

Jerry: Hey, Erine, how are you?

Erine Gray: I'm good Jerry. How are you?

Jerry: Good, good. Hey, before we get started, why don't you take a minute and just introduce yourself.

Erine Gray: Uh, so I'm Erine Gray. I'm the founder of Aunt Bertha, which is a nationwide search and referral platform for connecting people in need with available government and charitable programs. Um, live in Austin, Texas, and, uh, excited to be here and talk.

Jerry: Well, that's great. And, you know, we'll note for the record that we've actually met each other, uh, once before courtesy of Techstars. And then, uh, and that was a couple of years ago and we also have a number of friends in common. Um, so the stars aligned for us to have this conversation. Um, tell me what would be helpful to have conversation about today? What would be helpful to you as a CEO, as a founder?

Erine Gray: You know, when I filled out your survey, I think things have evolved a little bit. And some, one of the things that I've been thinking about, um, is, you know, you hear a lot of platitudes about trusting your gut. Um, and for me, um, I spent a lot of years resisting my gut because I would place the ex- I would value the experience of others over my own. I've struggled, trusting my gut.

And, um, because in some cases, I guess the more responsibilities that I've been having with a larger organization, um, there, there's very articulate and well-reasoned people that, um, argue the case for the complete opposite of what my gut is telling me. Um, and I don't always have the confidence to trust my gut. I don't know that I always do. Um, and I'm tortured by it actually. Um, and so part of it is what I've been thinking a lot about lately is how much of it is trusting your gut, uh, you know, and you take it even a higher, getting deep really quick, but you take it at a very higher level. And, and that is, you know, how much of that is faith, um, because there's, you know, when you're in a conversation with somebody very experienced, very, um, successful, very articulate, um, you can't, for me, I can't help, but question whether or not my gut is right. And I would, I would just almost assume that I must be missing something because they seem to have their lives more together than I do. Um, and it's in that nexus, which I think, uh, that I struggle with. But, um, I'm interested in, in that, in that conversation.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So what I'm hearing is that it's this lack of self confidence. These are my words, not yours and lack of confidence in trusting your own self, your inner knowing, and that, um, I note that you said you feel tortured by that. And I imagine that means it shows up for you kind of constantly, is that fair?

Erine Gray: Yes. It shows up more often now that there's higher stakes. So we're now 154 person company. Um, we've established a, a market that didn't exist. We were the first, we essentially created it. And with a lot more attention, a lot more smart people looking at it, I would say the frequency of that conversation only goes up. So I think as the organization is growing, um, the, uh, this, this, this conflict presents itself more often, I would say.

Jerry: So as the stakes get higher.

Erine Gray: Yes.

Jerry: The conflict, it comes up more frequently. And one of the stakes that are higher is the fact that you have 140 employees right now. Um, let me bring your attention to something you said early on in describing Aunt Bertha, which is that, "we help people in need." And, you know, I'll be honest. This is not an open, honest question. I'm about to ask because I have a, an opinion about the answer and that is, um, what's happening to the people in need right now?

Erine Gray: There's, they're getting their lives are turned upside down right now. They are, um, I mean, their lives were in a hard position before this, this happened. Uh, in normal circumstances when life would happen, when someone gets sick, they'd lose a job or something like that, it was already complicated. The cards were stacked against them. And now for the paycheck to paycheck population, uh, their paychecks are gone and they're getting obliterated by everything that's happening right now. It's, uh, it's rough out there for people that are struggling. Um, and the population of people that fall into that category is growing. I'm not, definitely not an economist, but I do have an undergraduate degree in economics. And, uh, I'm very interested in my, in macro economics. And when you look at those numbers, um, and a lack of savings amongst that population, um, there's a fundamental shift in the way, their ways of lives, all of our ways of life right now. Um, they're scared. They're overwhelmed. Um, there's, it's just, uh, it's earth shattering.

Jerry: Oh, we're going to hang out with that feeling for a minute and we'll circle back. I promise we'll circle back to this question of trusting your gut. Yeah. I'm just watching your face right now. There's some deep feeling going on here. Let's take a note that this is the middle of June, 2020. And we are several months into the pandemic. And the economic implications of the pandemic, a lockdown. And, um, we're several months into what is arguably the longest and most prolonged period of unemployment since the great depression.

