

EP 18: TEMA OKUN "FACING INTO YOUR OWN RACISM WITH COURAGE AND LOVE"

Becky Margiotta (00:00:00)

Hey podcast listeners. It's me, Becky Margiotta co-founder of the Billions Institute. We help social change agents make their big dent in the universe, just like the people we interview here on this podcast. So in addition to this podcast, we also send out a weekly newsletter delivered with love to your inbox. Every Wednesday morning, it's filled with inspiration and provocation to help you do the inner work that's required to lead social change. You can sign up for that little goody and other special offers at billionsinstitute.com/awesome. I'll put the link in the show notes for you, and I'll see you there.

Tema Okun (00:00:29):

Our own racism can teach us so much about knowing our own racism and becoming familiar with our own. Our own conditioning into racism can be such a gift into...into ourselves. And because, as white people in this culture, we're conditioned into racism, there's no getting around it. So, we can either pretend that's not true, or we can say it is true and let me figure out what I can learn about myself as I explore that.

Becky Margiotta (00:00:56):

So, Unleashers, this episode we have a very special guest, Tema Okun. Usually we interview graduates from our training, but this time we're going to interview someone whose work is actually included in our trainings. And so Tema Okun is the author of, among many things, the White Dominant Culture and Something Different, which we've incorporated into our Skid Row School to help organizations see what are the norms that they've sort of almost taken for granted and haven't even thought about that are inhibiting them from being able to create massive change in the world. And then what would be an alternative to that? So Tema is the author of that piece. She's also a wise and compassionate teacher, who has devoted her whole life to helping people understand and dismantle racism. And in this episode, we're going to talk about why racial justice is so important for all of us, including white people, and what the cost of racism has been for all of us to our humanity, to our liveliness, to our ability to be fully in community with one another. And, she's also going to talk about how fear is keeping all this going. How shame is keeping all this going. And what we can do to dismantle racism, both in our lives and within and through our organizations. So I'm having a total fan girl moment that I get to sit here and hear from Tema herself about what it is that, her understanding and approach around racial equity and how that can inform all of our work and trying to make the world a better place.

This is the unleashing social change podcast where each week we'll interview a different bad-ass social change leader and get inspired by what they're doing to make the world a better place. I'm Becky Margiotta. Welcome to the show.

Tema Okun (00:02:33):

Tema, welcome to this podcast. Thank you for joining us today. I'm very excited to be here. Thank you.

Becky Margiotta (00:02:35):

Oh, I'm so thrilled you're here. So, my first question for you is how, well, let me back up. Can you tell us a little bit about Teach Equity Now and what it is that you're really passionate about doing right now in the world? And what, you know, so that our listeners can understand your organization and your main outlet for creativity right now?

Tema Okun (00:03:00):

So, Teach Equity Now is a collaborative of four of us who are trying to do our best to reach faculty at university and college level. People who are interested in knowing more about how to teach about race, class, and gender, or how to do a better job of teaching across lines of race, class, and gender. And our current major project is at Duke University, which is in Durham, where I live, and we're expanding to some other colleges and universities. So that's, that's the work that I'm doing now.

Becky Margiotta (00:03:30):

Oh, wonderful. That's a really high leverage point too, because you're training the trainer of the trainers of the trainers, even. Right. So, at the university level, that's wonderful. Okay, great. And, how did you even get called into working on racial equity? Or, I heard you say race, class and gender. How has that...how did this become? It seems like a life's purpose, life's mission for you?

Tema Okun (00:03:52):

Yeah. A long time ago, way, way in the past, over 30 years ago, I was working for a wonderful organization called Grassroots Leadership, which was based in Charlotte, North Carolina. And at that time we were an organization of experienced community organizers doing work to support community organizing across the Southeast. Our director was a man named Si Kahn. He's a musician so some people may have heard of him. And a lot of the organizations we were working with were coming to us and saying, we're really struggling with racism inside our organization, homophobia, issues of class. Can you help us? And we had absolutely no idea what to do. And at that time, there were a few other organizations doing this kind of work. So we decided to make a project out of our ignorance. And, the first thing we did was hire a man named James Williams, who was my first colleague.

He and I partnered. And we went and tried to find all the training we could find at that time around race, class, or gender that was out there. And what we found was a lot of one-offs or two days or half a day workshops. And we came back and decided that we wanted to try and do a project that would invite organizations in to tackle these issues over a two year period. And we created a project called the Buries and Bridges Project and did that for two years. And then we did a second round and learned a tremendous amount. Some of the groups that we worked with that helped us get started were the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond New Orleans. The Equity Institute in Berkeley, which doesn't exist anymore, the Lily Allen Institute in Atlanta, which still exists, and Crossroads Mastery, which is now the Crossroads Institute. So those were some of our early mentors. And that's how I got sort of in this.

Becky Margiotta (00:05:40):

Oh my gosh. Okay. So it really, it sounds like it came out of an express need from your community and then you and James said, let's go get good at this.

Tema Okun (00:05:49):

Yes

Becky Margiotta (00:05:51):

And what was it that made you think that people needed two years versus two days? Where'd that insight come from?

Tema Okun (00:05:58):

Well, I think as we were talking about it, so there wasn't, this was at a time before the social justice community, the nonprofit community was really thinking all that seriously about issues of race, class, and gender. And without, without much justice about that, or as much consciousness about that. And so we were just really clear that, um, in our experience of doing workshops and the people's Institute was doing more than workshops, but in our experience of doing them, that there was just a, at best what a workshop could do was raise people's awareness. It didn't really give enough support for people to make significant changes internally. And, um, our focus at that time, and my focus always has been sort of what, how, how do organizations change internally so that they can be consistent with their mission and vision and values. And, um, so we just knew it was going to take more than a one-off and we decided to be, I don't know how we came up with two years, but we decided that's what we would do.

