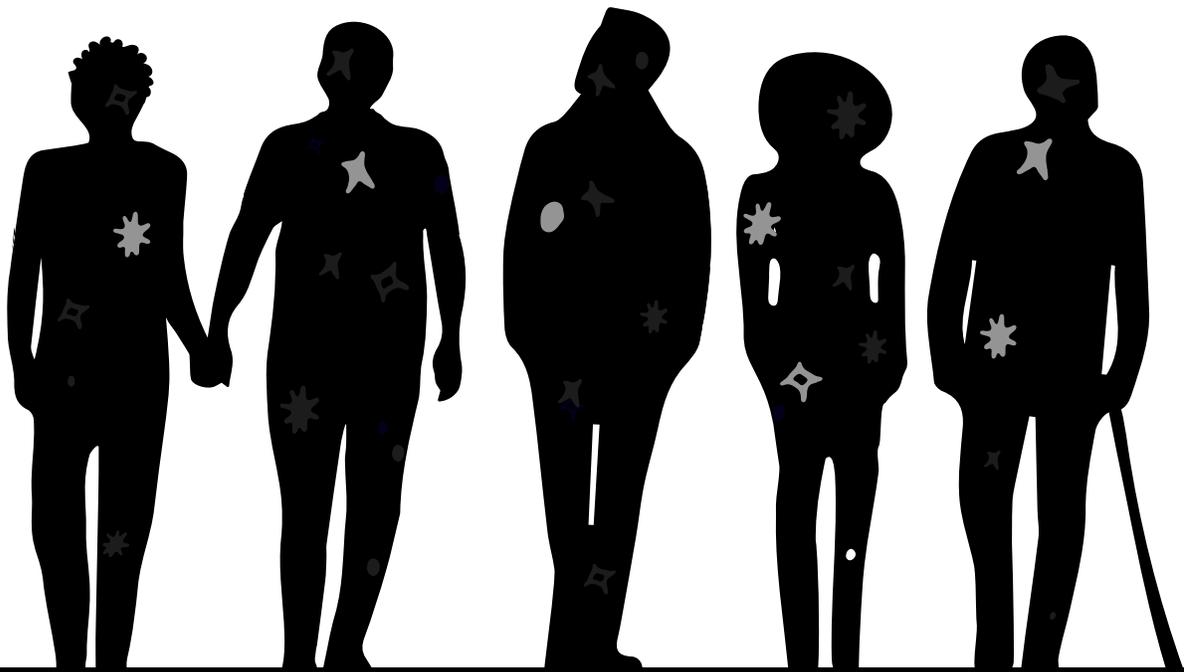


# THE COSMIC WE

Episode 5:  
Exploring the Power of Story

with Cole Arthur Riley



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Cole A. Riley: I started to think, “what artifacts are left from my family?” And grieving that there really aren’t many. And then feeling this kind of this momentum in me to start trying to excavate, to start trying to preserve what memories we could. And so I started interviewing people in my family and along the way, I’ll say just the practice of preserving memory has shown me something about myself. What histories am I keen to keep? And what histories would I rather remain hidden? I’m I less inclined to draw into, I learned something about myself, just in the practice of becoming my own historian in a way.

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 a Cosmic We. Today we want to welcome Cole Arthur Riley raised and educated in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Riley is the author of *This Here Flesh*, an examination of contemplation in the midst of the embodiment of blackness, family and community. She’s also the creator of Black Liturgy, an Instagram space for exploring prayer, contemplation, lament and rage. Riley describes herself as a writer, speaker seeking a deeply contemplative life marked by embodiment and emotion. She also serves as the content and spiritual formation manager at Chesterton House, a center for Christians studies at Cornell University. Welcome Cole.

Cole A. Riley: Thanks for having me.

Barbara Holmes: You’re a new voice in the area of contemplation. And I just wanted to know if you could identify the source of your spirituality.

