

Cherry Steinwender Interview

Jean 00:00

Hi, Cherry.

Cherry 00:02

Good afternoon, Jean.

Jean 00:04

Good afternoon. So I am more than pleased to welcome Cherry Steinwender from the Center for Healing of Racism. I attended the series that's offered by the Center more than a decade ago, possibly two decades ago, and found it incredibly insightful. It was a six week series. And so when I first considered getting this blog and interviewing people, Cherry was one of the first persons I thought of. For those of you who followed me, Mark Hayes, used to be associated with the Center, and I've already interviewed him. And so now we have the great pleasure of having Cherry with us. I am so delighted to have you.

Cherry 00:53

And it is my joy to be here. I've been waiting all week with anticipation to be on your podcast.

Jean 01:03

Oh, how wonderful. Okay. So I'm going to take, I want to start from who you are, I want folks to know who you are, you are a legend in the Houston community. So I wanted people to know who you are, how you got started, what the Center is about and what to see in the future. So that's basically how I'd like this to go

Cherry 01:27

On some of the questions that you asked me. It's really interesting. And I think I would really like to start there, because you asked questions about my early beginnings, my childhood. And the reason I want to start there, because even in writing a book about my life now, how does a child, a little girl, the oldest of seven girls, and one boy, living in complete poverty, on and off welfare, mother worked three and four jobs. How do you take a child from those types of beginnings and propel them. And I said, I have made it all the way to the White House. And I think that in itself is a very interesting story. And always I tried to peddle hope, I want to give people hope, that if I could do this, so many other people can to. Being the oldest of eight children living in poverty and looking at the world around me, did Jim Crow segregation. And in fact, I remember very well going to work with my mother to help her clean houses.

Jean 02:56

You said going to work with your mother, what houses?

Cherry 02:57

At the age of five years old to clean houses. And so when I saw the movie, *The Help*, and I noticed in that movie, that other little young girls was going to work with their moms too. And it really made me think about that they were prepared to take their place in society to be the next generation of help. And that's who I was, I was being prepared to condition at a very young age. What is also very interesting, about just a little over a week ago, I received the Civil Rights Award from the Anti Defamation League.

Jean 03:04

I saw that on your website.

Cherry 03:44

And in that acceptance speech, I said, even though we were very poor, but my mother was rich with love. And she wrapped us in love. And I truly believe it is that love that propelled me into the arena that I'm in, and why it's so easy for me to meet people regardless of what they look like, their sexual orientation, or even their religion, to totally embrace them. Growing up in that community in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Jean 04:24

Was it urban or rural?

Cherry 04:27

I was born in Appaloosas, Louisiana, but I was not in the rural part of Appaloosas, Louisiana. When I was two years old. My mom and dad moved to Lake Charles, Louisiana, it was still urban. We were living in government housing. And it wasn't until I had moved to Houston, Texas and a grown woman that my mother owned her first home. But to go back to when did I first noticed because in your question, You asked me about racism and when I first noticed it and how did it look? Well being the age that I am, I'm gonna tell you exactly what it looked like. I've often said that I've been aware of racism every inch in every bit of my life, within the Roman Catholic Church that we attended, that I was christened, all of the priests, all of the nun were always White. And yet they told us all the time, that we were all equal, and we were all God's children. But I know very well, the Catholic Church, in the White part of the city of Lake Charles, my friends that looked like me tried to go to the church one Sunday, because they were told that we all are members of the same human family, and yada, yada, yada. Well, interestingly enough, they were met at the door, we're not allowed to go in and was reminded, there was a church right down the street, that was just with them. So that was very interesting to me. But when you going to at the time, the school was called the colored school. And I never did get a brand new textbook until I was in the ninth grade. All the books that I learned to read in were books that was handed down from the White schools. And in fact, I could see the books right now, because there was a place for you to put your name in the book. Well, there was no place for me to put my name in those books, without erasing some White girl's, White boy's name in order to find a place for my name to fit. It was also very interesting to me in the ninth grade. I'll never forget this. This is how these things really cold your soul. I remember the literary book was brand new. It was a literature book. And now it's in the ninth grade. And one of the stories in that book was *Great Expectations*. Now how could I remember all of that, if that incident of having a brand new textbook just really did something to me. It was also very interesting also. And I look around at 10 year old children. And I've been looking at them now for 20 years, and I'm trying very hard to take a 10 year old little girl and have her catch the bus alone and go to the suburbs,

get off of the bus to go to her house to go serve as the help in the suburbs. I had my own job at the age of 10 years old. I would get on the bus all by myself this 10 year old little Cherry to the suburbs to go and work in a White home.

