

LOVE PERIOD.

WITH REV. DR.
JACQUI LEWIS

**Curating Bold Black Joy
with Tracey Lewis Michae'l-Giggetts**

Jacqui: Hey, everyone. I'm Jacqui Lewis. Welcome to the third season of Love Period. In this season, we are exploring what fierce love looks like in a time of trauma when all around the globe, folks are trying to figure out how to be the best version of human they can be in these difficult and traumatic times. My guest today on Love Period is Tracey Michael Lewis-Giggetts. We met briefly working on a project together, and man, did I like her. It's wonderful to welcome her and her bold black joy, something she curates with intention in these challenging and hot mess times. She has had quite a time in these last few years. I think our conversation will move you to your own tears and your own joy. Hello, Tracey Michael Lewis-Giggetts. How are you doing today?

Tracey: I am well. How are you?

Jacqui: Are you? I like that we both have Lewis in our name.

Tracey: Yes. I think we're long-lost cousins-

Jacqui: I think so.

Tracey: ... somewhere.

Jacqui: Are you good today?

Tracey: I am well. I'm here, which is a blessing, and I'm well today. Today's a good start of the day.

Jacqui: Today's a good day. Where are you today?

Tracey: I am at the Jersey Shore.

Jacqui: I knew that, but I needed to covet your Jersey Shore-ness. The last time we talked, I was just about in tears thinking about you on the Jersey Shore.

Tracey: Yes. I had to do it in the middle of a pandemic. We moved.

Jacqui: You said that.

Tracey: It was the best decision ever.

Jacqui: Can you tell the listeners? First of all, y'all, you need to look up the Instagram live that Tracey and I had together a few weeks ago about Black Joy and Fierce Love. It was all the things, but in the context of that, Tracey was saying that she made this move for her life. Can you tell that story again?

Tracey: Yeah. For my joy, really. We're in the middle of the pandemic. I have some immune issues, so I probably stayed in a lot longer than a lot of people, and that isolation created some reflection, and I had a conversation with my husband about, "What do we really want this, I guess, latter half of our life to look like and where do we want to be?" I know for me, I always used to say, "I want a little piece of land by the sea." So, as we began to really think about what that means and what does a joyful life, creating a sanctuary look like, we began looking. You could not have told me that this would be the move that we would make.

Tracey: I mean, we were in right outside of Philadelphia. We were in the city. We were in a twin, what they call a twin, which connected to someone. We were in a community. And just a series of phase leaps, we ended up with two acres, 15 minutes from the ocean and we're doing renovations and that kind of thing, which is always its own thing. But it has been such a blessing and such a affirmation I think of the intention to always be seeking joy, and to create your joy in places where you may not be experiencing it in the moment. That's the story.

Jacqui: I'm not kidding when I say how much I admire the bold pursuit of joy that that represents. I mean, unapologetic bold. Go get it. I wonder if you could say why you picked that place. I don't want you to out where you are because you're fancy and famous and we don't want everyone trying to come find you and stuff, but what drew Tracey to that two-acre place? What was it about it that made you know, you could curate joy there?

Tracey: I lived in New Jersey 20 years ago and I never saw myself coming back. My husband is actually a South Jersey boy. He grew up here and he never saw himself returning back, and I think it was a series of circumstances. First of all, the housing market was bananas. Right? So, I think we put offers on at least six or seven houses. It lost them all because its full offers too. It was just our economy and what's going on with the real estate market is just bananas. But that said, I knew that we still needed to be in proximity to Philadelphia just because our community and our people were there. So, I knew we weren't going to go longer than an hour out, and the only way I was going to get to some ocean or sew some water was to either go to Delaware or to South New Jersey.

Tracey: So, it was just, I think... You know when you walk into a house or you walk into a space, and it's a feeling? I don't even know if I have the words for it. It's just something in your gut that says, "Hmm." Ironically, we couldn't meet on the numbers. And here's the other piece of it, there's a black family living here and I'm very adamant about, I wanted my daughter to grow up in a diverse community. I did not want her to be, in particular, in an all white community particularly in this climate. That was not an option for me and there's not many of those in South Jersey. So, when we walked in the door, the previous owners had a big picture of Obama sitting on the table, and I said, "Oh, so they knew that they wanted another black family in here."

