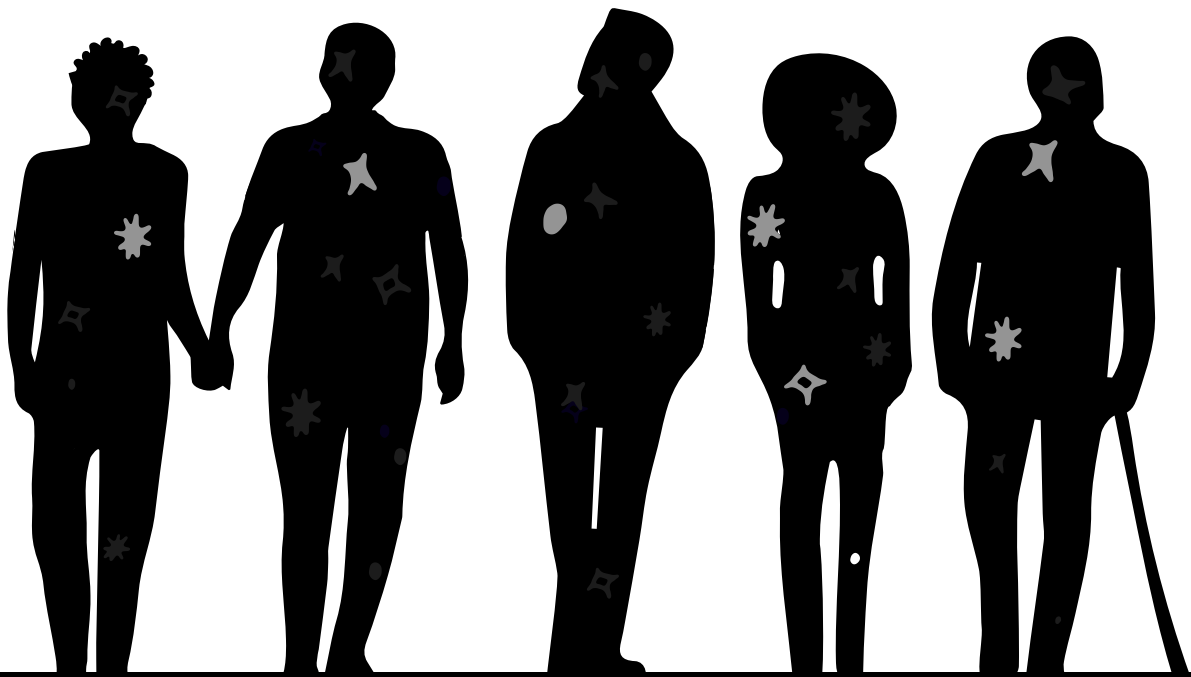


# THE COSMIC WE

Sacred Activism  
with Alison McCrary

hosted by:  
Dr. Barbara Holmes and Dr. Donald Bryant



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Alison McCrary: And I also believe that contemplative practice for me is advocating for forms of justice that bring healing, forms of justice that build up our communities, forms of justice that address the root causes of harm and oppression, forms of justice that address and shift the cycles of harm from happening and really working towards reconciliation and accountability that heals, and shifting from punishment to repair and healing and from control to support for people and joining hands in beloved community and supporting each other on the journey and doing it together.

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.

Sometimes you meet a person and it feels as if you had known them all of your life. Such was the case with Alison McCrary. In the fall of 2019, I was scheduled to come to New Orleans for a weekend of talks and a sermon. I was fine when I got on a budget airline from Tampa to New Orleans, but when I landed, according to my pulmonologist, I was suffering from respiratory stress as a result of a poorly pressurized airline cabin and so I was in pretty bad shape by the time I landed in New Orleans. I was meeting new people and Alison was planning on attending the events. She volunteered to take us around, and it was the most wonderful part of the weekend. I was amazed by the work that this woman is doing in marginalized communities and the respect that she garners.

Alison McCrary is a tribal citizen of the United Cherokee Nation, a social justice movement attorney, Catholic activist, restorative justice practitioner and an internationally sought after speaker on social justice, spirituality and liberation. She currently serves as a practitioner in residence at Wake Forest University School of Divinity, a spiritual advisor on Louisiana's death row and a movement capacity building strategist. She has founded companies, worked on the repeal of Jim Crow laws. She has worked in mediation with the police. There's almost too much to tell, but we are so delighted to have her with us today. Welcome, Alison.

Alison McCrary: Thank you so much for having me, Dr. Holmes, honored to be here with you all.

Barbara Holmes: What does it mean to hold tribal citizenship in this Cherokee Nation? I couldn't pronounce the exact tribe, so I thought I'd leave that to you.

