

Valarie: I began to realize that perhaps my contribution could be reclaiming love as this kind of labor for a new time, because if we take the kind of love that we experience with our babies and our most closest relationships and we love beyond what evolution requires, you know? When we love others in harm's way, when we show that kind of care even for opponents, we love on ourselves that way, then that is what I call revolutionary love. So, I define revolutionary love as the choice to enter into labor for others, for opponents, for ourselves to transform the world around us.

(Intro)

I'm Layla Saad, and my life is driven by one burning question: How can I become a good ancestor? How can I create a legacy of healing and liberation for those who are here in this lifetime and those who will come after I'm gone? In my pursuit to answer this question, I'm interviewing change-makers and culture-shapers who are also exploring that question themselves in the way that they live and lead their life. It's my intention that these conversations will help you find your own answers to that question too. Welcome to Good Ancestor Podcast.

Layla: Valarie Kaur is a renowned civil rights leader, lawyer, best-selling author, award-winning filmmaker, educator, innovator, and celebrated prophetic voice. She leads the Revolutionary Love Project to reclaim love as a force for justice. Valarie burst into global consciousness in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, when her Watch Night Service address went viral with 40 million views worldwide. Her question, "Is this the darkness of the tomb — or the darkness of the womb?" reframed the political moment and became a mantra for people fighting for change.

In the last 20 years, Valarie has won policy change on multiple fronts — hate crimes, racial profiling, immigration detention, solitary confinement, internet freedom and so much more. She founded Groundswell Movement, Faithful Internet, and the Yale Visual Law Project to inspire and equip advocates at the intersection of spirituality, storytelling, and justice. Valarie has been a regular TV commentator on MSNBC and a contributor to CNN, NPR, PBS, the Hill, Huffington Post, and the Washington Post. A daughter of Sikh farmers in California’s heartland, Valarie own degrees at Stanford University, Harvard Divinity School, and Yale Law School.

Valarie’s debut book, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, was released in 2020 and expands on her “blockbuster” TED Talk. It is also our November read for the Good Ancestor Book Club.

(interview)

Layla: Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Good Ancestor Podcast. I’m your host, Layla Saad, and I’m here with a woman who just stole my heart a few years ago and who I just feel incredibly honored and privileged and blessed to be in conversation with today. I am talking about the incredible author of this book, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, Valarie Kaur. Welcome to the podcast, Valarie.

Valarie: Oh, Layla, what a joy to be with you.

Layla: It is an incredible joy to be with you too and I have this beautiful paperback version of your book but I also have, if you can spot it here, the original hardback as well which has some — it has some sticky notes in it as well, if you can see. So I

started reading this one, received this one, and moved over to this one because they're both so beautiful.

Valarie: What I love is that the hardcover is next to your book, *Me and White Supremacy*, which I have just torn through.

Layla: Oh my goodness.

Valarie: And savored as I've been — and it occurred to me that these feel like companion books. They are sister books.

Layla: Very much so. Very, very much so. If *Me and White Supremacy* is sort of like the manual, the how-to, *See No Stranger* is the depth, right? It's the stories, it's the humanity behind it. It's the untold stories. It's the stories that we need to hear and it's just such an incredible joy to read. I love this book and I'm so excited that we are currently reading it — well, we will be reading it when this episode comes out in the Good Ancestor Book Club, because this is our final selection for 2021 for the Good Ancestor Book Club, it's *See No Stranger*. It is an incredible memoir but, like it says, it's also a manifesto. And so we're gonna be talking about that and about your journey in this conversation, but let's start off with our question that we ask all our guests: Who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, societal or familial, who have influenced you on your journey?

Valarie: A few nights ago, I awoke from a dream where I was at my grandfather's bedside while he was dying. And my grandfather, my mother's father, who I call Papa Ji, is always the ancestor who comes, you know, rises in my mind, his love I can feel in my heart. Any time I'm asked this beautiful question, it's him I go to. Any time before I speak, any time I feel like I'm about to do something brave or when I feel like I can't, it's his prayer, it's his *shabad*, "*Tati vao na lagi, par brahm sharnai*."

Chaugird hamaray Ram kar dukh lagay na.” “The hot winds cannot touch you. You are shielded by the Divine. You are shielded by love.” So it was so remarkable for me to have this dream of him after so long. And, as I was watching him die, he died about 10 or so years ago, I noticed that the nurse had given him some medicine to make the dying go a little slower so that he could — so I can learn from his dying, because he died a saintly death. He was fearless in the face of life, he was fearless in the face of death. He chose the moment. He smiled at everyone at his bedside, he sighed, he died. He went willingly to the one. And I wanted to learn, right? And so, suddenly, before my eyes, because of this special medicine, my grandfather transformed into, you know, his little boy self and I held my grandfather as a little boy, and I can honestly, Layla, I woke up with this feeling of holding my grandfather as a boy and it felt so familiar to me. It was like holding my six-year-old son. And it was like time folding in on itself. And so, yes, I feel like if there is such a thing as intergenerational trauma, and we know there is, there must be such a thing as intergenerational resilience and intergenerational wisdom and so to touch the truth of that in that dream and to know that no matter how hard or dark the days are, how worried I am for my children, that they have that gold, shimmering gold, pulsing through their veins as well, that love.

Layla: Oh, my goodness. That gives me chills because, you know, when I think about the work of becoming a good ancestor, which for me has become my touchstone, it's become the thing that when the pain is too much, the anger is too much, the grief is too much, there's a higher purpose, there's something higher or bigger or more expensive, more limitless than all of that rage and all of that pain. I think about becoming a good ancestor and I see it as we are, right? That we stand in the present as the beneficiaries or the descendants of those who have come before us and the ancestors of those

who will come after we are gone. And so this idea of time folding in on itself, that we're not only moving forward, we're also moving backwards, we're also moving in circular motion, that there is no time, we're actually all here at the same time, is just — it's such a beautiful thing. And I think, and I'd love to talk about this, I think it's something that you really talk about in your book but apathy is something that can really settle into our bones when it feels like the waves of injustice keep crashing against us. You tell the story not only of your own journey in the book but the journey of your people and the journey of your community, the journey of Sikhs. I would love for you to kind of give us a little bit of background about your family history and how that informed how you ended up doing the work that you do today.

Valarie: Right, because my story begins before me. And so it begins with my father's father, who I called Papa Ji. He sailed by steamship from Punjab, India, to the United States, to California in the year 1913. And when he arrived, he was one of the very first wave of Punjabi immigrants to come from India, and when he arrived on this soil, he had his British passport, it was still British India. The immigration officials took one look at his turban and beard and put him behind bars, so he was incarcerated. Ellis Island on the East Coast was this beacon of welcome for — on the East Coast, was this beacon of welcome for European immigrants, but Angel Island on the West Coast was designed to detain, deport, incarcerate, reject as many Asian immigrants as possible. So, my grandfather would have been, you know, gone, I wouldn't be here with you in this moment if it weren't for this intervention of this white man, this white man who chose to be an ally, as you write so beautifully in your book. He saw my grandfather not as a foreigner or as a suspect, he saw him as a neighbor, maybe even a brother. And after three months of incarceration, he filed a writ of habeas corpus that released my grandfather on

