

**Audio Title: The Book Stoop Courtney Napier Learning For Liberation's Sake – Know Better, Do Better**

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### **Transcript**

**Rebekah Borucki:** Hello, friend! I heard you were looking for our spot. I got you.

So, you're going to go past the corner bodega and down the block from the fresh cuts barbershop, and there you'll find a brick row house at the intersection of Literature Place and Social Justice Blvd. That's the stoop.

Amanda, Amanda Lytle, she will be there to welcome you to the conversation. The Book Stoop, that's the name of the spot. We got the hottest takes on book culture, nerd culture, current events, with best-selling authors, change-makers, and risk-takers, the best kinds of folks.

Oh, me? I'm Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing, and this is our podcast. I am so glad you're here.

Now, I'm going to let you get to Amanda.

**Amanda Lytle:** Thanks, Bex. Hey, friend. Let me be the second to welcome you to our spot, The Book Stoop. I feel incredibly honored to be the host of this podcast, and I'm so grateful you're here. Today on The Book Stoop, I'm speaking with Courtney Napier, a writer, journalist, gatherer and antiracism coach from Raleigh, North Carolina.

In this conversation, Courtney shares her perspectives and objectives with learning for liberation's sake, and why it's so important for people to understand their local histories, not just what's taught in traditional classrooms by predominantly White teachers. Courtney is also the founder of Black Oak Society, a collective of Black creatives in the greater Raleigh area. Courtney tells us the story behind her workshop, *Know Better, Do Better: The Legacy of White Allyship*, and how reading has exposed her to parts of herself she'd never known.

Courtney has coached individuals and organizations as they seek to lead and live in a way that undermines White supremacy, and honors the humanity of all people. We start our chats on The Book Stoop with a rather fitting question. So what are you reading these days?

**Courtney Napier:** This is so easy right now, because next week, on the 18th, I'm doing a book talk with my friend and author, Melissa Florer-Bixler, and so I'm reading a book called *How to Have An Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace*. And Melissa Florer-Bixler is a Mennonite pastor in Raleigh, where I'm from. And it's really, it's kind of answering the question of, if you're a Christian and you're modeling your life after the life of Christ, what does it mean to not just love your enemies in a personal way, but those who are an enemy to, like collective flourishing, like on a larger systemic level? And yeah, and it has been very illuminating already. I think I'm like 10 pages and then it's amazing, so.

**Amanda Lytle:** Wow! OK. And so where can we find this book?

**Courtney Napier:** I think you can find it everywhere. Yeah, anywhere.

**Amanda Lytle:** Amazing. Yeah. Thank you for sharing that.

**Courtney Napier:** Absolutely.

**Amanda Lytle:** So thank you so much for being with me. This is super exciting. I kind of want to start with your workshop, because I know that there's a story behind it there. So, *Know Better, Do Better: The Legacy of White Allyship*, tell me all about it.

**Courtney Napier:** Yes. So, *Know Better, Do Better* is the community name. So it's a community of folks who are coming together, I like to say, learning for liberation's sake. I believe we all innately have, a friend said, an inherent wisdom, an intuitive understanding of how to treat each other. But we also have been separated from a lot of that knowledge because of the society we live in that knowledge is often punished. And the ways of competitiveness and superiority and hierarchy are what are congratulated. And so, understanding about our history in our society is what helps us to know ourselves better, to know our world better and therefore to treat others and treat ourselves better. So that's where that part comes from.

The workshop was born out of – actually, I was closely following the tragic murder of Daunte, Wright, which happened the spring of this year. And it was just terrible and, and at that point, I had already really been reflecting on this sense of ally fatigue that was setting in for a lot of non-Black folks who were struggling to – or it felt like they were struggling to continue that enthusiastic support of me and my people. And I was [0:04:41] [*Indiscernible*] my feelings about it. But I also felt a boldness to try a new approach than what I was seeing around me.