Alison McCrary: Sure. Yeah. Ani-Yun-Wiya is what we called ourselves before the colonists came here and called us the Cherokee people. It means the real people. And so I'm of mixed heritage. My dad is Scottish and French. My mother is Cherokee Nation. I believe that indigenous is how we live our lives every day. It's about relationship. It's about connection with the land, and a lot of people do not have the privilege of having formal enrolled citizenship in a nation. And so I just want to honor the many reasons how colonization has impacted who is allowed to be a citizen and who isn't of various

nations, and to honor all of our heritages, our ancestries and indigeneity of many people who are mixed heritage.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah. Brian Swimme says we all sat around fires. We're all indigenous people of one sort or another. But how does a rural Southern United Methodist find her way to Catholicism?

Alison McCrary: Yeah. So I moved to New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina in earlier 2005. And after Hurricane Katrina hit, I came back to the city by choice and said, "This is a magical place. We have to rebuild the city." And I was looking for what are the needs? And I was walking around the neighborhood of the Treme where my church was, St. Augustine Catholic Church, and I wasn't a parishioner there yet. And I met a Catholic priest named Fr. Jerome LeDoux. Father LeDoux, may he rest in peace, was an incredible local icon. He was a black Catholic priest, was the first black man to get his doctorate of Canon law in Rome, was a strict vegan before veganism was as popular as it is now. And he would always make funny jokes. He would say, "I'm not racist except for my food. No white rice. No white sugar. No white salt." He was just so relatable and so lovable, and he really integrated so many traditions into the Catholic liturgy.

So I asked him, I said, "What's the need of the community here?" And he said, "Well, we need food. All the stores are closed after Katrina." So I started a food pantry with some friends. We called it the Making Groceries and Treme Food Community Center, and we were helping people with FEMA applications. Anyone who needed a space for anything, we said, "Come in. You lost your barbershop during the storm. Come in and start your barbershop here. We'll get you some clients. Whatever you need, whatever food you need, come on in."

And so that's how I met Father LeDoux, and he said, "You should come worship with us." I said, "Well, I'm not Catholic." I said, "I don't know what you all do." I said, "My family said you all are pagans because you pray to statues and idols and they think it's idol worship." So I went and I sat in the back pew. I didn't know any of the prayers we were saying because everyone had them memorized. I didn't know when to sit or stand or kneel, but I kept going, and there was something about the sacredness of that place that called me.

We had an archbishop at the time, Archbishop Hughes, who had set our parish to close after Katrina. So as I was becoming a Catholic, he set it to close. And St. Augustine is the first black Catholic Church in the United States. It's the first integrated church where free people of color, people who were forced into slavery and white people worshiped under the same roof. It's an indigenous burial ground. It was a burial ground for people who were enslaved. And it's the home of the Tomb of the Unknown Slave and also where the first order of black Catholic nuns, the Sisters of the Holy Family were founded. And so it was really sacred ground.

And so me and six former Black Panthers and some other activists from our parish, we decided to occupy the rectory. So we changed the locks on the door. We boarded up the windows and doors. We had a pulley system going up to the third floor with a bucket that people could put milk and food in. And we occupied the rectory to keep

that church open. This was all while I was becoming Catholic. It was knowing that the Catholic Church had the largest volumes of encyclicals of social justice teachings, but it was really seeing Catholics on the margins, black Catholics, queer Catholics, women Catholics, standing up and saying, “This isn’t right to close this historic parish, this holy ground. We lost our physical homes during Hurricane Katrina, and now you’re taking our spiritual home.” And so the church stays open today and remains very sacred and holy ground. A big part of my Catholic journey was during that occupation of the rectory.

Donny Bryant: Wow, wow. So Alison, where does this hermeneutic for social justice and activism come from? How did you develop this rubric or this worldview of fighting injustice, particularly in the area that you’re in, but where does that hermeneutic come from? Where did you get inspired? What was leading up to, and how did you get to where you are today from that perspective?

Alison McCrary: I stand on the shoulders of lots of people, so many elders and mentors who have transitioned, and from how I grew up. We grew up religious, Christian Methodist and then Southern Baptist because that was the cool thing to do in middle and high school, but it was really seeing how racism was playing out where I grew up in rural Georgia. The Klan was still marching on the weekends. I remember my mom hiding us under the public library steps on the square in Oxford, Georgia when the Klan was marching. And I said, “Why are we scared? Who are those people?” I remember we were hiding because she’s brown and it wasn’t safe.

So seeing that and growing up, my middle school and high school was shut down for weeks at a time for racial riots. It was about 50% black, 50% white. And seeing what was happening and trying to reconcile that with the gospel teachings that I was hearing on Sundays, even if I was like, well, the scripture says this, and I don’t know why the pastor is interpreting it, but how I’m thinking about it as a young person and what I’m seeing and feeling is right and just. And so I was always curious and always spiritual growing up and tried to read and study the Bible a lot on my own, confusing my parents oftentimes, but also growing up in a home with a lot of violence.

