

ASHLEY: Today, we're sharing an episode first recorded by another podcast.

RICHARD: This interview comes from Village SquareCast, which is made by a local group in Tallahassee, Florida called The Village Square.

ASHLEY: Every year, they organize a series of meetings and events that bring people together and build connections among citizens of different ideological, racial, ethnic, and religious divisions. The podcast we'll hear next is an example of that. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. We'll be hearing shortly from Chloé Valdary, a 30-year-old African American entrepreneur and public speaker who came up with an anti-racism training method she calls The Theory of Enchantment.

ASHLEY: It's been used in businesses and schools, and it takes a different approach from most programs centered around diversity, equity, and inclusion. Chloé says her practice fights bigotry instead of spreading it.

RICHARD: Chloé has held training sessions around the world including in South Africa, the Netherlands, Germany, Israel, and the U.S.

ASHLEY: The Theory of Enchantment includes three core principles. One, treat people like human beings, not political abstractions. Two, criticize to lift up and empower, never to tear down and destroy.

RICHARD: And her third principle? Root everything you do in love and compassion.

ASHLEY: Here's Chloé Valdary in conversation with Jovita Woodrich of the group Volunteer Florida.

CHLOÉ: My name is Chloé Valdary. I'm 29 years old. I created Theory of Enchantment.

JOVITA: What? I'm just kidding. That's great.

CHLOÉ: Knocking on 30. I created Theory of Enchantment about three years ago as an attempt to really revitalize the diversity and inclusion space and really infuse it with a orientation towards love. And we at Theory of Enchantment believe that bigotry, that prejudice comes from very specific experiences that we, as human beings, have. We believe that if we experience scarcity, especially of a psychological nature, and then we don't have the right tools to deal with that scarcity, so we're feeling, let's say, a lack of self-worth, then we have a tendency to overcompensate by projecting our own sense of inadequacy and insecurity onto the Other. We do this to defend ourselves. We do this to feel better about ourselves. But it obviously results in very damaging outcomes.

So, in order to undo that and to fix that, really, we need to enter into the habit and the practice of getting in right relationship with ourselves so that we can catch ourselves. We can catch when we start to project those insecurities. We can catch when we start to project aspects or projections of ourselves, even, onto the Other in a instance of stereotyping.

There are three principles that undergird or underpin this approach. The first principle is treat people like human beings, not political abstractions. The second principle is criticize in order to uplift and

empower, not to tear down or destroy. And the third principle is try to root everything you do in love and compassion.

JOVITA: Can I say treat people like human beings—am I supposed to do that even if they're wrong?

CHLOÉ: Yes. Yes. In fact, especially when they're wrong because being wrong is a part of being human.

JOVITA: There we go.

CHLOÉ: So it's not outside the human experience. In fact, everything that could ever possibly be perceived by the human being or be acted upon within the human context is human, and we forget that so easily because we want to separate ourselves from it because we want to say, "This is not us. This is something other. This is something alien. This is something foreign." But, in fact, it's all part of what it means to be human. So, yeah, that's where the hard part comes in.

JOVITA: So when you—because I think that semantics are huge in this space—well, in general, when we're talking about any sort of—whether the hierarchy is socioeconomic, race, anything, when you say "Other," honestly, for me, as I was listening to you and even in the midst of me trying so hard to think critically about things and engage my heart, when I think "Other," I immediately think marginalized, and I think minorities. Can white people be Other?

CHLOÉ: Of course.

JOVITA: Can whatever the majority is be Other? Let's define Other relative to what typically, people use Other as

CHLOÉ: I was actually thinking about this today, how we sort of put into this broad category, we say "the marginalized," right, which means people on the margin, right? That's what it actually means, but the thing about that concept is that is, by definition, relative. It's related to whoever is not on the margins in a given context. So it's not like a specific group of people are born with an innate marginalization-ness. It's relative to their treatment in a given context. So, yes, you can have a situation and a context where people of color are being, let's say, not ostracized, and white people are being ostracized for being white. In that context, they are on the margins because, again, it's a relative term. But of course, vice versa, you could have, and we have had many situations where people of color are ostracized, and the people doing the ostracization are white.

So it's a relative term, and this is very, very important to understand in the sense that what we do when we project is we see—let's say if I'm projecting an insecurity that I have onto another human being, I am seeing that human in a caricatured way. Now, when I say caricature, I want you to think of the word "object." When we see another human being in such a concrete, objectified way, we are denying the mystery that lies within what it means to me. So I think when we see any one group of people as marginalized, what we don't realize we're doing is we're objectifying. We're turning that group of people into an object.