Cole A. Riley: I think so. Yeah. I wasn’t raised in a overtly religious home, but I say in hindsight, I think my household spirituality kind of surrounded things like storytelling and humor and myth, even, it was a lot of myth telling in the Arthur family. We have this kind of family mantra, I would say of pay attention. From the time I was very young, my father would always, say, “Look up, pay attention, where’s home from here? What was the waitress’s name?” And there was always this kind of guiding us into the exterior world and also our own interior worlds, this attentiveness.

Barbara Holmes: The story that you offer in *This Here Flesh* is a tapestry of memories and invites people in. I was completely swept up. It’s not my story and yet it’s being told so respectfully, and it’s arising in a way that you can’t help, but be encompassed by it. The spirituality that you are referencing because Bible verses keep cropping up in story and they’re grounded in traditional biblical foundations, but yet they soar beyond what you were given. Interpret biblical interpretation.

Cole A. Riley: Yeah. So when I went to college a little bit in high school, but mostly in college, that was when I first encountered a Christian education, at least in a meaningful way. I’d

been to some church services before that, but it was really in college that I entered into a Christian tradition. And so the book has a bit of that in there, that's why I've made a home. And so I wanted to kind of bridge these worlds, like honoring the spirituality of my household growing up and kind of merging that with how I've been formed since, and along the way, which yeah.

Barbara Holmes: And out of that, what I saw was a very expansive God. I mean, you're using the feminine, the male, the non-binary modifiers for God, and you do it in such a comforting and fluid way. I remember going to seminary and having them tell me God's not a guy stop saying he, and so what they offered me instead was what they call gender inclusive language for God in all of God's whatever. And it was weird and so I would have to switch back and forth in church, but the ways in which you use feminine, male, non-binary, they, theirs, creates this image of God that is so expansive. Is this how you've always viewed God?

Cole A. Riley: I wish I had always viewed God this way. And thanks for using that language of, yeah, expansive. Even before I went to church, I viewed God as a white man.

Barbara Holmes: We all did.

Cole A. Riley: Right. It's so hard to pinpoint exactly where it began. I definitely think it was affirmed once I started to go to church, but even before church, yeah, I had this image of God as white man in my mind. And to date even you can cognitively understand that something isn't true, but it's not always fully alive in you as truth, I think. And so, yeah, even today I still have trouble reminding myself, like who are you envisioning? Who are you speaking to right now? And so I think it's always going to require a bit of resistance in me to kind of contend with the white male God. But yeah, I wanted to use kind of gender expansive language without kind of, I don't know, beating it into people. I just wanted it to be true to what I was feeling in the moment or how I was experiencing the divine in a moment.

Cole A. Riley: And so I honestly tried not to think too much about it. I was like, if I overthink this, then it will almost become less fluid and I'll use the sacred feminine only when I'm talking about God in the kitchen or God as a seamstress. If I overthought it, I think I would've really kind of ruined it a bit. So I just tried to go with what I was sensing in myself. And yeah, I was hoping that the reader would experience that as a freeing feeling as opposed to a demand on them.

Donny Bryant: That's exactly what I was going to ask you to maybe expand on that. What were some of your motivations behind writing *This Here Flesh*? As I took a journey, I felt like I was on a journey listening to your stories and listening to how you view the world and from a contemplative perspective, but what were some of your motivations and what were some of your intentions and what did you want the audience to get from this journey that you were taking us on within your body of work?

Cole A. Riley: I'd been interviewing my different elders in my family for some time. And I started with my father and my grandma and seeing how much kind of interplay there was between their stories and my own story, by the time I went to write this book, I just

felt like our stories were all just kind of tangled up in each other. And I couldn't really write about myself without writing about my father. I couldn't write about my father without writing about his mother. And it just became, I don't know, I think this bond between our stories just became so strong that it was hard to extract those things.

