



## **Building Capacity for Healing Racial Trauma**

**Guest: Nkem Ndefo**

**Alex Howard:** Welcome everyone to this session where I am very happy to be talking with Nkem Ndefo. Firstly, Nkem, welcome and thank you for joining me.

**Nkem Ndefo:** Thank you so much, Alex.

**Alex Howard:** So I'm going to just give people Nkem's professional background. I'm going to give a little bit of context of how this interview came about.

So Nkem Ndefo is the founder and president of Lumos Transforms and the creator of The Resilience Toolkit, a model that promotes embodied self-awareness and self-regulation in an ecologically sensitive framework and social justice context.

License as a nurse-midwife, Nkem also has extensive postgraduate training in complementary health modalities and emotional therapies. She brings an abundance of experience as a clinician, educator, consultant and community strategist to innovative programs that address stress and trauma and build resilience for individuals, organizations and communities across sectors both in her home country, the United States and internationally.

Nkem is particularly interested in working alongside people most impacted by violence and marginalization.

So to give people a bit of context of how this interview came about, so we started, we're recording this exactly a week before the first day of the conference. So we're about three weeks or so into the sort of promotional cycle, let's say, for the conference. And in the early kind of week or so of that, we started getting some quite significant comments on social media and also people e-mailing into the customer service inbox, pointing out that we had significantly failed, let's say, to represent a broad representation of cultural backgrounds and particularly people of black origin.

So there was this piece that was happening. And then, along side this, what's also started happening, has been the, I guess, resurgence of interest in the Black Lives Matter movement. And that's been something that's been rippling around the world. And I know, of course, the center of it has been in the US because of events there. But it's also been a significant movement that's been happening in many countries, including the UK, where I'm based.

So as this was happening, we started to, and I shall own, I said this to Nkem separately, that initially I had a reaction of being a little bit defensive. And part of that reaction was, well,

we've poured our hearts and souls into a conference. We're trying to put something out there into the world. I'm a good person, I don't feel like I'm a racist person and I'm getting sort of called out.

So with that initial reaction, I reached out to a few trusted friends of mine. And hopefully something I've learned over the years is, when I'm reactive, that's normally a sign of something I need to see and something that's being triggered, there's something that's going on.

And I began what I consider still to very much be the beginning of a journey, of becoming better informed about these issues. And the realization that putting out a conference, which is now, I think probably close to 100 speakers, where up until a few weeks ago, there wasn't a single black speaker that was part of the roster - there were speakers from a number of different ethnic backgrounds, but there wasn't a black speaker - was a significant failing.

And that's something that we've been working to bring back some balance in the time that we've got. And there are some other pieces that Nkem has been helping support. But Nkem is one of the people that initially I started speaking to and I felt particularly appreciative because Nkem's response was, well, Alex, I don't know if I want to participate. That actually I'd like to have a conversation, I'd like to understand what are your intentions, where are you actually coming from? Are you just trying to do a sort of PR puff piece to try and make something look better? Or is there some kind of sincerity to try to learn and to address this?

So Nkem and I have had a few exchanges and conversations and I think we've started to develop, what I've felt is a bit of a friendship, over the last week or so with the support and help that she's been giving. And Nkem came this is a bit of a long introduction, normally I let the speakers speak more quickly, but I wanted just to frame it a little bit.

And actually, my first question to you, and I realize it's also a question for me in some ways, but my first question to you is, how does a team of what I think are well-intentioned, good, basically good human beings trying to do something good for the world, how did we screw up so badly?

And that issue, which I think is not just in any way unique to us - the term spiritual bypassing is something that is being used in certain communities to understand how people ignore and go round issues as opposed to dealing with them. What are your thoughts and perspective on how this is happening in the way that it is, in the communities that both you and I are passionate about and care about?

**Nkem Ndefo:** I think, I mean there's a couple of things. I want to thank you for the introduction. I really want to thank you for your thoughtfulness and openness in this process before I even answer the question. Because, you know, like many black folks, we are being inundated with requests and some genuine and some not so genuine. And from people that we've worked with that were quite resistant and suddenly they're really open.