Becky Margiotta (00:07:11):

It's funny though, that, uh, so I went through a two year, like a mentorship apprenticeship with Dr. Kathlyn Hendricks. And she's convinced after doing this for decades, that someone's, to take sort of some significant leap in your development as a person is a two year journey. And yeah, and, and the, um, someone calls it the osmotic pressure of a peer group that there's this osmosis that sort of moves us all in the new direction where choosing, right. So that, that two years, and the fellowship that we do is a two year fellowship for the same reason. It's just, it takes some time for new ways of thinking and being to bake in almost,

Tema Okun (00:07:55):

And also to build the relationships that we need to do work that's going to be really challenging to our egos and to our concept of ourselves and to build the kind of trust that we need for each other, the kind of care that we need for each other. At Duke, the program is a year long and it took us a long time to convince administrators to do that. Their position was no faculty will commit that kind of time. In fact, faculty come in going "Oh, this is too much time." And by the end, they're going, "We need more time. We need more time." Um, yeah. So, and partly that is because the power of the community is a big part of what makes this work possible.

Becky Margiotta (00:08:37):

Yeah. The peer to peer connections and yeah, yeah, yeah. That's I, I think so too, it's, it's the one-off workshops. Um, it's rare that you're able to then fully integrate what you've learned right. Without that constant - Okay. I'm going to go try this and you have someone who's cheering you on and curious to know how it went. So well, I appreciate hearing that, the story of how that lined up then. So one of the things that I've heard you talk about is how important racial equity is for everybody. How all of us are harmed by the injustices. And, um, when I first began becoming more aware about all of this, someone asked me "What's been the harm to me as a white person." And I was like - I don't know. I mean, I kinda, I kinda cut the, the long end of the stick didn't I? And I couldn't even conceive of at that time, the harms to me as, as a white person of, of racism. And, um, so, my sense is that it's not well known, the harms to everyone, but I'd love to hear your thoughts more about what you've seen the harm to everybody be.

Tema Okun (00:09:57):

I'm still working really hard on, on how to talk about this. So what I'll say is that I think, and I also want to mention that after James and I worked together for six or seven years, I ended up partnering with a man named Kenneth Jones, and we formed an organization called Change Work. And he was my mentor for over 12 years until he died in 2004. And I think that, um, my answer to your question has to do with what my relationships with both James and Kenneth, and then other colleagues and partners of color that I've had over the years, work partners of color that I've had over the years, um, is that, those relationships, uh, made it possible for me to understand and see how, if I'm not clear about the ways that I've internalized messages about my own racial superiority or my own normalcy or my own okayness, um, then I am not going to understand how the way I show up in the world is preventing me from being in authentic and meaningful relationship with myself, um, with other white people and with people of color.

So here's an example I would give, which is that, and this is going to get a little personal, so I hope that's okay, but I'm going through, I'm about to be divorced from someone I was, I was married to for over 30 years. And this year, since we separated has been, it was mutual and it's both our best interests, and it's been the hardest year of my life, personally. And I think that I'm really starting to understand in a way I never understood before how my programming and conditioning from this culture, from this white supremacy culture really gets in the way of my ability to be in relationship with myself and with other people. And the example I would give is, um, now I know we're going to talk about this later, but in terms of, of perfectionism or sense of righteousness or, um, a sense of denial or defensiveness that, all those qualities, that as they come up, what I've noticed in trying to grapple with what it means to be separating from someone that I've been with half my life, is that when I'm in the middle of feeling angry or hurt, and I accuse him in my mind of, of something.

If I really sit with it, whatever I'm accusing him of, I'm also doing, and there's no way around it. And it's really painful to think about, and it's the truth. And I think, I think that a white supremacy culture and being white in a white supremacy culture, um, really has us in such deep levels of denial about our own disconnect from ourselves and other people. And we hide behind being right. We hide behind denial. We hide behind being qualified. We hide behind pretending we're okay. We hide behind all these things.

Becky Margiotta (00:13:28):

Yeah. "I'm a good person." Yeah. "I'm not a racist"

Tema Okun (00:13:34):

Or all these things because we have absolutely no practice sitting in not knowing or taking in that we've done something wrong without believing we are wrong. So the culture teaches us that if we make a mistake, we are a mistake. And one of the hardest things I've had to learn this past year is that, um, I've made a lot of mistakes. It doesn't make me a mistake. It doesn't make me wrong. It doesn't make him wrong. You know, it's that there's, there are, um, there are ways that we - so it has to do with the fact that if we are clear about the way we're conditioned into our racism, as white people, then we can't be in right relationship with ourselves, much less anybody. It's not just about our ability to be in relationship with people of color or our ability to be good allies, which is a term I'm not crazy about anymore, but to people of color it's about, can we be in a good relationship with ourselves, a good ally to ourselves? Because the racism that we carry towards other people is a form of hatred that we carry for ourselves. That's what I think.

Becky Margiotta (00:14:46):

Yeah. And I just, I want to circle back and appreciate your circumstances now that you just, it's the hardest year of your life. And my heart goes out to you in that. And, um,

Tema Okun (00:14:58):

It's also the richest year of my life. I'm learning, I'm learning so much, I'm growing so much. So both things are true. Yeah. And that's the other thing I think we can't...somehow I'm thinking about the story early on when I was working with James and we were, we were facilitating a meeting that was predominantly people of color doing anti-drug and drug rehab work. And he and I were co-facilitating the meeting. And one of the community leaders, really strong African-American woman. Uh, I did something or said something really inappropriate, and she got really angry with me in the meeting and started yelling at me and calling me to task, which I'm sure was quite deserved. I don't actually remember the details. And I went home. I was devastated because I like to think of myself as a perfectionist and someone who does things.

