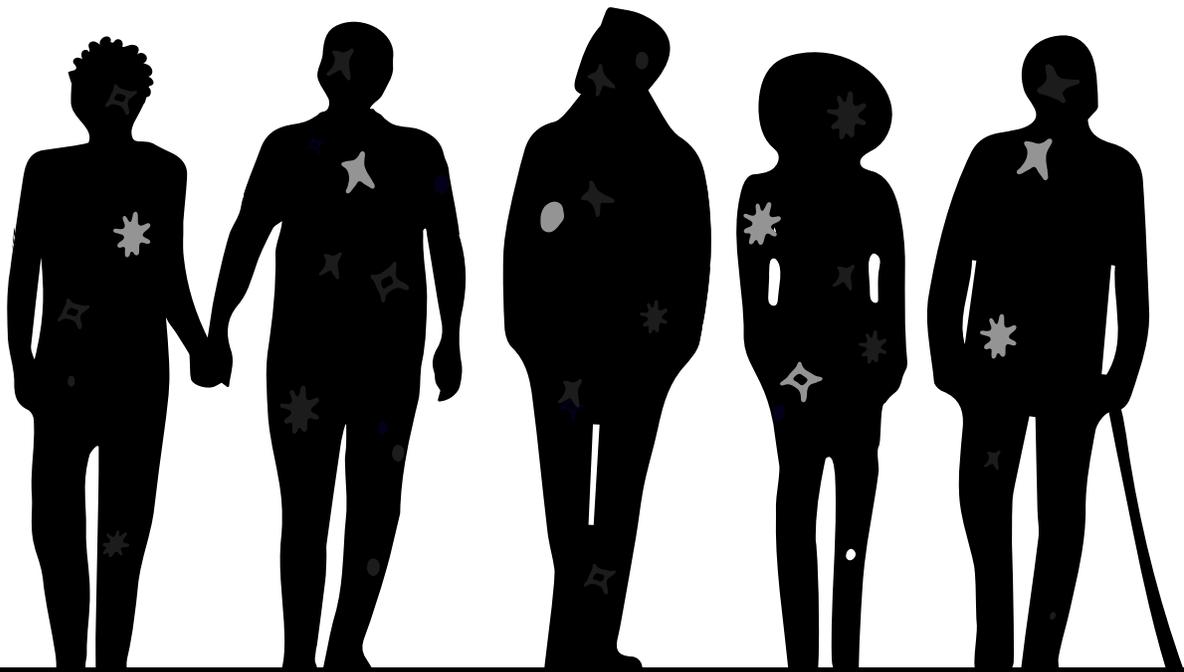


# THE COSMIC WE

Episode 2:  
Trusting the Process

with Dr. Monica A. Coleman



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Monica Coleman: I came to process because like many people, I was wrestling with deep suffering, my own suffering, the suffering of communities that I worked with, other people's suffering. And the theology I had been taught, the theology of my upbringing, the theology of black churches, the churches I had been in had nothing of comfort to offer, nothing that I would want to tell anybody in the depth of their suffering and nothing that consoled me.

Monica Coleman: And what many people do is they say, "Well, then I'm done with religion." But being faithful's really important to me. And so I said, "Well, there must be a way to understand God, to understand my own spirituality, that doesn't negate the reality of my experiences of suffering and clearly sometimes of joy, too, but also still has a powerful vision of a God who animates me and guides me."

Donny Bryant: This podcast explores the mystery of relatedness as an organizing principle of the universe and of our lives.

Barbara Holmes: We're trying to catch a glimpse of connections beyond color, continent, country or kinship. And we're going to do this through science, mysticism, spirituality and the creative arts.

Donny Bryant: I'm Donny Bryant.

Barbara Holmes: I'm Barbara Holmes. And this is The Cosmic We. Today, we are delighted to have with us, Dr. Monica A. Coleman.

Donny Bryant: Dr. Monica Coleman is a currently professor of Africana Studies at the University of Delaware. But most importantly, Dr. Monica is a process theologian, a womanist theologian, a scholar at the highest level. She has earned degrees from Harvard University, Vanderbilt University and Claremont Graduate University. She is an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. And she's also the author of many books most recently in 2016, *Bipolar Faith*, and one of my favorite, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*.

Donny Bryant: Dr. Monica Coleman, welcome to The Cosmic We.

Monica Coleman: Thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here.

Barbara Holmes: Your bio tells us that you accepted your call to ministry at the age of 19.

Monica Coleman: Yes.

Barbara Holmes: And that you're ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. But it also says you're an initiate in traditional Yoruba religion. Can you share with the listeners what that means?

