

Jerry Colonna:

Hi, Lisa, it's great to have you on the show. It is a delight to have you here and, um, I confess, before we actually started recording, that I'm kind of fanboying here, uh (laughing). Our guest today is Lisa Sharon Harper and, among other accomplishments, she is the author of an incredible book called *Fortune*. And, um, I was so moved, the book was recommended to me by my teacher, Parker Palmer, um, and I was so moved by that book that I reached out and tracked you down, invited you on the show. So welcome, Lisa, to the Reboot podcast.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

I am so excited for this conversation, Jerry. Thank you for the honor of being here and being in conversation with your listeners as well. Thank you.

Jerry Colonna:

It's a delight. So, yeah. So most of the folks who come on our show are kind of involved in entrepreneurial endeavors or in, in, many of them, in one way or another, are in, find themselves in positions of power, either positions of power by virtue of their role or by their dint of their skin color, by dint of their privilege and position in the world. And, um, in our case, what I wanted to do was spend a little bit of time talking about some core issues that really are affecting all of us, but that you've really spoken well to, both within *Fortune*, but, obviously, across your career and, uh, across the work that you've done.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Mm-hmm.

Jerry Colonna:

And I'm going to read a little bit back to you from your book and then ask you to expound upon it a little bit, um.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

That sounds good. Thank you.

Jerry Colonna:

"We are in troubled times. There is no way around it. We must wade in, face the realities and cost of the hierarchies of human belonging that we constructed in our nation's earliest years. We must face the cost and figure out how to pay it. If we don't wade into the water, we will find ourselves in the same place 10 generations from now with new iterations of control and confinement for people of African descent and others, exploiting their labor and justifying the inactions on the basis of a whitewashed [inaudible] read through the lens of empire."

I remember it was late at night, I was using Kindle, and I was reading that, and I just stopped and I said, "You said it so well," and it's heartbreaking, but tell me more about what that means for you and what that meant when you were writing.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Well, I think that America, in this great and grand experiment that we are as a nation, that, from our conception, and even before conception, from the foundations, the Colonial times, we have had forks in the road where we had choice points, times where we, we could have chosen another way, um, times where we could have faced and reckoned with the impact of choices that were made explicitly and, and, most times nowadays, implicitly, to create, protect, and entrench the social, political, and economic power of white men, that, at those choice points, we could have decided to open up the franchise and to make a true capitalist society, like an actual capitalist society and an actual democracy where everyone's vote and everyone's dollar has actual power and everyone has, has equal and equitable access to those dollars and, and those votes.

We could have done that in 1619. We could have done that in 1870, I'm sorry, 1776. We could have done that in 1787. We could have done that in 1791. We could have done that in 1861. We could have done that in 1877. We could have done that in 18, um, 96, with, with the, um, uh, the dread, uh, the Plessy versus Ferguson decision with the Supreme Court. We could have done that again and again and again. Even with the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, we could have done exactly that then, but we made a decision, because of our politics, to compromise away some of the humanity of non-white male, cis-gendered, Christian, um, um, claiming men. What do I mean by that? I mean that the Voting Rights Act has to be voted on every 20 years.

Jerry Colonna:

Be renewed.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

It has to be renewed. And, on top of that, just recently, in 2013, our Supreme Court actually gutted it, actually took the teeth right out from in, from inside the mouth of the Voting Rights Act and that's why, the very same day, Texas went out and changed its laws. And, for the last decade since then, we have seen, again and again and again, the scheming to, um, to, to nullify the votes of nonwhite men, um, or rather, I should say, people who are not white men, right?

Jerry Colonna:

Right.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

So, so and, and now, I mean, literally, this day, this year, they're not even hiding it. They're literally saying it out loud. They're saying the bad parts out loud, saying not only are they going to suppress the vote, but they are going to subvert the vote.

This year, in a couple of months, they have been talking openly about that, why, through, through gerrymandering, but also, um, also through, uh, the electors, um, the, the appointing of electors that are, that are, um, already decided, they've already decided who they're going to vote for regardless of what the actual, who the actual public votes for.

So we've had inflection points in our history where we could have chosen another way, we could have reckoned, but we didn't, and, because we didn't, January 6th. Dr. King said, in, in 1967, months before he was assassinated, he said, "The segregationists," read white Christian nationalists today, because it's basically the exact same people, just different language for different times, white Christian nationalists, "would rather have an American form of fascism than to have democracy if democracy required equality."

So we have watched, we've watched, in 1619, and, and all of those dates I just, I just mentioned, the compromise with those people, with those people who would rather have an American form of fascism. We, we watched in, in, uh, 1877, when the, the deal was made that pulled the federal troops out of the South so that the, the South would play nice with the North. Same kind of a deal was made in 1787, when the Three-Fifths Compromise was, was passed. I say in the book, you know, whenever there's a compromise in, in Congress, the ones who are compromised are us.