Jacqui: Yes, they did. It's so funny because usually they make us take our pictures down when you're somehow-

Tracey: Exactly.

Jacqui: Do not.

Tracey: Exactly. We talked to the owners and they were like, "They told us to take it down. We weren't taking it down. We knew that whatever family came in after us would have to be, I guess, a different kind of family, if you know what I mean." So, we went downstairs. There was Tina Turner and Michael Jackson on the wall. I was just like, "Oh, my goodness. They're very clear."

Jacqui: That's funny too. Oh, my gosh. That's great.

Tracey: But we went back on that back deck, and the land and the trees and there was such a quiet in my spirit, and as I've been studying the contemplative and thinking about silence and quiet, it just spoke. It was like the bend in the trees with the wind going by, just kind of spoke to me. We went through all of the drama of bidding on a home, and-

Jacqui: It is drama.

Tracey: ... God allowed it to happen. It is drama.

Jacqui: I'm so glad, God blessed y'all with that though. That's awesome. You will tell me your secret place sometime and I will come.

Tracey: Oh, absolutely. You're coming.

Jacqui: Tea on your porch.

Tracey: You're coming down. Yes, absolutely.

Jacqui: Tracey, I had a really powerful conversation yesterday about joy, and folks do get stuck on what's joy and what's happiness. So, how do you define joy?

Tracey: Hmm, you know what? I think joy... I like to go very somatic, very even scientific, I guess. Biologically, in our body, joy is this convergence of dopamine and adrenaline, all the stuff that happens in response to pleasure. That's a very real thing. We're this dynamic entity God created. It makes it so, that when we experience pleasure, all of this stuff happens in us. Right? And it creates a bodily embodied response just like every other emotion like anger, like sorrow. There's an embodied emotion that happens first and foremost for all of those, and it's the same with joy.

Tracey: So, when I think about joy, I do think about my physical response to pleasure. I think about the undercurrent stabilizing force that lives not just in my body, but also in the spirit. Because sometimes, and I make this distinction even in the book, that joy is present when happiness escapes us. A lot of times, those words are used interchangeably and they're not the same. My ancestors understood joy even when there was nothing happy about their lives. Right. But there was this presence. If I go real churchy on folks, I'll say, joy is a person. But joy is this presence that lives in spite of sometimes the circumstances. So, that's probably a long way of defining it.

Jacqui: No, no. It's beautiful. I actually think joy requires a long response, honestly. I don't know why. The person I was talking to yesterday, Paul Raushenbush, made me read your section on Joy, read that definition. And as I was reading, I was hearing myself like, "It's poetic." Rumi says, "If you do something from your soul, it's a river, it's a joy." I was captured by that quote, and I kept thinking about what is a river of joy.

Jacqui: So, I think your somatic chemical description, biological description, and then that spiritual description, it is a presence. I like that it's a person whose name is joy, but it is, right? It is both bodily and emotional and psychological, and I think the experience of joy is the best definition of joy. So, maybe that's why it takes words,

right? Your head is thrown back laughing, or your toe is in the warm sand, or you're having a beautiful sexual experience with your partner, or your child is squeezing your finger or running and giggling and playing monster with you, or all of those things that make people go like, "Oh, I know what that is."

Tracey: Absolutely. I don't know if you've been on an ocean shore and there's these little fish, and if you're sitting in the water on the shore, they burrow down into the sand when you're watching. That's the image that comes to me. I feel like joy is something that burrows down in us, beneath all of the other stuff, and it's so deep in us that it pushes the other stuff up. So, that's the reason why you can be so full of joy that you cry.

Jacqui: Right. Right.

Tracey: Right?

Jacqui: Yes. That's right.

Tracey: Or you shake, or you want to scream in exaltation. Right? It pushes up all that's there, and sometimes for some of us who are not acquainted with our joy or who maybe even have a fear of our joy, and that's a very real thing, or feel guilt when we experience joy, I think sometimes the pushing up of all the other stuff makes us deeply uncomfortable. Right? So, we push the joy down again. Yeah.

Jacqui: Tracey, I'm thinking now about the traumatic crazy hot mess, American sociopolitical global madness. Does joy rescue us or heal us? How does joy resuscitate us, heal us? Right.

