

LOVE IN A F*CKED UP WORLD PODCAST
EP14 SHIRA HASSAN

Dean: I'm Dean Spade. Welcome back to Love in a F*cked Up World, where we talk about how to build and sustain strong connections because our resistance movements are made of our relationships and are only as strong as they are. Before I jump into this week's episode, I wanna invite you to check out our Patreon if you haven't already, at patreon.com/deanspade.

I've been having a lot of fun building the platform and adding content that I don't really want to put on more hostile platforms. So there's a kind of different intimate conversation happening there, really cute message boards where people are meeting each other and discussing themes from the book and the podcast. And we're also having live conversations including an upcoming one with Dori Midnight.

We also just launched a store where you can pre-order the new edition of Mutual Aid, which has new content and writing in it, things I learned over the last five years since the first edition of Mutual Aid came out. And you can also buy cute things like hats and t-shirts to help us keep the podcast going.

This week I'm so excited to share a conversation I had with my dear friend, Shira [00:01:00] Hassan. I've been learning from Shira's work for over 20 years. I first encountered Shira when she was working with the Young Women's Empowerment Project, an organizing project by and for young women impacted by the sex trade and street economies.

YWEP created a range of publications and organizing resources that have been immensely influential to my own work, and I think more broadly to the feminist abolitionist world. Shira has contributed so much to the harm reduction and transformative justice movements in the US, and all of her work is motivated by this deep commitment to abolition feminism that, you know, honestly is something she has shaped. I really wanna encourage everyone to read Shira's book Saving Our Own Lives, and the toolkit she made with Mariame Kaba, Fumbling Towards Repair.

So what you're about to hear is the second of two conversations I recorded with Shira. For this conversation Shira showed up with some really thoughtful questions that came up for her while reading Love in a Fucked Up World. And her questions made me understand the book in a totally different way because of the depth of her own healing practice and the investigations she's done. It was just a very profound experience for me. We'll be posting the content from my first recorded [00:02:00] interview with Shira on Patreon at patreon.com/deanspade in the next few weeks if you want to hear even more than this.

Shira, welcome back for part two of our interview. Thank you for agreeing to talk more and go even deeper together. I loved our last conversation. And I'm gonna let you lead 'cause it seems like you've brought some prompts, some questions for us.

Shira: Well, thank you for having me back and also being willing for me to like ask you some questions that came up for me while I was reading. I just so enjoyed so much of this book for so many reasons and thought so much about what it would've been like to have it when I was younger. And to have it when I was just starting a lot of the work that I was doing (having nothing to do with age 'cause I think I started different journeys at different points). And so there were so many parts of the book that reminded me of different starting places in my journey, or midpoint in my journey, where I got [00:03:00] really stuck. And I think one of the sections that I spent a lot of time like going over was the section on numbness. And I started thinking a lot about how you were seeing like the differences and nuances between numbness and dissociation.

And the reason I ask is because I think of dissociation as lifesaving. And I've talked about this publicly, but you know, I'll just say it again. You know, I have had dissociative identity disorder diagnoses. And surviving abuse and surviving trauma, many people develop dissociative strategies that are nothing short of lifesaving.

If you think about growing up in a violent home, that ability to dissociate is something that is truly like a miracle of our bodies and brains. And so even now [00:04:00] when I've done a lot of work on dissociation and can have sort of like a different relationship to dissociation than I did, I still have to spend a lot of time allowing dissociation in order to connect with other parts of myself that know my own feelings.

I think we talked about 12 step programs and how much that has impacted me personally. And as I got further into it and started to think about how I dissociate into other people, then started like tracking how much. And you write about emotional labor, and I love what you write about emotional labor.

And for me, I hadn't thought about it personally. I have done a lot of emotional labor, but it hasn't felt laborious. Like it's been part of the, the joy of being in connection and community. But one thing that does happen is I start dissociating into other people or I start going into [00:05:00] sort of parts of myself that know how to like manage crisis.

And the crisis manager in me is like the only part of me that's running, right? Like the, and so if I don't step back and allow a period of disconnection, allow a period of like numbness to take over, I'll never know how I'm doing. Like I'll just stay in connection all

the time and stay like in this period or this place of sort of hyperawareness.

Or I think a lot about the difference between presence and hyper vigilance. And so if I don't allow that sort of numbness to creep in, if I don't make intentional space for numbness every day, I'll sort of never know how I'm doing. So I was just really struck by that chapter because it's so important to really be in right relationship to how we numb and how we manage and [00:06:00] how, what all of our coping tools are. But that balance between -- the _nuance_, I guess, less the balance -- between those two. I would just love to hear how you're thinking about that.

Dean: I love what you just described, it's such a careful account of knowing your own states, and I think that it's so beautiful. I know how much practice it takes to become aware of like what happens for us under pressure like you're describing, under pressure of a crisis where we're caring for others or becoming, you know, the manager. It just, the account you just made was for me, like an example of when people have done a lot of work noticing how things unfold in them. And that's really rare. And I feel like that's actually the point of this book, is like, can we move from just automatically being in states to noticing them but not judging them? So that like numbness itself is not bad, nor is like hypervigilance or arousal or other, you know, all of the states.

