



## Processing collective grief

**Guest: Michelle Johnson**

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### **[00:00:10] Jaia Bristow**

Hello and welcome back to the Trauma Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am delighted to be welcoming Michelle Johnson. Welcome, Michelle.

### **Michelle Johnson**

Thank you for having me here.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Thank you for being here. So Michelle C. Johnson is an author, yoga teacher, social justice activist, intuitive healer and dismantling racism trainer. She approaches her life and work from a place of empowerment, embodiment, and integration. Her newest book, *Finding Refuge: Heart Work for Healing Collective Grief*, explores cultural trauma and healing our collective grief, which is what we're going to be talking about today. You can read Michelle's full bio below this video.

So Michelle, let's dive right in. What is your definition and understanding of collective grief?

### **Michelle Johnson**

My background, at least part of it, is as a clinical social worker, and now doing more intuitive healing work. And through that practice of working with clients, many clients who have experienced trauma, for over 20 years, I was in private practice, I sat with what they might call their individual grief. But every time I heard a story of grief, it always felt connected to something else that was going on in the world or a system that was playing out in the world and marginalizing or harming people.

So through that practice of sitting with clients in my office and processing and moving through different trauma and experiences of loss and then making space to grieve, I began to think about collective grief and to remember that we're all interconnected. So our experience of individual grief isn't really separate from our experience of collective grief.

I think the other thing that's informed this definition now is, of course, we've almost for the last two years, it's almost been two years, so we've been in this global pandemic with COVID and many other pandemics, many other illuminations of systemic oppression, this experience of being socially isolated and figuring out whether or not I'm going to wear a mask (which I do wear a mask), of figuring out how we practice this collective care at this time, and of experiencing the amount of loss that

we've experienced, I've never experienced this amount of loss, not necessarily personally, but globally, I haven't experienced this amount of loss in my life.

**[00:02:39]**

So of course, I feel like now is the time for us to be talking about what we've lost as a collective, specifically in response to COVID-19, but also I mentioned other systems and what this pandemic has illuminated.

So I also believe there's a lot we need to grieve related to history and what we've lost because of our history and denial of history and pretending certain things did not happen and that things were not set up in a particular way to uplift some and oppress others. And so I would define collective grief as our experience of collective loss. And this grief could be an individual experience, not an individual experience, a one time experience like a natural disaster, for example. But of course, we understand that ripples out over time.

Or it could be living in the way we have for the last almost two years, where this is sustained exposure to changing the way we live, and loss after loss after loss, and not just loss of people, but also loss related to uncertainty, like people had to really give up their plans and this idea that we control things, and this illusion of certainty to respond to this time because there's been so much uncertainty. So the way I'm looking at collective grief now is perhaps a little different than the way I was thinking about it prior to COVID.

**Jaia Bristow**

Thank you for that. And so what is it that led you to explore this topic of collective grief?

**Michelle Johnson**

Well, about now almost three years ago, I am fairly intuitive, and I do a lot of ancestral work and practice, and I received a message from who I believe are the ancestors. And the message was we're going to need a space to grieve. We will need a space to be together and grieve. And I didn't understand it when it came through. It came through in a meditation, and messages come through like that all of the time. But this one really stuck with me because I was confused by it, and so I reached out to a friend who led me through a practice and visualization to imagine this space where we would come together and grieve. And I gathered more information about what it needed to look like and how many people would be there.

And this led to me planning what was going to be an in person retreat in June of 2020. We obviously moved that online, and the retreat was called Healing in Community. And I was really exploring this connection between making space to grieve together in community and finding liberation through that, so noticing the release that comes through from making space for our grief, but also the healing that only can happen in community with others.

And we met in June of 2020 with 40 people. And of course, that was one of the most intense parts of COVID-19 for many, and just the time we were living in and the uncertainty and the level of that at that point in time. And so people were really hungry to come together and be with one another and ask, what's going on, or how do you feel about what's going on, what's happening to us? How do I manage this or respond to this?

[00:06:22]

Yes, we're all having an experience of collective grief. And yet we're still having a different experience within this context of collective grief for many reasons, because of our identities, because of losing people in our lives, because of losing work, because of how we're positioned based on where dominant culture places us because of the identities we embody. So we explored these issues.