Tracey: It definitely heals us. It definitely rescue us, but here's I think the catch is that in times like these, we often have to be intentional about accessing it. It is ever present. Joy's our birthright. Like I said, it's embodied, so it's part of who we are, but because rage and sorrow and all of the deep disturbances we may have because of what's going on in the world, it can become so big in our bodies that sometimes it's hard to access or identify where joy is. That's why that's a daily waking up and deciding on what my joy will look like today. Right. That daily decision is probably even more critical in these times because everything else is so on the surface. I mean, *Roe v. Wade* happens and just the rage comes up or all of this stuff happens, and you start to feel all of that, and then you don't know. I have people come to me and say, "Well, I don't even know where joy is. I can't. It's too much going on.

Jacqui: Too much to look for it or to even feel entitled to it. I feel guilty. I wrote at the chapter in *Fierce Love* in the kind of *Love Your World* section. I don't know that we can be world healers, Tracey, or mommies or grandpops or senators effectively without curating joy, cultivating joy, seeking the joy that you say is our birthright that's in us, which I agree with 100%, that in a way, do we think it's weak? Do people think it's weak to have joy? Do people think that they're not entitled to joy? Do people feel guilty, Tracey, if they're doing some joy when the world is on fire? Think about that with me.

Tracey: I write about *Black Joy*, and I think for black people, some of the guilt comes from

feeling like we have to earn joy, or that when joy comes, because our ancestors went through X, Y, and Z, that somehow we don't have the right to experience joy. I know for me, in 2020, and I talk about this a lot, that we were in the middle of a pandemic. There was a lot going on, but for me, professionally and even personally, 2020 was a really wonderful year. I even hesitate even saying that to you now. There's still some of that guilt in me.

Jacqui: Why? Say more about it.

Tracey: Because I also know that it was devastating for people that there was so much loss, economic loss, loss of family members. I understand that it, from the standpoint of isolation and depression and people that were... I understand what people were experiencing in the world, at least for that first year. By 2022, I was over it, but in that first year, it felt like an enormous blessing to slow down and to be still and to be very focused and intentional on what I really wanted from my career, from my family, and all of those things, and really be able to have the space and time to think it out. Right? But to say that, feels like I'm not standing in solidarity with those who lost.

Jacqui: Totally. I totally relate to that. I totally get that. My own 2020 story, I mean, COVID brought my grand babies to our house. Our little one was exactly three weeks old when they moved in with us. Octavius, named after Octavius Catto, freedom fighter in Philadelphia.

Tracey: Oh, my goodness. I love it.

Jacqui: That statue.

Tracey: I love it.

Jacqui: I'm like, "Whoo."

Tracey: Yes. I love it.

Jacqui: This little baby is three weeks old and laying in his bassinet on our kitchen counter on the bed with me. My turn, while I'm on the computer while I'm Zooming in, he's... Oh, my God. His big sister was two. It was incredible. Sometimes crazy. I appointed myself to go to the grocery store check and I was obsessive compulsive about how many groceries I could wash. Tracey, I'm like, "These wipes right here, I'm wiping everything." One day, a man said, "Man, these are not for that." I'm like, "Well, what are they for? Why are they here?" I'm wiping everything. So, sometimes it was insane, but there were these incredible moments of Ophelia is going to dance outside on the grass and we are going to watch or we're all going to have cocktail hour at 5:00 and cook.

Jacqui: So, Tracey, we've put Black Joy and Fierce Love in our conversation before, and I love the way you say, "If love is the destination, joy is the path." Can you say more about that?

Tracey: Yeah. I think our human mandate, our ancestral mandate even is to love, right? That's where we're going, right? There's this constant refinement, if you will, of our personality and our character and our being, so that we reach a state of love and whatever goes into that. But I think the way that, again, we access it, I think joy is the path. I think joy is the route.

Tracey: When you can make room for joy in your body, in your spirit, you expand. Right? You're making room, so you're expanding. And that's what love loves, right? This expansion of us because we can hold more of the people around us, the different types of people around us where we can hold more. So, I really believe that when we are intentional about joy, and then after we've been intentional about creating joy, it becomes muscle memory. It's like we can't live without our joy moment or whatever it is, and we look for it at every turn and around every corner. Then that leads us to want to give that kind of joy out. Right? And that's an act of love. Right. We become more expansive, and then the person we're giving joy to expands, and now, we are acting out in ways that I think that we were mandated from creation to do.

