



REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS INTERVIEW
PORTIONS USED IN: *THE THREAD SEASON ONE*

Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lewis, Author
October 13, 2022
Interviewed by Nancy Steiner
Total Running Time: 49 minutes and 23 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Story Features

Kunhardt Film Foundation

MATT:

This is your chair right here.

JACQUELINE LEWIS:

This is my chair.

MATT:

That's you.

CREW:

Yeah, you get to take it home at the end of the day.

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I want to just move in.



NANCY STEINER:

I know. Don't we all.

CREW:

Reverend Jacqui Lewis interview, take one, marker. And Bill just, and Nancy, just give us a second to clear and then it's all yours.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lewis

Author

NANCY STEINER:

Quiet on the set, please.

Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lewis

Pastor and Author

00:00:19:00

NANCY STEINER:

In everyone's life, childhood's a creator of character. How would you describe your childhood and how it informed your character?

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

My childhood had many facets to it. I'm the oldest child in a family of five. Later in our life, we ended up finding our half brother, so that made me second. There were lots of years when it was just me and my sister Wanda



living on Air Force bases with my parents. You have to live with your parents. So we did. And there was this kind of idyllic ever- evergreen spaces around the base. Wild blueberry patches around the base. Places to hide and seek. Lots of beautiful quartz rocks that my sister and I would collect and play rock family with, you know, big, beautiful rocks. Swinging on our swing set, watching Mom bake, listening to Dad scream at the football games. This was the first chunk of life was just Wanda and Jacqui. How much trouble could we get in without getting in big trouble? Let's make coffee for Dad when he gets home from work by putting water in the Maxwell House can and just stirring the water up and see what happens. Let's take the Avon samples and go decorate Mommy's bed and face with that. Just mischievous girl stuff.

00:01:36:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

The second chunk of childhood was the entrance of the boys, three little brothers. The first one was just magical to me. I was only six. So, I became a big sister really in that space. And all through it is a lot of deep, fierce love from our parents. Protective love, demanding love. This is what Lewis kids do. We're mannerable. We mind our teachers. We study hard. We're going to go to college. Lots of expectations of excellence, quite frankly. And lots of giggles and laughter and dancing.

NANCY STEINER:

Lots of excellence was expected of you almost as there's a certain perfectionistic quality that you had growing up. You felt that you had to be perfect.

00:02:26:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:



Absolutely. Yeah.

NANCY STEINER:

That must have been very difficult.

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Oh no, it really wasn't because it's what you're supposed to do. It's what you know. We were— we were... Your grades are posted on the refrigerator. How did you do? How did you do in those exams? Lots of celebration for the excellence. So I don't think it was a burden. It was just was. And you live into what you learn you're supposed to live into, so we did. I mean, we've got Grammy Award winning singers, Army General, top of the law class folks. We really lived into the parents' expectations. And honestly, I have no regrets about that. I don't.

NANCY STEINER:

Tell me about what you learned in kindergarten and why it resonated so powerfully for you.

00:03:13:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I love that book, *Everything I Learned In My Life, I Learned In Kindergarten*. What I learned in kindergarten, in the idyllic place that was the Air Force base, was that I was the N-word. It was the first time that someone ever said that word to me. I was in kindergarten in my happy, well-adjusted little Air Force life with two friends. Tommy Holly, Tommy Hollister, blonde, red-haired, great guys. My buds. And then Lisa came. She moved from Mississippi to New Hampshire and brought with her her caste system and



stage whispered to one of the Tommy's, "I don't know why you're sitting next to this nasty N-word. And don't you know she gets chocolate milk from her mother's tits?" Now, had not heard the N-word and did not know that milk came from tits. So both of those were like yucky, yucky. I felt really traumatized by that. Went home and told my parents about that, and they had the most amazing reactions that shaped my personality.