And alongside the planning for that retreat, I ended up writing *Finding Refuge*, which came out this past July, which is all about exploring collective grief and spiritual practice as a tool to move through our grief. And *Finding Refuge* is also about... Often people are afraid to grieve because they think their grief will swallow them. And *Finding Refuge* is really about moving people through a process where they have more tools to hold them as they grieve.

So I would say the seed, one of the seeds, because I actually think now that I've written this book and been talking more about collective grief, that there are many things that led to this body of work, but one of the seeds was definitely the ancestors and their awareness that we would need to shift to the conversation about grief from just an individual experience to a collective experience, and that we would need to, as we could, come together in some way to be with one another and witness one another as we respond to this moment and the moments that will come after this one of uncertainty and of loss and the unknown, and that we'll need to come together. The ancestors knew that we would need to come together to heal as well.

So I think that's the short answer about that. The only other thing I'll name about this question is I've been a dismantling racism trainer for a long time, for 24 years, maybe, and I'm 46. I've been Black for 46 years. I live in the US. I live in a context where, of course, and globally during the summer of 2020, this was happening too, where, of course, a movement for Black lives to matter is still very present in this space, and I actually think will be for quite a long time until things shift and change. And I believe they can.

And in the work of having been a dismantling racism trainer for such a long time, what I realized, workshop after workshop, after a year long process with organizations to transform their spaces, is that so much of what I was stewarding in those spaces was grief, because we were talking about history, because we were talking about how we've been, some of us, marginalized and others uplifted because of that marginalization and oppression, because we were talking about loss, because people were exploring how they had been complicit in this system of white supremacy, because that's the focus in that dismantling racism work, although we hold an intersectional lens.

So I think that's another piece of the work and seed that finally I realized, oh, I'm just holding grief in these spaces. Yes, I'm inviting people to transform, but I'm also holding their heartbreak, because they're waking up to what is in a way that they have not previously been able to awaken, like they're sitting with and building some skills and distress tolerance to be with the reality of what is and the fact that the world may be very different than what they thought it was.

So I think that's the other big piece of my work that has informed this practice of making space to grieve collectively and to bring forth this conversation about collective grief and cultural trauma.

### **Jaia Bristow**

That makes sense. And I think it's a really important distinction you made where you say we might all be sharing collective grief, but we don't all experience the same grief due to our different identities. And talking about dismantling racism, you realized that actually the core of that was working with

grief and collective grief, which is different for Black bodies and Brown bodies than it is for white bodies.

**[00:10:40]**

And you mentioned that in your book, you give a lot of tools for processing collective grief. I'm wondering if you could mention a few of those.

**Michelle Johnson**

Yeah. So *Finding Refuge* has seven chapters, and I believe eight practices. So at the end of each chapter there's a practice. And *Finding Refuge* is also an exploration of my own experience of personal loss, but it's all been connected to the collective and what we are experiencing. So it's like my personal story as a doorway into what's going on in the collective, as a way for people to connect, because I think there are points in *Finding Refuge* and parts of my story that will be resonant for people. And I think there are parts of my story that people will feel empathy for because it's not actually their lived experience.

The practices range from meditations. The first chapter at the end of it, there's a meditation about the heart and heartbreak and really touching into heartbreak. There's also an affirmation or mantra that goes along with that. There is a practice about intuition, and there are actually two practices in that chapter. That's actually chapter four, where there's a practice where folks are invited to connect with the natural world as a way of deepening their connection with intuition.

There's also a practice related to intuition, protecting our energy. And this really is speaking to what I named earlier of folks believing they'll be consumed by their grief, when, in fact, we can actually not contain it, but we can create some, I would say, boundaries around it so that we can learn to be with it without it overwhelming us. So that's part of that practice.

There's a practice and mantra affirmation connected to wholeness and remembering our wholeness. And that's a meditation and mantra. There is a meditation... I'm a beekeeper, I have two beehives now, I combined two of them, so I used to have three, but now I have two, and there's an entire chapter about honeybees and the natural world and the hive, and how we see ourselves as part of the hive, not as individuals, but as an extension of the hive. And so there's a practice that's a meditation. There are some journaling prompts, and pranayama bumblebee's breath, or Bhramari breath, is the practice that's offered in that.

There's a ritual focused on, this is at the end of *Finding Refuge*, the medicine that one can bring forth from their experience of moving through finding refuge.

