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Episode Transcript

Wisdom of Small Joys

September 9, 2021 5pm

Nandi Comer: Hello. My name is Nandi. I'm connecting with you from Detroit, the land of Anishinabe people and I am very excited to welcome you all to the Allied Media Projects Seeds Fall Series. Today's event is called Wisdom of Small Joys and we are so -- I'm just so excited that we get to share this space today with Ross Gay and adrienne maree brown. This event is live captioned and we have ASL interpretation. The recording will become available on AMP's YouTube channel in a little bit. So we encourage you during this session to share your questions, we're going to be asking a lot of things of our guests today but also share your love. Say hi. Say hi to your friends in the chat. I'm sure there's a lot of people you recognize and make some new friends. Today we're going to get the whole thing started with -- before we start we're going to start with Ross. Ross is going to share a poem.

Ross Gay: Hey. It's good to be with you all. I'm glad to join you. I'm going to read this. It's actually a little essay. Is that okay? It's very short. It's called Pulling Carrots from the book called *The Book of Delights*. Today we pulled the -- so let me just tell you real quick the way this book came about is just I was like having a nice day one day, you know, and I was like I'm going to write an essay about this nice moment. I said let me write an essay, quick, boom, a bird flew in my ear and said, "no, no, write an essay every day for a year about something that delights you," so I did that. This is one of those essays that that bird told me to bring.

'Pulling carrots'

Today we pulled the carrots from the garden that Stephanie sewed back in March.

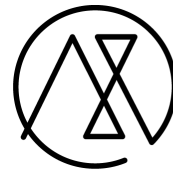
She planted two kinds.

A red kind shaped like a standard kind and a squat orange kind with a French name.

A kind I remember the packet company called a market variety.

Probably because like the red kind it's an eye catcher and sweet which I learned nibbling a couple of both kinds like Bugs Bunny as I pulled them.





The word kind, meaning type or variety, which you have noticed I have used with some flourish is among the delights.

For it puts the kindness of carrots front and center in this discussion, good for your eyes, yummy, et cetera.

In addition to reminding us that, kindness and kin have the same mother.

Making to those who are kind our kin.

To whom even those we might be and that circle is big. These are kinds I'm thinking as I snip the feathery green tops making my way through the pile, holding the root in one hand, feeling the knobs and grains, the divets where they have grown against a rock or some critter nibbled, or four of five of the red kind that have almost become two carrots. Carrot legs almost in need of some petite pantaloons.

The utterly forgettable magic of the carrot which applies as well to the turnip and radish and garlic and potato and onion and ginger and turmeric and yam and sunchoke and shallot and salsify and maca and sweet potato.

Is it because some of the food resides under the ground it probably had to be discovered, uncovered.

After the discovering and the uncovering choosing which ones to replant and replant and replant and replant and replant and replant and replant.

Until there was the long red kind I'm brushing the soil from.

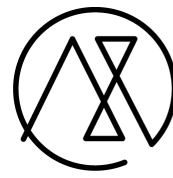
Until the squat kind piling up at the bottom of the basket. It was kindness. They are our family.

Nandi: Yes, yes, yes. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you for kicking us off that way. That's definitely the way that I think of this work, this work that you all do. There's a kind of -- there's a kindness in the way that both you and adrienne write and you share with the world and also you started us off with something that I was already going towards when I was thinking about preparing for this and that is within the natural world and how you two -- I just have to say I've been thinking about having you all talk to each other for a long time and part of it is because I've been thinking about how nature shows up, how it doesn't just show up, it drives you all's work but very differently. So I wanted you all to speak to that but also in thinking about how it also feels like a fleeting thing for a lot of us as readers. So how do you as writers, who are constantly in your day-to-day-- how are you finding ways to come back into that smallness of nature, to drive the work that you find most important in your practice?

adrienne: Well, first of all I just had to say hi. I am very excited to be here.