[00:07:00] But that like there is a cultural package of numbness that's kind of foisted upon us. That's like be numb to your own pain, be numb to others', pain be checked out, maybe like distracted and entertained sometimes is the way that looks. And then be in search of like extreme experiences of pleasure, and those are kind of consumption experiences.

So it's like, go to work all day and like put your head down and numb out so that you don't notice how unpleasant this is and how you're being extracted from. And then like after work, like go to Disneyland or have the most amazing substance, or the most amazing TV show, or the most amazing video game.

That swing set, like that emotional package is the one delivered by capitalism. And I was shaped by that package, as was everybody I know. And I wanna notice how it's living in me and see if there are places where I want choice. Like what do I use to go between these two states? What do I think of that? What happens if I use something else?

Like when I crave one of those two states, is there a feeling I'm avoiding? What's the underlying feeling like? [00:08:00] And just getting to like have more nuance, not necessarily getting rid of.

And for me, I really wanna be living not only at the two poles. Like

for me, a lot of healing work is being able to experience more subtle sensations, noticing the in-betweens and feeling even the possibility of choice. I can't always invoke another state than the one I'm in, but even being like, "oh, I have an intention to feel more compassion right now, but I'm not feeling it, I'm feeling vengeance". Or "I have intention to care for this thing in myself, even though right now I'm feeling judgmental as towards myself" or whatever.

Like just that move of like...And for me, your account was really illustrative of what it's like when we do the work to notice ourselves.

So yeah, dissociation is actually a word I think I don't use in the book and it's not a word I use a lot in my own consciousness about myself. Just, you know, different words grab us and become...But even though obviously I dissociated, I think everybody has to dissociate a lot to get by, and I think some people do that through ways that are kind of typical. When people [00:09:00] imagine the word dissociation they might imagine someone spacing out. But you're describing like dissociating into other people. Many of us dissociated to fantasy or like patterns of worry. I mean, there's so many. We, you know, if I'm not where I am right now, I'm probably dissociating into something, you know? Um, which most of the time, most of us are not where we are right now in our current sensations, we're in thoughts or something that's pulling us away.

But yeah, it's not a word I used a lot. I had a lot of dilemmas about what words to use in this book. Some people told me that some of the words I used sounded too clinical to them and reminded them of bad experiences with psychiatry or other like coercive systems.

Like I use the word distortion a lot. For me, that word is really meaningful. Like I literally think about a crystal and lights coming through like a prism. And it gets, it turns in another direction. I'm like, I've just lost the track of reality and now I'm having like a distorted belief about you or me or the group we're in. So I find that word really useful, but some people were like, that's really clinical.

I decided to keep that because it was so meaningful to me as a visual image. But I tried to use words that like wouldn't be [00:10:00] too clinical if I could avoid it, but would bring an image to mind in a simple enough way. You know? Or like when I use the word projection, I try to describe like what that word is in case that word's unfamiliar to people.

'Cause for me, that's a really visual thing where I imagine myself as a projector, like projecting a story onto you. I'm like, I'm seeing Shira through this lens. I'm making Shira my mom, or I'm making Shira my sister or my ex, or whatever. Yeah, so I didn't use 'dissociation', but I like that you're making the connection between numbness and

dissociation.

And also one of the things that, that I write about, about numbness is about the part where it lets us harm others. Like how like being numb to others' pain is part of the process of like being able to live in a society where I know that the way I live requires others to like, you know, work under terrible conditions or not have what they need, live with pollution that I'm creating. You know, I have to be numb to my impacts to kind of get by in this brutal society. And I think also interpersonally, being able to numb out to another person's pain that I might be causing is part of like how hurt and harm can work.

And it's interesting to think about the word [00:11:00] dissociation in that. I'm curious if you wanna reflect on that at all since so much of your work is about how we do harm each other in our communities and how we stop doing that.

Shira: Yeah. It's so interesting what you're saying. I do think there's a lack of awareness of the harm, like in a lot of accountability work when people are in a true accountability mind frame, when they're there to do their work and really wanna show up, a lot of it is about bringing attention to both. I think we get really distracted by intent and impact like, "but if I didn't intend to hurt you, then you shouldn't feel impacted by it." And I think a good portion of accountability work is bringing awareness to the fact that intention counts, but impact is actually the piece, and that people do numb out to that impact all the time. And we do it in like big and small ways. Like we do it when we participate in a lot of global systems that [00:12:00] in some cases we can't avoid for all the reasons, and then we kind of have to like numb out in order to participate in them.

I do think that's different than dissociation. And so I think it's a really important and subtle difference. Because I do wanna make room for the years that we can spend in dissociation without that awareness as a part of our healing process, as it relates to surviving trauma, surviving our childhood, surviving whatever we've survived. And the kind of critical stage of that, or I don't wanna stage things 'cause it sounds like you have to be older to not do it, which isn't true. But there is sort of a, because I still dissociate proudly, honestly, like I don't know where I would be without it. But I am trying to be more aware of numbness in terms of like [00:13:00] how I impact others. I do just wanna like take a moment for all of the people who don't even know that they're dissociating. And you know, are losing time and can't figure out what happened the last two hours, or day.

That's a really critical and important part of whatever healing journey you're on. I think like numbness can be too, because I, I also don't know how we fully wake up into ourselves without numbness. It's almost like numbness is a really important protector in the same way

that dissociation is. But maybe they protect differently or they serve different functions.