Cole A. Riley: And so I just leaned into it and thought, anyway, I want to communicate a spirituality that's intergenerational that values the ancestors, that values intergenerational self. And so, yeah, I decided to just ground the book in that. I thought I was going to write this very serious book of Christian contemplation. And in some ways there certainly is contemplation that kind of resembles the contemplative tradition. But if I was going to honor myself and who I am as a writer, I was going to need to bring in this kind of story element into it.

Barbara Holmes: There's respectfulness about the ways in which you talk about very sensitive stories, particularly your grandmother's trauma that really pulls people in. I'm always uncomfortable when people start telling stories that have been hidden for so long in ways that have sharp edges. As a writer, you know what I'm talking about, it just bursts out and slashes at your ability to hear. And these seem to drift up in a way that was for the community to hold. You talk about your grandmother's trauma and the tearing of paper, which is reflective of the rendering of her soul. And the community's response is to give her the paper needed to tear. It's the way the community responds to the trauma that you seem to have a real good hold on. Could you say a bit about that?

Cole A. Riley: I mean, honestly, I hadn't thought about that before you just said it, but that is so beautiful to think about it that way, to think that there was some kind of response, even if they didn't immediately understand what was maybe distinct about my grandma and kind of the sorrow that she contained, that they would do something to keep her from tearing herself apart. My grandma, she would tear at her lips, she would tear at her skin or anything. And so, yeah, I love thinking about that kind of communal response of being kind of tender, but undemanding, not asking her to go there, to tell her everything, all of the reasons why she is the way she is, but to just see her who she is now and try to rise to meet that. So I think that's really beautiful. Yeah. And then as to the handling of stories, I thankfully just love my father and my grandma so much that someone asked me the other day, who is this book written for? Well, people keep asking me that actually, like, who's the audience?

Cole A. Riley: And I never really know what to say, but the other day I thought, if I'm really being honest, when I was writing, I wasn't thinking about some kind of imagined audience. I was thinking about my family. They were my audience, how am I going to preserve these stories for the people that will come after me from my children if I have them, for my children's, children's. How am I going to really honor these stories? And then how am I going to honor my grandma? And so when I was writing, I mean, you talk about this kind of sharp way sometimes people communicate stories, maybe it's because they've taken the subject out of their audience, they've extracted them. And so if I'm writing

about my grandma's trauma, I'm going to write it as if she's in front of me as if she's sitting on the bed next to me. And what kind of delicacy that requires to do her story justice while caring for her. Yeah.

Barbara Holmes: Right. In her presence. Because I remember them asking Toni Morrison the same question, why don't you write about who's your audience? Why don't you write about white people? Why are you always writing about black people? And there's a way in which their dominance wants the story to be about them, even when it isn't about them. And Toni's response was that she wrote, like you said, out of her own context, out of her own community, she wrote the stories that arose up from her, just like you're writing the stories that arise from you. And what it also helps with is the ways in which abuse manifests. It's not always in the same way. There is a gentleness about your writing that is just breathtaking to me.

Donny Bryant: Cole, in one of your chapters, you talk a lot about memory and the impact of memory. Could you speak a little bit more about how reflections and reflecting and insight plays a role in just allowing us to be able to experience a sense of belonging, a sense of identity and even how that plays a role in just who we are in the existence of within a community of people.

Cole A. Riley: Well, now I'm thinking about Toni Morrison and in the sight of memory, she's writing about how, at that point, there were a lot of narratives coming out, a lot of storytelling around enslaved people, but not a lot that kind of did justice to the interior life of someone who was enslaved. And she talked about having this practice of imagination around the interior worlds of her ancestors, which I think is really beautiful, but she says they are my entrance into my own interior life. You could also think of Alice Walker as well, how simple a thing it seems that to know ourselves as we are, we must know our mother's names. And I think what they're both communicating in their own way is this kind of what memory can do, how memory can serve in terms of exploring my own inner world, in terms of becoming honest about my own identity and who I am and how I've been formed, I kind of have to become a keeper of memory preserver.

