

**EPISODE 94**

*“MT: My observation as a consumer of traditional health and wellness and as someone who participated in it as a practitioner, the goal is to help people meet a specific standard, a standard of beauty and a standard of health, and if you achieve those standards you are then considered to be more worthy of people who have not and who are not actively pursuing those standards. It does set forth a hierarchy of what's good and bad and there're very clear rules about what's good and bad. I find that that is rampant in health and wellness and it's rampant in diet culture. I don't see those two things different for the most part.*

*I always used to say, “Your weight isn't your worth,” and that is true, but then you step outside and it's a clear delineation between who is worthy and who is not based on the size of their bodies, the color, gender, ability, all of those things. It's a reality for people.”*

[INTRO]

**[0:01:12.7] AS:** You know battling food in your body doesn't work. You want to love and accept yourself, and because you're insatiable, you want results too. You bring the same intensity to your life, wanting to maximize your time, potential, and experiences you have here on our beautiful and wondrous planet Earth. Fair warning, it will be a rollercoaster. But for those insatiable, this is your primetime to thrive. Here is just saying yes to the hunger of wanting it all.

I'm your host, Ali Shapiro, who is dedicated to pioneering a saner and more empowering approach to health and weight loss.

[INTRODUCTION]

**[0:01:52.7] AS:** Welcome to episode 94 of the Insatiable Podcast, *How to Leave the Diet Culture Matrix with Melissa Toler*. We grew up in a culture like a fish swimming in water that rewards those who are thin. If you're thin, white and blonde too, you receive access to all the things. In today's episode, with writer, speaker and body justice advocate, Melissa Toler breaks down diet culture so we can find our way out. As Melissa shares in her story, “If you keep

thinking there has to be more to life than trying to control your body and beauty you can opt out of that culture and discover more truth in beauty.”

Melissa and I discuss how the wellness world is really diet culture and diet culture mirrors patriarchy. We talked about what patriarchy is. Number two; how weight loss is sold as empowerment, while in truth it does the opposite and disempowers us. Lastly, we discussed the intersection of race with diet culture and how Melissa's acceptance of her natural hair laid the groundwork for her to give up dieting.

Here's a little bit more about Melissa, she is a speaker, writer and educator. Her work encourages people to make the connection between our culture's oppressive beauty standards and our personal struggle with self-acceptance. She has written extensively on diet culture and the toll it takes on our lives and humanity. Her goal is to help people unlearn harmful messages and behaviors from years of chronic dieting. Melissa also has a background as a pharmacist and certified wellness coach.

You are going to love today's episode as you get a lot of clarity, and Melissa has a great way of articulating things in a way that really bring it home to the everyday struggles of being immersed in diet culture. Enjoy today's episode.

[INTERVIEW]

**[0:03:58.0] AS:** Welcome insatiable listener. We have a very special guest. I'm so excited to speak with Melissa Toler about diet culture, what that is and her really wonderful writing on it and ideas. Before we get to Melissa's interview, a couple of updates. Again, for those of you listening, I am hosting a radical self-care workshop in New York City with Melody Wilding. She was on our show. She is a clinical social worker turned coach, and that is Wednesday, September 13<sup>th</sup>, and we're going to be talking about deep emotional self-care, not manis and pedis, but how we can make our current stress better outcomes. If you're interested in that, it's 50 bucks before September 1st, \$75 afterwards, and it's at [alishapiro.com/radicalselfcare](http://alishapiro.com/radicalselfcare) to sign up for that.

Also, I have a fall program. It's going to be about how to stop falling off the wagon. We are going to get to the emotions underneath what people think of as bad eating. It will have some of the intellectual property from Truce With Food, but it won't go quite as deep, but it's still going to help you make when your thoughts turn to food. What are the vulnerable emotions underneath that and how do we turn that stress — How do we become more resilient in the face of that stress and how do we create more meaningful outcomes so that we feel more powerful in our lives. That will open after Labor Day. For registration, it's going to be \$500. It will run about seven weeks. Wrap up before November, before Thanksgiving. Just like last time with Truce With Food, there will be scholarships for those working in social justice. There'll be information about how to apply for those, but just know that if you're working on social justice, there're scholarships available.

I decided I'm going to be donating 10% of the proceeds from the program to either Black Lives Matter, who were recently awarded the prestigious Sydney Peace Prize for their work, or the Southern Poverty Law Center, which fights hate. I make do 5% to both, or I'm not sure yet. I just want to let everyone know that there will be some — I want to start donating more to the causes that matter to me.

A lot of my clients say it seems so frivolous to worry about what they're eating right now, or struggling with their food issues seems trivial during a time like this, but I want to offer you this, and I think Melissa and I will get into it much more deeply today, is food issues aren't only about food. They are about, as Melissa calls, body autonomy, which I love that word. This program is about how to create an emotional mindset that can develop more resilience and creativity around stress rather than relying on carbs and fat, which laid out the brain create a reward system.

This fall program is about becoming more resilient in the face of overwhelm. We call it falling off the wagon, but it's really when we're feeling emotional vulnerable that we do that. There's nothing more political than a woman having agency with her body and choices. Just want to put that out there that this work works double time, makes us more courageous in the world.

Also, in brief, this is my first recording since the Charlottesville domestic terrorism incident, and I am still processing how to make sense out of this, how to balance the very real threat Nazis and

hate groups who, it turns out, have better militias than local police departments exist and with the fact that there are more good and brave people in the world than there are fearful and ignorant. Working on the Affordable Care Act activism work that I've done, I have met people who give me proof and new story, one that is builds on the American promise of equality and justice is being born. I'm still processing all that, but I wanted you guys to know that I'm not going to — I kind of basically, since the election, been much more vocal about politics here and not in terms of Republican-Democrat, but issues, because there's problems with both parties, but I really want us to focus on the issues.

I just want to share with you what I wrote on social media which was accompanied by a really powerful image that said on the tip of the iceberg, it was an iceberg image, and white violence was above the water and underneath was white silent. It was created by Elizabeth Drew You. A lot of people commented on how powerful that image was, and it's right, and it's about ending white silence.

