

Radical Healing: Relearn self-care for deeper healing

Insatiable Season 6, Episode 3

[0:00:00.9] AS: Hello everybody. I just wanted to put a trigger warning on today's episode. We will be talking about sexual abuse, sexual violence. For those of you who have been affected by it, I wanted to put this warning on there so you could decide or not it's appropriate for you to listen. Consider this the trigger warning and we'll proceed with today's episode.

[INTRO]

[0:00:31.4] AS: When you're fed up with fighting food and your body, join us here. I'm Ali Shapiro, creator of the Truce with Food® program and your host for Insatiable; where we explore the hidden aspects of fighting our food, our weight and our bodies and dive deep into efficient science and true whole health.

Fair warning, this is not your parents' healthcare. This is a big rebel yell to those who crave meaning, hunger for truth and whose lust for life is truly insatiable. Believe me, freedom awaits.

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:01:09.8] AS: Welcome everybody to Season 6 of Insatiable. Our season theme is Radical Healing and what's possible when we get to the cause of what ails us. As I've been saying in other episodes, we're using activist Angela Davis's definition of radical to pull things out at the root.

When we can do that, we can heal. We heal when we're in choice, not when everything goes our way. We're going to explore how to get to the root of our stories and what radical healing changes in our lives. Before we get to today's guest, who has been on my bucket list to get her back on the Insatiable Podcast, I first want to invite you all to my 2019 Truce with Food Program. This program runs once a year and it's a personalized online coaching experience to create lasting food freedom.

We focus on rewriting your story so that you can be the author of it, because your story is what causes you to fall on and off track with your eating. We're just going to transform it. This program is only open once a year so I hope you join me come January. When registration opens, you can join the wait list at alishapiro.com/trucewithfood_2019.

Okay, so on today's episode; radical healing comes in many forms on many different journeys. One such path of healing is to advocate and support the healing of others. In today's episode, Radical Healing: Relearn self-care for deeper healing. I invited Tashmica Torok to share her inspirational story of transforming her personal trauma into activism and advocacy to end child sexual abuse and support the healing of children and families.

Tashmica will explore the root of healing challenges for sexual abuse survivors, how creating The Firecracker Foundation supported in facilitating her healing journey and how resilience can have a shadow side. For example, wearing ourselves out and how to relearn self-care again and again takes us into deeper levels of healing.

Before we get to question Tashmica, I want to tell you a little bit more about her. She is a nationally recognized survivor activist working to end child sex abuse. She is a powerhouse fundraiser and movement maker who has raised thousands of dollars and countless volunteer hours in support of her work. As the executive director of The

Firecracker Foundation, she incites riots of generosity and advocates for the healing of children and families every day.

The growth of this innovative organization has inspired a move into a larger space for all programs; mental health therapy, trauma-sensitive yoga, caretaker support groups and crisis intervention will be hosted under the same roof. Tashmica is also a published storyteller, kitchen witch and a nearly retired roller derby skater. She's also the mother of three boys, wife to a talented tile installer and a behind-the-scenes volunteer.

Thank you so much for being here today, Tashmica.

[0:04:13.4] TT: Thank you for inviting me. I'm so excited to be something checked off on your bucket list.

[0:04:19.2] AS: You are. You were on The Transition to a Career in Wellness podcast and I was like – I mean, I've admired your work forever and I was like, "I need to talk to her more, because she has done the work to heal." I think you show us at our best when we rewrite our story. We can basically take the pain and turn it into something really useful. Thanks for being here and being you and having a good story to tell.

[0:04:45.1] TT: Yeah. I have lots of stories to tell.

[0:04:49.6] AS: Well, let's start with that. Tell us a little bit about your story, how you ended up I guess, here today through the lens of being sexually abused as a child yourself.

[0:05:00.3] TT: Well, I am a survivor of child sexual abuse. My father was my perpetrator between the ages of 6 and 8. I often just simply say that I'm a survivor, but what really happened to me is I was serially raped during that time period and I

actually don't remember when the abuse started. I only know that my father passed away and that's when it ended. That's a really stark way to tell a story, but sometimes I feel our language doesn't really – when we say sexual assault, it doesn't really give us the full picture of what's actually happening to children in the world.

It can be a generalization. People can take that and imagine all sorts of things from around what that means. I just want to be clear that that's what happened to me, for the sake of myself and for the sake of anybody who's listening, so that there's a sense of solidarity when we tell our full stories in this world.

After he passed away, I spent about a year reflecting on what it would mean to tell what had happened to me and really just being very fearful, being really scared that my father whose reputation was really one that was respected when he passed away was really on my shoulders. I had this story. I felt at the time that I was the only one who knew my father in the way that I did as an abuser and I just wasn't – I was really scared about what that would mean to tell my family that he wasn't the person that they thought he was. That he was someone who hurt me for several years and changed the way I thought about myself, my body. Of course, I wasn't aware of all this when I was eight or nine-years-old, but I think now about all the ways it changed the way that I thought about myself, my body, my religion, my spirituality and my relationship to other people.

I disclosed about a year after he passed away. I shared with my mom that he had been abusing me and I think the words that I used when I told her as I just said that – Actually no. What happened is I had a teacher who brought in an educator to talk to us about what abuse is and he asked me to raise my hand. Everybody put your head down and if you've experienced this abuse, raise your hand. I was like a listen fool. Ain't nobody doing that.

Everybody knows that someone is looking during an altar call. I'm not doing that. I waited for him to leave and then I told my teacher. My teacher helped me tell my mother. I told my teacher that my father – I think I said my that my dad hurt me. She said to me, "I believe you. It happened to me and it's going to be okay." I still at 38-years-old, believe that those words were transformational for me and really set the stage for me to see the way that I had been hurt in a way that was not about isolation, but was about community.

