

## Relationship as a spiritual practice

**Guest: LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

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### **Jaia Bristow - [00:00:09]**

Welcome back to the Relationship Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow and I'm one of your hosts.

And today I am very happy to be joined by LaShelle Lowe-Chardé.

Welcome, LaShelle.

### **LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Thank you. Happy to be here.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Really happy to have you on board.

So, LaShelle is the founder of Wise Heart, which has been helping people with practical skills for personal transformation and creating fulfilling relationships for the last 20 years.

Her formal training includes a bachelor's degree in psychology, a graduate degree in school psychology, 20 years of dedicated mindfulness and meditation practice, certification as a trainer in nonviolent communication, and 3 years of training with M.E.T.A, Mindful Experiential Therapeutic Approaches.

Through over 20 years of training and experience, LaShelle has created a system of personal transformation and relationship competency called Mindful Compassionate Dialogue, MCD. This system provides a roadmap to becoming a relationship master by defining and operationalizing the essential aspects of creating a confident sense of self as well as engaging in the consciousness and skills that facilitate living from compassion, wisdom, mindfulness, and agency.

So, LaShelle, thank you for being here. Why don't you start by telling us a little bit about what MCD is, the Mindful Compassionate Dialogue? How does it all work? What is it and how does it work?

### **LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

At its center is the deep intention to be in connection with life, which could take a lot of forms, your own heart, the heart of another person, the nature around you, anything in the present moment to be present and connected.

And so from this deep intention, we go along in our path in life and we develop who we are. We attune to our own authenticity. And there's various elements to that. And I've named 9 elements to cultivating a coherent, resilient, thriving sense of self.

And as I did that, I'm bowing to the incredible work that's come before me. So really feeling the gratitude of all the hard work people have done throughout the ages and continuing to ask myself the question, how can I make it even more accessible? Especially bringing this world of mental health therapy to everyone so that we can each be empowered. Whether we see a therapist or not, we have access to the understanding and the tools to heal, to cultivate this sense of resilience and thriving in ourself.

So those are the 9 foundations that cultivate itself. And then I've articulated 12 relationship competencies.

So I'm saying that it's so important to focus on cultivating relationship skills the way you would cultivate the skills for being a doctor or a tennis player or whatever your profession is. And my dream for the planet is that we not only prioritize becoming masterful in how we relate to ourselves and others, but we see and we're confident that it's accessible. It's completely accessible and doable.

And so I have attempted to outline a system that when you look at it, it's big because relationships are complex, broad and deep. So it is big. It has 12 competencies, and each competency has 6 concrete skills. And of course, like I said, there's the 9 foundations, the intentions, and the manifestation, the 4 parts that you mentioned, mindfulness, wisdom, agency, and compassionate relating.

So it's big and at the same time, if you just choose one little piece to focus on, there's very, very concrete, doable and simple steps that you can take.

**Jaia Bristow - [00:04:41]**

Wonderful.

And so are you able to mention, give some examples of these steps and these foundations?

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Yeah, sure.

The first 3 competencies will be very familiar to those who have studied nonviolent communication, appreciation, empathy, honesty. Competencies that are most popular with my students, those are very important and popular, but perhaps what people struggle with the most comes to their consciousness first. And those tend to be the competencies of recognizing reactivity, managing reactivity, and setting life serving boundaries. And relationship repair is also pretty big in people's minds, wanting to repair things that have occurred that have disconnected them from people they love so much.

**Jaia Bristow**

And so when you're talking about boundaries, what's unique about how you teach boundaries?

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

I'm teaching boundaries from this consciousness of what is your deepest intention? And in the everyday life where do you want to send your energy? What do you want to devote yourself to?

More simply, boundaries is about what you want rather than what you don't want. And I think most of us think about boundaries as, I've got to decide what I don't want and keep that out. And that's one way, and it can be effective and important. And at the same time, I think it gives you much more power, resilience, capacity when you consider, what do I really want? And as I'm standing firm in what I want, what I care about, and how I'm devoting my energy to that? Then what I don't want naturally doesn't get chosen. I naturally don't give my attention to that or don't allow it in my life.

And so I'm teaching this consciousness, and then, of course, along with the consciousness are very concrete skills, like understanding universal needs. Understanding how that lives in you. The language of setting boundaries. A lot of people are asking for it but how do I say it? When I want to tell someone no, how do I say it and still communicate my caring for them or still feel my own goodness as I say no to someone's request? So there's these very little baby steps to learn as well as we cultivate the consciousness.

**Jaia Bristow - [00:07:26]**

That's beautiful.

