

- Mindy: [00:04](#) Hi everyone. Welcome to the One Love Fits All online conference benefiting the Embody Love Movement foundation. I'm Mindy Tsonas, a faculty member of ELM and I'm really excited to bring you this conversation that I had with Michelle Cassandra Johnson. Michelle is a social justice warrior at the intersection of yoga and activism. She's an author and intuitive healer, a licensed clinical social worker and anti racism trainer helping to create liberatory and healing spaces all around the world. So as you can hear, she brings a lot to the table and I was really super thrilled to be able to dive deep into the idea of embodiment through the lens of activism as well as really talk about the concept of social location and how that really allows us to see our privilege and the ways others are marginalized. Um, we also got to talk about her book, Skill in Action, as well as a little peek into her process for the writing of her new book, which is partially inspired by her passion for beekeeping. So, so many cool and really insightful, thoughtful, powerful, um, elements to this interview. And I really hope that you enjoy and it inspires you to support Embody Love and the amazing work that we're coming together as a community to create. So thanks so much for being here today and listening.
- Pura Fe Singing: [01:34](#) True freedom involves the understanding of our true human spirit within. It dispels the lie of inadequacy and helplessness who are we? Powerful beyond measure. Who are we? Power of the creator....
- Mindy: [02:01](#) welcome, Michelle. We are so grateful to have you here today and I'm so excited to have this conversation with you and I would love to just begin by asking you to speak to how your lived experience has really brought you to the work you do in the world today.
- Michelle: [02:21](#) Great. Thank you for having me here. I'm excited to be a part of this summit and that's a very big question. I'll answer it. Um, the essence of it and just get to the core of it. So I feel like what has brought me to the work that I do now, which is I'm talking about justice and yoga and the intersection and going around the world and teaching people about that through an embodied experience is because of my own experience in my body. Um, as a black woman navigating a culture that does not value blackness or being female identified. And I also feel like my mother and grandmother in particular have a lot to do with the work that I am doing now because my grandmother lived through times that, um, I mean we're certainly living through horrific times now, but I have more access to spaces than my grandmother did and access to things and doors open in a way that they did in for her.

Michelle: [03:23](#) And so I'm always aware of that, um, and my lineage and what I'm carrying on. And, and, um, I feel the same way about my mother. She's 76 years old and she also lives with disabilities, so we have different bodies as we navigate the world on top of her being a black woman. So I feel like my experience of coming from them has also led me to really be committed to talking about identity and how it shapes our experience and to invite people into, um, understanding how to leverage privilege and also how to acknowledge oppression and harm when it's happening.

Mindy: [03:57](#) Beautiful. Um, I love all these points that you've made. So many threads I can pull in just that one answer. I love this idea of how you're honoring, um, your mother and grandmother and the acknowledgement of how we move through the world with different experiences and different bodies and specifically, um, just this work that we are doing in the realm of Embody Love Movement in the work that you're doing, in the realm of anti racism and oppression. How do you think specifically embodiment relates to all of this work? How are we, as we, you know, are creating a relationship to and within our bodies? How does that inform how we move through the world through the system of oppression?

Michelle: [04:47](#) Um, I, one thing I know about oppression and the abuse of power is that it's set up to divide and conquer. That that's the strategy and tactic used. And that's not just happening between groups of people. It also happens to individuals in their bodies, right? And so I think the dominant culture really wants us to be disconnected from our bodies and distracted from our deepest knowing. And intuition. And, and our core beliefs and what feels right to us and what we know, if we remember to remember. And so this divide and conquer separates us from ourselves. So we're not feeling what's going on in the impact of oppression. Right. And it also separates us from people who are like us, people who are different than us. And I feel like there's so much isolation and separation and that just perpetuates more division than oppression. And so this, um, the practice of embodiment invites people back into their bodies and an experience of slowing down and really noticing and feeling and then taking action from that space of feeling and connecting to our core values versus being distracted by dominant culture, um, and, being misguided in our actions.

Mindy: [06:03](#) Yes. And do you think a lot about what's happening inside of dominant culture is really affecting how we are able to connect with our core values and ourselves as embodied beings? Like you talk about being disconnected and I am, and just curious to

what you think, um, impacts that level of disconnect that we're having as humans with our own bodies.

Michelle: [06:29](#) I think that, um, this started when, um, most of what I talk about is in this country cause that's where I'm from and this is where I live. But this may, there may be some global experience because of colonization, but I'll just speak to my experience here. So this country was, um, constructed on this idea of superiority and inferiority. And so right there from the beginning, um, we have this idea that some of us are better than others and then policies are wrapped around that to support that narrative and cultural norms perpetuated to uphold that narrative. And so that's our foundation and our beginning as a country different than like our own humanity. But that's how the country began. And then based on our social location, on our identity. So I named thing black and being a woman as two identities that are oppressed, I'm also able bodied.

