

# Become A Good Ancestor Podcast

Ep02: THIS HERE FLESH with Cole Arthur Riley

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

book, stories, people, spirituality, contemplation, body, writer, Cole, writer, question, writing, liberation, black, connecting, liturgy, reading, flesh, talking, called, feel

## SPEAKERS

Cole, Layla

### **Layla** 00:02

Hello everybody and welcome to episode two of the brand new 'Become a Good Ancestor' podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad and what an incredible month it's been bringing you this new evolution of our work. Our last episode was with Dante Stewart, who is the author of 'Shouting in the Fire', and we had a wonderful month reading and discussing Dante's book in the 'Become a Good Ancestor' book club. If you haven't checked that episode out yet, I highly recommend it. Today, I'm in conversation with an author that Dante is also a huge fan of. Today for episode two, I'm speaking with writer, liturgist and speaker, Cole Arthur Riley. If you follow Cole on Instagram, you'll know her as 'Black Liturgies', which is a book from a page she started in June 2020. And now has over 150,000 followers, including me, in her stunning debut, which you can see here behind me. Cole weaves stories from three generations of her family with contemplative reflections to discover the necessary rituals that connect us with our belonging, dignity, and liberation. Cole studied writing at the University of Pittsburgh and currently serves as a spiritual teacher in residence with Cornell University's Office of Spirituality and Meaning Making her debut book which we're going to be studying today and studying also in

the 'Become a Good Ancestor' book club is called 'THIS HERE FLESH: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make us' the book is published by Convergent Books, and it's our May 2020 book selection. To find out more about the book club, make sure to join us by visiting [www.becomeagoodancestor.com/bookclub](http://www.becomeagoodancestor.com/bookclub) or just checking the show notes. So welcome, Cole.

**Cole** 01:57

Hi, thanks for having me. Glad to be here.

**Layla** 02:00

We are so excited to be having you. We're also going to just before we begin, I just want to celebrate you because your debut book is a New York Times bestseller. Oh, my gosh. Congratulations.

**Cole** 02:15

Thank you.

**Layla** 02:18

I'm going to grab it just so people see it. So, this is it. 'THIS HERE FLESH' it's a beautiful, beautiful book and I'm really excited for you. Congratulations.

**Cole** 02:31

Thank you.

**Layla** 02:33

So, tell people where they can find you, where they can follow you. Just so they can go do that now.

**Cole** 02:42

Yeah, I have a project called Black Liturgies, which is mostly found on Instagram @BlackLiturgies, but if you want to follow me personally, you can follow me @ColeArthurRiley, and then @BlackLiturgist everywhere else.

**Layla** 02:58

Awesome, so let's start. Let's start with our first ancestor question. Who are some of the ancestors living or transitioned familial or societal who have influenced you on your journey?

**Cole** 03:14

I would say I think of Toni Morrison. I think of James Baldwin. I think of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker. Then on the kind of mystic side of things, I think of Julian of Norwich. People like that.

**Layla** 03:39

I love that and we'll get a bit more into that today as we speak about your journey as a writer, and what contemplation means to you. But first of all, let's go back to the foundations if you can tell us a little about your background, like your upbringing, and how you came to be a writer.

04:02

Sure. So, I was raised in the city, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by my dad and later in life, my stepmom, but I grew up not in an overtly religious home. I say that in hindsight; I think my household possessed a spirituality that was rooted in things like storytelling and myth and humour. I was a really, really quiet child, a shy child, and my dad would have us write little poems and stories to get out of chores or if we

wanted to go somewhere, if we wanted to go to the park with our friends, it was like, "Okay, do you want to vacuum or do you want to write a poem?" That was like almost payment. Sometimes you would just pay us to write stories. And so, I think, thankfully, my father, from a very young age, recognised that I needed some kind of tool for expression. Because I was so quiet, and I really took to writing.

**Layla** 05:19

What were some of the first things that you remember writing?

**Cole** 05:24

You know my family jokes about this now. I would write very dramatic stories as a child. So, my first short story was called 'Blood and Cinnamon'. Oh, it's so funny. In hindsight, I would write these very dramatic short stories, that were just kind of funny, but I would also write poems. So, my dad would give me and my siblings a colour and then we would time us and say, "10 minutes, everyone write a poem on yellow, whatever or just give us a word or something. So, I remember poetry. I remember writing poetry before I ever read it. I'm not even really sure where I gained the understanding of what a poem even is, honestly.

**Layla** 06:22

That is so cool. And it sounds like, go ahead.