I love that idea of boundaries and worth as an affirmation of what one wants rather than a negation of what one doesn't want. And it's almost like positive reinforcement towards oneself rather than a rejection.

And I know for myself one of the things I most learnt in nonviolent communication courses that I did, NVC courses, was seeing no, not as a rejection, but an affirmation of someone else's needs. Or even as an affirmation of my needs. And so whether it's receiving a no or giving a no, if we switch it into thinking in that way, it's given and received in a very different way.

So I love that.

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Yeah.

**Jaia Bristow**

So you talk about relationships as a spiritual practice. What do you mean by that? And how does one do that?

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

My aspiration is for us to remember at our core who we are and what our purpose is here in this life.

And my sense of that in my deepest heart is that we are these beautiful light beings in this very heavy and dense physical plain. And so we've chosen to really challenge ourselves with what we need in this life.

And our purpose is to learn to grow and love in that challenge. If we're remembering that deep purpose, to grow and love and learn how to love. And maybe we'll talk about the word love in a minute because I want to reclaim that for a level of subtlety, other than what Hollywood uses.

If we're remembering that purpose, that deep purpose and that deep identity of who we are, then we can enter into our relationships with this beautiful intention, number one. And also, every little interaction becomes an opportunity. How can I love in this moment? How can I love in this moment? What does it look like with this person in this moment? Is it just a smile? Is it helping them pick up some trash that dropped in their yard? What is it? What is it if it's not these hormones and this syrupy covering over and smiley happy?

That there's something so deep there, a subtlety of care and attentiveness and warmth. And I like to add curiosity, there's this curiosity. What is this life? What am I doing in this moment? How am I caring for life?

**Jaia Bristow**

And it sounds like vulnerability as well and connection.

## **LaShelle Lowe-Chardé - [00:10:20]**

Thank you.

There's willingness to risk by saying here's who I am, here's my humanness. It's messy. It's all over the map. I don't live every moment in love, but I can still have the aspiration. And how can we meet each other in that vulnerability?

And then there's a couple of other things as far as relationship as a spiritual practice, there's the concrete skills we've already mentioned. So I might have this beautiful intention and that takes skill and subtlety, cultivation of presence, which I define as remembering who we are and what our purpose is moment by moment. And the actual moment by moment, how do I say this? How do I view this? What are those skills by moment in those interactions?

And then there's this whole realm that, I am starting a podcast in September called *Relationship as a Spiritual Practice*, and I want to just jump into this whole realm of spirituality and relationship for partners or families when they don't share the same spiritual practice, how do they talk about it? How do they care for each other in that? How do they manage differences there? Embrace those differences with each other?

## **Jaia Bristow**

So what are you defining as a spiritual practice when you talk about relationship as a spiritual practice?

## **LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Well, like I said, first, is remembering who we are and what our purpose is. Maybe I'll add there, the spiritual practice is this remembering and also this allowing or this acknowledgment of our utter interdependence, that you are not an island. Everything you do, you think, you say has an impact on those around you.

See, oftentimes we can't see that impact. So then we start to get confused and we believe there's not an impact. You're alone in your house with your beautiful plants in the background and you're thinking something and you're thinking, oh, I'm having this thought that's grumpy or angry, and it doesn't have an impact. It does, whether we think in the energetic realm or whether we think that moment of you losing contact with yourself maybe comes out when you're short with the store attendant as you go out that day.

So spiritual practice is just remembering that. Not with, I should be more of this or that but just a humility and acknowledgement, wow, I'm in this web of life and what I do matters. I want to be able to choose.

## **Jaia Bristow**

Useful. And it sounds like, again, that fits almost what you're defining a spiritual practice as similar towards oneself as what you were talking about in relationship. It's that care, that connection, that vulnerability and that staying in contact with oneself.

## **LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Yeah. Absolutely. Including yourself is so important in spiritual practice I think, and we'll cover in the podcast this difference between self sacrificing and self responsibility.

So sometimes religions might provoke self negation, even. And really understanding that you're a precious being in this universe. And that when you care for yourself with that quality of attention, you become a resource for yourself. You honor the universe that created you by doing that. And then your

ability to contribute becomes exponential when you care for yourself. And there's a subtlety to that as well.

**Jaia Bristow - [00:14:13]**

Wonderful.

And when you talk about relationship, are you talking about primarily romantic relationships? There's so many different, relationships is such a broad word. So in this situation, what are you defining as relationships? What does relationship mean to you?