JOVITA: The other component, and I know I would never ask you to expound on this in the way it's probably going to come out, but when we talk about human beings and human beings versus a political abstraction, so we could do human beings for hours and hours and hours or thousands of years, but if

that's going to be part of our principle, what are some of the things you would define in that way versus political abstraction?

CHLOÉ: My sense is that, when I speak about a political abstraction, the characterization of that is it comes with that quality of objectification, objectifying someone, putting them in a box, of denying the mystery for the purpose of political gain. And I think we're at a moment, specifically in the United States, where this is not even in the atmosphere, it's in the water, where everything is seen through a political lens in the sense that everyone is seen as a utility through which to gain power in a political context. That is defeating the purpose of the first principle and of what we mean when we say "human being" because to be a human being is to be complex, and not just complex but—and this is something I've been sitting with recently—it's to be unknowable to a certain extent. And this is a part of individualism that I think has gotten lost, what we mean when we talk about the sacredness of what it means to be an individual.

One of the reasons why being an individual is so sacred is because of that mystery. There's a kind of unknowability in the very fabric of being itself. When you forget that, or perhaps when you've never known that, perhaps when you've never realized that about your own self, in the way that you see others, you can be tempted to reduce people through this very narrow lens. By reducing, you're abstracting. You are not being in touch with that beautiful richness that is, on a fundamental level, ungraspable. That would be what I would offer at this juncture as of the difference.

JOVITA: Thank you. That is so rich and so powerful because I think we use terms like "love" and "Other" and "human" and "connection" in ways that sometimes either come across as a cliché or don't represent the work that you represent and are trying to share. So I think just establishing a little bit of that groundwork helps. When we think about what we're entering into as we have this conversation, it's that each of us has that mystery, and it's not just in a way that may feel—it is ungraspable, but it is weighty, as well.

CHLOÉ: Yeah, at the same time. That's the paradox. That's the paradox.

JOVITA: Yes exactly. I'm going to step back out a little just to the Theory of Enchantment. You wrote, "Looking for an anti-racism program that actually fights bigotry instead of spreading it," and I do want to be primarily proactive about it, but that means looking at what you have learned from in order to get to where you are because it's all a journey and a learning process. What was going on that you had a sense that the DEI space was not hitting the nail when it comes to truly moving forward? I'd love to hear a little bit about that, what you mean by spreading it versus not when it comes to DEI, anti-racism.

CHLOÉ: That's a juicy question.

JOVITA: I know.

CHLOÉ: My background is in international studies. I have a degree in international studies. My focus in college was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I got an amazing degree, amazing education. Shout out to University of New Orleans, incredible, incredible experience. And I found that it was interesting that there was an absence of a conversation about love in talking about how to mitigate conflict. So, after I graduated, I moved to New York—from New Orleans originally—worked at The Wall Street Journal, worked on a thesis basically attempting to tease out love as a central force in trying to mitigate conflict. I

did that, wrote for the paper, worked for a nonprofit for two years, basically refining it still within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

After that, I didn't know what to do. I had been talking to a lot of people, and some people were like, "This is applicable to so many things. Why don't you try to bring it to high schools as a social-emotional learning program?" So, in 2019, that's basically what I tried to do. Now, I have learned that the school system is—it's context-dependent, but it's often rife with webs of bureaucracy. It's very difficult to get a curriculum into a school, but I was trying my best, and then 2020 descends upon us. So I had done the curriculum. The curriculum was full of gems. It was full of people like Dr. King and Maya Angelou and all of these incredible minds and thinkers. 2020 descends upon us, and there's COVID, so that's the first thing. People are locked down, isolated, feeling alienated, disconnected. The the summer of 2020 descends upon us, and we have Black Lives Matter and George Floyd and all of this interest in anti-racism, diversity and inclusion.

At this time, I was giving different interviews, showing up on different podcasts speaking about the work I was doing, and all of a sudden, companies started reaching out to me, and they were like, "This is an anti-racism program, and it's different from the anti-racism program or the diversity and inclusion program that has been brought into our space." So that is really when I started to see the difference between what I was bringing to the table and what other folks were bringing to the table. What other folks were bringing to the table was a kind of—I would say it's a type of program that causes separation between people and causes division between people. I don't think it's purposeful. I don't think the people who are doing this are doing this on purpose. I don't think it's intentional.