Jacqui: I just love that so much. I think joy and love get a bad rep in the world of being sort of woozy, or mammy Pammy, or not serious, or some kind of thing. When I think, actually, maybe the two fiercest forces on the planet are love and joy. I'm a Christian pastor who's a Universalist. You know that. And I just have found myself in these last few years, especially my mom having cancer for about eight years and then dying five years ago. So, a 13-year journey of leaving us, Tracey, a little bit at a time. Sticking around resilient, fighting, stays for my sister's wedding, stays for the birth of so and so. She's just amazing, and I have to say her love and her joy are the resurrection to me. That's how it's say it now. Wow.

Jacqui: She's in a blue-lit hospital room, with the sounds of the thing and the thing keeping you alive and the sucking of the stuff. Lung cancer's just hard. I'm sleeping with her and I wake up and she's staring at me. "Mommy, what are you staring at?" "You girl." Just the kind of sassy, and funny, frisky, that didn't die with her. I mean, it didn't recede with her. I don't think she's the only person who knew she was dying, and therefore kept joy. I think that it might be tons of people that just know that that's palliative and that's healing, and it's sustaining. And I think it's her legacy. She left us joy and love. If a person dying of lung cancer can bequeath love and joy, can a dying nation... Let's take that. Let's look at that metaphor for a second. Can a dying democracy... Come on. What's the message for our world from black women about joy and love?

Tracey: I'm so glad you said that because I think as human beings, we love to complicate things. I think the reason why some people view joy and love as like you said, weak or something is because we think that this life of ours has to be complicated for it to have value, and it does not. What I experience for myself is that most of what I've learned about love, I love the language of your mother bequeathing love and joy to you because getting to your point about a dying nation, I think the way that we fully embrace love and joy is through grief and through loss and through the passing of way of something, so that the new thing can come about. I know for me losing my elder cousin to racial violence in 2018 sent me on this road. Right? I had no clue, no intention whatsoever to write about Black Joy. That wasn't on my radar.

Tracey: It wasn't until I went through experiencing that call, the shooting that happened in Kentucky, that I just posted on Facebook that said, "Hey, folks, check in." Because that's what we do nowadays because we've become acquainted with this level of violence. I was like, "Hey, I heard there's a shooting out by my mom's house. Hey, tell me, is everybody all right?" And then, to get the call that, "No, it was actually your family member. This white man walked in and decided that because she was black that day, she would die going to the

grocery.” Right. That sent me, as someone who was writing about it and quote unquote, doing the work of social justice, for it to land in my lap in that way took all the breath out of me, and then, in 2019, experiencing a severe health crisis that I truly believe was a result of holding in all of that grief and trauma in my body and being laid out for eight months.

Tracey: All of that loss and grief opened me up to the idea that there’s something else that love and joy might be accessible to me as a mode of healing, as a mechanism for healing. So, to your point about this country and this democracy, it almost feels to me that we experience the heights of joy and love when we are forced to grieve an old way of being and moving, and for this country, that might mean a hard push-pull resistance to this new thing that’s being birthed that will bring love and joy. I have to believe that. Part of me, even in saying this to you, Reverend Jackie, is like, “Girl-

Jacqui: Is it true?

Tracey: ... this place ain’t change.” This place ain’t change. Not in your lifetime. There’s a sister on my bus. Right. There’s a sister being like, “I mean, that sound good, Tracey, but stop it. Okay.”

Jacqui: You got this skeptical sister on your show.

Tracey: Yes. But then, there’s this other piece that has to believe, that has to have hope, that has to believe that there’s something being righted, if you will, even in the midst of what feels very horrible, feels like a horror show on a daily basis.

Jacqui: Tracey, I’m with you there. When we say we have to believe, I really do think that that’s the nature of faith. I think there’s a day when you’re dipping and skipping down the beach or having dinner in Paris or something. You don’t have to believe that day. You know what I mean? This is okay. But I think this have to believe in this, that is our faith. I’m really serious about that. It’s the substance of things hoped for, evidence of things unseen that wants to show itself to us, Tracey, just when things are excruciating.

