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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 Tiffany Townsend.

Tiffany is a certified professional midwife connected to her ancestral land and roots. Her early experiences with her abuela, an OB-GYN, and a Dominican had her involved with birth early in her life. As a young mom herself, she saw firsthand how many misconceptions and misunderstandings there were in the birth world and committed herself to educating herself throughout the birth and raising of her first four children.

Through misconceptions, myths, and pure ignorance about Black people and pregnancy and breastfeeding, Tiffany's commitment to providing holistic support became paramount. She is proud to say that she is the first Black CPM in West Michigan, but we will talk about the importance and the unspoken weight of what that means to Tiffany today. She celebrates uniqueness and aims to create comfort through authenticity and by offering heartfelt humanity, medical, physiological, emotional, and spiritual support.

Before we jump in, I want to invite you to share *The Book Stoop* with your community. If you are loving this podcast, grab a screenshot and tag us on Instagram @rowhousepub. Every share, 5-star rating, and written review helps us find more listeners and climb the charts. So we are 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?

Tiffany Townsend: OK. So I'm probably not supposed to be reading this because the book is not out but I'm definitely checking out Brittany Carmona Holt's book.

Amanda Lytle: Yes!

Tiffany Townsend: I'm reading *Tarot for Pregnancy* right now and I love the book because I love how easy it is to – like even if you know nothing about tarot or anything, I love how she literally like makes it good for like inexperienced person and someone who is like newly like trying to understand this. And even if you don't believe in that stuff like there is so much good information in there about just pregnancy and like caring for yourself. I love that in the art there, everyone represented like I've never seen a book that has everyone represented in it from everybody, like everybody, everybody that you can think of is represented in this book. So that's what I've been reading.

Amanda Lytle: Even in the title, I remember her mentioning that it was about – was it birthing folk or birthing people? Like it was just so inclusive. Beautiful.

Tiffany Townsend: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: OK. So I want to dive into your back story here because knowing a little bit about this and about the fact that even through childhood, you had a big obsession with birth, and you were very lucky to have your abuela who was an OB-GYN. So can you take us back and tell us about how your own journey in midwifery started?

Tiffany Townsend: OK. So my abuela who passed away a couple months ago was an OB and I was very fortunate enough to be a First Generation American who is still very connected to my ancestral land and my roots and my customs and all of that and like just reclaiming that. So my mom would send us to Dominican Republic in the summers and my grandmother works so after she came home from work, there were a lot of patients, there are always people that couldn't necessarily access health care and they will come to our house, and she will care for them and give them antibiotics and do all that stuff. And I just saw that work and I was like, "Wow! That is so beautiful."

And then I got to see her kind of be in the work setting and I saw how different that was and I was like, "Oh, I want to be an OB but like only if it's this way, only if it's in the way of like being in community and caring about people and like finding that balance."

And then time went by like even from that time I was obsessed with like the baby story and like birth stories and all of that. And then I got pregnant really young, so I was 16 when I got pregnant and my grandmother came from Dominican Republic and when I went into labor, she labored with me. She was, "All right. Well, you're around 7. We'll head into the hospital." And I remember asking her, I'm like, "OK. Well, I'm 7 centimeters dilated. Why don't we just stay

here? We could stay here. You're a skilled professional. I'm a healthy person. Let's just have the baby at home."

And I never knew about home birth. I never knew about midwives. I never knew about those kinds of things because the system that I was brought up in was like you have a baby, you go to the hospital. But my spirit already knew that I will be here like at this time, which is what I find fascinating.

So long story short, I go to the hospital. And of course, all the interventions, I'm 7 centimeters. My labor started because I'm in a new place. They are like, "Well, let's get Pitocin." I got an episiotomy without my consent or knowledge. Just all the things that are really traumatic as a 16-year-old. That's a lot. My body is still developing. There's a lot that I don't understand. But my vessel, my body understood that trauma and I was like, "This is some heavy stuff."