I guess it segues into my next question, which was something I love that you wrote about how numbness and accountability can't coexist. And that's, I don't know if you said that directly, but that's what I was getting, was numbness and accountability can't coexist.

Something we say at Just Practice Collaborative, which is the [00:14:00] collective I'm a part of that's done a lot of work around accountability as it relates to sexual violence, intimate partner violence and intimate violence. We often say curiosity and judgment can't coexist. And so when you have a curiosity you can sort of ask a question, and that sort of interrupts judgment. And that feels like a really important part of how we can be present for each other without sort of slipping into automatic rejection mode.

Or I love that exercise you had with the concentric circles where it's like, this is how I'm feeling, and what else is true, right? Like that exercise describes the "curiosity and judgment can't coexist" reframe that we have in Just Practice. It's like, what else is true?

And so I loved thinking about the "curiosity and judgment can't coexist" with those models. And then as I was reading further you were talking about [00:15:00] numbness more and accountability more, and I was thinking about how complex that is, right? Because so much of us are numb so much of the time and we need it.

And so what does that mean for our accountability work? And so I don't know, I'd love to hear more about how you were thinking about that.

Dean: Yeah, I mean, that's a great question. I don't think I know the answer. I do think that feeling more, for me, has been a path to being more accountable. Like those things have been connected. And being able to feel more and to feel more subtlety means less like kind of charging through, running over my own feelings and others', ignoring dynamics in a room, rushing myself or others.

I'm also thinking about a really profound experience I had where I started dating someone very intense, like wonderful connection, and the person didn't really believe that they had an unconscious and said this to me. And then sometimes, like all of us, would do something sideways or say something that was hurtful, and then [00:16:00] they were like, "I didn't mean that by it."

And I was like, well, you know, you might feel like, for example, when you are falling in love with someone and you're feeling really vulnerable to them, there might be like a protective hostility towards that person because you're tenderized. And if you don't know that might be a possibility, then when you say something or do something

that you know, may be revealing that, and you're like, I couldn't possibly say or do anything I didn't mean, and that I don't intend...right? This thing you're describing about like how without being able to reckon with unintentional actions we all engage in, we can't be accountable.

And ultimately it was the only like, you know, kind of ultimatum I laid out. I was like, I can't relate with you -- as much as I really am so into this -- unless you can imagine that you sometimes do things you don't mean to do, and that they might impact me.

And that feels related to your question about numbness and accountability for me. Because if I believe, which I do, that my liberation is being maximally in reality, I want to actually be here with what's going on. And as little as possible be caught in like a [00:17:00] story that's not true, that's from our culture or from my family, or for a survival story I made up about myself or others that is not what's actually happening between us right now, but that did me some service. You know? If I'm trying to get to reality, that includes potentially letting in more information than I let in when I made up that story, or when I'm relying on that story under pressure. And so for me that's somehow a process of de-numbing, or of feeling more a lot of the time, or like perceiving more than I at first want to perceive when I set you up as my enemy, or as my abandoner, or like as you're crowding me, or whatever the story that I'm making up is that has a role.

But like what you're bringing is the value of numbness and the necessity of it in the really intense lives that we're all trying to live through and, and also that we've already lived, that we're still experiencing the effects of.

And so what I hope this book is primarily about is that all feelings are okay. And that when we get awareness of them, [00:18:00] we're less likely to act them out on ourselves or others in the ways that are hurtful. But it's not about any feeling being bad. And in our culture where it's like, "be happy, don't be sad, don't be angry" it's very much like 'good' and 'bad' feelings. And I see most people I know suffering from trying to shut out 'bad' feelings or feeling shame about 'bad' feelings. So I, I wouldn't wanna put numbness on a 'bad' feelings list by any means. And, I want to notice that our culture might force it on us more than we want. Or like you were saying, like unconsciously, we might be not noticing that we're not here. And that if we know it a little more, it might give us a little more capacity to act according to our values.

Shira: Absolutely. Yeah. I love thinking about how bringing simple awareness to our daily actions with the people we love, with the people we organize with, the people we have any kind of relationship with can give us the opportunity to not only be [00:19:00] accountable

because it's, there's not always gonna be something...

I think like sometimes people think of accountability as because you did something wrong, you have to be accountable. But a lot of times accountability is just being in the right relationship with that person. Like being in integrity is another way maybe to say being in accountability. Because if you're in integrity in whatever with yourself and with that other person, whether it's a neighbor or a comrade or an organizing collective or someone you love, if you're in sort of right relationship with them, if you're in right size integrity with them, and you're sort of moving at the pace of trust and with that kind of level of consciousness and integrity, you can then also have the right sort of probiotic foundation for something going wrong. And then bringing awareness to something going wrong is a natural part of that relationship because things are always gonna go wrong. Like I think [00:20:00] there's a lot of fear around the word accountability, and I've tried to talk about this sometimes, but we, I still use it all the time 'cause I haven't found anything better.

But at Young Women's Empowerment Project, we used to talk all the time because the word was so scary. Accountability meant like really scary things, right? Like as a kid it had like horrible consequences, and usually disproportionate. And you know, I think trying to be in integrity means that when something goes wrong, that we can show up with the same consistent integrity we've shown up the entire time.

