

Courtney Martin: Hi, welcome to Solvers. I'm Courtney Martin.

Nguhi Mwaura: And I'm Nguhi Mwaura. On this podcast, you'll hear stories about how social innovators are tackling the world's biggest problems to build a better future.

Courtney Martin: Solvers is a show where Nguhi and I have conversations with people who are dealing with problems that are not just big, but also complex. Today's guest is Esther Armah, the executive director of the Armah Institute of Emotional Justice.

Nguhi Mwaura: So, Courtney, I'm really looking forward to hearing this conversation with Esther. But just for our listeners, before we get into it kind of top level, what is emotional justice and the work that Esther is doing?

Courtney Martin: Well, you know that Walt Whitman thing I contain multitudes, I feel like Walt wrote that about Esther. She's a playwright, a diversity trainer, a journalist, a global soul, and she's created this framework, emotional justice, that I think goes at least one layer and maybe 10 deeper than almost any other conversation that the public has having about race and gender and power right now. I am so interested to hear what you think about this one. I warn our listeners, this one is heavy, but you will be changed by listening to it, I promise. Here's my conversation with Esther Armah, the executive director of the Armah Institute of emotional justice.

Hi, Esther. Welcome to Solvers. Where are you today? I know you live on many continents. Where are you speaking from today?

Esther Armah: Hi, Courtney. So I am in Accra in Ghana's capital. I'm sitting in home office. I'm up by the window, which means that the sidewalk is actually quite close. And it means to feel as if there are sirens in the room. You'll hear ambulances or hear some traffic, but that's what it means to live in an equatorial climate where you're kind of near the outside, even though you're on the inside. And I'm looking at some beautiful Jasmine flowers that are filling this room with some good perfume.

Courtney Martin: I think that's a perfect metaphor for your work, what you just described. I love it. Let's get right into the interview. I want to start with a story, because you and I both believe so powerfully in them. I was wondering if you could tell us about the moment when your mother finally broke her silence about the coup of 1966 and sort of handed you this narrative puzzle piece, as I understand it, to understand so much of who you were and what you've been pursuing with your work. Could you kind of bring us into that moment?

Esther Armah: It was 1997. My dad and what I call the old man of the sea, they're sitting outside on the veranda. It was the 40th anniversary of independence. So all these ambassadors and diplomats and politicians, all these people had flown into Accra for all these different celebrations, gatherings. And my dad was

sitting outside with his friends. He was, God rest his soul, a former ambassador to England for Ghana. And he was in Kwame Nkrumah's cabinet. He doesn't drink iced water. So he'd asked my mother for some water. My mother walks out onto the veranda, holding a tray with room temperature water. And as she's walking out, my dad is telling a story that I've had a million times, the night of the February, 1966 coup and what it did to a nation and a nation's history. Heard the story a billion times, honestly I was half asleep because I was like, "Oh, these old men and these stories, more of them."

And as he gets to this part about being on the way to Vietnam on a peace mission with the former president, Kwame Nkrumah, and all these other cabinet ministers, and he's in the middle of the story, my mother says as she puts down the tray, "How would what happened in Ghana? You were not even there." And I was just like, "Wait, what?" So there's this moment, I don't know if you've had this between your parents, where they look at each other in a way that says this is just trouble. So they exchange that look, and then I follow my mother into the kitchen and I say to her, "Well, what do you mean he wasn't there? So who was there?" And so, I had never thought about myself and my sisters as having a role in that history in the way that I discovered when my mother essentially broke really what was on almost 30 years silence and just said, "This is what happened," and then she starts.

She doesn't speak in full sentences, but she starts. It's 3:00 AM, the soldier at the door shouts, "Freedom, freedom." Suddenly she hears this banging against the door and banging and banging and banging, and its soldiers with their rifle butts. And they're banging down the door. They smashed the door in. She had just come back from London, so there are suitcases all over the floor nobody had unpacked. She'd gone to bed. She jumps out of bed and there's just screaming, explosions, tanks. It's just mayhem and chaos. The soldiers are in the house. They're using the rifle butts. They break everything in the house, glass, wardrobes, doors, everything. Screaming. Screaming inside the house, screaming on the streets, explosions. My mother tells of a soldier putting a gum to her head. He was young, I'm not sure if he was drunk, but as he goes to pull the trigger he stumbles and the bullet goes pasta.