We are the compromised. And so until America faces this, until the church faces the impact of our anemic gospel, we will continue this. We've done it for 400 years. What's to say we're not going to do it for another 400 years? But we don't have to. It doesn't have to be this way. We are human and, because we are human, we have choice. We have the ability to choose another way to be together in the world, and that's what we're exploring in Fortune.

Jerry Colonna:

Wow. I reached out to invite you on the show because I wanted to thank you, among other things, and, and continue the conversation, but now I need to thank you again for your first response to my first question because it, it, uh, your answer so resonates with me.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Mm-hmm.

Jerry Colonna:

Th- th- this is an inflection point and it, and we have a choice and, as I shared with you before and as you wrote in the book, the scales from white eyes began to fall in 2020.

And, and the scales from these white eyes began to fall, and I went from I would argue was a progressive, woke, in the way the conservative movement might use it, well-intentioned, but not actively engaged person of power and privilege.

And I'm trying to move myself, literally pick myself up, and, as I shared before, part of my ongoing message has been this notion that better humans make better leaders.

Jerry Colonna:

I believe that's true. I-

Lisa Sharon Harper:

I do too.

Jerry Colonna:

But I also know it's insufficient.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yeah. Let me, let me speak to that.

Jerry Colonna:

Yeah.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

I mean, I, I think, first of all, I think you're right, it is insufficient, but I think it's insufficient if we don't understand what it means to be human.

Jerry Colonna:

Mm-hmm.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

I mean, I think that, that, especially, quite honestly, I think the core ... I don't know if your audience is, uh, is a faith-rooted audience. Um, if they are a faith-rooted audience, then they'll appreciate the word sin, right?

They'll appreciate the concept of sin, sin being, you know, what we are taught sin is, or what I was taught in, in youth group, was sin is missing the mark of perfection, right? So, (laughing) well, I've learned since then, actually, um, by doing my last book before *Fortune, The Very Good Gospel*, in that research, is that, actually, in the scripture, sin is whatever breaks any of the relationships that God calls very good in the very beginning on the first page of the whole Bible, and those relationships, um, our, our relationship with God, but also our relationship with each other and our relationship with the rest of creation... and the relationships between genders and relationships ... ultimately, if you, if you go out from there, the relationship within families and, and between ethnic groups and, and between nations. All of those relationships have opportunity to thrive and flourish or to be broken, and whatever breaks those relationships is sin. Well, I think that the core sin of people of European descent, and, in particular, especially men of European descent, starting with Constantine and maybe even going back ... actually, no, going back before then to the Greeks and the Greek philosophers, um, specifically, um, Plato and Aristotle, but especially Aristotle, was to imagine the self as, as not only, not only, um, the supreme humans-

Jerry Colonna:

Mm-hmm.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

... but, actually, to, to, in the actions, the impact of the philosophies that were taken in, to really, in many ways, war with God for supremacy, to try to control all things and all ones, everyone, and so ... and to define everything and everyone and, therefore, to then control it. So, so it was people of European descent, um, and, and through their, their Christianity, um, when Pope Nicholas V, um, had, uh, uh, an explorer friend, friend of the family, come to him and say, "Yo, Pope, I'm going to go exploring and I need a blessing," (laughing) he, well, he reached back to Aristotle, right, and Aristotle said, um, "Well, if you are a people group that has been conquered, you have proven that you were created to be enslaved." That's what Aristotle said.

That's not in the Bible. That's not, certainly not in Genesis 1 or, or even Genesis 2, where, before the fall, right? So but Pope Nicholas V, he made a declaration that said, "Wherever you go in the world, you have the right to claim that land for the throne and for, and enslave its people." He was drawing on the authority of Aristotle, not the authority of scripture, which, on the very first page, says, "All humanity is made in the image of God." And, as a result, if you are made in the image of God, it means that you

were created to exercise dominion in the world, stewardship of the world, and it is the fastest two things that actually limit the capacity of human beings to exercise stewardship are poverty and oppression.

So when we enact policies or enact, um, practices on people groups that cause oppression, that limit their capacity to make decisions that impact the world or cause poverty, also limiting their capacity, what we're doing is we are actually at war with the image of God on Earth and the image of the king is supposed to be a marker of where that king rules, so to war with the image of God is to war with God.