Christmas Eve of 1913. So, my grandfather settled on the farmlands of California and, you know, he worked for pennies a day, slept in grape crates at night, twisting his body to keep safe from the snakes, and perhaps that first act of solidarity on the soil stayed with him because, decades later, when it was his Japanese American neighbors who were rounded up and incarcerated in their own camps, in the punishing deserts during World War Two, my grandfather looked after their farms so that they would have a life to return to. And he visited them when it was dangerous to do so. So, I grew up with these stories, Layla. I mean, I grew up on farmland, I would ride tractors with my grandparents and my parents, I would pick the peaches in orchards, you know, filling our shirts on long walks so we can bring home the bounty. I would talk to the stars at night as if they were my best friends. It was as if the sense of belonging, you know? Being home in my body, being home in the world, was my first orientation to what it was like to be alive on this earth. There was no difference between being a Sikh or being an American, that we belonged fully because my grandparents gave me that feeling of belonging and recognition and wonder, you know? To lose yourself in wonder, to look upon the face of anyone and anything around us and say, "You are a part of me I do not yet know." So, all of that, of course, came crashing down, as it does for so many of us who are a people of color. When I when I was six years old, my first racial slur in the school yard was, "Get up, you black dog." So, how interesting then, right? That anti-blackness could show its face, you know, so that my brownness was enough to make me black and that meant inferior. And I — for the years after that, I wrestled with not just the racial trauma but also the attempts of religious conversion, that I was not only brown or dark, I was unsaved, I was primitive because I wasn't Christian. So, in our small, conservative, mostly white farming town, it was, you know, I was a problem that I couldn't solve in the face of teachers and friends who sought to convert me to Christianity. I

had an exorcism performed on me at one time. It was — my dreams were filled with Judgment Day with hellfire and it wasn't just me, it was my family that I was called to save, but, Papa Ji, my grandfather who lived with me, whose love I call upon all the time, he was the one who — I would come home crying and he would dry my tears and he would say, "My dear, don't abandon your post," you know? I was a little girl in two long braids who liked to ride tractors, but my grandfather saw me as a warrior and, truly, Layla, my whole life since then, my whole existence has been this beautiful struggle to keep the promise I made to my grandfather not to abandon my post, not to let anyone take away my ability to see through the eyes of wonder and insist on love.

Layla: Thank you for sharing that. That refrain, "Don't abandon your post," is repeated several times throughout the book and every time I read it, it would make me smile because he always said it in these moments where you were in great pain, they were — it was like, "Yeah, I'm gonna abandon my post because X, Y, Z is happening," right? And instead of him saying, "Yes, you should," right? You need to step away. He was calling you it felt like to this greater spiritual principle that is grounded in your religion, which is, you know, these things like seeing no stranger, right? These higher ideals. So, how do you, as a child, process that? Like how are you, when you're hearing, "Don't abandon your post," what was that signaling to you and how did it become like part of your spiritual DNA, it sounds like? It really sounds like that is how you continue to lead your life, but I'm wondering, as a child, how did you process that?

Valarie: Well, it felt like there were these two forces within me, you know? There was this — when the little boy with the cruel eyes hurled that first racial slur on the schoolyard, it was like he was projecting into me this little critic. They call it internalized oppression, but what it feels like is that I wasn't mad at the

boy, he was just simply showing me a way the world saw me so then, oh, that became a way I saw myself. So, there was a part of me that said, “You know, you’re not enough. You’re not good enough. You’re not smart enough. You’re not strong enough. You’re not pretty enough. You’re not fair enough. You’re not enough.” And I think what happened with my grandfather telling me the stories of sages and warriors, I mean, the first woman warrior, I’m gonna show you on the video here, here’s the portrait of Mai Bhago, the first woman warrior who leads the 40 deserters who abandoned their post back into battle, she dons a turban, mounts a horse, says, “I will lead you where no one else will,” you know? And he was teaching me that it’s okay, you’ll have the voice that wants to desert, that’s a part of you, but then if you can call upon this part of you too, this woman warrior, this wise woman inside of you to say, “It’s okay, my love, I know you’re scared. Well, take a breath and we’ll show up, we’ll go back, let me lead you into the battlefield,” or, if we’re using birthing metaphors, “Take a breath, my love, and I’ll push and I will be with you. Your ancestors will be with you.”

Layla: When I was reading about your upbringing in this predominantly white community, predominantly Christian community, it echoed a lot of my own upbringing as well. I went to predominantly Roman Catholic schools, predominantly white schools. I think it’s different in the US versus the UK, there wasn’t that push for, “We need to convert you.” I was put there on purpose in those schools. My parents actually wanted me to be in schools where God was a concept, right? Where religion was actually taught. But there was always that feeling of difference. There was always that feeling of, “There’s something not quite right about me, I’m not sure where I really fit,” but what really was painful for me when I read your book was how religion caused this rift between you and your best friend at the time. Tell us about that story and, you know, so

much of what you talk about from when you were a child, these things are still happening today. They're still the very same things that are dividing us. So, tell us about that story and how it evolved over time.

Valarie: I was sitting in the library in seventh grade, maybe it was eighth grade now, with Lisa, my best friend, and she paused from her book to look up at me and say with this dreamy look, you know, "Valarie, I just can't wait for Judgment Day because then it'll just be us. It'll just be us and all the evil will be gone. It'll just be us." And I paused and I realized, oh, my best friend doesn't know that I'm not a Christian. And I say, "Lisa, where will all the other people go?" And she looks really uncomfortable, why would I bring such a thing up? She said, "Well, you know, down there," and then, at that moment, I realized that I had to break it to my best friend, that I had to break, I had to be the one to break her heart. Like, "Lisa I'm Sikh." She's like, "Oh, I just thought that Sikh was a sect of Christianity," right? This was how dominant that worldview was because how could her best friend who she loved, how could she be unsaved? How could she be damned by her theology? And so, for the weeks and the months and really the years that followed, we exchanged letters back and forth where she was trying so desperately for me to say the magic words to make me Christian and I was trying so desperately to not just, I think, for myself but realizing that my grandfather, certainly, he would not burn in hellfire, I had to defend us not for me but for him. And so here I was trying to make a way for her to see that we were worthy, beloved as we were, and it ended our friendship and, you know, looking back, I feel like, you know, I did go through a kind of pain but now I really see like how much pain she was in, like she had inherited a theology that severed her from her own deepest longing, her own deepest knowing, her own capacity to love, to love me well, to wonder about me. Her theology wanted to shut down that capacity to

wonder, to make way for different ways of being and that, you know, I only began to understand the struggle in that and to see it about 20, 25 years later when I get a Facebook notification from Lisa with this beautiful, sincere acknowledgement and apology and, Layla, now we're dear friends again. She's been a research fellow for the Revolutionary Love Project. She gave me permission to tell our story and the words that ring within us, it's like, oh, love is the way, the truth, and the light.

Layla: Yes. Oh my goodness. I loved hearing about these stories from kind of the younger years of your life, before there was before 9/11 and after 9/11, right? And the kind of coming of age that you had as a result of that. It's really interesting seeing your face now sort of in 2021 because before we jumped on to this interview, I, today, had been watching your movie, *Divided We Fall*. Okay? Which you recorded a very long time ago, you're baby-faced, 20 years ago, you're baby-faced Valarie, you and your cousin Sonny drove all across the States recording and witnessing and documenting the many, many hate crimes against Sikh people and against people of color that came as a result of the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Wow. First of all, I'm pretty sure you couldn't have imagined 20 years ago when you were there — I mean, you were literally baby-faced, that you would be here with this incredible book but also still bearing witness, still documenting, and still trying to find a way through, still trying to figure out how do we navigate the pain that's here now and how do we transform it and how do we create a new world. Tell us about that time in your life, because it feels like it was the fire that made you, like it was the fire within which the Valarie that we see today was formed.

Valarie: I remember sitting on the floor of my parent's bedroom watching the towers fall again and again, the horror stuck in my throat, and then this image of a man with a turban

and a beard and realizing that the nation's new enemy looked like my family, looked like my grandfather. And even then, I think I had the suspended like I didn't want to believe, I didn't — part of me didn't want, because I had inherited the story of forward progress, right? My grandfather, my grandparents sacrificed, they fought for equal rights under the law so that we could be more free and that was the story. So then, within hours, really, later that night, the next day, we started getting news of hate violence erupting on city streets across America. And this was before social media, before YouTube, before we had any channels, it was just email, it was community listservs, and it was like, "My brother's been stabbed," "My sister's been chased," "The gurdwara's on fire," "Someone's going to die, someone's going to die." And then September 15th, that weekend, the phone call came with the shaking voice, "Balbir Uncle has been killed." Balbir Singh Sodhi was a Sikh American father standing in front of his gas station in Arizona. So beloved. So beloved. He was known for handing out candy to the children when they came as if they were his own children and people didn't have money for gas, he would let them fill up and go. I mean, you know, the sages can live, you know? In the most mundane, ordinary places, here was a great soul and I don't think people of color need to be saints to be remembered in death.