Jacqui: I’m not mad at that, people say, “People find faith in the foxhole.” Good. I hope they find faith in this crazy time. I hope people get to have to believe that there’s more because I do think that’s hope. I think it’s faith and hope. The words are the same almost in Spanish or in Latin. I’m sorry. But this place of stubborn commitment, Tracey, when you say I have to believe, I feel like I too. I’m stubbornly committed to believing that these are birth pains, that we are watching something break down because something new is coming, because something better is coming. (Singing).

Tracey: But my ancestors had that kind of hope.

Jacqui: Absolutely.

Tracey: Right. They had to believe when nothing else around them said that this system of enslavement was going to change, when this system of segregation and Jim Crow wasn’t going to change, when colonization on the continent didn’t seem like it was going to change and independence was not possible. They had to believe that they could have a different vision for their future.

Tracey: When you lose that, you lose the willingness, I think, to really work toward the thing that you’re hoping for because why work if you don’t believe that it’s even possible? And I worry sometimes about the despair that I see. I think that... We say all the time, “This is not different. We just have social media that shows what’s going on in the world. We can get the message out faster to people about what’s happening in Supreme Court and this, that, and the other. It’s not new.” But what I think is new for me that I pray about is the levels of despair and resignation that I see people have

because I know that when you lose hope, you're no longer willing to hit the streets or go vote or do all the things that can actually implement the change that you want to see.

Jacqui: I think that's right, Tracey. I'm going to call, I have to believe. I like it, hope. It's ancestral. It's in us. That's how we got it. That's why we're here. That's why we're here on the radio or wherever we going to be. Because somebody had to believe for us and believed us into existence. What I think is a message from our ancestors to this nation is one way to get better is to hope in a God who will show up, to believe in your ability to walk off a plantation and go back and get some more people and do it again, to love your kids and your people, and your aunties despite the horrific nature of your life, and to ritualize joy, to sing and to dance, and to get in the clearing, and to hold onto each other and stop and cook, make the best you can out of the stuff that's around you. I mean, where does this come from? Is this in our DNA? Is this African DNA stuff?

Tracey: I think that what I would add to what you're saying is that we also... This is to get to what is it in us. I think what's in us is our willingness to expand our notions of what liberation and freedom is, and expand the tools that we have to go after it. Right? For instance, in their example, if Harriet Tubman did not embrace the fact that she could walk from Maryland to Philadelphia, that that was possible for her, if there wasn't that driving force that said that no matter what I'm going to get over these rivers and hills and get to where I need to be... That's a tool. That was a resource available. She had two legs and she could walk and get where she needed to go. She knew how to hide and she knew how to...

Tracey: So, what I would say is that I don't want us, even as we are saying that our ancestors gave us this resilience and this bounce back and this ability to be creative and innovative in how we approach our liberation, I just want us to continue to be expansive and open to all the tools that are available to us even as we innovate. The reason why I say that is because I can't parent the way my mom parented me, and my mom did not parent the way her mother parented her. There were things that were passed down, but I have access now to more resources and tools and more understanding that I can now utilize. So, I just want to make sure that we expand our capacities because that's how we get to also, liberation and freedom,

Jacqui: Adding new tools in our toolkit, keep being wise, listening, learning. Yeah. That's great and beautiful.

Tracey: Because Harriet had two feet, but she also had a gun.

Jacqui: Yes, she did.

Tracey: You know what I'm saying? She didn't... You know what I'm saying? Again, I'm not saying that... She embraced whatever was necessary for her freedom and for the freedom of her people. And I think for us emotionally and spiritually, embracing all that we can for our emotional and spiritual and actual freedom is part of the mix that we have to because some of us be like, "Well, it was good for my mama. It was good for me." "Mama is telling you, go on and do something else."

Jacqui: Don't take a willow switch and strip it.

Tracey: That part.

Jacqui: Just have a conversation with your child.

Tracey: Right.

Jacqui: Exactly. Yeah.

Tracey: Absolutely.

Jacqui: Exactly.

Tracey: That part actually, believe it or not, in my research is very African. Some of what we believe makes us, and I'm just speaking to parenting, is actually not African at all, but having those rights and rituals and conversations and discussions and understanding, that's actually African and that was stripped.

Jacqui: Yes, that was stripped. Anyway... Yeah. Oh, that's another talk. Let's do it though.

Tracey: Oh, I'm sorry.