So there are journaling prompts along the way. There are meditations which are about turning toward and being with, but also building the capacity to be with our emotions, to be with our grief, to be with one another as we move through this, and mantra and pranayama breath work and rituals throughout. So these are some of the tools.

There's also an invitation in chapter two to move through a Sadhana, a 40 day practice that people determine for themselves what that will be. I will give some examples of that. And that chapter really is about how having consistent practice really saved me, I would say, in a moment of crisis that was prompted by something external but definitely triggered a crisis internally, and could have turned out horrifically this situation, and how I'm really clear that my practice saved me in that moment. And had I not had consistent practice, I wouldn't have had it to call on.

**[00:14:27]**

And so I invite people into this practice of a Sadhana, so that they have built a tool and worked with the tool that they can call on when they need it, but they've moved through it for 40 days to notice the transformation and transition within themselves. So that's the other practice that's in the book.

**Jaia Bristow**

Wonderful. It sounds like a really great workbook and with lots of tools and ability to figure out for oneself as well exactly what's needed.

And you talked about the ancestors telling you that a space was needed to grieve. And so I'm curious about the obstacles to that. In what ways do you experience dominant culture discouraging us from making that space?

**Michelle Johnson**

Yeah. One thing I'm really appreciative of is my connection with the ancestors, the ones that are known to me as well as ones that are unknown but clearly show up for me and guide me. And I'm grateful for their wisdom, which I think is much more expansive than dominant culture and then the constraints that dominant culture can place on us.

And when I say dominant culture, I really mean systems that are based on dominance and superiority and making whole groups of people feel inferior, or systems that are about dominating the planet, owning things, taking things, systems that are really wedded to this idea of scarcity, and there not being enough, when, in fact, there is enough, we just have to redistribute it so everyone has enough. This is a little bit about what I mean around dominance. There's more, but I wanted to explain that, because people may have a different understanding of that than what I explained is my understanding of it.

And given this, often, I'll talk about dominant culture as connected to systems within awareness that people make up systems. So people are setting policies and practices and creating protocols around many things within organizations that people work inside of, or that people need to interact with. And some of these policies and protocols are centered around, for example, how much leave one can take when they've had a loss, and their policies and practices focused on what losses are valid.

So as I've worked in institutions, and again, I've only lived in the US, so this may be different in other parts of the world, and yet there's still some boundaries around how much space one can have to grieve. I imagine that's happening in lots of spaces all over the world. But here in my experience, I've had three days or three to five days bereavement leave, and typically it's only been in response to a person I've lost, not a relationship, not what's happening in the world, not the Black and Brown folks are being murdered and extinguished because of systems like white supremacy, but it has to be like my grandmother. But that's a valid loss that an institution will recognize, and some institutions will not even recognize that. They give you a day. They send you a card and flowers. They expect you to be back at work and to be working in this way that you were before, when, in fact, perhaps that's not possible.

I've worked in spaces where, and I think this is very connected to dominant culture, and it's fear of acknowledging what we've lost because that would then invite people into reckoning with what we've lost, and then invite people into doing something different, but in spaces that cannot actually hold grief...

**[00:18:07]**

When I lived in Portland, Oregon, for a year, in 2017 and 2018, and my father passed away right after I arrived there, eleven days after I arrived, and then my grandmother passed away a few months after that, and I was clear I was in a space, we were doing organizing work, we were doing training work, and I was clear I was in a space that actually didn't have the capacity to hold that kind of grief. And the expectation I felt was that I should just show up and do the work. And that felt really strange to me because of the context of the space and the work we were doing, which I would say was offered in the spirit of healing. But the container couldn't actually hold the healing that needed to take place when employees like me had losses or transitions or things going on. The expectation was workaholicism, which is so counter to our healing. It gets in the way of our healing.

And I feel like this is related to dominant culture, too, and cultural norms around containment. Like, I know long ago, I'm 20% Irish and I'm 80% West African, and I know there are rituals connected to my lineage and heritage. I know that. I don't know what all of them are because that's part of what systems like white supremacy have taken away. And then I have to research and find them.