Monica Coleman: The traditional religion of the Yoruba people who are in what we currently call Nigeria and Benin. That religion traveled largely because of the triangular slave trade to the Americas. And so, there are instantiations and practitioners of this religion in Brazil, Cuba, throughout the United States and Canada, and of course now more globally.

- Monica Coleman: And it is a tradition where we focus on honoring our ancestors, whether that is our familial ancestors, our cultural ancestors. And we see divinity in the earth. We see divinity in our ancestors. And we do this that we might develop good character and be able to live not just lives that are good for ourselves but lives that are beneficial for our communities.
- Barbara Holmes: Yeah. It tends to make traditional Christians nervous when you say that you're also working with ancestors and traditional African religions. I mean, it took a while for me and a visit to Cuba to realize that the orisha who ruled my head was, "Oh, yeah." And so, folks when I say that to them, they say, "But are you still Christian?" So, how do you hold those two things together?
- Monica Coleman: Well, I think it depends on what kind of Christian you are. One is some Christians believe Jesus is the only way to God. I am not that kind of Christian but I think if you are, you are. But the religion of the Yoruba people is not a proselytizing religion. We don't think you have to be this religion to be okay or to be saved. We don't really have a concept of salvation. And we believe in honoring ancestors and everyone honors ancestors.
- Monica Coleman: We visit graves. We hold funerals. We have federal holidays. These are all ways people honor ancestors. And we do it in Ifa in ways that are particular to how the Yoruba do that are very connected to the land. But to me don't have a contradiction with wanting to emulate the life of Jesus, learning from Jesus, and seeing Jesus as a unique and, for some, an exclusive way to connect with the divine.
- Barbara Holmes: That's wonderful. That's a wonderful way to integrate it because we celebrate Martin Luther King holiday every year. Well, we don't think of that as an ancestor and yet he is.
- Monica Coleman: It's the same thing as an Orisha Festival, right? Orisha are cultural ancestors. Martin Luther King is our cultural ancestor. We're not descendants of King. I mean, somebody is but I'm not right. And so, when we celebrate him, that's our way of having the same thing as like an Oshun Festival, people coming together around an ancestor who we think is important, who we want to learn from, who we hope to embody in some ways.
- Donny Bryant: I think even in a broader sense in America, Columbus Day which can be debated have the significance of that. But for some people, you could actually make that connection in how that applies to honoring a particular ancestor who had a significance in a particular event, either your history or your nation's history.
- Monica Coleman: Right. And that also is a way of connoting we want to perpetuate the colonialism that Columbus instantiated.
- Donny Bryant: Exactly right.
- Monica Coleman: For anything which is why people say we should not be honoring this because we don't want to continue these deeds, but some people do. I mean, let's be honest. Some people are perfectly comfortable because they benefit from colonialism.

- Donny Bryant: Absolutely. Either the symbols that are attached to that, the significance, the privilege that's attached, so absolutely. One of the things that I really have been just so blessed through your work is your work in process theology and how process theology has been significant in your journey. But hearing your journey, your articulation, your experience and even your work in this field has really been truly a blessing to me. I would love for you for those who are not familiar with process theology, could you give an interpretation, an explanation of why this is relevant and why this is significant?
- Monica Coleman: Sure. I mean, I can say ... I guess I'll give my quick and dirty what process theology says and then say why I think it's important. I describe process in this way. Everything that happens in the world is a result of three things. What you have to work with, what's possible in your context and what you do with it. And because those three things are always interacting, you might say your past, your present, your agency, your past, your future possibilities, your agency. Those things are always interacting. Things are always changing.
- Monica Coleman: And so we believe that change is the most fundamental thing in the world. If you can trust nothing else, things are going to change. And we believe that we are always changing everything in the world and we believe God is also changing. That's the part that is a little daunting to classical theology. That not only is the world changing which most people are willing to accept but God changes and God is in symbiotic relationship with us.
- Monica Coleman: God influences us. We influence God. God calls us. We make suggestions and give God things to work with. God is not call coercing us. And just as we are always changing in part because we're a constellation of energy events, God is also the same kind of thing. And so, that's what process says. For me, I think process is very powerful because it acknowledges how powerful and influential our past can be. And yet it also reminds us there is novelty, that we are not in a deterministic world in which we have to live out the same thing as our past and because we have agency.
- Monica Coleman: So, for me, it gives a lot of fuel for justice. And it also gives a God that has a vision for justice but also doesn't deal with the world in an authoritative way. And so, I came to process because like many people, I was wrestling with deep suffering, my own suffering, the suffering of communities that I worked with, other people's suffering. And the theology I had been taught, the theology of my upbringing, the theology of black churches, the churches I had been in had nothing of comfort to offer, nothing that I would want to tell anybody in the depth of their suffering and nothing that consoled me.
- Monica Coleman: And what many people do is they say, "Well, then I'm done with religion." But being faithful is really important to me. And so, I said, "Well, there must be a way to understand God, to understand my own spirituality that doesn't negate the reality of my experiences of suffering and clearly sometimes of joy, too. Doesn't ask me to check my brain at the door, check what I know about the world and science and psychology and those kinds of things, but also still has

a powerful vision of a God who animates me and guides me. And that's what I found in process theology and what I think is great and that everyone might enjoy about process theology.