So, I was deeply inspired by a book called *Women, Race and Class* by Angela Davis, where she talks about movements throughout American history and the women who were central to those movements, White women and Black women. And I learned about the Grimke sisters, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, who were born in the antebellum south to slaveholding parents to enslaving enslavers who were very disgusted by the lives that their family led, and chose to begin to speak out about it, even in antebellum north in South Carolina.

And so, they eventually moved on became Quakers, moved to Philadelphia and experienced all types of ridicule. They were always kind of like too outspoken for whatever group they found themselves in. But learning about the bravery of these women, understanding that, you know, to abide this, as we call a peculiar institution, affects them too, affects their hearts, affects their humanity, but also affects their safety, like materially impacts their lives.

And so I took that and continue to research and learn more and more and more about these White identifying allies throughout American history, who had shown up in like real strength and solidarity and integrity, alongside Black and Brown folks, for the purpose of illustrating two points. One is participation in White supremacy is a choice. White people aren't inherently racist, I

believe, because racism is not inherent to humanity. So you can't really inherently be something that's not human. And, racism is not a human trait, it is created trait, it's a man-made trait. So there's that.

But the second is that White people have an ancestry and a heritage and legacy that extend beyond White supremacy. There's more to y'all than that. And therefore you have a choice, right? You have a choice on what part of your heritage you lean into. And it's a matter of you choosing to learn, and it's a matter of you choosing to do. And so that was really the thrust behind the workshop.

**Amanda Lytle:** What about the success of it? I mean, this sounds to me like it would just be incredibly powerful, incredibly moving. And, yeah, so we'll start there. I have a part B to that, but I want to know how was this received?

**Courtney Napier:** Well, the first time around, we had about 25 folks, which blew me away. And it's not an inexpensive thing as far as money or time because it's two days. But that was a really great cohort. And then a month later, I had another one and there was a smaller group. And I took July off, and now, for August, I'm planning on another one that was going to be in-person in Raleigh. But of course, with the resurgence of COVID, I decided to kind of pull back and do another virtual. And so there's a lot of excitement and interest in it.

But it is I mean, that first cohort, kind of reading their feedback. They were very moved, very inspired and challenged. And it was just a very humbling thing to see folks really grasp hold of my vision, and also kind of see themselves in the work and just dive in very vulnerably and very enthusiastically throughout the whole thing. So it was awesome.

**Amanda Lytle:** I think just even being a White woman and being able to hear conversations and to be a part of conversations where there is that super fragile response, right, to hearing about this, and to learning about this and to talking about this. So, I feel like you've created something that for people who want to be doing better. It's so non-threatening. I think that that would be so widely appreciated by people that are really wanting to do more.

**Courtney Napier:** Right. I mean, it is – it's one of those things where I just feel like a lot of spaces – we're all trying to do the best we can with the tools that we have. And, every – especially Black, antiracism educator, coach, practitioner, worker is doing whatever that they're supposed to be doing. But this is just a space in which I didn't really see anyone holding. It was an approach I didn't see anyone taking. And I know personally and, maybe we'll talk about this a little bit more later, but I understand how important narrative and story and becoming reconnected with my history, how critical that was to my racial identity healing process.

And so I didn't – I just I mean, it was just kind of from my personal experience. I'm like, "Well, this works for me, let's see if it works for others. Let's see if kind of seeing yourself in this new and expansive way helps you understand what you're truly capable of, instead of the confines of White supremacy kind of making some like you can only be this one thing." So that's what I – kind of the idea I wanted to introduce into the space.

**Amanda Lytle:** So on that then, because I think that that feeds in really beautifully, when it comes to the narrative and understanding your own history and making those connections, can you walk me through what that experience was like for you emotionally and mentally and how you were able to work through that?

**Courtney Napier:** Yeah, for myself, for my personal story, I was raised in Raleigh, North Carolina, in the south, in a southern capital city. So anybody who lives in the southern capital city will kind of understand that connotation. But essentially, you're in the seat of the government but you're also in a very, oftentimes a more like Metropolitan space, so you have this interesting mixture of wealth and culture, but also in the seat of the government, there's a lot of consolidation of power. So you kind of have this very interesting duality happening.