So, I breastfed my son at 16 and I always wonder why nobody ever talked to me about lactation. I was like, "Well, you know, maybe it's because I'm 16 and they're like babies having babies." And then I had my next son and then I had my next son and then I had my daughter and I finally talked to my OB, and I was like, "Hey, I know that I breastfed on my kids when I was 16." I went to the library, and I check out these books to educate myself because regardless of my age, nobody was preparing me for motherhood and I'm not a failure.

So I was like, whatever I do, if people are going to look at me and like talk about me because I'm young, I'm going to make sure that they see that like I'm going to be a good mom. That's something that I'm not going to fail at. So I breastfed my baby. I did all the stuff. My son is a genius, AP classes like 3.5. He is a great kid. I will literally give him the earth if I could.

I asked my OB. I said, "Why did you never talk to me about lactation? You never mentioned breastfeeding. Every time I leave, you gave me like the Similac packet sample. Why don't you ever talk to me about breastfeeding?" And he was like, "Well, Black people don't breastfeed." And I was like, "Well, that's pretty messed up." Right? But of course like this is not some guy that I'm like, "You're a racist. You treat me bad." His care was decent for the hospital space.

But again, like that's how people's lives are impacted by other people's biases because if I didn't take the initiative and nobody ever talked to me about lactation and my family didn't breastfeed and there was nobody to help me with that, there would be no way or no reason that I will even desire to do that.

So that kind of put a bug in my ear that with my last baby, I had a home birth, and I was really looking for a midwife that was either Black or Latina. And I was like I don't want to have to explain my essence to people. I don't want to have to explain like the things that I say or my culture or norms to anyone and I could not find anyone. I could not find a Black home birth. It didn't exist. So I was like, "OK. Well, if it doesn't exist and I'm looking for it then clearly, other people are looking for it." And I think that birth is a healing ritual that more people that look like me need to understand and like have access to.

So I went back to school, and I did it myself. And I was like, well, I'll be the midwife of my city and I'll come back and like reclaim and all of that, our birth history as people, as autonomous healthy people that can have babies at home because we've been doing that forever. And I just went back to school and did it.

Amanda Lytle: So you went back to school after having had four kids or all five?

Tiffany Townsend: Five.

Amanda Lytle: After five you went back to school.

Tiffany Townsend: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: And so, what's the age difference between your first and eldest or I guess eldest first and youngest.

Tiffany Townsend: They're 10 years apart. *Odaya [0:08:22] [Phonetic]* who is 6 and then my oldest is 16.

Amanda Lytle: OK. Oh my goodness. So really, I guess school is still quite recent.

Tiffany Townsend: Well, I've been practicing as a licensed midwife for two years and I graduated like three and a half years ago.

Amanda Lytle: OK. And then I also really want to highlight here that you are the first Black Certified Profession Midwife in West Michigan.

Tiffany Townsend: I am.

Amanda Lytle: Can you tell me what that means to you?

Tiffany Townsend: OK. This makes me emotional because while some people find it to be like such an honor, for me, it's just a reflection of like how much work we have to do as a community. I don't know that being the first Black anything right now is like, "Yay! I'm the first Black this!" It's 2022. Are we still celebrating first?

And also, the reason that I feel that way is because we know like the inception of midwifery and what that looks like and for it to be like of home birth midwives, 2% of them are Black when like that's where we beat it and that's what the culture and norm was for me on both sides. Like on my Black-American side and on my Black-Afro Indigenous side of like the *[0:09:29] [Indiscernible]* which is Dominican Republic, that's what we did. And somebody told us this lie that that was like a thing of poor people and dirty and all this stuff and like everybody rejected it. And now, we get to see those great grandchildren and the great, great grandchildren being like, "No, we are bringing this back." And I'm proud to be a part of that for that reason.

Amanda Lytle: Oh my gosh! There's so much that we all owe to the Black grand midwives. Ugh! I feel that. Yeah, and thank you for bringing that forward.