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REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

My mother says, "Isn't it silly that people will think you're not as good as them because you're Black?" I think I was a negro in those days. I'm saying I'm aging myself. But, "Isn't it silly that people will think you're not as good as them because you're a negro?" Yeah, that is silly. And she took me to prayer. Like, "We're going to pray about this." So in the middle of the now I lay me down to sleep prayers. We also prayed that— I prayed that no matter how anyone looks, they'll know they're loved. That is my core mission. My dad was furious and went to the base commander and demanded an apology to him and to me. Now, this is 1963 and my dad is being an activist, a Black Lives Matter activist in 1963 in this all white Air Force base. I was totally turned on to you can speak the truth in love and you can challenge things and they can get better. And I was totally turned on to prayer changes things.

NANCY STEINER:

So you're called the N word. Your parents explain it to you. Your mother really sort of diffuses the power by saying, "That's so silly. That's so silly. And let's go to prayer here." And the high road is instantly taken. There's no corresponding attack.

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REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Well, that's not entirely true. I have to remember the story better because when she called me the N word, I said, "White cracker, white cracker, you don't shine. I'll bet you \$5 I'll beat your behind." I could not tell you where I learned that, how I knew that, how that bubbled up out of my body, but it certainly did. And in that talk with Mom, she goes, "And Jac, we don't call people's names. We just don't do it." So there was still a high road from them. Mommy was like, "You are not going to bend down into the behaviors of these people, you are going to pray for them." And Daddy was like, "These behaviors will get called out in the justice pool." And that's how it went.

NANCY STEINER:

Is that the first time you realized that prayer was something that you could turn to?

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REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

That wasn't the first time that I had turned to prayer in this moment. It was an every night ritual. Every night ritual with my mom as soon as I had a bed. If you had a crib, she was ready. So at night by the bed, a prayer. "Now I lay me down to sleep." Or it started with, "God, please love everybody." And then now I lay me down, which is a little scary prayer. But then learning that we could just image people. Like, who shall we pray for? So, she put that in our imagination. The president, my dear, our grandmother. Let's pray for Fluffy. We could pray for the cat, you know. So it was early that she taught a conversation with God did not need, you know, big ritual. It did not need to be in church. It could be anywhere where you could call on God and chat a bit.



NANCY STEINER:

In your book you say that your journey has been one of making amends with yourself. What do you mean by that?

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REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Yeah. I have been on a journey most of my adult life to make amends to the little kid inside me. The times where I didn't tend to her well enough. If I didn't stand up for her on the playground, or if I didn't teach her that it was okay to swear. Or if I didn't say, "Everybody else is having sex, and you don't have to be promiscuous but you might want to have sex right now. That could be okay." If I could give her more... freedom to explore... To explore the edges of what theologically she had been taught was right and wrong. I think I would've loved to do that.

NANCY STEINER:

And when you say her, you're really talking about you.

00:08:22:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I'm really talking about me, little Jacqui. I think that so many of us who've had childhood trauma have a piece of ourselves, a piece of our inner life that is that wounded child, that is that hurt child. And our job as adults is to protect that inner child, that wounded child. To put our arms around that child and help that child feel safe and cared for, and help that grow- that child grow up. I've done that for myself. I've cared for myself. Through therapy. With coaching. So that the little one in me, my therapist says the little one in me, sometimes has a big thing to say. Big voice. So I listen to that and I feel like

there's wisdom in that, that comes from my wounding and comes from also my growing up.

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REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

So the wisdom I've gleaned from being a child who was wounded and an adult who grew through that, with that, has been on the move from that, is every single experience that has happened to me, has made me me.

Therefore, though it hurt, though I wouldn't wish it, I claim it as part of my identity and it makes me strong. You know, one of the ways that I think about human development as a psychologist of religion, is that there is a kind of inner family system. I'm not talking about multiple personality disorder, but I am saying at the different stages of my life, that girl that got called the N word at five, and the girl who didn't have any breasts when she was 12 and everybody else did. The 22 year old that made love for the first time and was like, "What is going on? I don't know what I'm doing." All of those Jacquies are here and they keep moving and growing, and they show up and be like, "We're scared," or, "That was hot," or, "Let's do better." So I think about comforting, encouraging myself the way I comfort and encourage my congregation. That that's my job now, is to love on me that way.

NANCY STEINER:

When you were, I want to say nine, you had an incident in your life that was absolutely awful.