We had a lot of violence in my family. My dad was in and out of incarceration for domestic violence. And so seeing how that was playing out and how this carceral system and the system of policing, of prosecution, of prisons didn’t help my dad to be a different person and it didn’t help my mom or my family to heal. And just seeing how that system doesn’t work for anyone, and that’s when I started doing a lot of criminal justice reform work, and I’ve been doing that for more than two decades now.

Barbara Holmes: You said that you had a conversion experience at St. Augustine. Was it the social activism that you were engaged in or was it more of a metaphysical? Is it something you can share?

Alison McCrary: A piece of it was seeing the action part. Seeing Catholics putting their faith

into action and acting on their conscience of what was in their hearts for what they felt compelled and called to do, even if it meant challenging the authority of the bishop at the time. That was very profound and powerful, but it was a deeply heartfelt experience. I remember sitting in these pews and I would just weep. Those pews were built by people who were enslaved because they had to sit in a different part of the church, but they built that church.

So feeling that and feeling this holy ground, this holy presence and experiencing it also in the Eucharist and in community and seeing how we as a people came together. Even when our priest, Fr. Jerome LeDoux had been taken from us, we continued to worship. We continued to keep the spirit alive in that space. We had 24-hour vigil with song, with prayer, and continuing to practice our traditions in the ways that we could, with or without a priest and with or without our bishop's approval.

Donny Bryant:

I really want our listeners to really understand the passion that you have. You have this engine, this divinely inspired motor that just keeps going. You referenced your criminal justice work, and I want them to hear a little bit more about some of the work that you're doing and have done. Specifically, I want you to share a little bit more about the work that you've done at the Angola State Penitentiary there in Louisiana because you've done some fascinating work, you've done some very important work, and there's some historical references that I want our listeners to be able to understand about the relationship between state penitentiaries and plantations, particularly there in Louisiana. So if you can just share a little bit more about the work that you've done in the past and even moving up to the present as you're fighting to try to eliminate the death penalty within the state of Louisiana.

Alison McCrary:

Absolutely. Thank you. So out of our contemplative practices, out of our prayer, out of our worship should come action. Otherwise, what's the point of it? If we're not actively working to change the world, and every action that we take is a vote for how we want the spirit to move in the world, how are we to incarnate God in this world and what are we called to do and how are we called to become? And sometimes, that means changing and evolving. Thank God for evolution.

So I believe we're called to go to the margins. I feel like that's where God most speaks to me. As someone who's on the margins of the Catholic Church, as a woman, as a queer person, as an indigenous person in light of church-run boarding schools, I think the margins is where we can have the most movement in our hearts. It's a love that comes through relationships that helps anchor us in the present moment of what's happening. So we can talk theoretically about what's to come and future. We can talk about what's happened in the past. It's really about what's happening in the present moment and how do we breathe the spirit of love into this world, even in some of the most oppressed places?

Angola State Prison is the largest prison in the United States. It was a former slave plantation. It's named Angola from the country in Africa where people

were forcibly and violently taken from and brought there. I have been a spiritual advisor on death row there for 19 years, accompanying people who are facing executions. And today in Louisiana, here in February of 2024, our state legislature just approved to bring back the electric chair, going back decades in time to bring back gassing with nitrogen, hypoxia, suffocation as a method of execution, despite testimony from rabbis yesterday saying that that was used by Nazis in Germany and we don't want that done in our name and the trauma that that evokes to our Jewish relatives. And to keep the whole process secret so that any lethal injection drugs, someone will not know what the government is putting into their body so it cannot be challenged as cruel and unusual punishment under the 8th Amendment.

And so pretty much stripping people on death row of all rights. Many who are innocent, 80% of convictions in Louisiana have been overturned on death row. A month ago, we just had a conviction overturned for someone who was wrongfully convicted. So our state gets it wrong. And when we're talking about taking a human life, you can't risk getting it wrong.

Yeah. One of the people who I accompany is a guy named Chris. Chris is 80 years old and in a wheelchair. I've been visiting him for 20 years. He's a great grandfather, and our government is now going to set a date to execute him. And so in the accompanying ... A lot of people don't know what a spiritual advisor does. That means that we meet with them monthly. We do spiritual direction, if many people are familiar with that practice, but it's also getting to know their family, other people who are in their lives, meeting with the victim's family member. I often facilitate restorative circles between the victim's family member and the person on death row as a restorative justice practitioner, bringing them communion and taking their phone calls, sending emails, sending spiritual materials and books as I'm able to, and also planning their funeral. We're the only ones in the execution room when an execution happens.

