity with me, while at the same token, they were afraid of the body that I was walking around in.

And became very normal for me to recognize that I scared women who understood themselves as white within this story, that that the story that they had engaged taught them to clench their purse at the sight of my physical body. I learned, over time, to find a way to put at ease people who did look like me when I stepped into an elevator to try to be humorous, to try to put them at ease, to try to manage my own space, to try to figure out how to navigate the powers that be within the system, just by nature of the body that I'm living inside.

And so I think that also built in me growing up this - while I experienced the deep love coming from the people who were around me - I also lived with the deep fear and awareness and readiness that I was not safe in this world and that there was nothing that I could do necessarily to make myself safe, but I could simply try to manage that. And I think over the journey of time, the more that I've been pursuing my own sense of what does it really mean to be free - not on paper, but actually within the soul, within the heart, within the mind - it's really been a journey around this whole conversation around the personal, the private, the public, and how do we really do the work to get more free inside while also create more freedom for others that are experiencing subordination differently than us?

Roxy Manning 09:34

I'm just really touched and moved by what you're saying, and there's also some grief coming up in me, because what you're naming is the experience of so many people who look like you and me, about having to manage other people's ideas about who we are in order to find belonging, in order to feel safe, in order to be given opportunity. And somehow, I'm really struck in this moment that that's also an example of what privilege is. That privilege is I can go into a space and just trust I'm going to be seen and judged for who I am and what I do, and not about how well I can manage your ideas of who I am and what I do, right? Yeah. Thank you for naming that so well for our listeners.

Ben McBride 10:18

Yeah, yeah. Now, I think, particularly when we are on the backdrop of important weeks like elections and local strategies that we're engaging in, projects that we're involved in, you know, sometimes it's important for us to name regardless as to whether others are sharing our experience. This is the experience I'm having.

And I've really loved hearing a story told about a white trans person who said to another in the middle of some conversation, they said, I just want you to know that I am having a human experience. I don't need you to understand it. I don't need you to agree. I don't need you to sign off. I just need you to acknowledge that I am having a real human experience, and even if you can't understand it, it has nothing to do with how true it is for me.

Sarah Peyton 11:19

Well, you've been a community organizer. You've done work with Oakland Police Department and with gun violence in in Oakland, and the reason that we found you was because of a community project that you've been involved with in Salem, Oregon. Would you be willing to tell us and our listeners a little about this project,

Ben McBride 11:41

Sure. Well, there's a couple projects that I've had the opportunity now to lean in in the Salem, Oregon region. And it's it's funny, because outside of a gentleman that I had the privilege of meeting about five years ago named DJ Vincent, I had never been to Salem, Oregon. I had never known anyone from Salem, Oregon. I knew of Salem Oregon by nature of knowing that it was the capital of the state of Oregon, but that was about as far as my story had traveled. But through these relationships, I subsequently found myself there. And I say that because to me, it's a little bit of a metaphor, that relationships with people across difference can actually help us find new places of belonging that we otherwise would never imagine ourselves within.

But as it related to Salem, when I got a chance, over the last couple years to be in conversation with different community groups and others who were really trying to take on this conversation of what does it mean to foster belonging? And that's something I've been heavily influenced by, from Dr John Powell. And really the way that I've defined radical belonging in the book I wrote *Trouble in the Water* was really about, how do we co-create with the perceived other to widen the circle of human concern? So as I was doing some of this work with community groups and leaders and others in the city of Salem, the police department, happened to be at one of the trainings, and they came up after and said, you know, the conversation that you're having is one we want to be a part of. What's been helpful for us in the training is the language that is being used in it is more accessible than some of the language we have heard before, and also you as the messenger, because of your background, having worked with police departments and around gun violence and community violence actually also helps us close the gap born.

And so there was an invitation for myself with the consulting firm I have, Empower initiative, to come and work alongside the police department to help them better implement a community violence intervention initiative that was rooted in some shared agency about how that strategy should be designed.