Jerry Colonna:

So to, to bring it back to this notion of better humans there is, uh, as, as a boy, I was taught that sin was that which separates us from God and that which moves us away versus that which moves us towards. And what I'm surmising and taking from your reaction is that being, being a better human, especially one who has the responsibility of power, someone who deems themselves a leader, has an oppor-, has a responsibility to what I would say is overcome separateness. And, in particular, I think of the Howard Thurman, uh, sermon, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, in which he speaks, he says, "Within the walls of separateness, death keeps watch." And I think that what we're really talking about, in some ways, is that the policies and the practices that manifest in othering, in its various forms, creates a separateness that is, in effect, death.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yes, and that separateness stems from a lack of humility that, at its core, it's hubris. At its core, it is humanity warring with God for supremacy, not warring with each other, warring against God, because if God made all humanity, then who are any of us to chain or confine or limit the capacity of any other human to grow and flourish and have access to flourishing? And yet, through our policies, we've done that, historically and right now.

Jerry Colonna:

And so, in, in some ways, being a better human, and I think you say this well and so eloquently in the book, in, in *Fortune*, requires those of us, uh, who might identify as male, those of us who might be descended from Europeans, especially those who participated in that capitalist enterprise, right of immigration and Middle Passage-based enslavement, the entire experience-

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Or benefited from it.

Jerry Colonna:

... and benefited, whether or not it was directly associated, so that's, that's, that's the conundrum that, that ... that, or that's the perceived conundrum, "I didn't personally benefit." Well, it doesn't matter. You, you were able to go a better school because of it ... fill out the entire construct, that racialized construct.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yeah. We, we can, we can get into, we can, we can definitely get into how people did actually personally benefit from ... they may not have actually had ancestors that owned slaves. Their, their ancestors might have come here later-

Jerry Colonna:

Yeah.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

... but just very fact of their ability to come here is benefiting from genocide and enslavement.

Jerry Colonna:

... uh, uh, you know, part of the reason Parker had recommended, so strongly, the, uh, *Fortune* and, as I mentioned before the recording, I'm hard at work on, uh, my own book, but one of the questions that I was grappling with, that I continue to grapple with, is despite whatever othering my ancestors might have experienced, they participated in, extended and continued and benefited from the othering of others regardless.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yeah.

Jerry Colonna:

And the balance of those, those two states, rather than developing humility, to use your word, or developing empathy, actually, created further separation-

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Mm-hmm. Yeah, let me-

Jerry Colonna:

... their, their lack of awareness of it. Go ahead, I'm sorry-

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Mm-hmm.

Jerry Colonna:

... for the interruption.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

No, no, no, no, no. No. You're, no, spe-, fi- finishing your thought 'cause it's ... yeah, I, I like that, the lack of awareness.

Jerry Colonna:

The lack of awareness of that experience, and I think you said it well in, in your book, in *Fortune*, that, that people of European descent in the U.S. lack such huma- humility because they lack such memory.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yes.

Jerry Colonna:

Yeah. I think we're getting to the core of *Fortune*, aren't we? But keep going, yeah.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

We really are.

Jerry Colonna:

Yeah.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yeah, no, that's exactly right because what, what *Fortune* is about is about remembering, it's about bringing back ... it's about reconciling our memories. Um, our memories have been dislocated from each other, been disjointed, been, um, fragmented, intentionally, actually, in order to continue the practices that oppress. If we knew what we were doing and we pass down the knowledge from generation to ge-, it would stop, but the only way to keep it going is actually to keep it under wraps, to keep it mysterious, to keep it, "Oh, this is just the way that it's supposed to be," but it isn't.

So let me just unwrap some of this memory, um, a memory that, that, um, I now have because of research, right? So, when I found my ancestor, *Fortune*, I found her, um, in a genealogical ... uh, like I was think it was Gen dot, Geni.com, right? So the first time we ever spotted her, and she was the, the daughter of Maudlin Magee and Sambo Game, and so Maudlin Magee is the, um, uh, Ulster Scot woman who was married to George Magee and she had an affair, um, with a man named Sambo Game. That's ... his name is listed as Game on some places and Gam on others, and we believe that the reason why his name is Game or Gam, it had nothing to do with his master. He was an enslaved African man. His master's last name was Dowdy, so it had nothing to do with game.

Um, he was brought to, uh, the, the Eastern Shore of Amer-, of, of America, (laughs) Eastern Shore of, of Maryland, um, in 1686. Um, Maudlin arrived in 1682, and, uh, we believe that the only ship that he could have arrived on, actually, came from the Gambia Rive, hence his name, Gam. They named him after the river that he came from. And so, um, their daughter, they decided to name Fortune. Now Fortune ended up in court in 1705 because, uh, because her parents were mixed-race, and she ended up being indentured until she was 31 because they were not married. Had they been married, she would have been indentured until they were 21. And all of this stems from the very first race laws, which were passed in Maryland in just 23 years before Fortune was born, 23 years. That's, that's one generation, um, within one generation.