I know there was a different way that we were though. At one point in time, I know people were, I always say this, like, sitting in a circle, celebrating, engaging the elements, grieving together, that we had all these rituals around grief. And in my experience here in the US, and again, this may be different culturally, I want to be really clear about that, depending on where folks are, because I do think this is one thing that white supremacy and perhaps colonization in other places took away, is this connection with our rituals, is this connection with our practices around grieving and many other things.

I feel like there's this, instead of expressing what we're feeling, grief and many other things, actually, there's this contain what you're feeling, don't share it, don't talk about it, especially if it's not something that's seen as positive, like, don't share about your experience of this. And I think we've lost a lot because of this socialization and conditioning around containment, like having it all together. Right? That's something I hear people say, and I feel like that's so connected to containment. What does it actually mean? Like everything's falling apart in reality. So how can we have it all together? Like everything is falling apart, people. So let's look at that and then maybe put things back together. But it's just like, don't acknowledge what's falling apart. Don't acknowledge that you feel sad. Don't acknowledge that you feel anxious. Don't talk about your trauma and the trauma that's happening in the world. Contain it or pretend it's not there.

And this shows up, like all the time in spaces when people cry, it happens...

I hold space all the time, all week long and on weekends, and people will start crying and they'll say, I'm sorry, I'm crying. It's so connected to this containment and what we've learned about what we can express and what we shouldn't, and that we should apologize for our tears. It's so ingrained in so many people, it's happened across the board. It's like the moment the tears flow, people will say, I'm sorry. Or witnessing people holding tears back, right? Like holding the breath and holding tears back, which I think causes a lot of issues around not being with emotions or building the capacity to be with our emotions and to believe we're not held in our emotions, that people can't support us in that.

And I also think it causes health issues, if you think about containment in that way. I think it causes physical health issues. I think it affects our emotional state, our mental state, we might feel our spirit might feel, however we think of spirits. I think it affects the whole system.

**[00:22:09]**

And I think it doesn't just affect individual people, but if I'm containing and I have all of this grief inside or anxiety or depression or other things going on that I've held onto, that will affect other people. That will affect how I move through my life. And I always say when we don't process our grief, it's likely we're going to cause grief for others, like there's some way we're going to create some experience that will create loss for someone else and thus create grief for them.

And if we don't process our trauma, it's likely we're going to replicate our trauma. And so this containment, I feel is so dangerous, actually. And I think it's rooted in dominant culture. I think it's rooted in how people were controlled. I mean, if you think about domination, I think it's that. Like stay in line, stay in order, only move your body in this way, be this way. Your body is to be used for this and thinking about enslavement and labor. Like this is what it is. Now that I'm talking about it, I think about it a lot more. I think it's so embedded in my experience in the dominant culture, where I am. And I think it's in the way of us being able to grieve.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And I think I can recognize that in the cultures that I've lived in as well, for sure. And as you were talking about that containment, the idea of apologizing for emotions came to me as well. And then you mentioned it, apologizing for tears. But I think it can happen with other strong emotions as well.

A really close friend of mine just the other day, yesterday in fact, was on the phone to me, and had some really good news, but hadn't quite caught up with it, and couldn't quite process the good news because life has just been so overwhelming recently. And she was apologizing to me for not being more excited about the good news. And it's okay to feel whatever you're feeling right now. It's okay that you're still feeling overwhelmed and exhausted and that those emotions are more primary than the enjoyment or the excitement of, it was a job offer, but the job offer also brought on lots of stress and lots of other associations, and she felt like she had to be grateful that she'd received this job offer, and she was. But she was also having lots of other feelings about it.

### **Michelle Johnson**

Yeah. I think that's true, too. Like, it's not just containment about feelings that may be framed as negative, which I don't think they are, or experiences that are difficult, but also people will contain their joy, too. And there's a lot of conditioning around that, too. But I think it's still connected to what was named. So it's not just grief. It's like when I'm feeling happy about something, feeling like I can't share that, I need to contain that.

And there's a lot around deserving connected to that. I mean, I think there's a lot of story around that for folks. And I think identity is connected to that as well.

### **Jaia Bristow**

100%. And so what would you say to someone who is afraid to acknowledge and process their grief.