I'm a fan of both of your work and have you on my bookshelf, I pulled your book down today Ross and was just sitting with it. And I was there when y'all were talking a little while back when Nandi's last book came out and I was in the bathtub watching y'all talk and being like when I grow up I want to be talking with them. So all my dreams are

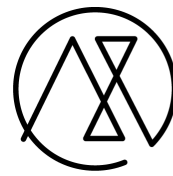




coming true right now. I love this question. I recently moved as you know from Detroit after 12 years of being there down to Durham, North Carolina. My life right now is very much around nature. Like being in a relationship with nature in part because my sweetheart is a 1st grade teacher and we have a tortoise and she previously was the one who took care of the tortoise most of the time. But now she leaves the house at 6:30 in the morning and the tortoise isn't really ready to do their thing until 10:00. At 10:00 I take him outside and I have to be aware of: is it raining? Is it a good time for the tortoise? Eventually we may get them their own house outdoors but right now they sleep in the garage. They are very -- you know, they're a tortoise who has been in a house with us during a pandemic. They are like, 'I like to be hand fed.' They are fancy tortoise. So we're experiencing the outdoors together. And I've never actually paid this much attention to the weather and like, 'did you poop?' and 'what's the nature of that poop?'- 'is that a good poop or not a good poop?'- or all those kinds of things. I'm just like it slows me way down to be just like, your care is in my hands and your environment I have to make sure it's clean and it's good for you and I have to make sure the sun is shining on you and that you're not cold because they are cold-blooded. They have to kept warm. All of that is really shaping me. I find that almost every time I come in from being outdoors there's a poem available or a song available that wasn't there before, right? That just like comes from -- like the other day I saw two cranes out with the tortoise. These two cranes were in a mating dance and one of them was like, 'I'm really not interested in you,' but the other was like, 'but I'm so interested in you.' They just kept hopping around and hopping around. I was like I want to write about the love story of that. I'm like 'will the crane that's interested win?' 'will the crane that's not interested leave?' 'will they just have a brief affair?' like what's going to happen with these cranes. So I feel like nature is providing most of my content these days and it has been for a while but now it feels more explicit. Like more directly. It's great.

Ross: I love that. I love that- I can't remember how you said it but it was like -- when I was walking with the tortoise I saw the two cranes... it was just like... awesome. It's like it's interesting to think about the ways. You know, if we're attending to -- you know, if we're paying any attention to the ways that our lives are made possible. Which is like, you know, like we breathe the air, we drink the water, you know, we do all these things that are made possible of course at every turn and every second by, you know, what we call "nature" but what we really know is us. And it is like sort of, you know, I think we have this concern or love or fascination in common. It's like a mycelial understanding. For me, it's like everything is fabriced together. So that for me it's like -- so it's like part of my practice is to be like -- of course not -- it's not always -- it's not always at the level of consciousness but part of my practice is just to sort of remember like, 'oh, right, this tree outside of this little studio is not like in a kind of theoretical way or hypothetical way making my life possible.' This tree is my life. And so you know that as





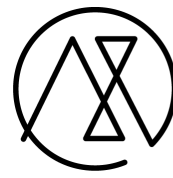
an attempt, always sort of an aspiration - breathe- aspire. Feels totally threaded through the work. Right now, I am interested in the work of joy - and to me, joy, has everything to do with those connections.

Nandi: You all shared particular moment about what's giving you joy, what brings you joy. I think about coming away from your own writing how we walk away with this joy, inspiration and we think about how we're going to go out and change. So in just like a very simple way other than the tortoise and your tree. What is giving you joy? What in the work you are doing right now turned to - that is my joy right now.

adrienne: I keep looking to Ross, like oh I can't wait for your answer. Then I'm like, oh right, I'm a panelist. This past weekend was my birthday weekend and I turned 43 and I -- I always do like some reflection. Like this doesn't matter to anyone in the world but me that this is my marker for life- except for my mom and dad and stuff. I woke up Friday morning -- I was writing fiction for the first time in my life being published. I was floating around all day because I received the box of books. It means a lot. I've spent about 25 years doing movement work, facilitation, executive director, all these kind of things and I really thought I would spend my whole life there. All along there was this little voice that's like 'you're a writer' and writing is what brings you joy and you have to do it and it doesn't matter if you don't make any money and have to do it on the side. So I did writing on my side of life. I woke up early, I stayed late. I wrote while people were in small groups. And I did my writing that way, but fiction required a different focus. And getting that box of books felt like -- it feels -- it's emotional amount of joy that it produced in me. I'm going to share this because we're here in a small joys category. I've always been like an orgasm a day person, I bank it, I write it about it, this will make your life better. After Friday I was like I don't need an orgasm a day. I was like I didn't even have an orgasm. It wasn't that I'm not interested in sex or intimacy, I was so joyful with the satisfaction of this experience of writing. It never occurred to me that that could be orgasmic. When the orgasms came it was great. It was very like this could be my whole life. This joy can be the whole container and it's because I listened to a small voice, not all the accolades of the thing I was doing already that I was good at. But the small voice that was like, you know, you might be horrible at writing fiction but you still have to write it. You just have to. So that's what is giving me joy right now. It's like very, very present.