And so over the summer, I took the opportunity to spend a lot of time in Salem and curate spaces where different members of the community could bring their perspective to how the police department might shape the way that this strategy would go out. And really the hope that I was

leaning into was the opportunity to bridge some different communities who usually don't share space at the table to think about how they could co-create something that they both wanted, which was peace and saved lives. But do so in a way, recognizing that how we go about doing that is very different and has different needs as a part of it. And so I spent that summer doing that, along with a few other organizations in Salem that we're still working on, and I think at the end of it, really what we're trying to accomplish in this initiative is not just create more public safety, but it's really about empowering people who see the problems of their society very differently and have different points of entry for those problems, to recognize that the only way we get to the solutions we deserve is to find ways to do it together. But sometimes, in order to do it together, it means not just working on the problem, but actually working on ourselves, so that we can show up to the problem differently situated than we may have before personal investment.

Roxy Manning 15:15

I'm actually curious hearing about this project. Have you noticed any outcomes so far, like, what's what's been the result of this project?

Ben McBride 15:22

Yeah, one of the things that was interesting was recognizing that even this summer, many people came to the conversation with different needs. And it's always it's something that we all know intellectually, but it's something for whatever reason, I'm always surprised by that people know what it is they need, if we'll pause and be willing to ask them, and if they trust that we will listen.

So one of the things that we learned was that the needs for Spanish speaking Hispanic residents were different than the needs that police officers had. Those were also different from the needs of Black residents, poor white residents, versus more affluent residents. The needs of young people were different from the needs of middle age or elderly folks, and so the outcomes that came out of that was we had the chance to produce a pretty comprehensive report that we'll be presenting to the city of Salem and its city council towards the end of the year to really help inform some next steps that it makes about investment of resources and the implementation of strategy.

The other outcome that I think was helpful was there were a few people at the beginning, who, when I had personal conversations, could not imagine sharing a table or sharing space with particular people in the community because of certain political perspectives, perceived harm that folks had created, or actual harm that they had. And towards the end, it wasn't that somehow that mistrust went away, or that concerns dissipated. But what did build in, for some was some extra capacity to know how to actually work with someone who at the same time, I still do have some mistrust around and I don't have a lot of deep like but I do have enough capacity to figure out how to co-create, and when I think about the idea of belonging in the world, I actually think that that's

probably the best that we'll do. There are some of us that just see the world so differently, see problems so differently because of all of our origin stories and some other things. I mean, some ways that, you know, unfortunately, some of us buy into harmful stories and narratives and ideologies about other people, but this notion that we all have to agree in order to find ways to collaborate and co-create, I think, stifles progress. The solutions that have been most meaningful in my life have been ones that were full of a lot of tension, and that really required me to co-create with people who was difficult to co-create with. And so we're seeing some fruit on the vine coming in Salem, and some of the opportunities we're having to do it in other places around the country.

Sarah Peyton 18:17

What kind of recommendations will you make as a result of your findings?

Ben McBride 18:22

Yeah - some of the big ones are going to be about investment. That is no big surprise to folks I oftentimes have said in my organizing career that our budgets, our city budgets, are moral documents. They actually speak about who we care about and what we care about based upon how we are willing to invest.

And, you know, I have said in many cities. I said it in the city of Oakland, where I lived for about 15 years or so, and I used to tell people, you know, if the blood of young white men who are washing the concrete of our city, I wonder if there would be such hesitancy about leaning into investment. But for whatever reason, in the American story, the blood of brown and Black young men does not carry the same level of value as the blood of young white men. And so when young brown and Black men are dying, as they are in Salem right now, young Hispanic Latino men are those that are most at risk to be victims of gun violence, sometimes there is some hesitancy about, well, do we have enough money for that?

So we're going to be making some recommendations around investment, and then also about some evidence-based strategies that have come out of the practice of many of us doing this work around the country, things like call-in tables, where you use communication strategies with those at the highest risk to commit acts of violence.

Instead of using policing and enforcement, you actually bring communication and human resources and financial resources as a way to not just divert people from violence, but actually to join them in co-creating a pathway towards peace and thriving. And one of the other larger recommendations is governance. In order for these strategies to work, we don't just need people from different backgrounds to start them. We need people from different perspectives to govern them. And so I've said often that there is no way for police departments and sheriffs to make

communities safe. The only people that can actually make communities safe are the young men involved in the community violence themselves.