I just want to share with you what I wrote as I'm still processing it, but let you know that I am not going to be silent as I've been speaking up more and more since the election. I'll continue with that. What I wrote is, "I took the weekend offline. Unsurprisingly, a lot happened, including Trump being Trump and how he responded. I've long moved on from paying attention to his reactions because I'm tired of being in an abusive relationship, and his election is a symptom. As much as I want to be angry at him, he's representing a symptom in our culture."

"What happened in Charlottesville is a symptom of a culture where the majority race, us, as whites, benefit from white dominance." Then I put in parentheses (I read somewhere how it doesn't make sense to call it supremacy because there is nothing supreme about this type of hate and ignorance.) "We all have to roll up our sleeves and create more equality and justice. What I've learned in my Affordable Care Act activism as it is fortifying and gratifying to do the hard work of politics, "which is another way of changing cultural conditioning in narratives". I've met amazing people who give me hope and new fair and just world is being born and have challenged me to be more brave. In this new world leaders aren't silent because silence is deafening. Leaders take a stand. They're out in front especially if they sell spirituality and empowerment."

Hat tip to Kelly Diels who we had on our podcast about the female empowerment lifestyle brand. I think it was about a year ago now, for raising my awareness around who's responding and the lack of response for many of our mainstream online leader who many have turned out to be marketers rather than leaders. Many are both.

I continue to reorient how I define leadership. I continue to learn how to be part of a solution and I continue to believe we can and must do better, and I want everyone to know I put myself in the category of needing to do better and I'm still figuring out what that means. I want to reiterate insatiable as an inclusive community of all races, shapes, sizes, religious background, sexual orientations. I've always had a clientele that is diverse and I will continue to support that type of culture.

Okay. One more thing before we get to a great show with Melissa Toler, who is changing cultural narratives, iTunes reviews I. I feel like I'm this absent professor about asking for reviews, and I need to be more consistent. If you could please leave a review of the show if you find it helpful, it will help more people find this show and get out this kind of conversation that is much more nuanced than one extreme of diet, calories-in, calories-out and the other extreme of Paleo Bros and Body Positivity, right? I've heard from hundreds of you how this show has helped you, and so if you could share that in the review it will help the show grow and get a more holistic or feminist perspective out there.

I want to think JMSS73, she was one of the most resent people to leave a review and, and she said, "If you're tired of all the static in the wellness world, this podcast is for you. Ali Shapiro is the real deal. Honest, insightful, life changing.

To leave a review on your iPad or iPhone, all you need to do is launch Apple's Podcast App, tap the search tab, enter insatiable. Tap the blue search key at the bottom right, tap the album art for the podcast, tap the reviews tab, write a review at the bottom. Enter your iTunes password to login and tap the stars to leave a rating and then enter title in text and content to leave a review and then tap send. As far as droids people, I have a droid myself and not tech savvy, so I'm going to ask Carlos how to do it for the droid people, since he's my tech team.

I would really appreciate that. Thank you so much for all of you who have already left reviews and continue to tell everyone about the show.

All right, that was a lot. Melissa, I am so excited to have you here today. First of all for, we have so many listeners in Philly, so everyone needs to know Melissa is from Philly, and I can't believe we didn't know each other when I lived there. I'm so bombed.

**[0:12:34.5] MT:** Yes, born and raised.

**[0:12:37.8] AS:** We have a huge Philly contingency and it still has my heart. Melissa, I want to open up today the conversation about diet culture, with one of the things as I've been researching you is this evolution of what to call yourself, because you have this amazing background where you're a pharmacist, right? You come from this traditional medical model. Then you became certified as a health and wellness coach. You did fitness competitions. Now, I think your evolution of what to call yourself is so indicative of diet culture defining everything, and then we have to define things in relation to that rather than we need new language. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**[0:13:19.0] MT:** Yeah. It's interesting, because when people ask me for my bio now, it raised the certified health and wellness coach, because that's not what I am anymore. Not a practicing wellness coach. I have no idea what to call myself. I just kind of talk about the work that I do, and I do consider myself to be a writer and a speaker and somewhat of an educator, but I sort of have given up my wellness coaching practice, and I wrote a big long blog post about that a few months, just because — You know this probably from your own experience. The more you become aware of what's happening in the world, the more you start to see that even in wellness, that some of those things don't align with your new beliefs, and that was the case for me.

I needed to kind of step back and define myself in some other way, which has yet to be determined. I'm still explore, like what am I going to do with all of these information. I think it's important to discuss the intersection of race with diet culture, and I'm not all the first person to be able to do that, but it's something that has become very interesting to me in the last year. It's

sort of like I have had my own awakening to certain things and how those two things coincide and intersect.

Right now, I'm still just sort of exploring and peeling back layers myself, and a lot of that is being done publicly through social media and through my blog post. I have no idea what to call myself. I say, now, that I have a wellness coaching background, because I do. I was a wellness coach, certified health and wellness coach for three years. I love the process of coaching. I love the science of coaching. I do believe in that. It's just how the health and wellness community as we know it has demonstrated time and time again that they don't really care about health and wellness.

**[0:15:27.7] AS:** Yeah. You just said so much that I want to ask you about. Let's start there though, because I think that the health and wellness community, to me it's kind of — Let me take a step back. I am like you, and that I keep having these awakenings I basically feel like we have patriarchal culture. As I was prepping for this interview I realized I wanted to find that for people, because I'm someone who didn't take feminism classes in college.

**[0:15:54.3] MT:** Yeah, me either.

**[0:15:55.3] AS:** Yeah. I grew up in a feminist household, but we didn't call it that. It's just my dad and mom made the same amount of money. My dad did the housework and drove me around, and we were told, my sister and I, as girls we can do whatever, and then it wasn't until we got out in the real world that we realized we were an anomaly.

Just for everyone who's listening, I want to kind of give you this overly simplified, very general definition of it, because I think the word is thrown a lot about, but in a nutshell, it's an organizing hierarchy where men are on the top and, basically, it was the first pyramid scheme, and religion mirrors it, and I'm not saying religion is a pyramid scheme, but it takes the same structure. Religion mirrors that with God as assumed is a man. Most people assume God is a man and he is at top, especially in our Judeo-Christian culture. Jesus is the Son of God and he's the focus even though Mary archetypally gave birth to him and Jesus had a girlfriend, Mary Magdalene, who was a healer, but she's in the background and all of these women are just side figures, or

the fact that there could be multiple gods, right? We're going to get into, I think, how diet culture mimics this power structure.