So she is experiencing ... her body, her, her future, her dreams, um, her, her family are experiencing the wrath of those very first race laws. And, in order to understand how did those race laws happen and why did she get mixed up in it, you have to understand that very first race law, which happened in Virginia in 1662. So, if you take it back a little bit, just a little bit, you get Elizabeth Key. Elizabeth Key was the daughter of Thomas Key, a white man who was also a member of the House of Burgesses in Virginia. He raped one of his enslaved African women and the progeny was Elizabeth Key. He actually was forced by the Colony to recognize her as his daughter and to have her baptized.

Well, Elizabeth got to thinking and she said, "Wait a minute now, according to English common law," and, of course, Virginia, at the time, was a British colony, "you cannot, um, you can't enslave another British citizen and you also can't enslave another Christian," and she said ... and British citizenship came through the line of the father and her father was the British citizen, so she said, "Wait, I should not be able to be enslaved because I'm a Christian and my dad is a British citizen." She took it to court and she won. And she said, "I'm out. Bye."

And so, uh, uh, a flood of other people of African descent, and also a Native American who had the same situation, went to court and they won and they won their freedom. And so that was 1650, when she won. Just 12 years later, Virginia passed the very first race law that said, um, "No longer are we going to count citizenship through the line of the father as British law requires. Instead, we're going to turn to the Roman law of partus." Now, you tell me, what does Roman law have to do with Virginia (laughing)? I don't know, right? Like what's, what's that?

Jerry Colonna:

Right.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

So but that's what they did because, again, they had an inflection point, they didn't have to do this, but they decided to side on the side of, um, of white male supremacy, political, economic, and, and social. And so they said, "Any, um, any human being who was born of someone who is not a citizen is, a woman who is not a citizen, is now not a citizen," so they, they switched, um, citizenship from the male to the female, which made it possible then for them to continue to rape, um, enslaved Black women and, and have them bear their progeny and enslave their children. And they added the two words, in perpetuity.

So, two years later, Virginia, uh, perceived its own race problem on the ground. Of course, these are, these are happening because the caste system is being confused by these mixed-race unions and the children, right? So Virginia has white women who are coming over to, sorry, Maryland has white women who are coming over to the colony, uh, mostly Ulster Scot like Maudlin, and they're falling in love with enslaved Black men and marrying them. And so, you know, this kind of gets the legislative class, who are also the planter class, you know, their panties in a bunch, and they're like, "You know what? We have to change the law." So, so what they say is, "If any white woman marries an enslaved Black man and has their children, that woman shall now be enslaved by her husband's master, and her children will be enslaved in perpetuity."

So you have, right, you have in this, these first race laws, you, you see what these first, these originating white men are willing to do to their own women in order to secure their power, their economic-

Jerry Colonna:

Their own women, women and their descendants.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

And their descendants.

Jerry Colonna:

Their children and grandchildren.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

In perpetuity. And white women were enslaved. Um, there was an, uh, Ulster Scot woman named Irish Nell, Eleanor, um, Butler, I believe her last ... her first name was Eleanor, and she was enslaved, and her children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren were enslaved all the way til the Revolutionary War, until the Revolutionary War, when they were all set free. So this is, this was, this was, um, the practice. This is where those laws came from and, when we look back at Fortune, what we can see is we can see the, the reality that generation after generation after generation now is impacted by those first laws.



Um, it, it established immediately a hierarchy of human belonging, that it is our work now, right now, we have to ask the question of how our practices right now echo the ones of the past, are continuing to entrench and protect those same hierarchies of human belonging, just in different ways, like subverting the vote.

Jerry Colonna:

I think that, if I could build upon what you're saying... in my own experience and my own exploration in the work that I've been doing here, I think that this notion of better human being a better leader, if ... and, and, and, and I set the task, I believe to the bottom of my heart, that leadership should be defined by creating what I refer to as systemic belonging.

Leadership that does not create systemic belonging is technocratic in its management. It's important but it's limited. It does not really live up to that word leadership. And if, if we start from that premise and we start from the notion of the scales falling from our eyes and seeing more clearly the conditions of our family members, of our extended, uh, community, and we actually see what's going on, then I think that there's an, there's a obligation to understand the way you did, to understand, maybe not all the way back to Africa the way you did, but to be able to understand the lineage, uh, and the experience of your ancestors.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Oh, no, no, no, not at all. I just re-, I just realized I was really going to ... I wanted to, to share this one piece that I almost forgot to tell you. Um, George Magee, Maudlin's husband... right, so if you were to do any research on George Magee, you would never be able to find Maudlin in any of his, in any of his story. It's almost like he had kids out of nowhere.

Jerry Colonna:

Right.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Like his kids never have a mother in any of the, um, records, any of the genealogies that are ... even, even, um, professors who, who study the family, they don't mention Maudlin. The only reason you, I know that Maudlin exists is because of court records, where, in that courtroom in 1705, um, Fortune is listed as the daughter of Maudlin Magee, whose husband is George Magee, right, so ... and it's a very small community, so it's not like there's a lot of George Magees running around.

