

Audio Title: Jamal Taylor
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Transcript

Rebekah Borucki: Hello, neighbor! Welcome to our third season of The Book Stoop.

And if you're new here, let me help you get to where you're going.

So, you're gonna 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 where you'll find the stoop.

Our host, Amanda Lytle, will be there to welcome you to the conversation. *The Book Stoop* is the place for the hottest takes on book culture, nerd culture, current events, with best-selling authors, change-makers, and risk-takers—our people.

And I'm Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing.

Now, come on in and meet 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 to have you here.

Today on *The Book Stoop* I'm speaking with Jamal Taylor. Jamal is an educator and activist that grounds his work in the canons of Love On Purpose. Jamal believes that hate has no place in the creation of changing the world.

We must find our best selves if we wish to elevate the change that we want to see. In the conversation today, Jamal shares his perspective on how important it is to see the best in people in the worst of situations.

He elaborates on how and why therapy and laughter have been so integral on his own healing journey and for the work that he does today and tells us all about the backstory behind Love On Purpose.

As a content warning, please be advised that Jamal mentions early in the conversation that he is a sexual assault supervisor who has experienced suicidal thoughts.

Before we jump in, I want to invite you to share *The Book Stoop* with your community. If you're loving this episode, grab a screenshot and tag us on Instagram at @rowhousepub. Every share, five-star rating and written review helps us find more listeners and climb the charts. So we're super grateful for your help.

We start our chats on *The Book Stoop* with a rather fitting question, “So what are you reading these days?”

Jamal Taylor: I am reading *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. Really good book. If you haven’t picked it up, it is phenomenal, one of the best – I think professional advice books is what I would call it, self-help books, et cetera. Just about building those atomic habits, wonderful book. And the next book that I’m reading at the request of a friend of mine is called “Radical Candor”. So it’s on the way. I haven’t gotten it yet, but it is about engaging in just kind of being radically honest, from what I ascertain, from what I saw in the book reviews. So I’m looking forward to that.

Amanda Lytle: The honesty, even just like radical honesty, even as something to step into. But I want to come back to the atomic habits thing because I feel like that’s a kind of book that really comes into your life when you need it the most. So what was your biggest takeaway from it?

Jamal Taylor: I think my biggest takeaway from it was this idea that I sometimes fixate on the goal without really fixating on the habit associated with the goal that I’m trying to achieve. I think that I see a very broad picture and I really like in that text how he talks about like if you want to drink more water, start by beginning your day by filling up a bunch of water bottles and placing them around the house so that when you want water or have to drink water or you see the water bottle, that you’re just picking it up and drinking rather than having to get up and go do it.

So I just thought like in the work that I do, in the things that I’m interested in, that sometimes I see that big picture but don’t build up the habit. The other thing that I found very interesting about that book was this piece about kind of focusing on once you’ve mastered a particular habit and achieve the goal, that there’s going to be a lull in some dips and that should really need to come back to your practice and determine what’s causing the lull of the dip. So I think that that one was really powerful.

Amanda Lytle: Totally. I also think that it’s interesting. I remember him saying something in the book about how if you just do one percent better today. You know, how much one percent better in a year can really turn into. So it’s a really good reflective piece I think to really figure out exactly what it is like you said about the goal and the baby steps that you can actually intentionally take to get there.

Jamal Taylor: Absolutely, absolutely.

Amanda Lytle: OK. So off of the word “intention,” I’m also thinking about purpose and on purpose and I really want you to tell me all about Love On Purpose, where it came from and why it matters.

Jamal Taylor: When I do this, I always give a trigger warning and I want to give it today because I think it’s super important and the basis for this idea of Love On Purpose. So a trigger warning, I am a childhood sexual assault survivor from the ages of 10 to 13.

Members of my family decided to assault me. For whatever reason, I have never figured it out and for a large part of my life, I operated in this idea of I'm going to get you back. I'm not going to let you get close enough. I'm going to get vengeance when you hurt me because I was a hurt person. The same hurt people hurt people.

So for me, it was really important that I engage in some burst intentional self-love and what Love On Purpose to oneself is, is this idea that you are better than your worst day in any given moment, right?

So really the next moment, you have the ability to overcome that obstacle that you face in your life, and you have to offer yourself the forgiveness, the grace, the benevolence that you would give to someone else. But it starts internally by dealing with the trauma that is associated with who you are.