It's basically been going on here in the Americas since Christopher Columbus, the last 600 years. What I've realized is that this organizing hierarchy, it has Russian nesting doll. Kind of like a Russian nesting doll. Our corporations mimic this hierarchy, the military does, the justice system, and diet culture is part of that. It's one of those hierarchies in terms of beauty, and I think — As you've talked about on episodes, and I see it too, at the top are thin white women.

**[0:17:40.0] MT:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

**[0:17:45.5] AS:** Do you think that's how health and wellness, and we're using air quotes here. Is that what they're really selling underneath the guys of that? Obviously, there's nuance. Not everyone is doing that, but as a whole.

**[0:17:57.7] MT:** My observation as a consumer of traditional health and wellness and as someone who participated in it as a practitioner, the goal is to help people meet a specific standard, a standard of beauty and a standard of health, and if you achieve those standards you are then considered to be more worthy of people who have not and who are not actively pursuing those standards. It does set forth a hierarchy of what's good and bad and there're very clear rules about what's good and bad. I find that that is rampant in health and wellness and it's rampant in diet culture. I don't see those two things different for the most part, because what it means to be well is often a singular or very narrow definition and does not take into account people's individual lives and experiences and trauma. It's just like this you have vegetables and you do five days of exercise and you can meditate. It's a very prescriptive thing and it doesn't allow for the full expression of being human, in my opinion.

**[0:19:06.8] AS:** I love that. I always say to my clients, “My definition of health is are you alive? Are you out there being curious, creating, living a meaningful life,” and you could have a diagnosis while you're doing that. You can be 300 pounds while doing that. The measurement isn't based on have you reversed your thyroid issues naturally?

**[0:19:30.1] MT:** We use it as a mandate for — Like a criterion for being worthy. First of all, of these barriers to being “healthy” and all of these rules, and then if you don't accomplish it, then you're somehow not worthy. It's just like this spiral that people can get caught in that doesn't good.

**[0:19:52.1] AS:** Right. I think in a patriarch, if it's a pyramid, the power is concentrated at the top.

**[0:19:57.8] MT:** Absolutely.

**[0:19:59.2] AS:** The reason people pursue that is you're going to have more ease, which I think when people say, “I'll be the real me when I lose 30 pounds.” I think what they're really saying is, I'm going to have confidence. I'm going to be able to take risks,” which is really independent of traditional power metrics. You can still take risks no matter how much you weigh. I think one of the more difficult conversations as it is easier if you're thin, blonde and white.

**[0:20:25.1] MT:** Absolutely. Yup.

**[0:20:26.6] AS:** I see in the multilevel marketing world, which sells doTERRA oils, supplements, that is a pyramid structure as well, whereas most people at the bottom are doing all the work and then the people at the top who is like 1% of people actually make all the money. I'm not dissing supplements and all that stuff, but it is the structure of how it works. The people at the top of the MLM lines and the people who have, from an online perspective, taken off in the wellness world, are all beautiful, thin, white women.

**[0:21:01.1] MT:** Absolutely. We see evidence that being thin, like losing weight, or being thin and beautiful gets you more access to things and resources and attention and all these things. We see even though people say, “Well, losing weight isn't going to totally change your life,” but we have so much evidence to the contrary. It doesn't necessarily change your worth as a person. It doesn't change your worth as a person, like the size of your body doesn't dictate whether you're worthy or not, but we see evidence in our culture that that's how people respond.

It's this difficult thing where — I always used to say, “Your weight isn't your worth,” and that is true, but then you step outside and it's a clear delineation between who is worthy and who is not based on the size of their bodies, the color, gender, ability, all of those things. It's a reality for people. It's not like this you know fluffy concept. It's a reality for people.

**[0:22:05.6] AS:** Yeah. I call it the matrix, because if you look — I guess my spiritual orientation is nature, and if you look in nature there is an abundance when you really take care of the ecosystem and you take care of what mama earth has given us. My mom gardens organically, and like she gets all these lettuce. She can't even contain it, even when the deer come. She's this hippie — I think about how patriarchy is an illusion, even though there is the illusion that we're not enough, there is enough attention for the skills and talents. Everyone can live their dream life and there be enough.

We have to pierce through that. I always say we have to make the pyramid more of a circle. That's our job. Not that we would've chosen it. I wish we were on a communicable — Whatever. How did you start to break out of that, especially being in competitions with — I imagine when I read that you are pharmacist, I'm like, “I imagine she's pretty analytical and precise.” How do you go from — I'm getting this attention and you talked about being on stage. It was amazing to get that attention.

**[0:23:23.8] MT:** Absolutely. Yeah, it was that whole fitness part of my life was I think I learned so much about myself. Honestly, it's the thing that sort of piqued my curiosity and sort of catapulted me to where I am now in terms of my thinking, because I had access and participated in this thing that celebrated very lean, thin body, even beyond the standard.

Overtime I just kind of realized that this wasn't necessarily changing my life for the better. For the most part, relatively speaking, I didn't have a terrible experience with that. I know some people have had really traumatic, awful experiences with bodybuilding and fitness competitions and thankfully I did not. It wasn't a thing that I look back on and say that I want to be there again, because I think it upholds all of the things that I now am against. I just can't go there anymore.

**[0:24:27.3] AS:** But how did you leave it behind, because I think that's hard to leave what you're good at?

**[0:24:33.0] MT:** It is. You know what? It started to become less interesting, to be perfectly honest with you. When I started in 2011 — I did it from 2011 to early 2014, and I was fascinated by it. I love exercising and all of these things. I was totally obsessed with in the early stages, like following all these people, and then as I started to wake up and to things going on in the world and becoming friends both in real life and on social media with activists and people who were talking about race and gender and disability, I became more interested in that.

One of the things I loved about being in fitness competitions was the performance aspect of it, like being on stage. That to me was the best part. Now, I want to perform in a different way through my writing and through my speaking. I've been able to discover that I'm good at that too. That's how I left it behind. It just isn't interesting. It's not how I want to express my creativity in the world anymore. This is what I want to do.

