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Disability Inclusion: Required.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Greetings everyone, and welcome back to yet another thought-provoking and care-evoking episode of Disability Inclusion: Required. I am your humble host, Justice Shorter, and today I have the immense privilege of being joined by the indomitable Aurora Levins Morales. Aurora is a renowned and beloved writer, artist, historian, teacher, mentor, activist, healer, farmer, and revolutionary. I hope your heart is ready to receive and hold on to this incredible conversational gift. Let's get into it.

Aurora, welcome, welcome, welcome to the podcast. How are you?

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

Thank you. I am tired and excited.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Oh, I am so, so thrilled to be in conversation with you. I am also so, so excited. I want you to introduce yourself here by way of this prompt, what are your favorite type of flowers, and what type of wishes and wonders bloom within you when you encounter them?

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

That was a hard choice, I have to tell you. I live in a tropical rainforest, so I have a lot of options, but I picked wild ginger. It has incredibly fragrant orchid-like white flowers, but the plant itself, it's ineradicable. It has deep root systems that spread really wide, basically one shared root for a huge patch of the ginger. And so it always reminds me of how in spite of everything, life is resilient and resistance is... you can't stop it from sprouting out. I tried to get this stuff out of my garden. It just doesn't work, and the flowers just make me feel joy, and it reminds me that resistance is joyful, that it's the expression of our aliveness, that we keep blooming really no matter what. So that's my answer for today.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Absolutely. It reminds me of Toni Cade Bambara who talks about making revolution irresistible, and thinking about all of the different ways that we can evoke joy and a sense of purpose and a sense of rootedness within the day-to-day work that we do, even if it's difficult, even if it is hard. I want to come around to one of my first questions for you about this episode, which is important because this episode is entitled Funding the Flowers, which is a call to action, right? So if foundations want to show gratitude to those who come before, one avenue is to fund the dreams and the interests of disabled and chronically ill elders. Can you talk to us a bit about what we lose when disabled elders are deprioritized for funding? And furthermore, what could the world gain if they received consistent support to create and live freely?

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

Well, we're living archives. We hold a lifetime of teaching stories, survival strategies, buried histories of individual work and collective work. The fights that we've won and lost over time, what we learned from them, healing practices, people to be remembered who haven't been documented thoroughly, but we hold them in our memory, ideas that may have sunk out of sight and can be brought back up. And so when disabled elders aren't supported, aren't funded, when we get swamped in really basic survival struggles, then that richness doesn't get passed on. It's lost. And when we're funded well and in the right way, not to do projects that we may not have capacity for, but to stay alive, to thrive, to be interviewed, to be in conversation, to do the work of eldering, then all of that rich soil gets passed along so that new thing can grow in it. See, I'm sticking to the plant metaphors here.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

You are. You are. I love what you mentioned about being living archives, and we're going to come back around to what it means to hold such histories, what it means to preserve and protect those histories. We're going to come back around to that in just a moment. I want to continue on with this thread. You once said that we create homemade theories out of our everyday shared lives, and it really helps us to make sense of everything that we are and all that we find to love. Many disabled folks of color are striving to make sense of this world and their place in it. Can you tell us what are the homemade theories that most help to get you through tough times?

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

Well, the very first one is to collectivize every struggle you can. We live in a society that privatizes pain, that privatizes difficulty. You need to go fix yourself instead of you need to fix the society. So as a single mother in poor health, I went to the playgrounds and said, "Okay, can we all set up play dates and rotate." Figuring out, okay, I have this struggle. I know other people have this struggle. Let's get in the same room and brainstorm.

There's always a hack is the second, that there are always multiple elegant solutions to any difficulty. It's just when we're trying to do it by ourselves, we get overwhelmed. So really it's about cluster, make a village, because when you have a village, you have way more resource.

I was 15 years old when I joined the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, and I remember the moment of sitting in this group where each of us was going around and talking about the conditions of our day-to-day life, and we looked at each other, it's like, wow, everybody is saying the same thing. It's not we have to get better at housework. It's like we got to get the other people who live with us to do their share. That is a social issue, not an individual issue. So I always try to figure out who is sharing this particular difficulty with me and what can we do together?