I also wanted to acknowledge that after 600 plus births that your direction or your vision for your practice was a more holistic approach. So can you speak to that?

Tiffany Townsend: Yeah, my practice is more holistic, one, because the clinical aspect of midwifery care is just something that is embedded to us. We understand the importance of checking to make sure that things are safe, but I think sometimes we fail to realize that pregnancy, labor, birth, and parenting is a physical, spiritual, emotional, mental, like all of those things go into it.

And so if you are just looking at the blood pressure and someone's urine, you're missing so much more that you could be helping and pouring into your clients at those times because you're just looking at like, "OK, we are checking boxes. This is good. That's good. That's good." But this person is falling apart. She is about to have a mental breakdown, and nobody ever cares enough to sit down and be like, "Hey, what's going on with you? How are you? How is your spirit? How is your heart? Do you feel stressed out? Are things heavy? What – is there something we can put into place to kind of help you prioritize this?"

For me, that is more important. Right? Including the medicine of the earth like the herbs, the medicine of taking off your shoes and going for a walk in your front yard and putting your feet in the dirt, like just simple things.

So one thing for me that has been hard was like the holistic approach to that. I think that because we live in such a capitalistic society, people think they need all these things for home birth and all – like I want to have these lights and I want to have this and like focusing on like the things and not focusing on like the preparation of like what your spirit is about to go through.

And so, I'd like to encourage my clients to remember that this is holistic and those cool things that are pretty for the Instagram pictures but when the shit hits the fan and you're there, face to face within that moment of labor, like that's not going to be of any good for you. So it's good for us to do the work now so that you have the tools that you need to be able to be in that moment and be like, "I got this because I prepared."

Amanda Lytle: I love what you were just speaking to about the emotional and the spiritual and mental preparation of that in order to allow your body to fall into this rhythm where it is ready to welcome and birth a child. And having been a part of a birth just even as a photographer and witnessing the entire process start to finish, it was incredible just to allow the body to do what it's meant to do. But what I loved too is that there was the spiritual, mental, and emotional practice and check-ins there that I think really go neglected or yeah, untouched I guess in just like a traditional hospital style birth.

Tiffany Townsend: We can't touch it though. We don't have time to. Here's the thing. A lot of people are like, "We are the worst in maternal mortality for Black and Brown people and Black

babies are dying.” But I’m like, if you think about the inception, the foundation of a thing is important. And if you think about the inception of the medical system, it’s operating in the same way that it was designed to operate on people without consent in an industrialized way. And that’s what we are seeing. We are still seeing the violence of what that was in the beginning. We are still seeing it now. And we are still seeing the targets of that violence still being targeted now.

Now, is the racism as overt and opened? For those who don’t have to experience it, maybe. But I think it’s important to understand like no, no one should be surprised that a system that is founded on practicing medicine and surgeries and all these things on Black bodies for free without consent or anesthesia is harming us today. Who is – can we be shocked by that? It’s industrialized. So in that sense, there’s a problem.

But also, doctors have productivity. And if you have productivity, you have numbers and you have the tools and the means to make things go in your favor. Why wouldn’t you do that? Why wouldn’t you use Pitocin induction unnecessarily? Why wouldn’t you give somebody a caesarian so that you can get a full night of rest when you have a whole day of work the next day?

There are human aspects of like, “Of course, we are going to cut corners,” and we are seeing the result of like all the corners we’ve been cutting for so long in birth.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, great point. That makes me curious about – I have a little bit of an idea having come on some of your lives and stuff, but I want you to talk about what it is that you bring into your practice? Like how do you show up?

Tiffany Townsend: OK. So first, I think that it’s important to know that everybody is unique, right? So that is why I spend so much time getting to know who I am taking this journey with, because, because we live in capitalism, we charge. If things were different like it will be an exchange of service that money couldn’t put – there’s no price to the work that I do.