Layla: Yeah.

Valarie: And this man was —

Layla: He was that.

Valarie: He lived his life in love. He really did. So, for him, you know, he was preparing himself to plant flowers in front of the gas station when five shots rang out and he bled to death where he fell. The man who arrested him claimed that he was a

patriot and he was a family friend, Layla, so it felt like an uncle had been murdered and yet his story barely made the evening news. And this is where, just like those 40 soldiers in the story of Mai Bhago, like I was afraid, you know? I wanted to desert. I didn't wanna be awake to this world. I was 20 years old, I ran into my bedroom, I locked the door, I hid for days. I read all of Harry Potter, you know? I wanted to escape the world entirely. Here was a story, of course, that I chose where the young people wielded a kind of magic when the adults in their lives wouldn't or couldn't and so that was the stirring, you know? The don't abandon your post. What does it mean to hold my post now, Papa Ji? I have to be willing to face crisis and ask what is my particular role? What can I offer? And I had a camera, I had a list of questions, I had a tiny research grant from my university, and, within days, we were crossing the nation. We went from city to city, from home to home, sometimes when the blood was still fresh on the ground, capturing these stories, and soon people began to yell at us, you saw it in the film, in *Divided We Fall*, "Go back home. Go back to your country," and I could feel this despair spread through me. And it was that last interview, I traveled to India to meet the widow of Balbir Singh Sodhi who had been living apart from her husband all this time and we traveled through the Punjab and the fields and the villages and there she was, you know, dressed in white, the color of mourning, and I had made a long list of questions, I just crumpled them up and I threw them away. I said, "Auntie Ji," you know, I just wept with her to grieve together, I wept with her and asked, "What would you tell the people of America?" And I was expecting a kind of reproach, a kind of despair. She said, "Thank you. Tell them thank you. When I went to America for my husband's memorial, they came out in the thousands and they wept with me and they cared for me, they loved me. Tell them thank you for their love." That moment, Layla, saved me. I mean, it still saves me. So I realized that while the nation did not know

Balbir Uncle's story, the local community was savvy enough to tell the story well, and that made it so that so many people in other faith communities didn't even know who we were but showed up, you know? You don't need to know people in order to grieve with them. You grieve with them in order to know them. And so they showed up to grieve with us and it didn't stop the violence but it was enough to be a kind of bomb to this widow's heart and this family. And I have just returned from the gas station in Phoenix just weeks ago where we held the 20-year memorial for Balbir Uncle, and, this time, you know, it feels like nothing has changed. I'm a mother now, like of all — every film, every lawsuit, every campaign, we thought we were making the nation safer for the next generation and now we have new babies coming up and we're having to prepare them for the kind of violence that we didn't even have to face when we were children. So what does it mean? What does forward progress mean? And in that moment, the widow came, dressed in white, the color of mourning, and I wept with her once again, but this time we lifted our gaze and, oh, we had people from every faith, every background, every place fill that gas station to mourn with us and to reckon with the last 20 years and how Balbir Uncle was the first. He was the first of all the people whose lives have been lost and the way our nation responded to 9/11 and the hate violence, the state violence, the two decades of war, he was the first. This gas station is the second ground zero. So, to gather in that place, to weep together, to say, "What have we learned?" and to have the audacity to lift our gaze to the future and say, "We insist on love even now," that kind of revolutionary love, if a critical mass of us, if more and more of us showed up in that kind of beloved community, not just in the wake of atrocity but just in how we are in relationship with one another. And this is what your book does, right? It's like this is a manual for how to be in relationship with one another, how to build anti-racist, sustainable community, beloved community with one another. And if enough — if more

and more of us commit to that labor, perhaps in the next 20 years, we'll be telling a different story.

Layla: Wow. Oh my goodness. So, that was really powerful, Valarie.

Valarie: It like pierced my heart, Layla —

Layla: No, that was — I mean, but this is — wow. So, as I'm reading your book, I'm taken back to 20 years ago, right? Because I was in second year of university, I'd just come back home to Qatar for, I think, it was the summer break, it was before we were due to go back to the UK, before, you know, before the term starts and all of that. I do remember seeing it on the TV in shock like everyone else, and then having to fly back to the UK from a Middle Eastern country, right? And on a plane, right? After we just saw this thing that we've never seen before. And in the years afterwards, I developed a real anxiety around flying, so flying home, back and forth between the UK for university and then here, Qatar, to come and visit my family for the holidays, I developed a real anxiety around it, and I remember a lot of my friends in university were Pakistani, were Indian, right? And so we were Muslims, right? And a lot of them were guys, they had beards, right? So every time they would fly anywhere, they would make sure to shave their beards, right? To kind of reduce the possibility of being racially profiled at the airport, and everything completely changed. But I think what I had forgotten and what your book reminded me of was the fact that, you know, obviously, I was really attuned to the fact that I'm Muslim, these people who have done this are claiming that they're Muslim, so I was tuned into that. What I hadn't been paying attention to were the people who "looked Muslim" to people who didn't know the difference, right? Or who didn't understand that a religion doesn't look a certain way necessarily and not all brown people are the same, don't

worship in the same way, and the harm that was done and so these stories of Balbir Singh Sodhi, so many of the people that you talk about in the book, was — I must have seen it at the time, I don't remember seeing it, right? But you brought it really home to me. And it was strange. It's been strange reading the book and being brought back to that time, where just kind of like now, the world we're living in has been irrevocably changed by this global pandemic, the world was irrevocably changed by 9/11, but one of the differences, I think, is that the hate crimes that came as a result of that, it's not like it was the first time brown people, black people, Muslim people had ever experienced hate crimes, had ever experienced racism, it's just that it went up a whole other level because of that, and it never necessarily went back, right? It may have been reported in a different way. maybe we're not as attuned to it, but it's happening in the same way that we've seen the Asian hate crimes that have completely magnified because of comments made by the previous US president about the coronavirus. Again, it's not like that was the first time that community of people were experiencing hate crimes. And so, again, that parallel of looking at like 20 years ago, wow, like I remember where I was in my life 20 years ago, I've been through so much growth, I've changed in so many ways, and yet certain patterns keep repeating themselves, keep coming back again and again. They look different, we have different technologies now, right? But the kind of mechanism is still there. And so within that, within the fact that that's the reality of the world that we live in, to say love is the way, love is the way, right? And when we hear love, a lot of the time, because it's a word that it's just thrown around so much and it's just used so much, there isn't necessarily a feeling of understanding it as revolutionary. There is also not necessarily a feeling of understanding love as encompassing other things, right? As encompassing pain, as encompassing grief, as encompassing rage, that all of that is a part of love. So, I would love if you

could talk to us about what love means for you. What does revolutionary love mean for you? And why is it not just this fluffy word that's just about just seeing the best in each other and just hoping for the best and just trying to be optimistic, just acting like we're not hurt when we are, right? Just forgiving when we really haven't resolved anything, right? What is revolutionary love?