**[0:25:39.8] AS:** What you just said was so brilliant, that underneath, you were able to see that it was the performance and you can perform in other ways that are more true to you. I heard in one interview you talked about how you didn't know you were good at writing. Had you written before?

**[0:25:57.5] MT:** Not like this. For my full-time job, I'm a medical writer. I do a lot of technical writing, and I'm never done creative writing. I still kind of don't, but now it wasn't until recently, in the last few years where I have really started to really connect to myself through writing and to learn that I have a very strong and specific voice in my writing. I don't think at my early 20s or 30s that I knew that I wasn't writing.

It wasn't until I started a blog, which why did. I started when I was doing fitness competitions that I realized, "Oh, okay. This writing thing is cool." Then, over time, just as I started to wake up to things and learn about things outside of traditional fitness, I feel like my writing has just become more powerful and more healing to me as I've kind of uncovered some things.

**[0:26:54.3] AS:** For everyone listening, realize, a lot of people — I think dieting takes up a lot of energy and is a hobby and you think, “What else would I do?” and a lot of people don't know. I think what Melissa saying is if you're tired of dieting or you're finding it not interesting, that's great news, right? This is terrific news.

When I was 23, I had so many diagnoses and I just couldn't diet anymore and I thought it was the end of my — I literally say to myself, “I'm just going to have to learn to be happy fat. I was 30 pounds heavier than I am now. I said that to myself, but I didn't realize my whole life was going to get better. I think people need to realize that there isn't a choice. You don't have to be pursuing health and wellness all the time, or dieting, that it can be a really great opening and beginning.

**[0:27:45.1] MT:** Yeah, that's one of the traps. That's one of the things where the pursuit of smallest, the dieting obsession consumes so much of your time and life energy that it keeps you from doing things that you would be interested in doing. It keeps you from expressing creativity. It keeps you from connecting with yourself and other people. It keeps you from putting your ideas out into the world, because if you're spending so much time tracking yourself and then judging yourself on top of that and all the other things that come with that, there's little mental and emotional energy left over to only express yourself. I feel like ever since I gave up dieting, I've been able to express myself creatively in ways that I hadn't before.

**[0:28:31.8] AS:** One of the things you said was in another interview is your writing gave you a sense of presence within yourself. Was that the first time you experienced that presence or were you someone who lived in your body more? Did you realize the contrast only after you started writing and felt that presence?

**[0:28:53.8] MT:** I think writing — It has definitely helped me to connect with myself, like to be embodied, because I have what is supposed to be a daily writing practice, not always daily, where sometimes I just write what I feel and not necessarily I feel sick or I feel happy, but actual bodily sensations which is a way for me to just connect. I got to feel the carpet on the soles of my feet and what that feels like.

Writing, because I have so much time now to — Not as much as I'd like, but now that I have time and the creative energy to write, I feel more of a connection to myself in my body in a way that I hadn't before. I think especially during my fitness competition days, I lived a lot in my head. When is my next meal? Is that 5 or 6 meals a day? What am I going to eat next? What time am I going to go to the gym? How long am I going to spend at the gym? Da-da-da-da-da-da-da. All of these head stuff, and that was exhausting.

**[0:30:02.0] AS:** That's what I found with my own journey and that of my clients, they don't even realize that they're not living in their body because this shaming of their body or emotional trauma, whatever, started way back as kids. A lot of my clients are brainiacs. They're super smart, and it sound like you are as well. It's so exhausting up there, but it's familiar.

**[0:30:28.4] MT:** It's very familiar. Yes.

**[0:30:31.4] AS:** I think that's what — It's this weird dynamic where weight loss tells us that life will be easier, will have more resources, more access to power, patriarchal power in terms of attention and, obviously — I don't know, attention, which historically for women has been how they've survived. Clients are always, "Why do I compare myself to other women's bodies?" I'm like, "Because this is the first time in human history," well, since patriarchal religions, "you've had access to your own resources."

Comparing is more like, "Am I going to be okay?" Even though on the surface it's about, "Am I thinner?" More deeply and metaphorically it's about, "Am I going to be safe? Am I going to be chosen?" Even women's — Their parents' property was given over to the man as like a dowry.

**[0:31:18.1] MT:** Yes.

**[0:31:19.0] AS:** That stuff lives in yourselves. Epigenetics is showing us how long trauma lives in cells. I found that weight loss, when people say — What they're really after is, "Oh, I'm going to be safe. It's going to be easier to be confident," but we have to develop that internally, emotionally within ourselves, but that's not an easy cell, like lose 30 pounds in 30 days.

**[0:31:42.5] MT:** No. Exactly. One of the things that you just said about — I think you used the word empowerment or power, weight loss — I have so many thoughts going on in my head right now, that's why I just started writing it down so I can keep it straight.

A couple of things, weight loss is often sold as empowerment, right? It's you will feel confident and empowered and whatever word. The reality is though we're not really empowered. I'd recently wrote a blog post about this too, where we think that — First of all, we kind of don't — Our definition of empowerment is a little off. It doesn't empower us in our community. It doesn't empower us to create change in the world. If it really gave us real power, there would be more — We would have a woman president by now. There would be more women CEOs. We have been consistently attempting to be smaller for generation, and where has it gotten us? That's the real question I think people need to ask. That's not empowerment. It just it isn't.

Yes, I get the whole confidence thing, but I sometimes think we put those two terms together, “I feel confident. I'm empowered,” but, no, we don't really have more power. We don't really have more power, because we are trying to be thinner. It hasn't worked out that way.

**[0:33:08.9] AS:** That's such a good point. Look at the data, it's not —

**[0:33:13.5] MT:** With all of the time and collective money and energy that women have been putting into weight loss, we should be ruling the whole, but that's not the case.

**[0:33:29.0] AS:** You just brought up such a very insightful and laser-sharp, our definition of empowerment is off. As you are speaking I was like, “Oh my God! If we're dependent on anything to make us empowered,” whether that's weight loss, whether that's your bottom line, whether that's the wardrobe, “just by being dependent on it, it has the power, you don't.”