So what I bring to the table is what is needed by that client because I take the time to get to know them when we have our hour-long appointment. But I’m also a Reiki master so like I bring physical touch. I’m not the midwife that’s like, “OK, call me when you’re pushing, and I’ll come catch your baby and leave.” I’m wiping your butt. I am massaging your back. I’m reminding you of the things that I know you needed to hear because we’ve been talking about it. I’m relaxing your forehead. Relax your forehead. Massage – like mothering.

And it really just depends. Some people just need me to sit there and make eye contact with them and let them know like, “You’re doing great.” Other people need to be mothered. And so, what I bring is going to depend on what I feel is needed in that space and it’s never the same for anybody. Everybody needs something different. Everybody needs reassurance in a different way. And honestly, there’s not very many people that I’ve done births for that I don’t remember, that I don’t still think about, that I don’t still send my love to because it’s more than just the like, “You catch my baby. Bye.” Like that’s such a sacred moment and there’s a lot that happens in that space.

So I how show up depends on, but I always show up prepared to hold that space. I think that is important like on that ride that I'm cleansing myself of whatever I might have had going on at home with my own family and my own children because I have five and you know how that can be and just making sure that I'm coming in like knowing what the work is and the work is to put aside myself and to hold the space for somebody going through this journey.

Amanda Lytle: I love that idea of the cleansing yourself just even energetically before entering another person's space.

Tiffany Townsend: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: So you mentioned earlier that you're moving.

Tiffany Townsend: I am.

Amanda Lytle: And so what sparks the move?

Tiffany Townsend: So when I was in Grand Rapids, while I'm finishing up and selling my house and things here, I really wanted to be a part of bringing forth more Black midwives and so I offered things like free preceptorship and things like that. A lot of preceptors charge for that service, and I just couldn't find anybody that could take the time. *[0:16:32] [Indiscernible]* You cannot work. You have to be on-call. It is a privilege to be here and like I'm one of the people that wouldn't have been here without community support.

That being said, in Columbia, I have a friend that is entering her third phase of midwifery school so I'm going to go down there and help her finish up so she can be another Black licensed midwife in South Carolina. So I'm going because I want to make more Black midwives and I know that the impact and the ability that I have to do that there is greater than what I can do here.

I am so sad that they wouldn't have anybody that's *[0:17:07] [Indiscernible]*. I hope that need is filled but maybe somebody from South Carolina that I've trained up can move up here and take that spot.

Amanda Lytle: Yes. So is that kind of like you getting to work as a mentor in the process?

Tiffany Townsend: So this would be like me being a teacher, just like if you are a hairstylist, you can come in and do an apprenticeship at a salon. They are basically working alongside me as a midwife and learning the trade of how to do prenats, how to run a practice, what needs to be in your birth bag, having all the tools so that when they are ready to graduate and start their own practice, they have the clinical experience because a lot of schools are like online, or you have a whole separate preceptorship. Our clinic – what will be clinical for a doctor is what preceptorship is for student midwives.

Amanda Lytle: OK. So I want to go back to some of these incredible credentials that you have too because besides being a CPM, I mean even into lactation. So obviously, your personal

experiences there with lactation had kind of I guess piqued your interest in wanting to become a consultant as well. So, tell me a little bit more about what it is that is under the umbrella that you carry with you in your practice.

Tiffany Townsend: OK. So I carry all the blood pressure Doppler, fetoscopes, stethoscopes, I carry meds, IV bags, all of that. But on top of that I carry herbs. I carry tinctures. I carry all kind of things because you never know what could happen. But I also bring along like holistic because I've trained in Mexico with Indigenous midwives. I learned that medicine like my clients get *binded* [0:18:48] [Phonetic] after birth. There are other traditional healing things that I bring in like the *herida* [0:18:54] [Phonetic] for some clients and just those kind of things because again, midwifery is more than just coming in and catching a baby. It's making sure that the pregnant person is health through that they're held and supported during, and then in their parenthood, they are also supported and set up. And that's our way of filling the parents cut back up after birth.