Ross: So beautiful. That -- yeah, love even thinking about even like the -- when I think about joy I think of it as being a way that we sort of disassemble into each other and we become the assembly of each other or something like that. And in a way that's -- I think maybe that's what orgasm is-- it's a becoming else, becoming otherwise. It's a kind of merging. I think of like, oh, right, so the -- this new book in the world that you've been





working with all this time, which is also kind of a gift, it's also kind of a merging, you know, a gift from you and you know to you from you, all these. It's so beautiful. I feel like that's what, you know, as I start to think -- as I'm thinking more and more about joy, I think that that is one of the sort of components of it. That it is -- it's like these moments where you're like, oh, this thing that I thought was this discreet me, it really isn't. And again, the way the light dapples into here constitutes my existence and it's not separate from me. Or if the leaves do something, it's like, 'oh it's going to rain.' That means that we're -- you know, or the squirrel in the tree is like doing this thing with the squirrel's tail. Maybe if I can know what the squirrel is doing but I know the squirrel's tail is, we're talking. It sort of troubles the idea of discreet self. I've worked with a community orchard here in Bloomington for years and Nandi also worked when she was here in Bloomington with this orchard. It's a beautiful project, like a bunch of people got excited about making an orchard and this young -- she was a college student actually kind of finishing an undergraduate project. She was like a grown college, she was like 28 or something. And maybe she was 30, I don't know. She was doing a thesis. The thesis was on food security and questions like that. The proposal was an urban orchard. She through various steps and labor she was able to get this proposal for an urban orchard to the city, the city approved it, a bunch of people sort of got involved. I was one of the zillions of people involved in this project. Which has been one of the most beautiful projects in my life because it was a sort of-- I don't know these people at all and by the end it was like not only did I know them, I loved them. But we were dreaming on this thing that was -- it was kind of impossible quite to imagine but we were dreaming it together anyway. And the other thing that's so beautiful about the project was that we were -- you know, fruit trees are a thing. You don't get fruit off a fruit tree in a year usually. 5, 10 years. We actually just put in some nut trees and that could be 100 years to full production, which is hopeful. But fruit trees, you know, like 10 years down the road they will be in full production. And we -- so part of the delight and what I feel like is sort of joy of this project was that we were making this thing that we would very possibly never see the fruits of actually. You know, whether it means we would just be gone or like really gone, like gone in some other kind of way which some of the people who were, you know, involved in the project, they are gone, they are no longer on this side. The other day it was blackberry time and we were getting some blackberries and harvesting blackberries and there were -- not only were there like grown people like harvesting who I don't know who the hell they were but just like people roaming around harvesting, getting blackberries, they were talking about what they are going to make. So it's 10 years later. So we planted this in 2010. Or we planted it in 2011. So it's 10 years. 10 plus. And there -- so everything is in production now. Stuff that's going to die, the plum trees showed trouble. So those are mostly gone. The apples are big, the peaches are big, the





blackberries are always abundant, they are doing this. There were these people who I did not know who were eating the fruit that we planted, which was kind of delightful. Like a miracle. Like holy shit. But even more, you know, was that there were these -- you know, like some crew of kids ran in there and they were eating these blackberries and they were like what are these things. They are eating all these blackberries and they're kind of scared to eat them, asking 'what is that?!' And I was like we did it. We did it. These kids, I could have never dreamt of, they are eating something that we made, that we planted together. And it was given to us, you know. That's one.

adrienne: I just have to say something I love about this, the writing process for the book I was talking about was also a 10-year process. And so there's something here about the delight of fruition and many hands worked on it. You know, many hands held it and fed back and believed in it and shaped it and anyway, there's something there that is intriguing.