And so, I grew up in predominantly White spaces, neighborhoods, churches, schools. And so much of my history as a Black woman, as a Black person was basically boiled down to barely the basics, right? We came over on slave ships, from there, Abraham Lincoln set us all free. And then from there, things didn't go so well for a while and then Rosa Parks sat down, Martin Luther King stood up, and now things are better.

**Amanda Lytle:** Right.

**Courtney Napier:** And so that was kind of the story that I received. And I mean, when I think about all of the national level stories in history didn't get much less the local, which I'm very passionate about people understanding their very local histories of what happened in their hometowns, in their spaces, and communities.

So that experience, I actually grew up in a conservative household and an evangelical church, so I essentially, despite the best efforts of many around me including my parents grew up with a lot of anti Black internalized racism. And I was on the verge of that Candace Owens' life, you know, very judgmental towards other Black and Brown people, especially working class and poor Black and Brown people, very much pull yourself up by your bootstraps kind of Bill Cosby philosophy about the world.

And it took me being in a very vulnerable position of moving away, being very poor, and also healing from major surgery where literally, I can't really do much, I can't drive because I'd had heart surgery, so I couldn't be in the front seat. And then we also had like, no internet for a little while, our phones were turned off, we didn't have the money for phones. And so I was just – it was just books.

And I started reading these books. I started reading about Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X and James Baldwin, and Eldridge Cleaver, who has a lot of wisdom, also problematic, but a lot of the wisdom there. And all of these books exposed me to myself in a way that I had never ever been exposed to myself before seeing a breath and a multitude, like multitudes within myself, that were never seen in any other space I held. Besides, like my family, I thought my family was just special. You know what I mean? I didn't realize that we all were like this, you know, so genius and resourceful, and beautiful, and intelligent.

And so when I saw that, of course, I went through that period of mourning, like, “I was an oppressor.” Like, “I was a part of the problem. This hurts.” I went through that, but then I also went through anger, like, “How in the world can you not share this with someone?” Like “How can you keep someone from knowing themselves in this way?” And then finally, there was like an empowerment, right? Like, “This is a part of me and my heritage. I can choose to be like this. I don’t have to be like the way I was. I can be someone else, someone truer to myself.”

So that’s my experience and I’m linking it back to the workshop. I just figured it was really just trying it. Like Bex convinced me to do it, I was really on the fence. So I’m like, “This is weird. I’ve never seen anybody do it before. It’s going to sound like I’m trying to like – it’s like a feel good White people thing. And that’s not my intention, even though I also understand that a positive learning environment is a richer, and oftentimes more effective learning environment.” So – and she’s like, “Just do it.” So it was a big old experiment. And I think it worked. We’ll see.

**Amanda Lytle:** Of course, it did. And of course, it will continue to. But I love that you just mentioned the learning opportunities there because another thing that I’d love to ask you about is education. And when it comes to civil and social studies education, and yeah, I’ll let you take that away because I know that there’s a lot to talk about there.

**Courtney Napier:** So, I went through all of this kind of learning on my own, but I’m also a journalist. And so I was doing a really, really incredible story on a group of young people, group of like high school students who were protesting police presence in their school and in our local school system.

But it didn’t stop at that. Their list of demands also included a more robust, comprehensive Black and indigenous history curriculum, which I think, first of all, I think we should point out the high schoolers are asking for more to learn in school, which is beautiful. But also they understood, and this is backed up by a lot of research, that when you have culturally competent curriculums, when you have curriculums that incorporate the histories of the student body to which you are teaching, which in our public schools, there’s a larger and larger percentage of Black and Brown, and students of color, then they do better in school and they have higher self-esteem. Violence and conflict in the schools goes down. All of these great markers and yet we’re currently living in a time where people want to do the exact opposite.

And so these kids understood that, and they were supported by some local activist groups, and they were like, “Look, we need this. I need this. I deserve this. I deserve to feel good about who I am and know who I am. I’m in school, for god sakes, like I should be learning about my history alongside all the other histories.” And it shouldn’t be which it currently is in many schools where like, European history is an AP class and so it’s weighted higher than an American history class.