So there is so much. And again, it just depends on what people need and what they are comfortable with. I know some people think about some of these traditional rituals and they are like, "Oh my God! I can't do that because it's bad," or whatever. I don't push any services on anybody. But I do think it's important to acknowledge that our ancestors knew that there was something to sitting down and resting and healing for the first 40 days postpartum.

Amanda Lytle: Oh my gosh! And how infrequently that actually happens? How it's just like the hustle bustle right back to life.

Tiffany Townsend: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. Oh my goodness. So in your personal practice then, how long do you kind of linger I guess even energetically with a birthing person who you've worked with?

Tiffany Townsend: OK. It depends like I have some 5-year-old babies that I'm still in contact with their families today. Like when I go to Mexico, I hang out with them. When I'm Texas or New Mexico, like we get together. I've even had a client gave birth in my house like we are – some of these relationships are very, very intimate. I come into my house and I'm like, "One of my babies is born here." You know what I mean? Like one of my client's babies is born in my house. And how long we are connected? I don't know. Hopefully, forever for some of them.

Amanda Lytle: I love that. I didn't realize you had one in your own home. That's pretty special. So you had a pretty big interview with NPR. Tell me about that.

Tiffany Townsend: I did. Michelle who is a reporter for their network reached out to me and she asked me, she said, "Hey, what do you think about giving me some information about midwives and doulas and how they make an impact? And do you have a client that maybe will be interested in doing this interview with you?" And I'm like, "Oh my God! Yes, I just had a birth like two days ago. Everything is really fresh and the day that you want to interview, she is going to be in town. Let me just reach out."

So, I reached out to Nova, and she was like *of course*. And it was just beautiful to for me have the voice of my client kind of highlighted and her whys, why she chose home birth and how special was it for her to have a home birth midwife who look like her, understood her, understood her motivation for why she was doing this in the first place, and how that was just so special for her. And so, it just took my breath away to have that moment to be able to kind of share about what I do as a midwife but also have my client highlighted. I was so, so proud.

And the pictures on the article are so cute and the national – the story that aired nationally like my cousins from all over were calling me like, “Oh my God! We heard you on NPR.” And I was like, “This is crazy.” When I got into this work, I wanted to make an impact, but I just didn’t understand that it will be in this type of the way. I thought I will be behind the scenes like doing this work. But just having people acknowledge like this hard, hard work that I’ve done and like the sacrifices that me and my children have made for me to even be here is just so – it’s so important to me.

Amanda Lytle: I want to highlight that too. That I have lots of people out there that have sacrificed a lot to be in this space with children and chase a career, to chase something that truly gives back to the greater good. And I just want to acknowledge you in that, and I really think that that is – it’s super empowering. And I also think that it’s showing other people. How do you know that you can be it if you don’t see it? And you are just like really putting a stamp on the fact that it does take sacrifice, massive sacrifice with your family, with your kids, with yourself, with your time, with your body, with your energy to essentially give back. So ugh! Yeah, so just so much acknowledgment and so much respect and so much love for your journey.

But in that, I really wanted to highlight that recently, you did take some downtime just to recoup. And so if you could just speak to the importance of rest because I think now more than ever with this go go go and as you mentioned capitalistic mentality that – yeah, could you just speak to how important rest is?

Tiffany Townsend: Rest is really important. Last year, in end of May I believe it was, I was just getting back from Dominican Republic, and I got home and like everything was normal. And I was working and doing everything. And then one day, like I just could not breathe, and I was like, “Oh my God! Somebody go get my oxygen from the car because I would rather die here than go to the hospital.” Right?

And so by chance, my mom happens to be swinging by my house and caught me like I couldn’t breathe. And so she was like, “I think you need to go in.” And I’m like, “Well, let’s just see if the oxygen will help me breathe.” And it didn’t. So we went into the hospital and of course nobody believed me. They told me I was having a panic attack. They had me waiting in the lobby like for about 5 hours. My mom kept going up. I was like literally passing out and coming back.