Jerry Colonna:

Right (laughs).

Lisa Sharon Harper:

So I, I, you know, have, have studied this family, and the thing about George, if you were to go forward from him, right-

Jerry Colonna:

Right.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

... so to see, uh, and this is what I'm talking about now is white men doing your homework to ask the question of how has it reverberated through the generations for you, right-

Jerry Colonna:

That's right.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

... and how have ... what are the practices that you have, you have taken on as normative that actually come from decision points where they could've made, uh, a different choice of a way to be, be in the world. George Magee had one of those decision points. Obviously, he was mad. I mean, who wouldn't be mad if your wife has an affair, right? Obviously, he's not ... but he didn't have to become a slaver but he did. George Magee ended up moving south, um, and through South Carolina, down into Georgia. He changed his name to Mc, uh, McGee, not Magee in order to blend in with the Irish who were there, because the Irish, of course, were being sent to Georgia, which was a prison colony for England. Hello, right?

Jerry Colonna

Right.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

So the Irish are down there. They're imprisoned at ... just by being in that place, they're imprisoned. He changes his name to an Irish name and he becomes one of the largest enslaving families in the South. They move from Georgia into Alabama and across all the way to Texas. So the Mc- McGee family now becomes, um, an incredibly lucrative slave-trading and slave-holding family.

They didn't have to do that 'cause the thing is the reason why we know that George Magee exists is because he came at the exact same time that the Scotch-Irish came to America, escaping what they would have called a pogrom, what they would have called persecution in Northern Ireland, but what the Northern Ire- ... I mean, Irish people, what they would have said was they were, they were getting payback because the Scots were being used by the English to plant plantations in Ireland-

Jerry Colonna:

Right.

Lisa Sharon Harper ([00:34:26](#)):

... for the English. So George Magee, his body, had been used by the English to colonize Northern Irish territory. He experienced an uprising by the Northern Irish and said, "I'm going to get out of here. We're going to America." So then they went to Maryland. They were indentured. When he got out of that, what could he have done? He could have made a choice, "I am not going to repeat what was done to me. I am not going to become an oppressor as we were oppressed and then used to oppress others," but, instead, he decided to play inside of the game and become powerful inside of the game of colonization and to then colonize himself.

Every CEO, every person who is a business leader, every person who is a leader today, lives ... your story lives inside of a larger story of leadership in America, and that story of leadership is one that exists inside of a capitalist story, a narrative of capitalism in America, that, at its foundation, assumes, assumes the exploitation of some in order for others, for the few to thrive. You have a choice. Will you participate in

that story, will you participate in that practice in order to get yours like George Magee did, or will you choose another way of being together in the world?

Jerry Colonna:

I think that, uh, your call for humility and your call for remembering, uh, resonates so deeply, um, you know. There's ... James Baldwin has this brilliant essay called *The Price of the Ticket* and he talks about the price of the ticket of whiteness, and what happens is a loss of memory and, if I can, I'd like to read to you a little bit. He said, "In the church I come from, which is not at all the same church to which white Americans belong, we were counseled from time to time to do our first works over. Do your first works over means to reexamine everything."

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yeah.

Jerry Colonna:

"Go back to where you started or as far back as you can. Examine all of it. Travel your road again and tell the truth about it. Sing or shout or testify, keep it to yourself, but know whence you came."

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yes.

Jerry Colonna:

I think that, when we have the humility, to use your term again, to recognize, uh, what so many scholars have talked about, this movement towards whiteness, this movement towards a supremacist structure, this movement towards the safety of oppression, of safety of being the oppressor, from this experience ... falsely equivalent, it isn't ... the Middle Passage for the Irish was not the same as the Middle Passage for, uh, folks of African descent, by no justification can you compare those two, except if you can reach into your heart and find empathy, except... if you can say, "Wait a minute, I am benefiting from, uh, a set of choice my ancestors made to move towards a safety and to leave behind those to whom they may have given birth, those to whom they may have fathered, those to whom they may have been in love with, those whom, with whom they shared the Earth, they left them behind and separated." And I think that, you know, to use your no- notion of these times, these troubled times, there is an opportunity, and your leadership on this question is profound, to go back, to do what Baldwin says, which is go back to where you started to know from whence you came so that then you might actively participate in that felt sense of love, safety, and belonging known as inclusion. Am I right about this?

