



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript Brooke Lavelle - Courage in Community

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Opening Quote – Brooke Lavelle (00:03): *In this modern Western culture, in which one of the main features or markers of that is a heightened form of individualism, if we're not careful, anything we take up within that context, we will start to assume that the starting point of that practice is me—“I become more loving by practicing these skills.” But the power of that, the sustainable power, comes through sensing that we are not actually isolated, we're not alone, we're not an individual. We're actually empowered through connection. It's not that I have to work really hard to solve all the world's problems; I'm catching onto an energy of care that actually pervades everything.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:45): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. Today I'm speaking with Buddhist scholar, contemplative teacher, and social activist, Brooke Lavelle. Brooke's career has focused on contemplative approaches for cultivating compassion, as well as the ways that spiritual practice and social activism can inform each other. She is the co-founder and president of Courage of Care, an organization that seeks to build transformational practice communities that are rooted in compassion, healing, and counter-oppressive frameworks. Brooke has been the recipient of several Mind & Life grants, and we're so happy to be able to support her work. I should also mention that I've been fortunate to know Brooke personally for many years, and have been honored to serve on the board of Courage of Care, and have taken part in some of their programming.

(01:38) I spoke with Brooke in early February. And we started by tracing the evolution of her in this domain—from mindfulness, to compassion, to relational practice, to social justice. And we get into the idea of relationality as the starting point for contemplative growth. Brooke then describes some of the work of Courage of Care, and she walks us through their framework for transformation, which is called CourageRISE. This takes us to a discussion of the different roots to understanding oppressive systems, depending on one's location within that system. We also talk about the role of the body in transformation and the body as culture, and Brooke shares her take on the skills needed to build true multicultural community. We also touch on applications of these ideas in climate work. And we end with a really interesting discussion about non-duality (something that comes up on the show quite a bit), and Brooke also shares her thoughts on love as a primary organizing principle.

(02:44) If you're interested in the work Brooke is doing, there are of course links in the show notes and I'll also just flag that Courage of Care's the next program called Radical Communion starts April 9th. So there's still time to join. Brooke talks a little bit about this in our conversation.

(03:01) I also want to mention that applications are open for the next Mind & Life Summer Research Institute. The topic will be Othering, Belonging, and Becoming, and we'll be exploring how experiences

of self and other arise in individuals and communities and how we can move toward states of belonging. These are ideas that overlap with this conversation and with many conversations on this show. I've actually been serving on the planning committee for this year's event, so I'm confident in saying the lineup of speakers is going to be amazing, and I think the experience of participating will be both community-building and inspiring. You can learn more at mindandlife.org; applications close April 1st.

[\(03:47\)](#) OK. Without further ado, it is my very great pleasure to share with you, Brooke Lavelle.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(03:56\)](#): Well, my guest today is Brooke Lavelle. Brooke, it's so great to have you here. Thanks for joining us.

Brooke Lavelle [\(04:02\)](#): So good to be with you, Wendy.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(04:04\)](#): I think that your trajectory of your interests and your work actually mirrors the development of the field of contemplative science in some ways. So I would love to hear some of your story in terms of the different areas that you've been interested in over time, and how the scope of your work has changed.

Brooke Lavelle [\(04:24\)](#): Great. So I guess I should start a little bit at the beginning. I was born and raised in Bayonne, New Jersey, which is this small town outside of New York City. And Bayonne is a working class, kind of working poor town. And when I grew up in the early '80s, it was primarily Irish and Italian Catholic. And I had a sense from that very young age about a kind of class consciousness and also a race consciousness—I think both living in Bayonne and being outside of the empire, right, in New York. And although I didn't quite have words for it, but I had this very young yearning and a commitment to what I thought of as equity and justice at the time. I could have easily just become a lawyer, but I was also a spiritual child. I remember growing up in that Catholic community, loving the ritual of church, and the incense, and the songs, and to some extent prayer, but also feeling like the framework, the spiritual framework that I was handed, didn't quite fit. And maybe if I had come up in a kind of mystical Christian tradition it would've fit, but I remember feeling like there's something else.

[\(05:31\)](#) I have this vivid memory. I don't know if you remember when three-way, we had that on landlines. *[laughter]* Being on three-way doing a proof that there couldn't be a finite God. The universe had to be infinite. There couldn't be an end to it. I don't know where that came from, what that meant, but I had this, "There has to be more. This doesn't make sense." And I had this loose idea of reincarnation. I wouldn't call it quite that, but this sense of we have to experience walking in different ways, like being different genders, and class, and locations, to become fully human. I don't know if I stand by that anymore, but I had this sense of what you might think of as actually pretty Buddhist ideas, in a way.

[\(06:16\)](#) When I was young, about maybe sixth grade, I had these two amazing teachers who taught meditation and yoga. And I didn't realize how profound that would be later on, but I remember just so being drawn to that class and those sessions. I'll fast forward a little bit, I got to college and I went to a Barnard College in New York, and there was a Zen temple down the street. And I started sitting there every morning at 6:00 AM, which was not the thing that most freshmen in college were doing at 6:00 AM *[laughter]*, but I was like, ritual practice, chanting... it was just in the DNA. And that first year, I met Bob Thurman. Imagine being 18 years old and encountering Bob Thurman. He blew my mind. One of the most important humans I've ever encountered.