Valarie: Yeah. Well, let me say first that I'm a trained civil rights lawyer so, for many years, anytime someone stood on a stage and said, "Love is the answer," I would roll my eyes. I'm like, "Really?" But, you know, what is love against institutions that perpetuate injustice, you know? And it was my existential crisis after my son was born and realizing that you're right, hate crimes had never gone back to the levels they were at before 9/11. Our communities are five times more likely to be targets of hate than we were before 9/11. My son's first racial slur came at four, you know? I was six, he was four, "Go back to your country." So it was it was from that moment of crisis that I stepped back from frontlines activism and I poured through all of my lived experience, all the stories that had been entrusted to me, social movements of the past, wisdom traditions, and began to see these patterns and I thought, "Oh, okay. The problem is not with love. It's the way we talk about it." We tend to talk about love as if it's this rush of feeling, this rush of emotion, and, I mean, I remember the moment my son was placed on my chest, I was shaking and sobbing from that rush of feeling and I thought, "This is love, I am falling in love," and there's a role for the falling but, in the meantime, my mother is opening up her bag, taking out her dal, and proceeding to feed me, right? Like feeding her baby as I'm feeding mine and she knew what I was just beginning to learn that that love is more than a rush of emotion. Love is sweet labor. Fierce. Imperfect. Bloody. Demanding. Difficult. Life giving. A choice we make again and again. And if love is labor, if love is what we do with

each other, for each other, then love encompasses the whole range of human emotions. So, joy is the gift of love. But grief, grief is the price of love. The grief that we're carrying in our bodies is a sign of our capacity to care. To honor our grief is part of what it means to love well. Rage, you know? How often have we been taught that rage is the opposite of love? No, my love. Rage is the force that we harness to protect that which we love. And so I began to realize that perhaps my contribution could be reclaiming love as this kind of labor for a new time. Because if we take that kind of love that we experience with our babies, in our most closest relationships, and we love beyond what evolution requires, you know? When we love others in harm's way, when we show that kind of care even for opponents and we love on ourselves that way, then that is what I call revolutionary love. So, I define revolutionary love as the choice to enter into labor for others, for our opponents, for ourselves, to transform the world around us.

Layla: Wow. It sounds like it's become not only a practice that is about your work in social movements but also about how you live, because they're not separate, right?

Valarie: Yes, that's right.

Layla: Yeah. So tell us about that. Tell us how it — because it sounds like you — I can just see you sort of like poring over books like trying to figure it out, right? Like trying to find the answer. You're reading the spiritual books and the memoirs of social activists and the poems and everything and you come to this understanding of this is what it means to love. This is how I can survive in the work that I do. But what about how I live my life?

Valarie: Oh, that's it, Layla. You just saw it. Because while I was poring through those texts in the afternoon, in the mornings, I

was going on hikes in the rainforest with my two-year-old son, you know, at this point, he's throwing massive tantrums, I'm thinking about what does it mean to mother him well, and I remember one especially bad tantrum, I had to like lock him in the bathroom because he was flailing in all directions, he was hitting himself, he was hitting others, I'm like — I was so angry, right? And I remember immediately feeling guilty that, "Why am I struggling with all of this anger? Am I bad mother?" And then I'm like, no, Audre Lorde, great black feminist, teaches us that our rage is loaded with information and energy, that the goal is not to suppress it but to listen to it, like it's the symphony, to dance with it. So I'm like, okay, what information does my rage carry? Oh, I want him to be safe, I want him to be well. Our anger is part of what it means to mother well, to protect our babies, right? And so I constructed this compass, this revolutionary love compass that you'll see at the back of the book, and, oh, Layla, we just released this big beautiful Learning Hub at seenostranger.com —

Layla: I've seen it.

Valarie: Bring —

Layla: Oh my gosh. We're gonna link to it in the show notes but your Learning Hub is incredible. It is so good. Yes, tell us about it.

Valarie: Thank you. Well, I originally constructed this for, you know, to give us a tool for our movements out in the world but, very quickly, I began to realize that this was also how to sustain healthy relationships in love in my own home. So, you know, how to love — so, how to love others, that practice is called See No Stranger and it begins with wonder, you know? I have to wonder about my babies every day in order to figure out how to care for them, they change so fast; like empathy, to feel as

another; compassion, to feel for another. Those are tools that will come and go, you know? Those are practices that will ebb and flow. But to wonder about them each day, you know, is how I returned to the labor even when I'm tired. To grieve with them when the world says no to them. To fight for them when they're in harm's way. So, wondering, grieving, fighting is how we see no stranger, how do we love others here at home and out in the world? And we turn the compass to our opponents, and that practice I call Tend to the Wound. Because I realized, Layla, and I tell these stories in the book that I've sat with white supremacists and prison guards and soldiers and as much as I've wanted to hate them, every time I choose to wonder even about them, I hear their story and I see their wound and I realize that there are no such things as monsters in this world, there are only human beings who are wounded, who are acting from their insecurity or greed or blindness. That doesn't make them any less dangerous but when we see their wound, when we insist on seeing their humanity, they lose their power over us. And we can ask ourselves, okay, what are the contexts that are driving them? What are the cultures that are radicalizing? What institutions are putting the guns in their hands? Like who is authorizing them to hurt us? And that makes us more savvy as activists and it also helps us inside of our own home because when my son is throwing that tantrum, if I tend the wound in him, ask like why, you know, and that will help me then reimagine the context. So, the practice of tending the wound, of orienting to our opponents with love begins with rage, you know, honoring our own rage, tending our own wounds first. You know, not just suppress our rage or to let it explode but to find safe containers to process our rage, like our ancestors did, the singing and the dancing, the drumming and the shaking and the sweating. And my son and I, we throw pillows on the ground, you know? This is our safe container for rage and then you step away to rage and then the next practice, to return to listen, to listen to the other, to hear what's at stake, not to

change them or persuade them but to understand them. And then to take that information to reimagine the context, whether it's the context of the home or the context of the nation that needs reimagining. We've been about resistance for so long, haven't we? I think I had t-shirts, you know? The resistance. And that made me proud but it also made me feel like if we're just resisting, we're not changing power struggle. What does it mean to reimagine the world as it ought to be in such a way that doesn't even leave our opponents behind? And this is why I cling to your book, right? You are sitting with people who identify as white and say, "No, we need you. There's a role for you. And there's a place for you in a multiracial democracy and this is how you can join us in the labor. This is your particular role in the labor. This is how you too can be a good ancestor." I mean, it's so selfless to invite everyone in like that. So, yeah, that's what it means. So loving others, loving opponents. And then the final part of that compass is to love ourselves. This is the feminist intervention. Gandhi, King, Mandela, they taught us so much about how to love others and our opponents but they didn't teach us at length about how to love on ourselves and these are black and Indian indigenous mothers before us, women before us, who I have learned from, who have taught me that, you know, loving yourself is not a form of self-indulgence. It's a form of political warfare. What does it mean? What does it mean to breathe, my love, and then push and then breathe again? And so this practice here, I use warrior metaphors because I come from a warrior people, but I use birthing metaphors because I come from a line of women who have given birth in unspeakable circumstances, who pushed through the fire and the midwife has wisdom for all of our labors, right? She doesn't say, "Push, push, push, push, push, push," you know? There's so much white supremacist violence —

Layla: Right, keep going, keep going, keep going, don't take a break, right? It needs to get done. We're running out of time, you need to go faster, right.

Valarie: Right. And how many times have I ground my bones to the ground, right? That's not what my grandfather meant by don't abandon your post. He said, "Here, my love, where you are," just like the midwife, "Breathe. Breathe for a moment. Sing, pray, dance, how are you breathing every day? How you letting joy in every day?" And then when you're ready, then decide how you want to push. And that pushing, just like in birthing labor, is going to be uncomfortable. You're gonna sit with uncomfortable feelings and thoughts and revelations. And this, again, is why I love your book because you're telling people who identify as white to say, "Oh, it's gonna hurt —

Layla: It's gonna hurt. We tell them at the beginning. Right.

