

Episode One: Healing Through Storytelling with Alexus Rhone

Sam: [00:00:00] Welcome to Our Stories Matter hosted by Trauma-Informed LA, whose mission is to foster resilient communities that promote healing and wellbeing through collaboration, education, and community engagement. I'm excited to be co-hosting with Susie Hess. Susie is an advocate, consultant, and a relational organizer in the areas of trauma informed approaches and the intersections of intimate partner violence.

Susie is the cofounder of Trauma Informed LA and a clinical assistant professor at USC, Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work. In recognition of her dedication. Susie was presented with the distinguished dr Marjorie Braude award by the city of Los Angeles Domestic Violence City Task Force for innovative collaboration in serving victims of domestic violence.

Susie: [00:00:44] I'm also excited to be here with my friend and cohost, Samuel Lazalde. Samuel Lazalde is a native of Los Angeles, born into an environment filled with gang violence, leading him to juvenile hall, juvenile encampments, and ultimately a hospital bed with a gunshot wound. He shifted his detrimental trajectory by earning his master's degree in social work from the University of Southern California and working in various capacities for the mayor's gang reduction and youth development office. In his free time, Samuel indulges and the noble art of pugilism and has used the opportunity to mentor young men exiting the prison system. Monique Moore stated, "healing happens in community, not in isolation."

So with that said, Our Stories Matter. We'll be focusing on healing centered engagement, which builds upon the notion of trauma informed by taking into account environmental factors. Healing centered engagement considers, one, recognition, which is recognizing collective trauma as opposed to solely individualized trauma by looking at environmental factors, two, narrative building, changing the question from what happened to you to what is right with you.

Sam: [00:01:58] Agency seeing people as agents and the creation of their wellbeing rather than victims of traumatic events as people are not harmed in a vacuum. And collectivity, changing the lens of helium as a political act rather than a clinical one. Many oppressive societal constructs contribute to trauma and are not strictly individual and medicalized.

We decided to kick off the season with Alexis Rhone to talk about humans through storytelling. And lastly, thank you Lokels Only for giving the podcast a home.

Welcome to Our Stories Matter. I'm Sam Lazalde.

And I'm Susie Hess.

Our Stories Matter is hosted by Trauma-Informed LA and sponsored by champions and service and the amazing music by Torrence Brandon Reese, founding member of the music group,

Street Corner Renaissance. And this could not have been possible without the recording of Mike Suede from locals only.

Susie: [00:02:50] So today we are super excited to introduce our very first storyteller, Alexis, Rhone. , Alexis Rhone is a writer, storyteller, producer, artistic theologian.

Should I start over or do I just give up and revolutionary artist who has written four young adult novels for reluctant reading teens and preteens and is the co-author of "29 years for 13 seconds." the injustices of justice, the story of Vance Webster, a man sentenced to life in prison for a crime he witnessed as a teenager while growing up in South LA. Since completing her master of arts and theology from Fuller Theological Seminary in LA, California, Alexis launched Unshackled Productions. where she produces page-to-stage and storytelling events around the country. She also facilitates training for private sector and nonprofit organizations and how to incorporate effective storytelling into public discourse. A native Texan and graduate of the University of Texas at Austin, Alexis currently resides in Raleigh, North Carolina. So without further ado, I am so excited to have you here today Alexis.

Alexus: [00:04:17] Yes, I am so excited. Thank you. Thank you, Sam, for the invitation. I get to lead the way for this dynamic new podcast that y'all are recording. I'm excited.

Sam: [00:04:27] Yeah. Super awesome. I'm excited too, even though I just met you virtually.

Alexus: [00:04:35] And I was disappointed that I put this makeup on thinking that it was going to be a video recording. So I'm glad that you and Susan got that to take it all in.

Susie: [00:04:43] Yeah, I mean, so, you can just. Start. And we would love to hear, just everything that you have done and your own healing, journey through storytelling.

Alexus: [00:05:00] Oh, wow. I've got to tell you the, the, the two gifts that, that, my life embodies are memory and story and, both of them have needed to be, healed, so that they can be relevant for universal audiences.

I'm very. Careful to, say that, our stories don't, they don't belong to us. But before we share them, we need to have some context and some self-care so that we can, you know, be graciousness where we're sharing with others. I'm here in Raleigh, North Carolina, where I have found in a new project called Truth Meets Story expanding empathy, one story at a time.