Wendy Hasenkamp (06:59): Was he at Columbia then?

Brooke Lavelle (07:00): He was at Columbia and that changed the whole course. I was like, "I'm studying religion. I'm studying Tibetan Buddhism specifically." Everything—practice, medicine, philosophy, Tibetan people, actual culture of generosity and holding... Everything. And it felt I guess like a homecoming. If you grow up feeling like, "Where do I belong?" and then you encounter something that is wild, and you feel a sense of freedom, and longing, and yearning for more. So that really changed the trajectory of the work that I was doing.

(07:36) And as you know, I went on to get a PhD in Tibetan Buddhism at Emory, in part because of that. Because while I was at Columbia, I did a Masters' at Columbia with Bob, and I was working in the Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center at the time. And I was working for Dr. Oz, who had the time had an integrative medical center. (This is back when Dr. Oz was interested in public education and writing a lot of books and user manuals around "you" and the guide to your own health.) And I was in there teaching mindfulness. So I had been trained by this point in different forms of MBSR. I was teaching yoga, but we were also starting to research the effects of mindfulness in a healthcare setting. And we were in a cardiac surgery unit, but we worked broadly in the cardiology division.

(08:21) And I loved that work, but I already was starting to sense the ways in which meditation was... Having my own background, my own academic background, my own experiential background, the kind of transmission and adaptation of mindfulness in a medical context—we were missing so much depth. So, bowing down to Jon Kabat-Zinn and all those folks, and yes to the transmission of work and the ways in which it's been adapted. And also I felt, even then, like we're missing something. And it felt like we were getting a piece of the vastness of this tradition.

(08:58) So that pulled me in a large way... I think of myself as a little bit of a cultural anthropologist at heart. Like, what is the context, how did we receive these teachings, under what circumstances? Questions around power, authority, rhetoric. How did our current context facilitate and inhibit different ways that tradition was received? So that was part of my own inquiry.

(09:23) And then I moved on to Emory—where I met you, and so many other awesome people *[laughter]*—and there, I got invited into the compassion studies world. So in the mindfulness world, there was already a sense like, "We're missing depth here." But there was also this sense of... I also feel a little bit like we're missing the heart. It felt, even at that stage, very much about stress reduction, very much about the individual, "making it" in the world. And there's been later work, right, on the critique of mindfulness and capitalism. But even then there was this sense of like, "What is this for?" And so joining that compassion work, the CBCT work at the time with Geshe Lobsang and others was like, "Oh, here's the heart. And here's the sense of 'for all.'" The sense of it's not just for us, it's for the we. And then even studying that though, I became obsessed with something else... Like, this still feels like we're in an individual frame. Where is the relationality?

(10:17) And I was studying with John Dunne, whom I love, and Sara McClintock, and then I met John Makransky—another hugely important person in my life, who introduced this kind of devotional framework. [He] took a core piece of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition that had been in many ways hidden in this secularization or adaptation of Buddhism in the west, and was like, "This is actually the starting point. The starting point of practice is relational. And until we get that, we're actually not catching on at

all." And that meeting of John and the way he talked about practice radically changed, not only my own trajectory, but my actual practice, in a huge way.

Wendy Hasenkamp (10:58): Can you say more about relationality as the starting point? Because I think to lots of people, that may not be a familiar concept.

Brooke Lavelle (11:04): Yeah. And John Makransky in his writing says this really well, but... In this kind of modern Western culture in which one of the main features or markers of that is a heightened form of individualism, that if we're not careful, anything we take up within that context—so we borrow, appropriate practices from other contexts through that individual frame—if we're not careful, we will start to assume that the starting point of that practice is me. Like, "I become more loving by practicing these skills, or I become more compassionate by doing these programs, or XYZ habits."

(11:43) And what John was pointing to is that, yeah, sure—we can learn skills. And there's many actually practices within the tradition for how we build skills, how we build habits, how we work through obstacles to love, and so on. But what John I think was pointing to is that the power of that, the sustainable power of that comes through sensing that we are not actually isolated, we're not alone, we're not an individual. We're actually empowered through connection. That's sometimes discussed through and with the teacher, but we could think of it... I like to think of it more broadly—sensing I'm not an isolated, atomized individual. There's an inherent interbeing, thinking of Thich Nhat Hanh. That the more we sense that, the more that's actually empowering our capacity for love and care. It's not that I have to work really hard to solve all the world's problems. I'm catching onto an energy of care that actually pervades everything. And the more I can do that, the more not only can I sustain in the work, but I can actually unleash a lot more potential of that love and care. That shifted everything for me.

Wendy Hasenkamp (12:48): Yeah. It's so interesting... It sounds a little bit, in some ways you could think of it as religious—getting this connection or empowerment from something outside yourself. And I know John Makransky's work originally was informed by practices in Tibetan Buddhism that relate to communing with deities and things like that. And then he did work to kind of make that more in a secular form, or relating just to the people in your life, or things in your life. So how do you think about that? Do you think that considering the often religious roots of these kind of communing practices, is there anything that's lost in the power of them by removing the religious aspects, I guess?