And so there's a little bit of skepticism on our part, and I think rightfully so because it's fashionable right now or people don't want to be left out. They don't want to be called out. And so the impulses are varied about how people want to come forward around this issue.

So I think where the breakdown happens is a couple of things. Two strands, really. One is a tendency in Western culture of individualization. And I think that if we talk about integrative or alternative or complementary approaches, they like to think of themselves as alternative, complementary and integrative. But there are certain strands of the culture that they are not alternative to. And one is this extreme individual or hyper individualism, right?

And so we see practitioners pull individuals out of systems. And so it's part like, if you just do your thing, you'll be fine. It's a very, individual failure. Individual success. Lots of these models. And if you come from a more traditional, like, health care background, for example, if you worked in, let's say, a community setting. In community settings, we are acknowledging the community. If you work in psychology, community psychology. If you work in these kinds of settings, you look at these issues, you look at socio economics, these types of things. You look at violence, perhaps history or actually current violence.

But people who work in alternative complementary, integrative, they're somehow separate from that part. And I find there is a big missing piece. I remember, I'm a member of a professional association and integrative association that's local here in Southern California, in the Los Angeles area. And I remember doing a webinar for them about anxiety. And in this webinar that I did, I talked about anxiety. Like generally the thought is, it's psychological. Maybe if you're really forward thinking, you're thinking about mast cells, you're thinking about some biology of it. But I said, how many people in this community do violence screens? How many of you are asking, is there domestic violence in the home? And if you don't work in community mental health, you wouldn't think to ask that question, maybe this person's anxiety is actually due to their ecology and you've been individualizing it and you thought you were so forward thinking because you thought, I'm getting the biology and the psychology, but you forgot the ecology. So there's that piece. So the individualization.

The second piece of why people miss it, is people don't understand the definition of racism. Alex, you're racist and I'm racist. Racism is a system. So this is, if you don't define it well, you don't understand it. People confuse racism with prejudice or bigotry. Again, this is a difference between systems and individuals. Anybody can be prejudiced or bigoted against anybody, for all kinds of crappy reasons.

The difference is, is when your prejudice or bigotry - your actual behavior, your discrimination, your behavior - is backed by a culture and a history, then it has a whole different weight. And so that's where racism... I could be prejudiced against you, but I can't be racist against you. So the call for reverse racism, it doesn't exist, right? Because there's no culture that supports me. There's no history that works for me. There's no system that supports my bias against you as a white person.

But if you have bias against me, you are supported by history and culture and systems - economic, political, health care. All kinds of systems support your bias and that's what makes it racist.

And so when you understand it as a system, it's a culture. It's not just, you know, how economics are and how people are policed or this. It's a system that affects how we look at what's normative. How we say "white people" and "people of color". Just what's normative.

The white is normative. What would be the difference if we said non-melanated people? All of a sudden you're like, whoa, wait a second, wait, I'm not the center? Like, what's normative? When you go get a Band-Aid or a plaster, what color is it? It's your color. Right? What's normative?

And so recognizing we're all racist and there's no neutral here. So if somebody says, well, I'm not I'm not getting in politics, there's no neutral. It's a racist system. So either you're in it or you're working to dismantle it. Those are the only choices. And so if you were in it and not working to dismantle it, you are perpetuating it. And that's how you ended up where you were because you just went along with the flow instead of interrogating your beliefs, interrogating what is the prejudice that I carry, that I literally can't see or hear or experience because it's the water that I swim in and the air that I breathe. So it has nothing to do with intentions.

Good intentions don't help. You actually have to be an active anti-racist.

**Alex Howard:** So that makes a lot of sense. And I think one of the things which also, and I don't want to make this all about me. I want to just track back to my initial reaction because I think it's a common reaction that people can have. So what I noticed was, I wouldn't say I was being attacked because actually I think the people pointing it out were, on the whole, doing it very respectfully and very sincerely.