So the question is, how do we learn how to build a governance strategy that actually sits at the table the people who the meta-narrative has othered as the dangerous and as the criminal. So these are some of the recommendations I'm going to be making that will really invite city leaders, county leaders, law enforcement leaders, to ask themselves, are we willing to become a different version of ourselves, share agency and power with those most impacted by the violence in the region, and chart away towards peace together?

Roxy Manning 21:12

Wow, I'm really delighted to hear both about these very, very tangible recommendations that I'm getting is really coming from the voice of the people, of what they need, and also kind of excited to hear that you've been able to replicate this kind of strategy in other places.

And one of the things that's really striking me is this piece you have, like, I think you used the word bridge a couple of times around, really helping people, seeing people, and I know that you talk about a process that you call bridging, and bridging is, from what I understand, it's part of being able to see the people around you, see the homeless man on your front step, or the young person who might be involved in gun violence like you talk, also the officers who might be charged with responding to that gun violence with a person who experienced the violence, right? So you're able to make connections across race, across economic position, across status in the community. And can you talk a little bit more about the importance of bridging for you, and where did it come from, this capacity to bridge?

Ben McBride 22:19

Yeah, I would say, you know, that the, the idea of bridging is certainly not one that I'm authoring, or even some of the folks who've influenced me a lot have authored. I think, you know, as old adage says there's nothing new under the sun. We we get different terminology and different names for things humans have been doing for tens of thousands of years. But the way that I hold bridging is really as a different choice than breaking. And what I mean by breaking is one of the things that Dr Powell, John Powell from the Othering and Belonging Institute, talks about in his work at UC Berkeley, is that as social mammals, what is happening for many of us when we are exposed to rapid change or things that stress us out, is we usually respond through breaking. We identify the stress factor and then say, I need to figure out how to remove myself from the stress factor. And we other people. We say, These people aren't they don't look like me, love like me. They don't work like me. They don't come from where I come from. They have a different role in this story, and they're the cause of my stress, and so I'm going to dehumanize them and not work

with them. And not only am I not going to work with them, I'm actually going to vilify them. I'm going to try to organize more people to vilify them. Because really, what I'm trying to do is minimize the stress, and I've now ascribed that stress to someone or a group of people.

The opposite choice from breaking is bridging - is actually to say I may be feeling stressed, but it doesn't mean that the difference that I'm identifying is bad. I need to get a little bit more curious about how we're different and try to figure out, how do we minimize the stress for both of us and create the results we need by working together. Bridging doesn't mean agreement. Bridging doesn't mean affirmation. Bridging means acknowledging another perspective and point of view. Bridging is really the practice of stepping into the shoes of someone again, not to agree or affirm, but to acknowledge and understand and hopefully reach into that bag of empathy that we all have, that if I can understand what it means to be you, and while I deeply disagree with where you go from, this understanding, at least, I have now built to me the capacity to know where you're coming from.

And if I know where you're coming from, and I trust you with the ability to step into my shoes as well, and you can figure out where I'm coming from, then we can better figure out what can we do together, rather than just focusing on what we can and so to me, the bridging work really became very real for me outside of my own kind of wiring from this - and I shared a little bit of my origin story, but I think some of it came for me when I started doing the work of trying to reduce violence in Oakland. And interestingly enough, the bridging wasn't about race. The bridging was actually about class and place. It was the bridging of of uh, at the time, 35-year-old Black man with a family who's never been incarcerated, who did not have a history of violence, being proximate to a 22, 23, 24-year-old Black man who had all the opposite factors, and learning how to see him beyond the acts that he was doing with the firearm in his pocket, and see him as a beautiful human being full of opportunity, and regardless as to what he was doing, worthy of mercy and worthy of another opportunity. And the more that I saw these young men as worthy, the more it gave me capacity to bridge and figure out, what can we do together?

Interestingly enough, I often get praised for that, but when I've been talking to some of my colleagues more on the left, and you know, I'm a progressive person, politically, and when I'll talk to people and they'll find out that I'm doing bridging work with Evangelicals, white evangelicals, on the political right. People go, how in the world can you do that? You're betraying us? These are the people that are tearing the country down.

And I tell folks, so you praised me to bridge with young men who were literally taking the lives of other human beings, and yet you chide me on doing bridging work with people who look different,

with political perspectives that you know may cause and historically, some of the policies have caused harm. But the notion of who's worthy of mercy usually lies in the human being who's willing to offer it out. Are these human beings worthy of mercy, or are they not? Are they worthy to be bridged with, or are they not? And so that's where it lives for me.