Brooke Lavelle (13:36): I want to say yes and no, and yes and, and yes but. You know... do I think something is lost in the transmission of certain forms of practice into our culture? Yes. Are other things opened because of our culture? Maybe. Yes. So I guess I'm wondering what the starting point is. I think I would say that—I've found at least in my own experience and in the communities of practice I'm part of—that what we're really trying to do is find our own doors into relationality. And I care about tradition, and I care about depth, and I care about rigor and integrity. Something we say a lot in Courage [of Care] is, "Anything that helps you connect to a sense of relationship is practice." It actually doesn't matter if you get there through this particular tradition, or sitting near a tree, or sensing your connection with space, or literally leaning against the wall and feeling like something has your back. It doesn't matter as long as we're starting to soften that sense of separateness [between] me and the world. So anything is practice, in that way.

(14:41) I've found many of those practices very powerful, and I don't think it's just because of a technique. I happen to think there also is a connection with a kind of living tradition and embodiment that's actually being transmitted. And that's also something that's alive for me, right? My whole

embodied training is, these are not just disembodied ideas coming through. Literally when we encounter other beings who have regulated nervous systems, who embody care, something else is communicated. And so it's like, how can we start to catch onto that, and also cultivate communities of practice around that even more?

Wendy Hasenkamp (15:19): Yeah. You were saying how these practices and these ideas totally shifted for you, at that time in your life, your trajectory. Did you want to pick up that thread?

Brooke Lavelle (15:31): Yeah. I mean, meeting John shifted my relational trajectory... It blew open practice, and blew open love as actually the core organizing principle of what I do (even though I wouldn't have been able to articulate it at the time). And that connects to this relational, embodied piece we were just talking about. But alongside that, I was also studying different forms of embodiment, and the ways in which our body literally shapes how we see the world, what we think is possible, how we wake up.

(16:00) And that to me, this shift to a relational frame, this shift to understanding embodiment, and this attention to understanding the cultural context which we're in, really got me thinking of, well, what's happening in practice that, as practice is being shaped in and through this cultural context—particularly a cultural context that I know we're naming much more now, but back in these days, we were not really naming this in the contemplative of world—a culture literally shaped by white supremacy norms, capitalist norms, patriarchal norms... What are we seeing and not seeing? What becomes possible, what kinds of liberation are possible? And for whom, in this world? That question really started to animate me. Who are these practices for, and what's the goal here? And if this is not our natural habitat, if living in late-stage capitalism is not where humans are supposed to be living, what are we supposed to be doing? What's the goal?

(16:56) And that set me on... I think actually, coming back full circle to where I started with my life is like, "Oh, now I see how I'm integrating this kind of equity lens that I had from an early age with spiritual practice." It wasn't about marrying spirituality and justice anymore, like, what do they have to do with each other? It was like, what do they NOT have to do with each other? It was so 'there' in that way.

(17:20) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (17:55): So this, then, brought you to the work that you do now, through the nonprofit Courage of Care. So I know you've been working with this model for transformation that you call CourageRISE. Can you walk us through that?

Brooke Lavelle (18:09): Yes. We like to say that CourageRISE is a kind of framework for building cultures of practice that are compassionate, that are truth-telling, that are healing-centered, that are visionary and transformative. And I think of that framework kind of like an inverted U, and I also think of it kind of following the path. There's a problem. What's the cause of the problem? There's a solution to the problem. And here's the way forward.

Wendy Hasenkamp (18:40): And that's very much like the four noble truths...

Brooke Lavelle (18:42): And it's also just a standard diagnostic model too, in a way. But Courage is our approach and a kind of integrated framework that our team has developed over the years to kind of weave together different strands of non-dual contemplative practice, of counter-oppressive pedagogy,

of transformative justice, of science fiction and visionary thinking, world-building, design thinking, and work on risk and solidarity, what that actually looks like in practice.

(19:11) So we begin with courage. And courage we're drawing from the Latin root of the word cor, heart. We're starting with heart. And the name, Courage of Care, was born from this idea that the more we deepen in our sense of connection, the more we sense that we're held by a field, the more that empowers our courage. That's the kind of relational frame or the empowerment that I was speaking of earlier. And so we start there, with a suite of relational contemplative somatic practices, reflections to help us sense into not only that relational frame, but that the ground of whatever work we're doing in world actually is love and care. The second we forget that, or fall off of the idea that this is care, we're actually not... we're not on the path anymore.

(20:01) So we begin there and as we develop this kind of... or, remember. Courage is an iterative model, I should say. And so we can start it at any time, we come back to it, we move through it, we move through it again. But the kind of logic of it is as we deepen that capacity for love, we have a bit more courage to show up to what's really here. To really see what's going on here, what's occluding my capacity for connection, where am I causing harm, where am I out of alignment with that kind of energy or ethic of care, what's the broader system I'm in that's even shaping how I perceive or think about care? And so that's our Reveal Truths module.

(20:39) And as we move through Revealing Truths, so now we're starting to excavate, we're moving down one side of the model, we land in Healing. And that was intentionally put in the model to say, so often we see folks look at what's wrong... Literally the world is on fire. There's oppression everywhere. Like, where are we outside of oppression? To move from seeing all that, and beginning to wrestle with the hard truths of that, and our location in it, our responsibility in it, to say we need a space to also be able to heal. Not that we heal everything in one moment, but that we need to acknowledge a kind of pause, that is both a sense of tending to that wounding, like where does it hurt and showing up for that wounding, but also a pause that enables a little bit of the system to begin to unravel a little more. And it's in that unraveling, that new shapes or new ways of being become possible. Not guaranteed, right, we practice into them. But it's like, "Oh, there's something else here than just suffering."