But I felt a sense of, I've put a lot of heart and energy of putting something out there. And now I'm getting criticized for something that, rightly or wrongly, I hadn't seen I'm not aware of. So my reaction is, I started to feel feel defensive.

Now, perhaps through, you know, several decades of meditation practice and support in different ways, I was able to identify that reactivity and to see that as something in and of itself to start to work with. But that's a common reaction that people have when the spotlight is put on them. And it's, you might be in the, quote unquote, "wrong" here or you may be part of the problem here. And people become defensive. And from a place of defensiveness, if we look at it from a trauma's perspective, one of the things that happens is we start to lose touch with our heart. We start to lose touch with the capacities and the resources that are actually going to be helpful in having the compassion for ourselves to see the things we haven't been able to see and to have compassion for another.

**Nkem Ndefo:** This is so, so true. We know, just from the biology, you said the biology of trauma and this is the place that I work, is helping resource and stabilize people to have the bandwidth, the capacity to do healing work, to do transformation work.

The thing is, is that we're talking about, the people who need to do this hold significant power and are harming, actively harming black people and people of color. In many ways, lethally. So it's not like, oh, it would be so nice if you did your trauma healing, so you could be a more actualized person. It's like, oh, if you don't do it, I am blocked from jobs. I'm blocked from health care. My children are overpoliced. We're at risk of being killed. So it's not like, you know, ummm...

**Alex Howard:** It's not such a luxury.

**Nkem Ndefo:** Right. So, I mean, it's very interesting for me. As a perspective, is like I'm getting a lot of requests for my work. My work's been the same for years. So you're telling me that you weren't interested because you weren't looking at brown and black people. And suddenly, because now you're like, oh, wait, I need to look for brown and black people, then you interrogate who you're your first choices are. Same work.

**Alex Howard:** I think the problem is that for a lot of us, we are, whether we like it or not, we're narcissistic in a sense. We are consumed by our own ego-centric experience of what's happening for us.

And then at the next step, we're more aware of our ethnocentric connections, the people that we spend a lot of time with, the people that we're around. And it takes a certain awareness, a certain willingness to broaden one's perspective beyond that.

Now, there are people which live in very multi culturally integrated societies. So, you know, I live in London, which is a relatively multicultural city. There are other people that live in places where they may not see a black person for days or they may see a black person once a week. And vice versa. That we get, sort of in the silos of the worlds that we live in. And part of this is also having a capacity and an awareness and willingness to listen and be open to other perspective.

Because as much as I recognize, for example, in my example, and I hear the understandable frustration that must be there for you and many others, it's like, 'oh, so now suddenly I'm flavor of the month and you want to hear what I have to say'. So I hear the frustration of that. And it's true that for many people, it's not that they're... In a sense, it's a lack of awareness that at some point, hopefully something opens, but it's how to open that in a way which actually opens people to be able to hear as opposed to invites more defensiveness that comes back.

**Nkem Ndefo:** But ultimately, black people didn't create racism. White people did. And so the the thing is, it's hard to kick privilege. It's a drug. People are addicted to it, ok? So it's a really hard drug to kick. We don't need racism. Racism doesn't serve us. White people need racism.

So the question comes, you know, I think of James Baldwin. I think of Toni Morrison asking the question. It's up to white people to say, why do you need this? Why do you need this system? What is this system doing for you? Because it's not doing anything for us. We can't dismantle a system we didn't create. You all created it. Right? And so we can do our work around it. But ultimately, that's part of the privilege is that you don't have to see it. That's part of the privilege. You don't have to see it.

**Alex Howard:** I hear that.

**Nkem Ndefo:** And when people are like, oh, I'm so tired of talking about race. I'm like, try living it! Try living it. Yeah.

And I appreciate you talking about being at the beginning of this. And so, like, a big part of my work is, you know, like when I work with organizations, for example, and they want to bring in, like a cultural humility process. And we use an embodied approach because like,

you know, if you want to have conversations about race, you want to have conversations about race, they're awkward. They're difficult. People are triggered. Stress responses are triggered. And when they are, as you said, people closed down. Nothing happens. It just grinds to a halt.

