

[music]

0:00:00.8 Nicole Antoinette: I'm Nicole Antoinette, and this is Real Talk Radio, a podcast filled with honest conversations about everything. In today's episode you'll get to meet Amanda Jameson. Amanda is a black queer woman, communicator, and justice, equity, diversity and inclusion advocate, who is also a fellow long-distance hiker, that is how I know her. We talk about hiking, of course, as well as about Amanda's grief practice, learning not to take ourselves too seriously and more. This conversation was like some kind of emotional release for me, I think. Afterward, I was able to rest more deeply than I had in a long time, I was able to cry, and I hadn't cried in quite a while, it was almost like Amanda gave me some kind of permission that I didn't know that I was waiting for or that I needed to really feel my feelings.

0:00:49.0 NA: You'll see. Before we dive into that though, I would love to invite you to join our Patreon community, to help me continue making new episodes this year. This is a 100% listener-funded show, which means that we have no ads or sponsors. All of our guests get paid, with higher rates always paid to our guests of color and our LGBTQ+ guests and others with marginalized identities. And the money to do that, to pay our guests, our sound engineer and me, comes entirely from our Patreon community, which operates on a sliding scale.

0:01:21.0 NA: And that's the way that folks can contribute at whatever level they can from within their means, and that keeps the show going. Our Patreon isn't just a funding source for this podcast though, it is so much more than that, I feel like I actually struggle to describe what it is and all the things that we do in there, but we have a Discord community that we recently launched that folks within the community can chat with each other. We have small group virtual hangouts. I host a live reflection and journaling circle on the last Sunday of every month that's become really popular and fun, and lots of other things as well. If you love the show I bet you'd really enjoy our community. And as I said, we do operate on a sliding scale with all tiers getting access to absolutely everything regardless of how much you're able to pay. And you can find us at Patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. That's Patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. And I thank you so much for making these conversations possible. And now, on to the show.

[music]

0:02:23.3 NA: Alright, we are good to go. Amanda, welcome to the show.

0:02:26.1 Amanda Jameson: Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to be here.

0:02:29.4 NA: You've been on my little wishlist for a long time, so I'm very excited.

0:02:35.2 AJ: Yeah.

0:02:35.9 NA: This might be a weird place to start, but I'm just gonna go with it, 'cause it's what's on my mind. My word of the year for 2021, I don't know if you're a person who picks words of the year, but my word for this year is "fun".

0:02:48.7 AJ: Ooh.

0:02:48.8 NA: And I would love for you to tell me something fun, even if it's a really tiny thing that you have done so far this year.

0:02:55.1 AJ: Oh, wow. I feel like I've done a lot of little things that have been fun this year. This year's been... This year, and certainly the last couple of months of last year, have been really different for me, in that I have been forced to be more still than ever. [chuckle] And so I've taken a lot of joy, a lot of fun, out of doing cross-stitch and playing Stardew Valley, and just sitting and folding like half a dozen origami cranes, and sitting and staring at and playing with my cat. [chuckle] There's been lots of little moments of fun this year.

0:03:42.0 NA: Stardew Valley is basically the first game, like video game, I guess, we would call it, that I ever really got into, and this was only a couple of years ago, I was never really a gamer person, I never did that, and my former spouse and I, when we were going through our uncoupling process but still living together, got really into it together, and that was sort of our main bonding thing, the way we spent time together during that period of time, and went like so all in gon Stardew Valley and I have really fond memories of it, and the fact that you are playing it makes me joyful.

0:04:12.7 AJ: I just found it through one of my partners and she was like, "You really should... This is a game that you should really play. I think that it would be just really nice for you." And so, I was like, "Okay, I guess, this seems fun." And then I played essentially most of a season in one evening.

[laughter]

0:04:38.4 NA: Yeah, that's...

0:04:39.0 AJ: And I was like, "Oh, she was not lying to me. [chuckle] This is a thing that I should..."

0:04:45.2 NA: That's very relatable. I remember trying to describe something... Someone asked, I mentioned, 'cause you can get married to characters, right, in the game... People listening or already like, "What are you talking about?" But you can get married to characters in the game, or a character in the game, and someone asked how you can do that, and it's been a while, so I don't remember the exact details but I remember, it was a DM, I remember messaging back like "You have to get enough friendship hearts with them, and then once you get to that level then you go to the beach in the rain and you buy the mermaid pendant, and then you can propose..." And as I was writing it out, I'm like, "Oh, this sounds like some real weird stuff", but it's a lot of fun.

