

LOVE PERIOD.

WITH REV. DR.
JACQUI LEWIS

Drew Jackson

Jacqui Lewis: Hey, everybody, this is Jacqui Lewis, and this is a special miniseries of Love Period in which we're focusing on Black History Month. Of course, you and I know that black history is American history, but my guests are going to bring special perspectives about what it means to be black in America in these days, and I hope you enjoy these conversations. I am so delighted to welcome Drew Jackson to Love Period today. Hey, Drew.

Drew Jackson: Hey, Jacqui, so glad to be here with you.

Jacqui Lewis: How you doing?

Drew Jackson: I'm doing well today. Today's been good.

Jacqui Lewis: Today.

Drew Jackson: Today has been good. It's been a slow morning, so I appreciate that.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. You had a little bit of some trauma with the church on the weekend, huh?

Drew Jackson: Yeah. Well, it was actually, I had gotten a call MLK Day, that morning, that the fire department had to come into our building and shut off the sprinklers because it was a burst pipe that had set off the sprinkler system. There was water all in the sanctuary, water all in the basement, so been dealing with that for the past couple weeks. Finally, things are in a good spot, but it was a mess.

Jacqui Lewis: That burst pipe water thing is not a happy experience, that is a fact. What did you do for MLK Day? What did you guys do? How did you mark the day, besides that?

Drew Jackson: Well, I was just home with my daughters. Yeah, I have seven-year-olds, they're twins, and we talked a little history and just got to spend some time together, and that was my day.

Jacqui Lewis: That's a beautiful way to do the day. So you have seven-year-old twins.

Drew Jackson: I do.

Jacqui Lewis: What are you teaching seven-year-old girls about black history?

Drew Jackson: Well, it's important for us, I think, in the face of everything that's going on right now to have them have a sense of rootedness, a sense of belonging, understanding that they belong to a long lineage of people who have continued to learn how to show up fully as themselves. When so much has tried to dampen our voices as a people, I think it's been important for us to really try to teach them as young black girls, in whatever space they're in, to show up fully as themselves. And they're seven years old, but they read all the time, so. And they get that from us. I mean, my wife, I mentioned she works at the bookstore. She's constantly bringing home books, and they love to read those Little Leader books that highlight... And so we have them read those and we talk. They ask questions about people. They're asking questions about "Tell me who is Ella Fitzgerald? Let's talk about Ella. Let's talk about Billie Holiday. Let's talk about Ida B. Wells." And so just letting them know what their lineage is and what they have to receive from and carry forward.

Jacqui Lewis: I'm so impressed with that, Drew. So you, your wife, the two girls, the twins live in New

York, and you are raising leaders to continue to show up, to learn to show up fully as themselves. Part of the lineage that you and I share is the lineage of black people. But what about your particular story, Drew? What's your family story? Can you tell a little bit about that?

Drew Jackson: So I grew up in South Jersey, just across the bridge from Philly, my-

Jacqui Lewis: Which town?

Drew Jackson: A town called Williamstown. So I'm the youngest of four boys. My mom she's from Philly. She grew up in the Richard Allen projects in North Philly. My dad was born in Harlem. Their family moved to South Jersey when he was about seven or eight, but continued to come up and spend time here in the city, because we still had family here. Interestingly enough, my parents... We came up in the church, but the church that my brothers and I came up in was a particularly fundamentalist brand of independent Baptist. We came up in that sphere, but it was always in a sense of my parents never fully bought in, even though they were there.

Jacqui Lewis: Okay. Were they inside resisters?

Drew Jackson: They were. So I could tell a lot of stories about it, but I think what I learned from them growing up was just they would take it upon themselves to teach us the things that we weren't being taught elsewhere, whether it be in church or in school. That was just who they were, and I think they got that from their parents. My grandfather, on my dad's side, grew up in Anderson, South Carolina, but my dad used to tell me that he would not talk about what he saw and witnessed growing up. He wouldn't talk about it. He would get angry anytime there was news of racial violence that came across the radio or the television. And yet, there was this imparting of the... "We have to acknowledge it. We have to stand against it." But there's something in my grandfather that just... It was trauma that he did not know how to process, and so I think what I learned from my dad was more of a "How do we begin to process the trauma? How do we begin to engage it?"