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

For me, my calling is to attend to personal relationship. So at the level of relationship to your own experience of life, or you could say your relationship to yourself. And then at the level of relationship to the people closest to you, the people you're interacting with everyday. Families, friends, romantic relationships.

And I acknowledge there's a whole, we live in a system, we live in multiple systems at once. I dip into that, of course, especially as we talk about power and how it's distributed and how it affects how we interact with the person in front of us. And my focus is on those personal relationships.

**Jaia Bristow**

And you've spoken about relationship repair. What do you mean by that? Can you say something to that?

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Yeah.

Relationship repair means cultivating this attention that has you notice, I just went out of connection with that person. My heart contracted or more obvious examples, when people say I had a fight with that person or we're in conflict, I'm so angry at them. So the whole continuum of the smallest, moving away from your own heart as you're with someone and the biggest, estrangement that some people have in their families.

So first is a recognition, this is happening and I want to be in connection with my own heart with regard to that other person, which may or may not mean having a dialogue with them or ever contacting them.

So I also want to just offer, relationship repair lives on this whole continuum. Certainly in my own life with my dad, I did all my relationship repair with him on my side. By the time I had the skills to really engage in that, he was already, well, he was gone mentally with Alzheimer's, so there was no way to engage him. And still there was a lot of feeling. I felt my heart change.

And so relationship repair, I want to just name a couple really important points.

One thing that I've seen over and over in my years of, specifically working with couples, but with anyone really, one key thing is that when we're dysregulated, meaning our heart's racing, we're not fully centered, we have some reactivity up, we tend to rush things or defend.

And so tragically, I've seen people offer a beautiful repair, beautiful empathy or beautiful apology or beautiful listening to someone and the impact of some sort of disconnect from that person, and the person was receiving the empathy or whatever it was, and then the other person cut it off. And so now I want to tell you about my side of the story or whatever it is. And so that beautiful repair attempt never got fully received. And so then that keeps the disconnect going. There's not a completion.

And so people spend lifetimes in the same argument, one person thinking, you never hear me fully and the other person thinking, what are you talking about? I've heard you hundreds of times about the same issue. Can't we just forget it and move on?

So one of the things I teach is managing reactivities, regulating your nervous system, which the world of trauma talks about a lot. We have so many tools and skills for that now to be grateful for. And the importance of that.

And the second big thing with repair is understanding that most of us are so conditioned to think that when we do something it doesn't work for someone else or it doesn't meet a need for them, that we're wrong in some way, that we've been bad.

And sometimes that's very unconscious. We don't think it's happening for us, we've moved beyond that. But I would say conditioning is incredibly powerful and that it might be there even though you're not conscious of it.

So to be able to enter into relationship repair with an affirmation between both people, I don't see you as wrong, I'm not blaming you, I'm not here to criticize you or blame you. I'm here to understand how we can meet each other's needs better, how we can move forward together better. Offering that little reassurance helps with that level of shame that is almost inevitably triggered when we do something that triggers a disconnect between us and someone else.

**Jaia Bristow - [00:19:44]**

And so do you have practical tips to give people in those moments of disconnect?

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Lots, I have lots.

**Jaia Bristow**

And before you give us those, I just really want to highlight what you were saying about relationship repair and the fact that it doesn't need to involve a dialogue with the other person, because I think that can sometimes create more harm than repair if the other person is not open to that dialogue. If there's an estrangement. Sometimes it's not possible if the other person is ill, has died, we can still repair that relationship. I really wanted to highlight that point you were making. Thank you.

And then I'd love to hear some practical strategies as well.

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

There's so many, I'll just name a couple.

One is if you're entering into a repair dialogue, set up a little agreement with the other person. Hey, there's a chance we could get reactive or kind of lose track. Can we come up with an agreement that we can just pause at any time and engage in some breathing or some reminders that we're here because we care about each other? Whatever form it takes. That agreement to pause.

**Jaia Bristow**

And I guess it's also about consenting. Consenting isn't just about sex it's about all kinds of things. And we've got a couple of speakers talking about consent, self consent, consent in general. And I think that making sure that each person involved in the dialogue is consenting to being part of the dialogue is crucial.

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé - [00:21:23]**

I forget that because it's such a part of how I operate with folks.

I mean, definitely setting up a situation for success is the first step, which includes consent. Is this really a good time for you to enter into? Giving a preview, I want to talk about our disagreement the other night. Do you feel like you have the resources, the energy? What do you need to feel safe in our conversation? What do you need to really consent in an authentic way for you?

Absolutely.

