



## **The Colour of Fear**

### **Guest: Victor Lee Lewis**

**Alex Howard** Welcome, everyone to this session where I'm really happy to be talking with Victor Lee Lewis. Firstly, Victor, welcome. And thank you so much for joining me.

**Victor Lee Lewis** Thank you, Alex, it's a pleasure to be here.

**Alex Howard** Victor was just telling me some of his story when we were talking about the interview and I'm super excited to get into some of what we're going to get into here. I think that this is going to be really powerful. But I think there's also some really practical ideas and wisdom.

Just to give people a bit of Victor's background, Victor Lee Lewis M.A is the founder and director of the Radical Resilience Institute and Radical Resilience Coaching and Consulting. He is a progressive life coach, trainer, speaker and social justice educator. His work supports transformative change agents in improving and maximizing their emotional resilience, mental flexibility and personal performance and effectiveness.

Victor brings a unique, socially progressive vision to the work of personal growth, personal empowerment and emotional health. He is a neuro linguistic programming master practitioner and NLP health practitioner and an EFT advance practitioner and a AAMET certified EFT trainer, certified hypnotherapist and a resilient and thriving trauma survivor.

Victor, I think I want to start there. I'd love to - you were just telling me before we started, some of your background and some of the formative experiences in your childhood that have really shaped the trajectory of your inner life, but also the roles that you've played in your outer life as well.

Maybe just say a little bit just to open this up around what was the role of trauma for you, in terms of your childhood?

**Victor Lee Lewis** Well, as I had mentioned off camera, I would say trauma was the central emotional axis of my life for at least the first 48 years. The first three years I'm not completely sure about.

But when I was three years old, trigger alert, very profound, a horrific accident occurred that had deep emotional implications, but also social implications for me because I lost my only sibling in an accident in which I was the agent of her death. That is to say, simply that we were playing together, she stuck her hand out the window, I pushed the button on the automatic window mechanism in the car that we were sitting in, window rolled up on her neck. Over a period of a couple minutes, while I was completely helpless, she died.

I took grave offense to my own participation in that. I was devastated by the loss of my best friend. And for probably two years after the initial event, I remember just about nothing. After that, I found myself uplifted really, by a passionate curiosity, and I would consider that trauma protective factor. I was just always curious about things and in particular had a compulsion to read anything with words on it. I don't know if that places me ever so slightly on the autism spectrum or not, but I have some suspicions that maybe there's something having to do with neuro-divergence and that.

But I read, read, read a great deal. And by the time I was 13, I started reading a lot about spiritual growth, personal healing, self-help psychology, mysticism. And by the time I was fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, that was pretty much my life.

But then I became a social activist at 16 in the midst of all kinds of social turmoil, the Vietnam War had just ended and I went to Kent State University on the fifth anniversary of a traumatic social event for the nation, which was the Kent State University massacre that changed me forever.

So that not only did I have traumatic personal loss, but I had a traumatic loss of faith in my country and a traumatic loss of belief that the Constitution meant what it said and that our nation's leaders and adults in general were committed to the ideals that they espouse. As a survivor of childhood trauma, I actually concluded that a good many adults were hypocrites and they didn't recognize or fully appreciate the subjectivity and the capacity to understand adult behavior that children have.

And so, in our little bodies and psyches, we sit down and we look up at them and we think, you're lying. Why do you preach telling the truth? Why do you preach using your words? Why do you preach the things that you say in temple, mosque and synagogue, church and you don't live it? This is the way I think a child thought and I carried that naiveté into the fifth anniversary of the Kent State University massacre. My high school homeroom teacher was one of the organizers of the protests which led to that event.

So for me, trauma, personal and social, have always been linked. And in understanding trauma, learning about trauma, becoming curious about, how do we undo the causes of social trauma and recover from the effects of social trauma. And then, how do we heal from the internal consequences? The compromise and the theft of well-being that social trauma imposes on a life.

Fast forward to 2007. I had been, for 30 years, probably thinking about trauma and social change and poverty and childhood development. And ever since the book by John Bradshaw, *Bradshaw On: The Family* came out and sort of popularized the notion of doing inner child work and talking about the uncanny similarities and the spontaneous responses of the children of alcoholics and of combat veterans. And I was the child of alcoholics. And I said, that is me. I do react like a combat veteran to. The death of my sister and so many things since then, you know, I could not bear to have anybody controlling their car window but myself without going into some sort of near panic.

But in 1993, I participated in a sort of, a weekend retreat round table, without a table, conversation between myself and a group of eight other men of various ethnicities or racialized identities and histories. And that film was called *The Color of Fear*.