0:05:19.0 AJ: It's so much fun.

0:05:20.5 NA: If anyone's bored, we both... Plus one, plus one, to Stardew Valley.

0:05:25.3 AJ: Very soothing content.

0:05:27.5 NA: Yes, very soothing content. So, speaking of fun, in... Was it 2016 that you through-hiked the PCT?

0:05:34.8 AJ: Yes, it was.

0:05:36.1 NA: Okay, I would love for you to tell me the story of the T-Rex costume.

0:05:40.0 AJ: Okay [laughter] Yes, speaking of things that bring me joy, around Tehachapi, a little bit before, I started hiking with a group of people that would eventually become my trail family, "awoo" to them, and we were dreaming, like you do in the first few hundred miles of the PCT, what it was gonna be like when we finished. And I decided like around mile 400, I was like, "You know what, what I'm gonna do is I'm gonna get me..." I've always wanted one of those inflatable T-Rex costumes, they bring me an inordinate amount of joy, I don't know what it is about them, but just seeing them on the street or buying coffee or dressing up in Cinderella costumes, those things just... There's something about it that just brings me inordinate joy. "And what I'm gonna do is I'm gonna order a T-Rex costume to where my partner is staying, and in my last resupply box I'm gonna have him send that to me, and I am gonna dance at the monument in this inflatable T-Rex costume, that's what I'm gonna do as my celebration."

0:07:09.0 AJ: And so a couple hundred miles later, I was like, "You know what, I'm also, for myself, to get myself pumped and to keep myself motivated, because California is long, I'm gonna go ahead and get this T-Rex costume and I'm gonna keep my eye on the dancing dinosaur prize." And so I actually had to stay... I didn't initially wanna stay overnight in Stehekin, but ended up having to in order to get to the post office. And sure enough, the following day, I was very, very anticipatory, the following day it was in my re-supply box, it weighed two pounds, so I carried two pounds those last few miles up to the monument, and sure enough, I have lots and lots of pictures. The folks that I was talking with, shout out to Undercover A Game, they agreed to take so many pictures and videos of me. I felt like I was...

0:08:18.9 AJ: There weren't a ton of people there, but I also didn't wanna hog the monument, so I have a video, I believe that it's on my Instagram, if you would like to see it, and I know that it's on my website, of me just dancing in this T-Rex costume in front of the monument, doing The Running Man and... Yeah, a couple of other very silly dances.

0:08:44.9 NA: I love it, I've watched the video a couple of times and I just... Yeah, it makes me happy to see you dancing at the completion of such a huge trek, but in an inflatable T-Rex costume. So... Yes, I was wondering how that came to be. Thank you for indulging me.

[chuckle]

0:09:00.0 AJ: Yeah, for sure.

0:09:02.0 NA: I feel like some of the stuff that you've shared so far makes me wanna ask you what helps you to not take yourself too seriously, and this is 100% a selfish question, because I feel like this... I'm quite a serious person, hence choosing "fun" as my word of the year for this year, it's something I'm trying to infuse more of, but I don't know, do you feel like there's anything that helps you to not take yourself so seriously?

0:09:24.0 AJ: This is not a question that I've ever been asked, because I feel like the conversations that I have with the people that are closest to me are often like way more serious and hyper-introspective, and they're like, "Amanda, you need to chill out." [laughter]

0:09:41.0 NA: That's interesting. So obviously, I only know you through Instagram and now through some emails and this conversation, and my perception of you based on what you choose to share is of course that you're deep and thoughtful, but you just seem like a really fun person, and my vibe was, "Oh, you don't take yourself too seriously." And so perhaps that was a projection or something I was picking up between the lines, but that's always interesting too, like how we're perceived versus how we think our closest people would describe us. That's interesting.

0:10:08.8 AJ: And I think that I'd say that I think that the more that I'm around people the more I remember that we are all just two-legged animals on the land surfaces of this tiny blue dot, floating in this vast universe. And in that, for me, is this thought that we can't... It's very, very hard for us to get it wrong, and the concept of getting it wrong is not something that... If you take human history as like a long... Certainly I think that there are things that are harmful and things that we should strive not to do to ourselves and to each other and to the planet, and if you have an orientation towards other people, if you have an orientation towards the natural world, if you have an orientation towards healing, towards liberation, I think that it's... There are things that you can do that are harmful and things that you can do that are less harmful, but there's not a wrong way to get by. And... I don't know. I don't know that I like that now that I'm thinking about it.