(21:41) And that's a key move in this model. We're not all about, where is there suffering, end of suffering? It's like, "And what else is here?" Where is there also beauty, and levity, and joy? And where is it also okay? To really try to hold both truths—the world is on fire, and the world is awesome—at the same time?" That's the move into this fourth piece of the module we call Sense Alternatives, which is starting to sense, not only that other things are possible, so not only that other worlds are possible, or ways of being, or new ways of organizing community are possible, but they also exist. That our normative framework—and I'm speaking to you as another white-bodied human shaped in the north American context—our normative framework of what the world looks like is not the only framework that exists. (It might feel like that, because of US imperialism and so forth, but it's not.) And so in a sense, other worlds are here. And what does it look like to lean into that creative capacity? And this draws on contemplative traditions, like wild. That's about world building. What are the communities that we're actually building together? An enlightened society, are we on that path?

(22:52) And then we move into this last piece, which is Embody, which is the continued practice of it, the continued commitment to do this in service of all, the risk taking involved in forming new habits, new ways of being, trusting, faith... And taking responsibility, an appropriate responsibility for each of us. Like what's my work in this puzzle? And then the cycle begins again.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([23:14](#)): Yeah, that's great. One thing that came up as you were just describing this situation of, we're surrounded by oppression, and the world is on fire, and all of these harms are occurring... Some folks, particularly, I think folks in privileged positions, may not have that understanding of the world. When they look around themselves, they may not see that. And they may feel like, "Well, my life is pretty good. And it actually looks like the world is getting better in terms of oppression..." (Comparatively, if you think of Civil Rights Era or historical eras of oppression and where we are now.) So is that part of, I guess, in the Revealing Truths section, of digging into and understanding those kinds of situations maybe from a different perspective, particularly for folks who are in privileged situations?

Brooke Lavelle ([24:08](#)): I think part of our learning over the last few years is that—and this may seem obvious as I say it—but part of our learning is that there are different starting points for us and understanding truth. Maybe I should say more accurately truths (lowercase t). We're all understanding different worlds. And we've been trying to scaffold and lay out different trajectories of learning for different beings, based on different aspects of our identity. Race, gender, class, and so forth. And I think it's true that what Revealing Truths looks like needs to look and feel different depending on where we start. But I think we are trying to develop also a common analysis that, like folks were saying when COVID first started, we're not in the same boat, but we are in the same storm. That was used in a slightly different manner that I'm using it now, but, well, some things may be getting better if we took a long historical lens... (I don't know that I fully believe that. I've been reading David Graeber's book. And it feels we've been, in a really beautiful way, struggling and contesting what the 'good world' and a 'good society' looks like forever, in spite of narratives that we've fallen from grace. This has always been contested—what's good, and good for whom, and so on.) But in thinking even just about climate crisis, it's really hard to say that things are getting better and that will affect all of us. It is already disproportionately impacting, negatively, predominantly Black and Brown communities and the global south. So it might feel like some of us are untouched, but I don't think we have to look far to see ways in which weather patterns are changing, fires that have raged across the West Coast, Australia. Flooding. This is all of us. And it's accelerating because, I think, of the ways in which... We could say we're conditioned, but I think these systems of repression are designed to try to hide this from us. To keep business as usual going, for the success or benefit of a handful of folks.

[\(26:10\)](#) So while there are maybe different understandings for us to learn, the sense that—for us, we're developing a common analysis—that the crisis of our time, the climate crisis, racial justice, economic justice, these are all related, and they're all inherently relational. That's our common analysis. And that's what we're trying to continue to sharpen and deepen and... in a way it's also a motivation to build community. We can build community because... I think that's how we stay alive, in COVID, we need one another. But we build community also for solidarity. We also need one another especially in the United States context because we do not have a government that supports widespread care for all beings. Whether you're in an official mutual aid group or not, we're literally depending on one another to take care. So for us, it's not just a grand, nice spiritual vision that we should be in community and wake up. It's literally for survival. And that's part of why we want that clear common analysis, as part of our motivation for why we stick through this when it's really hard.

[\(27:12\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp ([27:40](#)): I know within all of these elements of the work that you do, there's also, as you said, a big emphasis on embodiment and the role of the body. And also looking at trauma and

trauma responses, and how that's held in the body, in different bodies for different reasons. And then working to develop a sense of safety, I guess through that sense of connection that you're trying to build. Can you say more about the way that you view the role of the body in these kinds of transformative practices?

Brooke Lavelle (28:15): I've been thinking a lot about the body as culture. And Resmaa Menakem helped us think about this a lot too. That we're not just trying to build new strategies, or new models. We're actually trying to build cultures of practice. And that also feels like a central organizing principle for what we're doing at Courage. That even that model, CourageRISE I shared about, is not just a series of ideas that hang together, but it's also intended to help us learn new ways of being together. So new ways of being more relational, of being in space together in ways that don't replicate oppressive culture, of being more healing-centered, and so on. It's easy to point to some of the relational practices and the ways in which they literally rely on the body, that our body can be a doorway to connection. And part of what comes alive for us as we start to explore our modules on oppression (which runs through everything, but when we're exploring that), is the ways in which our bodies and our being have literally been shaped by the world we're in, by the systems of oppression within which we live, also depending on our social locations, and our identities and so forth.