And so the process of how do we help people - this is where I use the resilience tool kit - how do we help people be aware of their stress responses and learn to self manage their stress responses so they can stay in the conversation? Number one, they can get in the conversation. Two, they can stay in the conversation.

But there's a certain amount of self responsibility that, you can't make someone do something. And so someone has to have the willingness to enter and not everybody's going to enter the conversation.

**Alex Howard:** And I think part of the reason for that is, and just to kind of follow on from what were you just saying a moment ago, that one of the things that I realized, is there's a certain heaviness. There's a certain emotional, heart level impact of realizing something, starting to see more, something that's clearly always been there, at least in our lifetimes, and seeing that. And how to hold that without also going into a place of collapse.

And I think for both black people and white people, that, how to sort of hold that heaviness in a way that isn't the spiritual bypass of, this is just too difficult, I don't want to have to deal with this.

What helps people stay present with and stay with that emotion that, yeah, what can be difficult to feel?

**Nkem Ndefo:** I mean, this is the same capacity building you do around individual trauma. I think back to the idea of Judith Herman's work. So a phased approach to trauma. And I was working with people long before I discovered Judith Herman. And I was like, yes, that's what I'm doing! She gave name to it. Is this idea that people need to be resourced and stabilized. They need to learn how to manage their responses. How to settle activation that is not appropriate in the moment. And that grows your capacity to sit, your distress tolerance.

So when we see in conversations, we see white fragility happen. Waaaahhhh! Right? Which like, it's a collapse. That's what white fragility is. A collapse. And so often, you need capacity building around that. Capacity building to sit with discomfort.

And so often, the work has to happen separate. Almost, if you think about doing conflict negotiation, you work with each group separately to build their capacity to sit with discomfort before coming together. And so we need spaces where white people are talking about race, talking about whiteness, talking about privilege and building their capacity. And black folks are building their embodied capacity, right, to sit with discomfort. We do it all the time. But we have to do it, often, in a numb way just to get through.

And so building those capacities before coming together in multiracial settings to really do some of the repair work that needs to happen.

And this is long range stuff. I mean, I think about...

There was a study done in Sierra Leone after a civil war where they looked at, it was a fascinating study, it looked at 200 villages, they were randomized. A hundred villages did a restorative process. So kind of like a truth and reconciliation on South Africa, a coming together, a restorative justice type, you know, so it's very, talking about what happened. People making amends. So very cognitive, behavioral, emotional. And one hundred villages did not do this process. And they followed them for three years.

So I think this is very instructive for this moment. What they found, you would expect, in the villages that did the restorative processes, that people were on surveys more trusting, more active in the community, trusting of their neighbors etc. Looked great until they got to the psychological measures. And these people were doing much more poorly.

Because ultimately, if you don't address the body, we know, somebody comes forth with a heart warming, like truly genuine apology and we say, oh, that's great. But inside there's a little clutch. And if you don't address that little clutch, that little clutch will hijack, eventually, your emotions and your thoughts and your behavior. And this is why we see a resurgence of cycles of violence, because we don't include the body in the work. And that a lot of the body based trauma work is very individual focused. Maybe it's medical trauma, interpersonal trauma, childhood developmental trauma. And it divorces any of the structural, the ancestral, the cultural. Like, how do we find a place where it's the middle, right. Where it can really look at the individual in the ecology, in the systems.

And so when you can do that from a body based place. And people can build that capacity. Then when you do repair work, it's really deep and holistic repair work. And so I often think about the work, that I become really clear about the work I'm doing and the resilience toolkit, is unlike an individual level, where I think about where people are navigating between building their capacity to sit with distress and discomfort, to resource themselves, to prepare themselves for addressing trauma narratives. Maybe it's an individual trauma narrative. So you're addressing that in that way. And then you can work and re pattern the trauma narrative. And then you can dip back and forth.

But this idea of both repairing - sort of if you want to think of the Judith Herman models, sort of like phase one, phase two. But when you take it up at a collective level, it's this idea of, make the change, be the change. Make the change. Be the change. Right. And you have the 'make the change' people who are like, we've got to tear down these systems that don't work. And in doing that, that's a very intense, activated state. Which can be very powerful, but can also be quite destructive in a very generic way. Not just targeted.