I think numbness is a part of that. I think I'm gonna, I think I'm gonna hold onto that. Like I feel like I love the point of like staying as present as possible, being as attentive as possible, being in as much integrity and right relationship as possible. And I do think there's an important lever that we all, to your point, which I think is so important, need to [00:21:00] consciously engage.

Like we need to know when we're allowing numbness in, and sort of use it as a intentional medicine rather than as the sea we're just swimming in. Although I still have a lot of love and compassion for the times in my life when I could only swim in that sea and I had no idea how to climb out of that water. And I have a lot of love and intention for all of us who are still doing that, and I love that the book gives that permission.

Dean: Yeah, we can't just be a raw nerve at all times, you know, for good reason. Like, you know, sometimes I am exposed to media that's more violent than I really wanna let in. And I see myself stop letting it in, and that's actually just maybe the skillful means for this nervous system.

I do think you're right that that word accountability is scary because it reminds people of punishment. Even though that's, we're trying to, the whole point of us using that word is we're trying to get away from

punishment. I really have noticed that it has that effect on people. And also that people in our communities are like, "we're gonna hold that person accountable" and that they really mean is "let's punish and exclude that person".

[00:22:00] And I love Shannon Perez-Darby's definition of accountability. It's just like, am I acting according to my values? And then it's like, oh, my friends, quote unquote, holding me accountable is just being like, checking in with me in a like loving way. Like, "Hey Dean, like, did you mean to say that? I, I don't think that's the kind of word that you mean to use". Or I didn't, whatever, "you didn't show up to that thing and that where everyone expected you, that seems different." You know, whatever it is that feels...Of course I need and want help doing what I believe in, and I want my life to be aligned with what I believe in, and no one exists perfectly. Or just even seeing the way someone else lives can help me realize, oh, I wanna live more like that.

Like I've had this whole process and experience of realizing that living in our culture, I've been made pretty numb to the pain of animals. And really deepening my desire to de-numb to that pain. And that's from hanging out with people who are less numb to it and have really dedicated their lives to animal liberation.

And being willing to really notice why I had to numb to that, living in a culture that is so brutal towards animals. And what I wanna do with an increasing sensitivity and how it might change decisions in my life related [00:23:00] to animals. And like, for me that feels like a healing journey. But also I live in this culture where animals are constantly brutally harmed and murdered. And so I might not be able to feel that level of sensitivity every minute and get through the day. And so that's, you know, there might be some skillful or unskillful habitual wading into numbness to get by.

Shira: I love that. Yeah. That reminds me of like, I have always tried to be in increasing awareness to the numbness I feel about like the pain the earth is in.

Dean: Yeah.

Shira: And there's a lot of like difficulty with it because there's a lot of access needs that I have that don't align with a lot of environmental justice principles. And so I don't know that it's like always about a numbness in that case. But it is more helpful to me if I try to numb around it in order to like remember the importance of a lot of disability justice pieces in my life and my immediate community I have to sort of [00:24:00] numb around certain things. And it's a problem, right? Like it sucks that those things are in tension a lot. But it also really is helpful to remember that that's intentional, and that there might be something else to do and that it can be a journey

and it doesn't have to be a stuck point.

I was thinking also like it segues into the next piece that I wanted to talk to you about that I loved that came up in the book. I love this term of art that you've created called "rebellious awareness". It like feeds my sort of dirty punk soul to like think about awareness as rebellious in the face of numbing.

I think in liberatory harm reduction and a lot of the work that I try to do, I think about radical acceptance. And I really loved thinking about the relationship between rebellious awareness and radical acceptance. And I wonder [00:25:00] if you thought about the relationship between those things or what you think about the relationship between those things.

Dean: When you say that, the kinds of examples that my brain brings up are about, the more aware we are, the less purity politics we can have. Because we have to be like, wow, things are really, really, really complex and beyond my control. And so there's an acceptance inside it. It's interesting, I was just talking with somebody this morning, a dear friend who just read this book. And my friend was saying that for them reading the book, there was a balance. It wasn't like the way some self-help books read, "I did this and I fixed it and I'm good now and I'm healthy". The person was like, oh yeah, in the book I can tell you're still suffering, and that is easing. Because it's like, yep, there's no silver bullet. And also, yep, there are some things we can do. Like this kind of measured, "I'm still going to be the person who these things happened to and who made these adaptations to survive. At the end of the day, I'm still gonna have this wound, it's gonna visit [00:26:00] me again". I'm gonna be like, "god, Dean, you just did that thing again in that relationship" or in if your work or whatever. And there are actually things I can do to reduce some of what's hard about that, or to learn more about myself and potentially have different experiences.

And so there's like awareness of reality is the thing that helps. And it doesn't help in the sense of like leading to a neat packaged happy ending in which, you know, the idea that some people are like "well" and others are "unwell". Like, you know, these, these kinds of binaries. And I, so I think that this is maybe the overlap between rebellious awareness and radical acceptance.

Like, I think about this a lot too just like with my body. It's like, oh yeah, there's like certain injuries and like kinds of pain I have where it's been really amazing to be like, I'm just gonna have that from now on maybe. And like I do physical therapy things and I do these things to take care of myself, and like also some things hurt to do. And it's so much nicer when I stop being anxious about whether I can make it stop, and whether it's bad, and whether I will always have it. Just like, what's the relationship to this thing that's like,

yeah, it's unpleasant. Like some unpleasant things are here, in my psyche, in my body, in the world, for god's sake, [00:27:00] extremely so.