And so what's to come this year here in Louisiana is very sad. Last night, there was an execution in Texas of Ivan Cantu and there was a botched execution in Idaho. When we have Department of Correction officers administering medical procedures, they're going to get it wrong because it's not part of their training. And so this is what's done in our name. And as people of faith, we stand up against it to say this is contradictory to our values of mercy, of compassion, of forgiveness, what's essential of our faith traditions.

Barbara Holmes: You say your first call is to social justice. I don't see the difference between the call to becoming a nun, becoming a religious and to social justice. I think that's what we're called to. Maybe that's the way I've looked at it all my life, is that to serve as a religious practitioner is to work for social justice.

Alison McCrary: Yes, absolutely, Dr. Holmes. I don't see much different either. And yeah, I think we're all called to be holy beings and to allow the divine to work through us and to be the eyes, the ears, the hands, the feet, the heart of God in this world and whatever container it is that holds that. Whether for me, it was a Catholic nun for 14 years. Now I'm not a sister anymore and just Alison in the world. And I feel like I'm able

to be a little more radical in the work that I'm able to do and say yes to more things around ministry that I felt more confined to. And I think we have to let go of the containers and institutions that limit how God is wanting to move in our lives. Sometimes that's really hard and heavy decisions. And ending relationships and leaving institutions that we might be very comfortable in is hard, but we listen to the spirit's invitations to grow and to evolve so we can live more fully, most fully into how spirit is calling us.

Barbara Holmes: A lot of people don't know how to do that though. They don't know how to make themselves available for the work. They know what they're called to, but they don't know which avenues to take. And you talk about something called radical availability. Maybe that's a helpful path for those who really want to be allies but don't know how to go about it.

Alison McCrary: When I was a sister, a piece of the reason why I joined as being a sister, we made vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience. We live a life of prayer in community to do ministry. In my heart, when I was a sister, I was like, "Well, this is the only way I can be radically available to love everyone who needs love because this means I don't have one primary partner that's getting most of my time and attention or children who are getting most of my time and attention," which are beautiful vocations. But I was like, "I think this is the way I can love most radically." And I found that wasn't true.

And I think even though I've been out of the convent, call myself out of order, I did life out of order. Out of the order I've gone. Some people say I'm crazy and out of order and need some settling down, but yeah, I did things a little backwards, but there's so many ways to love. I structure my life so I can have a radical availability to love everyone who needs love and to try to go on the margins of the margins of the margins and try to identify who is that and how is that? That takes discernment and it takes community. We can never have too much community. I used to think, oh, well, the sisters are my community, and I'm like, "No, I have an abundance of community. I have so many pockets of communities."

And it's important to remember, and I map those out on poster board sometimes just so I can remember the abundance of community and support that I have when I have to discern so that I can listen to other trusted people and people who can ask me open and honest questions so I can delve deeper in my discernment with trusted friends to make wise decisions or wiser decisions.

Barbara Holmes: Now, you know, Alison, when you say, "I used to be a Catholic nun but I'm not anymore," you have piqued the interest of everybody and everybody wants to ask why. What helped you? We know what helped you to move into the order? What convinced you it was time to leave the order?

Alison McCrary: So it had been a tugging on my heart for a few years, a feeling confined of being one of the age minority in women religious or Catholic nuns. I was one of few under 70 years old in my congregation, one of few under 70 in my state. And so having that community and relationships was important and having a level of depth and intimacy in those relationships with people I would do life with for the long haul. So it was



hard to find that.

So a lot of it was around intimacy. And to me, that means into me see, see into me, see into me deeper and to really have people who know me on that really much deeper level and for the long haul to do this work and to have that type of support. And so yeah, a piece of it was around that.

And then also just having less confinement around what I might be able to do for ministry. I think sometimes, people put expectations on folks who might be ordained or religious or we're put on pedestals and we're expected to act a certain way, talk a certain way or dress a certain way. It makes us less than ... They think more than human, but I think less than human.

Donny Bryant: Less than human, right, yeah.

Alison McCrary: We're really living into the fullness of our humanity. My prayer is no different than your prayer. It might look a little different, but we all have the same access to the divine and the holy and the sacred and our traditions all call us into that.

Donny Bryant: Well, Alison, your vulnerability or your willingness to be vulnerable is contagious. You're a movie star. You're a TV celebrity now. I got to tell you. As I was following some of your work and doing some research about your work, I was so inspired. I was like, "Who is this person? Wow. She is so motivated. She is so disciplined. She is so structured." And I was like, "Wow. I need to get up. I need to get out there and do some more stuff here in Detroit." And then I watched season eight, episode five of Queer Eye. And I got to tell you. I saw a side of you, Alison, that was amazing, that was beautiful. There was a level of vulnerability. There's a level of sensitivity. There was a level of openness. And I really, as I watched that episode, I can literally say that I watched you relinquish control in that 54-minute episode.