(00:15:51):

Right. And I'm always right. And I was crying and crying and, you know, feeling sorry for myself and, um, feeling like I was a bad person. I'd never recover. And then somewhere in the middle of all that, it occurred to me that she had offered me such a huge gift. What she could have done, and what I think a lot of people have done both white and people of color, have done with me is, when I've acted inappropriately, is just written me off. Oh, you know, Tema's not - I'm not even gonna say anything cause it's not even worth it. And she gave me the gift of saying - I'm not going to write you off. I'm going to let you know what I actually think. So that gave me a chance to actually respond and we became good friends. So you know, there's just this way in which our own racism can teach us so much about knowing our own racism and becoming familiar with our own conditioning into racism can be such a gift into ourselves. And because as white people in this culture, we're going to, we're conditioned into racism. There's no getting around it. So, um, we can either pretend that's not true, or we can say it is true. And let me figure out what I can learn about myself as I explore that.

Becky Margiotta (00:17:09):

Yeah. Yeah. And what I'm hearing is one of the real costs of the, the society we've been born into, and then I guess even unwittingly help continue to perpetuate, is a disassociation from ourselves and from one another. And it manifests in all these ways, you're saying of, thinking the problem is outside and in criticism and fear of authenticity. Yeah.

Tema Okun (00:17:43):

And then admitting that we don't know what to do All of that.

Becky Margiotta (00:17:50):

Right, right. Versus being in the discomfort of uncertainty and unknowing, which is where new things can get created from. Right. Yeah. But I know for myself, I avoid that, like the plague, right. Like, wait till I don't want any uncertainty right now. Right? Yeah. It's an incredibly uncomfortable or, or, or, um, all the shame to of - you have to just, yeah. Okay.

Tema Okun (00:18:16):

And I think the culture doesn't, that white supremacy culture doesn't want you to be comfortable with not knowing and wants you to want you to think that you have an answer, that you have a specific answer that you have the right answer. And, um, because that illusion serves white supremacy, it serves power and it serves disconnection. I think white supremacy, the agenda of white supremacy is first and foremost to divide and conquer. So to divide and conquer me from you, me from people of color, me from myself. Um, so you know, that is its purpose. And if we don't understand that then I just think we're going to have a harder time.

Becky Margiotta (00:19:00):

Yeah. Yeah. Um, and here's just another question, which is more improvisational. So to what end, like what, what's the benefit of separating you and me from each other and from ourselves and from people of color? Who in theory, benefits from that and how would we interrupt that? I guess the first thing is who's benefiting from that.

Tema Okun (00:19:34):

Well, I mean, I think this is why white supremacy and capitalism are completely inextricably linked. So yeah. So who benefits from it are the few people who, you know, are making a gazillion dollars as well. So many of us who work so hard are making very little or not enough. Um, it's this illusion of control around us, you know, we're experiencing the dry metal devastation that unprecedented levels, because we have, we're so lost to what actually really matters. And, um, so I think that the only way we can do that, the only way we can kill each other, hate each other, kill the environment, hate the environment, destroy the environment is if we're disconnected. Yeah. And the only reason for that is because a few people think that money is more important than being in relationship with each other and with earth. And they're just, they're just deeply, deeply confused. Yeah.

Becky Margiotta (00:20:37):

Yeah. Almost, if we stay divided, we stay on to the exploitation and extraction that is everywhere - then we can just distract ourselves by going shopping and, uh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Tema Okun (00:21:04):

And I would say, um, you know, my mother taught me that there's a difference between people who should know better and people who have no reason to know better. And I say that because I think about, um, I had a teacher when I was in school myself, who made the point that so many of us are, we're all navigating these incredibly, are they called Hobson's choices or are false choices that capitalism and white supremacy set up for us? The individualism piece likes to make us believe that we, as an individual can step outside of it somehow and be pure or be better than other people, or we're not, we're all, we're all involved in it. So I think, I think understanding to me, the importance of understanding our stake and racial justice is the thing that's going to make it possible for us to actually get moved through this. If we're going to be able to move through this, because we understand that this is not about helping other people, this is about my soul. It's about my life. It's about my values. It's about my connections to the people I love and putting myself and, you know, or hope to love, or want to learn to love.

Becky Margiotta (00:22:18):

Yeah. Yeah. It's stated so beautifully. And, um, I just want to let that land, right. So, um, so that is the work that is the work that we have to do. Um, one, one of the questions I had for you, um, so first of all, just even in connecting those dots, right. From racial justice to capitalism also, and how those are inextricably linked and all of us are at the effect of that in some ways. So even though I feel like there's this sort of like, a self-righteousness that can take place of like, I don't shop at Walmart, you know, or whatever. Right. I'm guilty of that. Self-righteousness. Like, we have solar panels, we're on the right team. I'm curious your thoughts about the role of fear and the role, maybe even also, how does that play into some of that self-righteousness and that individualism of like, well, I'm not like that, you know? If you want to suck the air out of a room, talk about race right now, right. It just, it's just scares the bejesus out of everybody. Right. And then, um, I'm just curious your personal thoughts around what's going on and what do we do?

Tema Okun (00:23:46):

Well, the, the place I would start, and generally when I'm doing a session early on, or I'm working with people early on, I'll make or attempt to make a joke, but I'll say, you know, um, one of the reasons that white people in this room don't want to talk, we often come not wanting to talk about racism because we're afraid it's really going to end up being

a conversation about who's good and who's bad. And then I'll try and make a joke. Like, you know, I'm a white person obviously, and I'm also completely fabulous. And I'm also sometimes make mistakes. And so I think those of us who are white, don't want to talk about race or racism because of that.