**Cole** 06:25

I was going to say I also journaled a lot. Lots of diary entries from young Cole.

**Layla** 06:32

I love that. It sounds like it was a really beautiful and rich environment to grow up in with such affirmation and encouragement for creative self-expression.

**Cole** 06:48

Yeah, it was and I've been talking to my dad about this since the book came out, because he's not a reader, and my stepmom's not a reader. They're not writers, and people sometimes think I came from this literary family. My grandma was a writer, but they weren't. It's just interesting that he intuited that was where my voice would come through.

**Layla** 07:17

I love that so much. So, you have talked about you're the creator and writer behind 'Black Liturgies', which is a project seeking to integrate different concepts like dignity, lament, rage, rest, and liberation, along with literature and spirituality. Can you, for those of us not in the know, can you explain what liturgy is, and how you came to create this project? Because it sounds like you know, it's always easy to look back in hindsight, "oh, yeah, Cole was always writing". This is such a natural thing for her to do next. But I wonder if you can kind of thread the needle for us to get us to know how did you get to start this project? What is liturgy and how did you create this project?

**Cole** 08:06

Sure. Liturgy comes from a Greek word that essentially means the work of the people. If you encounter it, it's usually a form or a form for a religious ceremony or service, a form for kind of connecting with the divine. So, if you've been to a Catholic mass, or in England, Anglican, or something like that, you have probably experienced some kind of

liturgy. But I think at its core, it's a way to kind of the collective communicating with the spiritual or conveying the spiritual way of conveying that part of the human experience. I think, I recently had the thought that liturgists are kind of the artists of the spiritual. It's not really about conveying or teaching. It's not really about teaching a doctrine or creed or anything like that. It's about what does it mean to be human? How do I express this feeling? Or how do I express this desire in the presence of the spiritual or with an awareness of the spiritual?

**Layla** 09:19

In what form was that? Were you doing that work before creating that sort of work that we see and what led you to want to create it as this wonderful page?

**Cole** 09:33

So, I had encountered liturgy while I was working for this Episcopal Church after college, and it was my first encounter with the Book of Common Prayer, and I found a lot of beauty in it. In a lot of respects, to not have to always know what to say, but in the summer of 2020, which is when I started 'Black Liturgies' I was just experiencing this disconnect between my blackness and the liturgy I was encountering on Sundays. I said this before, but I think there are seasons where it's really difficult to pray words written by a white man and knowing that he didn't care about me or my blackness, Thomas Cranmer in the 16th century when the transatlantic slave trade was picking up, he didn't care about me when he was writing his word. As the world finally prepared to pay attention, at least for a little, to the murder of black people at the hands of white people. I was just in one of those seasons and looking for a space that could hold black grief, could hold the black person embodied experience, could hold black emotion in a spiritual

context. So, I started 'Black Liturgies', mostly out of anger, and with a little of resentment. Because I've I felt this kind of chasm between me and liturgical spaces, I was a part of.

**Layla 11:21**

How have you seen and felt it evolve? Since then? Because that was a really high emotional time collectively. How have you felt it evolve? How have you felt yourself evolve over the last two years?

**Cole 11:39**

Yeah, thanks for asking. Well, first of all, I thought it was going to be this really kind of small, intimate thing. I wasn't really involved in social media that much before 'Black Liturgies'. People were like, why did you choose Instagram, to post about this? Honestly, I wasn't really thinking about the nature of Instagram. I thought it would be a small group. I just didn't fit. In hindsight, I can understand its appeal and why people really took to it. But at the moment, I was so isolated from spiritual spaces that I didn't really have an imagination for it being much more than a dozen or 20 of us. So, I've seen it grow. I've seen as it grows, it gained the attention of a lot of white people as well, which is an interesting evolution at around 10,000 followers. I noticed this kind of flip switch, and suddenly lots of white people were following me. I've had to maybe work a little harder at figuring out what the white gaze is doing and what kind of temptations come with it, what kind of motivations come with it or come to awaken me. Now, I feel maybe it takes a little more time for me to post because I have to interrogate it. Who am I? Who am I speaking to? And who am I catering to? And it makes my work a bit difficult, but I think there can be a certain beauty in it. If you know, for the rare white person who's capable of decentring

themselves in the space bank, it can be quite beautiful to pray or hold words written by a black woman.