0:12:01.5 AJ: But I just really feel that remembering that we are all imperfect and remembering that based on what we were taught we're all trying as hard as we can, it's a remembrance that it's hard to get it wrong and it's silly and fun and I think that one of the things that we should strive to do in our lives, with our lives, is live as much as we can from a place of pleasure and joy, and for me, that includes a lot of laughter. And I wanna acknowledge that in the black community, certainly, laughter is oftentimes a covering of grief, and so instead of getting upset about something that I have no control over, that I'm feeling frustrated about or upset about, sadness and anger are not really emotions that White Supremacy culture really recognizes Black people as being able to have. And so often that manifests itself as laughter, and so it's a bit of an interesting balance, I think.

0:13:32.0 NA: Yeah, well and I appreciate you not just sharing that but sort of... I felt like I went along the journey of your thought process there in real time, which I think is quite generous, because it's one thing to have a perfect sound bite answer to something, but it's something else to actually, I don't know, like grapple with an interesting question or with a question in an interesting way out loud, which I feel like you definitely just did. And there's a lot of nuance in there of the "both/and", that in order to not take ourselves so seriously or to feel joy or to have laughter in our

lives it doesn't mean, "Okay, well, everything's perfect and everything's going well, and..." that it can both exist at the same time, that things can be really hard and that there can be spaces of lightness, and sometimes those spaces of levity are a coping mechanism, like you mentioned. Sometimes they exist in this pure little pocket all their own alongside everything else, but I don't know... What you just shared feels a little bit like a permission slip to me of... I don't know, for everyone to just incorporate more moments of joy.

0:14:39.2 AJ: Yeah, I hope so.

0:14:41.0 NA: Yeah. So we mentioned the PCT and long-distance hiking a bit, which I thought would be a good place to start digging in, since it's a shared love that we have in common. And after canceling all my planned 2020 hiking last year due to COVID, I just feel like I miss it so much and I'm very excited to have a space to talk about it.

0:15:04.7 AJ: Yeah, like I was saying, this is... 2020 was certainly the year that I had been more still than ever before in my adult life. I am a traveler, I am a mover, I tend to not stay in one place for very long or very often, even though I've settled on the occupied territory of the Arapaho, the Ute, and the Cheyenne people, I... Maybe "settled" is the wrong word for how much I travel and go hiking and do all those sorts of things. But just having to be still, both in the context of 2020, like not really wanting to travel, not wanting to leave my house when I thought that maybe I'm sick, for a long time during 2020, and then being unable to really go anywhere, do anything, in these last few months because of some medical issues that have been experiencing, it's been a very different way of orienting to the world.

0:16:23.7 NA: Mm-hmm. Yeah, that slowing down and staying still, especially if that's not your default, which I can completely relate to. Yeah, that could be a whole conversation in and of itself. And that idea of almost like stillness as grief is something I wanna put a pin in and come back to. Maybe we'll go back in time, talk about some of your hiking, and then we will come forward into that. We'll go on a little time journey, I guess, if that feels good.

0:16:48.1 AJ: Yeah, it feels great.

0:16:49.9 NA: So, in 2015 you through-hiked the Colorado Trail, that was your first really long distance hike, right?

0:16:57.0 AJ: It was, yes. Before the Colorado Trail I had only done about 30 miles with my then partner on the Gore Range Trail.

0:17:07.8 NA: Okay, okay, so it sounds relatively similar. My first long-distance hike was the Oregon section of the PCT, so the mileage is relatively similar between the Colorado trail and the Oregon section, and so I'm thinking myself, I was such such such a beginner, and it sounds like maybe you weren't quite as much, but I would love for you to tell me the story of day one. How did it feel to start this big new... And maybe I'm again projecting my own experience here... Totally scary thing. So it's 2015, it's day one on the Colorado trail. Take me there, tell me about it.