### **Michelle Johnson**

Right. What I know about grief from my experience of it and also stewarding it and holding it, witnessing it, is that it's, one, part of life. So we're all going to lose someone or something. And in fact,

we are right now. I always say our time is limited here. And along with all the things we've talked about, I think here in the west, there's this fear of mortality and death. And so if people wrangle with that for a while, that's going to bring up, like we're not going to be in these bodies forever. We will transition in some way. If people work with that, that's going to be a loss they'll need to contend with and grieve. And not everyone will choose to do that. But of course, we're losing other things.

**[00:26:05]**

And so grief is part of life. It's just part of what it means to be alive, is what I always say. And accepting that, I think can be really helpful because it can support us in responding to grief when we're in the intense throws of it.

Because grief, to me, feels like, and other folks describe it this way, like waves. So there's this, sometimes little wave, sometimes tidal wave, and then there's some respite, and then something else comes... A memory, an anniversary, more uncertainty.

I'm aware that the trauma of specifically COVID-19 brought up other traumas people had experienced before that they didn't know would bring. All of a sudden, everyone was feeling hyper vigilant, which makes a lot of sense, but it was also old trauma. It wasn't just trauma at the moment.

And so grief is part of life. It might feel like different waves, and there will be moments of respite. While I myself have had the experience of feeling like grief is going to swallow me whole, it did not, it has not. And so I also think it's important to remember. And *Finding Refuge* is about both our heartbreak and ability for the heart to open and respond to what is happening in real time. So I think there's something about understanding that we have the capacity to hold many things at one time. And I don't mean hold on to, I actually mean to be with and move through. This is what I mean, many things at one time.

And I think there's a practice of remembrance that needs to happen around that, and I'm not sure. I'd have to sit with it more. I'm really curious about it and have some ideas about it. What gets in the way of us remembering that? I think there's a lot that gets in the way that's actually related to some of the things we talked about earlier with systems and dominant culture.

And if I look around at the people I know and the experiences they've had, I'm so reminded of our capacity to hold many things at one time. It's just all around me that we can respond to our heartbreak. We can have an open heart. We can be experiencing grief and loss, and we can be celebrating something that's going on that feels joyous or that feels good to us. Or we can celebrate a friend and something that's going on for them. We can do many things at one time. So remembering this would be helpful for someone who's afraid.

And I have a friend who, about once a month, she makes space to grieve. So even if she hasn't lost someone or she's not aware of a loss in her life, she goes into her room, puts on music that she knows is going to make her cry, shuts the door, tells her family she's going to grieve. And I appreciate this. This isn't how I actually do it. But when she told me about it, I appreciated it because even if she's not aware of feeling sad or aware of a loss, she's like, somewhere there's grief, and I just need to make space for it to move through, and she chooses the time to do it. And so that might feel better to... Folks feel afraid and like it's going to overwhelm the system, and they don't know how they'll respond to that. Just making a space for that. Like, what am I grieving today? Or on Wednesday night, the last Wednesday of the month, I'm going to do this thing, a grief ritual, where I make space for it. Or something between the two, it doesn't have to be every day or once a month.



**[00:29:57]**

And other folks like me, grief will just come up and I'll be like, oh, I'm grieving right now. I'm aware I'm grieving all the time, because I'm really sensitive in response to all that's going on in the world and have been sensitive since I came into the world in this incarnation. Grief will just come up and I'll say, I'm grieving and I'm grieving for the world because often when the grief comes up and sadness comes up, it feels bigger than me. I'm like, oh, you're grieving in response to the grief that people don't actually feel like they can hold. So in some ways in your system you're responding to it. I'm really clear that I do that. That's part of stewarding grief too, I think. And just part of how I'm made up and part of my work in this lifetime.

So people grieve differently. I think that's another thing for people to remember as they're afraid to grieve or want to deepen their relationship with grief.

And finally, I'll name that grief is not, as I said it's part of life, it's not a state of being. It's an experience. And when we don't grieve or acknowledge what we've lost and where that exists inside us, I think it stagnates, and it can become a state of being.

But the actual process of allowing grief to move through us and of creating ritual and practice around that, that's not a state of being. That is a practice. That is a process. There's a beginning, middle and end to it. And then something else happens, and we're back in the process.

I really feel like when it's contained in the way I was describing, it just stagnates, and that causes all sorts of disease in many ways, physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. And then that can become who we are. That stagnant energy can feel like this is who I am. And it can also make people feel stuck. And it can also make people be stuck like they actually physically can't move because of the grief that has not been tended or responded to.