I told my mother. My mother believed me right away. After that, it became a – just became my life of healing really. It started pretty much from there. I didn't see a traditional therapist until I was probably 30, but I was believed right away, and I never felt I had to hide what happened to me, which I think is really important about the way that I grew up.

I was never blamed. It was never a secret. It was never something that I was chastised for if I brought it up. It was actually the opposite. It wasn't something that was celebrated for sure, but it was something where I could talk about it. I had the freedom to talk about it based on my capacity. No one ever forced me to talk about it either.

Down the road, I at 30-years-old went to therapy for something completely unrelated and I mentioned to my therapist that I had this experience. I told her that I fell off my bike. I really didn't say it in a way that was this sense of gravity. I was like, "Oh, yeah. When I was a kid, my dad molested me," and then on to the next topic, right? I remember she was like, "Maybe we talk about that a little more."

It's just how I had compartmentalized it as something that happened. It wasn't something that I needed to deal with and I didn't have the understanding how it was impacting, or how it could have been impacting other areas of my life. She pulled out a book during one of our sessions. For the first time in my life, she showed me what

the definition of sexual abuse could be. What could happen, what are all the things that could be included in a child's experience of sexual abuse? Then on the next page, and both of these were in a little graphic form. On the next page was what are the consequences of what she called several times untreated child sexual trauma, which is what I had – what my experience was.

For the first time, I was – I first of all knew that what had happened to me was very severe. I didn't have that lens before. I thought that my idea of sexual assault, or sexual violence was really rooted in lifetime movies, which I think is really interesting because it tells you how old I am, that I would sit with my mother and watch all these lifetime movies.

In honesty, I thought survivors were people who someone jumped out of the bush a stranger probably, sometimes it was a guy you knew rape you, maybe beat you up and then there's a TV montage that we were all – if were like me and watched these movies growing up, they were all very used to, right? There's a scene where she cries in the shower. I'm not minimizing that this could be a very real experience, but there's definitely a way that sexual violence is portrayed in movies and TV. There's definitely a certain survivor who is centered.

I mean, it's usually a white woman, sometimes a college person, whether they're an athlete or academic, but they're usually a college co-ed of some sort. They go to court, they call the police, they go through that process. Then in some way, justice is handed out, whether they get justice or they don't get justice in the frame of what they wanted. It's negotiable. Then at the end, there's some uplifting thing comes from it.

For me, that's what a survivor looks like. A survivor isn't – until I saw *The Color Purple*, or until I saw *Lady Sings the Blues* about Billie Holiday, or *Women of Brewster Place*. Until I saw these movies based on books written by black women, I didn't really know that the majority of survivors are actually experiencing things like I experienced.

It was really the first time that I was like, "Oh, so child sexual abuse is severe, or can be severe, does have a long-term effect on our life," which I learned also that the consequences, right? Some of the consequences that I was dealing with in my life could have been, and in that moment, I didn't know for sure, but could have been tied to the fact that I had experienced this trauma.

I went home and I started googling what happens to people who experience untreated sexual trauma? I found all these statistics on rape, assault, incest in National Network. It was all these statistics about people who are more likely to have addictions, or have disordered eating, or practice self-harm, or be incarcerated before they turn 18. To be honest, I used to look at it – when I first started looking at it, I was in so much pain going through this therapeutic process that I was like, "Okay, but you know what? This is really hard and it sucks, but I don't have an addiction." For me it was like, "Okay, we're going to get through this."

This time period felt like rolling on a cheese grater, but at least at minimum, I didn't have an eating disorder. I did certainly have some disordered eating, which I'm sure that we'll talk about a little bit, but never to the extent of having an eating disorder. That's what I did at first. Then I realized that there are all these people, there are all these humans that are out here in the world who have experienced sexual abuse that are living this experience, are having all of these negative impacts on their lives and I just started wondering why don't we get this information? Why didn't someone between the ages of 9 and 18 when I was a kid, tell me that this was a lifelong situation, that trauma could impact me my whole life.

With that information have changed the way that I healed, and that I thought about myself, and then I thought about what my future could look like. All of that turned into me creating [The Firecracker Foundation](#), which is really my effort to make sure that families understand sexual trauma as a long-term situation. That the impact can

manifest developmentally for children. The way that children look at trauma when it happens, versus when they're 10 or 11, or 12 or 13, or 15 or 16 look different, or when they start dating, or when they get a job and have people who are not family members in charge of them. There's all these things that happen in our lives that really do impact the way we view ourselves, in the way that our trauma shows up in our life. Here we are now five years later and that's what I'm doing today.

[0:14:49.0] AS: Wow. Thank you so much for sharing.

[0:14:51.6] TT: That was a lot. If anybody tuned out, that's a long story, but that's my whole story.

[0:14:57.2] AS: No. You said so many things that I want to circle back. First of all, I love your point about we have to name what it is, right? Not sugarcoat it, or say sexual abuse. It was rape, right? Those are hard words to say. If we don't name it, we can't really address it.

[0:15:18.4] TT: Yeah. I actually sometimes talk about an undiagnosed disease, because honestly, complex PTSD when you're 30 and you find out you have complex PTSD, that is an undiagnosed condition, that I had been living with since I was probably 9 or earlier, if we're really being honest. I had no idea, because no one told me. To be fair, I also say that this was 1988-89. It was the age pre-Oprah. Oprah was just stepping on the scene.

I really do mark time with when Oprah and talk shows started really talking about these things in a thoughtful way, in a way where we were really digging into these questions. This was before then. I lived in a fairly – at the time, we were pretty religious household. I think in some ways, they did the – not in some ways. I really feel my mother, after my father passed away, really did the best that she could and she created all of this space for me to talk about these things, but really we just didn't have

the information about how this trauma could show up in our lives, or show up in my life.

I can't say our life too, because this show – this trauma shows up in my mother's life, it impacts my siblings. I think that we just don't – at that time and even now, we don't really talk about the tentacles of what sexual trauma and sexual violence looks like in our families and in our communities.