I can't bridge with everyone because just like a real bridge, you know, you can't build one everywhere. You can't build a bridge with everyone. But what I like to say often is just because you can't build it with everyone and you can't build it everywhere, it doesn't mean you can't build it some places and with some people. And so I'm always looking for the opportunities for, you know, the environment that's ripe and ready for a bridge to be built, so that new solutions can emerge.

Roxy Manning 27:36

As I'm hearing you talk about bridging, I'm really struck by this idea that part of what you're doing is going from this idea that you and your difference are the cause of my stress, and therefore the reason I have to push you away, to saying that the cause of my stress is actually my not understanding and empathizing with you. So it's like shifting where we're locating distress and finding moving through that sense of difference being bad to it's my lack of understanding, and I can reach for that understanding, and then the difference becomes, not immaterial, but it's no longer the source of distress. We can now find a way to take our difference together, to find with empathy, to find our needs and to meet them together. Thank you.

Sarah Peyton 28:24

This is such an inspiring place to be with you right now when just this morning, Kamala Harris conceded the 2024 presidential election. So that takes me in a number of directions, but the first one is, what's it been like for you? And what would you like to acknowledge for our listeners? And do you have any words for people who might be experiencing despair?

Ben McBride 28:48

Yeah, my invitation is to not run from the despair, not avoid the heaviness, but to - and I'm to reach into my spiritual tradition to bear witness to it - because it is our insides telling us that something is wrong in the world around us, that something is out of balance, that something is unjust. And I believe that we must see it, not run away from it. It's a practice that I'm trying to lead into. I will admit that I ran from it for the first day and a half after I saw which way the election was going on Tuesday, and it just felt a lot easier to have a tall glass of red wine than it did to try to watch more news and have conversations.

But I think we have to sit with the reality that regardless how people align themselves politically, I think it is pretty fair to say that the rhetoric and the policies that had been articulated through the

President-elect Trump have been the rhetoric and the policies that create a smaller circle of human concern rather than a larger circle.

And as that circle gets smaller, there are people who are feeling the threat of that - undocumented relatives who are feeling the threat of what that means, people who may be documented but be racially profiled by nature of the rhetoric and the policies, women who are sitting with the reality that over half the country, at least of those who voted, seem to suggest that the government should have autonomy over my own body, rather than myself.

I'm thinking of the young, 18-year-old in Texas who had died a week before because she could not get access to health care. I'm thinking about all of our LGBTQ+IA relatives who were used as the the boogeyman of this election, as the one to be afraid of.

So I think we have to sit with it.

I also have gone back to trying to listen to wisdom and spiritual wisdom. And when I say spiritual, I don't mean religion. I mean the deep kind of values and inspiration that rises up out of us.

And I've gone back to listen to something that Valerie Kaur, a Sikh woman, said in 2016 when we found ourselves in this moment as well. And she said, as a Sikh woman standing inside a church invited by a Black preacher in the middle of all of this intersection, and she spoke powerfully that maybe the darkness of this moment is not the darkness of a tomb, but it's the darkness of a womb, and that maybe the dimness that we feel in this moment is creating an environment for us to move forward in a different way. I will say this though she said that eight years ago, and it feels to me that we've actually lost more light than we've gained, and I feel like those of us that are feeling the heaviness of this moment have to really reflect on how do we really diagnose what is wrong in this country and why are the majority of people who do exercise their right to vote, exercising it in a way that is constricting the circle of human concern?

And if I really believe that we have a spiritual crisis, again, not religious, but a spiritual crisis where we have lost our connection to whomever we see as the perceived other, and we meet that tension with violence - we meet that tension with, you know, causing people to be pushed away. And I actually think we need a massive campaign to think about how we handle difference and how we handle the stress about the other, because I don't believe that you can meet a spiritual crisis with a political reality. I think you have to meet spiritual crisis with a spiritual solution.

And I think the spiritual practices of belonging and widening the circle and bridging and becoming must be the work that we do not over the next two to four years just to get power back in a particular political perspective.