0:17:43.0 AJ: Yeah [laughter], I'm laughing because it's... I feel like this is very much like one of the moments that I did take myself too seriously. And looking back, there's just such love and joy and compassion for what I like to call "past me". So, I had one of my closest friends dropped me off and we drove into the trailhead parking lot, and I saw the sign, like "Waterton Canyon, Colorado Trail", and I just broke down crying, from anxiety, from fear, from like "What if bad things happen and I don't come back, like what... I don't know what this is about to be like, and for every other thing that I've done in my life, I had some sort of context or some sort of guide, and not to say that I didn't have that in terms of graded through-hiking, but in through-hiking as a Black and then closeted queer women, I didn't really have... Didn't really know of at that time any sort of role models or people to look up to or follow in that way, but once I got walking the first part through Waterton Canyon it's like very chill and there are lots of people, and it's not really graded at all. And so it's just me with this giant backpack on my back among a bunch of other people who are running and who are doing day hikes and who are just giving me these very knowing smiles, and I'm like, "What do you know that I don't?"

[laughter]

0:19:34.5 AJ: And so I sort of started to get into a stride and started feeling good about myself, and then towards the end of the day, these clouds start to roll in, and one of the things that still makes me pretty nervous, particularly in Colorado, is lightning. And so these clouds start to build and the storm starts to roll in, and I am in an area where there are no... It's all graded, there are no real good places to camp and to make it to a place where there is a good place to camp, I have to make it up and over this ridge. And so I am an anxious person by nature, or at least at the...

0:20:19.4 NA: Relatable.

0:20:22.0 AJ: In the last 5-10 years I've been a very anxious person, and so I'm climbing this hill and I'm trying to move as quickly as I can, but I'm really, really tired from the day, and my body can only go as fast it can go. And so I am both trying to be really nice to myself while also trying to calm myself out of this terror. And of course the thunder starts to rumble and I start to see lightning in the distance, and I finally make it up and over this ridge. I start to set up in one place, I am now pretty notorious for doing this, but I decide that I hate the place where I'm camping, and so I pick up and I move even lower. And by the time I've done all that and tried to settle in, I realized that I'm out of water and it's another quarter mile to go get more water. And so I run down to get more water and I only have Aquamira with me, and so I have to wait a bunch of time and I'm so thirsty during this time and I'm like, "I don't..." "

0:21:34.8 AJ: Like, "Am I gonna be okay?" I am chronically dehydrated also as a person, so is this gonna be okay? I finally eat and get some water in me and immediately throw everything up because I have been so anxious for so long, and that is how I go to sleep after my first day of the Colorado Trail. And looking back, it really just feels like fascicle, both the combination of just the situation that happened and also my personal reactions to it. And like I was saying, I just have so much compassion for the me that was, who was trying so hard to do through-hiking right.

0:22:19.5 AJ: Which I don't think that there is a way to do through-hiking right, but who is so focused on that and who messed so many things up on that first day, but I think it very much gave me permission and an understanding that... Not in a scary way, but also in a, "You should know this," way, anything that can go wrong might. And this is the thing that you wanted to do, so you just have to roll with it. And you have to do your best to take care of yourself and keep yourself safe as you can, and I think that that is a really beautiful lesson for someone who is, what I would argue, just coming into adulthood, although I was 28 at the time. I was in my late 20s at the time.

0:23:28.1 NA: Yeah, first of all, that's a fantastic story, I had no idea that... How eventful your first day was, but I'm very glad that I asked. That fear that you mentioned of wanting to make sure that you did through-hiking right, in very big air quotes, whatever that means, is so relatable to me, and I think applies to so many things outside of through-hiking for sure. Just this idea of, I am starting a new thing with which I'm unfamiliar because I'm interested in it, I've done a ton of research, reading books and blogs and people's Instagrams who have been doing that thing for a really long time, and while part of that is great because I could learn from them. I think that the downside of doing maybe too much research or putting other people who are further along the path on a pedestal, is that it really made me think there's only one right way to do this, And a lot of what's considered the... I don't even wanna say the right way to through-hike, but there's a lot of stuff in it that's just not for me, and it took me a couple of years to really realize, "Oh okay, I can do things my own way and..." Yeah, I hear that a lot in your story as well.