[0:16:53.9] AS: Yeah. I agree with you that okay, at that time we didn't talk about it. If people like you don't start stepping forward and naming it, we will continue not to talk about it, right? There's a reason that it's not talked about.

[0:17:08.5] TT: Yeah. Also, I think it's more about we don't even – we don't have the capacity at this point to create safe environments for people to come forward. I think for me, that's more what it's about. I think for me, my father was that. Most people who are survivors of child sexual abuse don't have the luck of having their perpetrator drop dead on them. That's a very unique privilege and I recognize that.

I can be here telling my story all day every day and I don't have to fear any retribution. I don't have to fear its impacts on a legal case. A lot of survivors can't tell their story in full, because their story is in some legal proceeding, or has been. If their story changes ever so slightly, that could impact their legal situation.

I think in some ways, the way that our system has been created to hold perpetrators accountable also really silences survivors, because not every survivor wants their perpetrator to go to jail either. There are many survivors who will wait until the statute of limitations has been passed before they start speaking.

There's lots of little nuances around why people speak up and why they don't, but I really believe a lot of it has to do with, we first of all don't believe people anyway

when they first come forward and we don't really create environments where – that really encourage people to come forward, just as a community practice.

[0:18:41.9] AS: Oh, my God. I mean, if 2018 taught us anything, right? Between Michigan State, which you worked with some of Dr. Larry Nassar's victims, didn't you? Because you're in Michigan, am I correct?

[0:18:53.6] TT: We are in Michigan and we have been – we're basically in this area, but I can't really talk about who our clients are and things like that.

[0:19:02.2] AS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, that's again, I don't want you to breach any confidentiality.

[0:19:08.5] TT: Yes, we are in the community where Larry Nassar lived and perpetrated on over 250 people.

[0:19:16.5] AS: Yeah. Then we just last month had the Kavanaugh hearings, where the Dr. Christine Blasey Ford who – Dr. Anita Hill, who by the way everyone has a doctorate from Yale, but the media doesn't say Dr. Anita Hill, because the media is what it is. Dr. Anita Hill had set a precedent and we thought we would have made some progress. Then you saw what happened. Again, it's not just because the verdict didn't go her way. I mean, we know tons of women started running for office and everything. We saw Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testify and was not believed clearly. Or that the version was, "Oh, we believe you, but you don't remember properly, which is we don't believe you," right?

[0:19:59.7] TT: Right. Semantics for sure.

[0:20:02.2] AS: Yeah. I think to your point about we don't create the conditions for people to even come forward. As you're talking to, I'm also thinking about how we

define justice in this culture, right? Who gets to decide? To your point about some survivors don't want their abuser to go to jail, or whatnot. Where do you think justice – what role do you think justice plays in the healing of how people who have been sexually abused move forward?

[0:20:29.6] TT: I think it's very individual. I also think that justice is a small piece, because first of all, justice is like the word 'love', or the word 'forgiveness'. It means something different to all of us. I don't care if you're using a biblical definition, or if you're using Webster's definition. We do not love each other the same, we do not – we don't forgive each other the same and we don't seek justice the same way. We all do those things very differently and there's a lot of nuance in the ways that we want those things.

I think for some people, justice can look like you call the police, the person who harmed you is arrested, they go to court and they go to jail. For some people, that will be what they want and that'll be the end of it. For other people, justice can look like accountability. For someone who harmed you to say, "Yes, I did that thing. Here is why I did that thing, or what my thinking was and why I thought that way. I am sorry and here are the things that I will do to make sure that I never do that to you, or anyone else again."

That doesn't necessarily need to involve the justice system, or it can. Both of those things can happen at the same time, or before after these things happen. I think it just really depends. I know that there's also situations where if we're justice in the way that we think about it in this country with the criminal justice system, there are people who are undocumented who are being assaulted that will never come forward, or because their family members are undocumented. If they come forward, there is a chance that they're intermingling with the state could impact their family member's ability to stay in this country and they're not going to risk that.

And/or the person who harmed them is undocumented. Even though they don't want to be hurt anymore, they also don't necessarily want to see that person be sent out of the country to a place where they might be harmed. Because one thing that is true for most children is they're trying to avoid violence and hurt for everyone else, in the way that they manage their abuse.

We always have to think about how – when we tell people what may happen next, or when people have an understanding on what might happen next and what might happen next is violence or is going to cause some harm or fracture to the family, then that also doesn't create an environment for children that welcomes them coming forward.

I'm always wondering, like I wonder what would happen if we had a system of healing for people who do harm and we told children that their person who is hurting them would go get healed. How would that land? I think about myself. If I had thought that my dad, because what he would tell me is that he – if I told, mom would hate him and the whole family that would be broken up and everything would be ruined, it would be my fault.

I just think about what if someone had told me that that wasn't true and that my dad would actually go get help so he wouldn't hurt me anymore? How would that feel differently to me, than my family being split up and what I have been more likely to come forward? I think probably, because that just feels different.

[0:23:47.8] AS: Yeah. That's so radical to say, "Wait, let's look at the abusers themselves, in addition to the victims," right? And what would it take for them to be healed. I mean, that's – you probably know the Bible better than I do, but that seems a biblical, like judge the sin, not the sinner type of hardcore forgiveness and empathy and compassion.

[0:24:13.7] TT: Well again, I don't even know that. When I'm thinking about justice too, I'm thinking about restorative justice and I'm thinking about transformative justice. Restorative justice is just focused on the harm done. It's like you hurt me, I don't want you to do that anymore, here's what I need to repair the harm.

Transformative justice looks more the overall, like what are the causes and conditions in the world that contributed to this being a problem? I feel it can include forgiveness, it can include empathy and compassion, or it doesn't have to. It really depends on what the survivor wants and needs from this situation, or to repair the harm that's been done. I'm very new in my understanding of both of those things and I'm sure someone will correct me, or post the real definition.