So I think remembering that as well is important, that grief is not who we are. It's part of what we experience because we're alive.

**Jaia Bristow**

I think that's a really important distinction you made there. And just on the topic of remembering. I also wanted to mention that Dr. Claudelle Glasgow is doing a really wonderful interview exactly on that topic as well, who I believe you've come across.

**Michelle Johnson**

Yes. I love Claudelle. Yes.

**Jaia Bristow**

They were originally going to talk about collective grief and then found out you were doing that theme so decided to talk about remembering in the context of collective grief.

And so you've talked a bit about, I really love the story you gave about your friend who takes one evening a month to grieve, and I also really appreciate you saying that people grieve in different ways, and I'm wondering if you could give a few other practical strategies or practical tips on what those ways might look like.

**[00:33:16] Michelle Johnson**

I would say that for some people, it might feel okay to be by themselves and to make space to grieve. And that might happen through reflection, through journaling, through meditating and sitting and noticing what comes up for them. It could happen when one is taking a few deep breaths.

And what I want to say is that even if I'm in my space alone, feeling grief and moving through a loss, I'm not alone. And so remembering that we're not alone. For me, there's an ancestor, someone in my lineage, or there's the natural world around me, which is part of one of the strategies and tools and skills that I use is connecting with the natural world, which I can share more about in just a minute, that we can make space and process alone, and yet we're not alone. Or for some folks, it might be helpful to actually be in space with others, to share about what they're moving through, or some combination of the two, so I want to name that.

I mentioned journaling and reflection, so this self study or turning toward oneself to understand and be curious about what's present for them. And in fact, the first practice in *Finding Refuge* is how is my heart and what is causing heartbreak at this time? And how is my heart opening? There are some questions that people can ask. Those are just some, people could ask other questions related to how they're feeling. Part of this is getting in touch with emotions.

I mentioned the natural world. So at one point in my journey, the natural world was the only place that made sense to me because I could see the natural cycles of life and death and rebirth in the natural world. And those things, they were happening around me in life and in my personal life, but also beyond me they were happening. But they didn't make sense because so much of what was happening felt unnatural to me because of systems connected to dominant culture. But in nature I could see, oh, this works this way.

I'm in North Carolina and the leaves are changing on the trees because it's fall, and eventually they're going to fall off the trees as we go into winter. There are seasons I can see. The natural world provides so much medicine for me and information and connection to, oh, this is the cycle of how things work. And healing, it provides so much healing.

So if people have an opportunity to connect to the natural world in some way, and examples of this might be I'm looking out my window right now at a huge oak tree across the street from my house. And watching it move in the wind and connecting with that. I'm watching the leaves on the trees and the color shift. I might go outside and connect in some way.

I might go and feel my feet on the Earth so I can feel grounded, which feels like a really important practice, as people are feeling so ungrounded by everything that's going on and the way that turning toward grief can cause folks to feel ungrounded, so physically grounding on the Earth. And there are other ways to physically ground as well. Walking meditation that's one of the practices offered in *Finding Refuge* as well.

I want to mention a few of the other ways to ground tools as people are moving through their grief or acknowledging it. Often I'll lead meditation, I'm working with people on Zoom a lot and not in person very much, but even when I'm in person I do this, when they come out of meditation, I invite them to reorient themselves to the space, so they notice the colors and shapes around you. Notice the light in the room, notice the temperature, perhaps rub your hands together and build some heat between the hands. This is to remind people they're in bodies. Come back into the body, feel the sensations in the body. So these are some other ways people can ground.

**[00:37:25]**

And I would also say any mindfulness practices that help people slow down enough to notice how they're feeling, this is a tool. So I mentioned meditation. I mentioned deep breaths, taking five or ten deep breaths, which calms the nervous system and also slows us down enough to notice what's here, what's present, asking what's present. And I would also say, because I mentioned people may grieve alone or grieve with others, that if there's a community that people can connect with, not only to make space to grieve, but to be in community and circle, celebrating and connecting. I think that is really important.

And I think it's hard to do for some folks now because of the way we're having to connect to many of us. And I think we're having to be creative as we try to figure out how to connect and reconnect if we're in physical space with others.