0:24:35.8 AJ: Yeah, there is just sort of this impression that you're gonna have a great adventure and it's... I think it's very easy to sort of project in your head what you think that's gonna be like or gonna feel like, but the beauty of it is that even for people that you're hiking with, your experience is going to be so much different even from theirs just because of who you are that day, and what your body is doing that day and what the weather is doing that day, and your reactions to what's going on on that day. And I think that that's a really beautiful part of through-hiking, and I think that again, that has a lot in it for... I'm reminding myself of all of these lessons as we're talking, and I think that there are things that I needed to hear four years, five years, almost five years later, and many miles away from the trail.

0:25:45.4 NA: Well, it's the reminder that... I guess some lessons you only have to learn them once, but my life experience has taught me that they're really important lessons, they're sort of onions that I just have to keep learning them like I thought I learned it, and then there's another layer and then something else happens, and then I have to re-learn it and... But a lot of the stuff that we're talking about right now, definitely applies to that. It goes back even to what we were saying at the beginning of how to take yourself less seriously.

0:26:07.1 NA: I feel like part of that for me is not fixating so much on wanting to do it the right way, which really comes from a fear of making mistakes or being seen making mistakes or being bad at something, and that applies to every area of my life and the more that I'm willing to make mistakes, and you mentioned having compassion for that past you. I would love to get to the point where I can, in real time, have compassion for the current me who is also making mistakes and who

also wants to get it right and like, "Oh, poor that version of Nicole. She's still here."

[laughter]

0:26:38.6 NA: Yeah, is this the part where we pause and we hug our little inner selves who need compassion? Right?

0:26:46.1 AJ: I think so. Yes, I think that that is a wise thing.

0:26:48.4 NA: Oh my God. Oh my God. Tell me... One more Colorado Trail question. Tell me about a time during that hike that you felt really powerful.

0:26:57.0 AJ: Yeah, I know exactly the day that you're talking about. So...

0:27:05.1 NA: Oh, to be fair, I'm not talking about any day. This is just a random question.

0:27:08.4 AJ: Yeah, no, but I very much... It's cool because I very much have a centered remembrance of that day, and I may not remember all of the details off of the top of my head, but I certainly remember feeling powerful. I was hiking with another hiker at that point, and we just... I wanna say it was just north of Molas Pass. You get to this point, you've just passed by the highest point on the Colorado trail, and it essentially opens up to just your above tree line and it's open and it's windy and everything is pretty flat for the most part, so it's not something that you're particularly fighting for. And I just remember that day, it was shortly after I had done my first day over 20 miles, because I am not a fast hiker and I was really proud of hitting that milestone. And you come around kind of a very... Not sharp corner, but it's like this very broad like winding trail corner, and all of a sudden you're standing at what essentially is...

0:28:40.3 AJ: It would be the top of the pass if you were in between mountains, but it being more of a flat space, you're just sort of at the top of a climb and you look down and you can see these stunning mountain lakes, and I hiked later in the season and things were like just starting to shift towards fall. And so there's just a little bit of red in the landscape and these stunning lakes, and you're looking out over this mountainous valley and the clouds were partially playing with the sunlight over this valley. And I just remember in that moment, thinking that I walked here and it was towards the end of the journey, and granted, on that day, ended up doing a lot of downhill and a lot of very punishing uphill, but... Afterwards to get into Silverton, but it was...

0:29:40.4 AJ: I just remember standing at the top of that valley and feeling more peace than I think that I had felt in just a really long time. And have you ever felt the rightness of a moment?

0:30:03.8 NA: Mm-hmm. I'm just sincerely almost gonna cry right now. Like listening and my eyes are closed, I'm really in this moment with you, I can relate so much. Yes.

0:30:13.0 AJ: And you don't... To me, it doesn't feel faded, it doesn't feel like I was meant to be here, but it feels so much like you've lifted the veil a little bit almost, and you're seeing what could

be and just both within yourself and in the wider world. And it's just this feeling of smallness combined with this feeling of love for the land and for yourself, and just this feeling of compassion, I guess is the word for this life journey that we're all on. And the most heartbreaking, but I also think that one of the most beautiful things about moments like that is that we do have to move on eventually. Sure, I could have camped up there for a couple more days, and one day I hope to hike the Colorado Trail again and I will probably spend in a more leisurely fashion. And I hope to spend a couple of days up in that spot, but just knowing that that moment will end is part of that moment's beauty. And I don't know that anything has taught me that particular lesson as much as through-hiking has.