Nandi: Wow. Yeah. One, thank you so much for telling the story of the orchard. I remember shovelling compost and that stinky little field. So it's so good to hear. I can't wait to visit it again. I'm thinking -- well before we -- before we move on I have to say the chat is blowing up. We have to like just acknowledge the fact that people are showing y'all love, people are giving y'all just responding. I see life-gasm in the chat. So there's a lot of -- Tina B. is here. There's a lot of people in the chat, people that we all share in common. So I just wanted to say hi to our community online even though we feel like we're in this small space talking to each other, we're talking to a bunch of people. I want to invite you all online to please ask questions. I do have more questions but I want this to be participatory. Please share your thoughts and questions. We will try to get to them all. Towards the end we're going to have adrienne leave us with a spell so don't log off just yet. We want to make sure that we all get a little bit of that blessing. So you were talking about like how it's interesting how you're talking about the garden and planting seeds for future selves. I always think about the nature of gardening, planting, the work that you're doing and directly the work that Adrienne engaging in with the Afrofuturism. So this question is about the future and how you see -- like we have a struggle that we're going through right now and how we're able to maintain our life and our livelihood. I'm curious about how the work -- what this futurist space is that you're trying to build. What is it that you imagine for the future? Like what is our next celebration in 2090? Like what is our joy? Where are our joys being focused in our future? What is the future you imagine? Took you off guard on that one?

Ross: I mean, you know, that's a beautiful question and a really optimistic question too. I feel like -- you know, I can say for myself that I feel more and more capable -- capable might be the wrong word. But more and more indebted might be the better





word for having people to show me how it is that we make our lives, each other's lives possible, you know. And I feel like in a way that in terms of imagining sort of a future I feel like the -- I feel very much inclined to be like we are always -- I feel very much inclined to be like we need to study our beloved's who have taught us to love one another. That's what I feel like. In all these ways that we often do not necessarily witness or, you know -- maybe we witness all that kind of small way but we don't necessarily be like, oh, that's called -- making each other's lives possible. And by that I mean like I mean like the most mundane daily stuff. I really mean like when someone drops off a thing of canned tomatoes. You know, I mean the most basic fundamental elemental stuff that we do all the time that we don't necessarily elevate to the -- to a kind of name, you know, to -- I mean, we don't necessarily call it mutual aid but it's sort of perpetual, you know. It's all happening and we're not saying it, you know. Can I just -- you know, can I share this thing. I see you doing this. It's kind of heavy for you. Can I help? Like boom, boom, boom. You know, so in a way like my -- you know, just my question I guess is how will we just continue to study that and practice that and understand that in the midst of things. Yeah. Yeah. I'll leave it there.

adrienne: I like those thoughts. You know, my first thought went to the mundane or to the simple. I feel like I've been kind of astounded by how satisfying life can be when it gets simpler, when purpose feels clear and when there's less dodging about in dishonesty. Just when you're more clear, like you said I see that you need help and you can honestly say, no, I don't, yes, I do. Like whatever the truth is. I feel like my motive of being a futurist right now is really being a nowist. Like in a different way than I've ever experienced before. Like something has really landed during this pandemic around how much -- how good control has felt to me, like trying to control others and control myself and control things that are beyond my control. I was like, oh, I can do that. I think a lot of my futurist activity was actually trying to control the whole future. I was like the current is out of control but I can just control how people think in the future somehow if I where I -- if I write a better story and put out a better theory. The pandemic forced me to relinquish control. The future is now. It's all happening right now. The future is a -- you know, Octavia said it, "tomorrow is the child of today." Whatever will happen is from what we are being. So I'm really into like how am I being, am I being honest, am I being true, am I being loving. I think about that all the time. With my partner, with my nibblings, with my family. I'm like -- it transforms everything. Like stop -- like when I'm not trying to control them and I'm just loving them and I thought I was loving them before with the control behaviors and it turns out I was judging them and boxing them and kind of giving them a narrow role in my story, which is a human thing to do...is to give the whole world a very narrow role in our story. So that might be the other piece around my futurism is I feel like I'm really decentralizing the human narrative in the future of life. Whether that means we evolve into a different species where love is able





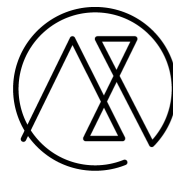
to be more central and our sensations and our feelings are able to guide us more directly into relationship and into action, or if humans are not actually compatible with the Earth that the octopuses get to be the ones kicking it in 90 years and it's all good. I just recently got to watch Star Trek 4 again in theaters. It came back into theaters for like two nights. I was reminded that I had forgotten one part of the story line is there's this species that -- species that can come and they only speak in a way that the whales understand and the whales are extinct and they have to time travel to talk to the aliens or some form of species which is some form of whales. I was so thrilled by it. There's nothing new under the sun, as Octavia says, but there's new suns. I love the idea that there's other world and it's life and it's our work, right, in the current time I feel like our work is to become compatible with life, to become compatible with the Earth by listening to her and, yeah, dropping in, which is less bombastic, which requires less time on the Internet and less time in performance. You know, more time just being with others.