Valarie: Yeah. It's gonna hurt. The shame, the guilt, accountability, apology, but this is not a sign you're doing it wrong, this is a sign that you are in a process of transformation. You are rebirthing yourself as you are rebirthing the culture around us and, oh, my love, let me be your midwife, you know? Don't do this alone. Breathe and then push and then breathe again. And those moments of transition where a voice in you says, "I can't," that's when you call upon ancestors and the wise woman inside of you and help you take the next breath and keep going. So, you're right, Layla, this work around revolutionary love, now that I found it, it's the song I'll be singing for all of my days. I've spent the last 20 years of my life organizing around hate. I'm going to spend the next 20 years organizing around love. And invite others —

Layla: And invite everyone in. You know, you tell so many stories in the book that are, like you said, you resisted, you're

like the first one there on the ground, right? When something is about to go down, is going down, has gone down. And so you were with people oftentimes in the very height of their grief and the height of their pain. You visited Guantanamo, which, you know, reading that chapter was really hard for me because I just couldn't imagine it. I just couldn't imagine being in those circumstances. You talk about an event where you were protesting and were arrested and in the process of that arrest and being held, you were very much physically harmed and how that affected you afterwards. There are so many points in the book where I'm like, it would be so easy at this point to say, "F them all," right? It would be so easy at this point to say, "This thing is insurmountable. This thing is bigger than me. This thing will grind me into the ground. How do I keep on going?" The section, so you talked about the three parts, loving others, loving your opponents, and loving yourself, I think the loving your opponents part is the one that is so hard for so many of us because we try to find — I think it's a human tendency, we try to find safety in those who are like us, who have the same ideals as us and who have the same perspective of the world as us. And so it's hard to wonder about the other when we're seeking safety and it's hard to wonder about the other when they are actively harming us or harming people who look like us. And so, what is your — can we go deeper sort of into that section? Because how do we navigate that? How do we — it's like we simultaneously want to live with these higher ideals of revolutionary love and becoming a good ancestor but the reality of your lived day, right? Is that you're seeing either yourself, like you said, your son faced his first racial slur at four years old, like in the midst of that, how do we not get swept away by what that triggers within us and stick with the practices of revolutionary love?

Valarie: Yes, this is so important. Everyone has a different role in the labor of revolutionary love at any given time. If you are

someone who has a knee on your neck, it is not your role to look up at your opponent and try to wonder about them or listen to them, right? No, my love, your role is to stay alive, to take the next breath. That's your revolutionary act. But if you are someone who is safe enough or brave enough to tend to those kinds of opponents, relatives, neighbors, friends, students, we need you now. We need you in that labor. And this is what it means to be a good ally is to discern your particular role in that fight. I'll tell you a story. On the day of the insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6 of 2021, my husband and I were locked in our office so the children wouldn't see us watching the TV set because my husband's brother was trapped in the building and hiding. And so we were talking to him on the phone while we saw images that he could not see, of, you know, the Confederate flags and the tattoos and the weapons and they were stalking the building, looking, and he's not just a reporter for CNN, he's a brown man, so it was only when he was shuttled to safety that I could become aware of my body and I thought, "Oh, this is terror and the terror is familiar." How many times have I seen people I love in the face of white supremacist violence and been unable to save them? That night, I could feel that rage quaking in me and I got a call from my teammate who helped me build the Revolutionary Love Project and she said, "I'm so sorry." She said, "My parents were at the Capitol." I said, "Oh, are they okay?" She said, "No, no, you don't understand. They were on the outside of the building." So her parents are on the outside and my brother-in-law is on the inside. And in that moment, it was like, oh, Dr. King's words that we are bound together in the single garment of human destiny, you know? As much as I wanted to hate those people, I had to see them through the eyes of their daughter who saw them as deeply wounded, deeply misinformed, whose racial biases were legitimized and fanned all the way up to the presidency, that did not make them any less dangerous but once I could see through their

daughter's eyes, I could no longer hold on to the hate, I could no longer make them one-dimensional monsters, right? It might not be my job, it's not my job to tend to those wounds, but it might be hers. It might be hers. So, the question then is what is the labor that I'm ready for in this moment in my life? Am I carrying enough trauma in my body — this is what I invite people to do, think of an opponent, you can bring that opponent to your mind's eye and just focus on their face for a moment and notice what's happening in your body. If you're feeling your heart beat fast or your throat closing, notice that activation. And if it's really, really rising, then, oh, my love, release that face. This is information. This is information that this might not be the time to wonder about them, to listen to them. This is your role, like this is your time to love on yourself to, breathe, to tend to the trauma, the trauma in your body, trauma in your people, right? But if you do now bring an opponent to your mind, maybe a different one, maybe you hold on to the same one, and you notice a little bit of activation but there's enough spaciousness in your body to wonder about them, "Why did they do that? What makes them think that? What story is so irresistible to them that they see the world that way?" then it might be information, it might be time, you might be ready to engage in a process of listening. And if you approach that opponent with wonder, like sincere wonder, like you really wanna know, not laden with judgment but sincere wonder, then our bodies mirror each other. If you approach with daggers, they'll approach with daggers, they will defend. But if you approach with a sincere kind of wonder, they might just start wondering about you too. They might wanna hear your story. And when that happens, a space opens up that makes exchange possible. Deep listening is an act of surrender, right? We risk and change by what we hear. And that can lead to the previously unimaginable possibility of reconciliation.

Layla: I love this understanding that we don't have to martyr ourselves for the work. We don't have to self-sacrifice for a greater good because, really, in doing that, I feel that we're perpetuating an idea that says, "Who I am is less important than who everyone else is," right? Yeah, right? And so that mirrors that inferiority-superiority dynamic that is the very thing that we're trying to get rid of. So, it's either, "I'm inferior, they're superior," or, "I'm superior, they're inferior," but when we say, actually, in this moment, I need to take care of me, right? I need to actually take care of me. I can't wonder, I can't listen because I'm in so much pain that I need to tend to my own wounds instead of believing that it's my responsibility to put myself at the end of the line here, that when everyone else is taken care of, then I'll tend to me because I think we'll never get to that world that we're trying to reimagine if we keep putting ourselves last.

Valarie: Like many women, I am a survivor of sexual assault. And when I broke my silence, it was my mother who stood between me and everyone else in the room who didn't want me to speak and there was fury in her eyes. I had never seen that kind of rage roaring in my mother and she was saying, "Not my daughter, she will be free," and she was accessing that maternal rage, you know that rage inside of her to show me that I was beloved and helping me do the same to fight for my body, my worthiness to be safe and to be free, and so when my assailant came to me and he wanted me to forgive him, I said no, you know? You're gonna take something else away from me? Like withholding my forgiveness was the only act of agency that I had. I had to hold on to my animosity for him, you know? And my only gift, my only radical act was to allow other people in the family to tend to his wounds. I could not. So, it took years, it took years of trying to heal and tend to the violence, the trauma lodged in my body. I talk about healing as the long journey of returning to feeling at home in one's body and at

home in the world. It took me 20 years to get there. And it was finally, I realized that I was still carrying around this hate and that I didn't need it anymore, you know? It was weighing me down, that it was burning a hole through me, and I could just let go. And once I did that, I could see my assailant not as this one-dimensional monster who haunted my dreams, I could see him as this frail, wounded kid whose father was an alcoholic who beat his mother, who didn't know how, you know, who didn't know how to treat the sisters in his life with respect, and I could feel kind of, you know, compassion for him and it released me and that could have been enough. Forgiveness is not forgetting. The body doesn't forget. Forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness is freedom from hate. For some of us, like me, it came at the very end of a long healing process. Only then did I wish to forgive. For others, like those who lost their loved ones in the wake of the Charleston massacre, who looked into the eyes of Dylann Roof and said, "I forgive you," I cringed, but, for them, realizing, oh, it was the beginning of their healing process. It was them declaring that you cannot make me hate you. So whether forgiveness comes at the beginning or at the end or in the messy middle, it's up to the survivor to decide, that that's an act of how we love ourselves well and that our forgiveness is not contingent upon our opponent's apology. We don't even need them, right? Just as their accountability and their apology is not contingent upon our forgiveness. He didn't need my forgiveness, he needed someone to sit with him with his shame and guilt and we know what happened, Layla, after 20 years, that, you know, I had forgiven and he was ready to make apology and it didn't have to happen in our lifetime but we met in this lifetime. I could hear his apology and I could accept it and he could be witness to my forgiveness. And that began this process of reconciliation that repaired, you know, has now — we can never go back to what it was like before the harm but we have moved into a new way of being as a larger

family because of this, you know, dedication to the labor and everyone playing these different roles to get there.