(00:24:33):

We have this fear that we're gonna find out we're bad, or we're fundamentally wrong. And I think that what I have found particularly in this last year is that when we haven't - if we can't identify our fear, if we don't know we're afraid, then we're going to mask it, cover it up, run away from it, deny it. And it's just going to get stronger and stronger and stronger. So that's one thing. So in thinking about fear, what I'm learning is that when I notice I'm afraid, the best thing I can do is just dive in. Like, what am I really afraid of? And see what's there. And then the other thing I'm going to say is that I think because of this sort of good-bad binary, or right-wrong binary, um, that those of us in the social justice movement, we sometimes get really confused and don't understand the importance of belonging.

(00:25:34):

And, you know, when I read these books by people who are sort of bravely investigating why they joined a white supremacist group, now that they're out, the theme I read over and over again is that I was not recruited for ideology. I was recruited, or the reason I joined initially, was because they offered me a place to belong for me, a place to be seen. They offered me a place to feel valued. And then the ideology came later. And when I see there was just another, uh, clan, Neo Nazi march in the neighboring town of Hillsborough. I just notice how part of what the energy is around those groups is like, we belong. And we know we belong because we know who we hate, or we know we belong because this ideology makes it very clear.

(00:26:23):

And I think that this is a long, long way around your question about fear, but I think on the left or, and in the social justice movement where we're so much less clear about that, because we're so afraid that, um, we have to get it right. We're so afraid that we can't be wrong. Um, that one of the ways we feel better about ourselves is we call each other out. It's like, you know, I've got my answers better than your answer. My politics are better than your politics. The way I show up is better than the way you show up. So if you're not going to show up then you're causing harm. And again, I'm not saying that in any way, that we, we shouldn't be conscious of the harm that we do to each other. And I think it's really helpful to understand that being in relationship means that we are going to hurt each other, and that it also means we're going to love each other, and that we have to learn, um, to the extent that we don't learn to be in relationship in a, in a constructive relationship with our fear.

(00:27:28):

I think we'll just keep contributing to this divide and conquer energy that white supremacy feeds off of so well.

Becky Margiotta (00:27:34):

Yeah. Yeah. So one of my mentors, Katie Hendricks, she talks about, you know, fight just makes more fight. Like pouring gasoline on the fire almost. Um, and it's not to capitulate and just say, Oh, I guess we should all go to the white supremacist rally. But there's adrenaline that's driving the fear. If I come back at that with adrenaline, I'm just making it bigger. Right. Versus how do you show up in a way that's deeply loving and challenging and inviting to something that's maybe more loving and which is so hard in the moment.

Tema Okun (00:28:19):

Yeah. I remember, uh, again, this is a while ago with two of my closest friends, we were hanging out in San Francisco having a good time, and it kind of struck me and struck all of us that one of the reasons we were such good friends was because we spent so much time talking about how, um, how up everybody else was in our community. And that was, that was a big moment because I feel like, you know, that, that that's driven by some level of, so it's knowing that we belong because we can identify the people who aren't, who aren't like us, who aren't measuring up in some kind of way. And all of that is fear-based. Yeah, no. Yeah. And that, that I, I want desperately to belong. I'm afraid I don't belong. And the best way to know that I belong is, is as modeled by white supremacy is to be afraid of people who don't

Becky Margiotta (00:29:14):

Right. I, you know, I'm thinking about, I forget Brown's human universals, that, that he was the anthropologist that looked at all these different cultures and said, this is what everybody can count to five or whatever. It was some things. And one of them was that I think most human cultures have some sense of an ingroup and outgroup and, and that, and, and maybe

Tema Okun (00:29:37):

And then within those cultures create even more, you know, when I think about I'm also Jewish, so in the Jewish community, I mean, there's not one monolithic, you know, Jew within the larger Jewish community for all these ways, that Jewish communities themselves pit against each other in attempts to.

Becky Margiotta (00:29:55):

Yeah, yeah. And, um, and the, like the challenge is to expand our circle of in-group or to just disband that framework. My wife and I will have, um, I mean, we've been together going on 10 years and I will often remark that, well, they're just a bad person. And she stops me every single time going on 10 years now being like, there's no such thing as a bad person, you know? And I'm like, no, I think this is actually the exception that proves the rule. And she's also wanting to teach our children. There's no such thing as just the good, bad binary is silly. Right. She's interrupting it there. And, and, uh, yeah, go ahead.

Tema Okun (00:30:42):

Well, that's where my mother's analysis of is this somebody who should know better versus a person who's never had a chance to know better.

Becky Margiotta (00:30:50):

I think about that with, even with the military of like, if I had a magic wand, we would, the concept of nation state would pretty much be irrelevant because we would have a sense of both local community and global and people wouldn't, it, would be an appealing, um, way to, to, uh, advance your socioeconomic status, which right now - that just kind of is what it is. Right. My hope would be that there'd be many, many other compelling choices for people for what to do, you know?

Tema Okun (00:31:26):

And it's, it's challenging because I read, again, when I was in school, I read a wonderful book by, I mean, mothers called in the name of identity and, um, he, he sort of making the point, and I think he's, I can't remember all his identities, I think he was Arab Christian. Um, cis-gender I can't remember, I read it a long time ago. But what I do remember from the book is that, what I took away from that as how our identities very definitely inform us, but they don't define us. And the ability to understand that, um, I think sometimes escapes us. Yeah,

Becky Margiotta (00:32:07):

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Uh, it's it's, uh, yeah, there's a whole rich thing around identity. Right. Um, even, so my wife and I we're gay, we don't mostly hang around with gay people. We like we're, we're all, we're all our friends are straight almost, you know, like it's not the most important aspect of our identity in ways, but like, I think you, it, that people might look at us and assume that that was to us the most important aspect of our identity. Yeah. Um, okay. Another thing I wanted to, to just take a moment and appreciate is the articles that you've written, that, that I've read and highlighted and underlined and circled and written notes in. And, um, but particularly the article, I think these can all be found on, on the internet.