So when I think about an almost suicide, some really frustrating parts of my life, what I realized was that I lacked the ability to love myself because I still blamed myself for things in my life that I had no control over. Then it just kind of transferred into this really, really powerful idea about even when people hurt you, you should love them. Not like them, not *pander* [0:06:12] [*Phonetic*] to them, not give them the space to continue to do it. But you love them on purpose because if I can love someone that hurts me, it gives me the grace to love myself in spite of the things that I have fallen short on.

So I really think that this idea of Love On Purpose is grounded in the ability to see the best in people in the worst situations when they're their worst selves because each person has a story to tell and their story shapes who they are.

So if I approach them from a place of love, then I am opening the door for them to heal too.

Amanda Lytle: Now this is not an easy road to walk in the beginning. You know, like you've mentioned. There's so much pain. There's a lot of suffering in there. There's a lot of figuring out and even questioning. You know, all of the whys and like you mentioned a bit, trying to get back at people or that being the energy behind a lot of action. Can you tell us some steps that you had taken in order to work through that, to heal to a place where you could love on purpose?

Jamal Taylor: So one of the things that was super important was that I go to therapy, and I am blessed, and I think in my life, I was given a burden to carry in that circumstance, but I was also given the way to overcome it.

So I have an aunt who was the director of nurses of a mental health hospital that had an outpatient unit and she had gotten therapy. She had gotten counseling. She got me in front of somebody to help me unpack or peel back the layers of the onion that was my life at that time.

So I think starting there, always starting with therapy and what therapy is to you because therapy isn't always sitting on a long couch while a person asks you how did that feel, right?

Sometimes it's the talking with friends or people. It is sometimes meditation. It's sometimes yoga. It's sometimes spending time with yourself. But spiritually, emotionally, physically, however you're taking care of yourself through therapy, whatever that therapy presents as.

I think the other thing that's super important to me or a step that I took is being really reflective in giving myself permission to forgive. Forgive me first and forgive others as well.

I realize that people carry a set of hurt. People have been through their set of traumas. So always giving grace and benevolence to the mistakes people made was really helpful and healing for me.

I think the third thing that people don't know about maybe because they see me online and really don't see this about me unless they interact is just infectious laughter in times that things can be laughed at and that's even in situations where something silly happens, that for some people in trauma would derail them in. But for other people, it just causes them to giggle from the gut and I think that that infectious laughter, that ability to smile is important.

I think the final thing is, is taking a step back and looking at the big picture. I was on a plane once and I was feeling just depressed, down, et cetera. It was raining out and the pilot broke the clouds, and the sun was still shining above them.

It was a really powerful situation to be thrust into in that moment in time and I frequently say to people remember that the sun is shining above the clouds or storms in your life, and I think really being able to take the step back and saying the sun is still shining above those storm clouds is super important in the work of loving yourself intentionally and loving others intentionally.

Amanda Lytle: I've had the same thing happen. It's just a matter of perspective too and I've had that experience even snowmobiling in the alpine where it's so dark and foggy or, you know, whatever the weather is and then you break the clouds and the perspective shift and it does give that immediate, "Ah, I'm here," you know.

Jamal Taylor: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I've looked for like videos of it because it's just like I need somebody to go and just like record that moment, that moment of being in the rain and busting through the clouds. I think it's an ever-pressing reminder of the amazing bit of light where we can look beyond our troubles.

Amanda Lytle: You mentioned the word "reflective" and how important reflection and being reflective has been throughout your journey. Was that something that came naturally to you?

Jamal Taylor: I think that it came naturally but I didn't always see it through that lens. I saw it as doing and allowed myself to go down the negativity, the road of negativity when things would come to me that I should be reflective about and that's really, really a huge part when you're at fault for something, right? Like just doing it. Well, maybe if I ought to and if I would have rather than saying this is a learning opportunity for me. What could I do differently next time? How am

I going to engage this situation, this obstacle, this hurtful person in a different way on the next encounter?

How can I be better than people would expect me to be in this situation with the realization that it's there for everybody? We just have to listen to our inner voice in determining who we are and that reflection also – I say this a lot is that some people will present as mirrors. They will give you a reflection of who you are in your life. This is a quote by somebody and then some people will present as windows. They will show you where you can be and so really being mindful in those moments where you have an encounter on an experience to determine is this person a mirror in my life or are they a window. Are they giving me a reflection of my best self or are they showing me what I need to change?

Amanda Lytle: That is so powerful. I've heard so much about the mirror stuff recently and I've never heard the perspective of a window and where you can go.