Jean 08:04

So how old were you when you first started working, having your own job? When did you start?

Cherry 08:12

I started having my own job at 10 years old at 10 years, but before that, I worked during the summers with my Aunties in Appaloosas, Louisiana picking cotton. So I know how humiliating cotton picking can be. I know how humiliating it is to have a truckload of Black people being picked up on the street corners in the dark of morning. As many as you could pack onto a truck, drive to the cotton fields and get out to work for \$3 for 100 pounds of cotton. I think I only picked 100 pounds one time, which meant I only made \$3 one day and that's from sunup to sundown. I picked cotton in the summer during cotton season. The other jobs was after school on Saturdays. Okay, so one of the things that I know very well. I know hard work. I don't shy away from work because all of my life that's what I knew hard work. But in looking around Lake Charles, Louisiana, it wasn't just the schools. A lot of it was also trying to go into department stores to buy clothes, to buy shoes which you were not allowed to try on. It's a different thing when you talk about--most people talk about the water fountains, the colored and Black water fountains. And you see that all the time even in footage but what you don't see what the conversation never really leads toward is the filth of the bathroom. Totally filthy. And until this day, if I go into a public place in the bathroom looked like something from my long time past, I won't even go in. Because this is also branded on my mind of how you're treated. But it wasn't just that, it was about these department stores and not trying on clothes. And you see right now we use a lot of plastic. But during the time that I was growing up, laundry bags were paper, they were like brown paper bags. And it's a good thing. They were brown paper bags, because my mother would draw our silhouette on these bags, as well as draw our foot size on these bags. Because you had to take something into a department store to try to get an idea of what will this garment fit my child when I get it home. Because once I walk out of here with it, I can't bring it back. So you have that. But then you have something else that was really very disturbing. And it took me a long time to deal with this. Because of Louisiana, because of its history of being owned by the French, because a lot of the French aristocrats would take Black women, as their mistress and put them up into houses, they would have children by these men, and these women were allowed to own slaves. Because of the history in this country. There were so many White colored looking Negro people in the neighborhood that I grew up in. So when you fighting White racism on one hand and you're fighting internalized racism on the other hand, so you're dealing with that as well. You see light skinned boys that look more like Tony Curtis and White movie stars like Robert Mitchum and Kirk Douglas at the time, they would never date me because I was too dark.

Jean 12:07

You mentioned the term internalized racism. I have to say when I went through the series and saw internalized racism was one of your modules, I was so excited. But for those who do not know what that is, would you please explain it?

Cherry 12:24

Internalized racism is when the targeting groups have all of the negative information, the stereotypes to caricatures, everything negative, and we are flooded with the images, we are flooded with words that cause us to hate ourselves. This is one of the things that racism did very well was to teach us how to hate ourselves. And in teaching us how to help our self or I'm sorry, to hurt and hate ourselves. Internalized racism sound like a cute little term. But what it really boils down to is self hate.

Jean 13:08

So connect that now with the colorism that you were talking about with the light skinned people. So how does internalize fit in with the children of the White old slave owner and the Black woman mistress that they put up?

Cherry 13:29

So to be able to look at the internalized racism, why those boys did not date me? Why all of the positions of power, so called power, like being the drum majors, or the homecoming queen at the football games. And, you know, all of these women were White looking. They all of them had colored and Negro on their birth certificates. But yet still, because of our own self hate under colorism, or pigment autocracy, we started hating anything that is dark. And see I was just a little too dark. But at the same time, to be able to know that women that took great pride in their skin color, even though they were raped by White men, and this is the reason that they were the color they were and the texture of their hair. But see, that was something to be proud of. Because the closer you can get to Whites, the better you are. And that's how that whole internalized racism plays out within our life. And I used my life as an early, you know, my early years, but we still doing that right now. That hate still exists right now. And I see it being played out all the time. So that's something that for me, it really, you were very interested in learning about it in attending that module. Well, I feel with all my soul that has helped me so much, because the way it played out also, I couldn't wear red lipstick, you see, I have red lipstick.

Jean 15:13

Remember that when you wear red lipstick.