[0:25:04.5] AS: No, they won't.

[0:25:07.5] TT: When I think about how we respond, I think what I'm really saying is I am 38-years-old. I have been a survivor for, let's just say 32 years. I'm exhausted of the burden of fixing sexual violence being placed on the shoulders of the people who have been harmed, when they – specifically when we create environments where it is not safe for them to come forward.

If we don't start approaching sexual violence as a problem that stems from the people who are doing the harm, then we will never resolve it. Because by the time clients come to me, it's happened. It's already happened. I want to focus on their healing and I want to be able to be supportive of their healing, but there's this whole other thing that's happening out in the world that is more about people hurting the people who are coming to me. I would love to see as a culture, as a community in the United States and globally really looking at why are perpetrators here? Why is this harm being perpetuated? Why does it keep happening and why don't we have – why don't we have a system to fix that? Why don't we have a system in place that

addresses what is a national crisis, that does not stem or focus on survivors as a solution?

Survivors are survivors because someone heard us. At that point, we can't do it – there's nothing survivors can do to prevent sexual violence, right? We can't do anything about it. It's already happened. I just don't understand why we're not looking at what can we do nationally to end sexual violence from the perspective of stopping people from doing it. What do we need to do? I just don't see that nationally and that's really what I want to see.

[0:27:07.9] AS: I love that, because I didn't realize that even in that question, I'm putting the burden on the survivor. Unintentionally, right? That's what we do is we put the burden on the survivor to figure it out, by coming forward or whatnot. Yeah, what are the causes and conditions? I love root cause resolution. What have you discovered, so in your five years of The Firecracker Foundation and of course, your own therapy and experience?

[0:27:37.4] TT: Well I mean, I've discovered so many things. I've learned so much in the past five years. A lot of it is what you already know. It's rape culture, it's toxic masculinity, it's white supremacy, it is rooted in our ancestral traumas. We know that rape has been used to torture Native people, African-American people, Black people, the enslaved people. We know that rape has been used as a war crime across the globe.

We know that rape is a tool that has been used against women. If we know that that is a tool that has been used because of all of those things, right? Because of white supremacy, because of toxic masculinity, then we have a lens. We actually have the answer. We know what the problem is, so then we can start working to remove those things as we are raising the next generation of human beings.

We know that we can remove whiteness as the goal of human beings, right? As what is right in this world. We know that we can start talking about toxic masculinity and dismantling it for the next generation. These are actual things that we can do through so many different systems across the country if we're proactive about thinking about those things and how those things lead men in particular, from believing that women's bodies are theirs, or that it's the tool to punish, or torture trans people, right? Or it's a tool to separate communities, or to show someone that they don't have any value.

There was a report that just came out that there have been over 500 law enforcement officers and they've been accused of sexual assault. It's not a report that we hear very often, because obviously, power and privilege. We also have to think about how these things – how rape is showing up in our institution, because people who are in mental health facilities, people who are incarcerated, are being sexually assaulted.

We don't often talk about those things. That it's not the boogeyman. It's a show of power and it is a tool that has been used to make sure that people who do not have value, feel that worthlessness since the beginning of time.

[0:30:09.2] AS: I'm so glad you named that, because it is – we're swimming in it, right? Like fish in this water. Until we can name it and realize, "Oh, my God. These are the roots of it," we're just going to keep trying to not going to solve the problem, right? We're just going to continue with more abuse. I feel it's still going to be the assembly line of trying to fix things, rather than go upstream and find the root causes.

I'm glad that you said – because again, this is new territory for me. I'm not super familiar with sexual trauma, or whatnot. I have read that it is about power. It's not about sex, it's about power. Can you define power for people, so they understand? Because I think there's all different definitions to your point of we all define things differently.

[0:30:53.0] TT: Yeah. I don't even know how I would define power. I think sometimes it's about power, but sometimes it is also about sex.

[0:31:01.4] AS: Okay, so it's both. Yeah, correct me please.

[0:31:03.7] TT: Yeah. No, no, no. It's not necessarily even – I think it can be about both things. We have heard so much about in selves that are trying to show they're obviously trying to take power back, but it's also about sex, right? That women are taking sex away from them in some way, some really unreasonable thinking. Again, trying to take ownership over a body that is not their own.

[0:31:28.2] AS: If you're in a culture that defines sex as power and that you're entitled to it, right? It's like, "Oh." Then you're giving sex that meaning, rather than it could be something beautiful, but you're using it in that context, in toxic masculinity cultures.

[0:31:42.7] TT: Right. When I think about my boys, I have three sons and I think about what it means to teach children that love, that sex, really that there's nothing in this world of value that can be taken, right? There's nothing that you can't take love, you can't take sex and have it be the same thing as a consensual relationship. You can't demand forgiveness, you cannot force people to be accountable for their behavior.

I think it's really important to draw those distinctions, especially for young men because we live in a culture where it's like if you want it, take it, go get it. You can just go get it. Well you can't. You can't just go get anything. You can work towards things and earn things. You can ask for things and someone can give you something, but you can't take something and have it have that same value as something that you have earned, or someone has given you. Or something that is consensual.

I think that's a really important distinction that we don't – again culturally, we are taught that we can just go out and get it, right? I think that we have to start talking

about when we're unpacking all of these things, whether it's toxic masculinity, or white supremacy, or homophobia, or transphobia or any of these things, we can't force people to do things that we want them to do with their bodies. We can try, but it will just be pain and torture. No one will be living in their wholeness, which is what we should be watching from the world.

[0:33:18.9] AS: That is such a beautiful point. I just wrote that down, like nothing of value can be taken. You have to cultivate the magic and the beauty of what you want, rather than really taking it. That's such a great point. I love your point – You basically said it does come down to power and I define power as choices. Who has choices? Who doesn't?