Cole A. Riley: So I mentioned I had been interviewing different people in my family. I was doing that long before the book process started, because I started to realize so many of my friends, my husband, actually his family, they have books and books of history. He's a white man, Irish and British lineage. And they have books and books of history and these little notes and these diaries and journals. I started to think, what artifacts are left from my family? And grieving that there really aren't many and then feeling this kind of, yeah, this momentum in me to start trying to excavate, to start trying to preserve what memories we could.

Cole A. Riley: And so I started interviewing people in my family because yeah. And along the way, I'll say, I don't mean to sound overly cliché, but I do think I learned too, I am in a different way. I do think hearing what my grandma has traveled through, shows me who I am. I also think just the practice of preserving

memory has shown me something about myself, what histories am I keen to keep? And what histories would I rather remain hidden? I'm less inclined to draw into, I learned something about myself just in the practice of becoming my own historian in a way. Yeah.

Barbara Holmes: You created Black Liturgies. For Toni Morrison, the healing begins in the clearing when the community becomes to cry and to dance. So is social media the clearing for this generation to talk about Black Liturgies, what worked for you with that and what didn't?

Cole A. Riley: Oh, that's an interesting question. I've never thought of it that way. So I'll start with the positive, because I tend to just rag on social media a lot, but in some ways maybe it is a clearing for some people, I think of maybe queer people who are living in violent areas or people of color who are kind of trapped in white dominated spaces. And who just don't have the kind of privilege of physical proximity to people who are like them, to people who feel safe to them. And so in that way, I don't want to completely dismiss that social media can serve as kind of a meaningful space of gathering. But I personally, as a queer person, as a black person, haven't found that to be true for me, just because there's so much... I mean, the clearing, I guess it was loud, but I think something about social media is just so loud to me, it's really hard to distinguish the voices that I'm really seeking and you don't really have as much control over who's invading the clearing and so that's really complicated for me.

Cole A. Riley: So I think about the space of Black Liturgies, for example, which I was hoping to be kind of this collective space for grief, for laughing, for the black body and it has been that in many ways, but also I now have the... I can't control who follows me, right. So, at a certain point, all of these really well-meaning white people, some of them lovely, some of them really looking for absolution, started to flock to the space. And I'm still trying to make sense of that for myself. I think there's beauty in it, but also it changes the space to have kind of white voices, the pressure of the white gays on me as a writer, as well as the white voice and comments and things like that.

Cole A. Riley: So that's just an example, I don't think social media can be a true harbor. It can't be a true hush harbor because it's just so loud and you just can't... I've put so many controls in place, I don't even have the smartphone. And even I feel this just cacophony when I go on my laptop or use my husband's phone. So, complicated answer to that one, I guess.

Barbara Holmes: Riley, you're touching something in Black Liturgies that the white gays can't ignore, and I'm not sure, but that contemplative storytelling may be the only way to confront white fragility because it allows the stories to arise. I was reading some of the reviews and many of the readers said that they were just drawn to tears, that they were confused that many of the dominant culture folks didn't know what to do with their own emotions as I confronted your storytelling. And it occurred to me that they might be confronting their own fragility around issues of race. What do you think?

Cole A. Riley: I would love for that to be the case. I have been too terrified to read any of the reviews, but I'm told they're not too bad.