Cherry 15:17

I wouldn't wear red clothing, I wouldn't wear red clothing. Because it made me look like those lawn jockeys that was sitting on the front lawns of White people. So I wouldn't wear red. And when I first started this organization, they told me that red was a color that played well to the camera. So whenever there was an interview for television, they would tell me to wear red. I didn't own anything red, I had to go out and buy red clothing just to play to the camera. It was also played out for me is that I didn't do watermelon. I didn't eat watermelon. And for the longest time, you see, I thought that was a Cherry thing. Cherry, you don't eat watermelon. But the interesting thing of it is I had nothing against the taste of watermelon, nothing at all. But when I tried to eat it, the psychological damage, I couldn't digest it. I couldn't hold it down. So I had to work on that. And so as I said before, I thought for the longest time, that was a Cherry thing. But I found that there's a lot of Black people don't eat watermelon. And I'll never forget, one woman said, Oh, I'll eat it. But I'm a closet watermelon eater, I will never eat it in front of White people. And then another woman said, but if I eat it, I have to chop it up, put it in a bowl and eat

a bit of bark. So when you have something that is so damaging, that it controls your psyche as a food that was brought here from Africa, that nourished us, but yet and still, we won't eat it because of the horrible images in the caricatures that we have seen around this watermelon. But you see it's deeper than that. You see, it's all of these things that we have to unpacking it. I think Malcolm X said it best, we were trained from the top of our heads to the bottom of our feet to hate ourselves. But let me tell you, Jean, of how it played out. The majority of the students in the Catholic school were lighter skinned. And then they would let the children in the Catholic school out of class, out of school a half an hour earlier, because they did not want them to interface with the public school kids on their walk home. So people wonder why we are still caring, and still talking about slavery, we talking about it because it had been so coded in us. And if it was only one or two things, it would be totally different. It would have made a difference. But everything. And when you don't see yourself, you don't see yourself at all.

Jean 18:18

So yeah, and what I've heard people say that it's slavery, we could have recovered from slavery, if it had not been for segregation. It was the segregation and Jim Crow that really did it and led to what we have today. So I want to ask you something. When you as a child, this was going on, you have this loving mother, you have these siblings, and you're surrounded by all of these inferiority, your inferior messages. Did it make you sad? Did it make you rebellious? Did it make you angry? What did it do to you inside?

Cherry 19:00

I think it's a lot of things. I think, as you grow older in different circumstances, you go through a lot of different emotions. It's not just one that emerged and then you stick with that when for the rest of your life. The first part of it is you're questioning, you're questioning why and see we're still questioning why. So even as a child, why did I have to drink out of this dirty hot water fountain, why I have to sit in the back of the bus? Why why why? why those light skinned guys wouldn't date me and on and on and on. But at the same time so you go through that phase of totally questioning everything. Then I went to the part of the anger, just being totally pissed off. One of the things too that I know of how we are so conditioned around this colorism. When a light skinned boy wanted to take me out, I thought I was special. You see, I saw my identity was wrapped up in if a white looking boy wanted to take me out, he's still Negro and colored like me. But when he wanted to date me, then that validated who I was in my beauty and everything else. And it's also tied up in your self worth, when do you begin to feel that you were something, but then there is moments of clarity and sanity. And I'm going to move forward, because I think it's so real. Part of that clarity and sanity after the civil rights laws were passed. And Black people had the choice if they had the money to move out of segregated all Black neighborhoods, the laws allowed us to move into all of these different neighborhoods. But the real estate is much more expensive in those neighborhoods. So if you're going to move in that neighborhood, you have to make X amount of money. And for most Black men, they didn't make it on their own, they needed to have a Black woman that is educated with a degree that's making X amount of money in order to be able to move into the suburbs. And once I understood it, Jean, first it was the anger. Because I would say to myself, I know I'm a good human being, I would be an asset and a plus for any man. I'm loving, I'm kind. But you see that doesn't buy anything. Once I realized the reason that they were sizing your bank book up and your job, before they've even asked you to go out on a date. Once I understood it, I was able to forgive them. I

understood it, they wanted upward mobility as well. And it takes money to do that. And I really had one guy say to me one night, that the only thing that a non-degree woman can do for him is to tell him where a degreed woman went, and so I really had to forgive them. And you see one of the things, not to forgive them so much for them, but to forgive them for me. And I feel a lot of times it's selfish. Sometimes when I forgive, because I'm doing that more for me than you because my not forgiving you will destroy me. It's not gonna destroy you. When I was 14 years old, my literature teacher said to me, Cherry, you think like old people, you are way ahead of your time. When I was 14 years old. At 10 years old, a little boy moved into my neighborhood, he was gay. At that time, we didn't have that word gay. But he would come over and play dolls with me every single day and he would wear my dresses and we'd play doll from morning to night when we could. And his father used to beat him unmercifully, to beat the gayness out of him. And my mother never one time said to me, Cherry, don't you think you can find some more acceptable people to play with?

Jean 23:34

So let's go back to forgiveness. So you said you knew you had to forgive them for yourself? I still don't understand how you knew that. Did something happen? Did your mother teach you?