I think the people who are advancing these ideas like Ibram X. Kendi and Robin DiAngelo are genuine in their desire to advance a good future for the United States of America and for the future of race relations, but I think that they're still responding out of scarcity. Dr. Kendi, for example, who promotes this idea of equity in his book, "How to Be an Antiracist," and I believe that I'm correct when I say that equity, in his vocabulary, is defined as equality of outcomes, essentially. Now, to remind us all of the first principle, treat people like human beings, not political abstractions, because of the mystery that is inherent and is what it means to be a human being itself, it is impossible to create a reality in which all people experience the same outcome.

It is not only impossible, but to try and do so would actually degrade the richness of what it means to be a human being. And there's a paradox involved in this because, obviously, we want to alleviate the suffering of others. Obviously, we want to come to a place in our society where those who are on the margins, whoever they may be, have something to catch them, have a net to catch them. We want to have a society where we take care of each other. But that is a very different paradigm from saying we want to have the same outcome.

RICHARD: Chloé Valdary speaking with Jovita Woodrich. We're sharing editing extracts from Village SquareCast. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. During July and August, Let's Find Common Ground is taking a break from recording new episodes and will share episodes that were published previously.

RICHARD: This one is from Village SquareCast. Like us, they're a member of The Democracy Group, a network of podcasts about civic engagement and ways to strengthen our democracy.

ASHLEY: Now more from Chloé Valdary, and we pick up on another one of the three principles in her training method, The Theory of Enchantment.

JOVITA: If you look at that second principle about criticize to uplift, to lift and empower, never to tear down and destroy, I bet there are people who say to you, "That's not possible. If it's criticism, then it is tearing down and destroying." So, if you were going to think about the idea of constructive criticism, the idea of what it does mean to criticize, to lift up, if you have some examples of that, obviously with that foundation of love, which is a hard thing—examples I think people would appreciate and then also just, how can you empower through criticism? It just does not—we don't see a whole lot of it happening that way.

CHLOÉ: I think that a lot of this actually—to be able to uplift another human being, you actually have to be able to do that to yourself. And I find that that's actually the hardest part for all of us, is to—the late, great Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who was nominated for a Nobel Prize by Dr. King, talks about how if you're—let's say I'm angry, and I don't want to be angry, I don't like the feeling of being angry, he talks about holding your anger with loving kindness and not trying to suppress it, not trying to repress it, but just hold it. Just be with it.

So I think that there's a way in which that practice of self-critique but from that compassionate lens or through that compassionate lens, that actually enables you to open up towards the other in such a way that when problems arise or when challenges arise that you feel need to be critiqued, you can do so while still maintaining loving awareness and presence. Now, this is very difficult. It's very, very difficult, and it requires practice.

JOVITA: Yes, it does.

CHLOÉ: It requires daily practice, daily practice. And I am, by no means, and expert. I will likely never be an expert because when I feel offended, I feel it somatically. I feel it in the body. Is there a practice that we can adopt, and I certainly have been exposed to them, where you learn to actually notice tension in the body and be with tension in the body. So I think that the first start is actually that practice. We have a game in Theory of Enchantment, 90-Minute Sprint, where we ask people to ask themselves, "Who am I?" for three minutes silently and to be honest with themselves about the good and the bad and to write down everything that comes to them. And for everything that comes to them, silently say to themselves, "Thank you." That is so hard.

JOVITA: It is. Are you only asking the individuals who are white in your workshops to do this exercise.

CHLOÉ: You know the answer already. You know this. You know the answer to this question. You know everyone has to do it. Everyone.

JOVITA: And that is—I want to hit home, this—and I think we can kind of go to this point, too, in terms of what it actually looks like when you're doing this that these hard things you're talking about—because I think pretty much everything that we have talked about, we have barely really talked about race or any of the more divisive things that have put these rips into our democracy and into who we are and our true ability to connect with one another. But part of this is, even as I'm listening to you, I will have this subconscious thought in my brain that moves me towards a certain side or not because of the things that are entrenched. So part of my "duh" here is because I'm trying to break through even as we're

chatting, thinking, "Oh, yeah, those folks have a lot of hard work to do." So everything you're talking about, I have to, even in our time together, constantly remind myself that you are talking to me.

CHLOÉ: And I'm talking to me. And I'm talking to me. I think that's very important to note. When we stereotype the Other as not being the better person, we forget those moments when we weren't the better person because the thing about stereotyping is people often think of stereotype only in a negative connotation. But if I stereotype someone as perfect, whatever that means, that's still an active dehumanization. When I stereotype someone as having all of these qualities, I'm denying the fact that these qualities are also within me.