00:11:02:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I am a clergy who has encountered so many people who have been sexually violated. It's stunning. It almost makes my nine year old story feel normal,



but it's never normal for a child to be molested. And I was, by a really trusted man in my life who touched me inappropriately, fondled me inappropriately, tried to kiss me full on the lips. And though that was excruciating and horrifying and shame-making, worse than that was this ongoing sense to a nine year old child from a grown man that we did something together. I mean, just saying that to you now makes me want to cry. And all the people I know who are little people who were sexualized or objectified, thingified by an adult, shame on the world that can produce that kind of trauma and heartbreak for defenseless children.

NANCY STEINER:

And just sticking with Jacqui for a minute and that little nine year old person who was so incredibly taken advantage of. When you go there, it's still very raw for you.

00:12:35:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Absolutely. It is. It's raw. It's raw because I still know this person. This person is still alive, and it's everybody's story. We can stick with my story, but truly it's my congregant who was raped by her dad for 16 years. It's my friend V whose father abused her and then started physically abusing her when she stopped playing. It's the boy child who was molested by an older uncle. There's— All of those stories are in me because I live in stories with people and I carry them with me. So I have tears for me and I have tears for Matt, and I have tears for, you know, all my friends and all the people who've sat in my office. And I have tears for the children who we don't know that this has happened to and for the institutions in which it happened, like indigenous schools. Those boarding schools. Like churches.



NANCY STEINER:

When you touch base with your pain, what happens? You feel it, and then how do you get beyond it? Can you explain that for me?

00:13:47:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

You know, pain is a really important barometer. I think when we talked about taking care of little Jacqui, teaching her, I taught myself that pain is a gift, a barometer, an important signal. There's lessons in the pain. There's wisdom in the pain. You can run through the pain or you feel the pain. And I have learned to feel the pain fully. And if it makes me cry, I cry. If it makes me angry, I just go ahead and cuss it out. I shake my fists at it. I move with the pain, through the pain. Almost like when you're working out, you're like, "Oh, you got to do 10 more reps." Those last 10 are going to really kick your butt, but that's where there's going to be growth. So I've had lots of wonderful therapists along the way. And one of them, my most recent therapist, used to say to me, "Stay right there. Stay right there. It's coming. The insight, what you need to know is right there, right there. Just stay right there."

00:15:00:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

And I thought what she meant was, "I'm here with you in this pain. I'm here with you in this agita. I'm here with you in this discovery, and it's going to come." So, just like feel it. Feel it. You push it down, you're going to get an ulcer. You push it down, you're going to drink too much. Could be fun. Not the best choice. You push it down, I don't think we learn what we're supposed to know.



NANCY STEINER:

So wisdom comes from pain. What wisdom would you say your pain has given you?

00:15:32:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Wisdom comes from pain. And what I've learned, how I've become wise from my personal pain is sometimes people are doing the best they can and they will just screw you up anyway. They just will. They don't have the resources. They don't have the wisdom. They don't have the insight. They experienced something that made them do it again to you. Hurt people hurt people. That's really important to me. It takes my hurt, sorrow, anger and puts a little compassion up in that pot to stir, because that's what happens. I think also I can see in the world better the pain that's causing the behavior. So a staff person might just be out of their mind on a Sunday. And I think, whew. Hmm. But because the pain is a teacher about wisdom, I then have a different set of questions about that behavior.

00:16:31:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

What has happened there? Are they remembering their mother's death? Are they feeling like they're not good enough today? Last night, did they have a fight with their partner? You just have a different interrogation if you let the pain, your pain, make you wise. It helps you open your eyes to how other peoples' pain can be driving them.

NANCY STEINER:

Excellent. How did you become an activist?



REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I was almost nine years old when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed. I was on a field trip with my friends out in a nature center. Mr. Smith had us out on the road, my gorgeous chocolatey brown fourth grade teacher. And we got ready to go on the bus back to Chicago and he was crumpled and just crying. And what is wrong? Dr. King was killed today. Oh my God. So we're on the way back to Chicago, which is erupting in violence. My mom and dad are crying. Everyone's destroyed. The city's on fire. I mean, I don't know yet why people loot when someone gets killed that they love, but they did. And it was dangerous in our neighborhood. And the guns were being shot. My sister and I were hiding under our bed, and we were crying. And I promise almost like a voice, "This is going to be your job."