Cherry 23:53

You know, I have no idea where I got that from. But I know I've been using it. I've been using it all of my life. Even as an adult right now, I use it. And I know why I'm doing it. Because it's not so much about you, that I have to be whole, and I will never be whole if I walk around with bitterness and anger in. I'm not gonna let you destroy me that way.

Jean 24:25

So the reason this is so fascinating to me, is because it's the foundation at the Center for Healing of Racism. I mean, it's one of your platforms. I don't know if you call it that. One of the values of the Center. And so I'm just struck that at age 14, you came to that.

Cherry 24:47

And then even before 14, something else happened, that I see all of these things as stepping stones to Cherry. My mother and father was put in a tuberculosis hospital about 100 miles away from our home. And here all of us children, we are fending for ourselves. However, there was a woman that agreed to come and stay in the home with us. And while my mother and father was in the hospital, and I was probably eight or nine years old, seven years old, I spent the majority of my time, my free time making gifts. So whenever an adult would go to the hospital to see my mother and father, they could bring gifts to all of the people at the hospital.

Jean 25:42

You did it for everybody?

Cherry 25:44

Yeah, I was coloring and cutting and pasting out of books and magazines and making things out of sticks and stones and everything else. But at that age, I already had that compassion for other human beings.

Jean 25:59

That's totally fascinating.

Cherry 26:03

And the other part of it too, because I had a child, and my baby died of leukemia. And when my baby died, right here in Houston, Texas, at Texas Children's Hospital, I wanted so much to do something for other children. But I had no nursing degree, so what could I do, but I've always championed the underdog. And I've always had this type of heart. The other thing too, you know, it's making me--this interview is making me tap into things about who I am and myself. And one of the things that I am thinking about is this giving Cherry, is this giving Cherry, the need to give, there is another part of that. I came to the realization that there's nobody on this planet better than me. But I'm not better than anyone else. Like, I really feel that happened, when it was really concrete within my mind when I was probably about 30 years old. And I'm going to tell you how it came. But let me back up a little bit. Because when you talk about, I really believe there must be something about innate abilities or innate learning. I don't know how it happens. And this is what I'm saying right now you're forcing me to tap into things I hadn't thought about before. Because people have come up to me when I was in my 20s. There's one woman that attended Texas Southern University. And this woman was born with no arms at all. But she was able to do everything that her feet, she graduated from Texas Southern, she could type with her feet, she could write with her feet. And I invited her to my home to spend the night because I've always had an open door policy, people were always welcomed. That's why I had to marry a man that thought the same way too.

Cherry 28:27

But anyway, the woman came. And the reason that she accepted the invitation, she says she's been watching me, there's something about me that she want to learn. Now I'm shocked, because I want to learn from her. How did you achieve everything that you achieved with what I saw is limitations by not having arms. The other thing too, I realized that all these people coming to me for advice and help. And I thought about that. And I know I know I've said this a many times, as I have tried to help young women out. I've always wanted to mentor young women. I'm not going to tell you what I read in a book. I'm not going to even tell you what I saw in the movies on TV. I'm gonna tell you what I lived. And I know what I'm talking about my life experiences. I've lived all of this, you see. So it's not something that and even when you go back to that little girl that looks White, and those other people in the community that look White that wouldn't have anything to do with this. Maybe that is also part of why I'm so good at what I'm doing with the organization, the center. So I said to people repeatedly, that my whole life has prepared me to walk in the shoes to create and to hold this organization called the Center for Healing Racism. My whole life prepared me very well. And before the Center, I've worked in corporate America, I've been the first woman to break ground to be the manager of this company. I've done things like that. But the majority of my life, I've worked taking care of children in the suburbs of Houston, Texas. I call myself a childcare specialist. And that's how I worked. And so I'll never forget this, how I knew this. But this attitude that I had about myself, and so I told her. She said, Well Cherry, I guess you're not gonna be working here. I said, I tell you what, go get a cigarette and pull up a chair. Let's talk. I'm gonna tell you what year that was. That was around 1970. So we haven't been out of the civil rights for a long period of time. Well, I told

