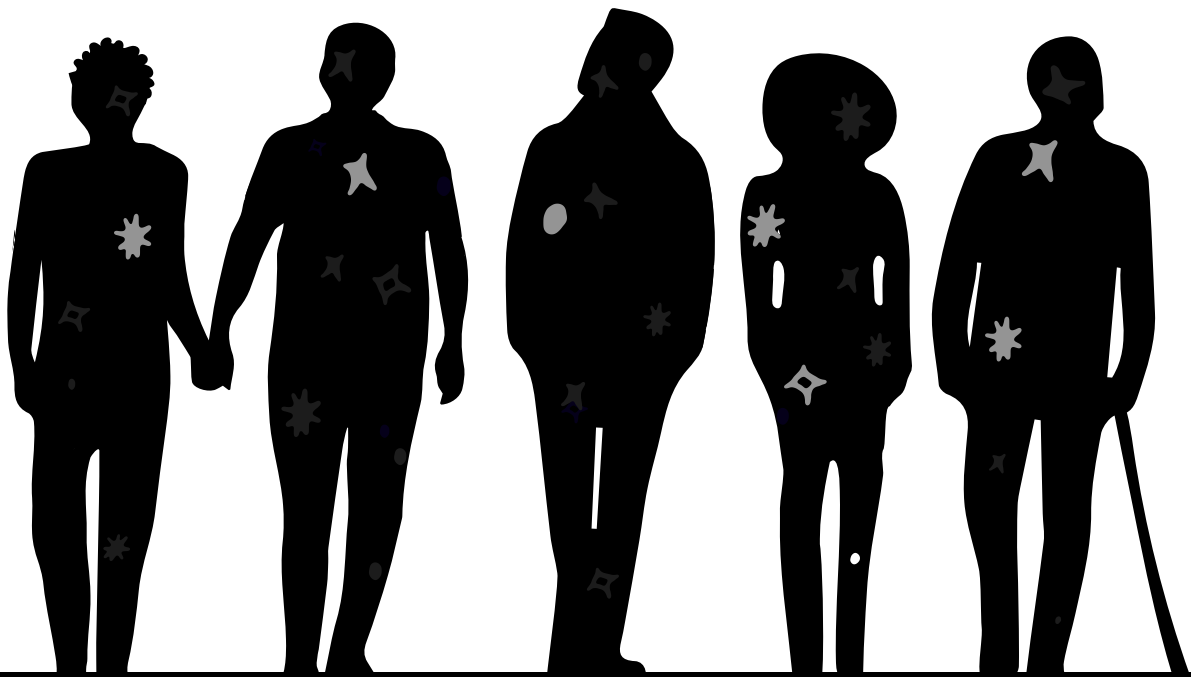


THE COSMIC WE

Episode 6:
Growing a Global Heart
with Belvie Rooks



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

- Barbara Holmes: This podcast explores the mystery of relatedness as an organizing principle of the universe and of our lives.
- Donny Bryant: We are trying to catch a glimpse of connections beyond color, continent, country, or kinship through science, mysticism, spirituality, and the creative arts. I'm Donny Bryant,
- Barbara Holmes: I'm Barbara Holmes, and this is The Cosmic We. I'm going to take a moment to introduce our guest today, Belvie Rooks and her partner, Baba Dedan Gills. Let me tell you just a little bit about her life and her social activism. Belvie Rooks is co-founder of Growing a Global Heart with her late husband Dedan Gills. She's a writer, educator, producer, whose work weaves together the worlds of spirituality, feminism, ecology, and social justice. She served on several boards that reflect her commitment to justice seeking. She served as a core faculty member at Holy Names University culture and spirituality program.
- Barbara Holmes: Belvie has published works that have appeared in many books and anthologies. And the most recent that we'll be talking about today is I Give You the Spring Time of My Blushing Heart. Now, because their partnership continues and because their lives are intertwined, I want to just give you a brief bio of her late husband Dedan Gills. He's co-founder of Growing a Global Heart. He's writer, poet, producer, environmental activist. He pioneered the idea of green recovery, a concept that combined stewardship and restoration of blighted urban areas. Dedan was a mentor for rising generations, a motivator for people struggling in those urban environments, including the homeless, the drug addicted and the incarcerated. Is there anything else you want the audience to know Belvie about you and your beloved partner?
- Belvie Rooks: Well, thank you so much, Barbara. I have been looking forward to this because it's given me a chance to think deeply about my path and journey. And I realized that meeting Dr. King ... Well, he actually was not Dr. King when I met him as a 15 year old in 1958 in San Francisco. He was working on his doctorate and I realized that there are just such important ways in which that was such a profound moment for me, which I didn't realize then. He came and the American Friend Service Committee had invited 400 young people from all over California. And there was this young minister that we had not heard of. And he spoke to our hearts and I remember we stood and we held each other and we cried because he ended by saying that we were special, but not in an elitist way, but we were special because he felt he could trust us to keep the faith and to love a better world into existence. And I feel that so much of what I've done was seated in that moment and in that encounter.
- Barbara Holmes: Wow. What a wonderful blessing for your generation. He's saying I trust you to carry on. My, my, my. What was the context for the gathering?
- Belvie Rooks: The context for the gathering was the American Friends Service Committee. And I and I had done some work with them in the past. And the person responsible for the youth program had heard about this young minister and the Montgomery boycott had occurred, but he was not a known person. In fact, when I checked in writing an essay that I was working on, there's nothing really recorded about his being