Ross: I like that. You know, dropping into the Earth and becoming as we are the Earth, you know. And it's just that -- it feels like part of -- if I were to again, part of the witnessing of something is, you know, the witnessing, you know, or participating and/or practicing the acknowledgment of that. You know, how we acknowledge that, which is to say how do we constantly practice and all these other ways witness and acknowledge that we are -- we are the Earth.

adrienne: Exactly. Right. So this iteration of Earth is so committed to being like I'm not but I am. You know, when I was facilitating I used to feel this thing flowing out of the palms of my hands and flowing through my feet and I would tell people root down into the Earth but it's like actually now I understand it's the Earth reminding me that I'm not disconnected, that it's flowing through me. You can feel the weather systems that way. You can feel so much that way where once you begin to feel you feel everything. I know people write about this, but maybe that's the next evolutionary step remembering that we are Earth and the sensations or the way that we know that. That can be really scary, you know, if we have such a trauma legacy around harm and being like I don't want to feel the sensations that might help me remember that harm or open me to that harm. But for me it's been so healing to know there's so many other sensations. Actually in a way those sensations can flood my system and cleanse my system. It doesn't take away what happened. There's scars, bruises, marks. The totality, the whole is reconnected. Yeah. Or it never was disconnected but now I know, now I remember.

Ross: Yeah. So often the scars are the detritus of attempting not to be the Earth. It's the violence that arrives from separation.





adrienne: Yes. Yes.

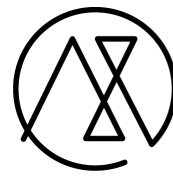
Ross: You can think of some of our particular histories of being the decent -- descendents of enslaved people. The Earth had no part in that. Or in -- well the humans were making their little mistakes, big mistakes. By trying not to be the Earth inflicting this brutality upon all these -- upon the Earth which includes --

adrienne: Right. It's that part, Ross. You cannot -- I don't think you -- when you get connected back into that Earth way I don't think you can cause harm that is not directly tied to survival. You know, I watch all my nature documentaries and everything and I'm like, you know, in the wild like the lion will kill the zebra and the zebra might be mad, right but the lion is killing that zebra to feed its family. There's a rhythm to it, a cycle to it, some respect to it. Only by disconnecting from that can you say I'm going to cause harm that has nothing to do with my survival, I'm going to cause harm that actually doesn't personally benefit me in any way. I'm going to cause harm -- I'm going to begin to get pleasure from harm, that to me the ultimate disconnection. I feel like that's what our society is swimming in right now. That's what we have to recover from, right. Like those two things can't coexist, you know. We actually have to untangle some things, right, and anyway, Nandi we're going off. You know, yeah, we have to -- I do feel like that's the work right now. That's where I'm like I'm an abolitionist. That's where it is rooted in. All of us are here. None of us are disposal. None of us are innocent. We are all living and we are figuring this stuff out and we have to do it in relationship with each other, not in domination and hierarchy over each other.

Ross: Yeah.

Nandi: Y'all can go off. Y'all are really going in is what y'all are doing. You're digging deep and I love it. I have a lot of questions but I'm going to actually look to the chat for a couple of questions right now. There are several questions about your writing process so I'm going to kind of group those together if the audience doesn't mind. It's a combination of Sara Greenman, Carlata and Karina. They were all asking about both of your writing processes. There's one question that's like, you know, adrienne you mentioned each time that you write outside you come in with a poem. Can you elaborate on how you connect your creative life to the rhythm of the seasons and Earth's natural cycles? I'm going to also tack on a little bit of what Carlata asked. What do you recommend to those of us who are still listening to the voice that we're not ready to write, experience joy in those pleasures in terms of scarcity, in terms of money and things like that? Karina asked what kind of methods you use to archive those joys. Those are associated with writing process, how do you archive, what are your recommendations to folks who feel like they don't have resources for continuing the

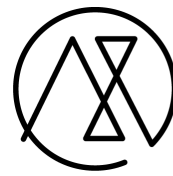




writing process and how is Earth's cycling influences, out of those cycles influence your writing?