**Layla 13:47**

That's so real you shared about Toni Morrison as one of your good ancestors who's influenced you. She wrote and spoke and taught so much about this. I definitely resonate with what you said about doing a deeper interrogation before you write anything before you publish anything. Who is this for? What am I trying to achieve with this? I don't know if you experienced this, but I went through feeling like I was running around in my mind. Like, is this for me? Do I even know what you know what I mean? Do I know who I am? Outside of this game? Is that something you've experienced?

**Cole 14:32**

Yeah, I mean, definitely. Because you know what, something I thought about the other day is the white gaze. It pays. You know, it pays. The white gaze makes a post go viral. It's really sinister because you know that you're sacrificing a part of yourself afterwards. You can kind of realise that, but at the moment, you think you're writing something for the people, but really are you writing? What will go far, and what will resonate with the most people? I wish there was more space to talk about the temptation of the white gaze of man, the money that comes with the white gaze on your work. And so, I have had to ask myself even looking, sometimes I think the white gaze has won in my work in 'Black Liturgies'. And I'm like, Man, I wish I could go back. But I mean, that's just a part of it, and becoming more and more aware of, for example, I'm prone to appealing to white intellectual men and I hated myself. But I mean, even as I was writing 'THIS HERE FLESH', I had to keep asking myself, who's in the room with you, Cole? Is it your



ancestors? Is it the people that made you? Or is it this random, white intellectual that you wanted and embraced by when you were in your teens to early 20s. I'm hoping as I age, it will become easier and easier to untangle those things more quickly, but right now, it takes effort.

### **Layla 16:23**

Yeah, it's hard. It just speaks for so many of us, whether you're a writer or a poet, like anything, any person who's a creator, who puts things out for public consumption. If you're a black person or indigenous person of colour, several things have to happen before you feel comfortable putting something out. And even when you do, you're like, "Oh, is it this? Or is it that?" And that's just such a privilege to not have to think about those things. There's so much energy that is taken up with that. But I think it's what gives our work such depth though at the same time. That it's considered. I felt, and I'd love to talk about your book now. I mean, your book, 'THIS HERE FLESH' is just beautiful, a New York Times bestseller. I've never read anything like it before. I don't know what I was expecting, because obviously, I follow you on Instagram, and with any social media account, the information is in very digestible chunks. You're trying to convey wisdom in a very short frame, you know what I mean? Yes, whereas with the book you can really share, you can really experiment and what I loved about your book is that it was such an experimental way of writing, it wasn't a clear A to Z narrative. It also wasn't just purely meditative or poetic. It was like everything all at once. It made me pause at several points along the way to just have to sit and digest what it was that you were saying. Not from an intellectual point of view. From how it landed in my body. That's what it felt like it was what does this feel like? So, could you tell our listeners and our viewers, what is this? What is 'THIS HERE FLESH'? What is the book? Why this title? What does it mean to you?

**Cole** 18:34

Sure, yeah, it's very different from 'Black Liturgies', isn't it? It's grounded. The chapters are quite

**Layla** 18:40

It is yes.

**Cole** 18:41

Yeah. Grounded in the things that black liturgy is a kind of grounded on the chapter titles, but in itself, I think to be true to myself as a writer; I was a writer before I was a liturgist; I was interested in the kind of creative writing before I was a liturgist. I wanted to make sure I wasn't bound by the singular project in my life that was almost incidental. So, I'm like, I'm going to write like me, and I think there's definitely something queer about my work that I wanted to preserve. But also, I'll be honest, I thought I was going to write this really dense, conspiratorial, contemplative book like Thomas Merton or something, but for black people. And as I started, there's no such thing, because I think Black contemplation is so distinct. I started to go back to the kind of the spirituality of my household, and as I said, it's about storytelling and myth, like we love to make up stories and pass them on like poor kids, and so I wanted that to be in my writing. I had been interviewing different people in my family, different older people in my family for several years at that point, and I'd started with my father and my grandma, and their stories and kind of the interplay between our three stories was just really present in me when I started to write. I made this decision post-proposal of I'm only going to focus on our three stories so that I can try my best to write a really complicated, nuanced person. I knew I needed to kind of home in on just a few of us, and the three

generations of my family, so if you haven't read 'THIS HERE FLESH' it's their spiritual contemplation on things like dignity, lament, rage, and rest. But then there's also interspersed with a lot of storytelling and a little of myth as well.

**Layla 21:11**

You were sort of touching on the publishing aspect of this, I'm guessing with 'Me and White Supremacy', for example, what really made publishers want to publish is the fact this was such a beautiful movement that you are creating on Instagram, in that people were really engaged with your work, and that people really had a hunger and appetite for it. Do you think either you knew, or your publishers knew, what the book would become wouldn't just be the Instagram page as a book?