Jacqui: No, no. I want to do that. I think that's right. I mean, the things we internalized and acted like they were ours, as opposed to sitting around a table talking and making space for each other, and the young people being valued and cherished and not told to sit in the corner and be quiet, that's some white stuff that we took in and we could let it go.

Tracey: I'm glad you said it. I wasn't going to say it because it's your podcast.

Jacqui: We couldn't let it go. I want to be honest. One of the things that's interesting, I do another podcast with three black colleagues called The Four, which I totally love. And what is so amazing to me, the joy to have this space. This is my space, with a center for action and contemplation where my producers are like, "Go for it. Talk about what you want to talk about." And the people who will listen to this, Tracey are going to be progressive people, but also white Catholic women, who are going to go, "What are they talking about?" And I think what I love in this space we're creating right here right now, yesterday Christena Cleveland, is what is ubiquitous about black women? Come on. I mean, why isn't our stuff, Tracey, the litmus test for gorgeous and wonderful and smart and brilliant and resilient? I want you and I, Christena, and Candice, and I want our stuff, our wisdom, our stories to be the benchmark for how people learn how to love the hell out of the world. I do. So, I'm grateful.

Tracey: It should be. You know what? I'm a firm believer that white supremacy knows that it is. I believe that white supremacy knows how powerful our beauty and our wisdom, and all of those things are. And its sole mission is to elevate itself above that to keep it because when a black woman... I was just actually talking to somebody about this, but when we show up in a room, the atmosphere changes by a virtue of just our presence. Right? That's powerful. We don't always recognize it or wield it maybe even the way we should, but it's there, and that has not for eons, for generations has not gone unnoticed. It's the reason why it's tamped down at every turn.

Jacqui: I think that's right, love, and I think the next time we talk, I want us to talk about Black Madonna. I want us to talk about black women's power and fierceness and love.

Tracey: I'm reading God Is a Black Woman now. So, that's perfect.

Jacqui: Oh, it is such a good book.

Tracey: Oh, my goodness.

Jacqui: It is such a good book. I'm going to say, get Tracey's... Do you have a copy of your book there? *Black Joy* is a book for your shelf, stories of resistance, resilience, and restoration. Get the book. Get *God Is a Black Woman*. Get *Fierce Love*.

Tracey: *Fierce Love*, for sure.

Jacqui: Get *Red Lip Theology*.

Tracey: I'll book it for my copy. Yes.

Jacqui: Tracey, we're going to wrap, and I wonder if you have something you want to say to the folks who find this podcast who are listening. You're a blessing, a benediction, a takeaway for them to think about how to be better in this hot mess time.

Tracey: There's an old hymn. It might be an old Negro Spiritual, but I know it's an old hymn from my Southern black Baptist church days that says this, (singing). I think if there's anything, I want those who are listening to know that the joy that is in you, that is your birthright even if you can't feel it, access it, identify it, you feel like everything else is just swirling around you, is just so much bigger, it's there. It's in you. It cannot be stolen. It cannot be stolen even by your own rage. Even by your own sorrow, it cannot be stolen. You can give it away though.

Tracey: So, I do want people to decide every morning to choose joy. I have on my office walls like, "Today, I choose joy." That might mean cutting your toenails. It might be so as simple and as seemingly not joyous. Or it might be hugging your grandmother. It might be getting on the swings with your daughter at the park. It might be anything, but choose it daily. What we choose often grows. It's almost like a seed, right? And you're nurturing it. You're watering it. You're giving it light. You're giving it all the things that it needs to grow, and watch how it makes you more expansive. The joy cannot be stolen. The world did not give it to you. It is yours already, and they can't take it away from you, unless you give it away to them.

Jacqui: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, that will preach, Miss Tracey. Thank you so much for the beautiful work you do in the world, and thank you for this amazing conversation. I'm looking for the invitation to tea on your porch.

Tracey: Tea, wine, whatever you want-

Jacqui: Okay. Red wine.

Tracey: ... it's here.

Jacqui: Red wine. Red wine. Thank you, Tracey.

Tracey: Thank you.

Jacqui: Rumi says, "When we do something from our soul, it's a river, a joy." Tracey's soul searching for joy took her all the way to the shore. My search for joy takes me to giggling grand babies. What about you? Where's your embodied joy and how do you go after it? Like your life

depends on it because it does.