What are the things that I can actually do about this? I mean, it's very "serenity prayer". Like, you know, what are the things I can change and how can I accept the things that I cannot change? And like for me, it's relaxing to think about it that way.

Shira: Yeah, it's so relaxing. And I think that the radical acceptance...I'm probably wrong about this. Someone should fact check it. But I believe it grew out of Buddhism and then was sort of embraced by 12 step or possibly vice versa. But it is about like accepting things that are out of our control and not judging them. And what I loved about reading about you writing about rebellious awareness was it's like that plus coming into consciousness about what is wrong in the first place, and sort of giving ourself like room and space to tend to what we can control. And I feel like a lot of how I think radical acceptance gets misused (but fair enough) is that we're letting go. We're in this process of letting go, a process of naming [00:28:00] what's out of our control. That is very soothing for me because I'm a control freak. And, I don't know, I don't wanna generalize, but I know that can happen to a lot of survivors. And it can also happen to a lot of people with disabilities 'cause we need our environments to be a particular way.

And so it can be a thing, but it also can just be a personality type, which I'm a double Taurus, so I'm gonna own it. Like I'm a control freak. Oldest child, you know, I've got, I can check every box. And so for me, like radical acceptance around like, oh, I cannot control that, that is actually outside of my sphere of influence: that is very soothing.

And then I loved what you were writing about with radical awareness -- or rebellious awareness. Where it's like, yes, and what is in your sphere? What can you become more aware of? What can you take more control over?

And I think, I don't wanna put them in tension 'cause I think they're actually a continuum. Like I think they're some sort of like beautiful circle diagram about how they feed [00:29:00] into radical awareness -- or rebellious awareness with radical acceptance. Sort of like feeding in this like ocean of, of self-work. And I just loved that so much.

Dean: And political work, I think too. Like I think as radicals, we're always trying to become more and more aware of how everything is connected. How all systems of harm are connected, how the connections between different kinds of transformative action we can take, the connection between people across the different parts of the earth.

There's connections between systems and the ecology, et cetera. And that awareness means that like we know there's not a single thing we can do that would fix it all. Or that, you know, like it's just, you're like, yeah, it's really complex and what can we do? Where is a good starting place?

Or like, our work is gonna be imperfect. Our group is not gonna do this perfectly right. Some people are gonna get left out or not gonna like it. And like if we can have acceptance around that, then it's okay when someone brings the critique. We're not like, oh, we can't bear to hear that. We have to either deny it or stop our work. Right? Like it's like the rebellious awareness allows us to be more accepting and still continue to do what we can [00:30:00] do and not be perfectionists. I think that's true in the interpersonal and in the political work.

Shira: I love that as a check on perfectionism too. I really appreciate that. I love it as it relates to like all of it. 'Cause I think we can use sort of numbing as an excuse around radical acceptance. And so I love like rebellious awareness as the way we come into conscious relationship with numbing. And then thinking about radical acceptance sort of allowing us to be at the exact right place, at the exact right time, doing what we can in the moment, you know?

And just sort of allowing all things to be true without that meaning we don't have to take action.

Dean: Yeah. It's also very related to what you said before about just practicing saying again and again that curiosity and judgment can't coexist. Because what I want is for all of us to be relentlessly curious. So it's okay to find out from somebody, "Hey, the way you did that didn't work for me", or "the way your group is [00:31:00] framing this leaves these people out", and I don't have to defend when I hear that. I'm like, "oh, I'm just so curious to hear more about that, because I already knew we were imperfect people doing imperfect work." So I was ready to learn more about what we might do that might make it a little bit better, or might connect to more people. Or also, you know what? We cannot meet that access need, and we're not gonna deny that it's an access need or that we didn't meet it.

I see this so often with perfectionism around access. It's like people do more excluding by being addicted to being perfect at it than just being like, yes, every space has gaps around access. And we're gonna be intrepid in our desire to build access, but we're not going to pretend it's there when it's not, or say it's not a real need.

But we don't need to go there if we're not defensive, if we're just curious. You know?

Shira: Yeah, I love that. And I love something that gave me a lot of

permission was when I got to be lucky enough to be a part of Young Women's Empowerment Project in my twenties. We intentionally described ourselves as a learning project. We were very clear, like we don't know what we're [00:32:00] doing. We are, you know, we were all young people in the sex trade and street economy using drugs, trying to figure out not only how to build like a leadership membership container, which is hard enough, but also inside of a nonprofit. It wasn't a nonprofit 'cause it wasn't a service model, but we had a C3 designation, which meant that we had to do so much paperwork.

And we were just like, we are just not gonna know. There's so much we're not gonna know. And the constant refrain of "this is a learning project. This is how we are learning how to do this work. This is what it means for young people in the sex trade, young people who are using drugs, dealing drugs, to learn how to be organizers. It means we're always a learning project."