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yes, you are, and that's why, I mean, the, the last third of *Fortune* focuses on how do we repair what race broke in the world, and the very first act that is required for rep-, for repair is truth-telling, and truth-telling requires truth-seeking, it requires truth-listening, and then it requires truth-telling the story that you heard. And so that truth-seeking is really what you're talking about. It's what Baldwin wr-, said our ancestors told us we have to do. It is, it is scary. It was scary even for me as one of African descent, who also has in our family story, um, descent from Indigenous people, and actually not just family story, but, you know, other, other, uh, evidence as well. And so, uh, but that's a scary thing because it's so mysterious, intentionally so-

Jerry Colonna:

Mm-hmm.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

... and we don't know what we're going to find. But I think that what I found was that the, again, the only way for me to become a rooted human being, for me to be able to choose a different way of being together in the world, was for me to know. I think that there's a different peril that people of European descent face as they face the choice of whether or not they're going to look back in order to move forward. You've been taught and trained from, uh, infancy, don't look back. You are self-made individuals. That's, that's the mythology. Um, you don't have a history. You, you're, you, in fact, have actually named yourselves at different points the Native Americans. Isn't that something? That just blows my mind, but it's true.

Even up in New York City, literally called themselves the Native Americans (laughs) and these were first-generation immigrants (laughs). It's like, come on, people, right? But that's the mythology. And so ... but you have to have those myths in order to live with yourself if you don't ever repent of the oppression.

Lack of repentance, lack of, of confession requires mental gymnastics to live with yourself.

Jerry Colonna:

I totally agree and I would add to it that I think that there's, uh, you know ... I, I went back and, and I looked at the experience of, of my ancestors and, and the, the nativist white supremacist reaction to my ancestors coming to the United States it leads me to believe, and, and, and within ... Theodore Roosevelt, who was, uh, vehemently anti-Italian, literally called, uh ... he spoke of a lynching of 11 Italian American men as a rather good thing because they were rattlesnakes, and the language mirrors, uh, Donald Trump's exhortations about Mexican Americans and about those on the southern border.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Oh, very much, yes. Mm-hmm.

Jerry Colonna:

There's this repetition of this experience and ... but within three generations. I am that third generation and my grandparents were, were immigrants.

Within three generations, the myth becomes so gauzy, and the fables of immigrant resilience, it becomes, actually, further means of separation. So, for example, I can almost hear my relatives say, "Why do they, why do they need a handout? We didn't get a handout," right, and yet there was, uh, there were, there was literally a person at Ellis Island who is making a chalk mark on a lapel saying, "You're, you can enter. You can't enter. You can enter. You can't enter."

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yeah, that's right.

Jerry Colonna:

And, and, and, and, and, and, symbolically ... and I, my theory is we maintain the fables just the same reason that we maintain the myths of exceptionalism, of American exceptionalism, because to acknowledge, you said it, it was dangerous, to acknowledge other than the exceptional nature of our ancestors, to acknowledge the exceptional nature, anything other than the exceptional nature of the American experiment, means it's tenuous, means it could be taken from us.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Wow. Wow.

Jerry Colonna:

I think that's embedded in the experience of some European descendants.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Oh, I think that's very ... I think that's incredibly prescient, and especially right now. I mean, that's where the whole, the fear that is conjured through the whole replacement theory comes from-

Jerry Colonna:

Exactly. Exactly. Like the, you know, the thread is from the other who might replace us.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Mm-hmm.

Jerry Colonna:

Think of that, those torchlit parades in Charlottesville.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

I was there.

Jerry Colonna:

Oh.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

I was there. I heard them and I watched them chant, "Jews will not replace us. Jews will not replace us," and I thought they were saying, "You will not replace us," but they were actually saying, "Jews will not replace us."

Jerry Colonna:

Right.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

And, of course, that is a millennial, like millennial age, um, theory that ... that's where that comes from, this replacement theory, and it ... but it's, in America, right, it morphs and it becomes about more than

just Jewish people. It becomes about Black people and Latino people and they ... especially with the reality of the actual demographic shift that is happening.

Jerry Colonna:

That's right.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

But the sinister nature of that theory is that this is ... it's a conspiracy. It's that this is all from the, the, uh, what do you call, the, the invisible hand of the Jewish p-, um, community that is tinkering with the demographics of America in order to replace. That's ridiculous. Can I just say it's ridiculous?

And, in fact, as far back as 1740-something, Ben Franklin predicted the moment we're in right now, in 1740s, he predicted, or '50s, he predicted that America was going to become a majority people ... or, actually, the world was going to become a majority people of color world and he then, at that point, actually, um, petitioned the crown to make America, to set aside American soil to be a place to preserve the white race, and he argued that only the English should be able to become white (laughs) because, of course, they are the ones who discovered this land.

Jerry Colonna:

I think that the conundrum, the experience and, and, and I'm still knee deep in understanding this for myself, but I think the conundrum is there's this movement towards whiteness that many outside of that what Benjamin Franklin would have described as white, right, because my ancestors would not have been described as white by, by Benjamin Franklin.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

That's right. Well, they had to earn their whiteness.