And I produce live events and I coach people how to tell their true, their true stories. And so part of my healing journey with story, I guess a pivotal moment, was when I was a student at seminary, at Fuller Theological Seminary. And one of the first classes that I took was called the clinical and theological exploration of guilt and shame.

And in that course, Dr. Janice Morgan strength, a phenomenal professor there, she talked about, how we need it to recognize that, guilt, is a, It's a relevant part of society, but shame is

not. And so she helped us to discern between guilt and shame. And in a religious context, there's a ton of both.

Everybody's always make you feel guilty or shameful about something. but you know, it's, it's, it's not healthy. And so taking that course was really profound for me because I realized that I battled, a lot of both guilt and shame, guilt being, you know, that, that thing that you, that you did that was bad.

But shame being the thing that says, hey, I'm bad because I did this. And so that's not, that's not good. So a lot of my workshops are about basically putting my life and sharing that well and dismantling this whole idea of what guilt and shame looks like. Letting people know that, you know, shame is not good and you don't have to dwell there. And there's something about the power of story that helps us to, to unpack all of that.

Sam: [00:07:06] Man. I think that's, that's amazing because, I, I mean, I'm speaking only really from like, the Latino community where our, our foundation has been, you know, the Catholic and the Christian Church. And so, yeah. Anything, anything goes, goes, and disarray in our lives. I mean, our, our parents, everyone's, it's shame.

It's shame that they bring it on us and that's, we should feel bad. We shouldn't feel that guilt because of the shame.

Alexus: [00:07:35] Exactly. Exactly. And you know what, an I, I'm, I'm careful to say, you know, we need to forgive, you know, our parents, our grandparents, our communities for what they did. No, which is the beauty of the Academy.

You know, I know, the USC School of Social Work, is doing some amazing work and helping to train healers, people to go out into the communities and to help them be better. And that's what, you know, my seminary did for me as well. It gave the training to say, Hey, there is a different type of healing that needs to happen that can happen through story.

And it, you know, you, you won't necessarily. No, you don't. You don't need to be in a pulpit to, in fact, you need to go out into the highways and byways to, help heal some of the things that have come from pulpits. But I found that story, is the most accessible way to do that because we all have a story.

So it, it becomes very disarming to know that it's not a, this person has it, but that person doesn't. And so we all do.

Sam: [00:08:31] Yeah. Yeah. That, that's huge. I mean, I, I feel I need to, sit down and have a session with you. Really, I mean, through much of my experience in, in academics and all, a lot of the work that I do now, I mean, we wear our hearts on our sleeves, right?

And there is, there is no real like training to, to get you to, to get past that, to be able to sort through that, that things that get stirred up.

Alexus: [00:08:54] Yeah, yeah. And you know, and that's, I thank you for, for saying that because it just occurred to me that there was one other thing, that Dr. Morgan strengths did at the, on the very first day of class.

She upset that the course, like in learning about guilt and shame, what we were going to be doing was exploring our own journeys. And so she warned us that, she didn't call it a trigger. She just said that there was some things that might, get stirred up. And, for that reason, she had a, a friend of hers, an older woman who'd given all, she'd given up, given up this woman, all of our names, and she would light a candle every class day and what basically just pray for us. So that ever what, you know, what, whatever happened in that space, that there was the mystery of the spiritual that was covering us.

And, so for all of the ways in which, you know, healers do, you know, we're trained and so we go about helping to heal our communities with the training. There's also a mystical piece. There's a mystery, with regards to that and the most credible thing a lot of times that we can say is, I don't know how this is happening, but I'm available to help facilitate that.

Susie: [00:10:04] Alexis, could you talk about the difference between storytelling that's healing and storytelling that may be retraumatizing.

Alexus: [00:10:15] Oh, that's a great one. that, yeah, that's, that's awesome. So, well before I answer that, let me say that when I produce live storytelling events, it is for organic community engagement. I believe that there is something powerful about all of our stories and that, and it's also creative, it's a quick creative engagement.

It's creative and safe entertainment. And I don't do open mics. I do curate mics, so I can, I first become the, the universal. So with that, the difference between a story that is healing and one that is retraumatizing has to do with the, first of all, identifying g the audience that you're film, you're speaking and, the, the, the intent of your story.