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REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I felt like the trauma of that assassination... Killing love is how it felt on my body. Like, somebody that good can get killed traumatized me and activated me at the same time. I found myself thinking, "I'm going to be a drum major for peace." Now, that might be one phrase that I had heard in the world about Dr. King's speeches, but a drum major for peace sounded like the job description I was signing up for. And I don't know how I communicated that to my family or my church, but they got it and they started setting the table for me. Like, "Let's go on the March for Dimes." "Let's go buy a cow from the Heifer Project for the kids in Africa." "Let's support Caesar Chavez." I was like 11 years old sending checks to Caesar Chavez.

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REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:



It was incredible to feel this calling inside me and then have this flame fanned by the people around me. They were like, "We see you. We see you." This Ubuntu idea that I love. I was seen by my family and my Sunday school teacher and my teachers as a girl who was going to be an activist and was an activist. And they just started throwing activist stuff in front of me. There was a lady named E. Valeria Murphy who was the oldest... I didn't think people could live to be that old when I was nine. She was this old, old, old beautifully wrinkled Black lady who decided to take me with her to meetings around the state of Illinois. "Let's go down here and talk about the indigenous thing." "What?" "Let's go over here and talk about labor unions." It was crazy. I don't know what she saw, but she's part of why I'm a clergy now. And this last year I got to speak at a thing honoring her. She's dead now, but she saw that. In a world where a lot of the church says women can't speak in church and shouldn't be preachers, she saw my inner let's make it better and gave a lot of energy toward it.

NANCY STEINER:

How would you describe that inner person? That inner you. That, "I'm going to be part of the world and make it better."

00:19:59:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I think inside all of us is something that we're supposed to become imprinted on us, inside us, stamped in us. I'm not saying it's static, I'm not saying it's only one thing, but I almost feel like it's part of the what gets formed in the womb. I don't know. It feels that way to me. My inner forming toward activism and justice happens because of my birth order. How can I take care of my little sister? We're only 21 months apart, but if she gets sick in the bed,



I'm like, "I've got to take care of her." If she wants to put a penny in her mouth, I'm like, "Get that penny out of your mouth." I was her guardian, like, "You were not going to hurt yourself." And that same kind of dynamic with my little brothers. And then being my mother's helper in the kitchen, my dad's helper outside with a car. There was a kind of helping. And literally we become the thing where affirmed being.

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REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I got so celebrated for being helpful, for having eyes that could see. So then your eyesight gets keen. "Oh, let me see what else I can see." And that thing inside me that feels... heartbroken when things go wrong for people. I have real antenna of empathy for people, but also what got celebrated and nurtured was I know how to do it. I know how to stand in the gap. I know how to write a letter to the president when I'm a kid. I know how to save my money in a bank and send it to a charity. I know how to advocate for the person on the... "Don't do that. You're going to hurt her." I know how to advocate for the vulnerable because of my family system.

NANCY STEINER:

That's amazing. Why do we need activists? What role do you think they play in moving our society forward?

00:22:08:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

For as long as there's been humans, there's conflict because wherever two or more people exist, there's different opinions. And I think our default position, sadly, sometimes as humans under stress, under pressure, we get tribal, we back ourselves into a corner, we stick with our own kind, we fuel our own self



interests. "This is what's going to make me and mine okay." And in that dynamic, somebody has to say, "But that's not okay enough for everybody." There's a whole world of us that are connected to each other. I'm inextricably connected to you and you to me. My destiny is tied up in your destiny. So someone who just raises up a mirror and goes, "No, that's not good enough. Women should be able to vote, too. Women should be able to have property. Yeah. Queer people ought to be able to live a life of love and get married. Yeah. Leave no child behind."