The body, you just ended there on the body. I want to talk about what you've learned is necessary for the body, because in your story it sounded like, "Okay, this thing happened to me. I compartmentalized it and put it away," but the body remembers, right? I think it's van der Kolk, his book *The Body Keeps the Score*. I think that's such a great title. What have you learned and implemented in The Firecracker Foundation is so important for the body and that the nervous system, the memory within the body?

[0:34:14.1] TT: Well, I think there's so much about the body that we're still learning about and still understanding. I think the first thing that I would say is that at The Firecracker Foundation, we all often say and we are a survivor-led, survivor-focused organization. I think the way that we talk about our bodies and the way that we talk about healing our bodies also follows that model.

We practice yoga with our youth. The yoga that we practice is a consent-based practice, where we offer postures and we offer options, but no one is forced to do anything in the yoga sessions. I like to tell the story of having youth, or children who come into yoga class and lay down and roll up in a blanket or a yoga mat like a little burrito and that's their yoga practice for the day. We'll have people who will be

confused by that, whether it's parents, or therapists, or practitioners who are like, "But they're not doing yoga."

We really stand on the fact that if they come into class as a survivor of sexual violence who has had their body disrespected and their consent ignored, then them walking into that class and saying, "Today, I would like to choose to do this with my body," and have an adult respect it is yoga. It is exactly what we want them to be doing.

We watch and we wait for them to decide to make a different choice. Oftentimes, they do. I think the first thing we do is listen to what survivors want and need and then respect it and go from there and really trust that survivors know what they need to heal. We're just here as a conduit. We are the copper wiring. We just conduct the what travels into that, like how does that healing happen?

Obviously, we conduct the donations, right? We conduct the practitioners. We conduct the learnings. We're always learning these things and evaluating and changing things based on what we feel survivors are telling us, and that's how we – that's one way that we do work within thinking about the body.

[0:36:35.3] AS: I love that, because I think what's very nuanced and tricky, because we're all in a toxic masculinity culture is that when you push people, that's patriarchy, right? When you're pushing people, you're saying, "I don't trust your process. Here's what you do." By letting people lead their own healing – and I love this, because in my work with Truce with Food, it's all about rewriting your story. It so mirrors what you're talking about. Everyone's rewriting their story and embodying a new one is so different. There's not a formula for it. The obstacle is the path, right? You got to develop the self-trust to do that.

What you're saying is we believe survivors are resilient and can do this for themselves. We just have to create the space. That's hard. That's a lot harder than it sounds, right?

Because it's easier to push and say, "No, you need to do these moves, or these twists or whatever the pose is."

[0:37:33.1] TT: Right. I think we can't fool ourselves into thinking that survivors haven't been doing this work on their own since the beginning of time, right? There's no way that black women could be who they were during the civil rights movement if they haven't been practicing their own healing traditions without the names that we give them now, right? There's no way that native women could exist without practicing some form of healing after all of the trauma they endured.

I think one of our problems that we have in this culture as we like to believe that until science says it's evidence-based, that it's not real and that we need to – of course, there's value in studying things, of course there's value in evaluating things. We practice those things as well, but I think we practice it from the perspective of humility noting that we are not creating something new here. Providing space where people are safe and centered and loved and seen in it of itself is healing.

Yes, do we provide therapy that is evidence-based? Absolutely. Do we use best practices in terms of advocacy? Sure. We also think about things, like what does it feel to be in our space. Do we have snacks? What happens when someone comes in? How does it feel to be here? Some people would say that that's trauma-informed practices, but some of us maybe would just say that it's called being thoughtful and treating people of hospitality, and treating them not as clients but as community members that are a part of a collective. That healing, like being someone who is healing and being someone who is a healer is actually on the same plane.

I'm not here as a healed person, or as a healer. I'm someone who practices both healing and being a healer. I think that sometimes we forget when it comes to people who have experienced trauma, or even people who have mental health issues that they can be the architects of their own healing path, and that we can come alongside

them and support that not from them being in the valley and us being at the top of the mountain, but us both being in different spaces all the time, that we're both on that plane. I think that's super important for all practitioners to recognize.

I would have a serious problem with anyone who was like, "Well, I'm healed. Let me tell you the six things you need to do in order to get healed." We can't do that. It looks different for everybody.

[0:40:18.4] AS: What you're doing there – Again, you have been so intentional with the design and I just so – as someone who's very intentional with the design of my programs to make sure that people feel they're the expert and I'm just the guide on the side. I just so appreciate that, because what you're doing is collapsing the hierarchy of white supremacy and patriarchy and even capitalism, right? Because that idea that men are more valued than women, or that white people are more valued than people of color, or that the rich are more – the ownership class are more valued than the workers, right?

I mean, that is – it's a complex hierarchy, but we believe in that, right? This is why we have experts and in the healthcare is the way that it is. Even science. As you were talking about that, I am totally – I love a good science study and the rest of them however, the deeper I get into this, the more I realize how science has its own biases here in the west, right? First of all, the body is broken, because what I was hearing you say is that these survivors aren't broken. They don't need to be fixed. We just need to help them create a space where they can come back to wholeness.

I think because we are a victim-blaming culture, so many of our systems build in this. It's not survivor-led, whether it's sexual abuse, or I don't know, cancer, right? It's all pharmaceutical-led or whatever. It's like, "No. We know best up here," right? Science looks at the body as a liability, like something – That's my whole master's thesis was on

war on cancer, war on sexual abuse. It's like, "Okay, we're fighting the very problem that we've created."

[0:41:58.1] TT: Yeah. Also, my body did exactly what it was supposed to do to protect me. I think that's the other thing that we don't remember about what it means to have PTSD, right? The reason my body and my brain compartmentalized what happened to me was because my body and my brain physically could not handle it. In order for me to survive, my body had to do some things, had to tweak some things, so that I could get through that period of time as whole as I am now.