It's been seen, at least in part, by probably 40 million people. I haven't been on The Oprah Winfrey Show and in syndication that way. For a period of time, it was a very prominent tool in all kinds of sectors where people did diversity, social justice or inclusion, education, cultural competence for clinicians and any kind of social science class. Campus life. Government agencies. Lots of work. So I traveled around the country, showed this film to tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people. I would say definitely hundreds of thousands of people now.

And every single time I showed the film, because it cuts so deep to the hidden core of racialized experience for people of all racial identities, I saw trauma erupting abreaction in every single event of size that I screened this film in. And I even though I believe that I was doing state of the art, cultural competence and social justice, education work, and I wanted to make it as gentle and as powerful, as rigorous as possible. There came this realization to me that was heartbreaking, which was, we're not doing this right. The way that we're trying to awaken people socially is leading to an intensity of trauma in the field. And in fact, it's uncovering a well of trauma that's always waiting every time I show up to do the workshop. There's a bunch of traumatized people. I throw my film on and we start the discussion and trauma stories and abreactions pop up like mushrooms.

**Alex Howard** There's so many things you said I want to speak to, but I think actually just to respond to what you're talking about here, one of the things I was saying before we started recording, I haven't had a chance to see it, see the whole film. But I saw some clips of it. And one of the things that really, really did land with me was there was a clip where you were sharing what it was like to be a black man and not being understood and not being seen in that place in a way that was emotionally intense and strong.

But there was something about it that, for me, having over recent weeks, been on the beginning of a journey of trying to better understand some of these issues. There's something about the emotion and the emotional truthfulness and honesty that sort of cut through theories and ideas and debate that just sort of hit me in the heart.

I wanted to hear a little bit from you. And I think this is the frame you've just shared around having screened that film and had dialog with so many people. There's something about being seen beyond words, being seen in one's truth of one's experience, which I think is so important. I think it impacts people differently. Perhaps you could just share a bit about that?

**Victor Lee Lewis** Sure, It was done as a gift, as a conscious act of emotional labor, which I hoped would be multiplied and magnified in its impact because I would only have to personally and spontaneously do it one time. And then every time somebody put on the video cassette or the DVD, they could join me and the other men in that circle, in that visceral experience over and over without us having to reengage in the emotional labor in the same way.

And when I told the truth, the whole truth is, in that moment of my experience of being racialized as black and male and being considered to be a member of the threatening race, the dangerous race, the suspicious race, the dumb race, the ugly race, the indigestible race, the unintelligent race the, you know, the problematic race.

And to hear this gaslighting, ignorance, which was hard to believe, it was actually ignorance rather than malice and dishonesty. But to hear this profound ignorance of the inequality of my racialized experience versus David's racialized experience. David Christensen, the white man I was speaking to in the film, who didn't realize that he had a race.

And that's one of the biggest problems that white people have. Two things, they believe that race is a biological reality rather than a social one. And they believe that black and brown people have race and that they don't. It's a biological fallacy. It's a social, political, cultural fact with profound life and death implications for the visceral and corporeal realities of black bodies. Which is why Alicia Garza's hashtag, Black Lives Matter, is so resonant to black people first and foremost. And to all racialized peoples of color, of course, as well. But now increasingly to white folk.

And if I could just say briefly why I think this message is getting through in a way that it never has, I believe, ever, in the history of racial discourse frankly. This is the inflection point of a 500 year arc of racial historical invention. One of the things that is demonstrated in the way white people are racialized is that there is a an empathic collapse, which I believe has to be in all cases, at least somewhat traumatic because of the moral injury in destroying the empathic bridge between people racialized as white and people who are racialized as inferior to them in their social, cultural and historical training.

And in that way, in this empathic collapse, Amy Cooper in Central Park in New York can summon a lynch mob in a spirit of absolute malicious gaslighting, dishonesty, deploying the power of the state to potentially destroy Christian Cooper, an innocent birdwatcher who is asking her to leash her dog so as to protect the wildlife in this small sanctuary. So she's wrong. He's right. But because of the racial codes between them, in her mind, here is a member of the governed race who has violated all the rules by asserting governance over a member of the governing race. And that is a capital offense. And that sentence was executed the same day within four hours, in the person of George Floyd, whose name is only one letter different from three of my cousins, because I have three cousins called George Floyd (different spelling).