So every active stereotype is not just an attack, if you will, on the other person. It's also a degradation of yourself, and this is why Dr. King talked about the "mutuality," how everything is interconnected. It's also why The Lion King—pop culture shout-out—"Circle of Life," everything is connected under the sun. This is not just like a cute thing for young people. It is a deep, profound wisdom that we, as a species, have yet to internalize that takes a lot of practice and patience with ourselves to internalize. But I think once a person internalizes it, the way you start to see both yourself and the Other is completely transformed, and it is enchanted.

JOVITA: I see what you did there.

CHLOÉ: You see what I did?

JOVITA: I see what you did there. Now, can you share just real quickly, and then we're going to backtrack a little bit, but when you talk about—because these concepts are broad, they are lifelong. Because we are human, it encompasses the fact that we have human limitations, so we're not able to execute these things. So, in my head, perfection could be executing your three principles correctly all the time. It could look a whole lot of different ways which will dehumanize in a different way.

But when you are doing a workshop, and you've got these three principles, and you're sitting there, you're hearing some probably really interesting things based on some of the other DEI principles in other spaces. You've got individuals who are white, who are Black, who are other—not Other, capital—but who have a variety of different backgrounds. What does that look like, and what can people wrap their heads around who are listening right now in terms of what do you do when you get these folks in a room?

CHLOÉ: That's a great question. We have two different day orientations. We have the 90-minute Sprint, and we have a full-day workshop. I'd probably say it'd be easiest to go through the 90-minute sprint, just broadly speak. We start with the "Who am I?" practice, and then we go on to a question, inquiry, something like, "What does your vision of a racially harmonious future look like?" That's a discussion. So we have that discussion, and then I say, "Well, what do you think stops us from getting there?" And inevitably, words like "fear" come up, or a big one, which is the central piece, actually, is "fear of the unknown." I ask people, "What's another word for the unknown?" So I'll ask you, what's another word for the unknown?

JOVITA: Okay. Well, I was like, "Hmm, yes, I can't wait for her to mention this rhetorical"—I think mystery is right, is a powerful word, although we use that one a lot, and I think sometimes people think "mystery" means potentially solvable.

CHLOÉ: Yeah. Yeah, which is interesting.

JOVITA: I think, just based on my faith, that mystery has more of that unknown component to it. I have adjectives that I could put to "unknown" like terrifying and scary and a noun like abyss.

CHLOÉ: I like this because we play this game. We see what people's word associations are, and only a few times, the word that I then have on my next slide comes up, and that word is "darkness." Specifically, we in—let's call it the West—because of our fear of the unknown, fear of the dark, we associate the darkness with things like evil and with impurity and the light with goodness. So we had this split. We like to split as human beings.

JOVITA: Yes, we do.

CHLOÉ: Then I move them to: how do we deal with this? We have to make peace with our own darkness, and we have to become integrated, essentially. This is a term that, as you know, has a lot of cultural resonance, history, clout in our nation's history. But the beautiful thing, one of the unique things about the civil rights movement was that it wasn't merely seeking integration on a societal level. Those leaders understood that society cannot integrate unless the human being, individually, is also integrated, also knows how to be in right relationship with themselves, also knows how to show nurture for their dark sides and their light sides. Integration is where the word "integrity" comes from.

These words have lost their power. We're trying to re-biblify them. So I talk about the culture and the history, and then we go into a few exercises that are really about teasing out that first principle where we, as participants, start to see what it means to be human, what we need to live and thrive as human beings, what happens when we don't have those things, when we are in scarce moments. What we do in scarcity, in times of scarcity, our default mechanism is to split, is to say, "All of this over here is good. All of this over here is bad." It's not integrated. So we go through these practices and these exercises, and it's sort of populated with pop culture references to also help along the way. That's the general 90-minute Sprint.

Then, in the full-day workshop, we do that plus the other two principles. We bring in stoic practices because we're trying to alter the lens through which we see the world, which can only happen through altering the lens through which we see ourselves.

RICHARD: Chloé Valdary in conversation with Jovita Woodrich.

ASHLEY: Hear a longer version of the 90-minute event at the Village SquareCast website. You'll find it at villagesquare.us.

RICHARD: And this is a two-way street. They also shared one of our recent episodes with Ted Johnson about different ways to think of patriotism.

ASHLEY: Thank you, Liz Joyner, and everyone at The Village Square who were involved in recording the conversation with Chloé Valdary. Learn more about Chloé at our website, commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard, and thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.