Like how do you want your audience to respond? So always, whenever I'm coaching people how to tell their stories or even to select what story to tell, I have them answer three questions. The first question is, who am I? Am I a minister? Am I a sister? My mentor, my professor? Like who, who am I? My politician?

So first question is, who am I? The second question is, who is my audience? My audience? A group of people who are going to write me a check? Some fundraising? Is it a group of people who have experienced the same sort of thing that I've experience? Or is my audience a, you know, are they looking for intimate inspiration or what have you?

But then the third thing is how do I want them to respond? Do I want them to write the checks? Do I want them to do better? Do I want them to not do what I do, don't want them to follow in my footsteps? So who am I? Who is my audience and how do I want them to respond? Those are

the three questions that I think you ask that will lead you and to make prudent decisions about which stories to tell that will be healing versus those that will be retraumatizing.

Because the thing that we have to remember...Is that every story doesn't, just because a story doesn't serve every purpose doesn't mean that it serves no purpose. And, the ways to keep us on purpose and on task is to identify the audience and how it is that we want them to respond. So, for example, when I am in a, when I'm talking to adults who are mentoring young girls, who are perhaps growing up really fast and they're just kind of, you know, just really, really out there. I can tell the story, about being a 12-year-old who took pride in two things. I didn't look like I was 12. I didn't act like I was 12. I could easily pass for 15 or 16, which is why I had two 17-year-old boyfriends.

So when I'm telling that story, I'm letting them know, number one, my, my end goal is, I'm going to loop my life. I'm going to tell you what happened, but it's because I don't want you to judge our girls. I don't want you to decide that because my 12-year-old self made this really, really bad choice that I am forever locked into that space. And so in the same way that you have invited me here to speak to you with that, you know, that situation that happened when I was 12, the 12-year-olds that you are, that you are, mentoring, see their future also as not being limited based on, you know, the really crazy things that they're doing.

So that's one story that I could tell for that particular audience. Now, a story that I'm careful to not share, with young audiences, particularly young girls, are stories about, the time when I was almost raped. And I say almost because my mother was able to step in quickly and she completely quashed that situation.

Now I was rescued. Other young girls were not. Now if I am trying to inspire them. If I am trying to let them know that you too can live an amazing life, that things do work out, that this current phase in your life or whatever, you know, we can refer to it as a rough draft that is yet being polished, whatever.

I can accomplish that without ringing, without triggering them or bringing up something that their underdeveloped context cannot handle. So, but again, I'm all the time asking myself through questions. Who am I? Who was my audience and how do I want them to respond? and because I'm all about sort of that end result, like I want them to respond a particular way.

I am very, very careful to pick a story with all of the stories that I have that will help me get them to that, to that space.

Sam: [00:14:41] So it's strategically wearing your heart on your sleeve.

***Alexus:** [00:14:44] Absolutely. You know, and, and listen, healing is a real thing. Like there are scars that I have on my body.

When I first got them, they hurt like hell. Now they no longer hurt when I punch them, but there's still the marker that's there. So I'm not saying that, you know, Oh, you've got to hide, cover your

scars. I operate as a wounded healer. I operate as someone who is very intentional, about the stories that I tell in the audiences, you know, to whom that I tell them, so it's not me.

I'm not random. And it's not a, you know, like, again, I, I don't even curate open mics, but even let me say this. I think that there are spaces that are acceptable for people to tell those stories that are, you know, the, to tell the stories about those tough places because sometimes your healing comes from sharing.

For example, there was a church in Phoenix, Arizona, during the height of the me too movement that hosted an open mic for women to come out and to share. And their, their rule was, men are welcome in this space. They may not have any time at the mic. This is strictly for women, and we invite the men to come to just listen to the stories. So one of the storytellers that came up. I had actually personally invited her because I knew of her story of being raped by her best friend's husband and her losing the best friend and the husband lying and saying it was consensual. And, you know, in all of that. And it was a, a, a deep, deep wound.

And, it had happened several years before I met her, but on, when I found out about this open mic at this church, I shared with her, hey, they're doing this thing. It's an open mic. These are the rules. Men will be present, but they cannot speak. What do you think about attending and perhaps sharing your story?

And then I said to her, if it does not feel life-affirming, you're not obligated to share, but I wonder what it would feel like for you to just be in a space to hear other women talk about being violated. So we attend the night and about after the third person or so, she squeezes my hand. She gets up from her state and from her seat, and she goes to the mic and she shares her story.