Barbara Holmes: I'm not sure that people are comfortable with a God who changes because we changed our image of God with the long flowing beard and the paternal attitude to nothing kind of. And so, when you tell us that God is in the process of continual change, then what is there to hang on to?

Monica Coleman: Well, I think I get that it's uncomfortable because we say, "Well, we change but God doesn't change." We are fallible. God is perfect. And it's a kind of comfort to know that God doesn't have our shortcomings. That's if you see change and imperfection as a shortcoming, I don't, I just see them as a humanity thing. And so one, just because we change, it looks not perfect doesn't mean that's bad, that just is. It doesn't have moral value to me in and of itself. So, that's one part of it.

Monica Coleman: And I get that it's uncomfortable. But to me, it's much more uncomfortable to hang out with a God that sees my suffering and doesn't care, doesn't do anything about it, could do something and chooses not to for any reason. That to me is way more uncomfortable than a guy who is like, "I'm working with what you gave me." And I'm calling you and I'm calling others but you can say no. And some people say no and their no might affect your life. But you can also say yes. But I'll keep calling.

Monica Coleman: You can say no yesterday and I'm still calling. And I can't do it by myself. You can't do it by yourself. But we create a partnership, God and the world. And we try and make things great. That, I find comforting.

Donny Bryant: Yeah. That's very comforting. As you talk about this symbiotic relationship, this divine dance between humanity and divinity, the change that you're talking about speaks of the graciousness of the Creator, this ability to reveal graciously himself progressively at the level that we're on to be able to address the suffering to reveal himself and not pull away. And I think what you're talking about is it's that grace. It's almost as if what we need he is. And what we need him to become he becomes.

Donny Bryant: And the change is difficult go for some people because we've been socialized oftentimes in our traditions that God, he changes not. And I think what you're talking about is a much more interpersonal God. You're speaking about this relationship that has the ability to walk with your suffering, to be with you in the midst of suffering and to provide the level of comfort, regardless of the suffering.

Donny Bryant: I think Dr. Finley mentions in our last podcast, he talked about how people who are seeking happiness oftentimes need to have the conditions that are conducive to happiness. And people who are seeking peace oftentimes need to have the conditions that are conducive to peace. But he was like, "True

happiness is when you can find peace or find happiness or find joy even when those conditions that are conducive to happiness that you believe are conducive are not met.”

Donny Bryant: And I think that’s where you find true spiritual transformation is in that moment where you meet your Creator, you meet the Divine. And so, it’s a very, very powerful way. I really appreciate that, Monica.

Monica Coleman: I think you’re much more zen about it than I am. I’m like, “If the conditions for my happiness aren’t there, I’m probably still not happy and I’m not going to find peace in that.” But that’s just me. I’m going to be like, no, suffering is it sucks. Having this kind of theology to me doesn’t make suffering stop necessarily. It does let me know I’m not alone in it. It does let me know that God didn’t do it to me which are two pretty big things to think if you’re in the midst of suffering.

Monica Coleman: And that even in the midst of this, not only is God present but God is going to call me as I can manage things to move forward. And so, I do think it has a kind of personal relationship quality but it’s also cosmic because this is not just true of people. I’m interested in people because I’m a people. But it’s also true of animals, of plants, of rock, of stars. And we’re not the only earth in a process world.

Monica Coleman: And so, we’re like, “We might screw it up and God is still God and there’s still other universes and other things that God is working with us, it’s not all about us,” for process people. So, it both has I think the makings of what I like to think as a friendship with God, a partnership with God. Of course, God has access to much more information than I do which is wonderful. But a partnership with God and a way of saying that God’s not just my God.

Barbara Holmes: Right. And I think what’s important about that is that you have a friendship with a God who is genderless and who is energy. So, it takes it out of the anthropomorphic and disembodies and makes available to you a great power, a universal power always at your behest.

Monica Coleman: Yeah. And for process people, incarnation is universal. This is why the Jesus thing gets a little tricky. So, we believe that there’s not like there’s the incarnation that God is in everything literally constituting everything. The way things are made, we’re made up of our relationships and that’s a relationship. And so, God is in all of us. And that’s why the energy part helps. But that’s also why we can see God in the earth, in the river which connects with Ifa in many ways, in the plants, in the herbs, in our activities.