**Cole 21:50**

You know, I don't think my publisher really knew. I think I'd written a sample chapter, and they had really liked it. But I think I'd even kind of held back in that because I was unsure how welcomed my truest literary voice would be. I wasn't sure if they would want to look closer to 'Black Liturgies'. I was really grateful to be paired with editors who really got it, who really understand me as a writer and understand and I'm hoping to have a long literary career. And to do that, I just have to be honest with my own voice on the page. But I don't think they knew, I think I kind of knew I would try, but I didn't know how far they would take it and how far they would let me take it, just literally putting myth and magic realism into this book. I just didn't know how much of it they would take to.

**Layla 22:59**

Was there a point at which you were writing the book that you felt like that? Truest self felt like she could finally be her truest self? Like, was there a point at which you gave yourself full permission to go in? Or was it just an unfolding journey?

**Cole 23:16**

I think it was just unfolding. But I will say I do think I quickly realised that comes across for me best in storytelling, not in the actual kind of reflections afterwards. I think I'm really interested in talking about lament, but I'm much more interested in describing, telling the story of my grandma on the linoleum floor and honouring that moment, and honouring the way her body was contorted. And I'm interested in kind of conveying those things, and storytelling, and I haven't really reread the book apart from editing. But while I was doing the audiobook, I could sense that in the parts where I was reading the stories, I just felt something different. In me, something different awakened me. Yeah.

**Layla 24:16**

Talking about the stories. Tell us about the stories who sent you, so the book covers three generations of stories, your own, your father's, your grandmother's? What was the process like for you to gather their stories? And what was it you wanted to make sure that you got across as a kind of a faithful narrator of their dignity?

**Cole 24:42**

I mentioned I had been interviewing them interviewing people in my family, and I don't know if you've done this, but I think there's some kind of resistance with people to talk about stories, particularly about really small stories for lack of a better word. There's something in us that kind of wants to expedite things and talk about grand sweeping

narratives in our lives, as opposed to these very specific fragments. I've learned a lot from people who've said, it's the fragments, it's very particular that is actually most transcendent which is actually most moving, and at least for me. I interviewed them, that's a very easy way to put it, because it was actually like a labour of drawing out these details that they weren't used to people waiting for, honestly, I think some of it is like, do you really want to know, do you really care what I was wearing? Do you really care what my hands were doing or what my face looks like? And, like convincing them I do, like I do, if you feel safe, take me there, take me to these spaces. I had to come up with some, while I had some stories in mind from the interviews, but while I was writing, I would call them, especially my grandma, usually on Saturdays, and I would have a list of questions to try to draw out the particularity more. Which was always quite the task.

**Layla 26:33**

What can you tell us one of your favourite stories from your grandmother or just one of the stories that were most impactful for you?

**Cole 26:45**

I think about this moment. This is the moment where our stories merge. I'm visiting her in the hospital. This is in the chapter on repair. And it's a really cool kind of meta moment because I added this during the editing process, not in the initial writing. But I'm visiting her in the hospital this past summer, so in July, and she had just been in a coma, medically induced coma for five days, which, if any of your listeners know that usually takes a lot to recover. So, I went thinking I was saying goodbye and prepared to read her some of the book because she hadn't read any of it. But when I got there, she was speaking she

was kind of out of it, but still coherent enough and she was talking about the stories that were in the book, and we are using 'I' and 'we' interchangeably, probably because of the medication she was on. And so, I didn't know if she was talking about my story, or she was talking about hers, which I think is really beautiful in hindsight. Then she just pauses after talking about some traumatic memories that are in the book. She pauses, and she says, "We did good. We did good. We took the sweetest part of the fruit and we cut it off". I was like, I just had chills, and I left the hospital room and I looked at my husband and I was like, "did you hear that?" and we googled it? Because we thought surely, she didn't just come up with this beautiful.

**Layla 28:34**

This sounds like poetry.

**Cole 28:35**

Right, exactly. Surely, she didn't just come up with this beautiful line and she really did that was in here somewhere. That memory of her kind of connecting each of our stories without even being fully lucid and that we took the sweetest part of the fruit and we cut it off. I'll never forget that.

**Layla 28:56**

Yeah, that is so beautiful. That is so beautiful. You write in the preface of your book, you say 'I'm interested in reclaiming a contemplation that is not exclusive to whiteness, intellectualism, ableism, or mere hobby, and as a black woman, I am disinterested in any call to spirituality that divorces my mind from my body voice or people'. Yes. What is contemplation? And what does it mean to live a contemplative life? As you have just described it, free of all of those isms?