And then we have the 'be the change' people who are like in Utopia and creating like new ways of being and living and thinking that this is amazing. And they're doing it from a resourced and stabilized place, where we can connect. But they also have a tendency to ignore the systems that are going on. And those systems are still impacting and eroding and attacking you in your 'be the change' place. And so how do you navigate from be the change, knowing when I need to be the change, when I need to make the change. Right. And going back and forth.

And so in conversations around race, equity. When can I be in this spacious place where I'm all connected to everybody and everybody's one? If I stay in that, that's spiritual bypassing. I'm not acknowledging what is actually going on around racism. How do I know when I need to engage and work on dismantling and then when can I come back and recognize our common humanity?

And it's important that you navigate both because they're both true. This is not a time for an either or. This is a time for a both and.

**Alex Howard:** And I think what can happen, is people can become more comfortable in one of those two places, right. That they're like, they're people that are much more comfortable doing their inner work and processing what's happening, but just don't want to get involved in the wider systems.

And others that want to tear down the systems and we need that energy that's going to challenge. But as you say, if it's not coming from a truly resourced place, A) the individual's more likely to burn out. But also the actions they take sometimes may make the problem worse rather than make the problem better.

And that is a very difficult balance because - and I don't remember who it was, but there was something I was watching on social media a few weeks ago that I thought was a really good analogy. And I thought it was interesting in the context of some of your background, which was that, talking about the process of birthing and how that's often a messy process. It's a noisy process. There's often some roaring that sort of comes with that. But that is the process of creation that all of us have gone through to come into the world. And that is also the process which often drives change, that you need that force and you need that power to challenge the systems that are there.

And I think what you're speaking to is really interesting of how do we balance these different forces?

And I guess probably, what's more helpful for us to speak to here, is how does an individual balance those forces? Because that's sort of some of the perspective we're coming from. But with your experience and background, what helps one, sort of identify, in a sense, their own blindspot? Like, how does one see where they are within that and what the real opportunity for them is in terms of their growth and their better supporting this change?

**Nkem Ndefo:** Ok. Just two things that I want to just circle and punctuate that you said, and then I'll answer that question.

One is this idea of birth. So being a midwife, birth has a lot of different phases. There are phases where it's really about release and acceptance. When you're dilating, it's about release and acceptance, relief and acceptance and waves of intensity are washing over you. But they're not constant. They come and they go. So being able to appraise, when is it strong and when am I like, whoa. And when can I rest and sleep between those contractions? Right. When can I, like, there's no pain. I can sleep. I need to rest now so I can ride the next one.

And then there is a time when you push and you push hard. And then you rest. And you push. So there's a lot of different things that happen.



So if somebody is used to always driving, they have a hard time with the release. And if somebody is used to release and acceptance, they can have a hard time with the driving. Again, so here's the same analogy. There is a known determinant of resilience. It's called regulatory flexibility. Regulatory flexibility is the capacity to shift your approach depending on the situation. And so when people talk about health, especially in alternative, complementary and integrative approaches, we often think of expansive and only expansive, accepting and only accepting. We have a hard time with some of the other side.

Sometimes contraction is the most healthful place to be. Sometimes rigidity is the most helpful. Sometimes flexibility is the most helpful. So it's the capacity to adapt to your circumstances. Some good old allostasis, right. That we forget that that is actually, you know, a goal.

And if the situation is abusive or oppressive, then constantly adapting to it is not a good thing. But in general, we want to promote people's capacity to adapt.

If, I mean I think a place is, when people are working, to your pointed question about what do individuals do? I think all of us. The idea of interrogating, interrogating knowing - so if you can take as a basis we are steeped in all kinds of impressions, all kinds of biases. It's a patriarchy. It's racist. It's ableist. All of those things. And so it's really a process of interrogating, what are your beliefs? How are things showing up? There's plenty of good things to be reading and plenty of good things to be writing. And I know you're going to put some references and stuff for people to have, to start educating yourself because our education system has just re-created some of those beliefs. So I think that that's really important.