And that refrain really helped around the purity politic. Like we just didn't have a lot of that because we just, there was nothing pure about us. But when we were in struggle around things, we had a consensus process [00:33:00] so that there wasn't like one way, we would often sort of come up with a scale of how we were gonna do things "if/when", so that it allowed for practice to be what guided us as opposed to idea of what the work should look like, or what young people in the sex trade organizing should look like, to be what defined how we operated. And there's something about that that was both, I think, an act of rebellious awareness and radical acceptance at the same time.

I have one last thing.

Dean: Mm-hmm.

Shira: One of the things that I loved about this book -- 'cause I also am like a giant self-help book reader -- I think that was one of our connection points is that sort of ravenous self-help book reading. I am a giant hater of 'you can't love others without loving yourself'. I am so... makes [00:34:00] me wanna throw up and start fires, you know, when I hear that. And there's a lot of reasons for it. I think it just denies people who are actively healing, from love. I think it creates some hierarchy that's so difficult, like it's so ableist, it's not trauma centered.

There's just so many things about it that drive me bananas. The sentence that I've sort of developed around it to say back to people is, "I can love you without loving myself, but I can't connect with you without being in connection with myself." And this is what I need to be in connection with myself so that I can feel the love that I have for you and feel the love that you have for me.

And I feel like that's true in organizing where I need to kind of go into a meeting and go, when I'm sitting with my collective, aware that I may be disconnected for myself in certain ways. And that being allowed to be okay, like I can't be embodied [00:35:00] all the time because I'm in pain and because dissociation is important to me. And I might need to be dissociated, which might mean that I'm not fully connected to myself all the time. But what can I do in that meeting? How can I go into it with rebellious awareness and be present in that?

And what I loved about the book was I felt it was really affirming around that. Like it felt like the book was sort of a recipe for being in as much connection as it's possible for you to be in in any given moment, which is never gonna be a hundred percent. It may for me never even be 80%, right? Like it's just gonna be as much as we can do at the time.

But it's an invitation and sort of a recipe for being in enough connection with ourselves that we can be in sort of, as Shannon [Perez-Darby] would say, our values around how we wanna show up. And yeah, I don't know if you have anything to say back to that, but I just really appreciated that room and that [00:36:00] recipe and that invitation.

Dean: I'm so glad that you said that. 'Cause I think it's so damaging, the things we're told about self-love. And also self-love just has this like, there's like a kind of shallow, mainstream take. "Just love yourself. Just start loving yourself now!" Like, you know, just what does that mean? I think it's really harmful because most people have to be kind of relentlessly critical of themselves, and full of shame to like get by in like school and families and stuff. So those are the most visible feelings inside ourselves often are narratives or self-talk. And then to be told, "love yourself!" And then, you know, people look in the mirror and they don't feel self love or they...you know, most of my life I was just like, what does that even mean? It actually like, it made like an ew, like ugh. Like now I don't trust whoever has just said, or whatever I've just read, that's told me that because it's just too simplistic. And of course it's very mean to say that means I can't love anyone else 'cause I can't relate to that phrase. That's ridiculous.

And I think this, one thing in this, for me that came up when you were talking is how the word "love" is just very, very, very vague in our society. What does it mean? You know?

So if love is a series of [00:37:00] actions, I actually am feeding myself, I actually am bathing, or getting dressed, or finding a way to have sexual pleasure with someone. People are doing some loving and caring for themselves a lot, even while not being able to have the thought or the like kind of succinct, special moment that maybe

they've been told to expect around self love.

So just not ignoring that like the act of surviving and being with others and with ourselves is loving in some kind of basic way that doesn't need to feel like the sensation of love that maybe people are hoping for. It's been healing to me to notice when my friends had kids, I was like, oh my god, it takes so much to keep a child alive. All of that happened for me, even though I don't remember it. And I tried to just let that in, that all of that love happened for me by those same adults who didn't show up in other ways that I do remember.

Just, you know, to do that about ourselves. Like whatever age you are, you lived to that age because you relentlessly [00:38:00] defended yourself from hostile people and culture, when you could. You know, like whatever you have that is pleasurable or expressive, you had to nurture and protect against this world. And like just that there has been a lot of love given, even if it doesn't feel like "I love myself" and that's easy to say and feel. I don't, I just feel like there's a, um, getting away from that very mythicized, abstract, overly pat and simple story about love for ourselves.

And I think I write in the book about how I was 38 when I first felt self love. It was a fleeting feeling and it was really cool. I was like, oh my god, I am so glad I am alive. I was, I was on silent meditation retreat and all the ways in which that allows different sensations to surface for me. And I was like in a beautiful place, and I just had a fleeting moment where I was like, oh my god, that was self love. And I'm so glad I made it to this age and had a moment of that. Not because that's the "be all, end all", or all the other ways I've cared for myself didn't matter. But cool, it can show up what I would've judgmentally thought was late, you know? [00:39:00] 'Cause in my mind, everyone else is probably already having this, you know?

But actually it might never show up, and that wouldn't mean that there wasn't love in our lives for ourselves and others in lots of different ways. But yeah, I really appreciate you like taking away that myth from anyone who's listening, who's still maybe judging themselves about that.

Shira: Yeah, and you know, I'll be honest, I don't know if I've ever truly felt it, 'cause I don't truly understand. It's like self-esteem where it's so amorphous and vague and connected back to things that don't make sense to me. I think one of the things I say to my friends on their birthday, and the people, my chosen family, is, thank you for everything you did to survive. And I think to me that's a lot of what your book is saying is "we've done so much to survive."