Jerry: What I hear is that there is, so the stakes are higher not only because the company is larger, the stakes are higher because the need is higher. The need is larger. So we're going to acknowledge the reality of the work that you're doing. And talk about going back and finding that sense of inner knowing, being able to lead from there. And I want to bring your attention to something else you said. And if I paraphrase this incorrectly, correct me. You were describing the situations where it's more difficult for you to say "push back" on what somebody is suggesting. It could be a board member. It could be another employee. It could be somebody outside the organization. I'm imagining this is true. Can you use the phrase you said when others have it seemed to "have it together." Did that, do you remember that? Is that, did I remember that correctly?

Erine Gray: I think so. Yeah.

Jerry: So tell me about that. Tell me about that moment. When someone that seems to have it together starts to assert something, what happens to Erine?

Erine Gray: With people I don't know, there is a, an assumption of they know more about the world or they, they understand at a higher level, uh, on the subject matter. And I almost bring to the conversation that, um, you know, I know less. And when I say seem to have it together, (laughs) um, I feel like the poor kid that grew up in a poor small town again, and I think that's that feeling is, is there. And I, I get the benefits of that and I love that kid, but there's still a little bit of, of a, um, uh, thinking that, you know, maybe I'm an outsider in this world of business or, um, um, whatever the case may be. Um, that's, that, that is still with me and probably will always be with me. And then when I say seem to have it together, maybe they're (laughs) get the haircut more consistently, which is another story. Um, but, um, maybe can find maybe they can find the right words for me that I struggle, struggle with and sort of, maybe I'm a little bit more emotional about something and, you know, they just can battle their emotions with a little bit more rigor.

Um, and I think there's just a feeling of being on two different levels that happens, um, as a, you know, as, as somebody with my background that, um, is in this world of, of people that are, seem to be a little bit more at home in this world of, of business than I do.

Jerry: 'Cause you just shared a lot. Can you reflect back when I'm hearing. But first I'll just note that every time we talked about those other people, you raised your left hand to a certain level or your right hand. And then you, when you talked about yourself, you put your left hand below to talk about yourself, that gave me a visual representation of you always being below. And then as you were sort of ending some of that, you looked across the screen and you looked at me and with that same, uh, right hand you pointed at me. As if, as if I'm one of those people who has it together and maybe even above you. Does that feel familiar?

Erine Gray: Yeah, I think so. And I, and I think I can talk about that openly, you know, I mean, a published author, successful coach the, these are the things that go through my head, you know, maybe a little nervous.

Jerry: Mess, a guy kinda just making shit up. As he goes along. A guy, who's got a Crow in his shoulder telling him what a terrible job he's doing in this conversation.

Erine Gray: (laughs) That's all. And that's why, what I love though, is what I get to know people better, that thing goes away. Uh, um-

Jerry: Yeah, but your first impulse is to actually put yourself lower than.

Erine Gray: Oh, absolutely.

Jerry: Right. And, um, and I heard you recognize that child inside of you, and I heard you also give some love and shout out to that child. Um, and, um, without really knowing your story, um, you carry forth the experience that you had growing up poor. And, uh, and

that experience, I'm imagining, still lives with inside of you. It's never really far from you. Am I hearing that right?

Erine Gray: Yeah. It's defined me in a lot of ways. And, um, it's motivated me. Uh, I've got a big underdog sort of mentality that I latch onto quite a bit. Um, and there's, there's days when I love that kid when like street smart. Um, no, no bullshit. Uh, just, you know, just get, just tell me what's going on really. Like, you know, um, and there's other days where, um, it doesn't serve me where, um, I, uh, I'm not in an underdog situation anymore, you know, we're the market leader in our space. Um, and in those cases, um, you know, that, that doesn't serve me as well. And I'm thinking about this more and more lately. Um, I mean, I can share how that kid, um, defined the work.