And then how do you, I mean the way I use the resilience toolkit is to help people recognize where their stress is. So recognize, when am I in a stress response and then ask, is it serving me? And if it's not serving me, how do I regulate it and how do I know that that thing is working? And there is a plethora of choices that you can use to regulate your system. But how do you know it's working? And that allows you to, again, stay in the process of interrogating it. It allows you to withstand some distress, within reason, because there's a sense of, there's some growth. There's growing pains that are happening here.

There's growing pains. And I think we all would acknowledge, you know, growing pains as being a good thing. It's just, you know, this is a big one.

And, you know, let's also acknowledge, like we're in a pandemic, right. So people are already pretty stretched, pretty stretched.

**Alex Howard:** One also wonders is, is the reason why the push has been so strong because we're in a pandemic. There's been a bottled up sort of energy, which has been a helpful fuel, I think, in some cases, people had more time to reflect. People are less caught up in their normal kind of structures.

So I wonder if that's also been a helpful landscape for some of this?

**Nkem Ndefo:** I do, I think it's and it's lasted long enough that it's been disruptive enough to soak in and a lot of people are out of work. People are very desperate. They have very little to lose at this point. It's so bad. Right. So there's a real - the desperation is very high. There is, for some people, there's more time. For some people there's less. But, you know, in the United States, we're regularly punctuated with violence. You know, in the last week, our local sheriffs have killed three men of color.

In this time period, with this level of scrutiny, they're still killing us.

So we've been, you know, Black Lives Matter has been, you know, protesting this for years. And they stand on the shoulders of people who were doing it before them. So there, you know, for many of us, we've been saying these things and saying these things. It's just, it's a tinderbox right now.

**Alex Howard:** Yeah. Which also brings me another question I wanted to ask about, which is that it strikes me that, that there's a lot of talk in the pop psychology worlds around, sort of, positive emotions and negative emotions and one of the emotions that I found most helpful in my life, particularly when I've confronted something very challenging or very difficult, has actually been the emotion of anger and not anger spewed around and sort of taken out on people in cruel ways. But the power of the feeling of, I'm not okay with this. Like, this is not okay. And the sense of being called to act, to do something from that place.

I wondered if you could speak a little bit to the importance of anger and the power of anger to actually be a catalyst for driving change.

**Nkem Ndefo:** I mean, anger is to protect ourselves. Right. So if somebody has the gall to say anger is a bad thing, I'm like, well, I say you had a lot of privilege that you never needed to protect yourself. You have never needed to protect yourself.

So there's righteous anger. And to not confuse, I think, you know, referencing Ray Johnson, to not confuse anger with violence. They're two different things. The way I like to conceive of anger is, it's fire, right?

Fire is super valuable. You can burn things down, that maybe need to come down. But you can also cook food. That's how we cook. And that's very gentle. Fire is generative and destructive. It is both. And so, often, it's people's own traumas around anger that then are projected into, 'oh, that's a bad emotion'. An emotion is just an emotion. There's just emotions, right? Again, I come back to this idea of adaptiveness, adaptiveness.

So, I'm trained as a homeopath and I trained in the sensation method with a group of doctors in Mumbai. And I long came to realize in this practice, that humans were very interesting in that, in homeopathy, we're messy little creatures, in homoeopathy, we mix remedies from all different kinds of substances. And this idea of, I recognized that when we make a remedy from, whether it's from calcium or we make a remedy from a daisy or we make a remedy from, whatever it is, it's sort of the essence of that, whatever that object or creature is.

And I realized, calcium can only be calcium. And a daisy can only be a daisy. But humans, our kind of uniqueness is we can take form of different things. We can really, we can behave as this. We can behave as that. Which, you know, you'd be hard pressed to see a daisy behave as a dog. Right. But we could be, well, you know, like meek like a daisy or, you know, like a rabid dog. We can do both.