- Barbara Holmes: They're wonderful.
- Cole A. Riley: And yeah, I've had some people message me and say, man, I just I've been crying, I want to read your book, but every time I read a page, I start to cry and I think, what have I done? But in some ways good, because so many of us are living these emotionally constricted lives. And certainly in the dominant culture, living these emotionally restricted lives. And I do resonate with a lot of contemplative writing, a lot of even academic writing on topics of things like lament and justice. I resonate with that, but there's just something to story I think that does something distinct for certain people. At least I could talk about lament, or I could take you to my grandma on the linoleum floor and put a face to the human experience of a thing, as opposed to just talking about the human experience of a thing. And so depending on the person maybe, at least most people in my life tend to be drawn to story.
- Barbara Holmes: You're engaged with a lot of young people and in your role as spiritual teacher, director, what are stories that are not being told that need to be told that young people are struggling with?
- Cole A. Riley: This is a very general answer, but I think stories of nuance, I think we're really lacking my generation and younger. We're lacking a lot of... I read Toni Morrison's work now and there's so much nuance. Or for example, I watched the famous interview between James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, again the other day. And I noticed there was so much kind of push and pull in them. So, much mutual respect at first that allowed them to kind of have the relational capital to say, no, I'm going to challenge you on that, or no I'm going to push back on that. And it led to such a nuanced conversation.
- Cole A. Riley: And I think it's rare for me to encounter those types of conversations anymore, conversations where A, there's so much kind of goodwill that's been nurtured that people can speak kind of freely, people can push and pull and not be too offended or threatened relationally. And it's been very hard to find kind of complicated portraits of a human, I think, but I'm not really, if you look they're there, but I think at least on social media, we certainly don't see those nuanced does not win, nuance never wins on social media.
- Donny Bryant: I did want to follow up on a point that you were discussing about the power story and how even piggybacking off Barbara's mentioning of how positive and how wonderful some of the comments were and responses were to your work, to the book. One of the things that as I started to really think about the human experience as a shared experience, and as Barbara brought out that there was some maybe how you use story and how even you laid out the chapters. I mean, when I look at how belonging, repair, place, I mean, the chapters were laid out very intentionally, very strategically. And I think there is a universal, there's kind of a cosmic, if you will, aspect to how you will story your story, your family story throughout those chapters. And could you speak to how maybe what you were thinking about how you laid out the chapters and how you maybe envisioned your story possibly bringing us into maybe seeing ourself, maybe experiencing kind of that internal revelation about how not only this is my story, but how my story is also a universal story.

- Cole A. Riley: As far as the chapters, I knew I wanted to end at liberation. I knew I wanted the flow of the book to feel like it was in journey to this final chapter on liberation. And I knew that I wanted to start at dignity because I just had been reading so many things where the book was reduced to black pain and that was kind of the origin story of blackness was pain. And I knew that because I was going to be talking about some serious traumas in my family. I wanted to be careful that the book couldn't be reduced to that. And so I wanted to ground it in things like dignity, something that feels most true about the black origin, as opposed to where we're just naturally inclined to go, which is kind of the sad and the dramatic.
- Cole A. Riley: And anyways, dignity is very dramatic, but in a different way, I guess. So, yeah, I knew I wanted to start at dignity to kind of ground people in this belief that this is a journey. Maybe I was talking to myself, this is a journey that you're prepared to take Cole, you deserve to take this journey, you have inherent worth. And so, let's go there, let's do this and let's talk about your family's stories with the dignity they deserve. So I started to like, everything else kind of, I just pieced together in between like dignity to liberation and what's the trajectory in between? And of course the middle sections kind of become where a lot of pain comes through with fear and lament and rage.
- Cole A. Riley: And then we kind of start cycling back down through repair and memory and joy even, and yeah, not a bit an intentional work there, I would say. When you talk about the stories of my family and how they might transcend, I think it's so interesting. Since I started Black Liturgies, I'm realizing it really is, I'm not the first to say this, it really is particularity that I think people resonate with in terms of what... It's almost a paradox. You think that to speak to the masses, you have to talk in this kind of mass way and kind of strip it of its particularity. But what I'm finding is maybe a little bit of what you were saying, Dr. Holmes, people encountering themselves in the words like almost the more particular you are, the more human it becomes. And I think people recognize human and so they're able to see themselves in it.
- Barbara Holmes: I like the fact that you include rage as one of the chapters, contemplatives aren't supposed to get angry.
- Cole A. Riley: Right. They're not.
- Barbara Holmes: They're supposed to be peaceful no matter what. And yet what you identify is the displacement of rage that is so poisonous. That is so deleterious to our health. I mean, I'm still mad about Trayvon Martin. I'm not supposed to be mad about that, I'm supposed to be over that. I'm not over it, I'm the mother of two sons. I'm never going to be over that. And so basically what you say is tell them I'm not the one. And it's all right to say that. Tell me a little bit about how you dealt with the whole idea of being contemplative and handling the rage that trauma inflicts on people of color all the time.
- Cole A. Riley: It is hard. It's not natural for me. Not that I don't have a natural anger, it's just I'm really good at disguising it. And I've been made to feel guilty about it, or I feel like if I express it, I worry that I'll just be painted out to be an angry black woman and be reduced to it. And so for a long time in my life I've just kind of tried to stay away