And then lastly, at certain points in my own life and experience, I've gone to therapy and connected with healers. So someone outside of myself to remind me of who I am and the tools that I embody to heal. So let's say, if people have access to that or feel like they need that, I would highly recommend that. And that could be a therapist or a mental health professional. It could be a healer. It could be a holistic practitioner. It could be an energy healer. It could be a sound healer. There are a lot of different modalities, as we know, to respond to trauma and to respond to different things people are moving through. And to seek out those resources, again, as a reminder that we're not alone in this, and it's okay to ask for help.

### **Jaia Bristow**

I think that's so important, a very good reminder there.

You talk about grieving and about liberation. So how is grieving connected to liberation?

### **Michelle Johnson**

Yeah. When I shared about the seed and the idea that came from my ancestors and that led to a retreat space online where we came together. And the focus of that was healing, community, grief and liberation. What I know, and I mentioned stagnant energy earlier, is that when I make space to grieve, when I allow what needs to move through to move through, that there's some release. There's some space made in the body where my spirit, there are emotions that are clearing and moving through. So there's that way of liberating oneself by processing what needs to be processed and moving that energy that may be stagnant.

And in the context of this collective grief, if we look at this, there's so much that we haven't been able to heal because there's so much that we have not reckoned with. And I bring up history all the time. If we look at history and the things that... I think this is global in so many ways but I'll contextualize it to where I've been and lived, that feels important just because I don't know how other spaces operate, I haven't lived in other spaces, what I know about US history and even how the US became to be the US, like the Americas and attempted genocide and enslavement of people and a racial hierarchy and systems like capitalism and the patriarchy and all of the systems, the "isms."

What I know is these systems were, as I named earlier, set up to uplift some and oppress others. And that for both groups that have been uplifted and oppressed, that there are some things that we haven't acknowledged to ourselves or to one another across different lines of difference. And there's grief related to that, because there's disconnection there. And most systems of dominance are set up

to disconnect us from self, from others who are like us, from others who are different, from our connection with the planet. Like this is what, for example, the system of capitalism wants us to be, distracted and disconnected, so we'll continue to consume things that we can feel full and whole, when, in fact, we don't need more things to feel full and whole. But that's the myth and narrative that dominate culture and capitalism set up for us.

**[00:42:13]**

And so I think if we reckon with some of what I just named and there's a lot more to it, and we understand, I'm part of this, I have colluded with this in this way, I have actively perpetuated this in this way, or my ancestors did, and I'm part of that lineage, that acknowledgement, I think there's a lot of grief there.

And what if we just have that conversation over and over and over so we can actually heal together? And that's where liberation in my mind comes from. There's a recognition that in my heart that we are connected, even as we may have different lived experiences, that we are connected in some way, even though we're having different experiences as we move through the world. And that we're rooted in history in some way, in profound ways actually, and that we need to have the conversation. And a lot of times I racialize this, because I think it's a lens that we can then use to better understand power and oppression and how they operate and how they're affecting us.

So I feel like America, this country where I am, as some other countries have, has not reckoned with the system of white supremacy and racism, has not gone through a reparative process, brings up reparations but then, like, who's actually talking about reparations, is it the people who've been most harmed? And how can you actually... What monetary value can you put on people's lives, on my ancestors who were lost to systems like slavery because of systems like white supremacy?

So I think there's so much for us to excavate and uncover and unpack and some of that I will do on my own. And some of that I will do with other Black, Indigenous, people of color, and some of it I will do across differences with white bodied folks. And, of course, I'm just naming some points of identity here.

And through that process of really acknowledging the truth of what has happened and how patterns continue to repeat themselves now, I think liberation will come through that. But if we keep denying it, we're going to be bound to it in this way that will never allow us to heal. So that's some about the connection between grief and liberation, individually, the release, and then collectively, the release that will happen and the healing that will happen.

**Jaia Bristow**

I love that. And I love that you brought in that just because people have different experiences doesn't mean that there's not grief for all parties, and that we all are part of these systems where certain groups are made to appear dominant or dominate over other groups, but actually, they also have grief that needs, and collective grief particularly, that needs looking at and processing.

And I asked you at the beginning, you talked about your definition of collective grief, but you also have mentioned when you're talking about in institutions and how much time off, that grief can look like different things, it's not just the loss of a family member, for example, but also it can look like the loss of a relationship. It can look like a pandemic. It can look like hearing about people being killed. There are all different ways. So I was wondering if you could give a few more examples of how grief can show up for people.