**Alex Howard:** I've got three kids. I do a good dog impression, just so you know!

**Nkem Ndefo:** You do? OK. And what's interesting about humans is that, where our illness, our disease state is actually the stuck-ness in one state, like we're stuck. So this is this idea, coming back to the expansive. So many people in complementary, alternative worlds are very into expansion and freedom. Expansion and freedom as like, this is the thing. And that means, like, you're stuck in the idea of expansive and freedom.

And then the other side, if you think of it like a stick, expansion and freedom on this side and contraction and restriction on the other. And one side is good. And one side is bad. And what I realized, that the illness isn't being on the bad side and wanting to get to the good side. The illnesses is that you're trapped. This is the only paradigm you have. You're literally clinging, your illness is clinging to the stick.

When in reality, in any situation, you could, a healthy person could drop that stick and pick up a different paradigm, a different experience, a different way of living. Because maybe it's not expansion, contraction. Maybe it's melting and solidity. Right. So the way that you approach a problem or the way that you experience something could be through a different lens. And so that was very instructive in my development as a practitioner, to recognize what I now know is called regulatory flexibility, as being such a sign of resilience.

And embedded at this point in my practice, is around nervous system regulation flexibility, which allows, because the nervous system is so fundamental, allows emotional regulatory flexibility, cognitive flexibility, which is adaptive when things are rapidly changing or in situations of crisis like they are right now.

**Alex Howard:** One of the things I think becomes very, very clear from what you're saying is the importance of one developing their own capacity and doing their own work, wherever they sit in this sort of constellation and this sort of narrative.

But I think there's also a question that comes for me, which is, if one is hopefully doing that work the best they can, and that work is work that takes a lot of time and it takes patience and it takes practice. There can sometimes be some early wins in that work, but often it is an ongoing process. And we're also speaking to this point that you can't just bypass the issue. It can't just be, well, I'm doing my work and I'll sort of come to it.

How do we move from where we are? Like, how does this this narrative unfold in a way which is of service to the depth of the problem that we're dealing with. Like, on a day to day, interaction to interaction level. How do we better manage it? How do we better support the progress? That's a better way phrasing it.

**Nkem Ndefo:** I think this is a collaborative process. We're at an interesting time in history and I don't think having any set prescriptions would be all that useful. There's a lot of emergence coming out. We don't have good models of repair. Western culture does not have good repair models. We have submission and domination models. So somebody wins and then the story shifts and then somebody else wins. That's not repair. That's domination and submission. And so, what does a repair look like? And what does an embodied, holistic repair look like? That's ongoing. And uncovering, unearthing what do reparations look like.

I think this is, we're co creating it right now. So it's the willingness to get in the game and stay in the game and look at, also intersectional oppressions, that it's not just race. Right. There's race. There's gender. There's Ableism. There's all, you know, do you have citizenship or non citizenship. I mean, like all kinds of, right? So how are you looking at...

I like the framing of cultural humility because it asks people to be in a learning stance. It's not like you can, sometimes you hear people say cultural competence, like you can get there. There's no "get there". It's a process. And if we can be in a learning stance, one of the first things is, I mean, you learn about yourself. Because often, if you're normative in anything, you're a white person, you're a man, male identified, you're able bodied, whatever it is, whatever is the normative, you think you don't have a culture. Everyone else has a culture.

So starting with your own culture, like what does it mean for me to be a black woman? With a disability. What does that, what's that? Right. I'm cis-gendered. I'm, you know, I have legal citizenship. So there's places where I have privilege and places where I clearly don't have privilege. What's my culture? What are my beliefs, so some, you know, really exploring and unearthing that because otherwise I'm assuming I'm neutral and everyone else is the other.

And it helps, if you are very normative, right, like you are cis-gendered, white, male, from northern Europe, like, you know, probably on the top of many, many hierarchies. If you can find a place where you're not at the top of a hierarchy, that's also interesting to explore what that feels like. Right.