Michelle: [07:23](#) I'm also middle class. Those are identities that are privileged. I have a master's degree that's a privileged education as a privileged identity and experience. So based on our social location, I think we can internalize that we are more superior or inferior based on what the culture says about different groups of people. And that right there is a fragmented experience as we move through the world. So we're in an intersectional experience given our different identities and we're fragmented from the moment we come out of the womb, right, until we pass on or transition. Um, and again, policies are wrapped around that which really define our reality and how we navigate the culture. And then cultural norms are perpetuated about that superiority and inferiority. So I think this is an old pattern. This is old behavior and it takes a lot of work to reconnect with the body. And the truth because of all of the, um, cultural conditioning that we have to wade through and undo and reckon with and work with

Mindy: [08:25](#) feels like a lot. Right? So it's a lot. Um, I do want to circle back to this idea of fragmentation and wholeness, but before we do that, I would love to just be rewind and hear a little bit about your story coming through the world. And into the world as a black woman and how you started on your path into the work that you're doing today.

Michelle: [08:52](#) Um, well it's interesting because in skill and action, my book, I start with my birth story, which I didn't know until I was in the process of writing that book. I knew parts of it, but I didn't know the full story and something told me to ask my mother the story

and then it became part of the story at the beginning of the book. Fascinating. Yeah. It's really, I mean the ancestral theme is really present in my work and I feel like my birth story has everything to do with what I do now because I came into the world as a, um, premature baby, um, to a black mom and a dad who wasn't present when I was born. And my mother had, I have a brother who's adopted and biracial. And so she had him, um, before I came into this, this space in this realm and my mother was treated terribly by the institution of healthcare, which isn't about health.

Michelle: [09:47](#)

When I came into the world and, and her own body, I feel like was fragmented further through her experience of birthing me and then how she was treated by this institution and system. And, um, I think the reason I asked her about my birth story is because on a cellular level, I must remember this experience and that led me to just say what's, "how did I come into the world, mom?" And it feels so central to the work that I do to try to invite people to come home to their buddies and to, um, as I said earlier, remember to remember, like to, remember how we want to be. Because I think the moment I came to the world and it coupled with my mother's experience, we were sort of pushed into different ways of being. We were pushed into survival. We were pushed into being angry at systems because they harm us.

Michelle: [10:42](#)

We were pushed into advocating for ourselves because no one else in the system would do that. And, um, the, I think sort of deepest example for me is my mother. I was separated from her immediately. They did an emergency C-section. I was taken away to a different hospital. And, um, I think about what it must've felt like for her to wake up to no baby. Right. And not no anything and have people, she was very ill and people, doctors, they weren't communicating with her. Um, and again, that's that experience of, um, fragmentation, but also that's dehumanizing right? To both of us to have this experience of being separated and not cared for by the system when my mother's birthing of being into the world. Yeah. And so I feel like that whole experience of how I came in, um, shaped, um, what I invite people into through my work of, of skill in action and through talking about justice, um, because I also invite people to think about how we began as a country.

Michelle: [11:47](#)

So there's my own individual birth story, but then there's like the collective story around history and how this came to be. And that's when I invite people into and to think about where they're from and how their own ancestral roots shaped their experience as they move through the world, um, and shaped

their capacity. And ability to experience privilege and that superiority I was speaking about or their, um, identities that, um, make them feel like they're less than, um, or make them feel self doubt or self hate. So my birth story feels tied to everything that I do now. And it, I think it, it's also what, um, like this is definitely talking about justice and doing anti-racism work is my work in the world. It feels very clear to me. It feels very aligned. I'm not, I'm not sure I could do something else like other than when I'm doing because it really feels like it is. Um, it is from the moment that I came in that I was set up to do this. Um, I've done other things, but it feels like the way I came in to find who I was going to be and the work I was going to do.

Mindy: [12:56](#) No so much. Right. That story is just a story about coming back to yourself in every way. Some of beautiful is such an amazing metaphor yet it's also, um, just this reality you're living every day.

Michelle: [13:11](#) Yeah.

Mindy: [13:12](#) Um, so when do you think, do you have an awareness or a sense of sort of when you really recognized the systems that you are moving through and how you were either a part or disconnected from those systems? Like when was your first realization that that things in the culture, we're not set up for liberation for you?

Michelle: [13:40](#) That began in elementary school. So my mom was a special education teacher in public school, but she got scholarships from my brother and I had to go to private school and I was the only black girl in my class until ninth grade. And then in 10th grade I went to a different school. It was more diverse than the school had been in, but still less students of color than white students at that school. But definitely way more diverse racially. And so I remember elementary school being the only black girl in my class surrounded by white people and whiteness and white teachers. Um, but I remember the, um, black janitors that cleaned the building, And I remember the people who worked in the cafeteria. And so I remember wondering, um, why people were in certain positions because the people in the cafeteria who works there and the janitors looked like me and everyone else was white.