there at Asilomar. So the context for the gathering was the American Friend Service Committee, the Quaker service organization had felt that it was really important for 400 randomly selected, I never knew how I got selected, to meet and hear this person, this young man.

Belvie Rooks: And one of the other historical footnotes was that, I didn't know it at the time, but there was a young woman on the bus. We took a bus and the bus of stopped in Palo Alto. And this young woman got on with a huge guitar that was almost as big as she was. And she said her name was Joan. And we all were singing back in the back. And she said Baez. And I said, "What kind of name is Baez?" And it turns out her mother was the receptionist at the Quaker center where we went. And our joke got to be that the students in the south might be demonstrating not to sit in the back of the bus, but we felt all the cool kids were in the back of the bus. So Joan came to the back of the bus and sang, and we all sang together. So it was a big shock to us when she opened for Dr. King when she walked out first and she sang until the 12th of never.

Belvie Rooks: And that was a historical moment because she and Dr. King connected in that moment. And he invited her to come to the south with him and she did. And she explains in some of her writings that at one point, I think I was 16, I think she was 17 or 18, but she says at one point her job in the south was waking a very Dr. King and to make sure he got up and that they were out on the road. So there's that just historical footnote.

Barbara Holmes: Amazing. There's such a connection here because I was a Joan Baez groupie. And so when my father and I, we went to the second March in Selma, who is there the night before this great March but Joan Baez and Bob Dylan?

Belvie Rooks: Wow.

Barbara Holmes: And The Troopers had been called out. They hated us. They were glaring at us, but Joan and Bob saying, and we left that spot feeling everything was going to be okay. Great, great memories.

Belvie Rooks: Such synchronicity too.

Barbara Holmes: Now you and I have known each other, you and I have known each other for over 20 years. We met at a conference and it was the occasion of the release of the first edition of *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently*. And it was during that session that you came into contact with your husband. Tell us a story of you and Dedan meeting.

Belvie Rooks: Actually, this is one of those magical, I think the ancestors and the angels often just guide us synchronistically. And so the synchronicity was of course *Race and the Cosmos*. I was so excited to meet you and you all helped set up a radio program and for you and Brian Swimme. And then at the last minute, just you and Brian said, "We think you should join us." And I said, "Three people for our program is too many, and no, I'm not going to go." And there was something ... And so I went out and lay sun, and at some point there was no sun. And I looked up and there's this looming Brian Swimme who is a mathematical cosmologist said, "We're not going. We insist that you

come with us.”

Belvie Rooks: And I ended up going and I thought, well, okay, I'll just sit there And I'll not say anything. It was a Caroline Casey visionary activist show. And Brian said, “Belvie's here. Belvie, oh, no, you have to join the show.” And so I did reluctantly. Well, Dedan had moved into the LA Eco-Village and had, as he says, accidentally that at night, the show aired in San Francisco at 2:00 PM and it aired in Los Angeles the following morning at five or so am. And he says he had accidentally left his radio on, and I guess I'd gotten up to go to the bathroom or something and came back and heard these voices and heard us talking about your book and Race and the Cosmos. And he had just moved into an intentional environmental community where he was one of the few African Americans and was having a hard time struggling around race and these were committed people, but having challenging times.

Belvie Rooks: So The Universe Story, Race and the Cosmos, my work describing how I had gone to south central to work with a group of young people around expanding their vision beyond the block because I was really interested because at that time, Los Angeles had the highest rate of gang violence in the country and probably the world. And I had been inspired by reading Brian Swimme and Thomas Barry's book, The universe Story. And it had introduced me to this cosmic vision. And I felt that we could not condemn all these young men engaged in gang violence, because which basically was a struggle over a block when we had not had them understand that their place was so much larger than a block.