(29:39) And so part of our work involves excavating some of that. Looking at patterns. We like to talk a lot about stress shapes, or this idea that we have kind of habitual or learned ways of responding under stress or trauma, or in relationship to threat. And that what we're learning to do is, not just do that for some psychological inquiry, however interesting that might be. But it's really about saying, when we feel stressed or threatened, one of our body's natural tendencies is to contract or protect. It could be to lash out to protect, it could be to hide, it could be actually collapse when we feel totally overwhelmed, but a natural desire to kind of protect or seek safety. And that makes incredible sense living under the systems within which we're in... which probably all of us are doing to some degree most of the time, unless we're totally free and evolved. And so for us, what we love to help folks learn to do is sense how did that shaping happen? What were the roots of it? What's the context that shaped that? Because in somatic theory, the way in is also a clue to the way out.

(30:45) So we don't just want to learn about oppression and think about it differently. We want to understand the ways in which, for example, I continue to show up in ways, embodied ways, that replicate norms of oppressive systems. Like the ways in which I'm still unlearning how to not move the through life with a sense of urgency. A key cultural feature of white supremacy. How does that show up in my body? Well that, for me, that sense of urgency—that sense of having to do everything yesterday, there's never enough time, move faster, move quicker, the world is on fire—that's connected, in part, to my orientation. It's connected to my shaping as a white bodied being, it's connected to my shaping in academia. It's also connected to my history of growing up in a working class, poor town, and the shaping of scarcity. Like, is there enough? I've got to keep going so there's enough.

(31:34) So we're pulling these layers apart to say, how did this happen and what's the healing that's needed so that I don't just default into this contracted, urgent shape that is actually pulling me out of relationship? If I encounter you just in urgency, just in perfectionism, just in a stressful state of needing to get my way to seek safety, I'm out of relationship with you. So the direction of learning is, how do I learn how to heal what needs to be healed so I can start to almost practice new ways of being that are more centered, available, grounded, resourced? Knowing that that contraction will happen. Life is a series of expansions and contractions. Not to get rid of the contraction, but to not be stuck in it so much of the time. And I think of that in relationship to justice work. A lot of it feels like a contraction.

Wendy Hasenkamp (32:24): The work itself?

Brooke Lavelle (32:25): The work itself, the space itself, the times we're in. It can feel like like we're just caught in a contraction. And so, not trying to bypass that contraction or get rid of it, but how do we find more generative space here? Where is there room to work—so that there can be a much more natural kind of rhythm or pulsation of expansion, contraction, time and relationality, time inward, time together to reclaim I think a little bit more of that natural rhythm.

Wendy Hasenkamp (32:53): I'm wondering... I know you just recently moved back to Brooklyn from living on the West Coast for many years. And it's so interesting that you're bringing up this struggle with the sense of urgency, because I feel like New York city is the epitome of that kind of urgent mentality, the energy there. So I'm wondering how that's been for you.

Brooke Lavelle (33:10): Oh, that's such a good question. I really feel like I moved back to the empire. And it was a struggle. You know, I didn't realize the extent to which was "New York" until I left New York. And then I looked for home everywhere else and was like, "Nope, I'm going home." So I drove back here from the West Coast. When I crossed the bridge, not only were there tears, I mean, this is also like a coming home experience, but it was... I felt this in my nervous system. I felt my body release. Like, I'm back. And that's to say, I feel the pulse of New York, the culture of New York, my body has so attuned to that, that feels like home to me.

(33:53) Maybe the shadow side of that is, having been gone from here for 15 years, and having done a lot practice and even living in Europe, which is not the center of ease, I would say, but that helped me see how much workaholicism is embedded into United States culture, toxic workaholicism. There have been softenings that have happened over the years. Living in Atlanta, that is not New York City. Living in California, a sense of ease. And there's as a part of me, if I'm really honest, as much as I love it here, I'm like, "Do I want to be shaped like this again?" I walk out on the street and my fire shape comes online. I get bigger, I'm scanning, who's out for me? I mean, you need this to survive in a city, right?

(34:35) So what parts of it are just the shaping that are default and where can I bring so much more of that I feel like is in my body now... and not get kicked out of Brooklyn, you know? *[laughter]* But that speaks to context. There are different places where we thrive and flourish. I'm just saying that because I don't think there's one way, one model for community, or one model for the end of the world, or one model for this alternative. There are many worlds, and many ways to do life. That's just something I have personally appreciated moving through these different spaces in my own life.

Wendy Hasenkamp (35:12): Yeah. I'm curious to hear more... Maybe you could give some examples of the kinds of relational practices that you do encourage—between individuals or with than a group—because I think they're probably pretty unusual compared to what most people are used to thinking of (like an individual mindfulness practice or something like that).