I would love for you to kind of offer a better definition, or like kind of what are we operating under now and what's a better definition?

**[0:33:57.4] MT:** You know who's really good at this is Kelly Diels, and mentioned you had her on the show, and I loved, loved, loved your interview with her and she writes all about the female lifestyle empowerment brand and she talks about empowerment. Right now we're operating

under a situation where empowerment can mean almost anything and absolutely nothing. It's a very fluffy word that is open to a lot of interpretation and often gets us nowhere and is often used to sell you something, right?

Even if they don't use the word empowered in their ads, there is visual. There are visuals that demonstrate what empowerment could be and it's very individualistic, and you're right, your empowerment is contingent upon you buying this thing, right? I think that's what's off.

Empowerment is being able, in my view and what I've learned from Kelly, is empowerment is being able to be self-actualized, to be able to be your full self and self-determined. Also, in that, being able to contribute to society and your community, and so that's the — Not the ultimate goal, but that to me is more what — That's the definition of empowerment that I use now. Not the fluffy term that's used to sell cereal, or soap, or shampoo, or medicated eye drops. I'm going to — I have to say this, because I was looking at a commercial for prescription eye drugs several months ago and they opened it up with all of these like inspirational quotes and images of women and they use the word empowered and I was like, "Oh my God! I wonder what this is." It was medic eye drops. Are you freaking kidding me?

**[0:35:58.0] AS:** You can't make this stuff up.

**[0:36:00.6] MT:** I felt so duped, because it sucked me in. Then when I found out what they were advertising, I was like, "I can't." I just encourage people to really think about the words that are used to sell us things and words that are used to give us the illusion of control and power in our own lives and in our communities.

**[0:36:24.8] AS:** I think because patriarchy is such a beast of a matrix, because women are at the bottom of the pyramid, you think we get praise in our culture for being a martyr. It's like unconscious, but you get recognition if you put everybody first. Even though we're putting — We did an episode about how we're putting certain identities that we like about ourselves, even when it seems like we're not putting ourselves. If we like being the good mom that puts herself last, we are in some way. That's episode with Melody on radical self-care.

Women tend to think that everyone else comes first before they can get self — Put themselves first and prioritize themselves. I think even — This is kind of a tangential conversation, but I have to like let it sip, but did you know that Maslow's hierarchy of needs was basically inspired/ripped off depending on how generous I feel of the day for us the culture of, I think, Black Rock they were called. The pyramid was actually a teepee and the bottom was self-actualization needs to calm first so that we can have fair and just in a great culture.

**[0:37:36.6] MT:** Yeah. I saw that. “Ripped off” was a good term. Yes.

**[0:37:44.5] AS:** Maslow was struggling and then he went and like, “Oh, that’s what white people do. They misappropriate all the time.”

**[0:37:54.6] MT:** Yeah. Absolutely.

**[0:37:56.3] AS:** Let's talk about that a little bit of through the lens, beauty and race being this very thorny conversation, but I want to try to start to have it. Tell me what your thoughts are on all of these.

**[0:38:09.2] MT:** You mean just beauty and race as an idea?

**[0:38:12.9] AS:** Yeah. I guess, also — Yeah, let me back up. One of the things that I thought was interesting is you said, especially recently having this awakening, that we view everything through the lens of whiteness. Even though I'm white, I'm starting to have that like see it more clearly. It's like the fish. We always talk about the fish being in water. I mean I remember being in grad school and learning that the SAT were created by rich white men to test the knowledge they knew and they wanted a bell curve so that like — I remember learning about that and being like, “Holy shit! The SAT is something so —” I mean, obviously, they're profound with education, but they determine who gets into the best schools, who gets all of these as s predicated, a knowledge that was only available to rich, wealthy, white dudes, and they wanted a bell curve. There is not a natural bell curve, right? Again, these power structures are so artificial.

That was when I started to kind of — I don't know, I feel like I awaken every day and I'm by no way enlightened, but I want to hear from you as someone who is African-American and has more of a contrast than I do by all mean.

**[0:39:26.8] AS:** Yeah. Yes, we do view everything through the lens of whiteness, and when I say that — And I think now that — You've mentioned Charlottesville in the beginning. I think a lot of people are waking up after that whole thing, which is great. We do view everything through the lens of whiteness. What I mean by that is white is considered to be American. It's considered to be normal. It's considered to be good and it is considered to be human, and everything other than that is considered other. That's how we see everything. The white perspective or the white imagination is what controls things, and I started to realize that that was the case in diet culture, fitness, wellness, it's the white perspective that is centered all the time.

One of the think is a great simple example, and it's not wellness related, but it's related to just whiteness as the standard, is the idea of nude stockings, or nude bra and color that is. I remember being a little girl and seeing nude stockings and I'm like, "This is not my skin color." Maybe nude is actually like an actual color that is not like in my Crayola crayon box. I was always confused by. Nude was this peachy, and even what we call flesh colored. Flesh colored this is usually described as very peachy-white-pink, never brown. That's what I mean. We assume that everything is — Them norm is white. That's what that whole thing is about.

What does to people who are not white is it sort of erases your existence in a way that you're kind of not real, you're not human, you're not good, and so we see a whole bunch of other evidence that gets portrayed in the media and everything else that reinforce those ideas. Sometimes it's so subtle, you just never notice it and sometimes it's just blatant.

**[0:41:38.6] AS:** I know. I think sometimes the subtleness, like everyone thought racism was over, because they had a black friend. I hat when people say that. We're all waking up. I benefit from racism and I don't even know the depths of it, right? I'm not saying I'm clearly not an expert here, but I'm trying to learn.

Sometimes I think it's the subtleness that is almost more deadly than when it — I'm wondering, in your own, as you kind of realized that beauty is through this white lens, what have you

recognized that you've internalized without knowing it just because we're swimming in whiteness?

**[0:42:18.1] MT:** Swimming in whiteness is so true. I've internalized a lot and some of it I'm still peeling back. A lot of it is around my hair. Right now I wear my hair and it's natural, super curly state, but for the majority of my life I was like dying to have it straightened all the time. I had a relaxer, and even when I didn't have a relaxer, I was always flat ironing it. I was constantly fighting against myself.