Michelle: [14:37](#) And so I was also trying to understand is this my position? Um, is this where I'm gonna be located? Um, is this the only role or work for me? And there's nothing wrong with that work, but it was such a clear example of, um, how whiteness is uplifted and people of color are, um, pushed down and oppressed and

exploited and paid less than right. And seen as less valuable. So I remember noticing it in elementary school because I was having a, everyone in elementary school was having a racialized experience. Um, except whiteness says that white is not a racialized experience, but everyone was having that experience. Mine just felt very highlighted to me because it was so obvious and evident. And I imagine the other students of color that were in, you know, there was like one black student or two in every class. I imagine they felt the same way or notice because we're also trying to figure out our identity in elementary school and children understand race, um, at that age.

Michelle:

[15:39](#)

Right. It's like by age two children recognize race. They're just not able to talk about it. Um, so certainly in kindergarten or first grade, I understood race and that I was having an experience that was different than my peers in school. And I also internalize them, um, because of the system that I was set up to be less than. I'm not sure that I internalized that belief. Um, I mean, I've had times in my life where I've thought that, right? But I think I had some awareness or consciousness and I went home to a black mom and a biracial brother and we had some conversations about this. So I think I was certainly aware of the idea that I was positioned to being less than, I just don't know if I believed that and the system throughout, I would say high school, maybe even to college in grad school, that, that message of being less than continued.

Michelle:

[16:33](#)

Um, because in high school my guidance counselor told me I wouldn't get into college and, um, which she wasn't going to help me. Um, and that was her job. Right. And I had teachers respond to me in, in ways, with the assumption that I was less than and at interactions in college with peers and professors that were similar to that. I went to social work school for grad school, so it was a little different. We did talk about systems of oppression and power, but still, um, our class was mainly white at that time that my cohort was. And still I understood privilege in that setting that the white students were having a different experience than all of the students of color. So that's my experience of the system mainly at the educational system. And it started very young, my awareness of the difference that I was having, the different experience I was having.

Mindy:

[17:26](#)

Yeah. Um, and it's such a powerful thing to be able to have that awareness of looking at the containers that we're in and seeing the different roles that people are playing. And I just think it's extraordinary that that's, you know, was, was already in your awareness at such a young age. And maybe it's just, um, I remember having a similar awareness, uh, in a different

context. But, um, I think for, as you said, the idea of whiteness, um, is not a racialized experience. I would love for you, I'm wanting to just speak a little more to that and examine that a little bit so we can have a conversation about that piece. And then I have a follow-up question for that. But yes. Can you please explain a little bit more what that means? That you know, whiteness is not a racialized experience.

Michelle: [18:15](#)

Yeah. So I think that's part of what dominant culture says and it's how it conditions, um, white folks. And I'm saying white folks because I am not, I was not conditioned to misunderstand whiteness as a racialized experience. I know it's a racialized experience and I was comparing it to my experience, but I think white folks are conditioned, it's one way that whiteness functions, to not see themselves as white. And then to not see the things that go along with being white and the things that the privileges that are assigned to whiteness, um, with an awareness that white folks have an intersectional identity too. So other identities are gonna bump up against whiteness and shift the experience. A white person who's having. The same is true for me and my blackness, right? I'm intersectional as well. So race was constructed, it was made up is what I always say, and it has no power and it was made up with white at the top.

Michelle: [19:10](#)

So superiority was tied to that and black at the bottom and every other person of color moving between those two points. And, and often in the racial hierarchy, indigenous folks weren't represented on that. Um, because of the forced assimilation and attempted annihilation in genocide. Um, it's not that I don't recognize indigenous people it's that the construction of race was set up in that way. Um, and there are many examples of forced to simulation for native people and indigenous people. And so with that hierarchy of white at the top and black at the bottom, white seen as the most superior. And then white becomes the norm. It becomes the air we breathe in the water, we swim in. Everything is based on that. Standards and expectations. Um, narratives and stories, values are perpetuated based on what whiteness says is good and what whiteness says is bad.

Michelle: [20:05](#)

Um, or what whiteness says is valuable and what whiteness says is not valuable. So everything's set up on this idea that white is superior, which then allows whiteness to condition white folks to not think about their whiteness. That's kind of how it works because if I'm not a white person, but I'll use another identity as an example, I am able bodied, I don't have to think about how to navigate spaces physically because I'm able bodied. I mean this body that can navigate space freely. So I never have to think

about-and a being able bodied is seen as normal and superior-- and so I never have to think about, um, how I'm gonna move through a space. I don't have to anticipate this space not being set up for me physically. I don't have to think about whether or not it has a ramp, a wheelchair ramp for me to walk up.

Michelle:

[20:51](#)

I don't have to think about, um, what will happen, how I can accommodate if it doesn't have a ramp, right. I never have to make those decisions based on the construction of my body and what culture says about this body. Um, at least the able bodied part of it, other identities intersect with that. So whiteness functions in the same way it's seen as normal. White folks don't have to think about whiteness unless they want to think about whiteness. Um, and they don't have to think about the oppression that people are experiencing because whiteness is seen as good and is uplifted in culture. So that's, that's what I mean when I named that, um, white folks are not conditioned to see their race, their experience as racialized, yet they're having a racialized experience because they're at the top of the racial hierarchy. And they constructed, whiteness constructed white supremacy, constructed the racial hierarchy that we're now living with and trying to I guess work within because we don't really have another option because all of the institutions then were set up based on that hierarchy and all the cultural norms based or in response to that hierarchy.