She doesn't tell us how she gets herself and my sisters out of the house, but somehow she does. And then we end up under house arrest for another two years before we have to leave Ghana. And we come to London where the rest of school happens. The thing, for me, that's particularly powerful about that story is one, I had no idea of the role my mother played and what is a pivotal part of a nation's history that really remains the story of a failed presidency and a military coup. But the women who played such a powerful role in meeting times at the door, meeting soldiers at the door, their stories, I had just never heard them. So in my reporting, in that coverage, I pivot from hearing more of what my father was going to share and then I go look for other mothers to ask them, what was your experience?

And I learned all kinds of things that I had never known, and that people had never shared in a 30 year period. And so, what I start to understand is this history that had been told in this very kind of literary academic patriarchal way. This particular night had women at the center, but what was also at the center was their silence. And in the breaking of my mother's silence and me connecting, I had had years of really terrible night terrors, because I have no memory of that night at all, but I'd had nightmares for years where I wake up at 3:00 in the morning and I would hear boots and I would hear stomping. And I would wake up out of my sleep screaming and never understanding what that was connected to, and it never been discussed. And so, it was so much bigger than the breaking of the silence. It really was the birth of the framework that I now implement through my institute, Emotional Justice.

Courtney Martin: Wow. That's amazing. So let's get into that framework that you mentioned was born that day when your mom broke her silence. Can you define emotional justice for us?

Esther Armah: Emotional justice is a visionary framework for racial healing. It explores how a legacy of untreated trauma due to our global history as black and white people has shaped our relationship to ourselves and each other. Has shaped how we learn, how we lead, how we work and how we built, has shaped our institutions. And how emotions through the lens of both race and gender, a pivotal parts of what helped to uphold and entrench in equity and supremacy. And so, as I was thinking about emotions, not as just individual feelings, because we're all human and we all have feelings, but in the context of systemic realities, because we think about a globe of black people, we think about white people, not a white person, and how that then changes. You think about the quality of vulnerability, but you put it through the lens of race and gender when you talk about vulnerability in the body of a black woman or a black girl.

And if there's a completely different conversation, which we seen in multiple ways globally. And so, the framework was about me wanting to put language to how emotions contribute to upholding supremacy. And it was with me saying, "We need a way out of this, but we can't get out of something that we haven't effectively found a language for and then build a framework and a process and a practice around." So it was the doing of that work that has really been, I mean, honestly at this point, my life's work

Courtney Martin: Beautiful origin story. You started to actually get to this, we're on a podcast called Solvers. What do you think as the problem that you are solving for with emotional justice in your institutes work?

Esther Armah: The problem that I'm solving is that one of the ways to create equity is to grapple with the role of emotionality in upholding systems of supremacy. We don't do that. We haven't done that. We don't think that we need to do that. And yet, without doing that work, we are doomed to repeat cycles. Right now, we are dealing with the aftermath, in the United States, of a decimated

democracy. Part of what upholds white supremacy is not simply ideology. It's very much about what I call emotional patriarchy. That is a society and a system that caters to privileges, prioritizes the feelings of white men. Their vulnerability, that anger, that rage, that threat their sense of self in relation to the world, no matter the cost or the consequence for the rest of the world, for all women and for black and brown people. Now, that's what happens as a result of the system of white supremacy, that we think can be dismantled through legislation.

But legislation has been passed and here we are right in the middle of it, on the other side of an insurrection, or what I call an attempted coup. And the thing that coups teach you is that it's so much to do with a relationship to power. But in this case, you're talking about the fault lines of race and whiteness and power. And you cannot solve the cancer of white supremacy with simply a new government, a call to unify, and to somehow move on. You have to grapple with the fact that for white men in particular, the nature of US history means that their relationship to themselves is understood as subjugating or exploiting someone else. So their understanding of power is in relationship to subjugation. That's what it means to have a system of white supremacy. It's then becomes an addiction to this false notion of black inferiority and white superiority. So how do you solve that? You start by saying, "Okay, what is this emotionality? What is it?" Name it, language, identify it. And then how do you create a process to grapple with it? And then in creating the process, you then have to go on the path to practice it on a daily basis, because you cannot legislate your way or PhD your way out of 500 years of trauma. It's a physical impossibility.