**Amanda Lytle** Right. Yeah.

**Courtney Napier:** And so the opportunity gap that happens with things like that, the way that we are weighting European education versus American and Black and indigenous education or history rather, is very real, very tangible, has tangible effects on someone’s future when they’re college bound, and they have to make this choice. And so, I was really moved by that. And then in my

home state, there begin the rumblings that have basically become roars about critical race theory, about like DEI training for teachers, anything really race-related in school spaces is really coming under fire by Conservative and Republican politicians and families.

And I recently wrote a piece that just kind of, I wanted to communicate that while we're all kind of yelling and screaming at each other about what's best for these young people, we're not talking to the young people. We're essentially just yelling over them. And there's a really great piece that I believe it's the Washington Post came out where a journalist finally in Texas started interviewing some young folks in a couple of school districts out there were basically race conversation, lessons in school had all but been banned.

And I mean, you're hearing stories about bullying, you're hearing stories about just racial slurs and violence happening. You're hearing stories about young people feeling disengaged and frustrated, because they know that their teachers are essentially lying to them. They're being gaslit about their own history and culture in school. And in order to perform well and get a good grade, they have to essentially succumb to the lie.

And the difficulty of all of that and hearing from them, like I did, like I had the opportunity to, I think that's enough, right? I mean, I think it's enough of a reason to stand with our young people and give them the resources they need. But I think it's also, on the flip side, it really illuminates more disturbing reason why Republicans would be so against this curriculum, because it's so empowering for Black and Brown students. And that's heartbreaking.

**Amanda Lytle:** Hey, friend, we are coming straight back to The Book Stoop after a quick break.

You make a really beautiful point about listening to the students, because being an educator myself, and I've spent the last several years working with really vulnerable youth, when you can meet them where they are, and they feel genuinely held where they are and understood and seen and heard where they are, that's where the change happens.

**Courtney Napier:** Right.

**Amanda Lytle** So if they feel supported in that, that's their power in their hands, and we need that, they need that.

**Courtney Napier:** Absolutely. And I think you bring up a good point because the majority of teachers still in this country are White women. And the majority of students in our schools are becoming browner and browner, more and more minoritized groups and ethnicities and races are the predominant population in our classrooms.

And so, kind of circling all the way around for *Know Better, Do Better*, it is imperative that White women who are according to research, the most apt to be antiracist, the most apt to understand the importance of relating to each other with equity and inclusion, to really press into that work, to do the personal work it takes to be able to step up in the spaces of sharing, and understanding race relations and sharing this information in a really vulnerable and really authentic way. Because you all are the ones in these classrooms, still. You are the ones spending 5, 6, 7, 8 hours a day with our

children. And so, it really is important for you all to do this work because whatever is happening in these classrooms, whatever is happening in you rather is happening in our classrooms, and it's being imparted on the next generation. So, very important work.

**Amanda Lytle:** Absolutely. Yeah, yes. Unbelievable students that you can see that power in that you like to be able to foster and to encourage and to help support and see that within them. But no, you're absolutely right, as an educator, and for someone who, I feel better knowing that these students also have each other in that space, and that they are collectively working together in these spaces. My hope is that they continue to feel supported, or that they find those people that will support them in their journey.

**Courtney Napier:** Yes.

**Amanda Lytle:** And hopefully they just become more readily available. Oh.

**Courtney Napier:** Yes.

**Amanda Lytle:** I know. If we could just put those kinds of people in front of them.

**Courtney Napier:** Yeah, it's true. But the thing about it is it never has to be everyone. It doesn't have to be – it's never been everyone who's been willing to do this work, all Black people, all White people, all anybody. And so, it's important for us to feel like, you don't need everybody with you to make great change. You do need coalition, you do need community, only groups of people make a large change. There's no such thing as a savior, a human savior, you know, but you don't need everyone.