from it, stay away from expressing it in any kind of meaningful way. Of course, it was living in me somewhere, it had to go somewhere. And so it was a contemplative. It's been complicated because you want to belong to this tradition. But also I want to be true to the words of contemplatives, which are that people matter, that the human life matters. That human life has meaning, that human life should be protected.

Cole A. Riley: And so why can't my emotional experience affirm what contemplatives have been saying? You've said it, my emotional experience is just affirming it, that should be a beautiful thing, but it's not seen as that. And I think because there's such this risk, because we've seen what anger can do, especially white anger, the anger of an oppressor, the anger of tyrant that is almost kind of loudest in our minds when we think of it, that's the portrait we have. And I've started to really interrogate that, like no, I actually have portraits of healthy, indignified anger that's in protection of something. And so maybe that's kind of the switch is, is your anger and protection of some peace or person of creation? And if so, I like to think there's something beautiful, there's something sacred in that. It's difficult to communicate, but there are people in my life who I've seen them do it and I've seen them be punished for it.

Barbara Holmes: What dominant culture can't understand is that you actually can do your job, go to work, remain calm and still be angry and still have the righteous ability to say that was not right and nothing will make that right. The way you relate that to Jesus is very interesting because what you basically say is that we don't need a stoic savior. What are we doing with a savior who doesn't show pain or lament? What about that angry savior who turns over the tables and curses the fig tree? Don't we want a little bit of that?

Cole A. Riley: I work with college students. And I started to ask them recently like, can you give me some instances of Jesus being nice in scripture and then ask them with these different kind of emotional effects. And it's so interesting to watch us kind of scramble, grasp for this portrait of a nice Jesus. And I just don't know, I'm sure He was at times, but the stories that I read, He seems very mysterious. He seems a bit snarky. He seems a bit skeptical. There're all these other kind of dispositions that I go to before. I go to the niceness of God or the happiness of Jesus.

Cole A. Riley: And so I've started to really question that kind of pressure I feel to be happy, to be positive. I'm like, okay, if they want me to model Christ, then I'll be crying all night. I'll cry for a night through. This beautiful embodied act of anger in the temple, I love that, it's Jesus in His body. He physically overturns tables, which He doesn't just say I'm angry, which is what we're expected to do now under the guise of civility. It's not really civility, they just want you bound up. I don't see that in Jesus, it's this very embodied act.

Barbara Holmes: I think your snarky Jesus is very liberating. There's some interesting phrase that you use in the chapter in liberation. You say liberation depends on reconciliation with ourselves, not necessarily one another. What does that entail?

Cole A. Riley: I think sometimes we can't reconcile with each other. One party might be unwilling. No one person fully has a control over reconciliation in their spiritual practice, you

need someone else to kind of come to the table, so to speak. So I started to think like, well, do I have access to liberation apart from that then, if this person won't apologize, if this person isn't interested in making repair. What does liberation look like for us, for those of us who will never receive an apology, who will never have a meaningful reconciling moment. And that's what made me start to think about, okay, what have I experienced? I've experienced this kind of coming home to myself, this kind of befriending of the self and my body. Again, I talk about my chronic health issues in the book a bit and how that led me to turn against my body. But I think in many different ways, I've kind of, I'm in not unique in this being formed in kind of a spiritual practice of self hatred.