**Cole 29:42**

Yes. To me, I think it's partially paying attention to your own interior world. And it's also part of paying attention to the exterior and kind of bridging the exterior, the interior and becoming honest. I think I had been in spaces where contemplation was equated with intellect and just this complete practice of the mind. I'm very sceptical and started to try to put words to why and started to try to ask myself the question, is there a room for blackness and contemplation? Really, if it's this disembodied pursuit, because I don't want to be disembodied spirituality, I don't want to be disembodied in spiritual practice. So is there this really safe kind of path to the Divine for me, and in Toni Morrison, in 'The Site of Memory', she talks about this practice of imagination that she started to do for her ancestors who were enslaved. She was writing in a time when there were increasing narratives about people who were hurt, people who were enslaved, but not many that really translated into a rich interior life for enslaved people. And so, she talks about this practice of imagination, and she says, 'they are my entrance, they are my entrance to my own interior world', which is so beautiful and so appropriate for this podcast. Actually, I hadn't thought about that. Until I started speaking, just as they are my entrance to my own interior. Well, I thought, okay, so there's something intergenerational about black contemplation. And then you asked about the book title, and I forgot to answer, but this was the perfect moment. The title 'THIS HERE FLESH' is a nod to this scene in beloved or this location, the setting of the clearing.

**Layla 31:53**

Oh my God.

**Cole** 31:54

Yeah.

**Layla** 31:55

Chills, because I'm remembering in your book when you spoke about this. Yes. I love that book. So yes, sorry, continue.

**Cole** 32:02

No, it's okay. I'm glad that you love it. Because in 'The Clearing', Toni Morrison takes us to this clearing, and it's this kind of harbour for black people, this matriarch of the family baby, so for those of you who haven't read it, she's, says, "No children come to the centre and they are called to the centre of the clearing and says your mothers hear you laugh, and they laugh". And then she calls the men "let your wife see you dance" and they dance. Then she calls the woman to the centre, and she says, "cry for the living and the dead, just cry" and they do and she talks about, them all getting kind of tangled up in each other until the women are laughing and the children are dancing and the men are crying and they collapse in the clearing together and, and then Baby Suggs gives her sermon "In this here place, we flesh, flesh that leaps laughs flesh to the dances on bare feet and grass", love it. And so, she gives this beautiful kind of message to the people about loving the body after leading them in this kind of sacred practice of liberation in the body. And so, I wrote that preface. And I thought, okay, this is the spirituality that if I'm going to do this, I want to communicate this kind of contemplation, this kind of spirituality when it's intergenerational, when that's embodied, when that's emotional, you know? Yeah. That was a long answer.

**Layla** 33:43



No, I love it; I love it. And it was, that was one of my favourite parts of your book because it reminded me of that scene from that story, it's hard to even find the words of what it was like to kind of picture that scene as Toni Morrison describes it. In the book and the healing really truly comes from an embodied spirituality. It got me thinking about various things, just as we're having this conversation, both that scene, your work and your writing. I remember a few years ago; I was studying Feminine Spirituality, and studying about various mystics, and their spirituality was a real embodied spirituality, that from the lens of white, patriarchal, capitalistic sort of intellectualism is this person has lost their mind, right this person isn't an authority to speak on spirituality because they're not speaking from logic and they're not speaking from rationality and they are not sort of in a state of suffering and being filled with guilt and shame they're actually enraptured. They're in rapture and that's what I remember from reading that scene. In beloved, and how I feel about your work as well is that there is space for both the thinking, but there is deep, deep, deep space for both the embodied experiences. The fact that your work as we know it, the you we know now, not you, you've been your entire life, but the rest of us know you are what you introduced us to, and you create it for us in a space in which within the turmoil and chaos of everything that we saw from 2020 onwards, that the space that you've created, as it is a space of safety, and rest, but also of reminding us to tune back inwards to ourselves as you use on your Instagram posts, like on the carousel, they'll always be like an inhale affirmation and an exhale affirmation, you're connecting us to our breath. So, speak to us about that more, really understanding. What does it mean to be embodied in your spirituality and in your experience of humanity?