Now my process and what I believe my process is really communicating to my body that it's okay to unfurl yourself, right? You were not safe, so it makes sense to me that you have difficulty sleeping at night, because nighttime is not a safe time for you. That makes sense to me that you would have a better version, right?

There are little things in my body and in the way that I interact with the world that have been tweaked in an effort from my brain and my body to protect myself. Shaming people for doing neurologically what their body is supposed to do through instinct and through fucking brilliance, actually. It's so wrong. It's the wrong way to look at it. It's more an invitation of you are safe now.

What's hard about that is that no one knows more than someone who has experienced something traumatic. I mean, it can be anything. It can be a shooting, it can be domestic violence, it can be a fire, it can be being robbed. No one knows more than someone who has experienced trauma that this world isn't safe, and that we cannot lie to ourselves than it is, but that we do have to live in it as if it is safe in order to feel a certain level of comfort.

In all reality, survivors are the ones who know what the fuck is going on, you know what I mean? We know that shit ain't safe and the world is trying to convince us that it

is and that we're wrong for being hyper-vigilant. We're like, "No, no, no. Not only do we know it, but we experienced it and so you don't need to lie to us." My brain is not a fool. My brain is completely aware of what this world is like.

There is a strange hierarchy that happens and we know better because we can exist in this world feeling things are safe. Well, good for you, but that's actually not the reality of the world that we live in. I find that that and that is a part of how western medicine, or the medical industrial complex wants to convince us that we're wrong and they're right. When I think, most therapists will tell you that, or anybody who understands how our brain functions in response to trauma will tell you that our bodies know exactly what the hell to do.

[0:44:58.0] AS: Yeah, I'm so glad. I'm laughing, because when we first moved to Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh has such a cancer history because of how the steel industry left things here, because corporations externalize their costs onto the public all the time. We upgraded from a Brita to this Berkey water filter. It's not even expensive. I mean, it was an investment at first, but in the long run it's cheaper than all this other stuff.

I did it because I know – I mean, I was diagnosed with cancer. I know the environment was a huge reason I got cancer. I get this Berkey water filter and I'm like, "Carlos, I want to get this." He's like, "Oh, no." He's like, "If we're starting down this path at 36." He's like, "I know where we're going to end up in my 30." I was like, "I can't help it. I know too much." He's like, "Sometimes thinks ignorance is bliss." I'm like, "No, I do too. Once you pull back the curtain, you can't – you see that there's a little man back there that wants dollar bills, dollar bills."

[0:46:03.2] TT: Yes. Yeah, no there's no way to not know. I think that that in some ways is better. I always tell people I would choose to know, rather than to live in ignorance. At least then, I can operate with some sense of knowledge. I just would rather know. I

feel there's so much in this world that we – that people intentionally keep from us and we deserve that information in order to just live full lives.

[0:46:36.6] AS: Yeah, and so no one opens the trap door on you without knowing it.

[0:46:39.6] TT: Yes. Yes. I would like to see all the levers, please. I want to see where the trap doors are.

[0:46:48.0] AS: Then you know. Then you have more contrast too. I love how you said with The Firecracker Foundation, it's about safety. In this case, physical and emotional safety, because that was just so beautiful what you said, then your body can unfurl, right? Do what it needs to complete to get returned to wholeness again and again and again. I love that you're so mindful of that and you get it again, the design.

I think, for so many people listening, I think oftentimes I just want you to start paying attention to how things are delivered and how things are worded and fostered, because the design of something really informs whether someone's trusting you to be your own expert, or if they're just trying to – and again, I think people are a lot – a lot of people are well-intentioned, but it doesn't develop self-trust to just be given formulas, or follow the 3 steps to mindfulness or whatnot. You have to find your own path, right? That's the goal of healing. I mean, at least that's been my experience with myself and my clients.

[0:47:50.0] TT: I feel like if you never flex those muscles too, they atrophy. I think for one of the things when I think about when I first started going to therapy and healing, I had to do a lot of reflection on choices that I was making that were based on what other people wanted me to do, because I didn't flex those muscles. I didn't think about my needs before anybody else. I was thinking about survival and what would happen if I made a choice that someone didn't approve of, because I spent so much of my life navigating how my father was feeling and what might happen, what might happen if

I did this one thing. Does that mean I'm going to get abused later, or you know what I mean?

Children, humans in general who have been abused are really good at playing this double Dutch in their lives, where they're constantly double Dutch, you have a rhythm, right? You're always like, "I'm going in, I'm going out, I'm going in." You have to get the rhythm with the ropes before you decide when you're going to jump in. We're always navigating that and always gauging the weather around this.

Of course, this is not every survivor's experience. I know so many survivors that feel that practicing, sitting with yourself and knowing what you need which of course goes towards the work that you're doing with Insatiable is about how do we know what we need to eat, to drink? How do we know what it means to feel full?

I think for survivors, we spend so much of our time just trying to survive that we don't always know what is going to feel good in our bodies. We don't get an opportunity to practice that. When we're in a healing relationship with someone, whether it's a therapist or a yoga instructor, there needs to be that space where things are offered and we have a moment to think about like, "Wow, this posture feels really good. How long do I want to stay in it?" You know what I mean? "Or am I not ready for this posture, because this posture feel really vulnerable and I don't like the way this feels. Maybe I can do it like this."

I think that healing can be approached in that same way, where survivors are offered an opportunity to really feel into what does it look like to say yes and what does it look like to say no and can we survive saying no? That's a real question, because so many survivors are like, "Can I say no? What will happen? Is that a trapdoor if I say no? Will people still love me? Will people still value me? Will they listen to me if I have boundaries around where I end and another person begins?" I think that's very real.

[0:50:30.4] AS: Oh, yeah. You said it in a very beautiful way. Am I allowed to say no? Is it safe to say no? You know your stuff so much. I want to circle back and then, I know that we have to wrap up, but one of the things that you were mentioning about is does this feel good and my body does it not? I think that's something that's tricky probably for survivors is because a lot of survivors develop a lot of resilience, right? That resilience and that pushing gets them gets them a lot of stuff, not just surviving, but we live in a culture that rewards pushing yourself beyond your limits.