And then I would say story sharing is the basic unit of solidarity, that listening to each other's stories without interrupting, without a purpose other than hearing is so powerful and so affirming because isolation is really, I think, the most debilitating of the conditions we struggle with is having the full weight of an oppressive society on us without having a gang, we need our team. So yeah, that's my homemade emergency kit.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

I want to ask you to share if you have any advice. There are so many young people right now who are still isolating and sheltering in place at home as a result of the multiple pandemics and health emergencies that we're dealing with throughout this country. And that very real challenge that you spoke to about isolation is something that they're barreling through and dealing with on a day-to-day basis. And many people have acknowledged that, "Hey, look, I'm struggling to create community. I have folks who online, but I also miss the sense of touch. I'm sad that the people who I do know that are physically around me are not taking precautions or are not thinking about things that may compromise my health, and I am deeply alone," or, "I feel deeply alone." Any advice for those folks?

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

I mean, I've been living online since long before the pandemic because I have extreme chemical sensitivity so I couldn't go into the most rooms anyway, and making a small group, making different small groups. One of the groups I'm in, we hug each other online, we just wrap our arms around ourselves, and it's amazing how much it feels like touch to have somebody else say, I'm sending you this hug. It's hard not to have touch, but chronically ill people have been inventing ways to stay connected for a really, really long time using the internet.

I'm in a queer, sick, and disabled group on Facebook. I'm not going on Facebook as much these days, but that started with a handful of people, and there's a couple of thousand now, and you could say, "Hey, everybody, I'm having this problem. Anybody got some insight?" Or, "Can anyone recommend a good doctor in this area?" Or whatever it is. And there's always somebody awake. I've gone there in the middle of the night when I'm feeling in crisis, and somebody will respond.

So it's figuring out how to use online spaces not as the free for alls that they tend to be, but how can you make a small room full of people that you really take the time to connect with, to tell each other's stories, to get some actual intimacy even if you're not in the same room.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

You have described your work in this way, I tell stories with medicinal powers. Herbalists who collect wild plants to make medicines called it wild crafting. I wild-craft the details of the world, of history, of people's lives, and concentrate them throughout art in order to shift consciousness, to change how we think about ourselves, each other, and the world. The stories we tell about our lives shape what we're able to imagine, and what we can imagine determines what we can do. My job is to change the stories we tell, and help us imagine a world where greed has no power, the Earth is cherished, and all people get to live safe and satisfying lives. Aurora, can you tell us how can we wild-craft around aging? What ripple effects could such a re-imagining have on the natural world, our families, and neighbors, and the need for collective care?

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

It's something to hear someone else read that to me. I receive it differently. Thank you for doing that. I mean, wild crafting a vision of elderhood, it requires, I think, redefining productivity. One of the reasons that elders are discarded in our capitalist society is that the kind of work involved

in being an elder in one's community is not commodified in the marketplace. It's not seen as productive. And so we're seen as used up and done when we're in many ways the richest portion of our lives where we're getting to compost experience and really draw nutrients out of it.

And so wild crafting around aging I think means looking to multiple cultures, how are elders valued and cared for? What have people tried? What could we try? And to make it a big conversation to really propagate the understanding that we are a very enriched soil in which a lot of things can grow. And loss of soil literally is a major, major problem from the climate emergency. It's one of the things that impacts our nourishment.

So thinking about elders as enriched soil that needs to be cared for, that needs to be nourished, that needs to be protected from flooding and wind blowing it away and all the other things that can happen to people and to soil and to make it a big conversation to just bring it up in every conversation we have. Where are the elders? How are they doing? Whatever we're talking about to ask that question so that it propagates throughout, so it acts like wild ginger.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Absolutely, absolutely. I love that you refer to elders as rich soil, and I think about the importance of making sure that that soil is not stripped of the nutrients that's needed, and there is a very concerted effort in this country to erase and repackage history, histories that some white people have found to be uncomfortable or unaligned with their historical framing of the world. Now we know such efforts are not new, but that does not make it any less dangerous. You are a historian. Can you give us some historical context or examples of how people of color and disabled folk have successfully prevented attempts to invisibilize our stories and experiences?

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

Oh, yes, I can. So first of all, all oppressed people everywhere have always done everything they can to preserve our stories, always. Enslaved people made story quilts and spirituals that concealed coded histories and details of life and ways to escape and survival information. Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto during Nazi rule buried archives, milk cans under the floor of an illegal school full of self-documentation of life under the Nazis. LGBTQ+ folks, BIPOC people, females have all collected oral histories and correspondence, interviewed each other about the impact of people who are gone, made videos, written books. There is a rich semi-underground movement network of documentation.

There's a film that just, just came out about Sally Gearhart who played an incredibly important role in queer community in the Bay Area and beyond, far beyond, looking at correspondence of people who didn't talk about their disabilities in public, but who did in private so that we can... Some of the great artists that we revere really struggling with disability and illness, and it's not public because you couldn't make it public without losing public space at that time.