Tema Okun (00:32:54):

So, I used to be with a group called dismantling racism work when we closed about three years ago. And so we put all of our resources on a website called dismantling racism.org.

Becky Margiotta (00:33:05):

Perfect. Yeah. Um, from white racist to white, anti-racist the lifelong journey where you chart kind of the, the, the ups and downs and the inescapable, um, do not pass, go, do not collect two hundreds of that journey. And, um, the white dominant culture and something different worksheet that, um, that really lays out, um, how racism can play out, I think, in an organizational setting. And then what, what the, what the antidote to those might be, or some alternative ways of thinking about things. I just, can I, can I like, this is my fan girl chance to ask the author questions. Okay.

All right. So, from white racist to white anti-racist, you sort of have a ladder and you say that you've got to go through these phases and that, I think if I understand it correctly, it's not like you go through once and two dots done that it's actually more like a spiral and cyclical and you revisit it

(00:34:03):

Um, um, I, I feel like I recently had my own hard knocks of, of my own guilt and shame and, and, uh, and I looked at your ladder and I was like, Oh, come on. I'm only there. That's where I am like, come on. Like, I almost like use that my own perfectionism to make it harder. And to be honest, like I was in a pit of despair of guilt and shame. Right. And, and, and underneath that was, um, uh, th that belief that I was just fundamentally bad because, you know, like in the, what happened was I had zero intention and I still hurt somebody. Right. Or someone. Right. And so, like, I, and I, like, I knew that intellectually, that that could happen. And we've already talked about it on our, on the podcast that I'm nodding my head, like yes, of course.

(00:34:59):

But it was like, it was one of those things. Whereas everything I knew about how to be in a good person in the world just blew up in my face. You know what I'm saying? Like, it was like completely, and, and I couldn't find a way to be okay. Right. And then I was like, well, off, man. Why am I even trying? You know what I mean? Like, I should just give up and I was there and I know you say something about guilt and shame or a place to visit, but not to stay. And, and then there's this other thing where I hear this a lot in the realms of like, you need to lean into your discomfort and I hate being in, that's the worst thing you could say to me right now, help me get out of this. And so I just curious what, you know, what practical advice I feel, you know, I, I feel like I moved through that, and I think I'm much better for having had that experience, honestly, because I have more empathy for that. I'm like, Oh yeah, I've been there, but you know, how long should we stay there? How do we get the hell out of there? I don't think it's that helpful, but I, I do see the wisdom of that being a necessary phase in the journey. Right.

Tema Okun (00:36:11):

Just you should stay there 33 and a half minutes.

Becky Margiotta (00:36:14):

That's about as much as I can bear. Yeah. It's about, maybe it could have been three days or really three months. I was definitely in a funk, you know, of like what, okay. If I have the best of intentions and I still hurt people, then what am I doing here? You know? And yeah.

Tema Okun (00:36:32):

So here's the other thing that I think that I need. So the, the white supremacy culture article that I wrote really needs to be revised. And, um, one of the things I would put in it now is that white supremacy culture really likes us to believe there's a destination, and then we're done.

Becky Margiotta (00:36:52):

Yeah.

Tema Okun (00:36:52):

And this idea that all of us are works in progress our whole entire lives. And maybe beyond, depending on what you believe. Is not something that we're comfortable with. And what I would say is that the gift, so you're absolutely right. We can have really good intention and still have impact. And we all know that because we've all been on the receiving end of someone having good intentions towards us and not having that, that where we feel hurt, or we feel like somebody has not seen us or something. And so I think that the real, there's a couple of things about that. One is, again, this is where fear comes into play. If you're, if we're so afraid of feeling guilt and shame, then we're going to do everything. We can not to feel it. Then I would say, that's where we are as a country right now

(00:37:43):

Yes. Everything we can not to feel guilt and shame. We don't want to feel it don't want to feel it. So we're going to deny it like crazy, which is right into our living room. Doesn't it? Right. Yes, exactly. And so I think that the most, one of the most transgressive radical things we can do is say, it's the same thing I said with fear.

When I feel, when I understand what I'm, I'm feeling something I'm going to deep dive into it, because underneath that, I'm going to find out that, um, there's love. Yeah, there's love there because whatever it is, whatever your intention was, there was a loving intention. Um, you are, and we all are all are eminently deserving of love. All of us. And I didn't used to know, I didn't know that I did this work for many years. Not knowing that I'm thinking it was all about proving myself or other people proving themselves to me.

(00:38:35):

Um, which is a very, uh, fear based way to go about this. Yeah. So, so the more, if you are able to sit with your guilt and shame, then you're going to be in a much better position to sit with somebody else and their guilt and shame, which is going to make you a much better friend and a much better colleague and a much better. I mean, again, not the goal here is for you to be better, but it's just, I remember listening to, um, uh, uh, audio book by, I think his name is Frank. I'm not gonna pronounce this right. His last name, right. He was one of the founders of the Zen Buddhist hospice center and the five somethings, the five invitations. And one of the things that he says is that, you know, if you, um, not that you will, not that any one of us want to suffer, but whatever separately we've been through makes us much more able to sit with someone else's suffering.