0:32:11.8 NA: So the next time someone asks me why I love through-hiking I'm gonna fast-forward to this part of this episode. I'm just gonna play them everything that you just said because that is the... That's it, that's... For me, that is 100% it, it's those moments. And I have found that I can't fake those moments, I can't orchestrate them. I really am the perpetually recovering control freak. I wanna think that, "Well, if I just do this and I do this and I line everything up right, then I'm gonna have this perfect moment where I feel this oneness with the universe." Right? And so that's not possible. And I can... How do I wanna say this?

0:32:52.2 NA: I can, through my choices and actions and behavior, put myself in the path of more of those types of moments or the... I think what triggers those moments is different for different folks, and I know for me, at least to date, some of it comes from the real physical nature of long distance hiking, and that feeling when you hike hard enough for long enough that the bullshit in your brain stops. Or at least that's how it feels for me, and there's this sense of peace that comes from it, and I think that that's partially what I'm always chasing, going on long adventures. There's just something in that that I feel like leads to more of those moments for me, and doing that in these beautiful places in nature gives me a sense of connection that I don't get otherwise.

0:33:45.0 AJ: So it's super interesting. I've been reading a lot of books that are very of liberation-oriented that want us all to be free of the shoulds and supposed-to's and find our way into a way of living that is less harmful to ourselves, less harmful to others, less harmful to the planet and one of the questions that a lot of these books, podcasts, etcetera, ask is, what would liberation feel like? And so wanting us to get more of a conception of what it feels like to be free so that we can constantly be working towards bringing more of that feeling into our lives.

0:34:32.1 AJ: And for me, I think that that feeling... That clearly is not... Is not a singular experience on long trails for me. That I think is what liberation feels like, and I want to find ways to bring that more into my day-to-day and to start to live in a way where I also get to see this. I think it's a lot more complicated because it's one thing to sort of experience that by yourself or with just a couple of other people on a long trail, and it's very different to bring that into the habits and the expectations of front country life to sort of make that a lived reality.

0:35:35.9 NA: Yeah. But that's a really beautiful intention. Can you speak to anything more specific, 'cause my next question of that is the how or what does that look like for you?

0:35:48.4 AJ: For me, it's all about relationships and relationship building. Throughout this time, I have been pretty much alone since March of 2020 with very little exception. And I think that there's a lot of work that can and should be done alone. I've been doing a lot of work on attachment styles and consent culture, and just taking a really hard look at the ways in which I want my life to be rooted in pleasure, but also in boundary setting, and and and and. But I think that for me, my hope, my wish, my goal is to not only do better by myself, but in doing better by myself, by and for myself, do better for other people.

0:37:04.0 AJ: And so this idea of... Like I'm trying to get better at active listening, I'm trying to get better at being more holy myself, even when I feel pressure to not do that and to conform, I have felt for... We'll call it most of my life to try to conform to what other people expect of me and what other people think of me, and what other people think that I should be rather than having an opinion about that myself, but to lean more into this idea of having an active choice and having my decisions matter and being a beacon of permission for other people to do the same. In that... Being honest about the fact that it's hard and it's messy and it's completely alinear. [chuckle]

0:38:18.0 NA: Yeah. And not getting caught up in that same thing we were talking about before of, how do I do this exactly right?

0:38:24.3 AJ: Yeah.

0:38:29.2 NA: So you mentioned wanting not to conform or being wholly yourself, I think is what you said. Will you get a little bit more specific of what does it look like for you to not conform? Has, in making what sounds like an intentional choice to do that, have there been specific things that you say, "Okay, I'm not gonna conform in this way, or I'm gonna do this differently." What does that look like?

0:38:53.1 AJ: So I think I look at conformity a little differently. Since I was a young person... I am a light-skinned black woman, and so I have historically felt that I have not really fit in with the Black community, certainly among white people, and just in this hetero-patriarchal society that we live in here in the US. I've very much taken the tack that to survive, what I have to do is make myself as remarkable as possible in some ways. Because the respectability politics and the myth of the model minority does make things easier in a lot of ways. And I found that by picking up on the hobbits... The hobbits, wow. [chuckle] The habits, the activities, the... And just be, really being willing to listen to people and hear people and to try to experience the things that people love, that I have been able to find a way to survive and often to find joy with other people.