**Cole** 36:36

Yeah, so I've always been a person at risk for disembodiment that I've been like since I was little, lived in my mind mostly and so it's been a real journey for me to befriend my body. This is more a story-based answer, but I was a dancer, I did ballet. And that was my one kind of connection to my own body, to my own flesh. And apart from that, I would just live in the clouds or within my mind and kind of just keep my shoulders up. I was a very tense child. But dance was this one kind of avenue to my body, where I started to understand its strength and its power, its capacity for beauty and making beauty. At the same time, ballet is a very white-dominated space. It was the beginning of my turning against my body. I lived with bulimia for a little over a decade, and during the time that I was a dancer. I think my story has always been connected to this question of, like, cool, "Are you going to stay home? Are you going to? Are you going to do this? Are you going to try to integrate yourself, try to care, try to nourish your body in the same way that you're obsessed with nourishing your mind, you know, does that set matter to you?" I think from a young age, that's kind of been my journey. Later on in life, I develop a chronic illness as the book talks about. I think through chronic illness, I've had to really become honest about my hatred with my body, because frankly, the disabled community, the chronically ill community, like you can't afford not to, you can't afford to not pay attention to your body, it comes at such a great cost. And so, though, that is where I really started to think about a spirituality that was fully embodied. I was asking questions about what does it mean to love and what does it mean to grieve and these kinds of mental questions, as opposed to what does it mean to eat? What does it mean to play? I tried to start incorporating some of those questions as well. When I think about my ancestors who were enslaved, and who had so many limitations placed on the body, it's very difficult for me to conceive of a liberation that doesn't all, liberate

the body that doesn't also connect us to deep care and tenderness for the body. When many of the people that formed me, were their bodies neglected and used as capital, someone asked me recently, what happens when you leave, disembodied, and I said, "someone else is going to use your body. That's what happens". It's not this neutral emptiness. It's not a vacancy. If you're not paying attention to your body. Let me tell you, capitalism is, whiteness is. If you're not in your body, someone else is, someone else's at home, and I feel like I need to kind of remind myself I need to communicate a kind of spirituality and black liturgies, otherwise that kind of resists that.

**Layla 40:26**

Wow, that is just like you gave me everything I needed and just that last 20 seconds because I've never heard it put that way, but you're so right. We can't afford not to be embodied, somebody else is always looking. It's like Audrey Lloyd said, "if you don't define yourself for yourself, then somebody else will do it for you". And usually "it will be for their gain and to your detriment".

**Cole 40:56**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Layla 40:57**

Wow! I'm definitely a mind person more than a body person, I am that kid and now that adult that always has their head in a book, always learning something, always journaling, I have to write all my thoughts out like everything, embodiment and being connected with my body's needs it's not something that comes naturally, it's something that I actually have to schedule in. I write it down.

**Cole** 41:30

Yes, I know exactly what you mean. Kindred spirits.

**Layla** 41:37

What are some practices that you do? What are some things you write down? What are some things you try to integrate into your life?

**Cole** 41:46

Well, this one's really specific. But the first that came to mind, I talked about in my book; I have several eye conditions. Retinas and other things, but I'm also a writer and I can't just stare at the screen but because I'm so prone to disembodiment, I'll stare at a screen for four hours while I'm writing and not look away, because my body doesn't remember, it doesn't tell itself like cool, you're hurting, until after. So I've started to set alarms every 15 minutes. These people are going to be like, this is wild, you to set up. I truly set it for every 15 minutes. So that I remember to stare out the window for a few minutes and then get back to it. If I don't, I'll just I'll lose myself, I lose my body. But also, I am in a household. I mean, I'm in a family. Thankfully, that is really aware like I'll forget to eat until 7 pm. That doesn't happen anymore. I'll just like look up and there's a bowl of grapes or pistachios next to me, which I understand is a very lucky kind of dynamic. But I can't do ballet like I used to because of my health. But I've learned to stretch, I've learned to incorporate my body as I'm writing. I don't want to write about my dad folding a piece of paper. I'll do the motion. I actually think that makes me a better writer. When I actually put on, what are my hands actually doing as opposed to imagining in my mind or rolling a joint. I was like, "what am I doing?" And trying to figure out like, okay, how do I know, describe this outside of my mind and in my body? I

think it has made my writing better. I'm like you, it requires a lot of effort.