(00:39:28):

And I would say that that's, um, the suffering I've gone through this past year has made such a difference in my ability to be with myself and with other people very differently than I was before. Um, so, so one is like the, I think white supremacy and capitalism are terrified when we are comfortable with whatever we feel or feeling at all or feeling at all. Right. Right. And so if we know that we're feeling, so the goal isn't to not feel fear, the goal is I'm feeling fear. I fear, um, here you are again, what are we going to do? What are we going to do about that? Um, and high guilt, high shame, what's really going on here, because if you actually allow yourself to feel your guilt and shame, or if I let myself to feel mine, I will ha I, I had, um, yeah, I, I I'm relating to it because I was thinking about, um, an email that I sent to a friend that I thought was not very thoughtful, um, and actually came from a fear-based place.

(00:40:28):

Yeah. And, um, I was feeling really bad about it. And, uh, and an aside, so this is a white friend. And, um, the other thing I want to say about working on my own racism or working with other people, other people around for racial equity or racial justice has made me a much better friend to everybody. Um, so I was thinking about, and I was chastising myself and blaming myself and worried that I'd broken the friendship. And, um, and I just took a minute to breathe. I was walking in the woods and I thought, okay, let's just remember, let's just remember love, you may have done something really, really bad and really harmful. And you still are, the vehicle of your friend is still worthy of love. And I contemplated that for five minutes and then I, and then I came out the other side saying, okay, what I'm going to do now is send the email that I wish I had sent instead, a do over and apologize for sending the first one, which I've done. And I haven't heard from my friend. So I don't know, I don't know how they're sitting with it. And, um, you know, I just feel like it's all part of my trying to be in relationship with myself as honestly, openly, honestly, as I can be knowing that, even when I make a mistake

Becky Margiotta (00:41:58):

Yeah. Letting go of that perfectionism. Yeah. For yourself too. Yeah. And how freeing that is. Um, well, I hope that your friend, um, receives, and that you're able to enjoy that reconnection. And I appreciate you sharing that. And, um, yeah. What I also appreciate is you went for a walk and you were breathing, you're moving and breathing. And so me, with the fear, from what I've learned from Katie Hendricks, as you can't talk yourself out of it, it's a chemical in your body. And so, yeah. So I, when I get scared, I actually just kind of shake, shake it off, or like, I move it through my body somehow and, um, cause I'm not able to talk myself out of it generally. And I know when I act from fear, the results will be bad. Right.

Tema Okun (00:42:55):

Yeah. Yeah. I don't actually try and get rid of it anymore. I just try and sit with whatever it has to tell me.

Becky Margiotta (00:43:01):

Okay. That's like, like whole other level of, of courage. That's awesome. Well, I don't know about that, but, well, I know we're close. Do you have about 10 more minutes? Okay, great. And they'll edit that out there. Um, thank you. That's very generous of you. Um, well, so the other article I wanted to ask you about was the white dominant culture and something different, and I know you're going to be updating it, which I'm excited for you to do so. Um, when I read this, I think Leshawn Chapman and Kathleen, people from the national equity project introduced me to this many years ago. And I, my jaw just dropped because there was this huge level of overlap with what Joe McCannon and I were seeing in organizational cultures that was inhibiting, um, them being able to affect change in the world. And so, but you came at it through a different doorway.

(00:43:51):

Um, and I was just like, ah, this is even, this is 10 times better than what we had did, but it's so interwoven. And I was like, whenever you find something better, just go with the better option. And so we started incorporating that into our workshops where we teach people how to spread something that's working and with, with the irony that I totally agree that bigger, isn't always better. Right. And so with, with that, with that in mind, but, um, and, and we made these little cards that you've seen where don't have the dysfunctional oppressive norm on one side, and then something else that you could try on the other. So I've been kind of doing an unofficial survey of the most commonly found in nonprofit elements of white dominant culture. And I was wondering if I could share them each with you and just get you to wax poetic about them. Um, so everyone, everyone has fear of open conflict, and then they just put that in the middle of the table and don't talk about it. And, uh, I see that too. It's, um, my sense is that we don't know how to be authentic with one another and speak in a way that doesn't have blame and criticism make it worse. But, um, I'm curious what you've seen from your perspective on that.

Tema Okun (00:45:11):

Well, first of all, I want to say that I've been, um, in conversations with, uh, quite a few of my friends who, uh, who grew up poor or working class white, white, and, um, feel like this one is not accurate reflection of their experience. Um, so I should say that one of the revisions that, or overall revision, we want to make about the whole piece is that, um, this expresses does express institutional norms because institutional norms are middle or white, middle-class white upper-class. Um, so I think that, um, and that's where some of the class stuff comes in, which is that people who are comfortable expressing conflict openly then get shamed or marginalized in institutions because you're not supposed to do. You're not supposed to, um,

Becky Margiotta (00:45:59):

Yeah, that's not what we do here.

Tema Okun (00:46:01):

Yeah. It's not, it's not polite. It's not. Um, and again, I think that it, it, so being afraid of being in conflict and being afraid of being in conflict openly definitely serves racism and white supremacy. I mean, in very, very clear way. So we're afraid of open conflict, we're not going to take to the streets. We're not going to, um, challenge authority. We're not going to make people uncomfortable. I mean, I remember going to a city council meeting in my town, which is essentially, at that time, the city council was basically pretty liberal well-meaning people. And one white man stood up and accused them that there was a development project on the floor and accused most of the city council, people of taking money for their campaigns from this developer and the, the, and so it created a lot of tension in the room because he was, he was creating open conflict.