this woman to go pull up a cigarette and let her sit down with me, smoke a cigarette together, as if I'm her equal, because see, I knew I was. And I told her. I will stick around. I'll work for you awhile, but I will never ever wear a uniform. Because I don't think you need to wear uniform to do the job. I think that uniform is a symbol of oppression to keep in my place and see there ain't got no place for me. And I told her that's not a uniform that's ever been made that will fit Cherry. I said number two. I'm never going to call you Mrs. because why should I am older than you? Why should I call you Mrs? Well this woman hired me. And I stayed as long as I wanted to stay. I remember one time they did try me to ask me a question. And I said, you remember what I told you? If you can't handle the truth, don't ask me. Well she said, No, I really want to know. I said, I would not take you and all your millions if your bad kids came with it. But she just looked at me and she walked away. But I stayed with her as long as I wanted to stay with her. There's also another job that I was working at this church for Mother's Day taking care of children. And every one of the women there wore uniforms. And every woman there that was my color was like jumping beans. And yes'm, and yes'm. But see, that's not who I am. I ended up being the first person to ever be the supervisor over that nursery and I hired and fired people. And I didn't wear no uniform, because I don't think it was necessary to do the job anyway. So in 1978, I applied for the job at a medical firm. And they would hire doctors and nurses to give physical examinations on people applying for health insurance, as well as life insurance. And they hired me as one of the paper pushers or something I don't remember. But I know that I wasn't in that position long. When they asked, they hired me to be the supervisor. And interestingly enough, the supervisor before me, a White woman had a major breakdown on the job. And I called her into my office and I counseled her and told her that her behavior was totally unacceptable for the staff watching her and all of this. But she quit and they offered the job to me. The reason they offered it to me, because when I am on a job, I'm going to learn everything that is about the job, I knew how to do everybody's job. I am the only one in the office that could do anybody's job if they called in sick or anything else. Well, when the woman left, I'm the only one knew the whole office inside and out. They offered me the position. And I said to them, I don't know if I ought to take this job because I'm much too honest for this job. I said because I understand the business work, the way business work, a lie will always sound better than the truth. Because that's the way we are conditioned in this country. And I'll never forget the first time I had to solve a problem that one of the doctors or nurses screwed up. I said to the person that was on the telephone talking to me, I just let him talk until he wound himself down. And after he did, I said, I'm not gonna tell you a lie to make you feel good. I'm gonna tell you what I'm going to do to solve your problem. So that was that step into that arena. And I don't remember how Oh, yes I just stayed there long time, first Black person to ever hold that position. And then they even offered me another position higher in Louisiana, but I didn't want to take it. So I really feel when I said that everything prepared me for the place of being where I am now.

Cherry 35:36

Even the man that I was given to marry. Let it be known, and he knew it too. I've never been attracted to no White blood blue-eyed man, never. But I met him. He didn't speak English. I didn't speak German. My girlfriend spoke German and she interpreted everything and whatever. And then we'd use a German English dictionary. We dated for 10 months, my husband was here on holiday, he had no intention of staying here. He had one suitcase, was passing through. 10 months later, we were married. And he didn't go back to Austria for seven years. And when he went back, I went with him. So interestingly enough to be able to know who I am. Number one, whenever I've started doing dialogue racism, I would never put

my husband at the front. I didn't want nobody to know that until later, I wanted them to know me. Because I don't want to be validated by who I'm married to. And number two, this whole notion in this country, when a White person marry a Black person, a White person is marrying down. Black person is marrying up. But the thing too is that the way I carried myself around him, I let him know it ain't nothing about your whiteness, your blondness and your blue eyes that make you better than me. And so if anybody would say to me all the time, you lucky to be married to him. I say Hell no. He's lucky to be married to me. So bottom line is, there was nothing about me that came into this marriage feeling less than and so my saying that I would use all the time never higher than you, darling, but always by your side, say don't walk in front of me because I may not follow. Chances are I won't.

Cherry 37:39

They tried to educate my husband how to be a White man when he entered this country. And that is very critical in understanding how we are conditioned in this country. We are conditioned to be Black, we are conditioned to be White. So here's the conditioning, the White people in his life that he's living with, they are going to tell him who to trust, who not to trust. They're going to tell them who's a steal, who to look for that may steal that. I mean, they would give him this lesson every day as if he was in Sunday school, and so that's how I learned very well. And when these people found out he had a girlfriend, he didn't tell them I was Black. Because they had invited me to their house for dinner. And the day I was to go to dinner, he told him I was Black and they told him not to ever bring a Black woman to this house. I mean, just all of this other stuff. So go back to what I was saying earlier that everything about my life prepared me for this. If I would have been the type of person that didn't know my own self worth and didn't felt good about myself. I could just let him take advantage of me left and right. That's not who I am.

Jean 39:05

Okay, so I'm a romantic at heart. I gotta understand you meeting this man, y'all can't even talk. But there was something that was instantaneous. Just spend just a little bit of time on that, because I know I'm not the only romantic person who's going to hear this story and wonder how in the world you pull that off.