Brooke Lavelle (35:31): So over the last few years, we've been really serious about this project of building community. And when we say community, we've been trying to build a space of practice that does not replicate the norms of white supremacy culture that we've come from. So we've been trying to live into a space that is grounded more clearly in belonging, has a clear disability justice frame, is clearly not replicating toxic forms of hierarchy, and power, and control, and accumulation. So I see all of that as part of the relational practice. Okay, well, how do we build a new community together? How do we

practice together? What does that mean for how we're structured, how we communicate, how we make decisions, how we distribute resources, how we handle conflict, and so on?

(36:18) So in a way, what I said before is, and I don't mean to be glib, but actually everything is practice. If you start to see there's no outside, everything is practice. But what we've gotten more clear on in the last few years is that if we really want to build multigenerational, multiracial, multidisciplinary, multifaith community, which we are (we could be more multi in all of those dimensions), that we have to really think more carefully about the skills that we need to come together. We've all been thinking about what are the markers of readiness for true relational work to happen. So I could give you examples of relational practice, but where my mind is going these days and the edge I think of our work is more around mutuality. What does it actually really mean to encounter each other? So not to learn skills, to look polite, or say the right thing. Kind of these... not superficial in a dismissive way, but this top layer of the onion. Not just those skills, but what does it mean that we're encountering each other with a recognition of our identities, and also "more than" at the same time. So without bypassing, but without reducing it to "we're all one."

(37:31) And we've started developing this new approach we're calling Radical Communion, which is drawing on very beautiful work by Leticia Nieto, who wrote this great book *Beyond Inclusion, Beyond Empowerment*. And Leticia outlines these different trajectories of not just learning, but also healing that folks who embody more agent identities—so in our culture typically white, male, cis, educated humans, so who are agents of the systems of oppression, who receive benefit from the system of oppression, whether they're conscious of it or not—and those who inhabit or embody more target identities. So female, queer, transgendered, and so on. That we have different trajectories of healing in order to meet on common ground. Whereas those of us who embody agent identities are learning how to actually sense ourselves as also caught in the same matrix, that we're not outside of it, that these systems are also affecting us, to develop a really keen awareness of "I have skin in the game," and move into more actionable allyship. And for target folks, to move more from a sense of just surviving systems to really starting to think about how we strategize with folks from other identity groups, and then recenter so that there's a new norm and a new ground upon which we meet.

(38:55) So we've been working with Leticia's work, and looking at it through the CourageRISE model and saying, "Okay. Well, how do we develop a readiness? What's the boundary that folks need in order to be in the room that's generative? When are we really ready for relational engagement, at the level of building community and solidarity?"

Wendy Hasenkamp (39:15): I was going to ask, because as you just described so well... the trajectories of work are so different, depending on the identities, and your history, and what you've inherited and embodied. So yeah. I guess continuing, what does make you ready to come together? And is there a role for doing that work kind of separately, in affinity group type spaces or... What's your sense about that?

Brooke Lavelle (39:39): Yeah. We joke sometimes at Courage. We say, "Courage is for everybody!" Courage is not for everybody. And I think part of our own development has been getting comfortable with setting a clarity of a boundary of where our work starts and ends. In some ways I think we (maybe I) naively thought, if we just got people in the room who were already politicized, had some skill sets, had a commitment to this, we'd make it. And I'm feeling like the work needs to be more nuanced than that, especially in these times. Especially in time of even more fracturing, even more mistrust. We just witnessed one of the, maybe the largest global racial uprisings probably of our lifetimes, and what feels like a return to normal, within two years. The incredible amounts of mistrust that communities must

feel, of "Who is here for us?" So in these times, community is breaking down. Community being formed because of COVID, but also the sense of like, "Who's got my back?" It is so fraught and fractured right now that I think how we come together requires so much more care and so much more sensitivity.

(40:52) And so, yes. I totally think there's a need for and a role for affinity space, racial identity space, gender, and so on. I think white folks have their own work to do before they get in a room, a multi-identity, a multiracial space. And I don't think white folks are safe to be in a multi-identity collaborative space with Black, Indigenous, folks of color unless they have a deep awareness of oppression and understand how it's impacting them, and are taking action on it. I don't mean literally saving the world every single day, but if they're not putting their money where their mouth is or taking risk, I don't think those bodies are safe to be in multiracial space.

Wendy Hasenkamp (41:34): Is this back to what you were kind of speaking to about regulating nervous systems and how... Can you just say more about what you mean by the bodies are not safe?

Brooke Lavelle (41:43): Yeah. I think it's probably at the level of our nervous system. But I think it's... where my mind was going was more at this level of commitment and solidarity. Like, harm will still happen in spaces, missing will still happen, misspeaking will still happen, misunderstandings will still happen. But I think there's a sense not just of understanding, but an embodied commitment that has to be online. And I'm sure there's a signature of that in the body... But that's got to be online, not only before I think it's safe, but actually before I think it's ethical to ask folks to join you in multiracial space for the purpose of building community, of building solidarity, of co-learning.

(42:26) And, I don't want to speak for BIPOC folks, but my experience in the Courage community is that, the most generative cross-racial collaborations happen when BIPOC folks have moved beyond just surviving, or just trying to keep it together, and are like, "I actually want to be in a multiracial space because I think it's in service of a collective goal, collective power. And I feel like I have enough power, and allyship, and support from my own affinity space that I can be in here and actually redraw the lines of engagement." And I think when that's online, the potential for more... frankly, more real and more mutual engagement is possible.