(00:47:01):

It's like, here's the deal? You know, you say, you're good people. You say you have the interests of, of our town in mind, but you are accepting money from a developer. That's going to do this project. It's not in our best interest. And to a person, the city council people, um, got huffy about how dare he impugn their motives. And he was the problem and refuse to speak to what he had to say. And I thought it was just such a beautiful example of how power shuts down. Um, uh, truth-telling in the name of, you're not being polite. You're, you're, you know, you're causing conflict and, and how rude you're being. And so I just think it's a really obvious one.

And I think in our organizations or in our relationships with each other, uh, it just, it means that we, um, we shut each other down and we refuse to see each other or, um, accept each other.

(00:47:56):

You know, a lot of, a lot of white people in organizations are expressed in white caucuses or express fear of being yelled at it's like white. And it's like being yelled at does not. It's like the story I told earlier, the woman who was brave enough to yell at me in public was, was extending care. And if you care enough to yell at me, then I, maybe I should listen to what you have to say. Um, and I'm not talking about abuse. I'm not talking about, there are people who go over the line. There are people who, um, do that as a way of life. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about if somebody feels strongly enough about something to yell or to cry and again, not as a manipulation. Yeah. Um, then, then maybe we deserve to pay attention to it. You know, I grew up in a family where my emotions were not welcome. It's like, why can't you just calm down, be more rational? Why do you have to be so emotional all the time?

Becky Margiotta (00:48:49):

You're going to cry, I'll give you something to cry about.

Tema Okun (00:48:53):

I had very good reasons and, you know, and I still do. And so, you know, when somebody gets highly emotional, they have a good reason and it would probably be to our benefit to hear what it is they have to say about it - their emotional intelligence in that moment.

Becky Margiotta (00:49:09):

Yeah. It seems like in an environment where there's a fear of open conflict, curiosity has dropped out. Yeah. We've lost our curiosity about one another and about ourselves and that curiosity, you need that to grow. Right. Like, and, um, and also there's a, like an assumption that if somebody thinks or feel something different from what you think or feel that it's conflictual versus, Oh, that's interesting, you know, versus it being information. Right. And, and, um, that's actually, yeah.

Tema Okun (00:49:47):

Good information. Because the more we understand the different ways of looking at this, the better chance we'll have at figuring out something that makes its transformation makes sense.

Becky Margiotta (00:49:56):

Yeah, yeah. Um, that's yeah. Okay. And that is truly number one on the greatest hits of, uh, organizational, uh, misdemeanors. And the second one is overworking as the stated norm. And that could even, depending on how inaccurate my sample is probably by far the number one position. Um, and especially when people who are working, you know, we see people working to try to stop gun violence, to reform the education system, to help people elderly age in a way that's dignified. Right. All of that, even climate change. If I tell them, Hey, you're overworking. They're like, are you kidding me? The world's on fire? You know what I mean? I'm just curious your take on that and what you think when you see that and how to help people rest themselves out of that cycle.

Tema Okun (00:50:59):

Um, again, I think about how, um, white supremacy and capitalism benefit from our sense that everything is urgent. Um, and again, not to deny that things are urgent and that people's lives, aren't partly at stake. They are, um, that everything is urgent and that we have to, um, uh, work all the time either to make a lot of money or to achieve the stated goal. And, um, what, uh, what I know, what I feel like I know after all this time, and we talk about self care, but it's almost as if work and self care are put in opposition to each other. Um, and I also don't know a single and myself included, I don't know, a single person or a single organization that has done everything on their to-do list, in a timely manner. Right. You know, it's not, it's, it's, we're all striving for something that in my, in my experience doesn't actually exist.

(00:52:06):

Um, and, and sometimes I think, um, that, and I'll speak for myself that my, um, overwork is, uh, an escape from

wanting to actually be with what is including feelings that I'm not, I'm not ready to have about whatever it is that's going on. And I think that, um, I mean, I think nature has rhythms. We have rhythms that, um, can be in sync with nature and with seasons, and to the extent that we ignore that. And we continue to disconnect from the natural world. We continue to disconnect from our own rhythms. Um, we're not doing our best thinking. And the busy and busy work starts to replace our creativity, our ability to be expansive, our ability to think outside the box. Um, I mean, I remember being in a workshop of a group that did, did legal work on behalf of people who need lots of legal work.

00:53:13):

And we were trying to talk about racism and their set, their constant sense of urgency, and they got a call that something was happening, um, uh, that needed their attention. And as an outsider, watching them, so everything, everything stopped, workshops stopped, all the white people in power, mostly men got in a corner, uh, talked really fast with each other about what had to happen. There were people on the outskirts were having all kinds of feelings about that, about wanting to be included, not being included. Um, when I suggested as a facilitator, as a co-facilitator, I suggested that maybe we should just take a breath and see if there was some other way to think about approaching this. The answer was no, we can't. People expect us to be there. We have to be there. Um, and I just, not at all, all fascinating playing out.

(00:54:05):

And I, and it's this, it's this bodily felt sense that people have that I've got to fix this in some kind of way that not only doesn't fix it, but actually just contributes to more dis-ease and more racism. So there's something about, I mean, it's a complicated answer. It's just that, um, what are we really trying to do and how, how is what we're doing, building, uh, relationships and connection with each other and ourselves, that's the question I'm interested in these days? It's like, how, how do we, how do we go about this in a way that actually builds relationships? Because what I know is in this coming time of rising chaos, white supremacy, and capitalism want us to tear each other apart. And if we don't build the skills to care for each other, in those, in these moments, we're not, we're not gonna, we're not gonna make it through. So, yeah. So I just think that overwork starts to become, there's always, there's always more to do than we can do. And, um, if we don't have time to be in love with each other, um, inside or outside of the work, then I'm not sure what we're doing.