Cherry 39:20

Now, I am really a romantic Jean, let me tell you. My girlfriend invited, my German girlfriend invited him to her home for dinner. And we had already met him. We met him together at a garage sale and we were having a garage sale and he came to the garage sale with the family that he was living with at the time, on holiday. Remember, just passing through. Well, she heard him talking. So she started speaking German with him, invited him to her house for dinner. And the night that he was to come, she called me up and said, Cherry, why don't you come over because Ziggy is coming over. I don't want to come over and meet Ziggy. I'm going dancing. So and she just kept begging me. And I said, Okay, I'll come over. But I had no intention. Because I told her, I'm not attracted to Ziggy at all. I went over to her home, and it wasn't very long that after dinner, I invited him to go out to coffee at a coffee shop. Well, he said he was able to say this, "After five minutes, I have no more words." He was able to some way, let me know why we going to get coffee, I won't be able to talk to you for more than five minutes.

Jean 40:45

That's what I'm sitting up here thinking.

Cherry 40:53

So we went to a coffee shop. By two hours, we were there talking. And if you would ask him right now, how did we communicate without a language? We don't know. We don't even know what we were saying. So sort of bottom line is what is really interesting in this whole thing, and I am really very, very much a romantic. He's more solid on the ground than I am. I flies. But interestingly enough, he had this girl asked me if I would teach him English. So that put us together each other.

Jean 41:42

By that time the deal was struck.

Cherry 41:45

But wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. So now I'm teaching them English. And he said to me, he wanted me to teach him flirt words, so he can flirt with me.

Jean 41:57

Oh, he said that?

Cherry 42:00

And I said to him, I don't have to teach you flirt words. Because every time you look at me, your eyes are flirting with me. I don't have to teach you the words because all your mannerism is doing that. Because what we in the charade we call dating. I think that's very important. At 33 years old, I realized I didn't like dating, right? Because it ain't nothing but a game. I'm gonna try to be all that I could be to make you think I'm all that and the person is doing the same thing. You end up married and you can't keep up that charade. So you end up divorced and that happens all the time. So I had to understand from who I am, Cherry, who are you? And once I tapped into who I am and what I want it because of who I am. Whenever I would meet a guy with the possibility of dating, I would ask him five things and I asked him the same thing. Number one, do you drink alcohol? Do you smoke cigarettes? Do you have children? Have you ever been in a war zone with the possibility of killing another human being? I don't think you ever come back from that. If you have any children, I'm too selfish. I'm too tied up with myself. I don't want you to be over there with your children where I know you should be because I'm too selfish. I want you right here. So why should I get tied up with someone with children? And so I asked these questions, Jean, because I knew me. And I'm not gonna pretend to be something I'm not, straight up. He told me. I don't smoke. I don't drink. I never been in war. But I never been loyal to no woman in my life. Not even my first wife.

Jean 44:10

He just said that. And what did you do with that? That's something, that's a big piece of information.

Cherry 44:22

Now, you know what I did with it? I thought about it. I said, God, this guy sure is honest. I said, I'm gonna play this hand. Because what I have been used to. Boy meets girl. And boy is trying to be all of that and a bag of chips. And then all of a sudden, boy go, baby, you know, I'm not gonna look at nobody but

you, you know, you're the only one. May have something else on the side somewhere. But no, he told me straight up. I ain't never been loyal to no woman in my life. And then that goes back to again, how I see myself. I just said to myself. Oh, he said, and I don't want a girlfriend in the United States. And I don't want to get married. And in my mind, I was singing, but I'm gonna make you love me.

Jean 45:15

Straight out of Diane Ross song.

Cherry 45:21

I am serious. That's exactly what happened. So now, we going through, we played this dance that is played out in this country. I'm out in the street walking around people looking at us like I'm crazy. Are we crazy? You go shopping, they following me around? And he's looking at them following me around, you know, what we go through in the United States. Well, then, here comes my girlfriend. She's White. Her name is Jackie Cole Newberry. If you look at the link, I'll send it to you can see my husband's picture, our wedding pictures and everything else. And you hear Jackie talking. Jackie is White and blonde. Said we need to do something by racism. I said, I don't want to do nothing about no racism. Been there, done that. I did want to have anything to do with that. But she wouldn't take no for an answer. And she kept pushing me and I kept telling her. I'm too old. I'm too tired. Been there done that. Well, the long and short of it is, in order to get her off of my back. I said, Okay, I'll do something about racism. I had no intentions of doing anything about racism. And so I just said, Gee whiz, well, all we're going to do is sit around each other's kitchen table and talk. And we're going to have honest conversations around racism. And what really hurt me in the very beginning, because my girlfriend, she's still in my life. We've been in each other's lives over 40 years. I helped her raise a two boys. In fact, this year, both of them have been in my house for lunch. They live in Portland, Oregon. But they have every time they come here to see her they have to come and see Mama Cherry as well. But it was so interesting for me. She said to me, Cherry, why is it you've never felt comfortable enough to tell me what life is really like for you as a Black woman in this country? And when she asked me that question, Jean, it was as if she had stabbed me in my chest, because I want to pretend. You know we go through these phases. So now I'm all good. I'm all good. And everything's all good. But now I'm stripping away the mess. I know damn well life is not the same for me in this country as it is for her. But now, she wanted me to face that. My very good friend that I said still in my life. We she and I even live together. I helped her raise her boys, you know, so, but it's the idea that she would ask and make me strip that mask off. Well, the long and short of it is, we found other people that wanted to talk about racism, we would sit around each other's kitchen table talking about racism. And out of these conversations of talking about racism, we had no intentions of founding no nonprofit organization. We were just a group of people sitting around talking about racism. And so what we found in those conversations, is that every one of us have been hurt around racism. And when I step up there, to talk in public, to facilitate workshops, I always say, it really doesn't matter how White your skin is or shades of brown. We've all been damaged around racism. But the interesting thing about that is, for most White people have never even thought of it, how they have been damaged around racism. And it's easy for them to see how we have been damaged around racism. But it's not that easy for people of European descent.