0:40:40.3 AJ: And I think that... So when I say conformity, I don't necessarily mean to some sort of norm. I grew up in an area, not in an immediate family community, but in sort of a broader outside of the home community that was polyamorous, and that's not an experience that a lot of people have. Even though I grew up in small town, Ohio, I had just... Most of my friends were queer and surprise, so am I. [chuckle] And so I don't think of conformity in the way of I am specifically attempting to conform to US norms. I more think that I've oriented a lot of my life towards to, around things that other people were interested in, in an effort to find the things that interested me.

0:41:51.2 NA: Yeah. Right. And there's nothing wrong with that.

0:41:56.2 AJ: Yeah. And I'm trying to be more intentional these days about asking myself before I do something, before I participate in something, before I read something. Is this something that actually interests me, or am I just doing this to try to connect with this person or these people in a way that feels comfortable to them, but it's not comfortable to me and it's not what I want?

0:42:32.5 NA: Yeah. It's almost like you're saying that not conforming or perhaps this iteration of not conforming looks like that moment of pause to evaluate those questions that you just said. Am I actually interested in this? Is this for me?

0:42:46.2 AJ: Yeah, and I found a lot of things that I am interested in, in listening to other people and experiencing things with other people that I wouldn't otherwise experience. And I feel much more comfortable these days to say, "Okay, I'm gonna take this part of that, but I'm not really interested in that part of that." And it's been a journey to be able to get there because... We talk about what? Fight, flight, fawn, freeze. I have historically, in my life, been one who fawns. And so taking the time to tease myself out of that and my own desires and my own needs out of that has been a process. And it's ongoing, and I don't think that it'll ever stop, and I think that 30 years from now, if I'm lucky enough to still be around, I'll still be stopping and pausing and figuring out, "Is this something that I really want or really am into?" And hopefully it'll be a bit of a faster process by that time.

0:44:13.8 AJ: But yeah, that's kind of the ultimate goal is to take, to be in relationship with the people, with the activities, with the feelings, with all the feelings, that I really want to be in relationship with, and to understand that not everything has to be for me.

0:44:48.9 NA: Okay, so that makes me wanna ask you one follow-up question on this before we move on. Keeping in mind what you said that we're always on an evolution growth track with this, that there might not be a final answer at this moment in time, so February 2021, what makes you feel like you?

0:45:07.1 AJ: There are just so many things that I found that when I... So I took a class on pleasure this past October. And it really made me stop and think about what it is that brings me joy, what it is that I feel is pleasurable and how to find those things more in day-to-day things. And so, the times where I tend to feel the most disconnected for myself are the times that I'm trying to develop compassion for. So the other day, I was just really sad. And there were a whole bunch of reasons for that, and there are times when you try to logic yourself out of those things and you're just like, "I shouldn't be sad," and should, I feel like, is a very harmful word.

0:46:25.0 AJ: But I... For the first time in recent memory, just let that feeling happen. I'm just like, "Okay, I guess today we're just gonna be sad." And so I didn't push myself to do anything on a weekend. Sat and didn't make myself do anything that I didn't wanna do. And I went out and I sat in the sunshine and there's a fire pit in the backyard of the place that I'm living. And I tried

unsuccessfully to light a fire and got a lot of joy out of that, just from the smell of me trying to light the kindling. And while I didn't feel very myself in that moment, I felt a becoming, if that makes sense. And it's those moments of becoming, it's those moments of learning, it's those moments of revelation in which I feel most like myself.

0:47:35.7 NA: Oh, yeah. It's almost... I'm not projecting into what you're saying, but what I'm taking from what you're saying for myself is that it's moments of allowance almost, allowing the feelings that are there to be there. There's something wholly us about that experience. If you're feeling sad and let yourself feel sad... If the intention is to be wholly you, how can we be wholly us if we're not letting ourselves feel what it is that we actually feel? Does that make sense?

0:48:07.8 AJ: Yeah. And for me, it's about the learning as well. And I think maybe this hearkens back to what we were talking about earlier, but just the understanding that I am a being of constant change. And who I am today isn't going to be who I am tomorrow, who I am from moment to moment isn't necessarily going to be the same. And in the good times, knowing that is... Bitter sweet isn't even the right word. I don't think that we have a word in English for this feeling. But that letting go, but it's much more deep than just a simple like, "Okay, just let it go." Of both sadness and happiness and really understanding those moments of deep understanding where change is the only constant that I think is one of the most difficult, first of all, but also the most beautiful things, I think. And I'm real bad at it still.