A friend of mine talks about coming into like community that's healing, or healing community, or 12 step spaces as like "I can put my armor down in this room and just be as present as [00:40:00] I

possibly can for this moment." And I don't know how I think about sort of self-love overall, but what I do love is that you break sort of the art of loving and being in love with your political community, being in love with anyone, and anything that you're in love with, as a set of concrete practices. And as someone who needs to be re-shown things a lot, right, like I'm constantly like a "give me a recipe!" kind of person, I really appreciate that about this.

Dean: What you said about self-esteem just made me think about, back to the rebellious awareness and radical acceptance piece, I think a lot of us just go to extremes.

We're like, oh my god, I'm terrible. I hate myself. I shouldn't hate myself like I do. Or we're like, I'm great and I'm gonna have an like an empowerment narrative that I heard I should have. Like these two extremes.

And it's like, I think I just wanna be in the middle. Like, yeah, there's some things that I've done and ways I've been a friend to others that I feel good about. [00:41:00] There's some ways that I can see that I have non-loving self narratives that I'm not afraid to know I have. Like, oh wow. Like I can have some internal self-talk that I got from cultural stuff and from ways I was treated that I'm still working with. And it's okay to be sad about it.

Like I know a lot of wonderful people who were truly treated as children, like they were just garbage, and were just not loved and were hurt very badly by the people who were supposed to care for them. That's actually incredibly common. And I feel like they're not allowed to admit that some part of them thinks they're garbage. And that when we actually let ourselves have that awareness, "wow, I've been, whatever, I'm disgusting". Whatever the word is that comes, you know, from your siblings or your teachers or your parents or whoever was around you. "I'm too loud, I'm too much." Whatever the stories are, they're so common.

Like, it's okay to let me notice that circulates in my consciousness sometimes, and maybe affects my behavior towards myself or others, and feel grief about that. "Ah, it sucks that's in there." In the way that I feel grief for my friends and lovers when I see it. I'm like, "oh my [00:42:00] god, you were treated that way, you precious, gorgeous, beautiful being." I wish I could go back and hold you as a child and like have you know how fun and cool and interesting your ideas were and how beautiful and right your body is and how okay you are, you know? And that I think it'd be great if we could feel that about our past selves too.

And sometimes it's easier to feel it for a friend. And I think that's actually an okay place to practice that 'cause even bringing that feeling into our bodies at all is also bringing it to us.

But yeah, so what I'm saying is like being able to be aware that there is self hatred in there and not deny it, and not be ashamed of that. And being aware that probably most of us have a few things we feel good about, about who we are. And that's, and then there's like a cultural narrative, like don't brag and don't be conceited. You know, so people I know who are doing something great are like afraid to talk about it. Or afraid to say "that was a satisfying experience I had at work, or in my activist group, or in my family situation, whatever."

Like, so just finding that kind of like, you know, 12 step slogan: "I'm not the best person, I'm not the worst person." When we let go of those extremes we can be like, oh, [00:43:00] I'm like an ordinary person like everyone else. I do some good stuff. I show up good. I'm, there's some stuff I'm working on. And there's some old messages floating around in my head. And all of those things are fine.

Like that's so hard to get there. And that relentless "you must have good self-esteem and good self-love," really I think it doesn't help. That it's too extreme. It's too rigid.

Shira: It is. And it also is, it has a strange value set attached to it. I really appreciate that. My mind was going in so many places as you were talking 'cause I have so often felt that way with someone who I care about, or even a group of people, where I've just wished I could go back in time and tell them all the things that they should have been told, and do all things that should have happened. And I love that. I love that thought experiment and that journey because it softens us in the ways that I feel like are so necessary for showing up.

We show up so fierce in our work, and we show up so fierce in our community, and we have to be fierce [00:44:00] to survive. So it's so wonderful to have these invitations for softness sometimes. And I do wonder about accountability and softness and what the relationship is there. I'm gonna be thinking about that after this.

Dean: Yeah. I just, sometimes I'm with people I know and I'm just like, you made it here. You're still alive. And everybody I see is like, not just alive, but like expressing beauty, being weird and queer, making art, being brilliant, taking care of people really well. Like just wow. Like in their own individual way that's so gorgeous.

And I'm just like, how'd they do that? Wow. Humanity is so capable of being resilient and intrepid in the face of really ridiculous conditions. And like adapting to love whenever it shows up, even if it was really late and even if it was a really tiny amount, or like squeezing it out of like one relationship with a teacher.

Finding something you needed anywhere you could find it, finding it on

a cartoon, [00:45:00] finding it in a song. Like people just survive, and beyond survive, you know, like express. And I just, I feel so much gratitude and awe about everyone. And then I, I really wanna hold that when people are being really fucked up. Like, you came by this, honestly no doubt.

And when I meet people who have a really tough exterior and are hard to be with in groups, I'm just like, "it was hard, what happened to you, and I am here for it." Including having boundaries. But how can I be like, there's a good reason that you are coming at us this way, and can we regard you as the beautiful thing that you are, and see if there's a way together to like connect better?

Can I have that kind of compassion? Not always possible, but especially when I'm not the direct target, can I be part of creating a container like that for that person?