Monica Coleman: That means we can see that we don’t have this strong bifurcation like here’s the world and here’s God. It’s very much infused. And God is infused with the world. It goes both ways. The world is in God which must be incredibly uncomfortable sometimes for God. But God takes the world into God’s self and that shapes who God is.

Barbara Holmes: Yes.

Monica Coleman: So, God is shaped us.

- Barbara Holmes: And so, during your studies and you've been at some of the best schools in the country, you fell in love you say with your chosen field when you encountered James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Well, by the time you get to James Baldwin, you've read a lot of folks I'm sure. So, what is it about Jimmy Baldwin that gives you that energy about your chosen field?
- Monica Coleman: It's purely emotive. I read James Baldwin. I love Harlem Renaissance literature anyway. But it just felt like my grandma's church. It was like, "I know this. This feels familiar." And he was writing about it and wrestling with it. That my grandmother's from a Storefront Church in New York, she's not. My grandmother's Southern, didn't get further north than DC in terms of where we lived and she lived. But it felt like home to me and I felt really comfortable in it.
- Monica Coleman: And I also loved spirit, that there's spirit throughout it. And I just became very interested in how are black people writing about and understanding how spirit moves in our lives and in our religiosity. And just the way Baldwin does, it grabbed me.
- Barbara Holmes: Yeah. His language is pretty fantastic but so is yours. The memoir, it reads so well. Oh my goodness. And you talked about beginning the Dinah Project out of your own suffering. Just talk a little bit about the Dinah Project because it looks almost as if you had to create it because there was nothing there that the church could help you with or give you.
- Monica Coleman: For me, I think a lot of my ministry is in a selfish way creating what I wanted and needed and didn't find which is a choice and a calling and not always easy. But I was a survivor of sexual violence. And I had a really bumpy time in the churches that I was in just trying to understand what had happened to me, trying to wrestle with the suffering, trying to find healing. When I found therapeutic services which I did, thank you, feminists and rape crisis centers, they didn't know how to talk about religion.
- Monica Coleman: So, they would say things like, "Well, you don't have to forgive," which is really hard to tell Christians because forgiveness is a big thing for Christians. And so, I just felt like how do I ... My religion is important to me and I'm a little mad at God. I have some issues with God. I don't understand all of these things, how to relate to God in the midst of what's happened to me. And I didn't really have a space to work through that.
- Monica Coleman: And so, I'm a researcher. I was a student. So, I started reading. And I read a lot of things about trauma, about healing from trauma. And there was a set of literature that had come out in late '80s, late 1980s, early '90s about, "Churches should do something about this. Pastors should do something about this. Here are the ethical issues." But no one said, "What to do about it." And so, I said, Well, let's create it." And I was at a wonderful church that you know as well, Dr. Barbara. And I didn't want to create something. That was not the plan. The plan was for me to just try to find my own faith again.
- Monica Coleman: And so, I had asked the pastor who very much knew my story and was very patient in my healing process. Didn't ask me to do big ministered things. Just said, "Show up,

you'll be fine and the ministry will find you." And I said, "Well, I'm really struggling with embodiment." Of course, I didn't use that language. But I am really struggling with how to relate to myself again. And I thought that maybe some kind of ritual, laying on hands that comes from our tradition might help me to feel God again.

Monica Coleman: And he says, "Well, that's fine." I said, "Can I use the church?" That was it. I was like, "Can I use the church? Can I invite some friends?" And he says, "Well, sure you can but this might be bigger than you. This might be helpful for more people. I'd like you to think about that." And that became the Dinah Project. What did I need the church to do? What did I wish it understood? What did I need it to say? How do I find therapy if it's a stigma in my community? I'm not going to go to the rape crisis center but I can go to a church meeting.

Monica Coleman: And so, we did therapy in the church. And I was like, "Well, what are the barriers to that?" So, I partnered with people. I partnered with the crisis center and said, "You come to the church and just do it here." And I said, "Well, what are the barriers?" Well, no one has time to go home and make dinner for their kids and then come back to church. So, we had dinner. We had childcare.

Monica Coleman: It's just saying, "What are all the things that would prevent people from getting the help they need and how do we get rid of those? How do we remove those barriers? How do we talk about this not just between a pastor and a parishioner but how do we talk about this in worship? How do we preach about these things? How do we teach Bible study differently? How do we teach our youth groups differently?"

Monica Coleman: And we did that whether it was for younger kids knowing what are the safe parts of their body and how to say no and when to tell people about bad touch, good touch, bad touch. Or teenagers, we're talking more about dating violence and doing speak-outs and attending rallies like Take Back the Night so they could see what these kind of protests look like and doing this on a shoestring budget. You don't have to have a lot of money to do this, just some volunteers and the desire and the will.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah, because the story in Genesis 24 isn't very helpful. The Dinah rape story is all about the men.