One of the awakenings I had was that the same place where I learned to control and tame my body is the same place where I learned to control and tame my hair. The source of that is the same. It's me fighting against myself. It's me fighting against what is naturally occurring, because I am told that as I exist right now it's unacceptable and needs to be changed. That was a big awakening that I had, just like less than a year that those two things are not separate. They are very much connected.

**[0:43:25.5] AS:** Did it feel like at the time like, "No. I just really want my hair straight for me," or did you —

**[0:43:31.0] MT:** It's interesting that you asked that questions. There were times when I thought this can't be it and those are the same words that I said to myself about always dieting, "This can't be all there is," like my constant struggle to make my body smaller. I thought the same thing about my hair, like this constant struggle with my hair not going on in to the rain. It just was so confining and constricting and I felt like I did not belong in this box that was trying to tame me and keep me under control.

With my hair — And I've been wearing it like this for 11 years now, but it was just something that you just. I just thought it was better because I've been taught that it is better, and now that I know is not better. It's just different. Yeah, I did it because it was something that we've always done, had always done, but then there was a little voice inside me that said, "This can't be right."

**[0:44:34.6] AS:** I think that's hopeful and that even though whether it's diet culture or whiteness, even though it's like shoveled down our throats without — I love how you said we've opted in, which means we can opt out. It's like, "Oh my God! That's right. We have a choice." Often, when you've grown up with it, you don't realize that you're opting in, but we all are in big and small ways. We can opt out.

Even though it's everywhere, there's something inside of us that is more true and more soulful that's like, "No. This is wrong, or this doesn't have to be this way." I think that sometimes when I've been really low many of times since November, that's kind of thing that gives me hope despite all the Coke brothers "think tanks" that are saying climate change isn't real and all the right-wing media that has been creating this since the 80s and all these shit. People still want a more progressive, inclusive world and that's why we're seeing this flare up of hatred, because we're making progress.

I know Obama is always talking about the moral arc is long, but it's a longer game than any of us wanted. He's so much of a better person than I am. I'm like, "How does he not lose his cool?"

**[0:45:53.1] MT:** Yeah. I'm totally lost my cool, like lost it. I'm just impatient and want people to get it together now and not wait. Knowing that, I can't give up and speaking out. You just think these incidents, like Charlottesville and every other thing, which is wake people up in an abrupt and fierce way and it doesn't wake up enough people and enough time, for me, but I'm just impatient.

**[0:46:21.5] AS:** I know. Carlos and I were talking about this whole Charlottesville incident, and I come home and I'm always angry right after — I've had to limit my news to like once a day rather than just kind of a stream.

**[0:46:32.3] MT:** Oh, God. Yes.

**[0:46:33.6] AS:** He's like, "Well, maybe this will wake people up, more people up." I'm like, "He's a narcissist. We knew what we were —" I did not elect him and I have yet to say —

**[0:46:43.2] MT:** Yeah, me too.

**[0:46:44.8] AS:** [inaudible 0:46:45.1]. I was like, “He’s a narcissist,” and I mean I had to study personality and human behavior in grad school. Narcissist don’t change. We knew what we were getting, and he said, “Yeah, but maybe the people who weren’t as sensitive to that, like this is so clear message.” I’m like, “He still has a 34% approval rating?” What is not more of a symptom? How more clear can you be?

I do think — Yeah. All right. That’s kind of — I always end up on a Trump tangent. I don’t want to give it more air time. I was always impressed with how Michelle Obama could call things out without naming him.

**[0:47:22.7] MT:** Yes. That’s a skill.

**[0:47:26.9] AS:** Whenever I see pictures of them, I seriously cry, because I feel such a loss for the type of leadership we had and what we’re experiencing right now. I kind of want to circle back to your hair, and the hair, and how was it when you stopped straightening it? Because was their reaction? Did people treat you differently and did you manage that? Kind of how like when people, sometimes if they stop dieting, they gain. How did you manage that?

**[0:47:52.5] MT:** It was a combination of stressful. It felt stressful, but also felt very freeing. It felt confusing. You’re right, there are parallels when you stop dieting. It’s stressful, because you fear some adverse effect and. The fear for my hair was that it wouldn’t look right and people would comment and I would not be able to get a job, all of those things that you’ve learned and hear about. It was stressful, and at the same time it was freeing to not have to straighten my hair just like if you stop dieting. There is a certain freedom at times of not being chained to certain rules about what you should or shouldn’t eat and exercise. It was also confusing, which is another thing that you could draw parallel to when you stop dieting. It was confusing and that I hadn’t really experienced this hair for like 30 years, because it was always in some form — It was always straighten.

It was new to me. Even though it grew out of my head, it was this this new thing, and so it just took time for me to — Time and patience for me to just love it and treat it with a care that it deserves, and I think I am glad that you drew that parallel, because I’ve experienced both of all of those things with my hair and when I stop dieting; the fear, confusion and the freedom of

letting something go that has had such a hold on you in your life and you can just finally just be yourself. That's how felt.

**[0:49:31.7] AS:** Were there any repercussions from it?

**[0:49:34.9] MT:** Not really. Not that I can remember. People make comments about it. I remember my mother used to make comments about my hair. She doesn't anymore, because she knows that's not going to do anything. One time I had a colleague — I don't know if this person was my colleague at the time or if they had been my manager, and I've been wearing my hair like this and she said — And this as like after several months of me wearing my hair like this. She said, "Oh, I was just looking at some old pictures when your hair was straight and you looked so professional." It was her way of saying, "When your hair was straight you look professional, and right now you kind of don't." That was — Yeah, subtle, but not so subtle.

**[0:50:19.2] AS:** It's also, again, where like — That professional looks a certain way, and it's like what does that mean?

**[0:50:28.2] MT:** Meanwhile I'm still doing the same job. I'm doing the job well and nothing in my behavior has changed, but it's just my hair has now made me less professional. That gets to you. When you're told that how you naturally exist is wrong and doesn't — Yeah, it needs to be fixed. That takes a toll on your humanity. It does. It really does. I don't think people recognize that. I think people don't get that when you are told directly or indirectly that you can't wear your hair a certain way or that is against the rules at a job to wear your hair in braids or dreadlocks. The way that your hair naturally comes out of your head is wrong and therefore needs to be fixed. Oftentimes that process of fixing it is very harmful and can be expensive, but the people making the rules don't give a rat's ass about that. It's all about making them feel comfortable.