adrienne: Sweet. I'm into this conglomeration of questions. I want to start with the scarcity one, because this has been such a life lesson for me. For the longest time the narrative, the thing I was telling myself I don't have enough time, I don't have enough time to write and love and be friends and do all the work I'm called to do. There's just not enough time. I don't have time to do Earth things, they move so slow. I don't have time to be in agreement with everybody because that takes forever. It was like a scarcity of everything. My therapist was like, 'do you recognize that that scarcity of everything is impacting everything?' Like so I was -- I had come up with this commitment for myself, I'm a small Earth loving myself. My therapist was like, there's nothing small about you. What is this commitment to small scarcity thinking? There's enough of you. It was such a wooh, one of those things just clicked and I was like there's enough of me for the life I'm here to live. I'm the only one who is here to live it. There's enough of Nandi for the Nandi life and enough of Ross for the Ross life. There's just enough. But then it's about the choices we make and the choices we make don't determine if we have more or less enoughness but it's how we feel inside of it. They don't necessarily have more time of my life but I have made choices so that I feel very spacious inside my life. So that goes to the seasons thing and the writing and the seasons for me is like in the same way that I trust the seasons, like I trust when fall is coming, spring is going to come and I can just enjoy fall and be like, this is banging. Like this color pallet is my fav. It's my birthday season. Everything is falling down. The day of the dead is happening. I can grieve. I can actually head into winter and see the beauty of it. I can trust all of the cycles to keep cycling. And even as climate catastrophe moves, I have to keep trusting the seasons, things will keep shifting. I have to trust my writing process like that too. I don't push a project ever. I don't push a piece of writing out. I trust things to come in their season. I'll get obsessed with stuff. *Emergent Strategy* is just a season of my writing where all I can write about is blocking of birds and bees and ants and I don't want to look at anything that's not a massive communal system of insects or whatever. That was a season. Now I don't necessarily feel drawn to write about that as much. Now I'm really interested in how humans are doing all those things and how love is a connective tissue of all that. That season is here. So now the writing is there. And there's a season of musicals happening. So when I'm trying to write a poem now a melody shows up and it's like actually it goes like this. I'm like what's that. So that's the season. I can't be like now I write musicals only. I don't know. I have to trust that this is the spring of musicals, you know, and it will keep cycling around. I have to relinquish the facing the mortality feels like an important part of it. Like I'm not going to live forever. A lot of the people I love have died. I grieve them --both them--and I grieve the work that they didn't get to write or produce or make.

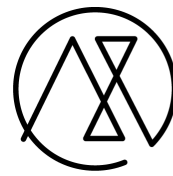




Like that's a part of how I am. You know, I think about David Blair, a poet that I loved. I want more poems from David Blair. I grieve that. It makes me pay attention to my mortality. Like David is a genius and he's not here anymore and it's not fair and that's what it is. I only get a limited time to give my offer. I better listen to what is in season for me. That's maybe the little last piece of it. Like being in season is what our body needs and what -- like that's what we should be eating, that's what we should be growing. Like trying to grow a mango in winter. It's like that's not the time. So I'm always often listening for that too. Like what's in season in my own awakening and in my own life, in my mind and I want to move towards what's ripe and I want to figure out what I need to bury and when. Because some stuff will come and I'm like that's a good idea but let me put it in the ground and it's going to stew for 10 years. It's going to sit in the ground and earthworms will poop it through a thousand times and it will make sense after that. So that's my answer.

Ross: You know, I love that. I feel like one of the things that I hear and that I am so with you on that is like even in terms of like listening to the -- as the weather changes, as the days change, as the seasons change, as climate itself changes, you know, it's still like a -- it still requires that we listen. More than ever it requires that we listen. And that feels -- in terms of sort of a practice, like a writing practice, you know, the -- you know, I teach writing and I'm always like everything I say I'm basically like, eh- it's bullshit, what I say, I don't believe that, I don't believe that. The one thing I always believe is: be precise. Be precise, you know. Whatever it is, be precise. But the other thing that I really believe is like, listen. You know, or be curious or whatever. Whatever the word is. Do not know before you know, you know. And that feels so, so vital, you know, just in terms of like a kind of creative process but also in terms of like a process of being in relationship with people. Like just you know what, I love you so much but I actually don't -- I have to trust that I don't know you totally, which is kind of terrifying and ungrounding and it's also the most beautiful thing about -- it's one of the most beautiful things about each other. Another one of the most beautiful things about each other is that we're going to die, you know. Which kind of cycles back to me this idea of joy, you know. There's this quote, I think it's one of the speeches from Samuel Beckett's play, it is, 'born astride a grave.' Again one of the practices I feel like, and this is connecting to everything that we're saying, makes me -- it makes me think that, that as a practice to sort of be perpetually understanding or remind ourselves that our beloveds are dying and we're dying, our beloveds are dying and we're dying. And not our beloveds are dying. That so-called stranger is also dying. We're all born astride a grave. Out of which what? To me, there is something radiant and profoundly sweet when we walk the Earth that way. When we are the Earth that way, you know what I mean. It seems to me that it's for sure mycelial. Here's a significant connection that we have. It's kind of