Drew Jackson: And, interestingly enough, I went to... I guess a couple months ago, at this point, I went down to the Equal Justice Initiative Memorial. And I have been wanting to get down there. Part of the reason is because I wanted to go and see what happened in Anderson, if there is some history in Anderson that I need to know about. So when I went, I ended up finding on the memorial for Anderson County, there was a man named Will Jackson, who had been lynched.

Jacqui Lewis: Is he related to you?

Drew Jackson: Well, I don't know for sure, but I know that he was lynched right around the time that my grandfather would've been there. Anderson's not a very big place. It certainly wasn't at the time. And so I looked up his story, and there were newspaper clippings from that time. And it was one of those lynchings where the whole town came out. He was accused of raping a white woman, was chased, and they lynched him. And it says, in the newspaper clippings, that his mother and his family, they were so embarrassed by what happened that they wouldn't even come to bury him. My interpretation of that is that they were so intimidated that the fear of what was happening during that time and that there was a... Basically, they

were intimidated out of even offering dignity to their boy. And so I know that my grandfather eventually left the town and never looked back. So I don't know if that's my relative, but it's highly likely.

Jacqui Lewis: Wow. I've been to that museum. And, in fact, listeners, if you do anything about making a sojourn in this country, go there to the museum and both parts of it, right, Drew?

Drew Jackson: Both parts of it.

Jacqui Lewis: The testimony to the lynchings, I'm going to say they look like funeral pyres. They're just big markers of human death. And this last time, my husband and I went on a sabbatical this summer, Drew, and we did a south tour. We went around and did some research on black folks' religion and white folks' craziness. I'm just going to call it that. But this time, reading the stories, the short stories of why Jackson was lynched or Johnson was lynched, the correlation between anything sexual about a white lady, tipped his hat, gave her his business card, knocked on the door, was seen talking to... Not Emmett Till flirt, not rape, just an encounter with a white woman was enough. Wow. Right?

Drew Jackson: Just an encounter.

Jacqui Lewis: Just an encounter.

Drew Jackson: Yeah. It's the refusal to allow blackness into your space.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes. And the presumption that the blackness in the space is violent or loathsome or predatory or over sexual or any of that is one of the fault lines on American life. Did you take your girls? Did you take your girls and your wife? Did you go by yourself?

Drew Jackson: No, I went. I was part of a cohort of some pastors from around the country that had went, and it was an American South trip that we ended in Montgomery.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, wow.

Drew Jackson: Yeah. We started in New Orleans, went to then Jackson, Mississippi, from Jackson to Selma, from Selma to Montgomery.

Jacqui Lewis: It's an interesting journey to take. And when you think about raising daughters, Drew, in the north, what are the lessons you want them to have about black folks' lives in the south?

Drew Jackson: When I was on this trip, one of the people that we got to spend some time with was Medgar Evers's daughter.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, yeah.

Drew Jackson: Yeah, Reena Evers. And just spending time with her telling her story, talk about the time she had with her father, and the night that he was killed by Klansman for speaking up, for challenging the status quo, for advocating for voting rights, for

being a threat, for being seen as a threat... And I think when I think about even that and her... But the thing that she said... She was telling us the story of just how her memory of her dad was coming into her room at night, tucking her in the bed, and her asking her dad the question “Dad, do all white people hate us?” Being a seven-year-old girl... And so it took me right into these moments with my daughters. And her dad took that moment to speak reality, but not to tear down folks, but to forge a path for her of saying, “It is our job to keep loving,” to keep being a force for good in the world, essentially, and in the face of all that is. And she’s like, “That’s the thing that I remember most,” that she carries with her, that she continues to tell that story.

Drew Jackson: And so when I think about my daughters and all that is still happening today, but also just the history. It’s the question of how will we be honest with them about what is, but also what’s the invitation to what does it mean to be formed as people who know how to love in this world in the face of everything that is deforming us in the opposite direction, you know?

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, yes. Did you go to that museum in Jackson?

Drew Jackson: I did.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh my God. Of all of the museums, including the one in DC, that, to me, is the best curation of this story that is our story. What do you think? Wasn’t it powerful, amazing?