How have you relearn self-care, as the executive director, the founder, a survivor, how have you had to see almost the shadow side of your resilience and what have – how would you have defined self-care in the beginning of starting The Firecracker Foundation and where are you now five years in, so that you can have deeper and deeper levels of healing?

[0:51:30.0] TT: Yeah. Well I mean, I think we have to talk about the time that I called you crying. Because I was like, I'm so tired and was just like everything is falling apart. It's not everything. No, it's just me. Everything else is being held together, but I am completely falling apart because I'm – it vacillates. There are days when – right now, I'm feeling really good. I am really tracking my schedule, so that if I work late, I don't work early. Being really aware of what I'm giving up. What is that energy exchange that the foundation is getting from me, versus my family, versus myself?

I just picked up – I just started taking cello lessons. I've always wanted to. Yeah, I've always wanted to my whole life. Not my whole life. Probably since middle school, but we couldn't afford the rental. Now I understand why we couldn't afford the rental, because that shit it was expensive between the lessons. As a gift to myself that's not work-related.

Yeah. I mean, I think it's hard. It's a hard line, because on the flipside of that, what I'm not doing as great, as great as, or as well as I'm doing right now in my self-care

practice – I mean, I can go, I can work forever and I have to really think about first of all, I can work forever because I love my work. I don't love that children are abused, but I love the healing that we do. I love that we are able to be in this position and that I feel very privileged as a woman of color to be a founder of an organization that can offer these kinds of services. That's remarkable to me. I don't even understand how it came to be some days. I don't even know.

[0:53:21.2] AS: I know. Come on. You're gifted and you're hilarious. Follow her on Instagram, people. I'm telling you.

[0:53:30.4] TT: Yeah, definitely follow me at Instagram. Then the other side of that is like, I can work forever because that's in some ways where I learn to find value in myself, because no one could argue – when people talk about how do you spot signs of child sexual abuse, I always get concerned for the overachievers, because people will tell you, “Oh, they won't get good grades, or they'll have an addiction, or they'll self-harm, or they're moody,” which basically describes most teens, right? Okay, so you describe humans.

[0:54:06.6] AS: From the ages of 13 to 18.

[0:54:08.9] TT: Right. Okay. Well, got it. That literally doesn't help parents figure that stuff out. The other side of that is I was getting great grades, I was a cheerleader, everyone, I was very popular, I had lots of friends. I was someone who would talk to everyone at my school. There's always cliques, but I had skater friends and drama club friends, I was in choir. I just really moved through the world very open, and also spent my time drinking in Mexico, right?

I had a very full, complex problematic youth, but also was dealing with a lot of trauma that was very internalized. I couldn't talk about those times when my friends were talking about sex and I had to pretend like I didn't know what they were talking about.

Or when I first started dating and I didn't know what – did I even want someone touching me at all? Or is this just the normal thing to do because I'm a teenager? How were those signs going to show up for anybody?

Getting good grades is never on a chart that says – or overachieving is never on a chart that says how to spot child sexual abuse, you know what I mean? I think that I constantly have to have a conversation with myself around like, are you doing this because it needs to be done, or are you doing this right now because you are surfing on both adrenaline and what it feels like to be valued by other people?

[0:55:37.5] AS: That's such a good question.

[0:55:38.1] TT: It's I have to ask it all the time, because there is a part of me that proved my goodness after my father passed away by being good at things, by being seen, by being visibly active and involved in things that were important, or that I felt were important. All of that can still be true. I still am that same person. I am still a person who wants to be about liberation and wants to be about good works in this world and during my lifetime. I also am a person who deserves rest, right? I deserve to learn how to play the cello really poorly.

I am a person who deserves to garden and to be a kitchen witch and make things and on a Sunday afternoon and not respond to all of the messages that I'm getting on a daily basis, which I don't know how anybody gets famous, because I get so many messages every day and I don't even know how to live, how to even respond to all of them. That is a very important question and I think that when I'm thinking about what I call a militant self-care, I'm thinking about how I would like to do this work for as long as I want to do this work and I won't be able to do it if I don't take care of myself.

[0:56:53.5] AS: I love when we connected though, because your doctor wanted to put you on meds because you were having heart palpitations and all this stuff. Again, I

think it's that tricky line. I think your rebellious spirit which was probably born from that outsider view, right? Of being a survivor was like, there's got to be a different way. You've reversed a lot of health issues on your own, haven't you?

[0:57:16.9] TT: Yeah. No, I haven't. My heart palpitations went away.

[0:57:21.3] AS: Yay.

[0:57:22.9] TT: Yeah, yeah. What I'm really learning about myself – well okay, first of all, this is not new information. I've always known this about myself. Like come on. I'm an all-or-nothing person and I think we talked about that too, right? This process is not all or nothing, it's a slow process. I've literally just been keeping notes in my journal of my goals. My goals are very simple. Right now, I think my goal is to drink more water. I think, it actually it's like, drink more water than last week. It's not even seven glasses a day, or whatever how people say. It's literally like, "Okay, last week I had my water bottle with me all week and I have a sense of how much tea –" you know what I mean? How much wine I'm actually getting in my body.

[0:58:08.3] AS: I love it.

[0:58:09.2] TT: Just being attentive to like, "Okay, well drink more this week." For me, it's a big deal if I'm – by the way, I'm still drinking smoothies every morning. That's my –

[0:58:18.1] AS: Oh, good. You learn to balance your blood sugar, which help the palpitations.