I think that's a really important piece of this, again, of whiteness. It's making other white people comfortable and it's about us even though we don't know it's about us, and that's why we have to do the work of being more inclusive of — Even I'm redoing my website and I making sure I have different body types, different races on there. I don't know if I would've thought of that a couple years ago, and it matters.

**[0:51:56.0] MT:** It absolutely matters.

**[0:51:58.2] AS:** That's one of the things I wanted to ask you, because I know for as women we can identify how much we haven't been part of history and, yet, if you're a white woman and not a woman of color, what is that like to not see examples of who you are everywhere, basically?

**[0:52:18.3] MT:** Yeah. It's very invalidating. It's invalidating, but it's also a lot of erasure, because we all know that people of different genders and races and abilities have contributed significantly to America, to the world, but we don't see that. We know gets celebrated and who gets centered, and there may be some few exceptions. It feels terrible to be erased or invalidated and to be made to believe that only one type of person is capable of doing great world changing things.

It can, it doesn't always. It can sort of set this way of thinking in your mind that it can be very limiting. That's what I'm trying to say. It can be very limiting. This isn't in the realm of possibility, for me. That's really unfortunate. Fortunately, for me, I haven't internalized that. I feel like I can do anything that I want to in the world, but for a lot of folks it can be very limiting, and not just to black people, but people who are queer, people who are disabled, trends. When you don't see yourself humanized and represented, it feels terrible. I don't think white folks can even imagine that. You can't even imagine that, because everywhere you look, there you are.

**[0:53:45.6] AS:** Yeah, I remember I interned in New York City in 2000, I think, and the subway I took, I got on and I was the only white person for like five stops and I was like, "Oh my God!" That was the only time that has ever happened to me in my entire life. I was like, "Oh my God! This is what it's like for minorities all the time," and they're comfortable around us. I was just like, "Oh my God! I think it's kind of an evolutionary thing where you just want to be around the same people and then you overlay — Not that not the same people. I don't mean that. It's tribal, but then you overlay the cultural conditioning you've been taught about people who are different than you. It's like, "Oh my God!" I was like, "I'm the only white person." I was like, "This is so new and different," but black people, Hispanic people, disabled people all the time. That is mentally exhausting.

**[0:54:38.9] MT:** It is, and I can only speak from the perspective of being a black woman and I remember in pharmacy school I was the only black person in a class of like a hundred. It was in my organic chemistry class, and I went to a very white pharmacy school. As a black person you just become accustomed to being in white spaces and we're taught the language of whiteness. It's incorporated into our learning, like we're taught how to navigate white spaces and how to behave. It just becomes normal. I sat and I noticed it, but I couldn't do anything about it. This is what it is. This is what the world. Often times white people have no idea what that feels like on a regular basis.

**[0:55:33.4] AS:** I think for white people listening who struggle with their weight and they feel like they have to always manage that, right? Imagine that times like a million?

**[0:55:43.9] MT:** Yes.

**[0:55:44.5] AS:** You're the math person. Organic chem, but you know [inaudible 0:55:49.6].

**[0:55:52.3] MT:** I don't like to — I'm not trying to compare oppressions, because the reality is we all — It's stuff. None of us should feel or be oppressed simply because of our body. The body that we're in, but imagine when you have all of these intersections, if you were a fat black friend's woman and — That is — I have no experience with that obviously, but we have to think about people who fit that into that category. People who are so far, pushed so far out into the margins. It's easier for a fat white woman to access resources and other valuable things than it is for a fat black friend's woman to do that. That's just a reality. I think people need to recognize that.

**[0:56:47.8] AS:** Oh my God! We have so much more to talk about, and I know you have to wrap up soon here, right?

**[0:56:52.2] MT:** Yes.

**[0:56:53.3] AS:** Can I ask you one more question about your challenge — First, I wanted to ask you, how can we make people of color more comfortable in white spaces? It seems like a tangible, but want to ask you part of your qualms with body positivity, because I agree with you

that on those qualms of body positive, because it's another standard that we're then just — I want to hear your thoughts on that. Do you have time for both?

**[0:57:16.3] MT:** Yeah, the body positivity thing. I think it needs an overhaul. I've talked about that for a while. I think it needs an overhaul because it has gotten into the mainstream, and the reality is when anything gets to the mainstream it becomes diluted and sometimes pretty useless. Body positivity has become a place where white women are centered. Young-ish conventionally attractive with fat in the right places, so basically people who aren't like model thin, but not really fat or would be considered a small fat.

Body positivity really centers those individuals, and I think body positivity was born out fat positivity or the fat acceptance movement, which is like 40+ year old movement. It has very radical roots, and I think for the most part body positivity is not very radicals. That's one thing about body positivity. The other thing is bo-pos spaces, body positive spaces and leader —

**[0:58:17.1] AS:** What's bo-pos?

**[0:58:17.8] MT:** That's the shortness. That's how —

**[0:58:19.8] AS:** The hash tag?

**[0:58:20.8] MT:** Yeah, bopo, B-O-P-O, body spaces. Many body positive spaces and leaders tend to ignore political issues. They think that body positivity is only about you, the person, loving your fat roles and whatever. Yes, it is that, but it is a very political thing and I think it's important to recognize that racism and disability discrimination, those are all body oppressions and we need to incorporate them into body positive discussions.

Also, center people who aren't already part of the dominant narrative. When I go and look at body positive stuff and how I see our 30-year-old hourglass-shaped blond white women, pretty white women, what is that doing for me? Nothing.

**[0:59:11.8] AS:** I love that.

**[0:59:14.8] MT:** Nothing. That's one thing.

**[0:59:16.5] AS:** Or for changing the conversation.

**[0:59:19.5] MT:** It's not changing the — Yes. That's exactly right. It's not changing the conversation. It's keeping it the same for the most part. It was like a slight deviation, and that's as far as people want to go and I want people to go farther. I know there are steps that people have to go through. That's fine, but we got to get there faster. We have to talk about these serious issues that affect all people, not just the chosen few.