Now she's sharing it. There's like a nervous giggle laughing that she's doing. But what I loved was that she was telling it like it happened. She, this, this, fortunately this church was not a, a place where they were like, Oh my God, you've got to watch your language. And so she was giving it like straight, no chaser.

And at the end of her, her story, of course the audience applauded. They were in tears, but she sat down and she whispered to me, "I'm on my way to healing. Like I can feel it." So her being able to share that story in that space and listen to other people to share their stories was not retraumatizing it was appropriate. Right. For the audience. The intention was this is a safe space for you to tell those things that, that have happened to you and to experience this, that comes with, you know, with sharing your story and feeling that way.

Sam: [00:17:50] You know, that's, that's what the experience has really been like for me. And being able to share my narrative and the narrative of my community to, to, you know, these leaders and changemakers out here in Los Angeles.

Alexus: [00:18:04] Absolutely.

Sam: [00:18:06] I dunno if you've struggled with this. I know it's been the case for me in that I feel maybe at times when, especially when it's been more of a sense of someone taps on my shoulder to come and do this or come and, you know, come speak at this event and I feel like I'm being exploited.

Alexus: [00:18:22] You know what? That's, that's interesting. Wow. So I would say that, my writing partner Vance Webster, the co-author of his memoir. He would tell me stories where he, he felt exploited. And I think that it was because he would accept the invitation without considering number one, the motives of the audience.

Like, what, what are y'all about? Like who is your audience and how do you want your audience to respond to me speaking? He did not, he was not savvy enough to ask those questions early on. So he would say yes to every quote, to every, opportunity that was extended. And what he found was that a certain audiences really loved the stories about all of the gang violence that he had experienced.

About his being shot. They didn't want to hear about, the, the healing, the, the, the adults who were around him when he was younger that tried to get him, you know, to go a different path.

For sure, they want to hear the sexy.

They want to hear the salacious. And, and so eventually he got to a point. Where he's like, okay, well, when I'm at the mic, I'm going to tell the story that I'm going to tell whether they like it or not, and I'm not going to feed into that.

So he became a, he became a lot more savvy about what invitations he would accept. But you know, the truth is, Sam, once we get to the mic, whatever stories we tell, you know what's going to land or not. But you know, we have, we have the option to decide what stories we tell and if someone is trying to limit our community, if they're trying to lock our communities into a particular narrative then that's the beauty of, the access, Sam, that they'd given you and me to the mic, is that we come from these communities and we stepped to that mic, and we can show them, hey, you know, here is what healing looks like. Here is what, here's what the other side of, of that, trauma looks like here.

Here were my steps to getting there. Here is how I suggest that you like, here's an option that's available for you. So, yeah. But no, I got not that that has definitely happened. And, but I think that we have more control than, than we know, and we just need to take that control.

Sam: [00:20:34] Yeah, no, certainly. I mean, I, again, this is just speaking more just from my experience, I, I, I get sort of stuck in this weird middle ground because I, on one side, yeah, I'm feeling the, hey, maybe this is exploitation in some way.

Right. I'm just, I'm just. Over here selling what's sexy because, whatever it's for funding, it's to gather, you know, more participants, whatever that may be. But on the, on the other, on the other end, it's also extremely healing for me to be able to share this narrative because, I felt

that, you know, much of the, the hardship and things that I've gone through and have been able to overcome, I, I only overcame them in order to be able to share that.

Alexus: [00:21:13] Absolutely. That's right. And I think that that's why I tell people our stories don't belong to us. I love to produce these community events because there are people in the audience who are thinking that I'm the only one. And then when you, you know, stand up, or when I stand up and I courageously share, they are just liberated in ways that we cannot know.

And I don't even know that we need to know except. We just need to continue to be out there sharing. Because when, when we don't share our stories, Sam, other people share it and they don't even get it right. They don't come close to telling it correctly. So we have a responsibility and an obligation to tell our stories in every space for the, the, the, the healing of our world. Stories will do that. They empower, they heal, they repair.

Sam: [00:22:05] You're, you're awesome.

Alexus: [00:22:06] Thank you, Sam. I was telling a friend of mine, I was in New York for Thanksgiving, and I said to him, I was like, I, you know, I looked at my face when I was done, you know, I was about to, you know, go downstairs for breakfast and what's in my face in the hotel. And I just start blowing her kisses.