Jean 49:26

So how have White people been damaged around racism? Just pick any typical person, any person off the top of your head, because you can't generalize to a whole group. Just pick one or two, and talk about how they've been damaged.

Cherry 49:42

Okay, what I would say no, I want to, I want to make it a general. One of the things that we're learning, when you were a little girl, you knew very little about who you were and your accomplishments and people that look like you their accomplishments, the same education, even though our education may have been years behind. White people were getting the same education. They knew nothing about us and our contributions to this country. The stories, the narratives that have been made up around indigenous people, Latin people, and in fact, indigenous people, and Latin people were at one time even considered mongrels, and all these other things, all of the negative character traits and negative stereotypes about us, they were getting that information. So sometimes I will say that the education that you walk around with so proudly displayed on your shoulders, half of it was nothing but a lie anyway. So when you talk about being as a person of a faith community, Thou shall not lie. Well, that in itself, that if your education is a lie, that have to some way another have affected you. The reason that Obama was so detested being in the White House, because all of these lies that White people have been told about who Black people are and were, now how in the heck ca one of them slipped through? Because after all, we supposed to have everything. You know, it's very interesting when you really, really, really sit down and look at that the other way that I feel anything, anything Jean that separates you from the world's population, which are people of color, have to be hurt, that have to be hurt.

Jean 51:42

Okay, I'm gonna play devil's advocate with you, Cherry. If I've been told a lie, and I felt good and on that lie, I have moved ahead in my life and my career. So what?

Cherry 52:00

And so Obama entered the White House in that debunked that whole lie. It just took Obama. Say, we're not going to look at all of the other people. And in fact, to be able to look at this. Well, how did one of them slipped through? They're not supposed to be there. Because I've been told ABC and D. You know, it's a whole lot of things, the truth have not been really told. And we are just getting to the place of, you know, peeling away the layers of that onion, the same thing with slavery, people that were enslaved in this country, the truth is just beginning to come out about that.

Jean 52:48

Okay, so two things. One is you're talking about the lynching museum. Is that the one you're talking about in Louisiana?

Cherry 52:58

The lynching museum is in Montgomery, Alabama. I'm talking about the plantation, the Whitley Plantation.

Jean 53:05

Okay. Yes, I remember hearing about that. I don't know much about it. Okay.

Cherry 53:10

Hey, we have taken three trips, and we were supposed to take a bus load this year, then COVID happened, and we had to cancel it. So to go to that plantation, and to really see what plantation life was about, to really tell that story. And it's the only plantation museum in this whole country that really tells the story through the eyes of the people that were enslaved there.

Jean 53:35

Oh, okay. The other thing I just want, I haven't said it explicitly. It just occurred to me I was raised in the segregated South also. I just wanted to put that on the record? So what you're talking about I have vivid memories of as well.