**[0:59:49.6] AS:** That's why I'm so frustrated with the — Not all, but a lot of the health coaching and the self-help world is they focus on self-limiting beliefs. We all came up with how to hate ourselves, uniquely and individually on our own. I get that we have to take responsibility and we can do that through understanding oppression and the systems and the culture. That's why love that you are talking about this, because since the election I've just been talking so much more about it, that cultural conditioning totally influences.

I was reading the New York Times article about a study with monkeys. Monkeys who are given more resources, like more grooming, more food. They're dominant and their receptors, there dopamine receptors — They have more dopamine receptors, which means they don't crave food or drugs as much, versus monkeys that are then become subservient. They have less dopamine receptors, which means they need more food and n more drugs to reach the same level of satiation. Power structures influence our health down to the physiological level.

**[1:00:55.9] MT:** Of course. Yes.

**[1:00:56.8] AS:** Yet it's all in our head.

**[1:00:56.8] MT:** Yes. I know. I just completely cringe when I see that, because we have to acknowledge that our culture, our environment, our connections with other people absolutely impact the way that we think about the world, the way we think about ourselves. It impacts our behavior. We are not completely independent. We're very interdependent and we have to acknowledge that. When people are just like — I totally agree about taking personal

responsibility, because I think that's part of your autonomy and being self-actualized, absolutely, but to lay the blame solely on me and like my limited beliefs about stuff is not completely fair and it's not a reality. It rings hollow for people who out into the world and face actual real live barriers to living their lives and being prosperous and successful and having access to resources.

**[1:02:01.2] AS:** I've actually found in my programs, Truce With Food and the fall program, I talk about cultural conditioning and I've actually found when people can see it, they have a lot more compassion for themselves and they heal more quickly, because they're like, "Oh! This is not me." It's what I've opted into to use your language, and now I can opt out of it now that I know what's happening.

**[1:02:21.5] MT:** Because you let go of the shame of — You can let go of the shame and blame of, "Oh my God! I've created this whole miserable thing in my head and now I've got to figure out how to get out of it."

Then because you don't address the actual real outside barriers, you tend to continue to just fight against yourself and it just is like this — Yeah. That's exactly what happens. You have to let go. When you recognize the cultural influences, it allows you to let go of the shame that comes with thinking that I'm just this awful bad person who has created this little cage for myself and I can't get out of it.

**[1:02:57.4] AS:** Great point. I just realized by asking you, I think fucked up by asking you how we can make people of color more comfortable. Aren't I asking you to kind of do the work that I need to figure out myself?

**[1:03:09.0] MT:** Yes. I think I don't even know if that's the right question, and I'm by no means an expert. I think white people need to do is just figure — You got to do your own individual work. You just do. There's a ton of resources on the internet and in real life to be able to do that.

I think one of the things that I have seen, white people get confused, maybe not confused, but it easy for white folks to get into white savior your mode, like, "Oh! It's my job to now save all

these people,” and that sort of takes away other people's sovereignty and denies our humanity as well.

**[1:03:55.4] AS:** Also, I wrote for Thrive, which is Arianna's Huffington's new piece. They asked me to write a piece after the election about how to deal with uncertainty, and I was like, “We need to pay attention to Black Life Matters, the people at Standing Rock.” You guys have been doing this stuff forever. We have no idea. We just need to take a backseat, because I think that was one of the things just to kind of — It talked about seeing the world through whiteness. I think it was Christian Fabian who is a writer on — and Facebook. He wrote about, after the election, the type of deep love that African-Americans, that native Americans, how as groups continue to stand up for love and justice in the face of horrible, horrible atrocities. It made me think about white love, meaning like kind of Anglo-Saxon. I'm kind of waspy. We used to laugh — My family is half Jewish, but how like the wasps are kind of cold love.

Even how we define love is often in America a very cold type of love. I was like, “Oh my God! What are we doing? We just need to be quiet and let people who have been doing this take the lead?” I think that's what white people, we don't need to be saviors. We actually have to be — I'm trying to think of something snappy, like not saviors, but follower. I don't know. I don't know. We're new to this game is my point.

**[1:05:12.9] MT:** Yes. I think it's important to, like I said, do the self-work but also the work with your fellow white friends and family. That is so critical, because then it takes the burden off of people who are already marginalized by whiteness to then have to make you comfortable and educate you, that's exhausting, and the people want it for free.

**[1:05:41.1] AS:** That's kind of patriarchy, right? We're at the top. That's like people get everything for free. I'm like — Or famous people, I should say, rich and famous. I'm like, “What? They're the people who can pay for it.”

**[1:05:52.4] MT:** They do. Yep, exactly.

**[1:05:53.7] AS:** Melissa, thank you so much. We're going to have to have you back. There are so many more questions I wanted to ask. How can people find more about your work? I just got

to tell everyone, when I wound up Melissa's site, it was like body justice, and I just felt like, "Yes! This is what we need." How can people find out about you and follow you?

**[1:06:09.6] MT:** Yes. I'm at [melissatoler.com](http://melissatoler.com), where all of my blog posts are and information about me and a little bit about my story. I'm also all over social media, which sometimes is not a good thing. I'm Facebook as Melissa Toler, and on twitter and Instagram, and my handle on both is @melissadtoler.

**[1:06:33.6] AS:** Toler is one with L, everybody.

**[1:06:35.3] MT:** Yes. Toler.

**[1:06:37.5] AS:** We will of course have links to Melissa in the show notes at [alishapiro.com/podcast](http://alishapiro.com/podcast). Thank you so much, Melissa.

**[1:06:44.8] MT:** Thank you.

**[1:06:45.2] AS:** Excited to support more of your work.

**[1:06:47.8] MT:** Yeah. This was awesome. Thank you, Ali.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[1:06:54.2] AS:** Have questions or reactions about the episode? Reach out to me on Instagram and Twitter @alimshapiro, or Facebook at [facebook.com/alimarieshapiro](https://facebook.com/alimarieshapiro). If you love this show, please leave an iTunes review and tell one friend this week about how to get the Insatiable Podcast on their phone.

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