Layla: Thank you for what you're saying about, you know, that each one of us has our own journey with it, right? And for some of us, it is a longer path. For some, they need to say it upfront so that healing journey can start because, you know, you said, "When I heard them give that forgiveness, it made me cringe," right? Because, for you, it was like, no, you know, and I think that so many of us see that and we feel like, "Why are you giving people the easy way out? Why are you not making them be accountable?" But each one of us does have our own path towards it. And I think it's important for us to own what our path is, for us not to judge ourselves when it doesn't look like other people but also not to judge other people as doing it wrong, right? As doing revolutionary love wrong, right? You're not doing it the right way. We make it our own and that's what I feel in this book that you do give us this compass, this blueprint, but you share it through the lens of your own very unique story. Like there's only one Valarie Kaur, you know? You've only lived the life that you have lived. You've only had the experiences that you have lived. We are able to connect with them because we're human beings and we know what shame feels like, we know what pain feels like, we know what love feels like, we know what joy feels like, right? All of those things. But this was your life and I love that there's that flexibility within it that it's these words like "wonder," "listen," "grieve," "joy" that are these all-encompassing human experiences that we can find our way to in our own unique way. I just — I really love that and I think it's, as I was saying before we hit record on this conversation, I really feel like this is a model that so many of us are looking for to figure out like how do we move in this time. You say at the beginning of the book, "This is a book for anyone who's feeling breathless right now," and I thought, oh, what a wonderful way to put that.

Because I think the words we've been using are overwhelmed, stressed, right? Like burnt out, right? But breathless. Talk to me about breath because that is one of the practices in the book.

Valarie: Oh, well, I had never felt more breathless than in my son's first year of life, you know? He was born at the onset of the 2016 election season, hate and violence was skyrocketing, and I had this crisis, right? And the breathlessness I felt in my body, I remember the last time I felt that breathless was on the birthing table, you know? That there is a moment on the birthing table called transition and it feels like dying —

Layla: It literally feels like dying. It literally does, right. Yeah.

Valarie: Yes, yes. And it's so hard to breathe, you know? And that's when the midwife says, "Breathe, my love." And yet it's the stage that precedes the birth of new life. So that's when this question arose in me. Okay, the future is dark. What if this is not the darkness of the tomb but the darkness of the womb? What if the story of America is one long labor? What if all of our ancestors are behind us now whispering in our ear, "You are brave"? You know, what if this is our great transition, the midwife says, "Breathe, and then push"? And that question, Layla, is one I've asked every single day, is this the darkness of the tomb or the womb? And it is both. It is both. We have lost so much. I mean, between the pandemic and the racial violence and the racial reckonings, the climate catastrophes. Right now, as we speak, my childhood forests are on fire and these sequoias that are thousands of years old are at risk of dying. There's a tomb quality of this time in our life and human history right now. We've lost so much that we may not get back. And yet to sit inside of this awareness, you know? This grief, this loss, and to have the audacity to lift our gaze and to see the darkness of the womb, what is emerging here that has not emerged before, and I have to say that every time I see people

who have no obvious reason to love one another come together to grieve, to rage, to be in the streets and the marches and the vigils or to stand behind closed doors and tend to each other, every time I see those manifestations of beloved community, I think, okay, we haven't seen this before, not at this scale. We haven't seen black people kneeling in the streets surrounded by white people in front of an army of police officers, a multiracial, multi-faith uprising for black lives, that has not been. And after the Indianapolis massacre in April of this year, I mean, how many times have I looked into coffins of people who look like my own aunties and uncles, you know, felt like Oak Creek in 2012, it felt like post-9/11 and yet there were ten thousand people who came to the vigil, to breathe with us, to grieve with us, to say no, stop Asian hate, along with black lives, along with indigenous. I mean, it's just so spectacular what we are seeing right now. And so I hold fast to those visions. And this is where I believe that this is a time of transition for our nation and for our world. You know, will we, you know, will we keep teetering on the brink of civil war, a power struggle with those who wish to return America to a past where only a certain class of white people hold dominion? Or, in the next 25 years, as we become a multiracial population, will we birth what has never been before, you know? A multiracial democracy where all belong. And when we look at climate change, then humanity itself is in transition, you know? Will we perish? Are we on the brink of mass extinction and suffering or will we marshal the vision, the skill, the solidarity to birth a new world, a sustainable earth for generations to come? Oh, I toggle between that, you know? I taste the ash in my mouth on the dark days and then I see the new and when I see the new, I think, okay, I choose to show up to the labor, you know? We know we need sound government, we know we need just policy, and the only way those policies will hold is if we create a shift in culture and consciousness, you know? An awakening to our interdependence, a revolution of the heart.

And this is where I believe revolutionary love, not just those that inspire big movements but as a way of being, as a way of orienting to each other, you know, every home, every school, every industry, every neighborhood, if we can build this ethic, these practices that our ancestors taught us, then perhaps we can begin to birth, over the next 20, 25 years, the nation, the world that can last.

Layla: You know, I was thinking of you today, obviously, because I knew that we were gonna be having this conversation and whenever it's like the day of a podcast recording, everything I see reminds me of that guest, right? Because I'm really tuned into that. But I was watching a news interview of William Shatner, who has just become the oldest person to go out into space, and I have my thoughts and feelings about, you know, white men going out into space, you know, at this time in history when so much work needs to be done on the Earth and in the Earth itself, right? But it was really striking listening to his conversation as he described his experiences of, you know, going out in this rocket, breaking through the Earth's atmosphere, and then the sudden darkness that hits, right? And he says, "There's no stars, there's no light, there's nothing, it's just such darkness," and it reminded me of when you talked about the darkness of the womb and the darkness of the tomb, because they are not the — in Islam, we believe you have a life in the womb, you have this life here, and then you have a life in the tomb, right? And then a life after that. And us here now, we don't remember the life of the womb and we don't know what the life of the tomb is, we're here right now in the light, but what we don't see in the light, because we're so close to it, is all of the harm that we're doing, the impact that it's going to have. And so as he's describing the absolute darkness that's out there and he's looking down at the Earth and, yeah, seeing the fragility of the Earth and everything like that but also, I think that what really struck me from what

he was sharing was just what that almost like terror that that darkness brought out in him but then also this feeling of just profound — I don't think these are the words he used but these are the words that I felt, this profound divinity that's bigger than me, this bigger than me-ness, but then also this, "What the hell are we doing to the Earth and what are we squandering?" right? And so I feel like we're constantly on the verge of, like you said, toggling between the womb and the tomb, but we're constantly on the verge of if we don't get it right now, this is not gonna end up good later for our descendants, right? And that goalpost is always moving, right? It was the same case in 1913 with your ancestor, right? Like if we don't get this right now, this is not going to end up well for our descendants. We are the ancestors now. How do you relate to that darkness? Like what does it bring out — what are the feelings that it brings out in you, whether it's the womb or the tomb, because I feel like it's still darkness, right? There's still an almost like otherworldly experience to it and how do you relate to it? Is it something that you meditate within? Do you sit and meditate of being in the darkness? Is it something that you're trying to keep away from you? How are you experiencing it?