(43:09) And that's how we've been shifting a lot of our work and thinking at Courage. It's not just like, "Who's ready and who's not ready?" That's not even the way I want to think about it, because I don't think any of us are fully ready all the time for this work. I mean, we're dealing with hundreds of years of trauma, and harm, and oppression, exploitation, colonialism, et cetera. But I think what we really need now is a commitment to say, "I'm ready to learn the skills, and I'm ready to play in a space to catch you if or when you check out, and walk you home with me." We're not racing to be the one to win the community game. We actually don't win unless we all win—that's the frame. And that feels inherently relational. It's not about me trying to look good, or do or say the right thing, which is so many of the trappings of so many of these justice spaces. But it's like, "Can we build enough sense of skill and a sense of "We've got us," that when things happen in that space, we can move through them, heal them, transform them in service... Not just in service of healing our own identities—I think that's also a little bit of a trap these days.

Wendy Hasenkamp (44:20): Like more individualism?

Brooke Lavelle (44:22): Yeah. It's more individualism. I think it's more a tool of the state to keep all different identity groups fighting between one another. And I don't mean bypass identity, I want to be

loud and clear about that. But I think it's a trap to think that the only work is about healing different aspects of our identity. I think we want to do that in service of actually working together and building collective power, in order to address the systems that are causing the pain anyway, right?

(44:48) I keep coming back to, what is the purpose here? What's the purpose of this healing trajectory? Because I don't have time to heal all the things that needs to be healed in this lifetime. *[laughter]* I just turned 41 and I'm like, "Oh shit—I totally thought I'd be so much more healed by this point!" And I'm like, "I'm not going to finish." And I'm just coming to terms with that. So it's like, "Where am I going to put my energy? What's in service?"

Wendy Hasenkamp (45:11): Yeah. And it's cool, if you shift the lens on[to] what's the goal, then maybe the healing happens along the way as well. It's not just about the healing, but it still happens.

Brooke Lavelle (45:20): Yes! You did it. And that's the model. CourageRISE does not stop at healing. CourageRISE goes on to sense what else can be, and embody that. That doesn't mean that the healing is finished, right? We were in a facilitator skill share this morning. So a group of us meet and we share practices. And someone in that group said, "One of the things I'm struggling with is that I feel like everyone is just focused on healing, just focused on naming oppression." Understandably, in a state of hyper vigilance. And it totally makes sense. And the question was, "Well, how do I create enough space here to ask, and to move this group into, well, what now?" Like yes and. Like, yes, there is tremendous pain, yes, there are tremendous inequities, and what can we do? How can we be? To not just get stuck there. And that's a delicate dance, because even saying that it could sound like I'm like, "Oh just get over it. What else could we build?" And that's another tool of white supremacy. "Just imagine the other world and get there." Like Bezos and all these people, building spaceships and going somewhere else. There's no other place. So this feels like a nuance. It's not a bypass, or it can't be, but we can just live forever in this healing mode.

(46:35) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (46:50): I know you've also in recent years been expanding the scope to think more and more about climate, and our connection with environment and nature. Do you want to say how those links are drawn in, as well, with social justice and with contemplative work?

Brooke Lavelle (47:08): Yeah. I had the good fortune to study in Germany (I was on a fellowship there for a little while a few years back) and to learn much more about the data around the climate crisis. And I like to consider myself somewhat informed, in general. I had no idea how bad it was. And how present it is. And literally that we're at what feels like a breaking point for civilizational collapse. And it seems like all the wise scientists and researchers that I got to learn and work with during that time that, not everyone would agree with this, but many people who I trust and really respect would say that some form of collapse is inevitable. There's already systemic breakdown, but some form of civilizational collapse is inevitable. And because global leaders have not mobilized to address the crisis in the way that researchers and scientists and peoples of the world have been begging them to do, literally. It seems unavoidable, but that one of the main ways to buffer the effects of that crisis—and by buffer I mean to keep as many people safe as possible—is to reorganize and build local regenerative communities.

(48:37) As I was learning about that, I was thinking [about] the tools that are needed to work in those communities. We can't just have a grand vision of building locally and sustaining through the crisis. So many of us have been shaped by... We've been talking about white supremacy culture, but systems of

exploitation and extraction. It feels like there's so much unlearning to do in the work, that the art of building these local communities feels like a very live and urgent need. And this is coming from work with Courage. Just because we want to be in community doesn't mean it happens. So how do we do that?