Um, I wouldn't be doing the work that I'm doing, uh, had it not been growing up, um, and seeing, you know, disparities and, um, and feeling the dig- the lack of dignity in the, in the United States, social safety net, um, seeing what my mom went through, seeing what, um, just what happens, you know, the judgment in experiencing that. Um, and so I'm, uh, I think, uh, I'm motivated to fix that part of things. Um, um, uh, and I, I think I have a pretty darn good understanding of why it's broken. Um, and I think with, uh, I think I'm a good voice for, for, for those kids that are out there. Um, and that comes through, I hope. Uh, but boy, like anything there's still that, like you said, that bird on your shoulder that is saying, (laughs) you know, you're, you're, uh, you're making things up, you know, what do you know, all that stuff still happens? Um-

Jerry: Yeah, I hear that. And, uh, you know, I'll just reflect back, uh, you know, I really appreciate the way you're, you're wise enough and self aware enough to see the somewhat perhaps obvious, but important connection between your experiences as a kid and the choices that you've made now as an adult, as an entrepreneur, right. You've dedicated yourself to those people in need. And your exp- and what I'm hearing is that it's funny, you used the word underdog. And when I was a kid, there was that cartoon called Underdog. Um, um, if you remember it, it was hysterical and, uh, he was a superhero. And so your superhero is Underdog, right. And Underdog flies to the rescue of those people. And, and I hear that and, and you know what it's like to be poor, you know what it's like to be food insecure. And we'll acknowledge that in this moment in time. And I don't have the statistics handy, but food insecurity for a vast majority of Americans right now is increasing again in 2020, after two decades of global poverty declining, malnourishment declining in the United States with some of the most advanced systems and the most advanced economy ever created the gap is widening.

But I'll bring your attention to a phrase you use. You said, I know the judgement, the folks in need feel. Name that for me, what, what is the judgment? What, what do we, you, they experience?

Erine Gray: I'll share a story. Um, my mom, um, she, she, uh, ha probably had, uh, some undiagnosed mental illness, um, and, uh, she had trouble controlling her emotions and, uh, during those periods, she would get mad at my dad and they'd split up. And during those times, we were on food stamps, uh, for a period of time. And I remember going to Tops Friendly Markets, which was a grocery store near our house. And I don't remember when it was, but it was sometime in elementary school. And I noticed that judgment,

um, while she pulled out the food stamps, uh, and was paying in the line. And I remember, um, maybe it was, maybe it was elementary school and maybe I was worried about, you know, other students seeing that, or maybe feeling the judgment.

Um, and then I remember not wanting to go to the grocery store with her anymore. And, um, and that was a divide, I guess, that I just remember that at how that made me feel and the fact that that happened, uh, at a young age and, and in a small town, everybody knows everybody's business. That's just the way life works. And, um, there's, it just, I don't know what to say. It's just accepted.

And so-

Jerry: What's accepted?

Erine Gray: Judging people that can't afford stuff, it is ubiquitous, um, in our culture. And, um, it's not something that a kid can control and I, and I think it beats you down after a while. Um, and I'll share one other story. Um, and, and, and again, I say this with I'm fortunate that I was no doubt loved by my parents. And, um, my dad was a saint in, in many ways. Um, but, uh, when my mom got sick, um, she, uh, she had her best job. She was a janitor, um, at Jamestown community college, and she had full benefits. She worked nights, and she would, um, take a couple of classes each semester at the community college. Um, so, um, but then she got sick and, um, her brain disease, uh, ate up better memory and she was disabled afterwards and she's permanently disabled because of this disease.

But I was a senior in high school and I had a crooked teeth. I had these two teeth here kind of looked like fangs. And, um, I remember hearing somebody call me fangs, um, group of friends and, you know, and I got very self conscious about my teeth. And, um, after she got back from the hospital and my dad they're back together, my dad took care of her. And, uh, and then I realized by looking at her book or her insurance company's book, that it covered braces. Um, but you know, I was a high school senior. I didn't ask my parents to help because they wouldn't know how to navigate. And so I literally went to the community college, talk to one of the HR people and realize, and I had a job at Wendy's. I was flipping burgers at Wendy's literally, that was my job for two years. And then I found an orthodontist and I explained the situation and I brought in an insurance form every month and he didn't charge me an upfront cost. And I gave him \$70 and the insurance form every month and I got braces. Um, and, um, and, you know, I guess I learned that people make judgements.