Jerry Colonna:

They had to earn their whiteness and, because you have to earn it, it can be taken away, but, a threat, I think, as, as much as the threat is from those who are racialized as nonwhite now, those who are perceived in that way I think that the internalized threat is actually from within. So, for example, when, when, when those marchers in Charlottesville were chanting the anti-Semitic experience the presumption is that, that those of Jewish, of the Jewish faith are, are not white, by dint of being of the Jewish faith.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Mm-hmm.

Jerry Colonna:

Well, of course, that's a canard. Of course, that's, that's, that, that's, uh, heartbreaking and, and yet there is this internal dilemma of who actually is white but white people don't have that conversation.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yeah. You'll, the re-, (laughs) the re-, here, you're going to hear what ... there's a reason why. They don't have that conversation because whiteness is assumed to be a divine election from God just like, um, you

know, the election of God in terms of salvation, right, so, um, and that, and it's ... in other words, whiteness is from God, but whiteness is not from God. Whiteness, we know, was, was invented in 1662 by that very first race law. That's how whiteness came to be in America. Literally, that's how whiteness came to be.

Whiteness was entrenched in the very first, um, in the, in the Constitution through the Three-Fifths Compromise, like ... and the word white, um, appears, um, in that same first, uh, in the first, uh, immigration act in 1790, when it says the only people who can become naturalized citizens in America are white. So what does it mean to be politically white? That's the reason why nobody wants to talk about because to talk about it is to risk going here-

Jerry Colonna:

Yes.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

... what it means to be politically ... it's because what it means, Jerry, to be politically white in America is to be human. To be human, theologically, on the first page of the Bible, we, we see it means to be created by God to exercise dominion in the world, created by God to exercise agency, to make choices that impact the world, to steward the world, but whiteness was created in order to reserve that right only for those who were deemed white. So all the way through the 1800s, even into like the first quarter of the ni-, of the 20th century, as immigrants came into America, they had to fight their way through the courts all the way to the Supreme Court, to be declared white. And some were, Armenians were declared white, Germans were declared white eventually, but others weren't, you know, uh.

Jerry Colonna:

Yeah, the Sikh, Indian...

Lisa Sharon Harper:

The Pakistani.

Jerry Colonna:

The Pakistani that exactly, who was, you know, "Obviously, they're not white."

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Exactly.

Jerry Colonna:

"Look at the skin color," was essentially what the Supreme Court justice said.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yeah, even though they're like, "But, but we're from the Caucasus. Like we're, we're Caucasian (laughing)." And the Supreme Court is like, "Oh, but we didn't mean that kind of Caucasian, (laughing) like actual Caucasians. We meant, we meant fake Caucasians (laughing)." Right? So-

Jerry Colonna:

Right. Right.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

... see what I'm talking about?

Jerry Colonna:

I do.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

So it's just, it's not, it's nonsensical. It is not logical. Whiteness is not logical. There is no thing called whiteness except what we ... the power we give it.

Jerry Colonna:

Right, right. You know, I, I, I think that, um, looking at these questions, it's essential, if we're going to break the narrative, if we're going to ... what, what is the point of, of someone like me, uh, having the scales fall from their eyes if they're not willing to actually lean into this, learn, be wrong occasionally, be less than perfect, to, to, to learn through dialogue and to look at its effects internally, so that I can then live up to the whole point of the experience of my ancestors. They didn't move across oceans for me to continue, um, the same kind of systemic othering that they experienced. They didn't sacrifice so that their descendants would become the oppressor. I cannot believe that that's true. So I have this moral and ethical responsibility to lean into the sharp edges of this and to say, in effect, "Who do I belong to?" so that I can create that sense of systemic belonging for those around me.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Mm-hmm. And I think that the only way for people of European descent to do that is to actually lean into their own family story, to really, truly go back and ask the question, how did my family come here, why? And I can guarantee you, there's only three ways, three. Count them. You can count them on less than one hand, three ways that people of European descent generally got here. They were either fleeing oppression fleeing poverty, or they were granted land along with the original colonizers who came here. So the Day family is w-, is the family that ended up indenturing Fortune, Fortune Game Magee and now I do DNA and I find the Days are in me, right? So, obviously, someone raped Fortune and that's, that's how my, was it, six-times great-grandmother came to be.

And the Day family was granted the whole lower half of, of Maryland, so they're in that very rare class of European, um, families that have been here for like almost, for since the beginning, since the beginning of, of the Colonies.

Well, if your family is in that, is, if your, if you descend from one of those very few families, then you really do have to ask the question, how have I benefited, what are the practices that I've learned that are normative, but, actually, they're not normative, my ancestors simply made a choice and I have continued those choices, those practices, usually, in order to secure and protect my fortune, um, but it's been at the expense of others. If your family is not in that Day class, in the Fuchs class, which is another family that I find in my DNA, find in, in, in our family lineage, maybe your family is, is among the Magees that actually came here escaping oppression, um, even though they were among the oppressors, but they were among the oppressors because they were helping oppressors. You get what I am saying?