Belvie Rooks: So I developed curriculum and went there and I talked about it. And Dedan got excited about it, he was excited about your work and started running around telling everybody about us and our work. And I think his friends, they tell me they were so tired of him, “You have to read this, you have to read that.” He was going and reading everything. And then one day his ex-wife came to him and said, “Some of those people that you're so excited about will be at Bioneers conference in a few months.” And he said, “Oh yeah, that's okay. I'm not going to go.” She said, “Yes, you are because I've already bought tickets and we're all going.” And I always just say Barbara, that you and Brian and this radio program, I met the person of my heart mate through that magic.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah. Magic of spirit. And you got married in Ghana in 2007, tell us about that.

Belvie Rooks: Yes. Well, Dedan, we were, needless to say, we had college kids, kids married, and we just knew too many people. We had too many grandchildren, so we just decided to elope. And we thought, forget this, we're happy, people are happy, we're out of here because we just ... And I had traveled in Africa during the anti apartheid era. I was anti apartheid activists. I'd met with the liberation movement leaders in Zambia and had gone to UN conferences around apartheid in Tanzania. So I had traveled extensively in Africa. Dedan had never been. And I felt like this was such an important time in our lives, we should

just do something very special. And so I re met an OKAN spiritual teacher through Reverend Michael Beckwith's church I happened to go to.

Belvie Rooks: And Brother Ishmael Tetteh was there from Ghana. And I sat in on some of his workshops, attended his sermons and I went up and told him how profoundly and grateful I was for his African spiritual sharing in terms of ... And I said, "And I'm thinking about getting married and I sure wish you were going to be here." And he said, "Well, if you come to Ghana, I'll perform the ceremony." And Dedan and I decided that that's what we should do. I had traveled extensively in Africa, as I said, but I'd never been to Ghana. And when we were in high school, Ghana was, being the first African nation to gain its independence from British colonial rule was just like, we couldn't believe it. We said we were going to go. So we ended up going.

Belvie Rooks: Little did we know Ghana had gained its independence in 1957, which meant that 2007, they were in a year long celebration of their 50th anniversary. So we felt like everybody was celebrating our marriage. I mean, the country was celebrating. And so we couldn't believe that we had just accidentally shown up at the 50th anniversary. So we felt that that was just really, it was a wonderful time to be there. And we had decided actually also that we would visit Elmina slave dungeon after our wedding, so a few days after our wedding. And people had said, "You're on your honeymoon and you're going to slave dungeon?" And we were explaining that we were really going to honor the fact that everybody who looked like us in this part of the world "new world" had an ancestor who had come through one of those more than 100 slave dungeons along the west coast of Africa. And that was why we went.

Belvie Rooks: And it was profoundly life changing, both in terms of the heartbreak and ultimately in terms of the heart opening. Could I just read you a sentence, a paragraph or so from my journal about-

Barbara Holmes: Of course, yeah.

Belvie Rooks: Belvie's journal at Elmina, "As I stood looking out at the vast ocean beyond, I tried hard to imagine what reaching this spot, this door of no return must have felt like for some long ago, unremembered African ancestor as she stood trembling on the precipice of a terrifyingly unknown and uncertain future. One of the most horrifying bits of information shared was the fact that at the height of the slave trade, there were so many dead and dying and sick people and dying bodies that were tossed into the sea at this very spot. The frenzied feeding opportunity resulted in the change of the shark migration pattern along this entire bit of coast. Tears flowed uncontrollably. I sobbed as I glanced at the ocean a few feet below. It was hard to process the fact that for over 300 years without interruption, millions of African men, women and children had begun the long journey into slavery from this very spot. The names of the people passing through the door of no return have all been erased from our historical memory. The names of the mothers and the fathers and the children and the sisters and the brothers and the babies and the aunts and the potters

and the weavers and the farmers and the priests and the healers, most of whom were women. The numerous slave dungeons over 400 on the west coast of Africa are living monuments and stark reminders of our inhumane history and what we have done to each other.”

Belvie Rooks: For a couple of days afterwards, the tears flowed uncontrollably. Something broke I was filled with hatred and I felt like didn't want to see another white person anytime soon. And I forgot everything that I knew and everything that I practiced and I just went home, went to bed and I couldn't stop crying. And part of what I was crying about was just, I had gone back afterwards and sat in the women's dungeon because I had heard and actually traveled up the back stairs of the governor's mansion where every so often he had all ... and the back stairs led into the women's courtyard at the dungeon and he would have them, we were told that they would be brought out and he would select a young woman to come up. And just my heart broke and I couldn't stop crying.