And I, you know, the set person in the mirror, because I, I know, about the times when I didn't feel you know beautiful. I didn't feel worthy. I, you know, I was just kind of, I felt the need to mask. I felt the need to cover. And, once I began to really unpack a lot of these things through story, and I began to share them, and it just became a, I just became a better version of, of, of who I've always been.

Yeah. So the baby girl who, inside of me who had, you know, all of these other things, you know, I let her know, you know, big girl lets you know, as it's taken care of both, like we were going to be. All right.

Susie: [00:23:03] I am so blown away by everything that you've said, Alexis. And I'm wondering, if you can share with our listeners. If people, if folks are listing and they're wanting to create their story, what would be like first steps that you can suggest if they wanted just like to start today?

Alexus: [00:23:24] Well, you know what, I think, so it's, it's, let me, let me, let me, like parse those, that, that question. If you are looking for healing. You know, if there is some trauma or something that's going on there, then, let me first say that part of the reason why I'm able to tell my story so freely is because I have had numerous therapists, that have helped me to work through a lot of my stuff. And I also have spiritual, I have a spiritual director, who has, you know, with me as a minister.

I can pitch things and I can posit and I can share, you know, different experiences that I have in that space. So, so first I go, I went to the healers to help me heal from those spaces. And then

once I had a sense of self, a better sense of self and, some awareness, some grace for myself and some grace even for all of the things that happen, because going back to what Sam had said earlier about the people. You know, in our community that we know that the church and you know, our families, and you know how guilt and shame and how they just want us to feel so bad about things. We really have to be gracious with people who don't know that, what they're doing is injurious or it's bad and it's keeping us in a stuck place.

So go see the healers first. And then once you have done that, the healing work, then, for people who are interested in telling their stories. There are a lot of storytelling troops that are around the country. And so in LA, you know, as a matter of fact, there are so many different options.

I think The Moth has some troops that are out there and Snap Judgment and that stick. And they also may do some things in that space. In the community colleges, a lot of them are now, for adult, with the adult learner programs, like lifelong learner, centers. Many of them have storytelling training.

I'll be facilitating a class I'm hopefully here in, in Raleigh, with our adult learners. Starting Fall of 2020. But in any case, there are a lot of different spaces. But before you start telling those stories, I really want to make sure that you are in a, an a healed and, and evolved space.

Because when you are trying to tell a story that you have not yet healed from, you could very easily reinjure yourself and, and it can be traumatic to others. There was a woman, when I was producing stories, for storytelling for USA Today Network. There was a woman who had submitted her pitch.

And when I read it, I thought it was interesting enough, it was about her being involved in some sort of religious cult. And so I called her and, I began to just let her, you know, tell me her story. And, what I found at the end of her story was that she was trying to do what I call a giving Jesus a superhero cape.

People who want to give Jesus a superhero cape. It's like this bad thing happened and this bad thing and this bad thing and this bad thing. And then all of a sudden Jesus came into my life and woo, Jesus, like a superhero healed me from all of that stuff. And now I'm better. Well, I am evolved enough to know that, there was more that I knew I needed to poke around my story a bit.

And so the more I talked with her. The more I could see that I understand that sort of brand of, like in a lot of our, our churches and, you know, religious spaces, you know, they liked Jesus with a superhero cape. I just happen to think that Jesus with a superhero cape is very irresponsible when you're going to a universal audience.

Because they're thinking, okay, well that's all I have to do. And then I, you know, Jesus can come in. And so they, when they tried that strategy. And they're not healed, you know, then Jesus gets a bad rap. So as I poked around her store for a bit, I, I said to her that, that I would

bet it sounded like that the story would not serve sort of the universal audience and that I wondered if, I asked if she had like, like what was her therapy like for her, her counseling or the healing, like going through the situation.

And when she said that she hadn't sought anyone, I was like, oh boy. I can't force anyone to go see a therapist, but I can say your story, does, your story. I don't think it would serve the greater good. And for me as the producer, that was my responsibility to her and to the audience to not put her at a mind, to not put her on a mic and allow her to tell that when.

I was like, yeah, no. And she, and she was still pretty bitter about that situation too. So that was the other thing. the, the, the, the, the scar was still very sore. I can poke at my scars that they're there, they're present, but they, I don't feel anything cause they've healed. Yeah. so there's just that marker.