Jamal Taylor: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: You're coming at me with all of these visuals here. I love it. I love it. OK. I want to ask you a little bit about how you show up online and how this has come to be, you know. I was also rooting for you so much. I knew that, you know, hitting 20,000 followers was like a big deal and I was celebrating you and the process. I was like, "Yeah, Jamal! You've got this."

But now that you've made it there, you know, what has this community online become for you and what was the idea behind creating it?

Jamal Taylor: So, you know, I think that when I think through what this platform was and what it has evolved into, I think I was still in the journey of like figuring out what I wanted to be at the beginning.

If you go back to the very beginning to my platform, it was like me running. Like I was jogging every day at the beginning of COVID, and it was just kind of like the map. From the end, you just run out and then I got into social justice work that I love dearly and just kind of advocating for people that don't have a voice and I think that's still the work that I embody.

I think one of the things that I realized though was that on one side of this argument, there was so much hurt and harm associated with activism and that people could not see their brother and sister for who they were. There was a whole lot of intentional effort to this person is no good. All they're worried about is – insert a word. It was a whole lot of backbiting and pulling people down and crap and the bucket mentality and I just didn't want to be there.

I don't always want to have to attack people. I don't always want to say I need to go out and talk smack about somebody because it has been official. What I realized and what my psych developed into, and my platform developed into rather in engaging that work was that there's also a road where you can advocate without feeling the need to tear other people down. I want to

name very clearly that love is accountability also. It doesn't mean that I'm going to be a fool. It doesn't mean that I'm not going to check a situation where it is necessary for me and I feel no other option than having to address an issue that presents itself, that requires immediate correction. In the military, they would say, "Censure in private. Praise in public."

One of the things that they always – you always got checked on though was if you get past by somebody and get [0:14:05] [Indiscernible] there are instances where we need to check the person in the moment because notwithstanding that, the behavior won't change. But that does not always need to be the option.

So I think my site has become a place where people can hear about issues of the day very powerfully. I think it has become a place that people can come to heal and hear stories about healing and to hear the news of the day from the perspective of somebody that's just trying to build friendship and community in a very, very powerful way for people. I will never know probably 90 plus percent of the people on that platform directly. I will never meet them probably.

But I build connections and have so many powerful conversations with people. I had a conversation with a young lady the other day and we've had this ongoing conversation. It has just been so powerful about the trauma that she's facing. I was able to help her engage that work.

Amanda Lytle: I want to link this back to the work that you actually do on a career level and the fact that between social justice work and giving a voice to the people that may not have a voice and really advocating in that way, but then also your work in special education and the fact that your whole heart is in the sharing and the spreading of love and voice and perspective. So I just wanted to name that because I think that that's really important.

Jamal Taylor: Thank you.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, absolutely.

Jamal Taylor: Thank you very much.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. So I guess my – because I can turn that into a question too because had you ever really thought about creating a space online based on the work that you're doing within education and special education in particular? Had you ever pictured blossoming into this space online with that intention of spreading community or love or intention and understanding?

Jamal Taylor: So one of the things that I value very powerfully, one of the things that's super important to me is this idea of not being a jack of all trades and a master of none. I certainly support disability rights and the rights of people to have full lives without the ableism that creeps in so regularly in this world.

But I rather uplift the voice of someone that is in their community than to take an opportunity at what I see as this just kind of hodgepodge engaging of every issue that presents. That doesn't mean that the issue is any less important. But what I've come to realize for my sanity, for my

peace of mind is that we have to elevate issues in a way that maximizes our ability to communicate consistently across our – across the posting that I do and the videos that I do. It's super important that I key in and hone in on that very important issue of elevating very specific things.

Here's the thing. On ten slides or our live chat on Instagram, you're never going to cover everything. One of the things that we've been talking about a lot lately in the *Breaking It Down* series is just like this idea that people want you to talk about every single issue and every single thing that's happening, and they take it as a slide that you're unable to.

I wish that I had the time of day to talk about everything but I will say where I do get postings on topics related to disability rights, to ageism, to sexism, to sexual assault, to – you know, I will elevate those issues on behalf of people to the extent that I can, to that extent, and I want to name very clearly that there are very powerful people doing the work online of elevating, naming, very clearly articulating the impact that disability has in the lives of individuals and the ableism that comes from the community.