Cole A. Riley: I think many of us who have been formed to hate ourselves and reconciliation for me look like coming to resist that and kind of lavish love on myself or receive love that I didn't feel like I deserved to receive. And I think something happens, this union with one's own soul, with one's interior life. When you feel like whether or not you believe we have a true self or not, I guess isn't the point, but at least this kind of feeling that one is being as honest about what they think their true self is, as honest as they can be about what they think. I think there's something so liberating about that. I have been in spaces where I've had to pretend and pretend to believe a certain thing, to like certain things. And when you finally meet yourself and really are able to encounter that in truth, I think that those have been my most liberating moments, if I'm honest.

Barbara Holmes: Is that what you mean by defiant rootedness?

Cole A. Riley: I just can't believe you've read my book. I can't believe I'm talking to you. Wow. You know what? Yeah, I do think that's a kind of defiant rootedness to say even when I feel dislocated, even when I feel disconnected, I'm going to resist a complete aimlessness, I'm going to resist a complete wandering. And always kind of return, always kind of be rooted in my own selfhood while of course having an imagination, as Toni Morrison said, this practice of an imagination for other people's interior lives, but I want to ultimately be kind of defiantly rooted in who I am or who I believe myself to be.

Barbara Holmes: A deep understanding you had of your father was such a blessing to be able to interweave the frailty, the hair braiding, the just belovedness of a parent who is not infallible, but who is necessary and who undergirds the entire story was just wonderful.

Cole A. Riley: Oh, I love my father. I mean, he still is more superhero than he should be to me. I'm like, no one is a hero, but truly if I'm being honest, that's still kind of the category I can place him in. But yeah, in a similar way of wanting to tell my grandma stories as if she's kind of sitting in the room with me, I wanted to do the same with him. And we're a very private family, so it's a big step for us to kind of have these stories out. It's one of the strangest things. My dad, he can't even read the book, he just cries, but yeah, he can't even read it. It's so unusual for us to practice this kind of public telling. And so I really wanted to be sure I was protecting him and honoring him as a black man so that no one could kind of transfigure him into anything less than what he is, which is beautiful and funny and smooth and yeah.

- Barbara Holmes: We didn't have The Truth and Reconciliation Commission that Reverend Tutu had in South Africa. But with these public tellings, private people are allowing the stories to rise to the surface and it's going to change the culture because once the stories are told, they can't be unheard, it will change history, I believe. So this is an amazing contribution to that public telling.
- Cole A. Riley: Thank you. I appreciate that.
- Barbara Holmes: Is there anything else that you want the audience to know about the work, about yourself or about your future projects?
- Cole A. Riley: Only that I hope if you read, *This Here Flesh*, that you experience it, not as answers, not as any kind of problem solving or me trying to tell you what to believe, but I really hope you experience it as a kind of opening into your own thoughts and beliefs or this kind of invitation to ask the same questions that I'm asking, usually with not much of an answer, but more of a kind of portrait of the human experience. So I hope people experience it that way. Yeah. And thank you for having me.
- Barbara Holmes: Thank you for being here, Cole.
- Donny Bryant: Thank you, Cole.
- Barbara Holmes: Thanks for listening. We'd like to leave you with the reflection from this episode. My takeaway was that liturgy doesn't have to be formal and churchy language, which is what I always encountered. I mean, because if we're really going to be true to the human experience, we have to pray out of our own stories, our personal, our collective trauma and our blessings. And we're going to do this because basically we're story people and we have stories. We have family stories, we have secrets, we have angst. And if we don't know our stories, then we don't know ourselves.
- Barbara Holmes: One of the things that Riley talked about was the ways in which she told her family secrets, because in this era of reality television, when personal stories are told to shame folks and to expose and ridicule, she invited us to tell the stories as if that vulnerable person was sitting right there. You're going to tell that story completely differently. And so what I ask you is, what is your story? What is the story that you can celebrate? Your family story of triumph, for lament, pain loss. Despite those stories, can you remain defiantly rooted no matter what?