Mindy:

[21:59](#)

Such a great example. Thank you so much for that clarification and that beautiful perspective just from, um, the difference between moving through the world able bodied and not able bodied, that really sort of hits home when you think about the different intersections for sure. And with that, I'm just really thinking about too sort of this work that we do in Embody Love Movement and really trying to identify body diversity, um, and make space for all the different kinds of experiences people are having in their bodies. Um, not just based on shape and size, but also clearly, you know, every other form of embodiment that we come and move through the world through. So I'm thinking about, um, and I'm curious what you think about how we embody these different physical aspects and how that relates specifically to what you were just speaking to.

Michelle:

[22:58](#)

Um, so I mentioned internalization earlier and um, part of what the culture does is because of the superiority and inferiority is that I'm, I'm internalizing messages about my oppressed identities and I'm internalizing messages about my identities that are, um, seen as good and right and privileged and deserving and entitled. And so I'm taking in these messages about certain identities being good and other identities being

bad as the other way I talk about those sorts, or a simpler way to think about it. And which is confusing. It's part of the fragmentation too because I'm taking in all of that from from the culture and um, things happen and manifest as a result of internalizing negative messages about the identities that are oppressed and positive messages about the identities that are privileged or uplifted. And um, the, I'll give two examples. I was talking about being able bodied and, and the behavior that manifests from that is that I don't have to think about anyone else's experience who's living in a different kind of body that may not be able bodied, physically.

Michelle:

[24:10](#)

Um, and I can think, um, that I'm better than people who are not, um, living in an able body, um, and I can feel entitled to space. Um, and ease within space if this physically, because of this body and the identities that are oppressed being black is most salient to me. So I'll talk about that. I'm internalizing that black is dangerous. It's a threat. Um, blackness equals, um, criminality. Blackness equals, um, being untrustworthy, irresponsible. And those messages are perpetuated, um, through the culture and, and then by institutions as well as the positive messages about my privileged identities. And so what manifests from that is this self-doubt, self hate, um, anxiety, depression. And so I'm walking around with those kind of manifestations as well as manifestations that are like, I deserve this space. And that is a mess in the body. I think that is a mess.

Michelle:

[25:13](#)

And it's, it's, um, if, if I'm not clear, like I have a really clear analysis, but let's say I didn't have an analysis and understand what was happening. Um, I think it would cause a lot of disconnection and dissonance in the body and, and in relationship and in community and in culture for me. But because I'm aware of what culture says about my identities, for the most part, I'm not aware of everything, but for the most part, and I'm constantly thinking about it, it allows me to think about my location in spaces. And so let's say I'm the only able bodied person in the room, um, that gives me great power in that space. And I need to be mindful of everyone else's experience in this space and how much space I take up, right? Or let's say I'm the only black person in the room.

Michelle:

[26:01](#)

My behavior is going to be different. If I'm the only black person in a group of white people, or let's say I'm the only black woman in a group of all white men, um, I'm likely more likely to buy in to that self doubt. In those moments, um, and have had to learn how to be strategic because I'm aware of the system I'm sitting in in those moments. So I feel like this awareness of body and this awareness of identity then allows us to understand how

we're being positioned. And it's not about me being a good or bad person. It's more that culture set up these identities and has assigned certain characteristics to them and we're having to respond to them. And so I feel it's our responsibility then to understand our location and which context we're in and what's within our power in that moment. Um, where do we have agency, um, and also in relationship with other people in the space too.

- Mindy: [26:58](#) Absolutely. Yes. And this idea about location, which you've spoken about a couple of times, I understand you're not speaking to our actual physical location. Can you just unpack that a little bit more for us when you talk about sort of our social location?
- Michelle: [27:15](#) Yeah. I invite people to actually, um, if they want to work with social location and think about it, to just, um, take some time to center and then to think about the identities they embody. So, um, maybe they're a parent or a sister, maybe they're a person of color or a white person. And then to think about ethnicity tied to that, um, traditions, culture, um, maybe they're cisgendered, maybe they're gay or lesbian or trans or non-binary or bi. Maybe they grew up poor, but now there are middle-class, um, or maybe they're still living, um, low income. Um, maybe they're in a community that is mostly white, but they're a person of color. Um, maybe they are like, my mom is 76, or they're my age and about to be 44 this month. So, um, or maybe they're a child or a teenager, right?
- Michelle: [28:11](#) And I'm not naming every identity, but it's that kind of activity that people can go through. And then, um, what I usually invite people to do is to think about privileged identities and oppressed identities. And there's some awareness of what those terms mean. So identities that are seen as good and better in culture and identities that are seen as less valuable or bad by culture, not not their own individual belief about their identities, but what the larger culture says about who they are. Um, and from that place of understanding--that's location. It's like here are my identities. Um, and this is my location based on those identities. This is how much privilege I experience, this is how much oppression I experience. And sometimes it's complicated because things could actually go into lists because context changes the experience of social location, but that's the starting place.
- Michelle: [29:03](#) And then starting to being aware of those identities all of the time. Like I would invite people to do that activity and then go to the grocery store and be aware of all the identities they're