[\(49:16\)](#) And so the last few years we've been turning towards work with climate researchers, climate activists, and more broadly under the umbrella of climate justice, to say the climate crisis is not separate from racial justice work. It's not separate from the crisis of capitalism. These are deeply interconnected, interlocking systems. So for us, even though we've been working on climate, in a way it's all related. But we've been developing this course to work with folks... it emerged in part because one of the folks on our team was working with a group of researchers at this well known climate Institute, who were literally on the verge of giving up during the Trump Administration years because of all the climate rollbacks. So imagine a group of people who devoted their life... We're not making enough traction anyway on the climate crisis. And then we have an administration that literally rolls back decades of work. For them, the writing was on the wall. Like, it's done. So we actually came in, in part, to start to just try to resource those folks. And that's in a way some of Courage's old legacy. How do we resource folks just literally trying to hold it together? But part of where we are, and I think what's exciting to grow is, how do we move not just from keeping things afloat to what else could be? And there's a lot of movement in climate work around the Great Turning or the Great Transition, the Great Collapse. I think we're trying to hold the realities of both. We are headed for collapse AND there is potentially a point for massive reorganization through that. Can we hold the 'both and' of that? And that feels central to Courage's work, and a central place for us to try to offer practice and try to offer service.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(50:58\)](#): Yeah. I know we've kind of been talking about this throughout the conversation, but I wonder if you can reflect on, specifically, the importance or the value of contemplative work in these spaces. What is it about a contemplative path that is particularly helpful in these spaces of work of social justice and environmental justice?

Brooke Lavelle [\(51:23\)](#): Such a good question... I think if one sees themselves as having a spiritual life or a spiritual path, in a sense of a deep commitment to personal transformation and to benefiting other beings, that as a core... I don't want to just say ingredient, but as the core backbone that holds this together. I don't know many people that can sustain in this work who don't have a sense of purpose beyond kind of conventional forms of purpose—having a career, having a family, whatever—who don't have a deep sense of purpose beyond that. You might call it transcendent purpose or... this could be framed in different ways. I think it's really hard to sustain. So I think doesn't have to be spiritual per se, but a deep commitment for, what am I doing this for? Almost a sense of renunciation. Like, I am so unwilling to continue cooperating with business as usual that I've got to do something else. Without that kind of awakening or us trying to awaken that, I have seen it for folks be really hard to sustain. So that's more of a path question, or why are we here? What are you doing with your life?

[\(52:40\)](#) But in terms of contemplative practice, I think there are many benefits of it. And I think it depends on the kind of practice one does. I shared that, in some ways I guess, contemplative practice offers tools for resource, for being able to be in the body, to sit with complexity, to sit with difficulty. Those are not necessarily skills we learn in justice movements or in our education system (as you know, and probably many folks listening know). So there's that kind of embodied capacity that we're building. We could be building or leaning into capacities for love and connection. And for us in Courage, we draw a lot from non-dual traditions. And our diagnosis is that the crises of our time are relational crises, which

means that at root, there needs to be a relational solution. At a deeper level of analysis, I don't mean the only way, but what deeper treatment than a non-dual understanding, or non-dual path of practice.

Wendy Hasenkamp (53:38): Yeah. Can you say more about non-dual, what you mean by that? How would those practices be different from, I guess, a dualistic form of practice.

Brooke Lavelle (53:47): Yeah, yeah. I think the logic of dualism—the logic of separateness, or the logic that enables self/other, me/you, us/them, male/female—is the logic that enables domination and oppression. So a non-dual logic that does not hold those things as fundamentally separate, binaried, is in a way a kind of path of healing from systems of oppression and domination. So any contemplative practices that are pointing toward that, and I think there are a whole array. I don't think they need to just be non-dual Dzogchen practices. I really think that anything that helps us start to sense our relationality is already pointing us in that direction. Non-dual frame, non-dual philosophy, having that view deeply embedded or embodied I think is helpful because of the trickiness of the work. Like, yeah, we're relational, and how quickly we forget that we're relational, because we've fallen back into habits of mind. So not just a non-dual practice, but even a non-dual framework is something we're continuing to try to deepen into, inquire into, question into—what does that even mean then for the work that we're doing—I think is a really important part of the process itself. So I guess when I think of contemplative, I think of meditation practices, but when I think of contemplative, I think of paths too.

Wendy Hasenkamp (55:14): Yeah. Well, this has been so fantastic. As we're wrapping up, kind of stepping back from the trajectory and the scope of your current work, do you have any big picture take-homes to share with the audience?

Brooke Lavelle (55:29): Hmm. Yeah, I could say things about the field. I think the field has come a long way and I think the ongoing direction of bringing more politics into the space (and I don't mean politics in a simple way, or a superficial way)... But I think the work of not just trying to marry social justice and contemplative practice, we've got to move beyond that into this idea of culture. What are we building as culture? I would love to see more of that direction. And I've seen recently more work come online around imagination, and visualization, and relational visualization. And that, to me, is mind blowing. How awesome it would be for the field to lean into more of those practices. Well, what are we building toward now? Not just what are we tearing down, what are we building toward? But I think at the heart of it, for me, it all just comes back to love. Sensing we're not alone, and literally just trying to become as loving as we possibly can. That feels like the work.

Wendy Hasenkamp (56:28): Thank you so much. I really feel like your work is always kind of a step ahead, and anticipating where the field needs to go. And in a way you've been, to me certainly, like a beacon of the next thing we really need to be thinking about. So I really want to thank you, and I appreciate your work so much. And please keep putting these good things into the world. And thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today.

Brooke Lavelle (56:57): Thank you so much, Wendy.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (57:03): *This season of Mind & Life is supported by the Academy for the Love of Learning, dedicated to awakening the natural love of learning in people of all ages. Episodes are edited and produced by me and Phil Walker. The music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes and resources for this and other episode can be found at podcast.mindandlife.org.*

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