I think about Gloria Anzaldua who dealt with massive disabilities, and talked about them relatively little, and how we can go back and bring these stories into the light. So really it's a daily practice, it's a collective practice, it's an individual practice.

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I'm about to start recording family history for my family. We can interview each other and get stuff down. We can create archives wherever we can. It's a daily continuous practice to hold the space of memory, and the reason that I studied history in order to be a better storyteller. I was a writer before I was a historian, and I saw the impact that my writing had on people who'd never seen themselves in books before. And I said, I need to do more of that, but I need to learn how to dig for stories.

But the erasure of history is always trying to tell us that the conditions we live in are permanent. It's always been this way, it always will be this way. And history shows us who did what to make things the way they are.

My father, who is an ecologist and evolutionary biologist said, "Things are the way they are because they got that way. Something happened to make them the way they are." So history is a really good medicine against despair, it's a really good medicine against being too locked into the present moment.

People have been organizing under fascist regimes since there were fascist regimes, and they know things about that, and we can study what they figured out. So I believe that the preservation of memory is an essential part of every kind of liberation work.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

We save ourselves, and we also save our stories. I love the ecological component that you mentioned. There's a wonderful book out called *Disabled Ecologies*, and the author mentions how on many government websites, when they talk about the history of how an area became polluted, that it is often devoid of proper attribution. There is no culprit, there is no company or corporation specifically who they name. They just say that chemicals somehow magically ended up in the ground, ended up in the groundwater, and in the aquifers, and this is now it's something that they're trying to mediate and to fix, to sort out.

But that erasing the attribution, the cause, doing the causal analysis and showing that there are individual entities that played an extremely active role, and all of this damage, devastation, and harm, how deeply harmful that is to not allow for that truth to be fully realized and represented in their accounting of community histories as well.

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

Sorry for interrupting there, I'm a Puerto Rican Jew, I speak simultaneously with you while listening.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

No worries.

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

It's like those TV ads where they tell you the side effects of some drug, and they say cancer can happen, but it just happens.

I'm actually in the process of researching my pesticide exposure as an infant and young child in relationship to my epilepsy. Where is the company that made it, and who decided it would be

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used here? And really digging into that story to find accountability to find out who started the company, how did they make their money, and how far back and how broadly can I look at the question I'm asking?

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Absolutely. How can funders, let's go a little bit further on this, how can funders interrupt revisionist histories and erasure tactics? What can they do? How can they better support community-led work to protect, preserve, and promote our stories and histories?

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

I think funding small local projects that are linked together. I think doing work locally is really important. A lot of times you get big clunky infrastructure around memory projects, and who's ever the lead is going to have the biases of their geography and their identities. And I think that funding a whole lot of local oral history and photo collection and document reviewing and digging into what are the documents telling us, what aren't they telling us, what's missing here is always a valuable question. But to have local history projects that have ways to communicate with each other I think is a really great way to promote that kind of work.

And funders need education, funders need to be able to recognize revisionist and erasure tactics. They're not necessarily going to without us telling them. And so we also need to have kind of community representation ways of talking to funders and saying, "Okay, come listen to us tell you about how our history, any particular group, how that history has been represented, and what's wrong with it, and what needs to be added, and what kind of red flags they need to look for when they're funding history projects."

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Funders need to listen, and you are someone who so many of us have listened to. I am not alone. Many of my contemporaries, all of us, we have learned so much from you. We adore and we cherish you. Your gifts to the world are innumerable. So I have to ask you, Aurora, what are you currently cherishing? What do you still yearn to receive? What makes you smile?

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

I'm cherishing the whole world right now. I am really feeling very deeply how interconnected all life is, all people are. The threat to planetary human existence is also about recognizing how deeply integrated we are into our ecosystems. And so actually that cherishing of connection is a daily practice for me, it's how I remind myself that I am in a place in a huge web that I'm both held and individual. So yeah, I cherish the whole world.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

You've given so many gifts. Is there anything you still hope to receive from the world?

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

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Yeah. So the gifts that I have given, a lot of people appreciate them, and it gives me what I sometimes call social capital. I am cherished, and I am recognized, and to some degree seen, but that doesn't translate into a livable income.

I've been back on my family farm where I grew up for five years, three of those years without running water. I don't have a washing machine or dryer or a hot shower. I'm living in very basic conditions, and publishing books doesn't bring a lot of income. My royalties from books are not very big. And so I am tossing out a message in a bottle saying I would love for my community to brainstorm ways to help me keep going with much less stress.