Cherry 53:50

Yes, yes. And so with the Center, so what happened, like I was telling my friends what we were doing, and you go and tell your friends what we're doing, we talked about racism and everything. And now your friends want to come and talk about racism, and blah, blah, blah, blah. So we've just started these big conversations. And with no intentions of founding no nonprofit organization, it was not on the radar at all. But as the Center as we became more and more known, and people wanting to talk about racism. We had no choice, we had to form a nonprofit organization. But the other part two of the center, let's look at why we named it the Center for the Healing of Racism. Because I'm one of the founding members, we could have named it anything that we wanted to. The center for combating racism, erasing racism, eliminating racism, we could have named it anything. But we wanted to focus on healing. And if we believed, because of those early conversations that we've all been hurt, there must be a place that we could come together to begin to heal those hurts. And that's how we named ourselves. And with that, we also had to put a set of guidelines in place. And of course, when you came, we read those guidelines. To make sure. You see, for me, I cannot have healing racism in our name, and further damage people by doing a lot of things that human beings still do. So one of those things that we have never ever did was to call anyone a racist. And so the thing of it is, the way that we have been able to conduct this conversation is to look at our racial conditioning. And without exception, everybody had been conditioned in this country. And it really doesn't matter if you were born here. Or if you came here in recent time, some other countries. My husband came here, recently, let me say to you, my husband can tell you straight up how he's been hurt in this country, simply because he was married to me. Another way that my husband had been damaged in this country, is that they look at him and assume people that look like him, they automatically assume that you're in my camp. So I could say all of this stuff to you, because you see we in the same camp, and here they are saying all this racist stuff. And I know very well, one of the things that my husband is not going to let them get away with it. And I'll never forget, on a job, my husband was talking to one man of European descent, a Latin man, and they were having all this camaraderie and everything else together. Soon as that Latin man walked away, that White man looked at my husband and said all kinds of negative stuff about that Latin man. But you see my husband had the last laugh, because when the man came back, my husband told him everything that White man said about him when he left.

Cherry 57:11

So that's what we've been doing. All of this time, we already traveled to 45 states, we worked in two countries, Canada, and Austria. And it's very interesting to go to Austria and talk about racism when you have no Black population. But I started to talk off with sexism, and how I had noticed the sexism in Austria. And if I could get them to see how they are oppressed under sexism, I could get them to understand how racism is oppressing me in this country. But I've also worked with people that have come through the state department from all over the world. We had the kitchen table conversations, we went from there to a nonprofit organization. And we were only educating adults with dialogue racism, we went from there to 10 years later, I realized we really need to start programs with children at a very young age. And so I created a workshop to take into elementary schools, and it is called Opening the Breadbasket. And I realized that people globally eat bread, this bread look different from country to country, culture to culture. And so I would shop for bread from at least 26 different cultural groups, bring it into the schools to elementary schools, and teach little children that bread is different color sizes and shapes, just like little children, but we all belong to the same human family. Well, about 10 years later, I turned it into a book. And the book is, you know been published. It's called Bread is a Simple Food, teaching children about cultures. So from there, we've created programs to go into middle school, high school, all the way through. The next big moment for us was really, when Obama was elected president, because we went into this phase of post racial America, you see, oh, it's no racism anymore. There's a Black man in the White House. And so now you have to offset that. And it caused you to work even harder, because it gave too many White people a pass for doing nothing about what we're talking about racism. The foundation of the Center, is that everybody have been hurt, everybody had been affected around racism. And it really doesn't matter how white your skin is, or shades of brown, we've all been damaged. So there must be a place that we can come together to begin to heal those hurts, and the way that the healing take place. As human beings, we are really born with natural ways to heal the hurts. Crying is very healing. But oftentimes, we are not allowed the freedom to really get those hurts out through cry. The other ways of healing is to be able to speak the truth to a true listener. I mean, really sit there and listen. And that's what you did when you went through dialogue racism, to be able to listen. And as Gandhi said, the greatest gift that you can give to another human being is to be totally present in your listening. You are listening to those hurts, you're not allowed to tell me what to feel, why I shouldn't feel the way that I feel. Or not to remind me that the civil rights laws have passed. It's to learn through listening to my story, listening to my pain. That's that foundation. And so in the mission statement, it's almost a paraphrase. The Center for the Healing of Racism serves as the catalyst for the healing of racism, the education and empowerment individuals. So people will come up and say to me all the time, you've changed my world, you have literally changed my world. And now somebody is really telling me the truth all of these years that thought I was crazy. There's one woman that was suffering from headaches all the time. And it wasn't until she went through dialogue racism, that she was able to begin to alleviate those headaches, to be able to understand what's going on now with COVID. Why so many people of colors are dying. This isn't something that their health just got bad. Stress is the major indicator of illnesses. And we have been under stress around racism, all of our lives in this country. So no wonder we are dying like flies, to be able to understand that even in the psychiatric community they have not wanted to touch racism. And how can you totally heal a human being that suffering from all types of things because of racism, but you don't want to touch it? So I could go on and on but we are able to have all of these types of conversations.

<https://www.centerhealingracism.org/>

Jean 1:02:47

Okay, Cherry, it has been a sheer pleasure. I thank you for your time. I thank you for your wisdom. And I thank you for sharing your life story with us.