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REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

It's kind of a vision for a healed world that is planted in most of us, that can get blindfolded when we feel under stress and pressure and we don't think there's enough. We think about scarcity, but someone reminds you that there's enough for all of us. Someone reminds you that we can all flourish. Someone reminds you what justice looks like.

NANCY STEINER:

So activists serve what purpose?

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Activists serve the purpose, I would say as a theologian, of articulating God's dream for a healed world. If I'm just in a secular space I say activists agitate to make the world that we all dream of come true.

NANCY STEINER:

Good trouble.

00:23:51:00



REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Good trouble. Holy trouble. Sometimes in a quiet voice and sometimes screaming with their fists in the air. Sometimes with a pen making a poem, sometimes writing a song, sometimes preaching a sermon, sometimes laying our bodies down on the ground and saying, "Black lives matter," or, "I can't breathe." Sometimes getting arrested. Oftentimes getting arrested.

NANCY STEINER:

What about illegal or violent activism such as what took place on January 6th? How are we to prevent that dangerous destruction, that deadly strain of activism from rearing its head again?

00:24:32:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I think I would argue with the word activism for the insurrection. I'm just going to argue with that premise. So, maybe better defining activism is like advocating for a just world. Advocating for everyone to have enough. Advocating for peace. Advocating for harmony. Advocating for economic equality. That's activism. Insurrection is fascist uprising. Stamping of one's feet because the election didn't go the way you thought it would. And I would say I'm a Kingian kind of person, a Gandhian kind of person. Non-violent resistance is activism. Violent uprising is just that, and that has happened and that changes the world, but that's not the kind of change— that's not the way I want to change the world.

NANCY STEINER:

You write, "Unless you do the work to understand the places where you hurt, where rejection and judgment have caused you pain, you can take childhood



wounds into adulthood." Can you tell me what that work looks like? How does that happen? What can you offer us in the way of wisdom here? And describing meeting yourself in the mirror, seeing yourself clearly, and then picking yourself up and moving forward.

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REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Sure. You know, it's interesting to me that almost all the world's major religions have some kind of love neighbor, love self parallel in there. Islam says, "Don't withhold from someone that which you want for yourself." Judaism says, "Love the stranger because you were once strangers in this strange land." Christianity says, "Love your neighbor as yourself" or, "Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you." So in that dynamic there's a you and a other. I'm sorry, how are you going to love the other if you don't love you? You just can't really do it. It could be infatuation. It might even be tolerance. But I think true love, the non-possessive delight in the unique particularity of the other is how I like to think about that.

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REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

My professor defined it that way. The non possessive delight in the unique particularity of the other. I want to raise a people who know how to love themselves. That's the work. The work of love yourself unconditionally, to delight in your particularity even if you're weird that morning, because you are. I am. How can I just receive myself as a gift to myself? I am tired today, therefore, I'm cranky. Not today, but yesterday. I am feeling hurt. I am sad. I am joyful. I am delighted. I'm insecure. The vicissitudes of our human experience, if we just relax and receive and love that about ourselves, that's the best rehearsal for that kind of love for the neighbor.



00:27:35:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

So the work is, look at your stuff. Don't pretend. Be candid. Get jiggy with your truth. This is me. Here's how I'd like to be better. I'm going to work on that. But don't pretend about you. You can't love your own facade, so the work is real, truth telling, excavating our story with a therapist or a coach or a good pastor or friend. Child, let me tell you about this part. Being curious about yourself, not narcissistic. That's not what that is, but this is how I got to be a me. And that kind of curiosity grows our muscle of having the same kind of curiosity for the so-called other.

00:28:25:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

There's a beautiful part of childhood that is nurtured because we have a mirror. My little grandson, "I'm biting my toes." "Are you what?" "Can you see me? I'm laughing." "I just dropped this cookie jar and broke the glass." "Ha ha, can you see me?" Not always the good things we want to be seen, but just that idea of being recognized. Loder used to say, "We're in search of the face that will never leave us." I love that. I see you. I see you into existence. This ubuntu theory. I see you and you become. Everybody wants to be seen. But we also, I think, as human beings, develop shame early. I wish that wasn't true, but we haven't had enough distance from the generations of shamers where shame is an education tool or a training tool so that it's in us, right?