But I think we're at a moment right now that as white-presenting folks are on a journey to become the minority by 2040 for the first time in the history of this country, we are going to experience a lot of tension as things change, and if we do not collectively work on a massive story and campaign about how we understand how we all belong in this future that we are stepping into, I think history tells the story that we will just be met with more violence. We will create the conditions for genocide and for more harm in the way.

So I think while we feel the heaviness, while we give ourselves time to grieve, when that period is over, we must get up and really make some wise decisions around how we move forward, that is just beyond protest, political organizing and moving to the next two year cycle,

Roxy Manning 34:23

I am so, so glad to hear you frame it in this way, because I think so many people are looking at this moment and looking for a political solution, right? How do we regain power? How do we, you know, turn out to vote and things like that. And I think that what you're pointing to is absolutely right - that if I were able to look at everyone else, the person who doesn't look like me, the person who is not from my community, and still see them as my relative, then I am not going to want to vote for legislation, vote for policies, vote for people who are going to harm them.

And so I think this is all possible because we've lost our capacity to see the relative in each person we look at, in each being that we look at. And so, yeah, I think putting as much effort into regaining the sense of belonging, the sense of community that surpasses identity, surpasses race, et cetera, is what we're needing to get past this moment in a way that's going to be sustainable. That's not going to be keep on flipping who's in power, who's in control.

Ben McBride 35:28

You know, to that point, if the only thing we work towards is getting enough quote-unquote power to be able to force our way on the system. My fear is that what ends up happening is we now are just in a race for having power, for the sake of domination, and what we have accepted is that the only way that I can have belonging is that if I have enough power to force my way on those who don't, and I think the one opportunity for those of us who were not happy with the election is to sit with how it feels, right?

How does it feel when there is a perspective that you can very much resonate with, the notion about how it is eroding your agency and your rights and your liberty, and the fears that you have about it to recognize that we should not want to gain power so that we can do the same thing to those who are different from us.

The invitation, and this is why I've said for a while that in the face of all the tension, the wrong first question is, what do we need to do? The right first question is, who do we need to become? The wrong first question is, what do we need to do? The right first question is, who do we need to become? And then how can that becoming invite us into a new way of doing so that we get a different story about power, a different story about agency, a different story about sharing and resources.

And I totally get, you know, for any listeners that might be hearing me right now, I have another version of myself on my shoulder who's listening to my voice right now, and he's going, nah, that just can't happen. You are just too idealistic, brother. We live in a messed up world. This is just not going to happen.

And so I'm just being honest with you all, I am in constant dialogue between my ears with myself about my aspirations for who we can be as human beings, and sometimes the pragmatism of what's really accessible in the moments that we have. But I think we only move forward when we at best, live between the tension of those aspirations and our pragmatism and our realism, so as to not just get to a place of despair where we find ourselves choosing violence and othering as well.

Roxy Manning 37:57

Just one other piece, like when you say, the question is, you know, who do we want to become? I want to make sure that what I'm asking myself in this moment is not, you know, how do I get you to do what I want, but how do I understand what was so important to you that led you to do what you did, right? And it's like, I really want us to be able to reach out to the people who are celebrating the election right now and say, Tell me more. Tell me more about why this matters to you - not about who you voted for, but why it was important. What are you hoping this now means for you? Because if we don't understand that, if we don't have that empathy, nothing is going to change. We're not going to be able to make that bridge.

Sarah Peyton 38:41

You've been using this word story, which I have just sort of some shivers with, and some some sense of it implicitly. But if you were going to explicitly tell us about your ideas about story, what would you say?

Ben McBride 38:55

You know, we we all, and this is my hypothesis, if you will. I feel like we all operate in the world based upon the story that we carry, even though we are not always able to trace the origin of that story or when we got that story.

Like an example that I've used is people walk through a crosswalk from one side of the street to another when there are vehicles that weigh 10 times as much as they do, flying at 30 to 40 miles an hour, coming straight down to them. But they were told a story, usually by someone that they trusted at a particular point in time, that the way that the world works is that as long as you walk between the white lines on the painted concrete that vehicle that is speeding towards you will stop. Now there are no laws in physics that cause the white lines on the concrete to stop the oncoming vehicle, and we've even seen vehicles hit people in the white lines on the concrete. Yet we still walk in them because we were told a story that we have enough faith in that it informs our behavior and we move through the world.