So finally, get seen and find out that I had a pulmonary embolism. So, I literally almost died, and I was like, OK, I took a little bit of time off but if I’m going to be honest, I’m not going to act like I took care of myself like I would have told my clients to because that’s not what I did. I

took my medicine and I stayed in the hospital. I think I was admitted for like 7 days before I discharged myself.

I went back to work. I did go back to work like two weeks after that. I was supposed to take like 6 months off of work. But the nature of this work didn't allow for that. So in that, I have incorporated better habits to take care of myself so that I am able to rest as I'm able to and I'm able to take care of myself better. That was just an eye-opener for me to like, yeah, you're young but like if you don't take care of yourself and if you don't listen to those little things your body is telling you like you could put yourself at risk for something more and more serious than what you think.

Amanda Lytle: Ugh! That's terrifying.

Tiffany Townsend: Bilateral pulmonary embolism. So there were embolisms in both lungs.

Amanda Lytle: Oh my gosh! And then you said too, you discharged yourself you said.

Tiffany Townsend: I did. I did.

Amanda Lytle: And then you went back to work two weeks later.

Tiffany Townsend: Yes. And June was a busy month. I think I did 9 births that month. It was hard.

Amanda Lytle: I bet.

Tiffany Townsend: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: So I have two more questions for you. One of which is just because we are on The Book Stoop podcast and I know that you are creating so much content online and you're pumping out some funny stuff but also some really serious, heavy-hitting stuff, which I really appreciate. But I'm curious about writing. How does writing show up in your life? Is it something that you're interested in moving into? Is writing a book on the radar?

Tiffany Townsend: Yes. So I have been into writing since I could remember. I'm a Taurus so I am a figure it out by myself type of person like I don't want to have to ask or do anybody. So I really use writing for healing for myself. And as the years have evolved, I have really enjoyed writing and I definitely am thinking about writing a book and that's something that I am currently working on, and I cannot wait to share more details about the title and what it's about and who my audience hopefully is for this book. I think everybody will benefit from just reading the story.

Amanda Lytle: I'm already excited. [Laughs] I'm also a Taurus too so I can feel that vibe of just the writing being the healing.

Tiffany Townsend: I'm like, dear diary. [Laughter]

Amanda Lytle: I know.

Tiffany Townsend: They saw me again today.

Amanda Lytle: My gosh! Well, actually, when we were speaking about the energetics about energy healing recently so when I was just a couple of weeks ago talking to my host mom from Argentina and she was talking about having a journal specifically for your guides, just to write down questions that you are trying to sort out in life and just wait for the messages to come. And it's almost like a beautiful combination of intuition, projection, reflection, guides, channeling, everything, all in one. And it has been a beautiful practice. It has been really – it has been bringing a lot more clarity than I could have ever anticipated like in its own specific place to write and track that.

Tiffany Townsend: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. Oh, OK. This is great. Thank you so much for your time. I have one last question for you. If you had the opportunity to give a shout-out to someone, an account, a person, an organization, a disruptor, an activist, or a change agent, who would it be?

Tiffany Townsend: Uh-uh-uh. That's so hard. OK. This is who it would be. It would be Stephanie Mitchell who is @doctor_midwife on IG. I love her. And the reason that I will say her is because I have rarely seen a Black woman be authentic in the way that she is online and like not be afraid of the consequence of like what it means to not like speak this way or be like, "Hi, this is Tiffany and I'm here to do this work." She is really like authentic in who she is like the way that she educates online, the things that she calls out that is happening like in the birth world and around the world. I just have a lot of respect for authenticity, and she is just somebody who I think really exemplifies that online for me. So that will be my person.

Amanda Lytle: Tiffany, thank you so much for joining us and being a guest on *The Book Stoop*. This has been amazing.

Tiffany Townsend: Thank you. Thank you for having me. I can't wait to come back and talk about my book.

Amanda Lytle: Yes! Oh my gosh! Me too! [Laughs]

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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