Yeah. Her scar was still pretty raw. And so I just, you know, so I told her that I, that I, I would work with her to get the story out, to find aspects of the story that could be helped told on a, on a stage to universal audience. But, and it's, and that current in the current form where she was still so angry and it was still so much bitterness, it was, it would not serve the, the universal good for her to be on the mic to share that.

So I would I apologize for that, you know, for these, these long answers but I, I just wanted to say that healing first and then the, then, go for the actual story training. And, once you, whoever it is that's responsible for giving you access to them, I hope they will be mindful and they'll be able to hear whether or not that story is ready to be shared.

Sam: [00:28:43] Yeah. So Susie, we're doing this story training.

Susie: [00:28:47] We are, wait, Alexis, will you be doing this virtually?

Alexis: [00:28:54] You know what? And actually, I, because in Raleigh I felt I'm going to have to record this. I'm literally going to have to put this storytelling training on video. I get so many requests, for this, and it's not cost prohibited for people to fly me all over the world to do it.

Although I'm available by my passport is with me, like super, super excited about that. But I will. But the, the, the training for this workshop and Robert, it's for an actual adult learners, so they will come out, and take the course. But I am, I'm, I'm tinkering with, how to put this, this content online. Yes. Virtual policy. Yes.

Susie: [00:29:33] Well, Sam and I and probably Mike here, who is the one who's editing, all three of us will be in.

Alexis: [00:29:42] And then now you do realize that, the one thing that I tell people when I'm training them to tell stories, I train people to tell stories on a mic. So it's like, this isn't just like your personal train, like, oh, I'm just going to do some, some personal trainers like, no, no, no, no, no. When I train people to tell stories, it is with the intention that they also find a microphone

to share that story because the story does not belong to them. And I've coached, you know, hundreds of people on how to, to do this.

And, and now, now that I'm here in Raleigh, I'm approaching at least a thousand. And I, but again, I want people to tell. You know, it can't be left to me and Sam to go on to tell all the stories. Me and Sam got a ton of stories that we can tell, but we've got to get as many people as the mic telling stories so that we can all feel and learn from each other.

Susie: [00:30:33] Absolutely. I'm so grateful. I mean, I think I would learn a lot. I have been one who hasn't told my story for a lot of the reasons that you've said. Yeah, and I so appreciate, you know, what you've said, everything, especially healing first and then this story, which I so appreciate. I think that's incredibly, important and I appreciate just your heartbeat.

I mean, you being real and authentic and sharing your heart, you know, all three of us. I wish you could have seen all three of our facial expressions, but we were like right there with you. And yeah, we so appreciate it because now...each episode will be focused on another storytellers healing journey. so we're really, yeah, we're really excited that you started us off in terms of, yeah, healing. We have about 20 people lined up now.

Alexus: [00:31:25] I love it. I love that. Love it. I am so excited about this work, and thank you for seeing the power of story and foreseeing, for, you know, for starting this podcast. Our Stories Matter. Absolutely. Absolutely. And, and I think that, what I, what I have found is that when we start telling them, you know, we will create the audience.

Like they will come and they will hear and they will be better because they thought they knew. They thought they knew, and then we stepped to the micro, like, ah, ah, no, I get it. Stories of healing and the, you know, stories are also, they don't, they, they are an easy way in their organic weight, in their natural weight, in, you know, it's like, I, I'm grateful that I don't have to mask, I don't have to put on a, I'm grateful for all of the healing work that, preceded the courage that I exhibit every time I'm asked to step to a mic. I'm grateful for the training that I've got and on, on how to do this well. And, I'm grateful that, you know, I don't want to keep this to myself. Like, it's too important for me to be the only one. You know, it's like I'm, I'm all about getting up to, you know, to that space.

Sam: [00:32:37] You know, so you've gone through this whole healing journey and you know, you put together these trainings and, and you're, you're a help. You're helping to guide others is to being able to share their own narratives, to share their stories. I wanna know more about your why, like, how, how, what has driven you to, to continue to do this and piece it all together the way you have?

Alexus: [00:33:00] Oh, wow. Thank you for, thank you for asking that. That is such a good question. And, so most of my life I have, because I have so much, if I didn't have flavor, I'd be called weird. I would've been called weird. But because I have so much flavor and I'm kind of used to looking at, then I was just called, eccentric or deep.

And, that's. Then, you know, for, for as long as I can remember, I, but I, it kind of all clicked for me. My last semester at the University of Texas at Austin, I was a public relation student in the school of journalism. And, I was taking a statistics class with Dr. Paula Poindexter and to model sort of how, math statistics reflect a particular audience.