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REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

"Did you drop that cookie jar?" You know. You learn early also that someone's going to see your poops, and someone's going to see your mistakes, and someone's going to see your flaws, and they're going to deride you. Oh, I want



to hide from that. I think the work we want to do in the culture in which we live is to make seeing people as they really are a celebration, to learn to affirm that. You got little kids in school. "How was your friend Bobby today?" "He seemed down." "What did you notice about him? How was he dressed? Had he eaten enough food?" Like, could we curate eyes that learn how to see and not judge? Just see.

NANCY STEINER:

What is fierce love?

00:30:21:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Fierce love. I've been in search of a word to describe my feeling for the world and my feeling for God for almost all my life, and I've found the way to describe it. It's this fierce love that is bold, brazen, risk taking, never say no, willing to put down your stuff for somebody else's stuff, vulnerable, rule breaking love. And I've experienced it. I experienced it when I had a car accident in Canada and I was... Totaled the car. My boy, my bull, my husband type human being was being in the hospital and I wasn't. I had no money. I had no car. I had nothing. Nothing, except my tears and my fear. And this nice white lady sees an Afro wearing Black kid clearly out of place, bloody jacket, glass in the hair, crying and she walks toward me in a lobby with all kinds of people. She's the only one and says, "What's going on?"

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REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

And man, that's right here again, just the what's going on? The bold approach that I'm going to just come to you. I'm going to cross the borders to get to you, to give you what you need. And she did. She took me to the drugstore to get



toothpaste and shampoo, and she took me to get food. She checked me into a hotel and paid the bill. She picked me up the next morning and took me to the hospital to get my lover. Like, what? Who are you? But she did that. That's fierce love.

NANCY STEINER:

What did that impress upon you? What did you learn from that?

00:32:16:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Human to human, our hearts are linked. She— My tears awakened her compassion. She was fearless and relentless and courageous about taking care of me. It unlocked in me... my own capacity... to reach out to the stranger, to make friends with the one who doesn't have a friend, to donate beyond my comfort level. To make sure that people can recover from storms. To go to Louisiana and pull out moldy plaster boards to rebuild houses. To go to the border and deal with the immigration issue. Her rule breaking kindness and her ferocious courage became for me, maybe the most theologically grounding event of my entire life. That I learned more about that, than I did in seminary, about this kind of love that is the fount of all blessings.

NANCY STEINER:

So that's fierce love. Fierce love is having the courage to cross lines, to break rules, to have extraordinary connecting compassion.

00:33:50:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:



Absolutely. I mean my book, *Fierce Love*, subtitle, *Ferocious Courage*. Ferocious courage is Linda Sarsour inviting Sharon Brous to speak at the Women's March. Palestinian, Muslim activist invites Zionist, Rabbi woman. That's fierce love. A fierce love is I'm white, but I'm marching down the street for Black Lives Matter and willing to get pummeled in that protest. To die in Charlottesville because I'm just standing up for the other person. Fierce love is the women in Iran rising up because one young woman is murdered because she doesn't have her hijab on right, and those women walking in the street with their hijabs off, taking pictures with their hair shorn. That's fierce love. Not just on behalf of me and mine, but on behalf of all of the humans on the planet. I'm going to stand in the breach and demand justice and love.

NANCY STEINER:

In your own life, there was love and confrontation with your father.

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Yes.

NANCY STEINER:

You loved him enough, you cared about him enough to take him on.

00:35:12:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Fierce love sometimes has tough conversations, conflicted conversations with the people we love the most, even when we're terrified. I grew up in a house where parents are respected and daddies and mommies are in charge and you lean on them for that. And it takes time to learn your parents are flawed and you disagree with some of the way they are in the world. My dad, love



him to pieces, was a bully for a long time. Just if it didn't go his way, he withheld his affection or used his words angrily, or sometimes he used his hands. One time in an encounter with my dad when I was really trying to stand up for my sister with whom he was having a verbal abuse, he took me on physically. And... wow, that was shattering of my worldview of him.

NANCY STEINER:

Did he hit you? What happened?