It's interesting because Fr. Richard where he talks about the opposite of faith is not doubt, the opposite of faith is certitude. And in my interpretation, the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is control. So you literally relinquished that level of certitude, that level of control throughout that episode.

First question is does your home still look the same way? But second question is just tell us about that experience. Tell us about that journey, if you can tell us about what that meant to you and how that impacted your life.

Alison McCrary: Yeah, thank you. I had so much resistance when Queer Eye reached out to me and said, "You were nominated." I said, "What?" And so they wanted to interview immediately and then they had me make videos of every room in my house, narrating every drawer, cabinet, closet, everything. And they're like, "And you can't change it." I said, "Okay." It was one of the most vulnerable things I've ever done. I'm giving a 60-person production crew access to everything in my house. They can look wherever they want and find anything they want, and you have no idea how they're going to pitch the episode, how they're going to edit it. And then when filming started, I had no idea what they were going to do. I was like, "Well, for sure they're going to go with me up to Angola Prison to death row. That would be a cool episode. Or of course



they're going to go to my church. That's pretty special. The church needs help."

They actually did want to film in the church. And the day before filming, they were going to renovate my church, which was amazing. I was so excited. And the archdiocese said, "We don't give commercial permission. Commercial filming isn't allowed." And so that was a real disappointment.

Anyway, yeah, the episode was very intense, overwhelming, very vulnerable. At first, I was resistant to it, like this is so superficial. I've never had a TV. I never had Netflix. I never heard of the show. I talked to friends. They said, "Oh, Alison, it's a really wholesome show. You should do it. A lot of people want to be on that show."

Barbara Holmes: Yeah. Good.

Alison McCrary: And so yeah, I was like, fashion, my house. I'm pretty cool. I just want to do my ministry work. So it seemed very superficial, but they do go deep. So when you talk about the superficial, sometimes it brings up deeper things, of course, of like I do like order. And for those of us who had chaotic childhoods with unpredictability, having order and being heavily organized is a piece of survival. This is something I can control and that gives me certainty and predictability. But it's also, if you saw the episode, you saw I'm pretty type A organized, and I do a lot of hospitality so people coming out of immigrant detention centers, ICE detention centers, Louisiana has the highest rate of those, they'll come live with me for three days or three months. The house is used for that, which is why everything is labeled and organized in addition to having that level of certainty.

But yeah, definitely relinquishing control throughout the episode and giving them full access of everything and having no idea. Every day, you get in the car and you're with one of the Fab Five, and I don't know who they're going to introduce me to, what they're going to ask me to do, who I'm going to meet or any of that. But yeah.

Barbara Holmes: It sounds like it was fun though.

Alison McCrary: It was fun. It was fun. I've made some adjustments, but yeah, I'm working on incorporating some of the new items in the wardrobe. I'm working on giving a little more attention to my appearance, which I'm usually pretty simple about, and working on the relationship and dating piece. But it was also my ... I think coming out in this day and age isn't such a radical thing, so I'm just like, "Does it need attention or not?" But it was also most people didn't know that I identify as queer. And being queer and Catholic and public about it, people have told me is important to them, so it's been nice. I get about 600 messages a day on Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, LinkedIn, all the TikTok, all the things. So it's really beautiful to see how it's impacted people and inspired them or made them feel more comfortable in their own identities.

Barbara Holmes: Alison, you say, "I think good theology can change the world." How does it change the world when we can't agree on anything at all?

Alison McCrary: Yeah. I believe in the power of our hearts to change. I saw it yesterday. Yesterday, I organized a prayer vigil on the steps of the Louisiana State Capitol. It was a prayer

vigil for compassion, mercy, justice and for life. It's through a group I started called Louisiana InterFaith against Executions, and we had about 100 clergy and people of faith, people of morals gather on the steps in prayer and in song.

And usually, every vote in Louisiana on criminal justice is strictly divided among party and race lines. Most of our Democrats are black. Most of our Republicans are white. The Republicans rule the House and the Senate and the votes fall that way on nearly every issue. And we have to get people to cross lines. And even though this one bill passed that will commence executions in Louisiana this year, we were able to get four people who were in support of this bill to be against it, both on the House side and the Senate side. So those were eight hearts that were three days ago, very deeply convinced that they are for the death penalty. Over just a couple of days, their hearts and minds were shifted.

And I don't think any amount of data will ever change hearts and minds, but it's the stories, it's the prayer, it's conversation, it's dialogue. And we saw that as well back in 2018 here in Louisiana. I led our statewide campaign to end non-unanimous juries. Louisiana was the only state in the country where a person could get life without parole with a non-unanimous jury. So that meant in most states, you have to have 12 of 12 juries say this person is guilty. And here, when black people were allowed to serve on jury, they said, "Well, we only need 10 of 12 votes to convict someone." And this was to keep what you talked about earlier, the plantation prison culture that happens here where people are paid two cents an hour to work on agriculture farms in our prisons.