Amanda Lytle: But I think you've also named something very important about how you're in your role or what you've stepped into is also helping amplify and elevate those platforms as some of the work that you're doing which is just as important because it's also redirecting people's perspectives or sending people in the direction of the people that are doing the big work that maybe you either – like you said, you don't have the time to do because it is big work. But also that are maybe speaking from a different place of knowing and lived experience.

Jamal Taylor: Right, right, right, and I think that when we conceptualize the smallest part of this, I don't want to do a disservice by not being fully capable of articulating an issue that exists, which goes back to that part about breaking it down, right? Like just kind of really focusing on and trying to get down to the granular pieces, the atomic parts, if you will, of an issue so that you are not an expert but an able communicator on a topic.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. Actually this segues beautifully Jamal into *Breaking It Down*. So tell me about the *Breaking It Down* series with Jess. I would love to know about this.

Jamal Taylor: So *Breaking It Down* just kind of happened organically. Jess and I are amazing friends. She and I have been friends for a very long time. She is one of the kindest people I know and just really, really happy to help elevate issues of the day. We were just talking, and we said we should go live.

So we then began to piece together, work together on posts and those posts turned into the topics of the discussion that we were having. So we try to engage a conversation every Thursday and one of the things that we want people to realize is progressivism, liberalism or even conservatism isn't a monolith. It's a scale and so we can have a conversation and in fairness, Jess is probably a lot more liberal than I am in some of her views. I am as a person from the south a little different. I think I'm conditioned to be as a male a little bit more stern on issues and topics.

So we wanted this to become or want it to become or continue to develop into a conversation between regular friends about regular topics or topics of the day and being able to articulate to the listening audience a communication that's happening between the two of us in real time, so that there are no surprises. It's not planned. It's not a set. We don't have teleprompters. We're just kind of engaging in an organic and thoughtful conversation.

Amanda Lytle: I see this as such an invitation for anyone listening to do the same because I think that there's such polarity. Like the divisiveness and division right now is just at an all-time high and I think what you're doing too is even as you're saying, there's a lot of things that bring you together and you share similar values and similar perspectives but that often – maybe the core root of it is actually far different.

So to actually model really healthy communication and dialogue back and forth that is unplanned I think is such an invitation for anyone listening to try and do the same or to seek out somewhere of safety to do it.

Jamal Taylor: Absolutely. I think one of the things and we will be going live about it is – and we both had a similar reaction for different reasons, and I think it's because of the privilege that we each bring to the world in a different way.

We watch, we were both watching the hearing today. Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson is an amazing jurist and I think that most people that are left leaning realize that. I mean I think there are even some conservative police unions judges that were appointed by our republican presidents that have given their nod to her.

I think one of the things that I realized today is that folks don't know how to have a civilized conversation given the volatility and toxicity that exist in politics. The way that Senator Hawley, Senator Cruz today engaged in questioning in the last couple of days, Senator Blackburn, engaged in the conversation with Judge Jackson is an indication of bigotry and racism in full effect.

I think the thing that flipped the switch today was Judge Jackson was grace under pressure. She refused to give them the gratitude of losing their cool like Judge – **Judge Breyer [0:22:02] [Phonetic]** at the now justices. Judge Jackson just kind of sat there and said, "OK, senator. Thank you senator." In their attempts at interrupting her, she never once pushed back. She was just what I consider to be the epitome of what a judge should be.

So we will be going live about that, but I think it's something that that's the sort of thing that I like to discuss. This polarization, the inability to be able to have an authentic conversation when there are cameras watching for the extent of performative action because people will ...

Amanda Lytle: I was just going to say performative action. Yeah, keep going. You were just about to say something else. I didn't mean to cut you off.

Jamal Taylor: No, no, no, you're fine. I think that there is a performative nature to some of this and I think that these people are better than their worst impulses but the attempt to run for president are in other instances are related to this case to get a claim, to get 20, 50, 100, a million followers. It's deeply rooted, the actions that we see for people, is deeply rooted in this intent at getting – this attempt at getting attention. Folks want attention and they are utilizing very horrible means about which to do it.

Amanda Lytle: I really want to ask you about legacy trips because even the last time that I had been in deep conversation with Rebekah, Rebekah Borucki, you two were together and I knew that you were part of these legacy trips and I know a bit about Tina. So I would really like to hear how that happened. How did that come about? What was your role in this?

Jamal Taylor: So Tina has had several of these and so she asked me to help facilitate one of the most powerful experiences of my life and if you're listening, I want to encourage you strongly to participate in those legacy trips because it does something to you.