Um, then, and I think I also learned that there's, I guess people should be able to self navigate. Eh, I know it's easy to paint the picture now, 25 years, 30 years later, whatever the, whatever it is. Um, but these two stories, I think, remind me of, of the things that happen. And, um, and I, it's unfair. I mean, why I'm different, you know, why I figured out how to navigate had a lot to do with my older sister going to college and proving that you can pay your way through college. Um, uh, mom and dad who were, who were just emotionally supportive through that. Um, but those feelings of judgment and, you know, and, and how unfair that is, uh, is crystal clear to this day.

Jerry: We can hate the poor can't we? As a society.

Erine Gray: You know, I've been thinking a lot about why people do, and especially now, you know, given everything that's happening and it's easy to talk about a whole population or a whole section of the economy. Um, but again, like anything, you talk to an individual person and you learn their story. Why, why, why is somebody poor? Well, everybody has a story. You know.

Jerry: It's been 400 years our ancestors spent 400 years in slavery.

Erine Gray: There's something really, really, really, really screwed up happening. And I, uh, um, on those attitudes towards the poor. I hope there's a major reckoning happening right now of what we all value, uh, as a society, COVID, you know, the, um, protests, but, um, I want to do my part on that.

Jerry: It feels like the façade is cracking to me at least. And it feels like, um, the darker underbelly of our natures being revealed and, um, uh, let me be clear being revealed in, inescapable ways, because the truth is the darker nature has always been there and folks have always experienced it. It's just not actually been so present in the faces of the collective and on camera and on camera.

Erine Gray: Yeah.

Jerry: I mean, the truth is, um, I know food insecurity. I know that shame. I know, and it was confusing for me because I would conflate the shame of our financial situation with the shame of my mother's mental illness. Because all I knew in those moments was I want it to just disappear and hide and not be seen. And I want to steer clear of broad based generalizations that could lead to false equivalencies. Each of us experiences, um, injustice differently. And those of us, um, I identify as white. As difficult as it may have been. I am cognizant of the advantages that that gave me. Um, and what I see before me is a man who stays connected to his most painful experiences so that he may be a service to others, which, um, in my book is the basis of compassion.

You know, in your notes to me, you referenced faith. And even in our conversation here, you referenced faith. And then at one point you referenced God. Um, do you identify with a religious tradition?

Erine Gray: I grew up a Baptist going to a Baptist church up North, um, and which was more, not as conservative as Southern Baptist. Um, it was a big part of our life growing up. My, um, we, we would always go to church. Um, um, even in the parts where my parents were split up, it was something to do. I'm from a big family. There's, um, [inaudible] there was seven kids total, but I, I didn't like it. (laughs) Um, uh, I, again, I did feel some of the judgment, um, uh, um, side of things-

Jerry: In the church itself.

Erine Gray: In the church itself, yeah. Let me just take a step back. I started, um, journaling in college, um, uh, inconsistently at first. Um, and usually it ended up journaling just when everything hit the fan, you know, breakups, you know, whatever the case may be.

Jerry: [inaudible] done that. (laughs)

Erine Gray: Uh, and then probably, uh, eight, nine years ago, I started doing it more consistently. So from about four years ago, I, I decided, um, my mom got me a Bible, uh, when I, when I went off to college and, uh, she wrote something in there and yeah, happy my birthday was in August. And I went off to college a couple of days later. Um, you know, she said, "stay close to Jesus and you'll always be happy." And at the time I, you know, I just was, I didn't get it. Um, so I found that, and, um, I opened up, I started reading the New Testament as an adult, um, and I, you know, I was going to journal and then I was going to read the new Testament and it took me a good, I guess, a year or so, but I read just one chapter at a time after my journal journaling session. And the new Testament is, uh, a wonderful, beautiful thing.

I've been thinking about that more, is that what is faith? Faith is stepping, taking that step when all you have is that gut feeling, which had to come from something beyond you, um, and faith is not explaining it. That's why it is what it is. There's no logical explanation for it. That doesn't mean do stupid things, but that means understanding that there's certain moments that you just have to be willing to take whatever consequences are there. And I found myself right around the time rereading the new Testament and just cognizant and thinking about that a lot more. Um, and it's liberating sometimes.