I now have Speak Out Now agency in the Bay Area is representing me for speaking gigs. People who are connected to universities to ask them to bring me so that I get well paid so that I can spend more time writing and less time hustling, and so that I can make space in my daily life for the rest that I need for just sitting in my garden, talking to plants without that making me anxious that I'm not going to be able to pay my bills.

So what I yearn for is I haven't worked jobs that take out much for social security, so I need my community to be my social security. And I have a Patreon, and that's my main source of income right now. So you could join my Patreon, you can give Patreon subscription as a gift to somebody, you can get your friends to do it so that I can write what I need to write, not what I think I can sell to somebody. So that's what I'm yearning to receive.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Thank you for your candor, honesty, and vulnerability, and sharing what the truth really is because again, I think so many groups, foundations, individuals speak in terms of accolades, and it's so important to realize that on a very material level, people need to eat, people need to be able to wash their clothes, people need to be able to have hot water or whatever else you need or desire to live the life that you want to lead. And so I'm thrilled that you mentioned this. And before the episode ends, we're going to make sure we post in the podcast notes, and we'll verbally say them aloud for folks as well how they can find your Patreon and contribute to that because it's critical, it's necessary, and it's the entire reason why we're doing today's episode.

Our previous episode, we spoke to a few guests, and they mentioned and we talked about how often elders are working because they have to, not necessarily doing the work that they want or they wish to do. It's out of necessity or having to pay bills and working far beyond the time where they ultimately would have rather retired. And so I'm so thankful and grateful to you for sharing this call to action because that was a clear request, folks. It was not ambiguous. There was no in-between on that. It was very clear on-

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

Dollars.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Yes.

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

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I just want to add one thing, which is that philanthropy tends to be geared toward projects, but it's also important to fund individuals. It's important to fund individual artists, it's important to fund living archive people. There are people who hold a certain place within communities that extends far beyond their own life, and I'm one of those people. I write things that help those who are younger and more active and energetic than I am to sustain hope, to feel inspired, to feel encouraged, to think about strategy in certain ways.

And so there needs to be... I think there's a tradition in philanthropy of assuming that if you get a bunch of people together and fund them for a two-year project that that's more effective than funding an individual human being. But individual humans move through projects and movements over a lifetime, and it's an entirely different kind of resource. And so I would say that is something that needs to be rethought, that individuals who play particular kinds of roles need to be funded as just themselves. Deliverable is our lives.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Goodness, so many great soundbites, so brilliant, so extraordinary.

You turned 70 years old this year. And I am curious about this. This is a closing vision that I would love for you to explore a little bit. What could you eat 70 times and still find it to be delicious? What could you listen to for 70 days and still love the sound of it? What could you hold in your hands for 70 hours without an urge to ever let it go?

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

What could I eat? Fried plantain. Tostones, I could eat tostones for as long as I have teeth, and if I didn't have teeth, I'd put it in soup and let it soften it and still eat it.

And one of my favorite sounds besides rain, I can't listen to rain all the time because I need sunshine, but is lizard cuckoos in the forest here who call out when the humidity gets to a certain level and they think rain is coming. I could listen to that for the whole rest of my life. What could I hold in my hand for 70 hours without an urge to ever let go? My pen.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Nice. That is nice.

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

Although that could give me a hand cramp, I don't know.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Absolutely. Just gorgeous, just absolutely gorgeous. And as promised, I want to come back around can you give people your specific Patreon details? And for those who want to know how to follow you and how to continue to support your work.

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

Patreon is the best place right now. My web page is not super active right now. It's patreon.com/c/auroralevinsmorales, all lowercase, no separate words, all run together.

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JUSTICE SHORTER:

Fantastic. And we will also include that link in the show notes.

Aurora, you are simply exceptional. And I've said it multiple times throughout this recording, you are such a gift. And thank you for giving us extraordinary words to unwrap each and every day. And I hope and I pray that we can continue to give you just a fraction of all that you have given us as well. Thank you so much for being here.

AURORA LEVINS MORALES:

Thank you for having me.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Now, the year is done, but I can assure you that we at Disability Inclusion: Required, oh, we have only just begun. We have some truly remarkable offerings in store for the next year, but if you simply can't wait until then, well, hey, listen, I understand. Go on over to the Disability & Philanthropy Forum website at disabilityphilanthropy.org. There you will find mounds of incredible material that will surely contribute to your learning journey. I'm Justice Shorter, and this has been another episode of Disability Inclusion: Required. Thanks so much for tuning in, and join us again next time.