**Layla** 42:29

This is amazing, love it. I love that. I love that you give us something that was just really simple as well. Because I think sometimes, we tend to overthink things. It has to be this whole orchestration. But actually, this would help, like setting an alarm to go off every 15 minutes would actually really help me through the course of the day so that by the end of the day, I'm not in complete and utter pain. Because I stared at the screen for hours because I can do that. I'm the same, I'm like once I get in the zone, I'm not stepping out of the zone. I have a morning practise called the 'Three M's'. So, it's part of my mind, part of my body, part for my soul. It's the first M in my morning pages. I write three. This is from Julia Cameron's 'The Artist's Way' so three pages of freehand writing just to get anything out that wants to come out and then movement and that can be any kind of movement. I tend to just see, I might have a goal, I want to do three days of this kind of movement, and in two days of this kind of movement, but I also really check in with myself every day and be like, do I feel like doing that today? Or do I just want to stretch, and then my last aim is meditation and I'm trying more and more to find meditations that allow me to connect to my body as well. So that it's not just about like, oh, yes, the mind what the mind can do, but really, how did different parts of my body feel? And I find that the 'Three M's', are done. And I'll write each one of them down, but they're done, just keeping it simple, I think helps.

**Cole** 45:51

I love that.

**Layla 45:52**

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Okay. So I'm not Christian, I'm Muslim. But I found deep meaning and comfort and liberation from reading your words and from following you. Would you say that contemplation, liturgy, all of that isn't just something that is restricted to kind of one religious framework that it kind of includes everything, but sort of transcends everything as well?

**Cole 46:25**

Yeah, I do. I do think that, and I think simply because it's not primarily focused on teaching or education, but about conveying the human experience. I think I'm operating out of the Christian formation, but I think it is in many spiritualities, this kind of form for connecting with the divine, this kind of ceremony, and it might be called something different. I'm not tied to it being called liturgy. But I think, really, if there is some kind of collective practice you feel like it was leading you toward the divine, and you're able to do it with some level of ritual, I would say, yeah, that's a liturgy. And I don't think it's the most and, there are people, there are literally just apologists out there who think it's the most important thing are like the necessity, I actually don't think it's a necessity. I just think for some of us, that's a really helpful way for us to experience the divine to remember, that we are spiritual beings to have this kind of collective, especially, I mean, for solitary people for disembodied people, I think it's a really compelling form.

**Layla 47:50**

What does wondering, what does communal look like, what does this look like? It is a community; I think it really speaks to me as someone who was very self-reflective, very, like self-referential, and really, is

very connected with my own personal relationship with God, or the divine, or whatever you want to call that presence. But what does this work look like as a community?

### **Cole 48:18**

You know, I think there's something to it that's maybe, like, a kind of solidarity that's really special in the community. And what I mean is, like when you're practising a liturgy, or when you're reading words, or engaging in a practice, like a shared practice, it's not going to resonate with everyone. The word, for example, black liturgies, you might read something, and it might not resonate with you at all. You know, you might not even understand what it's really talking about. Liturgy on perfectionism and someone DM'd me, like, "Oh, that's not my experience". I said, it doesn't have to be, you know, I think part of the beauty and even if it doesn't centre, me, I'm capable of remaining in the space, I'm capable of having an imagination for another person's lived experiences and staying, even if it's not about me, so I think it can be a kind of a beautiful form of solidarity and community and mutuality, not always focusing on one person's experience.

### **Layla 49:31**

I love that because it's not like as you were saying, it's not about the specific doctrine. It's not about following specific rules or a specific framework that says to belong here. This is what you have to believe, or this is how you have to behave. But really, that solidarity, all of that solidarity of honouring all of our individual unique experiences and perspectives while also really owning our own right, not comparing, right? Like not saying, oh, yours has to be like mine or mine has to be like yours. But really were the points that we meet, as some of the words that you used to describe your words like rage like lament, like

dignity, love, right? These are human experiences, these transcend any frameworks, any kind of formalised anything. This is our experiences as human beings.

**Cole 50:30**

Exactly. And when I wrote 'THIS HERE FLESH', I really tried to be careful to have it feel expansive, as opposed to narrowing. It might be unset, it might be unsatisfying for some people, because I'm very rarely answering a question, usually just asking it. I had to try to be really careful with how I used the Christian biblical texts, to not use them in the same manner that they are sometimes used in Christian nonfiction to say this is what happened, this is what it is to write. This is a story I found meaning is kind of how I tried to approach it as this story-based experience, even on those occasions where I talked about The Bible because I wanted it to feel like this expanding true spiritual liberation, which, as you said, doesn't demand a particular belief in order to belong, there's nothing wrong with particular lies, belief, but it's not predicated on that in order to belong.