Stories are important because stories and the messengers that carry them help us have faith about how we can move in the world. And so if I'm told a story that certain people are just a threat to me, they cannot be trusted. They are inherently sub human. You know, they are violent, they are dangerous, then I have no aspiration that these people can change, that they can be better. And I am going to be more likely to say, let's incarcerate them, let's segregate them. Let's do harm to them, because they are dangerous.

And some of the work from another mentor, Dr Jennifer Eberhardt, at Stanford, she wrote the book *Biased*, which is just a great book. But one of the things that she was telling me before in a break between a meeting, and she was like, you know, a part of what her science is beginning to show is that the more that our brain gets new stories about people with whom we were given old stories about the science is beginning to show that it has some power to shaping new expectations and subsequently new behavior. And she talked about the notion, when we were looking at police community relationships, that for a community member to begin to trust law enforcement, they actually needed seven positive touches with a police officer, particularly like Black and Brown community members needed seven touches in order to begin to move in, "Okay, I'm feeling more legitimacy with this department. I'm feeling more trust." But it only took one bad police encounter with that same person to set them all the way back. So the reason I lift this up is because the stories that we're telling are so important, and I feel like we need our institutions.

We need podcasts like these. We need the books. We need the poems. We need more resources to push into our collective zeitgeist more stories about each other that engender empathy and

understanding and humanizing of the other, rather than stories that fuel mistrust and danger. And so I'm trying to challenge myself, even in moments like the one we're in right now, to say, how do I not so easily tell a dehumanizing story about the people who voted differently than I do, while at the same time I am so heartbroken for the decision that folks made. But how can I hold both of these intention, and I love what you said, Roxy, and around this notion of, how do I get really curious about why for you? Help me understand how you see the world, because where I'm situated, I see it so profoundly different. And so help me understand what was motivating you.

And I tried not to disappear this in the notion that, yes, racism and sexism and homophobia and transphobia and xenophobia - like, these are realities that are living in our world. We're not, we're not living in in a heaven gone by and by. These are realities. And similar to my origin story, I've also held that that can be present in someone's life, and yet something else can also be present. And there was a time in my life where I was homophobic.

There was a time in my life because of how I was raised. I grew up in a container that was very patriarchal and paternalistic. But I'm not that way anymore, because I was offered an opportunity to get on a road towards becoming a better version of myself, and I'm grateful that people were willing to give me an invitation to become rather than to judge me for the moment that I was in. But it was because they were curious with me, and they provided handles for me, and they provided opportunities for me. They told me their truths, they were curious about my own, that it enabled me to go further and further down the journey. And so I'm hoping that we can think about how to prioritize story, be very careful about the stories that we're telling and offer the ones that we feel provide more safety, rather than danger.

Roxy Manning 44:35

I'm definitely hearing in what you're saying the importance, the power of hearing someone else's story to kind of reshape how we're thinking about them, and to challenge the stories that you might have. One of our guests talked about that we absorb stories from the culture without even being consciously aware of it, and so when I hear your story individually, it becomes a direct challenge to things that I might not even be aware that I'm holding, and that that can be also the path to the transformation

Ben McBride 45:05

Absolutely, you know, some of the most powerful stories for me coming from the world that I came from, which was a kind of hyper religious world that was fundamentalist in its origins, and just the way in which it was designed, had a small circle of human concern. Now, interestingly enough, this this religious place that had this small circle of human concern also was a space that I knew all these beautiful old Black women who loved on me and had the grace and would would

feed and clothe and shelter anybody who had need, and yet they weren't as open to many communities that they needed to be.

But you know, some of the things that was most meaningful to me was having a lot of LGBTQ+ relatives trust me with telling me their stories and trusting someone to be willing to listen, and some of the best gifts that I was given along my life was, you know, from women and queer relatives telling me, I need to give you some feedback around how what you said landed on me. And there was moments where I was so heartbroken for how my comment landed and over time, I became more heartbroken for how they experienced it, and then became on the journey of it's really not about just how I feel to be called in. It's really about learning how to really understand why, for someone who's in a different body than I am, they felt what they felt - they feel what they feel - and the the more that I got a chance to be their students, the more it freed me.