And so this was 138-year-old Jim Crow law, and we had worked to change it. And I said, "Well, gosh. We're in this red state. It's deeply conservative. How are we going to overturn a Jim Crow law?" But we were able to get 67% of Louisianans to vote to overturn it. And in 2018, we ended this practice.

And I really believe that hearts can be converted, and we have to hold onto the hope that that can happen. I always go back to this quote from St. Augustine of Hippo who said, "Hope has two beautiful daughters, anger and courage, anger at the way things are but the courage to change it." And for me, when I become enraged at what I'm seeing in the news, what I'm seeing in the world, what I'm seeing happen in Palestine, what I'm seeing happen in the Ukraine or in our own states here, I have to have the courage to change it, to do this work, otherwise the anger will fester inside of me. So it's like how do I embody it to move it out and into some kind of action, whether it's starting a petition or gathering with others in prayer or attending a march? And naming that that is all divine work, that is the embodiment, that is incarnation of God in the world through protest, through marching, through our social action. And that is part of my spiritual practice, is that embodiment, that incarnation of love in the world through that.

Barbara Holmes: For those who still feel uncomfortable, I live in the state of Florida, so every person of color in the state of Florida is being made to feel uncomfortable right now as we struggle with revisionist histories and all of that type of thing. And what you suggest, it seems simple but it's so effective. You said, "Listen to those who are on the margins."

Listen to people of color. Listen to those who are not like you. When you listen, people will talk. Listening is sacred.” Oh, that is so powerful. It is so powerful.

Alison McCrary: Yes. I try ... As a lawyer, I have a level of privilege and power with that. And we have to take direction from those who are closest to the problem, those who are closest to the pain because they're the ones who are closest to the solutions, and there's lots of barriers to keep us from listening to them. It's much more comfortable for our elected officials and others to work with the professionals. It's a lot harder to get access to someone who's behind a prison wall, behind barbed wire and kept in a cage to listen to their voice and to listen to their ideas.

There are guys inside of Angola right now who writing the most brilliant proposals for social change. They have these platforms. They've developed campaigns, beautiful strategy. I don't see professionally trained strategists with PhDs out here in our movement spaces coming up with strategies like that. We have to listen to them, and we have to find ways to really move towards them. I think around when you said, when I listen, people talk, and we always have a lot to say as social justice advocates, activists, and when I'm talking to people with different views, it's really listening to where are they and how can I meet them where they are to evolve them in a different way?

We have to be strategic in how we enter into those conversations and to enter in it with love and compassion and really believing that everyone is doing the best that they can with the information that they know. Even people who are causing great harm, I think they want to do good and they want to do what's right. And sometimes, either misinformation or they're not hearing certain voices that need to be heard and listening for what is my work to do around that?

Donny Bryant: For people who may not be in Louisiana but may be in another part of the country who may be inspired by your work or may be inspired by what you're doing, how can they get involved or what is an avenue? What's a vehicle? What is an opportunity? Or is there a pathway for people to be able to participate in some of the criminal justice activity that's happening in their local state and their local area? What would you suggest for people like that who may be inspired to do something?

Alison McCrary: I encourage people to listen to the issues that propel your heart, what sets your heart on fire? Start there because that's where your passion is. So start with the issue that propels your heart. And if you're not sure what that is, experiment. Go into different places. Listen to different stories. Go to the immigrant rights meetings and listen to their stories. Go to the criminal justice reform, formerly incarcerated people movement near where you live and listen to their stories. Listen to the stories, what propels your heart. So start there.

And there's lots of ways to be involved. We all have different abilities, different skills, different talents, different mobility in terms of how we can move and different resources that we may be able to bring to a movement or to create social change. So I think showing up is 90% of the work in any space, and it's just showing up and being present. So show up. Be present. A lot of it will come from that. The spirit will guide

you and tell you what to do. There's no roadmap for it. The roadmap is in your heart, and that's not pre-written. That's going to evolve and change. So you have to listen to that.

It could be attending a march or a rally. It could be writing a letter. It could be making phone calls. It could just be having these one-on-one conversations that are very transformative. I never undervalue how radical compassionate communication is when we really listen to each other for what's important, how we're feeling, what the values are that's underneath what we're talking about. And we really have to value that as much as the other work, the policy stuff that's happening on Capitol Hill or whatever else. It's all equally valued. And if one doesn't have the physical ability or that capacity, maybe they have financial resources that they can give to support the work and support the movement. That's always a need too.