Monica Coleman: And that's why I picked that name because you never hear from Dinah. So, I would like what would Dinah have said, what would she have wanted, or what did she need?

Barbara Holmes: Well, is that project still going?

Monica Coleman: It's not going at that particular community. But much to my shock, the book is still in print. People still read it. Rape crisis centers use it. And so, sometimes people will tell me that they're doing programs in their churches that are inspired by or different pieces of things from the Dinah Project book. And that just warms my heart.

Barbara Holmes: Wow. That's a wonderful way to inspire others.

Donny Bryant: Making a Way Out of No Way was I believe the second publication if I'm not mistaken, correct?

- Monica Coleman: Yes.
- Donny Bryant: One of the things I think is so really important that I really want to take from this podcast is really your contribution as a woman, as theologian. And I feel just in some of the circles that I'm in, there's a lot of misunderstanding, there's some ignorance. And I really want to help some of our listeners understand the significance and importance women as theologians and the work that has been done.
- Donny Bryant: You're part of a legacy. You're part of a lineage of great contributors, great women of God who have brought some great awareness to black female scholarship and contributions into this work. And I would like you just to help us as a whole to be able to gain insight to some of that great work, but also help us to understand some of the differences between maybe feminism and womanist or black feminists or feminism and womanist. So, some of those nuances and distinctions I think I would love for you to help us to become much more educated on.
- Monica Coleman: I'll start with womanist religious scholarship because the definition is really simple. It's just what happens when we center the religious and spiritual lives of black women? That's it. But that's still a pretty big deal when you have millennia of not centering the religious experiences of black women, where anyone who is not a white male is still expected to see themselves and their theology and their religiosity through the musings of white men.
- Monica Coleman: And so, womanist theology says, "Well, that's great for white men if you want to do that but that is not helpful for black women." And so looks at black women's history, black women's experiences, black women's culture and says, "We've long been thinking about God and religion differently." So, sometimes it's expressing what we know internally within our own community. And other times, it's doing constructive work and saying, "Okay, because of these experiences and these cultural inputs, this is how we can and should think about God or Jesus or healing or salvation or whatever it might be."
- Monica Coleman: And yes, I definitely stand on the shoulders of really great womanists, even the first generation I got to know and work with and still communicate with some. I would say I'm very much the lineage of Delores Williams. I love Sisters in the Wilderness but my own Christology and soteriology is more similar probably to hers than many others because both of us are very anti-atonement. And so, I think in the sense, I would put myself drawing lines theologically through Delores S. Williams' work in that sense.
- Monica Coleman: The discussion about black feminism and womanism, I hate this discussion I'll say because I'm like, "Whatever." I'm a feminist. I'm a black feminist. I'm a womanist. I'm not down with patriarchy. That's the problem. Patriarchy is the problem. However you get there. Some might say, "Well, womanists are Christians. So, if you're not Christian, it's black feminist." I'm like, "Eh, but you have womanists who are not Christian and they identify with womanists."
- Monica Coleman: I mean, it's fun theoretically to play around with it. And I've written articles and we talk about these things in the academy. But when it comes down to it, I'm like, "Well,

what do I teach my daughter about how she should feel about herself and her God and how she interacts with others?” That’s what it is. Whether I call it womanist or feminist or girl power would do it, I call it to her.

Monica Coleman: And I have a child who’s interested in science. And so, she is now the only girl in chess club. She’s the only girl in science club. She’s the only girl in her robotics things. And so, I’m like, it doesn’t matter if you wear blue or pink. This is what you have to say. It doesn’t matter, this, that or the other. It’s about who you are inside and feeling strong about that. And you don’t let those boys boss you around and she doesn’t. She’s not that kind. I have to tell those other kids, “Don’t let her boss you around,” because she doesn’t have any sense that there are things she can or can’t do or can and can’t say, or do and don’t believe because she’s a girl.

Monica Coleman: And so to me, if I can call that womanist, I could call it feminist. It doesn’t matter to me.

Barbara Holmes: Right. But you also laid down a really meaningful challenge to womanists in a journal article that became pretty famous. And it was an important, important moment. Do you want to just say a few words about that?

Monica Coleman: I did. I wrote *Must I Be Womanist*. I actually wrote it in 2004 and it came out in 2006. And I thought of it as these are conversations people in my generation are having, I just wrote it. But what I wanted to say was we have inherited this really amazing field. And I was also trying to think in my head I’ve been influenced by people who call themselves black feminists like Angela Davis and Johnnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall.

Monica Coleman: And I’ve also been influenced by people who call themselves womanists like Delores Williams and Katie Cannon and the work of Emily Townes. So, I’m thinking about this and why I’m thinking are they choosing different terms when they have access to both. And so I thought about, “Well, what are the things that womanists are doing great and what do I think womanism can learn from feminism?”