Drew Jackson: It was really powerful. And are you talking about the two Mississippi museum?

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, yes.

Drew Jackson: Now, did you go to both sides?

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, yes.

Drew Jackson: Yeah, because one of the things we talked about was the choice that they made as a museum to have a two Mississippi... It’s a two narrative thing, which is interesting to me. I think that the choice to do that, in one sense, is really powerful because it gives enough space for the history of civil rights in Mississippi to be told on its own, but there’s also the option to not go to the other side.

Jacqui Lewis: That’s right. You almost feel like you got to force... “You must go through this one to get to that one.”

Drew Jackson: Yeah. And so there are some people that come in and they go into the “regular Mississippi history side.”

Jacqui Lewis: Regular museum.

Drew Jackson: But they don’t ever go to the other side.

Jacqui Lewis: That’s right.

Drew Jackson: And I feel like that is... In the sense, it's such a picture of what even we're seeing today with how we tell our history. This poem is called *The Waters of My Weeping*, and it's written in reflection on Luke Chapter 3, Verse 20, where Jesus finds out that his cousin, John, has been arrested. *One of my brothers, my cousins added to the number of your incarcerated masses. One in three of us unarmed, yes. A threat? Yes, to your abuse of power and the way you sit so comfortably in your palace while we struggle go to eat out in these streets. But in this hour, I weep again for this innocent man baptized into your carceral system, immersed into this jail with no bail. I am forced to witness this unholy sacrament, this state-sponsored religious act. And for what? Something about his person disturbed you. Maybe by passing him through these waters, you will convert him to the faith of unsacred silence, one way or another. I'm sorry that it frightens you when we fight for our humanity. But tonight, I cry. These tears have become my food. I dipped myself in the pool of the waters of my weeping for my brother, for my cousin, for all of us until they stop locking us up.*

Jacqui Lewis: So grandfather from North Carolina.

Drew Jackson: Anderson, South Carolina

Jacqui Lewis: Anderson, South Carolina. Family, New York, Philly. What about the other side of the family, southern roots, or...

Drew Jackson: Well, don't we all in some sense. So my mom's side of the family, I know that I have a bunch of family in Philly. I don't know the full extent. I know that I have some family down in Maryland. Beyond that, I don't know where everybody's at, but one of the stories that... So we had a family reunion several years ago, and my aunt, she did a lot of the family tree work, trying to get all the stuff together as much as she could. And one of the stories that she told that stuck with me was about how she found just some information about our family pre-*emancipation* and how all of the children, they had very European names for, until the first child that was born post *emancipation*, and they named him Senegal. And they named him Senegal as a marker to the family of where we were from so that we wouldn't forget, so that we would know.

Jacqui Lewis: I love it.

Drew Jackson: So I love that that's part of my history and my family and that we need to understand who we are, you know?

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. Do your girls' names... You don't have to name them here, if you don't want to. Some of us keep our kids private, but do their names have meaning in your family's story or in the story of America or...

Drew Jackson: Yeah. So I have a daughter named Zora. So she's named after Zora Neale Hurston. My other daughter is named Sahaila. Sahaila has Swahili roots. It has both Swahili and Arabic roots. And it means gentle, easy spirited, but also star, which really, if you know her, it's fitting.

Jacqui Lewis: It fits?

Drew Jackson: Yeah, it fits. And Zora's name, actually, it means dawn. And so there's this-

Jacqui Lewis: Dawn. Okay.

Drew Jackson: I think both of them in their own ways really are living into their names. Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. I love that. I love to think about origins of names. Jacqueline comes from Jack jock, Jacob, which means heel grabber. Hello? Did I grab anybody's heels? No, but I'm named after Jackie Kennedy, but I do think about the naming of our children as prescriptive or something. We have a little grand baby named Octavius, who's named after Octavius Catto, freedom fighter in Philadelphia. I want to make that connection there. His dad and mom named him that, so he'd know he was supposed to fight for love, fight for freedom. Big sister Ophelia, named for a song that they love. But I think about our little people, Drew, I think about your daughters that are 7, my niece and nephew that are littler, 10 and 13, and another pair are 29 and 31, I think about 2 year-old-Octavius, 4-year-old Ophelia, in our black present, and I'm so in awe of how far we've come. I cannot believe how much black excellence, black joy, black resistance, black science, black mystics, black teachers, preachers, writers, poets, Drew Jackson, black goodness, parenting that has happened over these centuries here in this nation.