Jerry: Hmm. So through my questions, I kind of take taking you on a little bit of a journey back, and I'm hearing the role of your faith in your life. And, um, if we go back to the core question, which is the inability to trust your gut, the inability to stand up to, or stand up for people in need and to people who seem to have it together, and perhaps from a leadership perspective, the inability to assert what you know, not intellectually, but at the gut level, at the soul level, at the, uh, the seat of your soul, the solar plexus. Here's another phrase that occurs to me. What you're talking about is a loss of faith, moments of a loss of faith. And I'm going to share how I approach those things, not as a prescription, because I think one of the challenges, one of the, uh, one of the challenges of this kind of, uh, uh, construct in which you were, you were taught at a very, very early age, that you were less than, you were lower than.

And you're wise enough to know that there's a correlation between that message that you received repeatedly, that message that we continue to receive repeatedly, to know that it exacerbates the loss of faith, the inability to trust oneself. And so I offer this because in this moment, there's an opportunity if I offer it not as a prescription, because if I were to offer it as a prescription, it might feed that part of you that says you are less than me. And I want you to understand something. We are equal. No matter what story you tell yourself, no matter what you project onto me, God bless you. I appreciate it. But I am just as broken. And I struggle just as much.

And if I were to tell you what you should do, it might inadvertently reinforce that position that you are less than me. That's why I'm taking such great pains to say what I'm about to say. So here's how I grappled with that. I listened to that voice. I don't shut it down. The voice that tells me, I don't know what I'm doing. The voice that wants to internalize all the judgment that I perceived others had having and made it a part and parcel of my being. And I say to that voice, thanks a lot, but I don't actually need you anymore. I understand that you're trying to keep me safe from the pain that I felt when I was 10 but I'm not 10 anymore. And in my best days, which are not every day, but in my best days, I can remember the greater sense of purpose. The greater sense of what it is I do.

This time period has been difficult for all of us. And what I have said to my teammates, what I have said to myself was, "It's go time." This is what we built this in engine for. And I'm referring to my company. I'm going to suggest at the risk of projecting on to you, it's go time, dude. This is why you built Aunt Bertha. And you will fail to meet everybody's needs. That's a fact. But failing to meet everyone's needs doesn't mean you stop trying. This is not a one and done battle. This is a lifelong practice and you are serving people in need. And I like to think that I serve people in need oh, differently, but the same we're in the same fight. Does that help?

Erine Gray: It does. This reminded me of, um, the Pixar movie a little bit, um-

Jerry: Which one?

Erine Gray: The one about the, you know, the fears and emotions in your head.

Erine Gray: *Inside Out*. Well, it is that. And, and to think, you know, if I just share my journey as the founder of the company, um, you know, I was because of my background, I didn't know how to raise money. I didn't know how to communicate to investors. And I was afraid of them. (laughs) Well, if somebody invested, they invested because they really wanted to, I didn't sell them. Uh, but that kid, that 10 year old kid, uh, I've I love that kid. And that's what I'm serving you know, is, is, is that kid and his parents and letting them know that it's okay. And you'll learn to love that as well.

And, um, and I try to, we have a, anyway, I try to hire kids like that, and I, I want to do a better job of grabbing them and promoting them. And, um, um, because I think they're tough. Um, the next, I wonder what that next level of being a CEO and what that means, and, and it's fitting, given what we're going through now, is that, how do you learn to love people that don't have your same background.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Erine Gray: I mean, it does come down to love. And when you go back to the New Testament, that those are parts of it that I really struggle with, you know? Um, but there's a level of maturity that it takes to get there, but that the assumption that it's one or the other, but you can love that kid. And you can say, you're still my buddy, you're still awesome, but I need to listen to the bird on the other side of my shoulder this time, you know? Um-

Jerry:

So let me, let me give you some framing on that. This is how I handle it. The kid has the voices inside just as I do. The kid inside of me, has those, those voices, the voice is almost another part of me. And that voice is in my book, I call it the crow who sits on your shoulder. The purpose of the crow is, as we've both been saying to keep us safe, usually from humiliation and shame, it gets very clever. It says things like you, can't try to do that. You're going to fail. Well, so what? What's the consequence of failure. Well, then everybody will laugh at you. So it's shame. And we associate shame with sort of threats to our worthiness of love.