Courtney Martin: Well, that's why I was so struck listening to you thinking about that white Americans, I think those that have sort of woken up in the summer of George Floyd and tried to really be accountable for racism. Their motivation begins from an emotional place, right? Whether it's guilt or shame or compassion or whatever emotion might be their spark. But I think we quickly move into a much more comfortable kind of rational place of, "Okay, this is about taking an implicit bias training that can rejigger my brain." We sort of turn into these technocrats instead of staying with the emotion and dealing with it because it's so messy and it's so uncomfortable. And I feel like part of what your work is doing is saying, "Nope, none of this is going to get done if we pretend humans are rational or that we function technically. It's all emotional." But that also scares the shit out of people, I'm sure. Do you find that we're scared of your work, and how do you think about that?

Esther Armah: Nobody is not a little bit scared of emotions. The thing that we've done with emotions is to silo them. Is to say they belong in a particular world around the purity of psychology and the psychological realm. We haven't addressed and engaged the fact that they are central to what is also political, they're central to what is ideological. And because of their central, if you do not engage them, you cannot dismantle the ideology that you say that you want to with just another ideology that feels more rational, makes more sense than the one before. The

other thing doesn't work is to either mark, dismiss, disregard, or negate, because whatever you think about what people believe, their belief is really about connection and emotion. And so, you have to navigate and engage it. So that's why with emotional justice, it has a definition.

It's a visionary framework for racial healing. There are four pillars specific named title, racialized emotionality, emotional patriarchy, emotional currency, and emotional economy. Each one has a specific definition. You dismantle emotional patriarchy, you dismantle racialized emotionality. The idea that you're not simply a human with feelings, but that feelings in your body as a black woman, in your body as a black man, turn into something else because that's what the system of racism has done to you. It's made what is human, it's made it racial. And then in making it racial, it creates a justification for violence. And then, in making it violent, it helps justify the kind of division and brutality that we have seen at infinitum. You don't take that apart solely with legislation alone. It's never not going to be messy. I think the harder thing is people want to do liberation and comfort. You want to find equity of inclusion and diversity in the comfort of a space where you're not challenged beyond what you can face.

You want to be applauded and affirmed for your choice to acknowledge that there's an issue and there's a problem. You really have to grapple, negotiate with your resistance. Your resistance to being central in any space. You cannot create inclusion by centering whiteness. And that's what we're doing in the diversity world. So, of course, it's not going to work. How is that going to work? But the act of decentering will feel traumatizing. It really will. But does it mean you stopped doing it because you feel traumatized? You're going to have to navigate that very rocky terrain in order to get to the other side. And on the other side is a justice that you then have to struggle to protect as we have to struggle to protect all liberations.

Courtney Martin: Yeah. Well, let's make that rocky terrain very real for listeners and take them into one of the trainings, for example, that you do. Because as you've said, most diversity inclusion, equity inclusion trainings, don't change institutions, don't change organizations, end up being mostly performative however well intentioned. Your trainings are just a whole different animal, right? You do something very different than most trainers. Can you take us into a specific training and sort of give us a feeling for what happens in the room and how those emotions show up and how you see people deal with them?

Esther Armah: Sure. So we have a flagship training called the emotional justice, truth and accountability sessions. They are a three-day workshop followed by support follow up [inaudible] three months, six months, nine months or twelve months. Those three days [inaudible] over a period of about eight days. We use the tools that shape me professionally and personally. So we use a mix of journalism and theater in order to do what we call connect rather than just have folks consume more information. So we always start by centering whoever is the most

marginalized group within whatever chain. If we're dealing, for example, with an academic institution who wants to have a more diverse curriculum, or wants to create a more diverse space for students, we'll start by centering their black and brown students and spend a whole session doing a mix of activities with them in order to have them reveal what their experience is of that particular environment. At this point, every institution has a diversity policy. It has some document that articulate its commitment to be diverse, inclusive, and welcoming. So what we argue in emotional justice is that that policy represents an intention. And nobody measures a successful business based on intention, it's based on outcomes only. So that first day is all about centering those who are the most marginalized. That is because we treat their narrative of their experience. We treat that as data.