Now I do say to folks, the burden of learning is not on the subordinated to share. What I had to do is I had to join alliances and teams and places where queer folks were leading, where women were leading, and sit in the back row and learn how to follow and read the books that they say that they were reading, and listen to the podcast that they say they're listening to, and find ways to do some of my self-education. But I'm grateful that they left a path, and if we're going to get to a stronger democracy in this country and one that has a bigger circle - it's a lot of folks that need to travel the path. I'm included. There's still a lot of path that I need to travel as well.

Sarah Peyton 47:28

I love this question to ourselves of what path do I need to travel in order to get closer to my love of integrity and care? I'm really interested in another aspect of your journey, which is, did you used to consider yourself an activist? And then do you no longer consider yourself an activist?

Ben McBride 47:51

Yeah, so you know that word is interesting only because I don't know how it's always being used when when you're talking about it. I never named myself an activist, and I never unnamed myself an activist. It's always been folks have named me by the nature of my actions.

The way that I think about an activist is one who is deeply passionate about a certain social cause, and that they engage in the work with people and in work in the public to bring that social cause to bear and to change public systems and structures and the consciousness of society to a different place.

If that is the working definition - absolutely, I am an activist. I think what has evolved for me over the last, I would say four years - four to five years - have been the tactics by which I go about my activism.

I was a part of the Ferguson uprising in 2014 when Mike Brown was killed on Canfield drive. I remember going to jail alongside Doctor West and many others, as we were demanding the Ferguson Police Chief give us a confession for the murder of Mike Brown. I spent many nights on the streets, shutting down freeways, while at the same time doing the anti-violence work and being at the table with law enforcement, trying to bridge. And when I would be at the table with police, I was told I was too close to the police. When I was protesting on the street, told I was too close to the movement.

You know, usually for the different parties, I was always too close to someone else, because it was these binary frames, you're either with us or you're with them. But I consider myself an activist, and the tactics the way they've changed for me, and this is not to devalue folks that are still active with the tactics that I once used, and that's been a part of my learning. Like you don't have to yuck other people's yum. Just because you've evolved doesn't mean that you've got to tell everybody they got to start doing what you're doing.

But I think where my tactics evolved from some of the grassroots organizing. Activism, direct action, political theater, disruption of the status quo. I'm spending a lot more of my time trying to build bridges and build the capacity of people to build bridges, and I still see it as being focused on the same goal. I'm trying to get to a more just world. To me, in order for that to happen, it has to happen in the hearts and minds, and it has to happen in the public systems and structures.

So now, rather than organizing grassroots people on the street to take public action, the work that I'm doing now is organizing people in their workplaces, organizing people in their communities. I'm working within institutions and structures to try to empower people to bridge and make change with people that they would not see as worthy participants. And while my actions aren't as loud and public as they used to be, I still feel they're very rooted in that ethos.

Roxy Manning 51:02

I'm hearing, you know, kind of using a word that you've used also earlier today. I'm hearing that your work now involves creating more circles of belonging, really helping people in the workplace and lot of different places have that sense of belonging.

Ben McBride 51:16

Yeah, it's, to me, it's really about this notion and practice of how can we support people in making space for the person that is the other and so because I know what it feels like to go to jail and have my my garments taken off of me by a police officer and be handcuffed to the wall after doing a protest, and I understand what it means to sit down and have a meal with a law enforcement officer and talk about, you know, a community strategy that we're trying to do.

The work now for me is to figure out how to bridge these two different perspectives, to share a table and to use the understanding that I have from being in relationship with both to help hopefully close the gap a little bit, to encourage trust building where it can happen, and to be honest about where it can't and where it likely won't.

And I'll tell you, I'm still heartbroken at times. There are spaces that I don't get to work in by nature of some people still feeling like I am too radical, you know, or I'm too you know, the things he's done in the past, they were just too divisive. And I didn't feel like I was divisive. I feel like there was a point of my journey where I was much more - the word I would use was prophetic and disruptive - to get to that positive peace that Dr King talked about. You know, I'm still right now, not for a false peace, a negative peace, as he said, but to that positive peace, which is the presence of justice.

Sarah Peyton 52:57

How did you first run across Dr Martin Luther King Jr's work.