00:36:16:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Well, he chased me and tried to choke me. And in that moment of chaos, little brothers crying, mom and my sister crying, me terrified, he said, "Get out. Get out of the house. Get out." 18, "Get out." We got through that with some apologies and some time, but Dad was a repeat offender around violent talk, around anger, around disapproval with rage. So, one day, some decades after that moment, my dad was at my graduation party and really was ruder than I can describe to my friend who happened to be a white man and who I happened to fall in love with and marry. In that moment, my dad treated him like he was crap on his shoe. And I was like, "Dad, we can't. You cannot disrespect my life by disrespecting my friends, and I just can't do that. So if you're going to do that, I'm not going to do you." And when I tell that story, even now, like the the hairs on the back of my neck... Good girls don't talk to their fathers that way. But it was the most liberating experience of our life together and it totally changed our life together.

00:37:41:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:



The next morning, my dad apologized to me. What I said was, "I'm not going to do you if you're going to do this, and I want to do you because I love you, but I promise you this is the boundary." And the next morning Dad says, "I'm really sorry and I did not mean to be rude to your friend, and I don't want to lose you. And I don't want to lose you."

NANCY STEINER:

What did you learn from that experience with your father? What did you learn about the opportunities that having the courage to confront somebody can afford here?

00:38:13:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

If we don't speak our truth, if we don't set our boundaries, if we don't set our terms, nobody else is going to do it. That's a fact. One way to love ourselves is to know ourselves well enough to set our boundaries and set our terms. You might get to do that softly. You might get to say, "What I want you to know is," and set your terms. You might have to be louder to set your terms. But the only way people learn how to love you fiercely is for you to love yourself fiercely and show them what it looks like. That's about boundaries, that's about terms, that's about knowing where you end and begin.

NANCY STEINER:

But so many people choose to say, like to say, "I'm not very confrontational and I don't really feel the need to confront people. It's much easier to just go along and get along."

00:39:01:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:



When someone decides to go along to get along, to pretend that they're not annoyed, to pretend like it doesn't matter, to act like they're not a human with needs, they give up their full self. They give up their true self. And living a life without your true self is not really living a life. Living your life with a facade of kindness, a patina, is not a true life. No one can know you through your patina. No one can know you through your false self. You can't get what you want out of life when you pretend you are alive when you're actually dead inside.

NANCY STEINER:

Okay. Moving forward in the world, 2022, which is now so regressive in its racism, violence, division, extremism. How can each of us hurdle such seemingly entrenched impasses?

00:40:03:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I have been on the planet for several decades now, and I don't know that I as an adult have ever experienced this much acute, like a tsunami of racism, fascism, sexism, xenophobia, anti-trans. Oh my god, anti-women. We're going to make babies have babies. It's unbelievable to me, honestly. Horrible to me. And sometimes I think, I don't know how we are going to get through. But almost as soon as that comes out of my mouth, I remember how many people got through other horrible times. I'm looking at Ken Burn's Holocaust special right now on the United States, and when I look at those Jewish people who survived the Holocaust, who got their children out of the death camps, I think we can get through this. When I look at the indigenous people who were kidnapped and put in those boarding schools and they're still alive, and their children are still alive, and they got through that. They got through that. We



can get through this. I'm Black. My grandmother, my grandmother's grandmother got through picking cotton sharecropping, got through horrible conditions in Mississippi on both sides of the family.

00:41:34:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

We got through that. We can do that. So what we need to do is to remember the stories of the people who've gone before us. Those stories matter. Their testimonies matter. How did they do it? Their resilience matters. Their resistance matters. And dig deep into our own memory of that and find power in that. When I'm out in the streets doing justice work, I think about my Great-Uncle George who worked with Fannie Lou Hamer who took beat down after beat down and got back up working for voting rights. So if they can do it, we can do it. We have to want to do it and not give up.

NANCY STEINER:

So it's really a matter of having the will and the courage.