Belvie Rooks: And finally Dedan came to me and said, “I know this is hard. It's been hard for me, but what is it that hurts so bad?” And I told him that it was the erasure that we knew the investors, we knew the name of the ships, we knew when it left America, when it stopped in Jamaica, we knew everything except the people and that the wound, was just the wound of erasure. And he said, as you recall, his question was, what would healing look like?

Donny Bryant: Well, Belvie, I have to say that hearing the reading from your journal brought back imagery from a piece that was in the book, I Give You the Springtime of My Blushing Heart and that the piece was entitled Sacred Wound. And as you mentioned, the wound of erasure, it reminded me of that piece. Do you mind just reading the piece from that for us and for our audience?

Belvie Rooks: The Sacred Wound, this was a piece that Dedan wrote. He was a recovery counselor at the point at which I met him, which meant that there was something to recover from. And The Sacred Wound; the sacred wound is a wound so deep, so utterly piercing to the soul that it opens up a pathway of compassion for all beings who suffer. One day I realized that this odd journey that I had been on had delivered me to a place of compassion that I could not explain. It seemed that when I would encounter someone suffering, I could feel it myself and had this compulsion to reach out to them and to touch them and to soothe them and to weep with them. Something welled up inside of me. It was as if we shared the beat of a common heart.

Barbara Holmes: Remember Dedan's question, what would healing look like? And basically that's the question to our nation, to all people suffering trauma, suffering from just the malaise of society itself, what does healing look like for you now that Dedan is in the realm of the ancestors and what did you learn about grieving?

Belvie Rooks: Oh, Barbara, I think this has been ... and it's been five and a half years, it's so hard to even imagine because he's so present. But I just had to disconnect from everything that we had known because there were too many triggers and so many triggers and I basically fell apart. But now I realize I just surrendered to the love and the grief. And I

went to Colorado and I just cried a lot. And I had gotten wise enough to get a friend who was a therapist and I could deal with long distance. And she just kept reminding me as people were worrying how important it was to get on with life and that made me angry actually. And she just said to me one day, “Belvie, remember the grief journey is different for everybody and it takes as long as it takes.”

Belvie Rooks: And I’m grateful that I had the privilege of allowing it to take as long as it took. And I could really try to remember the love that we shared, but more importantly, he said as he was leaving Zen Hospice and he said, “Look, we have planted a lot of seeds and those seeds will need nurturing now more than ever. Just know that I would be there.” And in the midst of my despair, I said, for somebody who had to recovery, who had made amends, whose word was impeccable, I said, what if I believed him when he said just know and trust that I will be there? And it was at that point that I went back to what we had been working on which was Springtime. I went back to being in touch with all of the young people, part of our work in collaboration was intergenerational wisdom circles. And that’s what he meant about the seeds that we planted.

Barbara Holmes: One of the things that has helped me that I’ve learned from you is the role of ritual in healing. And I think it’s in your book that you say that well, while you were in Ghana and while you were considering what healing would look like, it was recommended that you do a ritual of cleansing in the waters so that you do not walk with sorrow. Yes. Tell us a little bit about that ritual.

Belvie Rooks: Well, that was really very interesting because when Dedan came to me with just so much love and what would healing look like? And when you’re in the pain. It was just like, what healing? I was annoyed actually and here I am crying. But his question and the love planted a seed, so that the next morning I remembered what the elders had said. I had not remembered it. So his planting that seed. So the next morning I got out of bed because they had said, when you visit the slave dungeons, when you come back, try and find the nearest body of water, running water and do a ritual because you do not want to walk with all that sorrow.

Belvie Rooks: So I got out of bed and went down to the ocean, the Pacific, where a friend had gifted us for a honeymoon and across the bay, I could see the the slave dungeon and the ritual, they said, had been to ritually wash our feet, my feet. And as I was ritually washing my feet and Dedan’s question about what hurt so bad is that the people had been erased, as I was washing ritually, washing my feet, I kept hearing in my mind, plant a tree, plant a tree, plant a tree. And then I realized that my friend, Alice Walker had a poem called Torture in which that’s the reframe plant a tree, but I thought it was a poem about sadness and heartbreak. When they torture your mother plant a tree, is the one of the lines. When they torture your father, plant a tree. When they torture your leaders and your brother, plant a tree.