**Amanda Lytle:** Yeah, great point.

**Courtney Napier:** But that's the hope.

**Amanda Lytle:** Yes. Good point. I have a question about Black Oak society. Can you tell me about that?

**Courtney Napier:** Oh, yes. So, Black Oak society, as a collective, it's, in a way, it's like a small press and artists support collective here in a Raleigh area. As I mentioned before, I am very, very passionate about local history. And so it was born out of that dual passion of local history, as well as the passion of creating soft and brave and empowering spaces for Black and Brown artists here in my area.

Our neighboring city, Durham, has a very, very robust Black arts scene. But for some reason, that has not translated to Raleigh up to this point even though there are, I would eventually to say, dozens upon dozens, if not hundreds of phenomenal artists and writers who – and musicians who live in my hometown. And so, my hope was to figure out how to bring us together more often, how to support each other, and then also how to tell the story of Raleigh's Black history and culture in a way that is engaging, in a way that's not just a history book.

And so, one of our first projects and continual kind of projects is called BOS Magazine. So it's just the acronym for Black Oak Society, B-O-S. BOS Magazine, each magazine is thematic around a feature, a sacred space or a group of people in the Raleigh and greater Raleigh area. And then we have artists, visual artists, poets, journalists, writers, photographers, kind of come together and interpret that theme in a really kind of provocative and creative and just beautiful way. So that's one of the things we do. We will be doing more. We are still a baby to this. And because of COVID, there's a lot of things that I've wanted to do that haven't materialized yet but we're preparing for more and more things, workshops and events and other ways to just uplift each other and our city.

**Amanda Lytle:** Beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing them.

**Courtney Napier:** Yeah, thank you.

**Amanda Lytle:** With the creation of this Black Oak society, which is incredible, and it offers that outlet for creatives, can you elaborate a little bit more on the importance of these spaces now more than ever?

**Courtney Napier:** Yeah, absolutely, because I've been thinking about this a lot. So I read a lot. So when you asked me what I'm reading, there's like a couple in the wings but I wanted to mention that one. But the other one is I'm reading *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. And so this is kind of taking the work of decades of very, very smart people and kind of dumbing it down for people like me, who want to understand but are not a law student.

And one of the things it talks about is the two different approaches to racism or to antiracism, I guess. And one group is called idealists, and the other one is often called materialists. And idealists is oftentimes characterized as someone who is really concerned about messaging, concerned about education, concerned about image, so they want a revolution within media. They want a revolution within the messages that are out there, the images of Black people that are out there, and so forth, which is very important, obviously. And we've really seen a massive shift in that in the past couple of years.

There's the other side, which is the material side. And these folks are much more concerned about policy, but also economics. So they're about creating Black businesses and spaces, where there can be a material resource shift from majority White institutions and spaces and kind of legacy, brands and publishing houses, media outlets, into Black hands. So there's currently a bill right now in Congress that is calling for an audit of the FCC, because of the just dramatic change of hands, a lot of Black newspapers, TV stations, radio stations that have been being transferred out of Black hands and into White hands. And there's been really no regulation of that.

So, stuff like that is that the material element, and that's part of where Black Oak Society came from is that it's very, very important to have a space, it's not just about the messaging, it's about the control. It's about the ability to mobilize capital resource, so money but also creative resources, and so forth for the purpose of building power. It's really about power building.

And so what I love about – something that me and Rebecca, me and Bex connected on was that, you know, she started Row House, I have Black Oak Society, we connect on the entrepreneur level



of like, how do we build spaces, how do we use this thing, money, this capitalistic system that has been just the arm of oppression for us for 400 years? How do we like materially shift that? How do we materially shift that power from one side of the scale slowly on to the other kind of creating that balance?

And that is not – that is a tenuous space. Because I don't believe in Black capitalism, I don't believe that capitalism will save us. And yet, because we live in a capitalist society, we need money, people need jobs. People need to be paid for their work. People need to be platform for their work. They need exposure. They need media, all of those things. And so, who are the ones who are going to bring that into being? And that's why I appreciate her so much. And that's why I do what I do, because I fucking hate business stuff. But I understand it's important. It's important. And I'm really passionate about that.