Courtney Martin: Right. So their experience is the outcome, not some numerical analysis. The story is the data, is the outcome, right?

Esther Armah: Absolutely. And then what you look at is the gap between the outcome and what is written in the policy. And then the work for the institution is to close that gap. Because the outcome is the measure of your success or failure when it comes to diversity, inclusivity and equity in an organization. And the outcome is their experience of your culture, your organization, and even what you define as accountability. We present those findings in a creative form. So that first day, we spend time with, it's usually a three hour session, and we do all these different activities, gather all that data. It's then collapsed into a 25 minute, essentially a monologue. So we have artists, actors, directors, are all part of our training team. And on the second day, what we engage in this case, faculty, management, the C-suite, usually white. The way we present that data is through an artist, through an actor.

Why? Because that allows you to connect to the experience of the marginalized in a way that centers their actual experience. How they feel it. How they experience it. How they receive it. How they deal with it. And what we find that that does is it's a massive opening up. It usually steals all the kind of defensive, well, this is what we've been doing for however many years, and that allows us to do what we call, okay, intention versus outcome. Intention is your policy, outcome are the marginalized experiences. Our work now is to close the gap.

Courtney Martin: I'm wondering why the artist's rendition of the student's experience in this example that we're exploring rather than the students directly. Have you noticed something different about leadership's ability to hear the artist and the students?

Esther Armah: It is much less about leadership. And again, because emotional justice as a framework, centers black women and girls first and foremost. And in centering them, it understands something very clearly. They know no matter what the policy says, but they have a particular relationship to power and whiteness if the power structure is white. So the idea that they would simply speak their truth to

the powers that be and not expect there be consequences, is just not how the real world works. What we want to do is put power back in the hands of the marginalized in a way that makes them both feel centered. There's no detrimental consequence, and also allows the C-suite to hear the totality of that power in the way that they speak their truth.

Courtney Martin: So they couldn't be identified and experience any retribution, it's made anonymous. And then it also doesn't put the labor of that storytelling and testimony in front of a mostly white audience in this case that you are talking about black women and girls, right? Which is such a huge piece of our culture too, is not acknowledging the labor and trauma that goes into retelling stories all the time.

Esther Armah: But also not just telling them, is that people don't hear you in the way that you tell the story. It's that part. And so, all of us as humans, if you think about a film that moved you, a book that moved you, a play that moved you, there is something about art that moves you in a way that the issue may not. You may be interested in the issue, but you'll be moved by the story.

Courtney Martin: So then take us into that moment the leadership team watches this artist, here's this artist rendition of the outcome, the actual outcome in this institution. And then how do you take them from their reaction, their kind of moment of opening, into some real action for institutional change?

Esther Armah: So it's usually a 25 minute monologue. From there, we just do two things. We ask them to say, based on the experience they've heard articulated by that individual artist who represents the narrative data of an entire group of black and brown people to describe the institution based on what they've heard, versus their own experience. And then that you can see the parallel between what those black and brown folks shared and what the management heard. The gap has been closed. So what's happened is that they've actually heard black and brown people in the way that they've told the stories and have their experiences. It's always a very emotional feedback session. Because I'm a generalist, we do the feedback the way you do an interview. So it was always very specific, all open questions, nothing leading. Give all of the management a chance to articulate, what did you hear? How did it make you feel [inaudible] the chat room?

And it grows and it builds. The minute they've done all of that, we then have a literal slide that says intention versus outcome. This is your intention. What you just heard is the outcome. Now let's get to work to the gap. So within this particular academic institution, it was department of theater. So we went into their curricular and looked at all the different things that they taught. We pick one specific thing, studied how it was put together and said, "Okay, find the fault lines where this is supposed to be inclusive, but it's actually exclusionary, where this is supposed to be inclusive and it's actually discriminatory, where this is supposed to be inclusive and it's actually elitist." The next session, we literally

found that work and took the whole thing apart and put it back together again in a way that's inclusive and centers those black and brown learners.