I'm going to say that again, the shame has power because it threatens our worthiness of love. The core messages of shame is that you do not deserve to be loved. One of the most powerful messages that I have found in all the religions I have encountered, all of the spiritual traditions I have encountered is the absolute essential nature of loving oneself, not above, but as a foundational component of that gorgeous move of compassion, which means if that crow is on my shoulder, I've got to love that crow because to hate the crow is to hate a part of me and I am not going to feel fully loved and worthy of love if I am cherry picking, just the parts of me that I like.

And I can say to that part of me, that is so desperate to keep me from feeling the sting of shame, "love you man, stand down. I got this." And then from that place of wholeness, I might reach out to others. You know, we raised a question and then dropped it. And I said, something that kind of took you back in a few minutes ago. I said, we, we can hate the poor. And it really, it seemed to sort of send you back. And I think what it is is that we as a society hate the parts of our society, the parts of our global collective itself, that we fear that we believe we might become. And the result is a divisiveness that is ripping apart the soul of this nation.

And at the risk of sounding overly religious or spiritual I think that the only way is love. Whether it's, we're talking about building our businesses, building our communities, taking care of each other, taking care of our show ourselves. And that means the call to love the parts of ourselves that we do not like. And it tears me apart that we do not love the poor. I do not consider myself Christian, but I was raised in the Christian tradition. And one of the core messages that I believe from that tradition is the unyielding message from Christ to love the poor. I mean, there was no exceptions here. It wasn't like, except those people over there, it was unyielding. It was fierce.

It wasn't don't love this person because they had a wall with black lives matter. And it wasn't, don't love this person because somehow they're throwing a fist in the air or they're breaking into a store because they're so economically put down that this is the only thing that they see that's in front of them. Where in that, that New Testament you spoke of, doesn't say, accept these folks, don't want them. And we religion. I do not want to live in a world that divides people into the loved and the unloved. So I guess this is a long winded way of taking you back to their question, which is when that loss of faith shows up when the lack of trust in oneself, self shows up. What if, instead of seeing it as something that needs to be changed, we saw it as something that needed to be loved?

And we saw that as something that needs to be welcomed back in. Hello my old friend. I've known you since I was a child. (laughs)

Erine Gray: Because it's not about me you know. The mission is to empower the millions of 10 year old kids facing the same discrimination facing the same, um, distinct, I mean the, the same judgment, racism, whatever it may be and with the amount of wealth and in the United States, uh, the poor are entitled to that support and they can deserve to access it with dignity and ease just like anybody with a wallet can access services with dignity and ease. Um, we as entrepreneurs, I think sometimes we let it become more about ourselves. And I fall into that trap but if we look at ourselves as the voice of, you know, that 10 year old kid, that we're advocating for it all, it doesn't matter.

There is a little bit of anger there, um, with that, you know, that 10 year old kid of, but the world is unjust. And, um, and, and the reality is at least for me personally, I need that anger to, to keep breaking down the bureaucracy.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Erine Gray: You know, when you look at the, what maybe what the have, and have nots are projecting onto the poor, part of it is fear of becoming poor. I think, I think you're exactly right.

I guess just being a little bit more secure and knowing that you need that ten year old Erine to fight with the right persistence against the broken things in society that are there. And I love this moment that we're in right now. Um, and I hope I can get my head out of my own insecurities long enough to remember that.

Jerry: Well let's hope that I'm remembering that sense of purpose and remembering that mission in that revolution that revolutionary spirit will help quiet some of the insecurities and when they don't [inaudible].

Erine Gray: (laughs)

Jerry: And we say, okay, you know, the last thing I would say is from where I sit, I believe that love, that anger in the name of justice is love. The opposite of love is not anger. It's hate. Anger can be in service of love. Thank goodness so many leaders have gotten angry. That's how the world changes.

Erine I want to thank you for coming on the show and sharing your open, what I would call your broken open heart. Um, it's gorgeous. I am so deeply admiring and respectful of the work that you do. It's important. And you know, I have a deep wish for you that when, when that voice [inaudible] you're just able to blow it a kiss, say thanks and get back to work because the work you do is that important.

Erine Gray: Well thank you Jerry, for the opportunity to chat. I really enjoyed it.

Jerry: Well thank you for that. And you be well now. Take care