She had us do this exercise. She said, okay everyone take out a sheet of paper, write down the top three things that you are worried about right now. Top three worries. And so, you know, most of us were, you know, graduating seniors. And so we took out a piece of paper and we wrote our top three down and then she said, okay, now take that paper and swap it with the person next to you.

And I pause for a little bit, cause I'm like rut-roh, like I'm about to be exposed to your possibly I liked at least the one other person, but I did it. I, you know, I exchanged it, with this woman, her, Amani McKella She's an attorney right now in Atlanta. I'm going to send her this up, this podcast recording.

As soon as I'd say I, I remember this. You remember this Amani? Anyway, so she and I were sitting next to me and, so Dr. Pointdexter Says, okay, give me some responses. What are the top three? And then people start calling out, you know, job after college. The economy, my, my student debt. That kind of thing. So it, but it was that those both, basically the top three that everyone had written.

And then she said, Dr. Poindexter said, is there anyone who wrote anything different? Everybody looked at me. And I said, yeah, that's fine. You can share. And so she raised her hand and she said, I think I have something different. And then just points back and say, okay, read it. And she goes, well, the first one here is, you know, I want my life to, make a difference. The second one is, will I, be relevant in the spaces that I inhabit? And the third is, what does it mean to like live life in vain? Can I literally go out and do all of these things that I say I want to do?

So after she's read these three items on my list, Dr. Poindexter says, "well, yeah, that is different." And the whole class busts up laughing. And so I, cause I knew that I was, you know, that that exists. But I was not worried about debt. I was not worried about finding a job after college. I was not worried about the economy. Those things are like, yes, you know, we're, we're training for, for this, we're good.

It's gonna work out like that. Those are not the big issues. The big issues are how do we live with meaningful life? How do we take this training that we have been afforded, this rich opportunity and not make it just about our own wellbeing. How can we go out and serve humanity? How can we go out and serve and help, the common good in whatever capacity, you know, we're doing.

And, as a side note, Amani, while she is also a practicing attorney, she also hosts, these retreats, for women, who are, you know, in various spaces and needing of feeling spaces. And it's sisterhood. And so she is not just practicing attorney, but she is also, a healer.

And she does that by hosting these retreats. So, as she came on, she came up on that later, you know, cause I think one of her top three, her top three was on the job, economy, accepted into law school. That was a hard top three. So she got to fit the, you know, the, the, the, the majority of, you know, population, you know, and then in that particular classroom.

But yeah, she, she came out. So it's, so this has always been, important to me and, I've always wanted to do it. The, the thing that I could never be sure of is, am will I be able to, am I talented enough and my gifted enough? And I realized that even the questions about my talent and my gifts was all of the layers of shame that I had just piled on.

And so, once I realized that going through the healing process and, and continuing to every now and again do a tune up. Like I, you know, I, one of my favorite therapists, you know, she, pointed her head and she say, don't go up here by yourself. Take somebody with you. And so that has been something that I have definitely done.

Now that I know that, can I do it? Yes. Should I do it? Yes. Am I doing it? Absolutely. And I'm going to keep doing it. And, Because it's, it's, it's, it's important and I'm, I'm good at it and be having a good time. Like, this is my life. In the middle of the afternoon, I get to be on this wonderful podcast recordings with you wonderful people.

Sam: [00:37:47] I am so happy you're on the team.

Alexus: [00:37:51] Yes. My, this is, this is such a rich opportunity and all because I've done the healing work and all because I value and appreciate and have made room for the power of story.

Susie: [00:38:04] Well, I'm so grateful for you, and I think this may be your quote. I know it's on your website, and I remember reading it, and I feel like it's very you, that storytelling will set you free.

Alexus: [00:38:17] Absolutely. Absolutely. It will set us all free. Absolutely. All of us. And in the same way that with the story about the young woman who, who I, you know, to the, the, the church open mic for the #metoo, event. She was able to, start and I can't say start, because she had been seeing therapists and, and doing different things, but it was something about a space being created for her to share a safe space, a space that was not going to be vitriolic, a space that would not, a space where men were not permitted to speak. They could be present and we wanted them present. We wanted them to hear these stories, a safe space for her. And, and when she was telling it like it happened, I'm saying like, she was like, she was very street in her, in her telling, there was no judgment about language.