And I mean, it's a powerhouse thing to participate in because at the end of it, you're like, "We've done some real work." So now you can literally scale it. You can replicate it again and again and again, and then again. And so the followup sessions are designed to do exactly that. We've identified a particular part of a department that they can work on, and then the followup sessions are what we call active updates. So the active update is, okay, next thing to do, next thing to do, next thing to do, next thing to do. The power of the training is that from the black and brown folks point of view, they have been heard in the totality of their experience, unfiltered and punished and uninterrupted. And that matters. The second part is that the totality of their voice has been presented to usually mostly white management in a way that they've simply never heard it. And then they've been challenged to do the work, to make the change real. And it's a really simple question. What do you say you believe? How will you stand up on its feet?

Courtney Martin: Yeah, that's so powerful. I just think of so many leaders who I think in their hearts are probably profoundly aware of the ways in which their intention is not being lived within the organizations and feel completely stuck as to how to shift that. And I'm just dumb struck by how this model speaks to that in a way nothing else that I've been exposed to, and I've done a lot of research in this area, actually gets at the heart of it. But it does require courage and bravery, particularly on the behalf of obviously the most marginalized who are offering their testimony. But also, on the whole ecosystem, right? Everybody has to ask to be up for this. What do you do if you're inside of a training experience and someone, particularly I'm guessing it would be a white guy, with some power resists and kind of shuts down and pushes back against you? How do you handle that?

Esther Armah: So there's always resistance and there's always pushback. Well, we always say Emotional Justice is neither one of those things is our business. The question is not what am there for? The question is why you're here. So we always just put it back on them. Emotional Justice doesn't do coercion. We don't even really do persuasion. What we're saying is you are saying you want to make this change. You are saying you recognize there's a problem. If you are saying all of that, then the question is always going to be what are you willing to do to change it?

Courtney Martin: Right. It occurs to me, even the question I asked, your response to it, I love what you said, has nothing to do with us because if you leaned into it, then you would be prioritizing white male emotionality, right? Which is the whole definition of what you're working against.

Esther Armah: Absolutely. But it's also what happens a lot because people don't recognize what I call emotional patriarchy, they don't recognize it until it's identified. When I say to the departments, "The challenge that you have is that you're



operating in a pure emotional patriarchy. You created an entire department that privileges centers and caters to the feelings of the white man who happens to be in charge." So he is willing to tweak, so everybody tweaks. He's not willing to transform, so nobody transforms. But you're centering that person. This training requires you to send us somebody else completely. Just that pivot is a literal 360 degree turn. It's never not going to be uncomfortable. That's why we'll say that decentering for white men will feel like trauma, for some white women, it will feel traumatizing because it interferes with a long standing relationship between white men and white women. And so, there's no way to not have real discomfort around that. But that's part of the emotional labor that is emotional justice. And that emotional labor is just something that's unfamiliar and you just have to become familiar with it.

Courtney Martin: Yeah. I'm working on becoming familiar. And thinking about my work, and one of the things you talk about is intimate reckoning, which I find to be such a provocative phrase. And I know you're working on a bigger project actually around this, which is what white women's role is in holding up emotional patriarchy. Can you talk a little bit about what does intimate reckoning mean, and maybe share a little bit about that project that you're working on?

Esther Armah: Intimate reckoning is about understanding that it is our relationships to each other, where we maintain and uphold emotional patriarchy in ways that enable inequitable systems to be maintained. And so, in order to do that dismantling part, it's going to be about the relationships we have with each other, between men, between women. The particular challenge between white women and white men is this, for white men, the emotional patriarchy is always that interests. They're always moving with the interest. It's always going to benefit them. It only benefits white women as long as those men are happy. But emotional patriarchy does not serve the future of white women either, unless their only understanding of themselves is in proximity to the power of white men. But as we have seen within political structures, you are going against what? Your safeties, your future, your health, all these different things.

So intimate reckoning is about challenging the relationships between white women and white men in order to dismantle the emotional patriarchy that has been an underpinning on so many relationships in so many ways. What makes it so hard is nobody wants to rock, lose, threaten the relationships with the men that they love, that they live with it, they work with that, they love, with who they're dependent on economically, emotionally, and all these different ways. There is no way to get to a dismantling of emotional patriarchy without an intimate reckoning particularly for white women. And the reason in our work, emotional justice, we say to white women, "You want to build a circle of willingness." That is a sisterhood of white women, because you need a place to go to to mourn. As you do this work and make this change, what will actually be the journey towards justice will feel like a loss within a relationship because the power structure is being upended, that emotional labor that all women do to maintain relationships and to keep men happy, ending that is going to feel like

ending a relationship. It's actually moving it through this dismantling stage to get to the opportunity and possibility for real equity.