Becky Margiotta (00:55:21):

Yeah. So it takes us out of relationship. And that, that relationship is the fabric. That's the, the anti-racist fabric. Right. It's um, right. Yeah. And it's, it's one of those things that seems like it's, um, what's the word like paradoxical to, to slow down, to go yes. To go faster, further. Yeah. Yeah.

Tema Okun (00:55:45):

A lot of truths are paradoxical.

Becky Margiotta (00:55:48):

Yeah. Yeah. It's um, yeah, so it's not like, Oh, we should all go goof off. It's like, no, no, there's important things, but there's natural rhythms to stuff. Right. Okay. I appreciate that. Okay. Number three, um, is we see a comfort with predominantly white leadership, and this is the nonprofit sector, which does have mostly, you know, is just proportionally white, white women led. It's almost like, what do you want me to do about, I'm just curious if you've seen that too. And any advice you have for people who are struggling with that?

Tema Okun (00:56:30):

Well, um, so this is related to the whole idea of being a right to comfort. And also the idea that, um, the way that white supremacy believes white people in particular have a right to comfort and white elite people have a right to comfort it and also has to do with the assumption we have that being white means we're more qualified to do things that we have no idea - that we don't know how to do. And so what I'll say is that I was recently, um, I recently joined an MFA program in the Northeast, like many, um, MFA programs and it's in creative non-fiction. I show up and I know going, cause I did all my investigation that, um, that this program, like every program I applied for had a predominantly white faculty, predominately white students.

(00:57:22):

And, um, I arrive on scene. I arrived on campus for the residency and I, um, I just had to sit for about 15 minutes, maybe longer with, uh, what I would say was this incredible deep felt disappointment.

If all that I was not going to learn or know, or be exposed to or understand because of the limitations, the racial limitations of this space. And I think that, you know, racial justice and racial equity work has so far so long been, um, built on this idea, built on this assumption that we often don't speak out loud, which is that the point is to include people of color into a white world. And in doing that, we helped them. And there's very little investigation of the white world and the toxicity of whiteness.

Becky Margiotta (00:58:18):

t's almost like lets do the opposite. Yeah. Yeah.

Tema Okun (00:58:22):

And so I just think that, um, we're comfortable. There's no question we're comfortable, many of us because it's familiar. It doesn't mean that's all it is. It's familiar. And I would say that my conditioning into racism is familiar. My propensity to be afraid is familiar. There's a lot about, um, the way I operate, that's familiar. And the decolonization work that I have to do, that we have to do is like, how do we, how do we create spaces where we're not, it's not familiar because we've never been here before. And I see a lot of my, uh, it's what I admire so much about black only spaces where people of color only spaces, or even white spaces where people are saying, we're going to - we're creating something new, we're creating what we want. We're not just fighting against what we don't want. And I think that's really a wonderful way to go. And I just think, just because we're comfortable with it, doesn't - in fact maybe we should be a little suspicious if we're too comfortable.

Becky Margiotta (00:59:36):

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And, um, there's something about the creating something new versus fighting. What is your, let's put our energy into the creating the new thing, which is going to be different. Let's hope from the old thing. Yeah. Um, Tema, I would love to ask you a million more questions, but I also want to be respectful of your time. You have been so generous with me.

Tema Okun (01:00:00):

Um, well, I it's been great. I don't feel like I've been particularly linear in my thinking, so,

Becky Margiotta (01:00:05):

Okay. Uh, well we have two circular people circling around each other and that's awesome. And it's, I actually followed a thousand percent everything you were saying. And so, and I, people are going to gobble this up. So I'm so excited

Tema Okun (01:00:21):

I'm very honored and flattered that you, that you included me. So thank you so much.

Becky Margiotta (01:00:27):

I would love to include you in anything I can find. So, um, thank you for how transparent and open you are and authentic. And, um, you're a real gift to the world.

Tema Okun (01:00:41):

I would say the same to you in the work that you all are doing. I'm glad that you found me

Becky Margiotta (01:00:48):

Yes. Better for having found you for sure. To be continued for sure. So if you had a magic wand and could make the world or make change exactly how you would want it to be, what would be different in the world?

Tema Okun (01:01:02):

I think one thing that I would love to be different is for everyone that I'm in community with that you're in community with that everyone who loves justice to be as clear as we possibly can, that we are all so worthy of being loved. We all are loved and we can all practice loving each other every day. And I don't mean that in a Pollyanna way. I think love is a really hard thing to do well. Um, I just think there's so much fear and we live in a culture of so much fear that the more we can understand the power of our ability to counter that fear with love for ourselves, for each other, um, in a way that's a really authentic and honest and not surfacing, just nice, nice love, but real love. Um, that, that would be a wonderful thing.

Becky Margiotta (01:02:10):

May it be so, and thank you. Thank you so much. All right. Wonderful to connect with you in this way. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you to you. Okay. Okay. Bye.

(01:02:23):

Okay Unleashers that was Tema Okun, and you can find her at dismantling racism, the website, or you can email her directly at Tema, temajonokun@gmail.com. Okay. temajonokun@gmail.com. So we hope you've enjoyed this rich conversation about why dominant culture and how it gets in our organizational, uh, life and nonprofit work and what we can do about it. And we invite you to come join us over on our Facebook group to continue the conversation. And we ask you if you like this podcast to go to wherever you get your podcasts and give us a review, that's very helpful. So thank you very much. See you at the next episode. Thanks for listening to our show today. Our producers are Selena Lou Rafael, and one music studio is based out of Rancho Cucamonga, California. I'm your host, Becky Margiotta and you've been listening to the unleashing social change podcast brought to you by the billions Institute. The billions Institute helps good people do great things. Learn more at www.billionsinstitute.com. And please subscribe to the show. If you haven't already, you can find us wherever you get your podcasts, and also at unleashingsocialchange.com.