Monica Coleman: And I identified those in terms of taking stronger political stances because at that point, a lot of womanist revolution you might say was within religious communities. I also thought about that in terms of being less Christocentric saying, “Oh, you can be womanist and not be Christian,” or, “You can be womanist and be Christian in different ways. You could be womanist and juju. You could be womanist and Muslim like Debra Majeed is. But other religions, there should be room in there to think about womanism.

Monica Coleman: And I think this is long debate within womanist religious scholarship, but to be inclusive of sexual identity and gender difference. And to be much more inclusive and direct about just the different ways in which we are women and what we mean when we say women and talk about women. Not to assume a kind of what we would now say and we didn’t use this language in 2004, cisgender heteronormativity. To be able to really trouble those terms and not seeing that as a departure but as another instantiation of womanism.

- Monica Coleman: I saw this at the Critique from Within. Like I'm still in this community, I just want to widen the circle. I want to push back and widen a little bit. And that's what the article said. And then I went on to talk about, well, I suggested third wave. So, what does the third wave look like? And so, I wanted to write a little bit and show examples of what is the work that is pushing those boundaries a bit more including your work, of course, Dr. Barbara.
- Barbara Holmes: Dr. Monica, you talk about what dance and the arts did for you. As a former artist, that really struck me. I think it's page 215 in your memoir. And you say, "That dance did for me what years of ministry, church and Bible did not. It returned me to God the same way I lost God through my body." Tell us a little bit about what being reembodyed or reclaiming your wholeness through the ritual of dance, particularly African dance.
- Monica Coleman: I was the kind of person who danced in the club like everybody else my age. So, my age of the Running Man, the Cabbage Patch. I wanted to go to the club and meet people and get my groove on. But I wasn't a kid who took dance classes. So, I wasn't a person who was trained in dance. I went to dance class because I thought the drummer was cute. It wasn't let-me-go-be-artistic move. But there, I found and for me, West African dance was important because it's prayer.
- Monica Coleman: That is how we and African religions pray. We dance our prayers. This is our worship. And we sing. That's why it's so hard to do it in COVID because that's a big way that we pray. And so, I knew that as I was dancing that I was learning my own culture that of my ancestors, like the unknown ancestors. There were songs that came with it that were prayers about our lives and of gratitude sometimes of asking, of needing strength.
- Monica Coleman: So, in one sense, it was learning another prayer language when words fail, when I couldn't find the right words in my native tongue which is English. And learning them and learning another way of praying. And Western Christianity has a long and rich history of elevating spirit over body and of really wanting us, particularly women, to devalue our bodies and to prefer to focus on spiritual things. And that kind of bifurcation is definitely not African, it's not African-American even if it filters into African-American Christianity.
- Monica Coleman: But to say, "No, no, we'll put it all together," because it was sexual violence that in that suffering that came after it, that was probably the experience that had me the most at that point in my life drew with God. Like I said, I wasn't mad. I was just like, "Mm, I'm done." That being able to reclaim my body to feel my body as sacred and not just violated, to feel it as my own, to feel it as God's again was a big deal. And the Bible didn't get me there. Church didn't get me there at all. I don't even know that it was trying to. It's just not on its agenda.
- Monica Coleman: But it's very much a part of dance for me. And there are other activities. Even as I get older, I always have to have an embodied spiritual practice and something that I think keeps my feet on the ground that helps remind me that God is moving in and through my body and needs that. I need it physiologically. I need it neurochemically and I need it spiritually.