So yeah, that's what I want to leave with. There's no one way. We need all – we need all of everyone's gifts. Everyone who's concerned with liberation, everyone who understands what the stakes are, you are now a part of the movement period. And we'll figure out the rest later. You're going to start ugly, you know, it's going to start ugly. It's going to start imperfect, of course, because perfection is a myth. But we need all hands on deck. Whoever is concerned, whoever understands that this is, we know we're talking about the future of our society, the future of our kids, you have a part to play, you have a gift. You are equipped for this work, White folks, Black folks, Queer folks, Asian. AAPI, A folks, Latina X, you are equipped and you have a legacy of liberation to pull from, you have inherent intuitive wisdom to share, and the hard stuff we'll figure out along the way. So, yeah.

**Amanda Lytle:** Thank you so much. I could talk to you all day about this. This is fantastic. I love this, Courtney. Thank you. I do have one last thing to ask you.

**Courtney Napier:** Yeah.

**Amanda Lytle:** If you were to give an account or a person, an organization, disrupter, activist change agent, a really big shout out right from the heart, who would it be and who should we be following along?

**Courtney Napier:** Oh man, just one?

**Amanda Lytle:** Oh, I know. I know. Who was the first one that comes to mind?

**Courtney Napier:** Just one. The first one that comes to mind is Sonya Renee Taylor. Sonya Renee Taylor and her community, *The Body is Not An Apology*, was the love, the radical self-love, the radical love centered liberation work that I needed to see because I didn't see myself and a lot of the other expressions of this work. Not that they were not valid, they're very valid and important, but my personality, my values, I did not see it represented until I came upon her work. And what she was talking about was very deeply spiritual. It was also very deeply emotional. It was very well holistic. It was integrated.

So she was talking about politics. She was talking about religion. She was talking about trauma and mental health. She was talking about body image. She was talking about money and it was all wrapped up together in this really, really like human, very coherent in a way that really made me think of her almost as a prophet, like her capacity to see something so fully, instead of kind of just majoring on the things that we often do which are, “Are you a democrat or republican?” Or “Did you get a book deal? And did you save your – share your money or save your money or give your money? Like, what did you do with it?” Like, she’s talking about the whole shebang. And that just resonated with me so deeply. And I’m just so, so, so grateful for her work. So thank you, Sonya Renee Taylor.

**Amanda Lytle:** Yes, we’ll link her in too. And then where can people find you?

**Courtney Napier:** Ah, so you can find me @courtney.has.words so that’s Courtney dot has dot words on Instagram, and that’s where I am mainly. I’m building up a Facebook page, but I hate Facebook so don’t look for me there. I have – I just started a Patreon account so it’s patreon.com/knowbetterdobetter. Black Oak Society also has a Patreon account and that really helps to cover the cost of making in the Zine so that it can be more accessible to more people, because we pay everybody, we pay everyone. I gave a contract to a 10 year old in one of our issues.

**Amanda Lytle:** No way. That’s amazing.

**Courtney Napier:** Yes, she had her own contract. So that is really helpful to make sure folks can access that work. And then I also just started a newsletter. So you can get through that, get to that through the Patreon for *Know Better, Do Better*. Or you can sign up to Substack, which is knowbetterdobetter.substack.com. So, yeah.

**Amanda Lytle:** Fantastic. And we will link all of this in the show notes so that it’s readily available. Courtney, thank you so much for being a part of The Book Stoop podcast.

**Courtney Napier:** Oh, thank you for having me. Thank you, Amanda. Like, for real, this was awesome. This is super cool.

**Amanda Lytle:** Yeah, thank you.

Thank you so much for being with us. We hope you loved the conversation and we’ll be back again soon. Please be sure to follow us on your podcast app and leave a rating where you’re able to do so. Writing a written review helps reach more listeners too. Check out all of the show notes for the links and share The Book Stoop with your friends. Talk soon.

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