**Jaia Bristow**

And then again, just like with sexual consent, that's what made me think about it, what you were saying about the ability to pause at any time. And that's true of sexual intimacy as much as it's true of conversations or connecting, being able to say, to withdraw consent at any time to be like, this is too much. I need a break.

I think those are great points you're making.

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Exactly. Beautiful. So important in any role.

**Jaia Bristow**

Yeah.

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

You know, so many people just want the wording for stuff. Most of us are growing up in situations where English is not based necessarily on love and universal needs and universal equity and care. So we have a language that hopefully we're changing and we're transforming into a language that can support us.

So giving people little phrases to say throughout a repair dialogue. Like, I just want you to know I care about what works for you as much as I want something that works for me. I just want you to know I want to do it better next time. Like having these little phrases that are authentic for you that offer reassurance offer a reminder of our care. So so important.

**Jaia Bristow**

There's a lot already just in those things to move forward with.

And do you have anything else? Any other tips you'd like to add? Any other elements?

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Maybe I'd like to talk a little bit more about reactivity because it's also so important. And reactivity as I define it, is the misperception of threat. So when I talk about reactivity, I'm not talking about actual threat situations in which it's good that our physiology escalates and we get ready to run from the bear or whatever it is. We're talking about this misperception of threat that has all sorts of sources. Which, for me and my work it's important to name our history only in as far as it serves our present moment.

So I'm really, really clear about we don't need to dig into our past and uncover things as a source of healing in itself. It's more about if I understand this thing from my past, do I become free in a given

moment of the misperception of threat? Because that misperception of threat moves me into contraction. And when I'm in a contracted state, which is not my natural state, I lose access to my skill. Also, things I've worked so hard to cultivate, I lose access to my warmth, my curiosity, my heart.

So the most basic skill of recognizing and managing reactivity is to recognize this very basic contraction, expansion, contraction, expansion. Where am I on that huge continuum? And would I like to shift that?

So at base, as we're doing transformation work, we're just saying to ourselves, am I enjoying the experience I'm having right now? And if I'd like a different experience, what would I like to do about that? And gaining that confidence that in that moment, that I recognize this is not a preferred experience. I'm contracted, I feel reactivity taking over my thoughts, my actions, whatever it might be, I'm dysregulated.

In that moment we recognize and we cultivate this confidence. I can be free, right in this moment I can be free. Even if it's just for a moment. I can be free. I can breathe. I can focus on my breath for 3 seconds, and in those 3 seconds I'm free. I'm back in this present moment where I'm naturally expansive and connected. In the next moment, reactivity might take over again. And that's okay.

So learning that, cultivating that confidence, cultivating that ability to notice that's the mindfulness piece. Can I notice where I am and have the confidence to do something to free myself? And that's the agency, the internal and external resources to act on that choice.

#### **Jaia Bristow - [00:26:47]**

And once we've noticed what's the next step?

#### **LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Then the fun starts. Once we've noticed, then we have so many things we can learn and cultivate, the skills or regulation, like I already mentioned, and then, more deeply, once I'm regulated, then I can notice, what does my aliveness say?

In M.E.T.A, which is this group I trained with for many years, Mindful Experiential Therapeutic Approaches here in Oregon, they talk about, they have a term called the organic self. It's a funny term, but I kind of like it. Meaning what is deeply authentic for you?

In nonviolent communication we might say what universal need is alive? However you say it, it's that authentic connection. What's really true right now? What's really true is I need a nap or something like that. I think people in the world need more naps in general. I'm just saying.

#### **Jaia Bristow**

I agree with that. Yeah.

#### **LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

When I check in, often it's my organic self, my authentic need is a moment of rest or an hour or a half hour nap or just sitting down and looking around at the sky and the Earth. It can be very simple. But attuning to that universal need or value and then acting on it, however small that action.

Sometimes with, this is the request part of NVC, the actions to meet the need that's alive in you or another person, sometimes our mind just wants to create like, oh, I need to rest. I need to change jobs or move to a different country. And that action could be so small and so satisfying just in that moment.

So the recognition, I'd like a preferred experience, the regulation, the tuning into what's authentically desired, wanted, needed in that moment and the specific and doable action.



**Jaia Bristow - [00:28:52]**

Brilliant. And I'd love to unpack a little bit more what you were saying slightly before about not getting caught in the story, like not getting caught in our history. Our story is not going round and round in our heads about, yes but my history was difficult, and more finding out what's actually useful to inform and what informs the present moment in that reactor state or that flight, fight, freeze response.

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Beautiful. Yeah.

Thank you for bringing that up. I'm so passionate about that point.