- Donny Bryant: I'm trying to think, Dr. Coleman, some other examples of that embodiment that we could even practice individually and personally. I'm thinking for me, it's oftentimes when I am taking a walk around the lake and I connect with the nature around me. And there's an embodiment and there's a connecting and a recognition that I think someone once said to truly be spiritually transformed just to be able to see the divine in everything.
- Donny Bryant: And that embodiment, I'm one wondering is there a way for us to not only have that embodiment as you articulate it within ourselves but to be able to recognize that embodiment in others or in nature, as you indicated in animals or in the stars, in the sun. So, there seems to be an extension of that feet on the ground to able to connect with nature. And if there's an extension, there's maybe progressive extension of that, a process if you will, of unfolding.
- Monica Coleman: Well, I mean, this is what's so womanist about it. Alice Walker's *Color Purple* is I think God gets pissed if you walk by the color purple in the field and don't acknowledge it and praise it. This is where I'm saying, "Look, there's God in nature." And this is probably one of Alice Walker's most well-known works, *The Color Purple*.
- Monica Coleman: But if you read *Temple of My Familiar*, you have ancestors, you have animals. You have this fissure of the past and the present which science is going to affirm like, "These are not linear things. They travel. They loop." It's about how energy moves. And so, for me what process does it gives me a metaphysic to remind me that this is actually the way it is. So, even if I don't feel it because you don't always feel it, I don't always feel like God is close. I don't always feel all holy and stuff, but I know like I believe it like it's a fact that God is in me and God is in everything which is hard because that means God's in people I don't like. It's an easy fact.
- Monica Coleman: That means then even if I disagree with someone, I still know that God is in them and that changes how you interact with people, how you interact with things. So, it should change how we feel about the earth and how we drive and decisions we make. If we really believe that God is in everything, then that means there's so much more secularity around us. Like you say, we see it in a sunset. We see it in the bunny happening to cross my lawn. I see it on my walk. We all see those things but to see it and be like, "God, that was really cool," that's what makes it spirituality.
- Barbara Holmes: What would you say to people still struggling with mental health issues? I mean, in African-American families, sometimes it is so difficult trying to keep the mask up that everything's fine, we're fine. Our children are all right and they're going to succeed. And yet within the family itself, there is dysfunction and often mental health issues. I know that's true in my own family. And so, it becomes a secret-keeping process that really impacts the people who are suffering even more than they would.
- Barbara Holmes: So, there's such an openness in you writing a book called *Bipolar Faith*. Just to say it right out loud, my faith is filtered through who I am and who I will be and who I was. What would you say to people still suffering?
- Monica Coleman: I'm not the first one to say this. This goes back to the love of literature. Paul Laurence

Dunbar says we wear the mask that grins and lies which I understand this is African-American survival here. So, it's not saying, "Don't wear the mask." Like, "We get it. We get where it comes from." This is, "Let us be here at this day." Well, then we also have Audre Lorde who's like, "You can be quiet and you can be silent and you're still going to suffer so you may as well not be silent." I'm definitely not quoting her right but you all know the section I'm talking about.

Monica Coleman: That our secrets are killing us. And I think that silence creates shame. So, even if it's something you're not ashamed of, when you're silent about something, it then creates shame because you're not talking about it. You're not expressing it. So, for me, it's a freedom project. Like, "This is what we have to do to be free." And black people like freedom but it's not just physical freedom. We also have to be emotionally free, spiritually free, psychologically free.

Monica Coleman: And it's complicated. It's not like you can say it's just a chemical imbalance and the right drug will fix it. It helps but it's poverty, war, trauma, legacies of rape and oppression, some of which might not be in the past for you. This might be in the last 10 years of your life. This might be a current real of one's life. So, it's complicated. I wanted to tell this is my story but it's a black story. These are the wounds that we carry as descendants of the US slavery system.

Monica Coleman: And nobody until maybe my generation or maybe mine, a certain like maybe '80-ish, '90s, I don't know, whatever year we would say, we're going to say, "Oh, I think that's depression." They were like, "If your shoes don't fit and if you're hungry, we don't have time to think about how you feel about it." Like when survival is really on the ground like that, sometimes emotions feel extra like things we can't worry about. But people of course did try to manage them through all types of dysfunction, through alcoholism, through addiction because pain is pain and no one wants to be in it. People want to alleviate their suffering.

Monica Coleman: So, I guess I'd say if you're still in the suffering, one is acknowledging that. And this is a better generation. We're in the 2020s. And there have been blogs and podcasts and all types of ways that I think there are so much less stigma in talking about stress and burnout and depression. I mean, we're in COVID, everybody's a little depressed. It's just how depressed are you? Because this kind of isolation and fear and loss and grief is hard on everybody, right?

Monica Coleman: And then if you have fewer resources, it's harder. And so, I think if you're in the suffering place, the first thing is break silence. Tell somebody who will listen. It might not be in your family, it may have to be someone outside your family. It may have to be a friend. It may have to be another person who you believe will hear what you're saying. And then, get to the kind of help you can get to. I'm a fan of therapy. I also know therapy is not easy to access all the time or takes a long time to access. So that might be really good self-help books until you can get to something else, depending on how much you're suffering or might be a circle of friends who you can keep it real with.

Monica Coleman: But I would say, first, you have to let someone know. Don't be in it alone. You can't

have no one know what you're going through.

Barbara Holmes: I like it though because it's practical. And it gives people who are floundering ... When you're floundering, you don't want a whole series of things. You want someone to grab your hand, give you a hug, tell you, "Do this next. Go get a cup of tea." And so yeah, you're acknowledging that it's complicated. But you're also saying, "First of all, don't be alone in it." That's important. That's really important.

Barbara Holmes: I was talking to one of your friends and mentors like mine last night, Dr. Victor Anderson of Beyond Ontological Blackness, BOB.

Monica Coleman: BOB. I'm like BOB.