**Layla 51:45**

Yeah, it's definitely not prescriptive. I love what you said about actually asking more questions and giving more answers. Because I think that was what made it feel beautiful. It feels like reading you in the process, as opposed to, this is the journey that I've been on. And this is the end which I have now reached, right? It's like, no, this is me in the process. This is me on the journey. This is me as a human being. And so I'm wondering, what is it you hope this book will do in the world? How do you hope it will help people? I don't want to put words in your mouth, but kind of what is, what is it you hope it will do for people, or what people will do with it?



**Cole 52:35**

I hope I give people an imagination for preserving our stories for preserving the stories that came before us for being our own historians, in a way our own familial historians think that is really the kind of the most special part of the work that came alive in me is like, oh, I feel like such responsibility to sacred responsibility as a caretaker of story. In awareness, that's how we're formed, that's formed by those things. So, I hope that storytelling, a story exchange, and also, I hope I give people this picture of what it means to be a spiritual person. That also, as you said, is in a process that isn't so certain that isn't so sure that it's more about the experience than it is about knowledge. And that contains a lot of mystery, honestly, that contains a lot of mystery and wonder, I want that for more people. I don't mean to sound arrogant or anything like that. But I feel like I've really found something in that freedom, that liberation. I want that for other people.

**Layla 53:57**

Absolutely. You know, I mean, what you've just spoken to is a huge reason why I wanted to be able to speak with you on the podcast and why we definitely wanted to be reading this book, in the book club. Because what we're hoping to do is to give people tools, stories, narratives, encouragement, whatever you name it, on their journeys, and on our collective journeys, is trying to become good ancestor, really trying to honour those who have come before us really trying to be of service to those who come after we're gone. Really trying to live the depth and breadth of our human experience now in the presence, and I felt that what you really, and this is why it's no surprise that this book has done so well is that what you've really given us is a book and a framework is not the right word, but a kind of perspective that allows

us to really dance It's more of a dance rather than a step one, step two, step three, is a dance of like what is arising within me as we experience such tumult and such chaos, and so much fear, and separation and all of those things in the world as we have it today? And where are the places where I can find connection and belonging, and truth, my truth, our truth. Together. The journey really is. So much of it is a mystery. I'm so glad to use that word. So much of it is a mystery. And that can feel what does that mean? I want the answers. Tell me what to do, Cole. But it's now that we're not just robots. We're not items that have been created out of the factory. We are human beings. We're embodied flesh. But we're also a lot more than that, as well. And it's all together, and it's all divine. And so that's why I wanted to be able to speak with you and to bring this book into the book club. So, I'm so excited that we'll be reading this through the month of May. I know people will come out of it on the other side. Both feel that they have answers and that they probably have more questions as well. But those questions are the questions that they will live into, as opposed to just feeling stuck. So, I think it's beautiful, what you've done. And thank you so much.

**Cole** 56:37

Thank you. And thank you for inviting me into your space.

**Layla** 56:40

Absolutely. Absolutely. So, our final question, Cole, what does it mean to you to become a good ancestor?

**Cole** 56:48

To me, to become a good ancestor is to keep the memory, to be a keeper of memory, a curator of collective memory, so that the people who come after me aren't too far.

**Layla** 57:12

That was beautiful. Thank you so much.

**Cole** 57:14

Do you typically answer this question? What is it?

**Layla** 57:17

Well, I don't know. Are you posing it back to me?

**Cole** 57:20

I mean, I would love to know you've been doing the interview.

**Layla** 57:24

The interviewee becomes the interviewer. It is a question. It's a mystery. It's a question that is continuously evolving for me. Because at different points in my life, it looks like different things. And for different spheres of my life, it looks for different things; it looks like different things. But I think, on the whole, from a bird's eye perspective. It's really for me, situating myself in the present timeline, and really wanting to do, to have to, to honour those who came before me, those who poured into me those who survived, so that I could be here, those who sacrifice those who also took risks, right, and who tried, and so to really honour them, and also then to live my life now. To live my life now as the fullest, truest expression of myself. So that it may be an example to others who come after I'm gone. Not as this perfect role model, but really as a full human being. Who is trying, who is failing,

who is figuring it out who's trying to figure out how to be less than her mind and more in her body who's experimenting and finding ways to really express herself? I feel like it's the purpose of my life. It is so much more than the kind of podcast the brand that everything it's like this is me, Layla. This is what I'm here to do. And it's a question that every day when I sit down to journal, you know, I'm thinking about, I'm thinking about it.

**Cole** 59:18

That's so beautiful. So beautiful. Really is.

**Layla** 59:22

Thank you for the question back. I love it. Thank you.