There was no judgment about like, oh, this holy place that you've used is kind of languages. There was rawkus applause. She could feel that she could feel that, and she could see that for all of the ways when she probably was going in her head by herself, thinking, Oh my God, I've got a pretty it up. I better clean it up because I'm with the church folk.

No, she was with people. She was with women. She was with men who were empathetic and who were so. Who was so sorry that she had experienced that kind of trauma, and she was with people who understood that healing is real, healing is real, and that her healing was going to come. Fortunately, part of her healing will come through her ability, and creating this space to tell her stories.

So yes, stories, they, they definitely have power and stories are funny. Stories are inspirational. Stories are nimble. When I was, teaching..And stories can stories. He would teach the teacher. Years ago I taught this narrative storytelling class, at a high school. And, the assignment that I had given was for them to write a story about their funniest moment or their scariest.

And one of my students, her name is Felicia, she was, one of my most like just, you just loved my class. She was a decent writer, not the strongest. And so when she came to me and she said, Ms. Rhone, I would like to, I have a story that's both scary and funny. So when she said that to me, I did not trust that her story was both scary and funny.

So I just kept calling Felicia, please just pick one. You're scary. So your funniest moment and work with me please. And she's like, no, no, no, no, no. Like, just like try like, just, just trusting. Just let me just do the story. So I, I let her write the story. She tells the story about when she was nine years old, she was a girl scout on the fourth grade, and they were having a girl Scouts meeting after class.

So they go to the, they go to the, to the afterschool meeting or whatever they're doing arts and crafts. She raises her hand to be excused to the restroom. The girl scout leader excuses her. She goes to the restroom, she washes her hands, and as she's attempting to exit the bathroom, she pushes the door.

But the door won't budge. She pushes it again, still won't budge. She starts beating on the door. Hell, hell. And no one can hear. No one has come. And so she's thinking, all right, well, I'll just, you know, hang out here until the janitors come. They will, you know, when they, when they come in and unlock the door, then I'll be able to leave at that point.

So she takes a seat on the restroom floor. Suddenly the lights go out. They were set on a timer. They go out the same time every day. But that also meant that no one was going to come back into the restroom until the morning, and she is panicked and she is just really frightened and she's wondering why her scout leader hasn't come to look for her and in her state of tears and paranoia, she said that she begins to pray and she says that God answered her prayer with one directive, pull the door, Felicia, pull the door.

She goes to the door, she pulls it, the door opens. She's, she exits the rest of your maternity, of the girl scout, never ever trapped in the bathroom. All she needed to do was to change directions. So I tell that story a lot as evidence of sometimes, you know, all that we really need to do is to change our direction.

You're pushing. Nothing is happening, pull. But what that story taught me as a teacher is that clearly, even my less than gifted writers have these amazing stories and they have the ability to understand funny and scary and how dare I tend to limit her to just the one, because that one that she gave me is one that I've actually, I've checked the store for years as one of my favorites, and especially when I'm, when I'm talking, I just had a, an interview last week with a group of girl scouts. They love the story.

Sam: [00:43:12] So I'm assuming she got double the points.

Alexus: [00:43:17] She was A plus, plus, plus, plus after that. I was like, clearly you have taught the teacher today about how not to limit you. Forgive me, forgive me. And she was so wonderful. She was so gracious. She just loved me. She loved my class, and she loved to tell stories. She loved to tell her stories. And so, for me to give her, to create that opportunity for her, was, was as much of a thrill, as anything she could have received that.

Sam: [00:43:44] That's, that's beautiful. Like all you've been doing, you, you're beautiful. You're a beautiful person. But piecing this together for doing this.

Alexus: [00:43:53] Thank you Sam. You make me feel even better about kissing myself in the mirror.

Susie: [00:44:04] Well, Alexis, thank you so much for starting off our brand new podcast. Yes, we are so, so super excited that we had you and your voice and your heartbeat. Yeah, you're incredibly inspirational and just healing to hear you again. I can listen to you all day and please let us know when you are virtually up and running and for sure the three of us in this room are all in.

Alexus: [00:44:34] Okay. And then y'all, and then the three of you have to bring three. So that's all done. Oh gosh. This has been amazing. Thank you so much for this opportunity. I appreciate it. I've enjoyed our time.

Sam: [00:44:49] Thank you, Alexis.

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