Barbara Holmes: And he was trying to help me. He said, "You're so far out of date trying to keep on with the liberation project." He said, "Don't you realize the new generation has given up on liberation." They still want to be free, but the entire project as if they would be some healing of the nation and the trauma, they've given up on. And there is an increase of Afro-pessimism. And yet what I hear in what you do is always some joy in it. There's always some hope in it. There's always that transcendent leap.

Barbara Holmes: So, what did we do with all that liberation stuff we had in the '60s?

Monica Coleman: Well, it sounds like something Victor would say, first of all. It does not surprise me. This is Victor. And I guess because I'm in Africana studies, I'm like, "Oh, plenty of people are still committed to the Liberation Project. Don't get it twisted. There are still some good hardcore pan-Africanists out here trying to free us and all our sons and daughters and take us back to wherever we need to go and I'm here for it.

Monica Coleman: So, I definitely am around communities. And individuals and communities that are interested in liberation, meaning both our psychic and psychological like our healing liberation and our physical release from oppression. But many of them are not doing this in a religious context as well. I probably deal more in Afro-futurism. One thing that Victor said, I don't know that he believed this in terms of his own life, but I think he said it many years ago to me that I held onto was what theology gives us is hope.

Monica Coleman: And so, I'm like, "Yeah, that's what I get. I get hope. It's that novelty that we are not determined or destined to always relive our path that we can have in-breakings you might say of newness and in a process world that can happen in every moment. And so, that's why I like Afro-futurist literature, how I got so connected with Octavia Butler's work is we have to be able to dream it, to envision it, to get to it.

Monica Coleman: So, the dreaming is part of the Freedom Project. I love the work that abolitionists are doing because they're not just saying, "Oh, get rid of jails." They're saying, "We actually have to dream up another way of interacting with each other, another way of teaching each other, another way of dealing with our faults and our weaknesses as a society." And that's the dream. It's not just get rid of something but we have to envision something new to put in its place.

Monica Coleman: And I find a lot of hope. Even if it's bold and there are big holes and empty questions

in it is still hopeful because if you can still dream and dream big, then there's hope in that I think.

Barbara Holmes: What a wonderful way to end this conversation. There is hope and there's hope because there's change. We change. God changes. It all changes. So, all will be well eventually. All manner of things will be well.

Monica Coleman: Well, it might not actually. I mean, this is what people don't like. The other thing people don't like about process is that we can't guarantee a happy ending. And this is also true of open and relational theologies. That if we have real agency, we could screw it up. God can be like, "I'm encouraging you to go this way but we can always push the red button and blow it all up." We have real agency. And that is a little depressing that, well, a happy ending isn't guaranteed but life shows us that.

Monica Coleman: So, I think it feels realistic but it also is empowering because to me, the more people who want to have creative transformation work together, build together in our individual lives and our collective lives then we know it's possible.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah. Well, thank you, Monica.

Monica Coleman: Thank you.

Barbara Holmes: Wonderful conversation.

Monica Coleman: I so enjoyed this.

Donny Bryant: Thank you, Monica. Thanks for listening to this episode. We'd like to leave you with a reflection from our time with Monica today.

Barbara Holmes: One of the things I got excited about during this interview was that practicality that Dr. Coleman presented throughout the conversation, resilient hope, belief in the God who is by her side, but a practical understanding that everything doesn't always end up the way you want it to.

Donny Bryant: She makes it very clear as you indicate that this journey is a partnership with the Creator, a partnership of co-creating. And so, the invitation to envision the world like, got nothing as you would say, is set in stone that there is a beautiful, gracious future set before us. And it's not just based upon ourselves individually.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah. Folks who just turn to the church to alleviate suffering, they turn to the church when they don't know where else to turn. And sometimes what they're saying is that they don't find what they need there but maybe they're not looking for the right thing. If you're looking for easy solutions or need endings or magic, you're not going to find that in a church. Because all you have in a church is a bunch of broken people looking for the same thing you're looking for.

Barbara Holmes: Basically, what the offer is to journey with you. Well, the God of surprises lead you where you never thought you could go.

Donny Bryant: I love that. And I think the word can be defined as incarnation, God with you.

Barbara Holmes: Yes.

Donny Bryant: And to your point, the institution or the institutions that we sometimes place too much hope in, they're really designed to be guides, they're really designed to be signposts, not the ultimate answer to life's journey or problems. They're just guides to the one that we place our hope in.

Barbara Holmes: What I love is that she never gave up. She said she didn't find what she was looking for at first but that she had been taught to be faithful. I mean, you don't give up. I mean, the God who's with you is with you whether it looks like it or not. And so, you journey on. It doesn't matter how you envision that God, himself, herself, God of all creation, it doesn't matter. That energy, that creative process of energy will always be with you.