**Alex Howard** Wow.

**Victor Lee Lewis** The first, the second and the third. So it's, again it feels very deeply personal and visceral. What makes *The Color of Fear* work in any case, is that instead of talking about the statistics, I talked from and through, as Kimberly Jones does in a six minute whirl wind historical cultural critique that is so fantastic, it humbles everything I've ever done my whole life, that I connected the pie charts and the sociological reports to visceral experience. And that is a difficult thing to do and something that black and brown people can do but usually don't feel willing to do because the emotional labor and the dishonor that that labor is typically subject to. If we try to tell the whole truth in a completely truthful way, we're out of our minds, we've lost control. We are being aggressive

and intimidating. And I was accused in the film of being so even though I never left my seat and I never even pointed my finger.

**Alex Howard** One of the things that for me, I think particularly was so powerful about it, was it felt like you are in touch with the truth of your feeling of the rage and the anger and the frustration. But it actually didn't feel aggressive. It didn't feel like it was, you were attacking someone, it felt like you were speaking your truth. Which for me made it all the more powerful somehow.

**Victor Lee Lewis** Yeah. And if I could just make a brief cultural tribute to my mom. I was spontaneously modeling... I walk like my father. I turn my head like my father.

But I tell the truth in the face of injustice, like my mom. There is a form of black girl magic, as we call it, a thing that black girls and women do that are amazing. But one of those things is speaking truth to power where we don't have physical might. And they don't have legitimacy and authority. But that does not stop them from telling all of the truth without a shred of compromise, because you can't take anything from them. Nothing to lose. So, you know, in order to stop my voice, they say, you'll have to stop my life. And I'm not going to stop my life for you. So I embodied that as a student, as a male student of Black Girl Magic. I just thought, this one time in my life, and I prayed briefly to my grandmother before I spoke. I mean, two, three seconds. And I got, her blessing and was like, here it comes. I'm only going to do this once. And there's still a great deal of pushback.

**Alex Howard** It's beautiful that you could do it once and it could be so powerful and captured and then impact so many people.

**Victor Lee Lewis** Yeah. Well, I'm grateful to have been caught up in that moment. I would add that, a lot of what made my teaching and training career as a social justice educator, I now identify as a healing justice educator because I henceforth refuse to separate healing of the body and the soul and the body politics from the transformation of policy and social conditions. Both of those processes need to proceed contemporaneously. Simultaneously. Yeah.

**Alex Howard** I think that's an important point, because I think what can happen is people can get overly fixated on one side of that sort of direction and negate the importance of the other side.

And actually, one thing I wanted to ask you about, particularly given some of your own personal history. Why is healing our own trauma so important as part of this wider dynamic of addressing these complex and important social issues?

**Victor Lee Lewis** Well, I have a sort of a deep history answer to that question. I believe that the vulnerability to trauma is part of our complicated evolutionary legacy and that the development of empires and patriarchal society some 5000 years ago and then eventually these feudal and adventuring societies, the seafaring colonialism and all of that stuff, all the way up to the invention of race in 1492 thereabouts, the beginning of the age of European expansion and to all the other continents of the world. That right now, even in 2020, we're

at a culmination point and intersection of all these forces that have been on a great arc that has been saturated with trauma.

You cannot establish or maintain an empire of any sort without encoding trauma on the population. That is how we create citizenship and order within empires, within the Egyptian empire, within the Roman Empire, within the Greek empire, the British Empire, the Spanish Empire. They came. They traumatized. They took. They continue to traumatize and generated narratives that bury the lie of the trauma under mystification, some kind of mythology. So Christopher Columbus didn't invade the Americas with a team of raping pillagers who spread disease and destroyed the entire population of at least one island. But he is a "discoverer". He discovered how to commit genocide on people far away and to turn that into wealth. And then they discovered how to steal people and treat them as property and chattel, to reproduce profit and to hold themselves up as champions of liberty and freedom at the same time.

And so at the core of - just a fast forwarding to US racialization, which has resonance, it's not the same, but racialized societies all over the world can learn from what I'm about to say here. At the core of the baseline, mainstream white identity is a set of defenses, creating an emotional distance and a visceral distance between the tragedy, the trauma and the horror of the genocide of the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere and the enslavement, the kidnaping, the enslavement and the grotesque dehumanization, the monstrous dehumanization of black people for the sake of white freedom and guilt. And the construction of white American identity is impossible to comprehend outside of those traumatic tragedies, those moral horrors and abominations and white people's willful refusal to take any ownership of being the heirs to that legacy and the beneficiaries of that violence, which is ongoing.

**Alex Howard** Yeah, I hear that. And it also raises another question of, how do we do better in creating dialog? Because what I'm hearing you say, I think is very powerful. And I think it's very important. And I think, speaking as a, you know, privileged white male, it's very easy to go, 'oh, that's just the past. That wasn't my fault. That just sort of happened'. And, you know, that clearly doesn't help things move forward. One has to own one's legacy and one's history. And what facilitates that? What helps that process?