Belvie Rooks: But it was in that moment of doing the ritual that I realized that I had been focusing on the death and the dying that preceded the plant a tree, but that the tree that it was a poem of hope because the very act of planting a tree meant a commitment to the future because it took trees a long time to grow. But more importantly, the act of planting a tree on the day of our wedding in Accra, 400,000 Ghanaians in Northern

Ghana had been displaced by a flood. And that Bishop Tutu had pointed out that in Africa, catastrophic climate change looks like drought sometimes and looks like flooding the next. So I had just experienced, I thought it was Katrina when I looked at the newspaper the next morning after our wedding and saw all these Black people with things on their head and in the midst of this full ...

Belvie Rooks: So in that moment, I didn't connect all those dots then. But in that moment, I realized that planting a tree in the context of catastrophic climate change and what was happening to the planet and planting them ceremonially and ritually was a way of breathing new life into all of these forgotten spirits and souls.

Barbara Holmes: That's the foundation of Growing a Global Heart.

Belvie Rooks: Yes, yes, yes. And I'm always still quite amazed in the context of doing the ritual that the vision appeared.

Barbara Holmes: Oh, it always evokes something. Do you remember being at Haley Farm about 15 years ago?

Belvie Rooks: I do. I do.

Barbara Holmes: And the women from New Mexico began a ritual counter clockwise dance.

Belvie Rooks: Yes.

Barbara Holmes: And I'm Gullah, So I knew enough to get off of the 30, the 12, the 15 and the 45. I grabbed my computer and I ran. You were sitting at the 45. At each of those key points, there was an eruption spirit happening. Each of those four points, there was something that happened that I will never forget. I mean, I know it's not really shareable, but it was a ritual that unwound time.

Belvie Rooks: Well that, your being and having a Gullah background and ancestors that you honor and that you know, really has meant a lot actually in a lot of ways. And synchronistically, Praisesong for the Widow by Paule Marshall is just an amazing and astonishing book that meant so much to me. And I have not read it for over 20 years, and I finally woke up and realized, wait a minute, as we're in Carriacou and I'm thinking about you and thinking about the Gullah tradition in our part of the world and you, I realized how important it is for us to reconnect, particularly at this time with those ancient wisdom traditions.

Barbara Holmes: Yes. I have seen coming across my Facebook feed a lot of activity in California right now that you're involved in, saving the trees. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

Belvie Rooks: Yes. Because part of what happened was this tree metaphor and trees that breathe for the whole. We saw it in a very, I realized Growing Global Heart, we were thinking about it, you have to allow the time for visions to express themselves. And so the trees were there, the tree metaphor and breathing for the whole and Dedan wrote several poems about the trees. And I realized that now I'm back. I didn't think I was

going to be here back in California, back on this coast. I had left because it was so, so triggering. And I come back at a time when ... I moved here in the eighties and I came to when Alice Walker won the Pulitzer and we started a publishing company that she had been visioning and dreaming about and decided she'd just won the Pulitzer. So if we were going to start it, we should do it now. And I left mother Jones and came here in the early eighties.

Belvie Rooks: And when I arrived, there were people in the trees trying to protect the trees. Julia Butterfly Hill, who ended up actually writing a blurb for the book had stayed in a tree for two years. And I could not believe that here I am back here 25 years later, and this is what I'm being presented with. And I felt a despair in the young people and I felt like I needed to come out of and be more active and mainly support them in understanding what we learned, what we got right. And so I stepped den as a mentor really for a 13 year old goddess daughter of mine as she gets up and just has just taken this on.

Belvie Rooks: And I really realize that my grandmother's, one of her favorite mantras was from the book of Esther. And it basically, she would always remind me when I was wondering and trying to figure it out. She always reminded me, but for such a time as this, that you were born. And so coming back after 20 years, nearly 30 years and having these young people deal with the same issue. And there's just something very frightening about a culture does that does not honor and has gotten rid of the majority of trees that were 2,500 years old, many of them. And that there's a tree here in town that shows the size and the number of rings when Christ was born, when the Magna Carta was signed.

Belvie Rooks: So yes, I really, really have just had to step up and be present for the planet, for the future and for these young people whose futures are just being, who are being devastated by the prospect of what they're experiencing. And we're experiencing fires in California and my grandson has his apartment flooded in New York. But it takes me back to our wedding day in Ghana being confronted with catastrophic climate chain. And here we are, 30 years, 400 thousand people displaced, people being displaced right now in Germany. A friend of mine said his family is from the region where there's flooding and 1300 people have been lost. So I just feel that, but for such a time as this that we're here.