significant. Like the mycelial, what other fruity bodies. I think among the -- among fruiting bodies from that kind of approach that we're all going to die, friends, is care. I feel very, very confident of that. It's care. There's obviously an opposite one which can be brutality. But I think if we practice a certain kind of way that it -- if we acknowledge that it is in fact among our truest connections, I think care and love and actually I think the radiance of that is actually one of my definitions of joy.

Nandi: Thank you for bringing Blair into the conversation. This is one of our ancestors, one of a -- a poet who really like showed up in a lot of the allied projects conferences and is a person that we all look to from AMP. I didn't expect to hear his name so thank you for bringing him into the room. I saw in a chat that a lot of people were very appreciative of bringing him in this space. Thank you. So there are some questions that are asking about influences. I had a question too. Because I feel like any time anybody asks me about who they should be reading about, anything, they are like I'm trying to organize something or I'm trying to write poems or I'm trying to write joy, I'm like have you heard of Ross Gay or adrienne maree brown. And they say, 'no, I haven't.' I feel like I'm passing your book out all the time. But I think it's always important for us as writers, as readers to know that the person who is doing this creation, that is inspiring us, has had their own ancestors or their own mamas and papas and babas and aunties has their own inspiration for them. Who do you go to for your joy? Who are you going to for your influences? Who are the people who have helped to shape the kind of writing that you're doing?

Ross: Ummm, you know -- you know, like Audre Lorde, I have a quote in this one book of mine, "Our children cannot dream..." -- this is from *Poetry Is Not A Luxury* which is one of my most important essays and *Uses of the Erotic* also, "Our children cannot dream unless they live. They cannot live unless they are nourished. Who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different than ours." You know, so, you know, Audre Lorde, means so much to me, you know Morrison means so much to me, Jamaica Kincaid, John Edgar Wideman is a writer which I'm deeply influenced by. For some reason I had some years where I wasn't reading him. However I was reading him deeply. And then 8 years later in the last 3 years I started reading him again. I was like, oh, that's how I learned how a write a sentence, you know, John Edgar Wideman, who writes about families, fathers and sons, he writes about basketball. Really important to me. You know, lots of musicians are deeply important to me in all these ways I feel like I learn stuff, language wise, performance wise. I'm really indebted to Eryka Badu in terms of a lot of her music is really big to me. You know, John Coltrane is really important to me. On and on. I have teachers, you know, Gerald Stern is really important to me, Thomas Lux, Marie Howe, Yusef Komunyakaa...Toi Dericotte has shown me things. Her poems and book *The Black Notebook*. Rebecca Solnit is a really





important writer to me. You know, Saidiya Hartman, you know, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments* and *Lose Your Mother*, like those are both such formative books for me. Fred Moten and Stephano Harney, *The Undercommons*. I could go on and on and on, you know. Yeah. I could go on and on and on. Maybe I'll stop there. That's one of my favorite things though is just to talk about like that kind of stuff. I mean like also like Luther Vandross' cover of Dionne Warwick's *House Is Not a Home*.

Nandi: I was about to say, where Luther at because I know you love him.

Ross: The version himself is an inspiration to me. All these versions. On and on and on. You know, like Al Jirraeu's version of *Blue Rondo Ala Turk*. It's just endless. Okay. I'll stop. *The Wiz. The Wiz.*

adrienne: Don't forget *The Wiz*. You almost forgot the *Wiz* out here in these streets Ross. Like we weren't going to get over that.