Ben McBride 53:02

Well, my dad met Dr King when he was 13-years-old in North Carolina. I was introduced to Dr King by my father and a series called Eyes on the Prize that he used to have us watch when we were younger children. We hated watching these videos that he would make us watch, but he was building in us this cache. And my dad said that when he met Dr King, Dr King came to his school when he was 12, 13-years-old in North Carolina, he had a mock up of some water fountains, and he turned them around and showed these young Black children that they were drinking the same water as their white counterparts. And my dad said I had this opening in my mind, like we're not drinking a lower level of water, we're drinking the same water. And he went out and participated in the children's protest in North Carolina, and he was arrested, and he was all for the non-violent movement.

And so my dad introduced me to Dr King. I was a shy kid. I'm still a shy person. I just learned to be more extroverted professionally. But you know, in order to help me overcome my shyness, my dad the first speech he had me learn so that I could learn how to speak publicly was the dream

speech from 1963 and so from the time that I was 11-years-old, it was holding the words of Dr King. And you know, it still bubbles on my heart where he says, I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream today that that rootedness is something that I've not lost. And I believe Dr King was a prophet for this country. And I think even as he's no longer with us, as he was taken from us, he still speaks to us for where we need to go.

Roxy Manning 54:51

Yeah, that right there is the very definition of bridging and belonging, like a perfect example of that. You know we could keep talking to you for a really long time, but I know wanting to honor your time so as we're coming to a close, and especially given the moments in which we find ourselves, are there some actions that you would love to see our listeners take?

Ben McBride 55:12

Yes. So three practical invitations I would give folks.

One, I would say is build shared humanity as you move forward. And what I mean by that is, I want to invite you to think about, how can you make space for people who are different from you? Don't think about, you know, the people that are most different from you. But let's just start strengthening our muscles to learn how to make more space for people. Now what I mean by build space is think about an activity that you might be able to put on that could make it more likely that you could hold space with someone. Maybe it's a barbecue, maybe it's a picnic. Maybe it's a conversation this Thanksgiving, instead of running away from the person and othering somebody. Maybe it's a lemonade conversation on the front of the house that you could say, Hey, I'm curious about what's going on for you, talk to me. I encourage folks to make space.

Second action is to bridge across your difference rather than break. And what I want to invite people to do as much as you can is look for an opportunity to see the world from somebody else's perspective instead of your own.

And then the third action I would give you is to co-create belonging. I encourage you to look for an opportunity to actually do something with someone who's different than you, to try to make your world a little bit better. Maybe it's make your family a little bit better. Maybe it could be doing something to make your neighborhood a little bit better. What I encourage us is don't try to change the country. Don't try to change your city in a moment of heaviness. That's probably not the best way to start. Look for an opportunity to see, Is there something that I can do with the people that are around me that helps increase the level of connection that we have, the empathy that we have? Let's look for those opportunities, and above all of those things that you do for

others, my biggest invitation and call to action is, Be gentle with yourself. You are worthy of love, mercy and respect because you are human. Give that to yourself and give it with abundance if there's nothing else you could do, be gentle with yourself

Sarah Peyton 57:21

And folks, Ben has written a beautiful book called *Troubling the Water: The Urgent Work of Radical Belonging*, and also is on social media with really cool stuff - on Instagram, on Facebook, on LinkedIn, and has a website. So we'll put these pieces of information in the show notes for you so that you can find him more easily. His work is beautiful, and it's been such a pleasure to have you with us. Ben.

Ben McBride 57:48

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Sarah Peyton 57:49

Thank you for being with us. If you enjoyed this episode and are finding value in these conversations, please help us spread Fierce Compassion by taking a moment to share this episode with a friend and rate and review the podcast on your podcast app. This helps others find us, and helps make sure these conversations reach everyone who might benefit.

Roxy Manning 58:19

If you would like to receive live one-on-one coaching from Sarah or me on a special episode of the podcast - or you want to find out more - follow the link in the show notes. Or visit our website. You can find our books, *How to Have Anti-Racist Conversations* and *The Anti-Racist Heart*, and learn about our podcast guests and new classes on our website, antiracistconversations.com

Sarah Peyton 58:44

And Roxy and I love teaching, and we're always offering new classes, courses and other opportunities for learning in our own individual work. You can visit us at roxannemanning.com and at sarahpeyton.com to learn more about our individual offerings.

Roxy Manning 59:03

We hope to see you.