Donny Bryant: Absolutely. Thank you so much. Thank you.

Barbara Holmes: I loved the essence of what New Orleans is. There's something about the indigenous undertone in that city that just set my heart on fire. There seems to be a different approach to the way race relations work in that city because it's been a problem as it has been in other cities, but there seems to be a way in which the multi-ethnic, multicultural coming together has assuaged some of the problems. Is that what it looks like from the outside? Because it looks like you're able to include Catholicism, indigenous religions, the Orisha. When I was there, there was a parade and all the Orisha folks who were clearly Catholic but seriously devoted to Oya.

Alison McCrary: Yeah.

Barbara Holmes: I don't know how to hold all of that together and I'm always just thrilled to be there to experience it. What can you tell us about that?

Alison McCrary: New Orleans is a big gumbo pot of lots of traditions mixing together. And with all the problems that Catholicism has, because Louisiana was a very Catholic state, was colonized by the French, Spanish, Italian who were mostly Catholic, Catholic was the required religion here. But also because of that, it allowed for a lot of intermixing of traditions from the Caribbean, from Central America, from African countries all mixed together. And those have been really carefully preserved. New Orleans isn't as transitory of a city as other places. There are people who have lived in the same family home for generations and who have no plans to leave, regardless of how much climate change threatens us as we lose a football field of land an hour here in South Louisiana. Some of us are deeply devoted to staying here.

While we have our social problems where New Orleans is very much seen like a developing country in terms of a lot of our social issues and poverty, I think being able to have the cultural traditions to help us heal. I think when you were visiting us, Dr. Holmes, in 2019, there was the reenactment of the 1811 Slave Revolt that we watched coming down Rampart Street and into Congo Square, and seeing the embodiment of this with power, with fire, with this energy, with this hope and determination and weaving the culture, weaving the songs, the drumming, the dancing into it. And that's

in all things. It's in the black cultural traditions of New Orleans. It's in the African diasporic religious traditions here. It's in our indigenous traditions here, which are also very strong.

We just built a new Indian mound here on the Lafitte Greenway. We buried our language books. We buried items from our ceremonial grounds into this sacred mound, and we believe that this mound will help us heal and will be medicine for us. We build regalia together. We have ceremony together. We have stick ball teams, also known as Indian ball, indigenous sports. And so very strong traditions here that do mix like a cup of gumbo. And I think that allows us to have that community to heal and that coming together.

Barbara Holmes: What an amazing example you're setting for all of us.

Where do you think we're going next, Alison? There's something about you that speaks to the prophetic in the midst of the folks who need the prophetic word more than anyone. Where are we headed?

Alison McCrary: Oh, wow. I have no idea, Dr. Holmes. I live in this moment because I feel like the spirit is in this moment. And the 13.8 billion year history of the universe is great wisdom to guide us and how to move forward and to look at what destruction we have done to this earth and to creation and what we need to do moving forward. It gives me deep time perspective when I look at our social problems to keep things in perspective about how change happens. And it reminds me that we have to live out of this deeper oneness, this deeper connectedness, knowing that all of us as humans are connected and our connectedness to the land, to all of creation and to rewild our lives, to be in relationship with connection like that and to have bold courage, to take risk, to dream bigger and to gather with others, to talk about the most pressing questions of our time, to listen deeply to the collective wisdom among us.

Justice work, there are no solo acts. It's all community work and we're all doing it together. And when we gather together, we can listen to the wisdom that emerges and identify ways to support and encourage each other and plan for the future. And when we live in a country where fascism is real and it's happening where Christian fundamentalism and Christian nationalism is causing harm now, we have to get close to each other. We have to stay connected. We can't sit in our individual homes scrolling through our phones on social media. We have to have this connection. We have to gather with each other and keep each other close and just encourage people to get out of our homes and gather together in as many ways as possible. Bring people together. Cultivate that energy, passion, creativity and new ideas so that we can move from a place of rootedness, of connectedness and renewal when we're able to do that.

We create the communities that we need for ourselves. We create the containers that we need. Last night, I had 14 people in my living room. We were all sitting shoulder to shoulder and we were talking about classism, and we ranged from high schoolers to people in their 70s. It was men, women, non-binary folks, people of all ethnicities and races. We were a very mixed group. And we talked about class, and everyone went around and talked about what their parents did for a living growing up and how class

impacts them, what class they are part of now, if they were raised poor, if they were working class, if they were middle class or owning class, and how that impacts how we move in the world, how does that make us feel and what emotional work we need to do to heal from the class divisions and from what capitalism does to us.

So we create the containers and the conversations that we need to heal and to create the change that we need to create. So I always invite people to create those communities, gather the people, have the conversations you need to have for your own healing and for what sustains you, and to identify what are the practices that we need for how we survive living in resistance to oppression every day. And we see it growing nationally and internationally.