moving with in relationship to other people in this space. Sort of like I named in this school, everyone who was a person of color and was a janitor or a cafeteria worker or we may have had an administrative assistant who was, but I didn't have any black teachers in school. Um, the first school that I went to that I can remember, I don't think I had any, uh, and so any, even that continued in college, it was rare to have a teacher of color and in grad school rare to have a teacher of color. Even in the school of social work, I did have one teacher of color in the school social work.

Michelle: [29:45](#) So I invite people to like go through an experience really holding onto those identities and noticing what happens as they like relate to other people, um, as they're in different settings. And that is what connects people to agency. Like, so when something is going down that is unjust and someone wants to intervene, they really need to think about their location and the context. And so, um, that's why I was naming, if I'm in a room of all white men, I'm going to be contemplating the consequences for me. Um, if I speak up about some injustice that's happening in the room or the ways in which I'm being silenced by them in the room, if it's half people of color and half white folks in a room, um, I'm going to be thinking about the experience of the other people of color based on their identities that I'm aware of because I don't know everyone's identity.

Michelle: [30:37](#) Some are visible and some are not visible. So that's more of what I mean when I talk about when I named agency, it's like we have to be strategic and some of us different times have more room to take action and speak up and others, um, need to leave the space where I'm actually need to, to not, it's, it's the most strategic thing for them to do is to, to not say anything in that moment and maybe just strategize with folks later who are feeling the most marginalized in the space. So that's what social location is about.

Mindy: [31:09](#) Thank you so much for those distinctions. I think they're really helpful. And I think it feels like doing that exercise of um, you know, locating yourself in all of these intersections is really what gives you power and really what allows you to, you know, decide action and impact. For sure. Yes. So I'm wondering in your work as a yoga teacher at the intersection of this activism work you do, how is all of this impacting the wellness spheres and, and what do you notice as you're moving through the yoga community in the wellness community at large, um, where all of this is playing out in the same way and just in a different microcosm?

Michelle: [31:56](#) Well, wellness as an institution is, um, was set up like every other institution based on culture and all the things I've named about it. And so what, what I see in the institution of wellness and yoga is included in that. And when I say institution, I don't mean practice. So the practice of yoga is actually about something very different than the institution or industry of yoga is perpetuating. Those are two different things. Um, but what I've seen in the institution of an industry of wellness is that it is replicating or mirroring this idea that white is superior, um, and doing this through, um, who's allowed to be well and, um, also through who's allowed to be in a space or who's in a space for wellness was teaching, right? Who's, who can go to a teacher training, um, the face of yoga through media.

Michelle: [32:49](#) Um, it's, it's the big teachers, um, yoga teachers are wellness instructors, many of them are white. Um, and so, and that's because of culture and what it says about whiteness. And so I think wellness is, is, um, excluding people who don't fit the norm of who deserves to be well. And it's not just race. I mean, being living with a disability is not seen as normal and moving with a disability is not seen as normal. When we think about wellness, um, being trans is not seen as normal. When we think about wellness or non-binary, it's not, it's not what people think about as normal, um, in the culture. And so there's no separation between this institution of wellness and the larger culture that's wrapped around it. And it's just, um, replicating the same behaviors and systems that culture does through its norms. The norms it's perpetuating. And how this plays out specifically for me is that when I first started teaching, I was teaching in a studio two different studios, um, and um, had mostly white students.

Michelle: [33:54](#) And part of that is because of how wellness was constructed. And I'm not saying this, I mean we had work study, we had people who gave donations and scholarships, right? I mean, it's not that everyone could afford to come to class, but my classes, um, were mostly filled with white students. And I'm the black teacher in the room. We had another teacher of color or two, I think if the studio was teaching, which actually think at the time was pretty rare. Um, when I finished teacher training. And I also feel like when I go to a practice, to classes, I'm having a similar experience of being in a mostly white space unless I'm in a, um, studio or space that's owned by a person of color or a class that's just for people of color. Um, so again, that's sort of mirroring like we have to create our own spaces because the spaces are not, these spaces aren't made for us and they're not made for our liberation.