Shira: Yeah, and boundaries are also okay. Like I'm thinking about the work that we do so often in Just Practice where we're working with people who are violent and abusive, and really also giving ourselves permission to [00:46:00] have boundaries and know that we can create safety for ourselves and safety as a part of what we need to survive. And survival is what we're doing so that we can be as queer and incredible as we can possibly be.

Dean: And the boundary is loving. It's like, my deepest self wants feedback if I'm coming at you in a way that's hurting you, and I deserve that feedback. So I think the other thing is when people think that endlessly allowing someone to cause harm is somehow the compassionate way, that is not the message of transformative justice. I think that is confusing to people. They're like "I'm an abolitionist, that must mean that I can never stop having contact with someone who's hurting me." That is not what abolition requires of us.

Shira: Yeah. It's the same with harm reduction. People get confused about harm reduction, but harm reductionists have some of the most skilled practice at making boundaries as any sort of community.

You will always find boundaries in a harm reduction community, like a community that's bound together through harm reduction. And they [00:47:00] may not be the boundaries you expect, but they are very loving and clear. And I do think it's been a myth that sort of fed into transformative justice. I think one of the secrets in transformative justice that I, I'm always trying to reveal is that so many of us who were a part of transformative justice work came from anti-violence and harm reduction. And those two movements have some of the best boundaries and best practices around boundaries, and I think it's such an important part of investment in creating communities that we can turn back to.

Dean: Yeah, because abolition, transformative justice, and harm reduction are about pragmatic solutions to immediate difficult situations. It's "what's actually the danger?" And let's just create boundaries around the parts that really will matter, instead of excluding huge groups of people using big abstractions to you know, further systems of exclusion and harm. It's like, "oh, what would actually help right now with this [00:48:00] specific thing that we're facing in this space or in the relationship?" Instead of some like massive overreach, which is how the society responds to violence and creates more violence. And it's like, I think people miss that pragmatism is the center to me of transformative justice and harm reduction.

Shira: There is one thing I'm gonna keep sitting with your book, and I've been sitting with it for a really long time as I was trying to write down more things around harm reduction, and as I've been in TJ for so long, I just, and healing justice too. I just keep thinking about also this, like "what is embedded in the value of presence?"

Like we place such a high value on presence, on being able to show up, on being able to be verbally communicative. And there's so many layers to how we make boundaries that involve a lot of self knowledge and involve a lot of like components of presence that create a really [00:49:00] interesting dilemma for anyone who's in an altered state, or who may be disabled, or who may be dissociated, and the ways in which that can affect presence.

And yeah, I'll just leave it at that to say that there's this thing that I'm sitting with and I'd love to, I'm gonna be sitting with it for a long time, 'cause I think it's a tension that exists in a lot of what I do, is that there's a value of if you can't communicate about a particular thing, if you don't have a certain amount of self-awareness or self-knowledge, if you don't have the ability to make, set, and maintain a boundary (and all those things are very hard). And now we're adding the layer of like being embodied, which to me is like the hardest hurdle. And I have a lot of feelings and complex confusion around it because when I sort of was coming up messy in harm reduction, it was a very much 'come as you are' space, which is what kept me alive. And a lot of what we're doing is actually, we're not saying don't come as [00:50:00] you are, because we're saying we're not a culture of disposability. But we are saying, come in a particular way, which I think is fair and good boundaries, but then it gets super complicated for me in between those.

And so I love this book because it provides an opportunity around that. And I just really appreciate this conversation and you, I'm not sure how to close this 'cause I feel like we could keep talking forever.

Dean: We could talk forever. Literally. We will be, hopefully for the

rest of our lives.

Shira: Yes. Amen to that. Or not amen, I'm not religious, but yay. Yay to that.

Dean: Thank you for bringing such juicy questions. It's really a pleasure to me. You know, I wrote this book for like nine years, and didn't share it much along the way with people. Compared to my other work I felt a lot of shyness about it. And so it's really amazing to get to engage with people I love and respect and learn from, and whose wisdom guides the book. You know, you are such a person. And I am also very grateful for everything you ever did to survive.

Shira: [00:51:00] I'm so grateful for you and I can't believe we get to have something in our hands that represents nine years of your life. That's so incredible, and thank you for putting nine years into it. I can feel it and it's so special and you keep giving us things to grow with, and I'm so grateful to you for that and for everything.

So thank you.

Dean: Thank you so much to Shira Hassan. It was such a pleasure to go deep in these concepts together. I'm really grateful for the conversation.

Thank you for joining me for the latest episode of Love in a F*cked Up World. This podcast is based on my book of the same name, which is out now from Algonquin Press. I hope you'll pick it up from an independent bookstore in your community and not Amazon or Audible. And I recommend using libro.FM as an alternative to Audible if you want the audio book.

Love in a F*cked Up World is hosted by me, Dean Spade. It is produced and edited by Hope Dector. Thank you to Ciro, Eugene, Derekh, Kelsey, Lindsay, Jessica, Raindrop, Nicole and [00:52:00] everyone else who helps with this podcast. Our theme music is, "I've Been Wondering" by The Ballet.

We need each other now more than ever, and I hope this podcast offers tools and ideas that can help us to build and sustain strong relationships and strong resistance movements. I hope you'll keep listening, subscribe and share this episode with people in your life.