Valarie: Oh, I'm returning now to the dream I had of my grandfather and what I saw of him on the deathbed when he was on the brink of that ultimate darkness, that ultimate unknowing, and how he chose to smile at each of his children and then take the *amrit*, the sacred nectar, into his mouth, when my grandmother dabbed his lips and he sighed and he smiled and he died. Every night since he died, I've been trying to figure out what it means to be as brave as that in the face of darkness on all sides. The darkness behind us, of the womb; darkness ahead of us, the tomb; the darkness and the space on all sides of this Earth, right? What does it mean to be that brave, to embrace, to say, actually, you are a part of me I do not yet know, I am a part of you, that I belong actually to the

wonder that is the universe that is all time, that is to surrender to it, you know? To let go of one's individual consciousness and surrender to the belonging to everything around us. And so every night I have this practice where I think of the day as a whole lifetime with a beginning, a middle, and an end and I ask what was the hardest part of this lifetime? Because no matter no matter how hard the lifetime was, I made it to the end. What was the most joyful part of this lifetime? And I let myself relish that in my body, smelling my children's hair, rubbing their cheek. What are you most grateful for in this lifetime? This beautiful moment I got to have with my sister Layla, my cup of tea. Now, are you ready to let go of this lifetime? Are you ready to behold everything you've known, loved, and kiss it and just let it go? Are you ready to surrender to the everything and nothing? Are you ready to die a kind death? And I, you know, some nights, it's really hard, but some nights, you know, I sigh, I die, and I wake to the gift of a new day, a new life. And in the mornings these days, my children and I, we look at each other and we say, they can still sleep with me, "I get to be alive. I get to be alive today. I get to be alive today with you." And that's the thing, Layla. I feel like now that I've understood how to orient to my life, you know, not just so fixated on outcomes of what I produce, to measure my success on how much I produce and how fast and what I accomplished, to let go of that as the metric for a good life or to be a good ancestor, right? And to instead say, no, no, no, my love, measure your life on your faithfulness to the labor, can I be faithful to the labor of each day, can I show up to that labor with this kind of love? And when I do that, then the labor ceases to become just a means to an end, because even if we cross the threshold, even if we make it to a multiracial democracy or sustainable earth, we know that the next generation will take up whatever unfinished work and keep going, right? We might not live to see the beloved community that we all are dreaming in our mind, so what does it mean then to make the labor an end in itself? It is

to — when I show up with love, when I'm breathing throughout the labor, that my breath, my labor becomes porous enough to let joy in. And when I labor with joy, you know, the joy of just being alive here and now, the mystery, to be surrounded by darkness on all sides and to be living and breathing and exchanging and becoming like all the complete ecstatic wonder of that, to let that come in throughout the labor, it makes it so that I believe that laboring for a more just and more beautiful world with love and with joy is the meaning of life.

Layla: That is so — that feels so good. That feels so good. As somebody who is constantly asked by white interviewers predominantly a question that more or less is asking, “So do you think we're almost there yet? Do you think that we'll see a post racial life in this lifetime? Like are we almost there? Are we doing —” and there's the — I was asked this question a lot in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020. I was asked that question many, many times over. And because of the time that we were in, because I was processing in real time what was happening while being expected to be an educator, right? You know, my answer was quite cynical a lot of the time.

Valarie: Yeah.

Layla: And it wasn't no, it wasn't necessarily no even though I had made that resolve in my mind that, no, that's not gonna happen in my lifetime. I'd already come to terms with that. But my answer was, “That's really up to the people who hold the privilege and whether they're gonna do the work so that we —” you know, that's really not my answer, that's really for you to say we are going to commit to the work, right? But I think you've just clicked something for me inside of the understanding that I'm not — that being a good ancestor is not just about focusing on the future but it's about focusing in the

now, that the labor that I'm doing now in my lifetime is the gift itself for me, right? It's the gift itself and it will be a gift for other people after we're gone but I get to be a beneficiary of the experience of the labor itself.

Valarie: And so —

Layla: That is nourishing —

Valarie: — laboring with you.

Layla: Right, exactly, as we labor together. And that we — and I think you say this in your book, that we, correct me if this is wrong, we create the beloved community by becoming the beloved community.

Valarie: Yes, yes. So, I think you were trapped by the question and you are just — I think the click is unlocking the entrapment of the question because progress in birthing labor is cyclical, not linear. A series of expansions and contractions and every turn through the cycle feels like the previous trauma. So summer of 2020 post-George Floyd felt like 1992, felt like 1968, and we can go back and back. Indianapolis 2021 felt like Oak Creek in 2012, felt like 2001 9/11, felt like 1913, you know? You can go back, you know? But every turn through the cycle, just as in birthing labor, if more and more of us show up to do the breathing and the pushing to labor, right? There's a little bit more space for equality, justice, solidarity than there was before. I don't know, I would tell that interviewer, "I don't know how many more turns through the cycle it's going to take before we birth an America where we are all safe and free, but I wanna show up to do my part in the labor." And if more of us are activated, motivated, ignited to labor but with us, to labor by our side, then maybe, you know? That is the most purposeful way we can use our lives on this earth.

Layla: Oh, my gosh, thank you for that aha moment for me and I think it's gonna be for so many folks as well who are listening in. Valarie, before I ask my — I'm gonna ask a very last question but, you know, *See No Stranger* is the book that we're reading in November in the Good Ancestor Book Club and so it would be remiss if I didn't ask you about your journey as a writer and what it felt like to have — I mean, for your entire life, really, I was gonna say for the last 20 years, but really your entire life, be learning these lessons, be having these experiences, and then go through the process of putting pen to paper and crafting this book, which is, I think memoir is a healing for the self but then it's also this great gift for the rest of the world. What was it like for you to put down these stories and try to make sense of them for yourself and for others? And how are you — like who are you on the other side of this book?

Valarie: You saw that baby-faced 20-year-old?

Layla: I did.

Valarie: Well, Layla, when I returned from my initial road trip across the country after 9/11, I took my first book writing class and I was writing this book.

Layla: Wow.

Valarie: The stories I wrote you find in chapter 2 of the book. I submitted my first book proposal in the summer of 2003 and got a stack of rejection letters. "There's no audience for this. There's no voice in this." As if your audience, your stories, your voice doesn't matter. And I think if it was just my own stories that I was writing, I would have given up. But other people, my people had entrusted me with these stories and so I kept writing, I kept documenting and then writing and then living

and then writing, Guantanamo and then writing, the prisons and then writing and then writing. And every few years, I would have a new book proposal, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, until finally it was 2016 between the election and the inauguration, I wrote a book proposal, *Revolutionary Love Is the Call of Our Times*, and it was as if all of the stories I collected my whole life were finally adding up to a manifesto, a declaration for how to labor. And perhaps it took all that time for someone like Chris Jackson to find a position at Random House. You know, he publishes Ta-Nehisi Coates and Bryan Stevenson, for this to land on his desk and say, “No, actually it matters and revolutionary love, the cultural intervention,” he gave me enough of an advance so that I could step away from frontlines activism for the first time in my life, take my family to the rainforest in Central America. I had to leave the country in order to see it from the outside, right? In order to breathe, you know? The rainforest felt like the womb, it was warm and wet and generative, I could breathe. And it was there that I pored through everything that I had written and began to see these patterns of wonder, grieve, listen, reimagine, you know? And joy. And that’s how the book began to actually become formed after all this time. It was a long gestation. And then, of course, I got pregnant with my daughter and there’s no deadline like a —

Layla: Right.

Valarie: — like a due date. And so, finally, because I was writing and writing, and so, finally, I was trying to be so literary and trying to sound so — and then finally my best friend was like, “When have you most sounded like yourself?” I’m like, “Well, when I have a person in front of me and I’m just trying to get the thing from my heart into their heart and the little critic is really quiet,” and she’s like, “Well, why don’t you write each chapter as if it’s this speech, this conversation that you’re

having with someone you love?” So I began to write the book out loud. I would use my Voice Memo app and write it out loud as if I was composing music. And so my daughter was hearing through the whole pregnancy the music of the wisdom, the words, the stories, the starts and stops, and I was sitting at this desk and I wrote the final words, “May joy be your lifeblood,” and I sort of tried to get up and I immediately go into active labor and she was —

Layla: Wow.

Valarie: — born four hours later —

Layla: Oh my goodness.

Valarie: It was like she was waiting, waiting, so the baby, the book was born —

Layla: My goodness.

Valarie: And, Layla, do you know, her first day of preschool was the same day that the paperback came out, like they were launched into the world on the same day, they’re mystically connected, these two, but that was, you know, I don’t know how the next book will get written but that was a particular wild story of this book. And I remember always being afraid that I was gonna die without the music inside of me so when you’re asking, “What does it feel like on the outside?” I feel like I’m astonished that I still get to be here. My pregnancy was very hard. There was a part of me that wondered if I was gonna make it. So, part of what I was doing was writing everything that I needed her to know, just in case I wasn’t still here. I’m kind of amazed I’m still here. And I have, you know, like, okay, I have the next 40 years, what do I wanna do? How do I wanna be? And I feel so grateful. I feel so grateful that I get to do this

work, that I get to do this work with you, you know? There's no other joy than to labor with people who nourish you, inspire you, even from afar, from all the way there. Yeah.