And so really naming those practices and cultivating them with others is essential. I make a list of it. I call it my mental health medicine cabinet, my spiritual health medicine cabinet. I have a list of my 30 practices. And whenever my prayer life feels dry or I'm feeling alone, I go to that kit and I'm like, "What haven't I done recently?" I go back to that.

Donny Bryant: Well, Alison, this is a reminder that this is just not someone else's responsibility, that this is also our responsibility. And you do invite us to, as you say, create a container but just create the opportunity, create moments, see every day as an opportunity to be able to have a conversation, to be able to be connected, to be able to participate in someone else's healing, to be a blessing in someone else's life, and to utilize our individual gifts, our individual resources to be able to cocoon among, to make the world a better place. And it is connected to our contemplative experience.

Maybe you can share a little bit about your practice and how out of your practice of contemplation, you continue to be motivated, you continue to be inspired. It seems like you never get tired. I don't know how you do it, but make that connection for us and for those of us who are practitioners of love, practitioners here in the contemplative experience. But how do we continue to move forward in the action piece?

Alison McCrary: Yeah. Yeah. So a lot of my practices include morning meditation, prayer with scripture or poetry, painting, art, watercolors, praying with music, journaling, always smudging every morning. First thing is a cleansing and lighting a candle and just sitting in the darkness and the silence and starting my day off with that. When I don't start my day off with that, I know something is off and feel it. But it's also pausing in the moments throughout the day to name these divine and holy moments and to take stock of it and say, "Wow. God was just in that conversation. That was a hard conversation. I did not want to have that. Spirit was there." So really naming that.

I make an annual 10-day silent retreat. I have engaged in a lot of our indigenous ceremony practices and a lot of spiritual reading and prayer work and also staying active in my home parish community. I'm a lector. I run our social justice committee. I'm a lady of Peter Claver, which is a Catholic organization. After 19 years of them asking me, I finally said, "Yes, I'll join."



And I also believe that contemplative practice for me is advocating for forms of justice that bring healing, forms of justice that build up our communities, forms of justice that address the root causes of harm and oppression, forms of justice that address and shift the cycles of harm from happening. And really working towards reconciliation and accountability that heals, and shifting from punishment to repair and healing and from control to support for people, and joining hands in beloved community and supporting each other on the journey and doing it together.

Barbara Holmes: Thank you so much, Alison. This has been an amazing conversation. Your ministry is a blessing to the world.

Alison McCrary: Thank you. It's such an honor to be here with you all and to share with our community. Thank you.

Donny Bryant: Thank you, Alison. Thank you.

Thank you for listening. We'd like to leave you with a few reflections from our conversation with Alison McCrary. Dr. B., this was a fascinating conversation that we had with Alison, and one of the themes that came out of this interview, Dr. B., was around this theme of sacred anger and/or righteous anger. And as we were reflecting on this conversation, Dr. B., I thought about where does that righteous anger come from? Where does that identification come from with the oppressed? Alison told the story, Dr. B., about her childhood, and she pulled back the curtains on an experience that she had with a mother where the Klan was marching across their property, and her mother hid her along with her mother under the porch. And for me, what I understood from that moment in her life was that that's a transformative.

Barbara Holmes: That's a moment you never forget. No matter how old or young you are, it's transformative. I wonder if our listeners have had moments like that, that help them to shape their very own identities. For me, Alison doesn't identify by race or gender. She identifies in the very way that Christ told us to, to align with the poor, to work with those on death row, to work with poverty in New Orleans. This is the way you embody being a Christian. I'm not always sure we remember how to do it. Alison is an amazing example.

Donny Bryant: Yeah, absolutely. Her faith is deeply woven into her social justice work. The action that she takes is totally intertwined with the way she sees the world and the way she sees God, her theology and her anthropology. It's a blueprint. It's an example for all of us to be able to not see ourselves as other, but to see ourselves as one with those who are on the margins, those who are oppressed, those who are downtrodden. It literally embodies the Christ-like theme of identifying with those who are hurt.

Barbara Holmes: That's right. The other thing that I noticed that really struck me is that she's willing to shed titles of great importance. You have to have seen her sister. There she is. She's the nun who's more famous than any nun at the moment in New Orleans, and she's willing to shed it when it's time. She's willing to say, "That's not who I am. That's who I inhabited for a while, but I could still do God's work. Not in a formal way, but as one of the lay priesthood of believers."



Donny Bryant:

To our listeners, I would like to invite you as a practice to recall a time where you felt righteous anger about injustice. I'll invite you to sit with that feeling and sit with that emotion and allowing it to surface and try to notice where you feel it in your body, and now imagine directing that energy towards a specific action that you can take to resist and stand against oppression. Thanks for listening.