Courtney Martin: It's an incredibly practical level. Since I first learned about your work, so I'm actually married to a white male CEO, and I've been thinking more, when we get into some tough spot and I'm thinking, "I feel like this has to do with his blind spots and the ways in which he's been shaped as a white man and his culture among a bunch of other things." And then I'll think, "I don't know if I have the energy to get after this right now, especially in the middle of COVID and all the rest of it." And then I'll think, "But me getting after it means when he goes to lead, he's received a different kind of feedback. My work with him shows up at work with the women of color he works with too," because as you pointed out, it's a whole system, right?

So anyway, it helps me draw a line between my white women friends and all the conversations we have about our white male partners not seeing certain things, not living up to their agreements in certain ways, that that is sort of passed off as elite complaining. But then your work helps me also flip the script and be like, on the one hand, it is elite complaining. On the other hand, we could be pushing back more against these intimate spheres where that emotional patriarchy is in place. So that in more public spheres, the men from our homes, our intimate spheres would be behaving differently in the world, right?

Esther Armah: Absolutely. And we are shaped by multiple worlds that are personal, professional, educational, religious. We're shaped by those worlds. We learn who we are in those multiple worlds. And so, I'm learning who we are will also come from those multiple worlds. And so emotional justice says, "Yes." We've always had this kind of weird thing where you got to separate the personal from the professional. White men say that, it's never been true. It's never been true. It is a way to essentially punish all women and black and brown people, because the truth is nobody lives that. Nobody does. It allows you really to punish the human and to protect a certain kind of power. Because what you do is say that the panorama of emotions are allowed in the bodies of white men without consequence or punishment.

But when they show up in anybody else's bodies, they can be shamed, disqualified, they're professionally punished, something about them becomes problematic. And yet it's not true for this particular group of people. And that's all they have ever known. And that's got nothing to do with their politics. It does everything to do with their emotionality. And so, that's why I always say progressive politics alone cannot get you to a freedom space. And that the work of white women with white men is an intimate reckoning because it is those personal behaviors that show up in professional spaces, political spaces, educational spaces. We don't lead in silos. We don't live in silos. We don't love in silos, and we don't learn in silos. It's just not the way the world works. And so, Emotional Justice looks for a pragmatic approach to what is essentially messy,

because the only way you stay free is to work to stay free. That's the way this works.

Courtney Martin: Yeah. Okay. I keep working to stay free. You heard it here. I have one last question which is, do you have a poem or some other piece of writing that has significantly shaped your journey? And if so, can you share with us?

Esther Armah: Yes, I do. So it comes from a book of poems called Collective Amnesia. The poet is Koleka Putuma, she's a queer South African poet. And so, these are lines plucked from multiple poems that really speak to me and my work. Learning should be a place and all the women in your family should gather there more often. Until unlearning learning is a tradition we can pass on. Until we learn how to hold each other at funerals and inconvenient occasions. So you're healing looks like talking and transparency. For them, it is silence and burying, and both are probably valid. Undo your silence. I have learned how to stay my glass is half-full even when it's broken. I have learned how to dance on graves without mourning what is lost.

Courtney Martin: That is so beautiful. I just feel incredibly indebted to you for your depth and the gift you've offered through this conversation and through, I hope, many conversations to come. But thank you so much, Esther.

Esther Armah: Thank you. Thank you so much, Courtney. It was such a pleasure.

Courtney Martin: It's a lot, right?

Nguhi Mwaura: Yeah. I think collective deep breath out. Yeah, that was incredible in so many ways, but also really difficult to listen to in so many places as well. And I think just for me listening to Esther, the things that struck me was, even as we're creating this space to talk about solvers, so often the solving space it's put down to what can you count? How much money have you raised? How many lives have you impacted? That kind of direct service, how are you solving the problem? And it feels like a really very white culture dominant way of solving things. And what Esther is inviting us into is kind of back into our humanity, which means that it will be messy, that we need to solve for people. And people are messy. Society is messy. Our histories are messy, and intricate, and complex.