**Victor Lee Lewis** Well, first, I think it's helpful to realize that creating racial justice and understanding how human beings are racialized. This is a form of violent and destructive domestication of all human beings who have had a racial identity imposed on them, including white people. And what it costs you is, you know, one of the conversations that needs to be had is what it costs white people to accept the role and identity of whiteness and the social advantages that are associated with that privilege, the unearned benefits that go with being coded as a white person in our society.

To have a good learning conversation, we need to recognize that race is not a biological reality, it's a sociological one. And that racial identities are learned. They can be transformed. That we can reflect back on how we've been racialized as people of color, how we've been racialized as white. How this process was designed to justify the deep financial self-interest of wealthy governmental and religious and civil elites. But it actually captured the whole culture in this trajectory of racialized wealth, production and extraction.

It is at the heart of the engine of capitalism. All capitalism is racial capitalism and racially exploitative. So, getting, developing a willingness to go to school is important. And for white people to embrace what I would call 'culture of humility,' like, you don't know and you don't know what you don't know. So it'd be in your interest to listen so you can find out what it is that you don't know and why it's important to you to undo racism, because while you're trying to protect your racial reputation and the reputation of your ancestors, your racial clinging and the reproduction of social stratification and super exploitation of the global south and racialized black and brown people all over the world, including in Western societies, all of that process is at the heart of the engine of climate chaos and the destruction of everything that you love.

So if black and brown people don't make it today, if you do not stand in solidarity with us today, by the time you realize that you should have, it will be too late for you. And the science of that global breakdown are already evident to many of us, for some of us it's been for decades and for others, it's only been happening in the last few weeks.

But make no mistake about it, the coronavirus pandemic is a reflection of climate chaos and the racialized and economically stratified impact of coronavirus, the way that it kills black and brown people at a much higher rate has everything to do with the way the project of racialized expansion of the descendants of Europe and Europeans themselves for the last 500 years. But that is collapsing. All of the stratifications, as well as the interdependence are coming to light.

And the last thing I wanna say, and I'm going to give you your mic back, is that King made it plain in his letter from Birmingham jail when he said that 'we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly affects all indirectly'. And this was the gem that he dropped after he said 'injustice anywhere is a threat to justice, everywhere'.

So having a collaborative rather than a competitive and argumentative conversation about race is the way to get it done. We will have the conversation slow. We have it patiently. We have it honestly and courageously, and we have it for the sake of understanding rather than for the sake of victory.

**Alex Howard** I think that's very powerful what you're saying. And I think one of the things that I think is a really interesting reflection at this point, is what I think seems to be changing is it seems that more white people are starting to recognize, 'hang on, something, I've been missing something. Like, something is going on here'.

But it's taken a great deal of continued suffering and escalation of that to somehow reach a point where it's been able to penetrate the sort of cultural narrative in such a way that it seems to be a different dialog and conversation is happening.

And one of the things that I know it's been called white fragility that happens is that white people start to become delicate and collapse and either become overly defensive or unable. And it's like I, one of things I've spoken about in some of the other interviews is when we first launched the conference and we started to get some pushback on the fact that we didn't have initially any black speakers on the conference, which was not an intentional thing, but

it was an - as my education continues - was an enormous oversight, reflective of the very issue that we're trying to speak about it at this point.

But it's very easy, particularly when one has their own trauma that when one feels attacked, they defend and they shut down.

How do we, on both sides of this discussion, how do we support dialog happening in a way which actually allows things to move forwards rather than people just retreating back into kind of the old habits and patterns?

**Victor Lee Lewis** Sure. Well, intercultural, interracial dialog is not a level playing field, it's not a symmetrical conversation. And I hope that white people can appreciate that as anxious and uncomfortable as you might be entering into that kind of hard conversation, that the opportunity cost for people who are racialized black and brown to participate in it are much, much higher.

And because we already understand how and why, if we are successful in changing racist ideas and racist policies at the cultural and institutional level and maybe at the interpersonal and group level, that we can change society in a way that wins for everybody. But racial coding at its core is win/lose. So white people who have been coded as winners in the racial story have as an initial reflex when their comforts are called into question to imagine that now they will have to lose.

And I believe that racial justice in creating a win-win society means that we completely strip away that dynamic and that white people in particular get to understand that solidarity is self-interest. And where you feel empathic collapse, that is a diminishment of your humanity. Where you care, but you don't care in your bowels, when it doesn't make you want to throw up the kinds of horrors that black and brown people live through, then you're not enough sufficiently invested in the conversation.