I learned – I think our participants that joined our session learned – Rebekah Borucki did some amazing meditation and reflection with the participants in conjunction with me. We had a really powerful opportunity to engage each other and learn more about each other in person.

One of the things that amazes me about Rebekah Borucki in the context of that trip is the ability that she has to improvise so powerfully and she's so humbled. It is something to work for in this work of Love On Purpose.

So in engaging that trip, we had a really powerful experience, and this is the thing that I think the crux of this is Tina Strawn is just amazing and the work that she's doing. I can't wait for her book to get published. The work that Tina is doing is amazing.

But that trip offered the opportunity for people to learn together because I don't always get it right and there was feedback that I was given on the trip relative to things that I didn't get right.

I was able to internalize them because the trip just opens an opportunity for people to authentically be without judgment. Not to mention the powerful stories of people, of black people in this country that have so powerfully mobilized, that have given their lives, that have lost their lives in an attempt toward justice. It's just really powerful and unique and I will tell you – they will tell me about it. That I wept. Not cried. I wept the whole time.

Every time I got back to my room, I wept because I realized that many people don't know the horror of these stories. So when people say or talk about racism, that it's over, it's always interesting to me because I would like to know when the memoranda came out. I guess I missed it but there was clearly some memo for people of privilege that said, OK, we're not racist anymore. We need to discontinue the use of that term. So it was a reminder of the poisons of privilege in the rot of racism.

Amanda Lytle: And how much it's not over and it hasn't gone anywhere and that there is still so much work to do.

Jamal Taylor: Absolutely, absolutely. It was on full display today with Judge Jackson. It definitely was on full display, full display.

Amanda Lytle: Absolutely, it was. OK. So now, if you were to pinpoint, you've kind of mentioned that was one of your takeaways. But even as a facilitator and as an educator myself and I know that you're in the realm of that as well, I'm super curious about what your next step was like as any – you mentioned feedback. I don't know what your feedback was. But I think that as a facilitator of anything, whether it's an online workshop or it's in front of thousands of people or in a small and intimate setting, any sort of feedback, you know, there has to be the removal of ego in order to grow from that experience. So what is something that you learned that you will carry forward into other areas that you're facilitating?

Jamal Taylor: I think it's really important to – and this is one of the things that I work on regularly. I think it's really important to realize that people's perspective, though it may not be factual and there are instances where it's not going to be factual, is their experience.

So you have to give yourself the latitude, the room, the space to accept the feedback even if you disagree with it and be reflective and sometimes it doesn't require you to have a response.

I say this a lot online. Say nothing that does not improve upon the beauty of your silence. I think we always seek to have an answer but sometimes we must pause and be with ourselves before responding.

Amanda Lytle: I love that. That has been a lot of my own personal journey. So that really hits home. A lot of mine has just been learning to bite your tongue and just sit in silence. But often how powerful that awkward silence can be both in dialogue or conversation with another person and with yourself. So much can come out of the quiet and the silence. So yeah, oh, I feel that. Jamal, I have one more question for you. Are you ready?

Jamal Taylor: Yes.

Amanda Lytle: If you were to give a shoutout to an account, a person, organization, disruptor, activist or change agent, who should we follow?

Jamal Taylor: Absolutely, absolutely say and this is not because I believe that relation to a person means anything, but I think one of the people that I follow very closely, and her book is coming out is Myisha T. Hill. The way, the love that she shows, the capacity that she has to look beyond the situation and give just powerful feedback is super important. I'm going to cheat here and give you a second person. *Louise Duran [0:28:31] [Phonetic]* is the other.

Amanda Lytle: Yes!

Jamal Taylor: *Louise* is just a beautiful soul that is unafraid. She is unapologetically who she is, and she is immensely qualified, capable. I'm not sure why both her and Myisha don't have TV shows yet because they just have all powerful – they have a powerful voice.

Amanda Lytle: Yes.

Jamal Taylor: But on different ends of the continuum. Like the two of them together would be absolutely powerful. Like on a TV show, like it would just be waiting for the next episode.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, I love these two shoutouts. I know them. Well, I don't know them well, but I know both of them. I've had conversations on the podcast with both of them and this felt really good Jamal. Thank you so much for being a guest on *The Book Stoop*.

Jamal Taylor: Well, thank you for having me and if you haven't heard, today you're loved on purpose.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, and you are too.

Thank you so much for being with us. Please be sure to check out rowhousepublishing.com/podcast for full episode transcriptions and guest image descriptions and the show notes for all the links. Talk soon.

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