- Michelle: [34:46](#) Um, so that's mainly what I see and it's, um, it also shows up with skill and action. The book that I wrote because I, I've had some people say that I wrote this for white folks and I think, um, I wrote it because of what I said, like it's my work in the world and it feels like it was my ancestors speaking through me and I knew I could explain very clearly how culture was constructed and yet I get why it's speaking to white people because it's like a clear analysis of how stuff was set up and then how people are privileged from it. And I also get that it's a truth that's not often expressed, particularly by a black woman. Um, but I've also had many students of color come up to me and say thank you for telling the truth. So there's this like dual experience that's happening based on social location and where someone is and their, their position in this institution of wellness as well.
- Michelle: [35:39](#) Cause like I think many folks of color, they were waiting for something like this, like somebody who's just going to lay it out and say, here's what's happening. And also use personal narrative to do that. And I feel like some white folks feel like whiteness because it's not conditioning white folks. It doesn't tell them they're having a racialized experience. This is like new information for some white folks. And it can feel liberating because now there's language to understand and there's some opportunity for white folks to think about how that perpetuating the inequities in wellness, um, through understanding what I wrote about in that book. So, um, I think it's, it's just interesting to, um, be in the industry of wellness while trying to fight the institution of wellness while trying to create more liberation for people who are marginalized by the institution of wellness, while also trying to be in my own truth about it and clear about why I'm doing the work I do.
- Mindy: [36:32](#) Yeah. I mean they seem like they're probably often very contradictory things. Um, so how do you, how do you navigate, um, such differing systemic issues while staying on your path and continue telling the truth?
- Michelle: [36:50](#) That's a really good question. Um, I think I, well I don't think what I know is that I, I, um, come back to my ancestors and um, come back to like, I'm very clear that I'm, it's like on purpose that I'm alive at this time. I'm, it's clear to me and as horrific as the culture can be and as heartbroken as I feel most of the time, if not all the time. And I feel deep grief and sorrow because of what is happening in the culture. I also know I'm perpetuating harm and I don't always understand how I, how I do that, but I'm implicated in this culture. I try to come back to my roots and where I'm from and to stay grounded in that. And also, I mean I have a deep spiritual practice and so I think I rely on that to

keep me centered and grounded in this body as different things are coming at me while I'm also living in a racist culture.

Michelle: [37:50](#) Right. And trying to fight it, fight that racism. Um, and I've said this in my interview like that I'm not the person who's going to end racism. I'm going to educate people about racism, but I'm, while I'm experiencing racism, but I'm not the person, like people of color are not the people who are gonna turn off the racism switch because we didn't create the race construct. Um, so I just feel like I'm so convicted in the work that I do and about the work. And, um, I also feel like there's, while things are coming at me that there's some part of me that there's things don't get access to. Like, I feel, and that may be my connection with spirit and my practice and my ancestors. It may be something else, but there is some part of me that very centered in the midst of things coming at me and people who have seen me facilitate and these moments that are like, stuff is falling apart and stay grounded,

Michelle: [38:45](#) it's because of whatever that part is, the core. Maybe it's my core, but it's tied to like ancestors and spirit and spiritual practice. Because I know that this moment, like I'm doing the work, but the moment is about something much bigger than me and, and we're bigger than conditioning. Right? And I can see that when people are like throwing stuff at me verbally, that they're just acting out of their own conditioning. That it's actually not necessarily about me. It's about the toxic stuff they've taken in from the culture. And that the moment I realize that it allowed me to be way more grounded in moments, um, as I'm trying to navigate these different paradox paradoxes and like contradictions.

Mindy: [39:26](#) Oh my gosh, that's such a great point. And, um, just lesson for us all when we're navigating that just, we are all constantly acting from the culturalization that we've inherited. Um, and that so much of it is not deeply personal, right? Even though it is personal, it's not, um, it doesn't come or is not necessarily aimed at, you know, in a personal way. So I think there's a lot of power in that. And I think, um, you know, I really appreciate you speaking to that, especially from the positioning that you are in as someone who aims to create less fragmentation, more wholeness, um, you know, in a culture that really, you know, is constantly breaking that down.

Mindy: [40:15](#) so I'm curious too,

Mindy: [40:18](#) in thinking about sort of the timeline and all of your work, have you always had this awareness and, um, and how has that

awareness then specifically with you and your relationship to your own body, has your, has your perception changed? Have you felt, um, you know, growth or a different context for yourself as an embodied human being while moving through this work in your own life experience?