00:42:22:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Having the will and the courage and having the vision. I mean, those are three things, I think. The reason that... The reason that our friends who survived the Holocaust are still on the planet, is they had a vision for a nation, for a homeland, a vision for a kind of a God ordained existence in the world. I think the reason that Africans in America have survived and thrived... There's a special coming out now about that, is because we have a vision of a homeland, of a people-hood, of our own goodness and beauty and joy. My queer friends know that they're fabulous, right? The vision keeps you



moving. So vision and courage to do the thing that you think you can't do, but you can, and the will to keep on keeping on. Those three things matter.

NANCY STEINER:

How did you decide you were going to become a person of the cloth?

00:43:26:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I'm sorry. I did not decide to be a person of the cloth. I don't know what happened. I was eight years old and I took communion for the first time, which is called Eucharist in some traditions, but the bread and the cup, which is a Christian appropriation of the Sabbath meal, but that's cool. I took it for the first time and my mother was sitting next to me on the pew and said, "Jacqui, when you take this bread, it means God will always love you." And it was like that sweet, yummy bread, the Hawaiian bread. "Drink this cup. This cup means God will never leave you. God will always love you and God will never leave you." I was like, I'm hooked.

00:44:08:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

So I was hooked on God, and then I think I was haunted by God. Why would I want to be a clergy? I mean, that's hard work. But I did feel early that I was supposed to be a drum major for peace, that I was supposed to work to heal the world. And I thought I'd be a lawyer, but this other thing kept pulling. And the pulling was a feeling of, to be honest, a feeling beyond myself, a beyond myself pull to join other people in this kind of march for justice and being a clergy felt like the best way to do it.

NANCY STEINER:



Great. You write that, "We're the ones we've been waiting for to write a new American story, to find a way to build fierce love in the world." What are our own, individually and collectively, next best steps forward?

00:45:08:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I love that June Jordan quote, "We are the ones we've been waiting for." She wrote it in a poem after some South African women were doing some resistance. It stays with me always. My friend Titus Burgess wrote a song about it. We are the ones we've been waiting for feels to me like a reminder that everybody's got a job to do. Everybody's got a job to do. So what are our next steps for healing a world? One is to be conscious of the way your fate and other folks' fates are intertwined. You are not on an island. We are our brothers and sisters keepers. If we're going to go down, we're all going to go down. And I think the only way the boats are going to rise is if we all rise together.

00:45:52:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

So, you understand that you're inextricably connected. That means when you go to the polls, you're not just voting for you. You're voting for that person's auntie, that person's uncle, that child's childcare, that person's 401k that's disappearing in the stock market. You're voting for Mama Earth. All of the choices that you make belong to all of us. Wow. That's a lot. But it's important. And that then three sends us into issue... issue investigation, or just learning, right? Get in the world and read the books written by the people, the books that have been banned, read the books from the others. Listen to the music from the others. Listen to the radio from the others. Open your mind past your tribe. Open your heart past your tribe. And you're like, "Oh man, that's



why this policy matters. That's why I need to take a stand over here." That's our next step. I am not alone. My fate is connected to other folks' fates. Therefore, I need to understand their point of view.

NANCY STEINER:

Can you sing for us the verse from "We're the Ones" that's in the book?

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Oh my goodness.

00:47:10:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

[Singing] I sat back waiting, anticipating/At some point change would begin/But then it hit me, I was what was missing/My weight was dead/That's why we couldn't get ahead/So nomore delays/It all ends today/It don't have to be so heavy if we'll pull our weight/You and I are the ones we've been waiting for/You and I thought this was somebody else's war/You and I are the ones/The ones we've been waiting for.

NANCY STEINER:

In your own story, at this particular point in your life, I want you to repeat and finish this sentence. You know what I learned from my life so far? The big lessons I've learned, the real wisdom for me...

00:48:22:00

REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS:

You know, what I've learned in my life so far. The big wisdom for me, the big lesson for me, I have so much power to make a difference. I cannot believe it. How you treat somebody in the grocery store line. What you decide to send



or not send in an email. The way you pick up strangers on the street or on the subway. Girl, those shoes are fierce. People love being connected with. The power I have to change the weather. My friends call me Storm. To change the weather by what I decide to do and say is beyond my imagination.

END TC:00:49:23:00