And this intersections of the systems of oppression that we live under are just so difficult to overcome if we don't start from that place of emotionality and thinking about who gets to be centered. And there is one thing that maybe, I thought you did a great job, Courtney. But if I was interviewing her, the one question I would have asked is, as black people, how do you prepare for liberation? Because she talks about how liberation for particularly white men might be really uncomfortable and for white women traumatizing. But for black people, and I think about myself being raised to always defer and under that culture of white supremacy really just keep the white people around me comfortable, how do I prepare for liberation? What does that look like? How do

I start to unlearn, as she put in that just incredibly powerful poems. So yeah, I have so many thoughts. So many more thoughts than that. But would love to get your reaction, Courtney. How are you feeling after doing that interview?

Courtney Martin: Well, first I want to just say thank you for that reflection because I feel like it's so important and so wise. And I would love to hear a part two, that's a conversation between you and Esther, where you do ask her that and many other things. This interview really screwed me up. Esther's work kind of screws me up in the best possible way. I mean, when I first started to learn about it, it just sort of shifted the way I saw even my most intimate sphere and my most intimate relationships. And that is very uncomfortable. And I practiced being uncomfortable and it was still almost beyond my capacity. There's this educational theory about the optimum disequilibrium for learning. In order to actually learn and grow, we have to be a little off our equilibrium, but if it gets too far, it can shut us down.

And I feel that in myself with Esther sometimes, where I'm like, I'm in this and I believe in it. I know it's true. And it's freaking me out and I'm staying open on purpose. So to your point, what capacity do men have to do that with her work? What capacity do other white women have to do that with her work? I don't know. I think it's challenging for people, which is part of why I'm so admiring of her because I think she kind of doesn't give a shit. Because she's like, "This is the truth and you better figure out how to have the capacity for it." So, it makes me want to rise to her occasion. It makes me want to be stronger and have more stamina. So much of what she says kind of haunts me again in a very good way.

And I've been thinking a lot about the unlearning that you mentioned and just a lot about emotionality, which you also featured. I'm a very emotional person. I always have been. And I've been in so many spaces in philanthropy, in thought leadership, where emotion was just something to be manipulated in order to get money, but it wasn't actually an authentic, real presence in the room. You know what I mean? It's like I helped coach people to give TED Talks where they would wow people with their stories. On some level, it's a real manipulation of emotionality versus being like, "Hey, assholes sitting in this auditorium. We're part of a system that talks about scale all the time." And what does that even mean? The real true emotions of some of the work that social change folks are involved in, I think, it has mostly been manipulated or erased in a certain way. So, I love that you brought up that point.

Nguhi Mwaura: Yeah. I have many other thoughts, but I think just to wrap it up, as we think about what it means to actually be solvers in the world, I loved what you said about the idea of pushing far enough so that you're learning and growing. But once you've come out of that zone, that it then maybe becomes a little bit unhelpful. And I think what I would love to encourage anyone who has been touched by this interview is to think about what the cost of your lack of engagement with discomfort means for the rest of the world, for people who live at the intersections of these systems of oppression, for folk around the

world who don't have the privilege of maybe reflecting, but are living out the very real consequences of the way we've chosen to organize as a society and the labor that we've chosen to exploit, or the land that we've chosen to live on. So what does it mean to not engage? What does that cost? Because it's coming at a cost and I think we see that more and more.

Courtney Martin: Yeah. And to your point, discomfort is only a choice for someone like me, right? I can choose, oh, I'm a little too uncomfortable. But there are people throughout the world, including in my hometown of Oakland, this is not all about some far reaching place that have no choice but to be uncomfortable because of the systems we've created in the history of this country. And so, even to have the choice to say, "I'm a little too uncomfortable. I'm going to step back from this consideration or this sort of path that Esther's laying out," isn't it in and of itself a privilege that most people don't have.

Well, that's a lot for this episode of Solvers. You can subscribe to the show on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google podcast, or wherever you're listening to this.

Nguhi Mwaura: And if you what you heard, please rate and review us and share this episode with someone who you think would love to hear as to this story too. See you next week.