**Alex Howard:** That's interesting. One of the things that, when I was trying to initially find my entry point, let's say, to having a more informed perspective. One of the things that, for me was very helpful, was remembering what it was like to have a chronic illness. Particularly being at university in the UK. And you have sort of understand British culture to really get this point. But being at university and not drinking alcohol. Now, I know for some people this may sound like an irrelevant point. I remember actually, I had some American friends who just didn't get it.

But British people, drinking alcohol in large quantities when you're a teenager is sort of the thing. So things like that. Things like not being able to participate in sport, not being able to do the things which, kind of young men normally do as a way of defining their sort of identity.

So that was one of my entry points, sort of remembering the sort of, the trauma at times and the difficulty of some of those experiences. And also remembering that the pain of, when you're suffering with a chronic illness in that way, and you have this debilitating, utterly

debilitating fatigue and people saying, oh, yeah, we all get tired. And the sort of sense of the misalignment.

And what I realized is, something very painful about when someone thinks they see you and they totally miss you. And that, for me, was certainly an entry point into realizing, because you're right, I do have a lot of privilege in my life and I've had some very traumatic and very difficult things. Like we all have in our own ways. But there was something in, to realize what it feels like to be in a minority and to be in a position of vulnerability and weakness, I think is a sort of important developmental step, that if people haven't experienced that, it does make it harder to empathize and understand issues such as this.

**Nkem Ndefo:** And that's part of it. It's like Western culture is dependent-phobic. Everybody's independent. Do your thing. Dependency terrifies, terrifies in Western culture. And this is why, you can see, like I always say, like who's the lowest paid in any culture. Right. The people who care for the most dependent are the lowest paid. Because we are terrified of that. And so when people have to admit there's dependency or vulnerability or that, you know, or those places in them. Those are spots for your own healing.

And so, some people are like, no, no. No, no.

**Alex Howard:** We're going to put together some references, some sort of steering for people that want to become better informed on this. And you've also, Nkem, been very helpful in terms of introducing some other voices to help contribute to the dialog that we're attempting to bring to the narrative here.

Is there anything that we haven't touched on, so in this kind of conversation today, that you feel is important, that you want to say.

**Nkem Ndefo:** I mean, I think, you know, the idea of trauma, recognizing trauma as a root cause of so much suffering, individual and collective. Between historical, current, like in every way you can conceive of it, trauma being a root problem. That people who address trauma as that is part of your calling in this world. That I believe it's through trauma healing, that's where we're going to get somewhere. So the people who this is your calling, it's you all. It's you all, if that's your calling around this.

And so, the wider you can understand the experience of trauma, the better we can navigate through this. We can get across this bridge.

And so, I really encourage people, you know, this may be fashionable right now, but this is long haul work. And so where is it that this is asking your model, the way you think about the way the world works, the way people heal, that wasn't including ecology. That wasn't including race, wasn't including different identities. And how those interact in the face of history and culture and economics.

Widen your perspective a little. And then I'm so excited to see how your models shift. How they grow. Take it as a challenge to improve the work that you're doing.

So it's sort of like a call to practitioners. Because we get a little, I mean, I think we create things, we say, oh, this is working, right, and then we can kind of sit back and maybe we tweak it at the edges.

This may call for a reworking. And so that can be scary because things are like shaking, like I thought this was how it worked and it might really change.

But if you can open yourself up to that, I think that's a chance, an opportunity for an even deeper level of healing.

There is a well-known saying is, we say, find the conversation that can only happen with these people in this room at this moment. And if I take that idea, of this conversation that we are having as a culture, around the world, in micro and subcultures, around this issue. This is a conversation we can only have right now, at this time, with these people.

And in that, can we find, it's something, it's a sum greater than its parts. Like there's some kind of alchemy, some kind of collective wisdom that can come out from all that we bring to the conversation.

So I really hope that people do their work to get in the conversation and stay in the conversation, because it's actually, really an exciting time.

**Alex Howard:** I think that's a great place to end. Nkem, thank you so much, both for a really great interview today, but also for your support in helping us attempt to do better. I really appreciate it.

**Nkem Ndefo:** My pleasure. My pleasure. It's great to do repair.

**Alex Howard:** Thank you.