- Michelle: [40:44](#) Yeah, I mean, there's definitely been an evolution of embodiment for me, um, because the culture has done so much to move me away from my body, but also have individual trauma that I've experienced that has made me move away or just dissociate from experience and the experience I'm having in the body. And so I think I've had to, um, work in many different ways like in therapy and, um, in groups and just talking to people and working with myself and my spiritual practice helps a lot with this, um, to continually come back to my body and see it as whole because there's so much pressure and so many narratives and so many lived experiences that are, have been set up to move me away from myself. And so I'm really intentional about grounding and sometimes that's breathing and sometimes that's praying and sometimes it's like feeling my feet on the earth or touching the ground. Um, it shows up in many different, we're connecting with something in the natural world to just regroup in the body because more of the messaging and experiences that I've had are about a lack of wholeness and humanity. And so I've had to work hard to like reconnect to humanity. And it's not as if I figured it out. Like it's, it's a daily practice. I think it's a daily practice. Um, and some days I'm not very good at it and other days I feel really grounded and clear about it. So, yeah.
- Mindy: [42:12](#) Do you think that that is a key aspect of being able to even do this work to be connected and grounded to our bodies? Do you think it's possible to even, you know, be an activist or be doing work on such a large social context without being fully embodied?
- Michelle: [42:31](#) I think it's tricky because I remember I was like 20, and I read this book, it was a book of, um, feminist narratives, um, collection of feminist narratives. And there was a story in there about a woman who was, um, a feminist and she was like on the front lines. And she had an eating disorder. And I will never forget, I was, I worked a lot with people at had eating disorders in my private practice when I was a therapist. And so I will never forget it because it was this way where she was like on the front lines, um, fighting against this construct of like beauty in the standard of beauty. And yet she had bulimia. And so there's a way that she was like, well aware of the systems and the

systems they were working on her. And she was acting from that place.

Michelle: [43:16](#) And something about that just struck me deeply that I actually think people, people can be activists and they can do work in the world, social change work and still be struggling with wholeness because of how the culture is set up. And I think our work is to be as embodied as we can be when we do the work. Um, because I do think that disconnection that she was experiencing, um, and the ungroundedness, it means that the work, social change work isn't going to be sustainable. Like at some point. I imagine she had to like reckon with that. What am I doing? I am a feminist. I believe these things. I don't believe in the standard of beauty. And yet I'm buying into it cause I'm drying up right when I eat because I don't feel like I, um, can be in this body. Right. And be seen as whole by the culture. Yes. And so it just really, I will never forget that it was so clearly, it was so deep for me to think about that. Um, I think we need to be embodied to sustain the work and we can do work. But, um, I think there's dissonance and uh, nagging that will always be there for doing work and not working on our own mind, body.

Mindy: [44:29](#) They're parallel journeys. It feels in a lot of ways. Yeah. Um, I have kind of a, a side question, something to do with, um, your life, uh, as a beekeeper. And I've seen just from following you on social media that you do keep bees. And I'm just really curious and I've, I've, I've seen, you mentioned this a couple times, just how the construct of community, I'm wondering what you've learned through the process of keeping these, these, about what, how does this speak to us as, as community and our humanity and being able to work together.

Michelle: [45:08](#) I love this question. Um, I love it. I'm working on a second book and the last chapter is about, um, the bees. It's about, yeah, I'm really cause it's all about community and I just want to say like, I knew nothing about bees and I woke up and got bees. Like it was automatic. I was doing it. I feel like it spirit tied into this. Like I'm supposed to have these bees. And it was in the middle of my mother being sick. It was like very strange timing for me to, um, listen to this call to get them. But I did and I, um, so it means I didn't know much about them. And I'm learning things every day. And what I've witnessed and seen is, um, both outside of the hive and in the hive, they, we have so much to learn from them about community.

Michelle: [45:55](#) Like every, every bee has a different role. Um, they can graduate into a new role, like they can be a nurse B and then become a forger, go out and gather pollen. And her daughter

didn't know that is so cool. They have bees that are undertakers. So they bring out the bees that have transitioned out of the hive and that's their role. Um, the bees feed the larva, um, and then they, um, cap it over, um, and wait for it to hatch. So they have, they have all these different ways and roles within the hive to survive. And if, if you watch them, um, it's like everyone understands their role and they're working together as a hive. And so for example, when I'm in the hive and they don't want me there, like one individual bee can sting me, which just happened, um, or the whole hive starts to like vibrate and it's because they want me to see them as a whole.

Michelle: [46:49](#) And the power as a whole versus one Bee stinging me. And it's really, I mean, I get out of there when that's happening because it's clear to me that they're like, we're bigger than you, we are making ourselves bigger than you. And I'm like, okay, I need to get out of here. But it's really kind of amazing to watch that, um, because individually they have roles in power, but then as a collective, they're like way more powerful and they understand that and they understand when to engage that. It's like, okay, they're always working together as a team, but when they're, um, feeling threatened, they understand like, okay, we have to, all of us have to align right now and respond and get person out of our highs. Um, and the other thing I noticed about them is that they, they are like disciplined about their work.

Mindy: [47:38](#) Oh, so interesting.

Michelle: [47:39](#) It's really, and there, I mean people say busy bees, they really are like, they don't feel like anybody is slacking off right there. They're like, Oh wait, showing up to work. And they're doing it because they know that some other bee or some part of the hive or its survival is dependent on them in their role. And so, I mean, I can talk about bees forever. I feel like there's so much to learn and I wouldn't, I would invite people to, if you don't want to get, go to a beehive, but like there are gazillion documentaries about them. Just watch how they build community. Um, and the other thing that feels very, um, deep to me is that we depend on bee bees to survive. Like they're pollinating our food and there are other pollinators, but bees are also dying. Um, and it feels like it's part of climate change and it feels like it's part of like human error, um, in killing bees.