Jacqui Lewis: And, at the same time, I'm frightened at about how intractable whiteness is. Wajahat Ali has a new book out and he calls it *The Whiteness*, but "whiteness," friends, in quotes like white supremacy, white nationalism, white people, not ethnic Polish, German, British, but just the construct of whiteness created opposite blackness to perpetrate a fraud of inequality. I'm stunned at the lengths to which our electeds, our public officials, our pundits, the media are going like they're in death throes to-

Drew Jackson: That's exactly what it is.

Jacqui Lewis: ...continue to stay. It makes my head hurt. I'm tired today. You and I started. I look tired. I am so tired of the morass. Talk about that. What are your feelings about this?

Drew Jackson: I mean, the idea of whiteness as a power... Willie Jennings often talks about whiteness as this power that is always moving toward ownership of, power over, dominion over. In any space that it's in, it owns, or it believes it owns. And when that is being challenged, which I think we're seeing the challenge of that... I think that what you described as the death throes is what you get, the "I'm going to hold on to what I believe is life, which is my ownership of this space, my voice being the preeminent voice in this space, my ideas and ideologies, my heroes, all of that being first and center." So yeah. I mean, I think what we're experiencing is the push against that and the challenge and the trying to hold onto dear life instead of letting go. And someone said, "If you save your life, you'll lose it." Somebody said-

Jacqui Lewis: Somebody said. I'd love to think about you, Drew, as a younger African-American man. Where's your hope, and what's love got to do with it?

Drew Jackson: I'm a poet.

Jacqui Lewis: I know.

Drew Jackson: And so one of the first things that comes to my mind when I think of that word, the word hope is... What did Emily Dickinson say? "Hope is the thing with feathers." It's this sense of

it's always there, but it's flying away and there's this move to grasp it in a sense. And so there are days where it's like, "Where's my hope? I don't know. It's gone off somewhere."

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, that's right.

Drew Jackson: But then there are days where the hope lands on my shoulder, you know?

Jacqui Lewis: Yes, I love that.

Drew Jackson: And it's close and it's singing.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, it's close and singing. Woo.

Drew Jackson: And so the invitation is to listen and to sing along with it. So, for me, when I think about that, I do think about my daughters. And I think about the ways that they, even at seven years old, have this thing within them that understands what justice is, that understands they have this light within them. And one of the things that one of my daughter's teachers said to us in one of their parent-teacher conferences, she said, "Your daughter is the most salt-of-the-earth person I've ever met."

Jacqui Lewis: Salt-of-the-earth person.

Drew Jackson: And I said, "What?" But I was like, "Wow, what can I learn from her about what that means, about what it means to be a salt-of-the-earth person?" I watched a lot... I watched them a lot. I observed them a lot during lockdown, during quarantine, and I mean, it was a disruption for all of us, right?

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Drew Jackson: But I mean, they were taken out of what had become a normal rhythm for them being in school and having to flip to this online, all of these different things. And as I'm watching them, I see in them this ability to create, create beauty, and joy in the midst of... And now, they didn't fully have a concept of what all is happening, but they knew something's not right. But in this something's not right, there's this ability to create out of that and to give it away, to constantly being inviting me into that and mom into that and knowing that things are heavy, but there's a "Hey, we just made up this game in our room. Come play with us." And, to me, it's the hope is always creating this beauty and joy and an invitation to come and sit with it in the midst of everything else that's going on. Not dismissing everything else, but saying, "How do I take what's here and create beauty out of it?" I think that is... It's the spirit hovering over the chaos sort of hope that creates out of that.

Jacqui Lewis: Beautiful. Yeah. And so creating that out of... There was a void, but actually, there's not-

Drew Jackson: It's not a void.