Jerry Colonna:



I do.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

They were conscripted by oppressors. Um, maybe you're in that. Maybe you need to go back and ask the question, what were they facing in Europe?

Jerry Colonna:

Right.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

I think that, once people of European descent understand what their ancestors were fleeing when they came here, that they will have greater capacity for, first of all, empathy, and to see the patterns here and to then choose not to be a part of it.

Jerry Colonna:

To be actively choosing.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Now once you've seen and you choose-

Jerry Colonna:

Right.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yes, ex-, yeah, yeah, it's not passive.

Jerry Colonna:

Yeah.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Once you've seen, you then have to choose not to be a part of it.

Jerry Colonna:

Yeah, you cannot unsee anymore. And, and you can't maintain the fables. You c-, you can, you can appreciate the truths that lie within the fables and the myths.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Mm-hmm.

Jerry Colonna:

You know, my grandfather, Dominic Guido, was a strong, capable man, who, with nothing more than a sixth-grade education, built a life for himself [inaudible 00:55:52]. That is true but, when he actively founded the American Italian Association in Brooklyn, New York, choosing to put that adjective American

before Italian, it was wi- within a context of virulent anti-Italian experiences. He chose to sign up for the draft for World War I when he was just 17 years old. He was choosing to be on the side of ... even though that war could have gone the other way. He could have been the enemy, as they were enemy aliens at the start of World War II.

It was that experience. You know, what I have found, in doing the research I've done, is a deeper appreciation for the difficulties of the choices that they made. I can step empathetically into their shoes, and, and I would not want to make the same choices, but I can understand their choices, and deepen ... you know, we, we sit here now and, on the southern border of the United States, basically, people not unlike my ancestors who are fleeing poverty, oppression, political, ex-, existential oppression, famine and we're seeing them as a threat, just the way my ancestors were seen as a threat.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yeah, I think what you are benefiting from, because you've done the work, you are doing the work, is that you're benefiting not only from the empathy for your ancestors, but also a greater understanding of the forces that were amassed against them. So you can see, you can see the, the political levers, the othering, the political othering, that they were trying to survive and then you can also now see those same political levers at work today and-

Jerry Colonna:

Completely.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

... because you can see it, you can now vote against it.

Jerry Colonna:

That's right. And I can take steps and I can put my shoulder to the wheel and I can work and I can do what is my task to do which I have been blessed to use words, I have the privilege of a platform. Um, it is my responsibility to, to use those words and the privileges that I have to actively work towards what I refer to as systemic belonging.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Yeah. And, and, Jerry, we were talking earlier about what it means to be human, right, like or even what's the whole purpose of all of this? I, I used to think that ... I mean, I don't, actually, I don't really know what I would have said if somebody asked me what's the purpose of life, what's the purpose of all of this, what's the purpose of leadership? You know, I think leadership, you can ask a lot of people what's the purpose of leadership and you'll get a million different answers. What I've come to understand now is the purpose of leadership is to lead us all into greater connection with all things.

And so it really is, the purpose of life is to be reconnected, reconnected to ourselves, reconnected to each other, reconnected to God, reconnected, um, across nations and ethnic groups and reconnection of, of humanity back to the rest of creation. When we see that, that's when we see and experience glory. And so, you know, now, when you can see the ways that our policies cause fragmentation and breaking of the human spirit and breaking of families and breaking of communities, as a leader, you are using your platform actually, no, the, the work, the work is to use the platform, to use the power that you have been granted to bring about greater connection, and you're doing that.

Jerry Colonna:

I appreciate your saying that. It, it chills me to think that, uh, I promised myself I wouldn't cry, to think that, uh, I'm doing good work. That's, that's the purpose. Um, it reminds me of a conversation I had with Parker on this podcast and we were talking about ... we were laughing, as is often the case with Parker Palmer, um, about people coming to us and saying, "Well, what's the purpose of life?" And, uh, we hit upon the answer, which is ask oneself the question, have I been kind? Kindness, true, empathetic, humble kindness. Uh, you know, I think of the, the cost of separation, you know, I think of the violence that is so prevalent in our society, both state-sanctioned and sanctioned by way of our policies, uh, that's the death that I think Thurman's preached about. That's the consequence of that separation.

And, uh, I, I want to thank you for our time together, for our conversation. Um, as I expected, I've learned a tremendous amount, and I, and I really encourage our readers to read your work, and in particular, Fortune, and, and to do their own work and to really, you know, just ask oneself the questions that arise when, when you're reading your story. You know, thank you for the work that you continue to do. It, it matters in the world. It really does.

Lisa Sharon Harper:

Appreciate that.