Michelle: [48:35](#) And, um, I feel like there's a lot to learn about, um, how we actually depend on them or that they're depending on us because they've been around. Right. Um, even though they're dying as high as it's because of human behavior, it's not actually because of the bees behavior and their capacity to live. Um,

during this time, it's all human behavior that's causing them to die...their hives to die. So I invite people to learn more about them. Cause everything you want to know about social justice is in the hive. Oh my gosh! It's all there, that's why they're in my second book because it's there, um, they have it together, they understand community in this way that I think, um, superiority or supremacy has like separated us from community, they understand it. Um, and they know like other bees are depending on them.

Michelle: [49:27](#) And um, and the last thing I'll say about them is that they're protective of their hive. And I mean that's, I got stung and that's how I was in the hive too long and one bee stung me. it was a guard bee and stung me and um, could have sent a signal to all the other bees to sing to me and it didn't. Um, and so, but they are like protective of their space, their hive, their bees. There are people, right, their community that in a way that I feel like we need to be protective because we recognize like each other's humanity. Yes. So I'm so happy you asked me clearly. I'm like, I love them.

Mindy: [50:07](#) I love that and I love that they're gonna make an appearance in your second book and which is a perfect foray just to, I'm wondering, you know, what you're passionate about right now, what else you're working on, what's coming next for you now that we know another book is coming.

Michelle: [50:22](#) Yes. I'm so excited about this book. It's going to be about how to respond during these times, these uncertain times. And the first book was Skill in Action, which is from the Gita. And I'm hoping the second book will have, the title will be from the Gita as well. I'm hoping for a Shelter from Sorrow: How to Respond During These Uncertain Times. That's what I'm hoping for. And um, it's going to be longer than scale and action, but it's going to have a similar format with practices at the end of each chapter. Um, and it's also about my experience of grief and loss. Um, and I tie those narratives and stories to what's happening in the culture and our collective grief and loss and, um, also talk about spiritual practice and how it will ground us and support us during these times, um, and sustain us and allow us to sustain our work in the world.

Michelle: [51:14](#) So, um, it's about that and, and much more. And so I'm really excited about it. And, um, I'm also working on a Skill in Action immersion. So I, right now I, I offer workshops, short workshops, day long weekend workshops, and I have a teacher training that's about to finish a 200 hour. That's about to, they're about to graduate. I'm gonna start offering week long

immersions. So I have to plan for 20, 20, and one is on the West coast and one is on the East coast. Um, once in California, one's in North Carolina, and they're just going to be a week long immersions and they don't have to be for, people don't have to be yoga instructors. It's really like how do we practice responding during these uncertain times, using the principles from Skill in Action to do so. So, um, those two things are happening. And then at the end of 20, 20 or not the end, August of 2020, I'm going to start at 300 hour teacher training.

Michelle: [52:08](#)

I've led 200 hours trainings for a long time. People have been asking me for 300 hour, um, focused on social justice and I'm gonna create that in collaboration with a lot of other teachers, um, guest teachers coming in. But that's in the works too. So I have a lot of stuff going on. Amazing. And where can people find you and all of your amazing work and you, yeah, you can find me. Um, [www.michellecjohnson.com](http://www.michellecjohnson.com) is my website and I'm also on Instagram. I have like a, a personal Instagram that people can follow me on. It's, it's @mysticcassandra. Cassandra is my middle name. So @mysticcassandra, and there I do post some social justice stuff, but it's more like my dog, Jasper and the bees, and my garden. It's different. And then, yeah, it's good. It's like if you need a moment from the heartbreak, go look at a picture of my dog.

Michelle: [53:05](#)

And then the other one is @skillandaction, which is more about skill and action and stuff going on in the social change space and sphere. Um, and I'm on Facebook as Michelle C Johnson Skill in Action Yoga and Justice as well. So lots of ways to find me and there's a contact form on my website and I do update the website with events. There are bunch coming up that are not listed. I'm just waiting for people to send me links to the events, but I'm going to be all over the place in the fall and then the beginning of 2020. So there'll be plenty of opportunities to find me. And the last thing I'll name is that, um, I also offer intuitive healing. And so that's on my website too and information about that. I do a lot of work with the natural world and spirit and, um, can work with individuals around deepening their own intuition, which I think is tied to wholeness and humanity and being less fragmented. So I did want to mention that, and most of those sessions are virtual. I work with people all over. I'm doing that and I do coaching with people. We want to create more inclusive spaces, um, individually in addition to race equity training. So a lot people can, all that's on my website.

Mindy: [54:15](#)

Amazing.

Michelle: [54:17](#)

Thank you so much for being here today, here,

Mindy: [54:19](#) all your wisdom and your stories, so, so grateful for everything you're bringing to the world and can't wait to see all these beautiful things manifest in the next year. So, thanks Michelle.

Michelle: [54:32](#) Thank you. Take care.