Jacqui Lewis: ...a void. There was confusion. There was chaos. There was all kinds of stuff. But out of that creation, Drew, you are a poet. I'm going to read something to you and ask you to tell me about it. Are you ready? I Did Not Awaken, in memory of Amir Locke. "I did not awaken at 6:48 AM to the sound of screaming police who had no warrant for me, yet somehow had a key to my apartment. I did not awaken at 6:48 AM rubbing the crust out of my eyes to find myself surrounded by officers tricked out in tactical gear. I did not awaken at 6:48 AM having to reach to protect myself against the ones who had come to protect and serve. I did not awaken at 6:48 AM throwing off the blanket keeping me warm to be met by bullets piercing my flesh, covered in blood, body now cold. I did not awaken." That's you, Drew Jackson, y'all, a poem in honor of Amir Locke. From whence did that come, Drew?

Drew Jackson: Well, what was happening for me was just imagining Amir waking up and really being stirred awake by the sound of a door being burst open, screaming officers, all of this happening within the span of just a few seconds before he's shot. And so, as I'm sitting there on the edge of my bed, I'm trying to, in that moment, sit with Amir as best as I know how and both give voice to so much of my own pain at this reality that it seems to just keep happening over and over and over again. And thinking about stories of instances of my own life, where I could have been Amir or Tamir or Trayvon or the list goes on. And for me, it was like, "Okay, I'm just going to write this because I don't know what else to do. I just don't know what else to do."

Jacqui Lewis: I'm grateful for your voice, for your voice in your church, for your voice as a poet, as a dad, as a husband, as a son. At the CAC, are you still connected?

Drew Jackson: I am. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. Prayers for Richard always. I'm thinking, Drew, about black future. So I'm not Afro futurist girl necessarily, but I am thinking about black future, and I wonder if Zora and Sahilia and Rio and RJ and Octavius and Ophelia are listening to this someday, Drew, and Drew, the poet, had just a few words to say to our little people, Drew, about a black future, what might you say?

Drew Jackson: I would read a poem.

Jacqui Lewis: Good.

Drew Jackson: It's a poem called The Power of Parable. And I wrote it just thinking about just that, the ways that parable and story have always functioned among our people. And the poem has an epigraph from Octavia Butler's parable The Sewer. And it says, "*The destiny of earth's seed is to take root among the stars. Down through the ages, we've passed down wisdom through story. This is what the scholars call oral tradition. We simply call it living because there is no life without the elders gifting us their parabolic insight, subversive like Octavia's earth seed. They unearth the power of our humanity that has been covered by years of subjugation, reminding us of our connection to the divine. They tell us of things certain folks fear, things those on top do not want us to hear. So give ear when these stories are uttered. It is here that we must do battle, rattling the cages of evil with the power of parable.*"

Jacqui Lewis: "*Rattling the cages of evil with the power of parable.*" Wow, beautiful, Drew. What's that book?

Drew Jackson: Yes. Yes. This is God Speaks Through Wombs.

Jacqui Lewis: God Speaks Through Wombs, Drew Jackson. Drew, what do you know for sure about love?

Drew Jackson: That love is always expanding. It is always pressing up against the boundaries that we have set, pushing us further, wider. When we think love can only go this far, love says, "No, let me take you out a little bit further." It's the invitation that says, "Come and see. Come and see with me." That is what I know for sure about love off.

Jacqui Lewis: Beautiful. And when I say fierce love, what comes up for you?

Drew Jackson: It's the image of resurrection that comes up for me. It's the refusal for love to stay buried underneath the ground. It bursts through announcing that a new day is here.

Jacqui Lewis: Lovely. Absolutely beautiful. Drew, we have come over a way that with tears has been watered, And I'm really glad for this conversation with you today as we think about black history and black present and black future. Many blessings to you-

Drew Jackson: You as well.

Jacqui Lewis: ...and your family.

Drew Jackson: Thank you.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you. Thanks for listening to this episode of Love Period, a special series we put together for Black History Month. As an African-American woman who grew up in this nation, I think about the poet, James Weldon Johnson, who says about my people, "We have come over a way that with tears has been watered." I think about the tears of my ancestors, watering the soil of America, tears baptizing my hope, tears that are often tears of joy, because we've learned how to make a way out of no way. Black history, black heritage, it's everyone's history. These stories belong to all of us, and I hope because you've listened to these episodes, you feel connected and that you'll dig and do some research about black folks in America.