It's like the bacon and egg breakfast. The pig is committed and the chicken is interested. So white people tend to be interested in the race conversations.

**Alex Howard** I hadn't heard that metaphor before... That's great.

We haven't got so much time. But I also wanted just to come back to, where do we start? People that are watching this, listening to this and feel impacted - I include myself in that - what does one do with that emotion? How does one start to live their life in a way which helps this issue progress and move forwards.

**Victor Lee Lewis** Well, you realize that you don't live your life alone and you don't live your life with your demographic or zip code alone. You live your life in a global human community in which we have common problems and differential access to the necessities of life. And that what white people have to come to understand is, their individual existence never existed. You've never been an individual. You've been an inter-vidual. You have always been caught in an inter, on a seamless garment of destiny and an inescapable network of mutuality with people whose lives provide lift to yours without you knowing it.

So race is not an intrinsic property. It's a relational property. So understanding how does whiteness relate to non whiteness? And what responsibility does that involve? Both to take initiative, to build your own understanding rather than to leave that question to me.

I would say, as I return the question to you, you're a grown up, you have a good mind. You have research capacities. You have access to Google machines and and public libraries and the Amazon UK bookstore with all of its recommendations. They'd be happy to sell you whatever you want. And if you go on Google just for your attention, they will educate you for free.

So the main thing white people need is motivation. Black and brown people have been studying racism and race and white people for 500 years. It's about time you studied yourselves and realize that your survival is dependent on what you can finally at last learn about that. And in part by joining the rest of the family, being in partnership with us and accepting some instruction, because we've been studying you for for some time.

And take back your projection. We don't want to hurt you. Like Kimberly Jones said, watch the Kimberly Jones video on the YouTube machine. And she will tell you that Black people around the world want justice and white people should be relieved about that. Because if we wanted revenge, things would be playing out a good deal differently. We don't. We don't. So accept that. You can be courageous. You can afford to be. It's a good risk for white people to be racially brave.

**Alex Howard** I think it's a really important point. Several number of points, but particularly a couple of points you just made, one of which is that it's not the job of black people to educate white people.

**Victor Lee Lewis** But we will. And we do.

**Alex Howard** I know. I realize that. But ultimately that the responsibility falls upon white people to actually take the time and do the research. I think one of things that you've spoken to very eloquently today is just looking at history and being a student of history. I think that that is very powerful.

And I think one of the things that I've noticed over the last few weeks as I've been beginning on my journey of trying to better understand this, is entering into dialogs such as this and other dialogs that haven't been recorded and dialogs that have been recorded. Coming from a place of recognizing my own limitations and recognizing my own failings in this issue and how much gentleness and softness I've been met by. As opposed to, my deeper fear is that in coming forward in that place, that that's going to be squashed on or attacked. And I think that that's hopefully a really helpful thing to share, that actually, certainly my experience has been, both publicly and privately, of coming forward and saying, I realize I don't understand this issue well, I realize that's my failing. How much, actually, love and kindness I've received in response to that, which has been quite touching.

**Victor Lee Lewis** Well, I think we're trying to speak from the top of the polyvagal scale, that we're remaining in social engagement when the default response to racialized conversations is to be in fight or flight. And even with an element of ambient freeze, sometimes acute

freeze and the, on the grass mats floor of the Gandhi movement in India, which was a racialized also, liberation movement from British colonialism and the church basements of the civil rights movement. We were practicing, our ancestors were practicing how to remain in the social engagement circuitry, honoring our own dignity and honoring the dignity of those people who've been trained to oppress us, as we demand that our human humanity be honored with the same level of deep and spontaneous sincerity, that you'll honor each others. And the secret of all of this upheaval of the moment is to recognize that that social engagement circuitry is the driver of any real revolution and that revolutions are not about justice ultimately, but about love and the mending of the fabric of the human family.

**Alex Howard** That's very true and very powerful.

Victor, for people that want to find out more about you and your work. What's the best way for people to do that?

**Victor Lee Lewis** Well, I'm engaged in some courses on racial justice matters called Hard Conversations. So if you check out [Hard Conversations](#), you can participate in our online introduction, the racism course, an introduction to racism and its undoing, I should say.

And the [Whiteness, Race and Social Justice](#) class, which is not only exclusively for white, but especially a benefit to white folk who want to understand how they have been racialized and also do trauma healing. A group coaching or individual coaching level.

And you can reach me at [radicalresilience.com](http://radicalresilience.com) or [radicalresilience@gmail.com](mailto:radicalresilience@gmail.com).

**Alex Howard** Victor Lee Lewis, thank you so much for this interview. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

**Victor Lee Lewis** Well, thank you for letting me wander so freely through these matters with you.