To ask an empowering question there, what if we lived from, let's say, I think it's our present moment, but it's easier with our minds here caught in time. What if we lived from our future enlightened self rather than our past hurt or conditioned sense of self or past pain self?

**Jaia Bristow**

Sounds easier said than done.

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Right. It's an orientation thing though, which I think is the crux of what you're saying. If I'm looking for, and a lot of it is unconscious so that's why the easier said than done thing. But we have this concept in Hakomi, or body-centered therapy about how are you organizing your experience? Or, you could say, organizing your life.

If I'm organizing how I'm seeing life, how I'm relating to life, how I'm making decisions from my past pain and my difficulties, I'm likely repeating some patterns. If I'm organizing from a vision of what I want to be or in our most grounded moments, what I know I truly am. It might've been made from love, held in love forever returning to love. If I'm coming from there, I see things differently. I do things differently. I organize my life differently.

So that's, like you said, easier said than done. That's the bigger picture. That's the big picture. In the little picture, in the present moment, it's just this movement of, oh there's a thought, I recognize that thought, it's telling me I'm not good enough. And in that moment, I have some choices, well I'd like everyone to have some choices. If we don't have a choice in that moment then there's this term from the Pali language, which is an ancient Indian language, called papañca. It's a perfect onomatopoeia term. It's the proliferation of thought based on conditioning.

And that's what's happening when we don't have mindfulness. In that moment, I have a thought, I'm not good enough. And then there's a whole stream of thoughts just like, I don't belong, people won't like me, however unconscious or conscious that might be. We start to, maybe I won't even go to that event, maybe I'll cancel.

So in that moment, what I'm hoping for is that we have a choice. Oh, I'm having this thought, I'm not good enough. I can choose to remember my past. I know where that came from. I remember how that came about. I can name a couple critical events. I can investigate. So that's a choice to investigate. I had this thought, I can choose to investigate and often that means referring to my past. And when I see the birth of that thought originally, in a few instances in my life, I create some space from it, and I tend not to believe it so much. That's one choice.

Often over many years, that ability to see it and have distance comes with lots and lots of empathy for those events in your life. Receiving lots of empathy, giving yourself lots of empathy, lots of warmth and care. And when we hit a critical mass of empathy for ourselves, then we reach this point when we turn towards investigation, we just see it for what it is, and we're not as caught by it.

**Jaia Bristow - [00:33:41]**

Yeah.

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

That's one whole piece, another piece as we've completed a lot of that, we might just choose, oh, there's that thought, I choose not to believe it, I'm going to regulate and attune to the need alive in me in the present moment and take action.

**Jaia Bristow**

Which I guess ties in perfectly with what you were saying about when you're talking about relationships as a spiritual practice it's that being able to be connected to oneself, to observe what's happening in oneself, to be able, we can't have that space and that observation of the thought patterns and the feelings if we don't have a certain amount of connection to oneself and a certain amount of, what you're defining a spiritual practice in those moments, to then, as you say, have the choice on how we act or how we respond.

And yeah. Wonderful. Beautiful.

Well, LaShelle, I think we're coming to an end here but if people want to find out more about you, your work, about MCD, about your podcast, how and where can people do that?

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

People can find my website at [wiseheartpdx.org](http://wiseheartpdx.org)

And I also have a website in Spanish, I also teach in Spanish.

[dialogoconscienteycompasivo.com](http://dialogoconscienteycompasivo.com)

So you can find either of those.

And it's really, I feel, I hope my intention has been to make my work incredibly accessible. And so I have an incredible amount of free resources on my website. I have a weekly article that I've been writing for 15 years. I have a new website, so I haven't transferred those hundreds of articles over, but there's a good amount there.

I have a YouTube channel that goes through each relationship competency so you could be introduced to that.

**Jaia Bristow**

What's the name of your YouTube channel?

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

I think it's just [Wise Heart PDX](http://Wise Heart PDX).

And I have an online learning system so you can become a member and have access, I think we have over 40 courses on there that you can take self paced. Which people have gained a lot of confidence from over the pandemic by making good use of.

**Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. And the podcast is *Relationship as a Spiritual Practice*?

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé - [00:36:07]**

Yeah. *Creating a Bridge Between the Secular and the Spiritual*.

**Jaia Bristow**

Wonderful.

And for those who want to know more about MCD and how to get started and all of that, is that also on your website?

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Yeah. That's the place to start.

**Jaia Bristow**

Brilliant.

Well, thank you so much for taking part today, LaShelle. I really appreciate it.

**LaShelle Lowe-Chardé**

Thank you for having me. Appreciate connecting with you.