[0:58:22.1] TT: Right. Yes. Not drink coffee for 12 hours a day, that also helps. Who needs a pill for them? I sat with my doctor like, no one needs a pill that you told not to drink coffee all day. Then making sure that I'm getting protein in the morning. For me, again, my goals are very simple. I want to make sure I eat, that's it. I want to eat every

meal and it doesn't have to be a big meal. I know what I need in the morning. I've done better at lunch, but I'm not being hard on myself. I'm just like, "No, all or nothing." Just be all in and being attentive to slowly improving and making sure that your body is at least, at minimum being – getting nutrients, at a basic level. Let's make sure you're actually getting food into your body.

From that of course, based on the work that we've done together, or that you shared with me, I'm definitely eating healthier things. I think that another thing that survivors of trauma tend to be is extremists. We're very extreme when it comes to how we think things are supposed to be and we can be really hard on ourselves.

For me, just being like, no, you're just going to eat. Until we feel confident that we're not going to not eat, we're going to keep that real simple. Then in a couple of weeks when I feel confident that I've prioritize eating for a good period of time, then I will decide that okay, so I'm going to eat this way. Right now, eating is the whole and sleeping; going to bed at 10:00 versus at midnight and not working all night.

I definitely think that it's a process. I think that it's a careful process of again, listening to ourselves and really just unfurling, just being like, where can I take up space? Because that's the other thing that not only as a woman, but as a Black woman, we don't think that we have the right to take up space. I think that that's another thing that I have to approach with some wisdom around like, "Yeah, I can take up space. I should take up a lot of space."

[1:00:29.7] AS: Yes, yes.

[1:00:30.6] TT: In my schedule and in my personal life and just in the way that I'm moving through the world, like I deserve space. I think that that's something that I've been really reflecting on too.

[1:00:40.6] AS: I love that. I think what you're describing Tashmica checked my Freedom from Cravings program is it's very gradual. Even with your sleep working on that, I think that's also healing for survivors of any trauma to realize that you can go slow and steady and get results, that it doesn't have to be again, I think the design of going slow and steady which you're brilliantly doing.

I love how you're even using your own benchmarks, right? I remember in the Weight Watchers cards like, eight glasses today and you're like, "Wait a second. For me right now, the process itself can be healing, if I just focus on more than last week," which is how it's done. I think that's brilliant, trusting our own unfurling. I love that you gave us that concept. Thank you. So good.

[1:01:24.0] TT: You're welcome. Especially not about somebody's else's benchmark because I mean, sometimes too I'm – like you said, I have a rebellious spirit. If someone tells me I have to do something, I am definitely not going to do it. If I choose to do it, that's actually why Weight Watchers and any type of program that's bossy pants is not going to work for me, because as soon as I feel that tension of being told that I have to do something a certain way, my whole body goes into a temper tantrum and is like, "Nope."

[1:01:56.7] AS: I'm that way too. A lot of my clients are – I mean, I know from an adult learning perspective, adults hate their autonomy being taken away, like any adult. That's what we do to people all that we infantilize them all the time.

[1:02:09.1] TT: Yeah. Then they're like, "Track your food and tell me how many points." Who has the time for that? Get out of here. Nobody is doing that. Listen, if I am sitting here trying to convince myself just to eat three meals a day, I'm not telling you what I ate. I don't have time for that. Not my points, right? I can tell you I had a roast beef sandwich, that's all the information you're getting me out of.

[1:02:35.7] AS: It has been so wonderful having you here Tashmica. Is there anything that I didn't ask that you think is important to share before we find out how we can support The Firecracker Foundation and follow you on Instagram?

[1:02:48.5] TT: Yeah. I think, one thing that's really hard about this work especially right now and I feel it a lot for individual survivors is just trying to find safe space. I would just want to say that if you are someone who is working through these issues and you are struggling with your partner, or your community, or your church, that there is safe space out there. It may take a little time and intentionality to find the humans that you need to surround yourself with, but I think you were right earlier Ali, 2018, really since 2016, we've really seen a resurgence of this victim blaming congress. Not even resurgence. I mean, who are we kidding? It happens all the time.

I think what has become really clear in Lansing, in my community, is that we really do have to carve out a space for survivors to really be validated and seen and for them to heal. That's not just for children. That's for adults too. I think that I would encourage people to try to find that space, because it is really valuable.

[1:04:01.1] AS: I love that. I love that. Trust your instincts, right? Because I think sometimes we don't, but trust your instincts if a space is safe or not and do a little research ahead of time, and make sure it's survivor-led, which is why that's part of – I mean, there are many reasons I want to have you on, but I love that you have – that survivors leading, because you guys know best. It's like, why don't we just take all the group wisdom, that hard-earned wisdom and experience and put that to the greater good? I love the work you're doing. Where can people find more about you? I love the name, The Firecracker Foundation.

[1:04:37.8] TT: Yeah. We're at thefirecrackerfoundation.org. That's where you can find information about us on our website. We're also on Instagram @TheFirecrackerFoundation and then on Twitter, we're FirecrackerFDN. Then you can

just follow me on [Instagram @Tashmica](#). I'm one of those lucky human beings that not a lot of people have that name. I have a Facebook page that's Tashmica Torok.

[1:05:04.3] AS: Wonderful. We'll have all the links to find Tashmica on in the show notes at [alishapiro.com\podcast](#). Tashmica, thank you so much for being here. I hope we seize this collective moment and do something differently and take a look at and let [The Firecracker Foundation](#) take the lead, so that we don't have to have this happen again in 30 years and say, "What's happening here?" We will know making progress. Thank you so much for being here and your work and rewriting your story.

[1:05:35.7] TT: Well, thank you. Thank you for having me. I really enjoyed our conversation, Ali.

[1:05:39.6] AS: Great. Me too. I learned so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[1:05:44.8] AS: Thank you, health rebels for tuning in today. Have a reaction, question, or want the transcript from today's episode? Find me at [alishapiro.com](#). I'd love if you [leave a review on Apple Podcast](#) and tell your friends and family about Insatiable. It helps us grow our community and share a new way of approaching health and our bodies.

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