Layla: Oh, that's incredible. And we are so glad you are still here because it feels to me that this book is both, in the ways that memoirs and sort of manifestos are, they feel like this culmination of life experiences and, you know, lessons learned and things, like you say, you wanna impart and you wanna make sure you leave nothing unsaid. Like it's this culmination. But it's also this beginning. It's this beautiful beginning. And when I went onto your website today and saw the Revolutionary Love Learning Hub and thought, oh, this is not just a book. This is a movement. This is a touchstone for many people to be able to return to. You've got videos there that teach the principles. You've got text. You've got other resources. We'll make sure to link it in the show notes. But it's a way to continue the work, that this is not just ideals, it's not just guidelines, this is how you can actually live it. This is how you can work it. This is how you can apply it in your very challenging circumstances when things are really tough but also when it's time to celebrate, when it's time to experience joy, when it's time to love on yourself and love on your community. And I just love that it's, like I said, both this culmination but also this beginning. I really cannot wait to see where your work goes next, like how this expands out because I think this is, like I've said, it's what's needed. It's really grounded in the, like you said, feminist ideology. It's really grounded in the strategics that come from your experiences as a civil rights lawyer, right? And somebody who's done work as an activist on the ground, but also deep, deep spiritual wisdom that just transcends — it just transcends time, right? It's the thing that's there when the bottom drops out and there's nothing else, right? When we get to — we're being ground down, I remember last year, in the aftermath of the protests, the kind of — I mean, you saw what

it was like when, you know, books were flying off the shelf, everyone wants to read about anti-racism, everyone wants to read books by BIPOC authors, and then I said, “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t do any more interviews. I need to tend to me.” And what I actually turned to were the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. and I had never read them before and I had never read — I also turned to his autobiography, I’d never read it before. And I was looking for the answer to the question, “How are we supposed to not lose ourselves? Like what are we supposed to cling to? There must be something bigger, deeper, more true than our feelings in the moment,” right? And that is what I feel like you offer in this book, is a reminder, yes, through the lens of Sikhism, because that’s the religious tradition that you come from but it’s grounded in — for those of us, you know, it’s grounded in all religious faiths, and even if religion isn’t your path, it’s grounded in, you know, humanity, right? It’s grounded in how do we see ourselves as human beings and see each other as well. And I love it so much. So thank you for this offering.

Valarie: I have this like soaring feeling in my chest right now. It’s like my heart is soaring, there’s no feeling like, you know, being witnessed. I am so grateful that you see the Learning Hub as the beginning of what’s to come. I mean, we just released it in the summer of 2021 and, you know, it has teaching videos and guided enquiries and whole educational curricula —

Layla: It’s extensive.

Valarie: — and in these last few months — Yeah, it’s like if you wanna do the work —

Layla: Yes.

Valarie: — here, and we've been hearing accounts of schools. Just this morning, I got a letter from a school in New York that has taken the framework and made revolutionary love the ethic of their school culture, from pre-K all the way up to, you know, all the way up to high school, college professors using the curriculum and houses of worship doing sermon series around it, and it's like, okay, if this call to love is ancient, you know, Jesus, to love thy neighbor; Mohammed, to take in the orphan; Abraham, to open your tent to all; Mirabai, to love without limit; Buddha, unending compassion; if we've heard this call to love, whether we're religious or not, coming down through the centuries, perhaps our next great awakening, our transition depends on whether we can put it into practice and structure our society around the recognition of our dignity. And that doesn't mean we have to get all mystical and saintly, this is practical stuff. There are tools that you can, you know, you could write, you can do it, so I've been dreaming a lot about the next 20 years of my life and what it might mean now when I say organize around love, what does it mean now to make my offering a Revolutionary Love Institute and I invite people to go on this journey with me, knowing that it's a movement. We have Ani DiFranco making songs for Revolutionary Love. Her latest album is called *Revolutionary Love*. And we have artists like Shepard Fairey. So, can I tell you — can I show you a little secret? Like a little joyful thing, a little —

Layla: This is a sneak peek.

Valarie: Yeah.

Layla: Yes. Oh my gosh, I forgot to share this, please tell them.

Valarie: Well, this is — I mean, I had Shepard Fairey's Obama poster on my wall all through law school so this is still very surreal to me that he took this story of mine and this vision

around oneness, *Ik Onkar*, and made it the center of this portrait that is on the paperback and then Amplifier Art sprinkled some magic over it. So here is — this is the QR code on the back of the book so this is just for all of you who are reading the book to play with. Are you ready?

Layla: Yes.

Valarie: I'm just gonna hover my phone.

Layla: Okay.

Valarie: “Revolutionary Love is the call of our times. Revolutionary love is when we are brave enough to see no stranger, to look at anyone and think, ‘You are a part of me I do not yet know.’ So when we flood the streets in our grief and our rage and fight for justice and insist on the humanity of our opponents, we are birthing the world to come.” A world that leaves no one behind. My phone just died. That’s it.

Layla: Can I tell you, my husband lost his mind when I showed him. He just was like, “How is this happening? What is happening?” There is, like you said, Valarie, there’s a QR code at the back, download the app and then hover it above the cover and watch this book literally come to life. Just incredible. And I just — you have such a distinct voice and a distinct energy to your voice so to have the book literally speak to you before you even open it, it is — this is not just — this is Valarie — Valarie’s energy is in this book, like you are carrying Valarie with you and the wisdom that she has learned for herself, the wisdom that she is passing on that she has learned from others, it is very much so a manifesto and it’s incredible. Thank you for sharing that.

Valarie: Thank you, Layla. My two-year-old daughter, she now thinks that all books speak, and I was like, and our portrait, she's like, "Mommy talking, look." It's like maybe this is — yeah, maybe this — may we all feel so as inspired, right? To lift our voice, to make our particular contributions.

Layla: Thank you. Thank you so much, Valarie. All right, our very last question: What does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Valarie: Can I answer this with a passage from the book?

Layla: Yes, please.

Valarie: You made me think of it when you talked about hearing the account of going into space. This is on page 257. "I had forgotten the stars burning so strong and long that their light reaches us long after they have died. Isn't that what our lives and our activism should look like? Not the supernova, a single outburst under pressure. We must be the long burning star, bright and steady, contained and sustained, for our energy to reach the next generation long after we die. Oh, and to be part of constellations. Let us see ourselves as part of a larger picture, even if we are like the second star on Orion's Belt or the seventh of the Seven Sisters, for there is no greater gift than to be part of a movement larger than ourselves. That means that we only need to be responsible for our small patch of sky, our specific area of influence. We need only to shine our particular point of light long and steady to become part of stories sewn into the heavens." That's what it means to be a good ancestor to me.

Layla: That passage is exactly why you feel like such a kindred spirit for me and why, when I was reading this book, I had many moments of just stopping and staring because that is what it

means to me to be a good ancestor, right? Is seeing ourselves in that way. And thank you for that visual description of seeing ourselves within the constellation, the grandness and the greatness and the limitlessness of it all but also understanding I only have to be responsible for my star and the light that my star shines. I don't have to be responsible for them. I don't need to be looking at what they're doing. My job is to — what's the saying? "Do not abandon your post."

Valarie: That's right.

Layla: Do not abandon your star, that's right. Oh my goodness. Thank you so much, Valarie. This was incredible. I appreciate you deeply.

Valarie: I feel so nourished. Thank you, Layla. I love you fiercely.

Layla: I love you too. Thank you.

(Outro)

This is Layla Saad and you've been listening to Good Ancestor Podcast. I hope this episode has helped you find deeper answers on what being a good ancestor means to you. We'd love to have you join the Good Ancestor Podcast family over on Patreon where subscribers get early access to new episodes, Patreon-only content and discussions, and special bonuses. Join us now at Patreon.com/GoodAncestorPodcast. Thank you for listening and thank you for being a Good Ancestor.