**[00:45:50] Michelle Johnson**

Well, it can look like all the things you named, the loss of a person, a relationship, a dream, how we thought life would be, and how life is actually going at the time, the climate destruction, how people are feeling about that and speaking about it. And in particular, people who may have children in their lives or have children that are theirs, or caretaking children, they're thinking about what will the planet be like for these children and their children's children? That's a whole other place we could explore.

Grief is showing up in a lot of different ways. And if we just focus on losing people, then we're missing out on what people are actually experiencing, which is like grief of so many things. The job I thought I was going to get that I didn't get. The way I thought my life would be. I don't have children, but because I worked with families, the way families thought or caregivers or parents thought their children would be, and the way their children turned out or the way their children now identify, which may be very different than what they thought.

I mean, there's a lot. The historical loss of land and how that lives in the body. Our ancestral grief lives in the body in ways that we may not actually understand, but in ways that inform our conditioned tendencies and responses and how we relate to self and others. So it's vast.

And I also want to name that grief can show up, and I wrote about this in *Finding Refuge* that often it will show up for me physically first, and I will not know why I'm feeling sick. And I've learned over the years that, not every time I feel sick, but around anniversaries or things like that, or if I'm just like, why am I... I don't understand why I feel this way or why I feel down in this way, or my immune system feels suppressed in some way. Often it has to do with grief.

And if I went to a medical doctor and said, I just don't feel right physically, 9 out of 10 times, they would not ask me about grief, like they would ask me about other symptoms and what else and how long it's been going on, but wouldn't be like, is it the anniversary of someone you lost, or is something happening in your life that... Has there been a big transition or a small transition? Do you feel this way this time of year, every year? That would not be the line of questioning. That's not in my experience. People don't ask that. They asked me about my symptoms to get to the thing and may give me a prescription for something that I don't have, when, in fact, I'm moving through grief.

And so I want to say this because people need to know that. They might feel it physically and not understand that when I feel that I'm like, oh, am I grieving? Or if it persists for a few days. Oh, something else is going on.

But it can also show up as sadness. It can show up as what might feel like depression. It can show up as anxiety for folks. It can show up as rumination and obsessive thoughts. It can show up as feeling just disconnected from source or spirit or just disconnected from the body. It can show up in a lot of ways. So it's not one way, or one size fits all. It's not that.

And I would invite people to be curious about what they understand about their grief process, if they're able to do that, and to begin to notice, oh, when these things happen, often that means I'm grieving, because then they can recognize it and resource themselves. When we don't know what's going on, it's really hard to resource ourselves.

**Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. I'm so glad you brought that piece in. I know that I'm definitely someone where things, emotions tend to show up physically sometimes even before I notice. As a child, my father used to

travel a lot, and every single time he would go away, I would get ill automatically. And it's one of those things.

**[00:50:03]**

Michelle, I'm so grateful for your time today. Thank you so much for joining us. How can people find out more about you and your work?

**Michelle Johnson**

Thank you for having me here and having this conversation. They can go to my website, the best way to stay in contact. It's [michellecjohanson.com](http://michellecjohanson.com). It has all of the events on there. It's updated regularly and has some resources. I have a podcast called *Finding Refuge*, which is about everything we've talked about and how people are finding refuge at this time and the different ways people are doing that. It's in season two now. So that's an available resource.

And also on the website, given what we were talking about, I interviewed Claudelle, was one of the folks, I interviewed 20 people before I knew COVID was happening, about healing, community and grief and liberation. And then when COVID happened, I interviewed, I think twelve more. And so there are some links to those interviews and they're a resource for folks to hear from different people about the connection between grief and liberation. And I really think they're useful for this time and will probably be useful in the future, and people from many different backgrounds and perspectives, so that's there.

And then I'm on social media as [@skillinaction](https://www.instagram.com/skillinaction). My first book is called *Skill in Action*. So people can follow me that way as well if they'd like to know more about what I'm up to and what I'm thinking and what I'm moving through, those are the best ways to stay in contact with me.

**Jaia Bristow**

Wonderful. Thank you so much.

**Michelle Johnson**

Thank you.