Belvie Rooks: And as I say I think about Dedan when he said he would be there and I've been thinking about my grandmother, and I so respect the Gullah people because of the emphasis on elders and history. But I thought, my grandmother, what if she, not just but for such a time as this that I was born, but for such a time as this that we were born here together.

Barbara Holmes: Yes. And I mean, we never realized this would happen that we would age, but we are now. We thought we would be young forever, but we are now elders.

Belvie Rooks: Right.

Barbara Holmes: And so the thoughts that you're leaving with us are blessings upon another generation.

We are not promised that the tasks will end. We are just told that for such as time as this, you were born to continue the struggle.

Belvie Rooks: Yes.

Donny Bryant: This is probably a good time to maybe reconnect with one of the pieces that I think was in the book Springtime. I actually listened to it as an audio book. And what was amazing about is that to hear you read it, and also to hear Danny Glover read it gave so much more texture and context to the work. And there was a piece as you alluded to earlier to a cosmic connection and you alluded to the influence of our ancestors, but there's a piece in there early in the book called the big picture. And I wanted to give you an opportunity to maybe even read a piece from that book, because that book really stood out to me. It gave a different perspective. It invited us to reimagine if you will, what life looks like. It allowed us to reimagine what grief looks like. And it puts us dead in the center and diametrically opposes various aspects of life. And I just wanted to see if you could read a little bit about that piece for us and invite us to be able to experience that for this moment.

Belvie Rooks: This was a piece that really I ended up doing a lot of editing of Dedan's and he only had a couple of things published while he was alive. But this one he really sat with and I saw it in various incarnations. I so love this piece and it's called I Am.

Belvie Rooks: *I am old and wise as the knight. I am as beautiful as a bird in flight. I am the moon and the sea. I am the Robin and the be. I am the soil and I am the tree. I'm the lion and the gazelle. I am heaven and I am hell. I am the ring and I am the bell. I am the joy and I am the tear. I am the brave and I am the fear. I am the blistering desert. I'm the freezing snow. I'm the cringing coward and the gentle hero. I'm the aged and I am the young. I am the weak and I am the strong. I am the smile and I am the frown. I am the popper and I am the crown. I am the wrong and I am right. I am the day and I am the night. I am now and I am never. I am yesterday and I am forever.*

I am the bitter and I am the sweet. I live on the hill and I live on the street. I am the top and I am the bottom. I am Martin Hitler, Gandhi, and Sodom. I am red, black, yellow, brown, and white. I love hate, laugh, cry, and fight. All the universe is reflected in me. I am all that ever was and ever will be. When I lose, it's the lesson that I win. Judging others is my sin.

Donny Bryant: Wow. Thank you.

Belvie Rooks: Thank you for asking, because this is special in another kind of way, because he kept not letting it go. And finally he brought it to me and he asked me to read it and I said to him, "Well, what you're saying is that you are all the universe and it's reflected in you and you haven't really explicitly said that." And so I contributed all the universe is reflected in me based on that conversation.

Barbara Holmes: Wow. Very profound.

Donny Bryant: You're very profound. I just want to say thank you because, and I know this may be a little out of order, but I wanted to give my response and my ... It got pretty emotional

as you were talking about grief in your process of healing. And I recently experienced a loss within the last year, experienced a divorce and it is a grieving period. It's like the loss of someone you love, a loss of a family, loss of something that's familiar. But your work and your insights and your journey, even your wisdom has been very well received at least on this side here. And I say thank you to that.

Donny Bryant: In the Marvel comics world, there's a Marvel series entitled WandaVision. Vision is a Marvel character who is actually not human, but in season, and I hope this not just a spoiler alert, but in season one, I believe episode eight, there's this scene, there's a moment in episode eight where Vision is sitting down with his soon to be wife, Wanda, and she was grieving over the loss of her brother and Vision was having a hard time processing the pain. And he says something that is so profound. And he says, "I really don't know grief because I've never had anyone to love. I've never loved anyone." And he said, "What is grief except love or love that perseveres?" And I just thought that was so profound.

Belvie Rooks: Oh, I'm sitting here just very moved. Thank you for that.

Barbara Holmes: That's a story of you and Dedan now, a love that persevere. Thank you, Belvie. I love you. I love your work. Thank you for blessing us with your presence today.

Belvie Rooks: And thank you both. Blessings and much gratitude.