Nandi: You know, I can't trust anyone who has not seen *The Wiz*, who doesn't know it. I can't trust you.

adrienne: More people are like the -- anyway. I'm not going to get into that. So I was going to -- I'm going to see if I can turn this and show y'all my ancestor wall. Can you see it, Nandi? I can point people out. Audre Lorde. Toni Morrison. Nina Simone, Octavia, of course. Grace is here, Blair is here. Maya Angelo, Prince, Malcolm X. That's some of the ancestors, it's still growing. One of the things I was doing is who are the ancestors in the lineage of my work, because as a displaced person I don't always know all of the ancestors in the lineage of my life, and so I have to imagine the tributaries that were them, somehow flow into me. I recently found out this year, Imani Perry and I found out that we're third cousins, we share an ancestor. Before we found that out her writing moved me, *Looking for Lorainne*. I want to mention one of my favorite writers who is not as widely published yet and who I think is the best living poet, Janine de Novais. People don't know her work. I would be remiss because we're on this phone call and I have every single thing that Nandi Comer has ever written and Nandi and I have gotten to work together for all this time during which she has put out book after book after book after book, that is incredible and particularly -- let me pull it out. This book [American Family] changed how I write. Yeah. This book changed how I write. You know, Nandi -- and the reason I want to say this, the thing I think you have in common with all these writers and Imani has in common with all these writers is not being scared to say here is the actual truth, here's the thing. We can feel all kinds of ways about the thing. I think before that I often used to try to write around the thing. Right. Like here's something hard and here's all the stuff around that hard thing.





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You are -- you know, I told you this when I was reading this. I can't actually read more than one poem at a time. That's a remarkable experience for me. I'm used to like consuming stuff like that. So those are some of the writers who influence me. And you Ross. Your *Book of Delights* was a freakin delight. I read it. Especially for you writing as a Black man I was so excited by the freedom I felt on the page of you just reclaiming like I am a human being, I am a human being, I'm an earthling feeling this delight. That's Blackness and that's everything. And I feel like that is -- right now it feels so important because I think identity is being shaped, you know, as the tiny lane of suffering that we share. And I feel like the reclamation that all of these artists have done has been like, oh no, identity is the place we tap into the whole humanity. We find out how have you survived, here's how I survived, here's what we're going to do to keep surviving. I feel like those are the writers that do that to me. Your face, Nandi, I love it.

Nandi: Y'all have almost made me cry on so many moments so after I get off of this I'm just going to go decompress and kind of be all in my feelings. I love both of you so much and not -- like I love your writing but we share these personal bonds and I love you. Thank you for coming and doing this. We have to wrap it up. So I'm going to start to close it out but I just want to, you know, thank you so much both of you for sharing your joys, your influences, you're letting us see these tiny parts of your lives.

But before we -- we're going to have a spell from adrienne before we close out. Before we close out I just wanted to do some acknowledgments to some folks who helped make this possible. Thank you first to all of our audience that logged in today. Thank you all and your comments, I'm sorry we couldn't get to all of your questions but thank you so much for logging in. We're going to put this video up later if you want to share it out or rewatch it. It will be on the Allied Media Projects YouTube. You can also share it. It will be out on social media and stuff, for sharing it out. I want to do a special thank you to our ASL and our cart interpreters, Jeanine and Lanette who were on today doing the ASL. Thank you so much. Our events have been recorded as I said before. They will be on YouTube in a couple of weeks. You can also learn more about future events with our bit.ly/series link. If you want to tell us what you thought about today's program please fill out our survey, [bitly/fall2021](https://bit.ly/fall2021) feedback. We will have it in the slides for you all to review. And we want to invite you to the next upcoming event. So we have Reimagining Safety which is going to be on September 23rd. We have Dismantling Barriers on October 7th. And we have a lovely curated performance of multiple for -- performers on October 24th for the Performance as Resistance program. Stay tuned to our events by signing up for our AMP newsletter on our website now over to adrienne for the spell.

adrienne: Thanks, Ross. I'm hugging you in some safe way.





Ross: Thank you. It's so good to be with you. Grateful. Grateful.

adrienne: The spell is an Unlocking Joy spell called the Radical Gratitude spell. I think that if we cast a spell it's a spell to cast upon meeting a stranger, comrade or friend working for social and environmental justice and liberation. But I think if we cast this spell as a way that we met everyone, we in 10 years could transform the world. So this is my spell.

*You are a miracle walking.
I greet you with wonder.
In a world which seeks to own your joy and your imagination you have chosen to be free
every day as a practice.
I can never know the struggles you went through to get here.
But I know you have swum upstream and at times it has been lonely.
I want you to know I honor the choices you made in solitude and I honor the work you have
done to belong.
I honor your commitment to that which is larger than yourself and your journey to love the
particular container of life that is you.
You are enough.
Your work is enough.
You are needed.
Your work is sacred.
You are here and I am grateful.*