0:49:44.3 AJ: I am also a bit of a control, like when it comes to my immediate environment, I am a bit of a control freak. And I say that in a loving and compassionate way. [chuckle] And I really think that just those moments where I... I live for the moments where I learn and re-learn and re-learn again and will constantly be learning, hopefully, until the day that I am no longer this iteration of myself, this physical iteration of myself. That change is. And we have to learn to find as much peace as we can with that and as much beauty in that as we can.

0:50:37.4 NA: Yeah. I feel like I'm just sitting with what you said. Yeah, that... When you were mentioning before that, basically that nothing stays forever. And that particularly when it's the sweet moments, the letting go of that, I think about that a lot as anticipatory nostalgia. When you're in the moment that you know... And going back to what you described of that moment, that powerful moment on the Colorado trail. I feel that a lot on trail, off trail as well, almost the experience of being in a moment that you know you're gonna miss when it's gone.

0:51:13.3 AJ: Yeah.

0:51:15.3 NA: And that, it breaks my heart, in a really beautiful way. There's something to that of living through something that you just, you know that you will just miss it so much when it's gone.

0:51:29.5 AJ: Yeah, the wholeness in the heart break. I've definitely, definitely described through hiking like that. And again, that's the kind of feeling that I really want to and I'm trying to bring into my day-to-day as well.

0:51:57.3 NA: Yeah. Is there anything else about grief in particular that you wanted to mention?

0:52:04.1 AJ: I guess I just really feel like it's... This is gonna sound a way, but I think that it's really important to practice feeling big emotions, both joy... I think that joy and pleasure is a practice, but I also very much think that grief is a practice. And it's not something that we, here in the US have, again, have good role models for. Or good ways or understanding of how it looks. And I think that that's partially because grief is such an individual experience in a lot of ways, but I also think that, certainly these days, grief is also a very communal experience. And how do we... Questions that I just have more generally for the future is, how do we process that grief, both individually... Certainly while all of this is still going on, but how we process that grief collectively and what that looks like. And part of grief, I think, is learning what is important to you. And so how do we experience the fullness of our grief such that we can process it, but then how do we take the lessons about what we learned is important to us and how do we move into a collective future with that knowledge? I don't have the answers. I don't know what that looks like. I don't... [chuckle]

0:54:02.2 NA: I have zero answers to those things and yeah, I'm really drawn to this idea of having a grief practice. I don't even really know what that means, but there's something in it that I will definitely be thinking about long after this conversation.

0:54:16.5 AJ: Yeah, I think to me it's... So far, and of course it's ever-changing and evolving. I think that a lot of that is... Just like I did the other day, it's just sitting with that sadness and sitting with that grief and not trying to do all the usual things that I personally do to try to distract myself from that. So I'll do a lot of housework, or I'll do a lot of reading, or I'll turn on something that I've seen a bajillion times on Netflix. And instead of doing that, trying to just be with the emotions and not trying to stop the tears and not trying to be any other way than the way that I am. And I don't think that that's a wholeness of grief practice, and I don't think that's a grief practice for everybody, but for me it's a start.

0:55:14.1 NA: Yeah. Well, and it's definitely something that I'm gonna start with. You mentioned earlier in the conversation wanting to be like a beacon of permission. Was that what you said?

0:55:24.2 AJ: Yeah, yeah.

0:55:25.4 NA: Yeah, and congratulations, you already have done that in this conversation, because I feel a lot of permission in what you just said. Because that, keeping busy with housework, rewatching the same thing on Netflix. And I'm not demonizing any of those activities, I know that you're not either. That is 100% what my life has been like lately, and I have this really growing feeling inside me that I really need to cry, and it just hasn't happened yet. It's that fullness of needing some kind of release, and I very much am seeing... Hopefully in a compassionate way, but how I'm not allowing that. And sometimes I feel like I don't allow it because I just... I don't know. Not to say that I don't have time for it, but it's almost that feeling of like, I need to schedule a time to have a breakdown, which is probably the most toxic productivity culture thing I've ever said out loud.

0:56:16.1 NA: But there is something in that feeling of like, I don't have time to completely lose my shit or I don't have... I can't do that. It makes me feel kind of icky to say that out loud, but it is honest that that's sort of how I've been feeling lately, and you have just opened up for me even like a little pocket of space in order to be able to explore this, so I appreciate it. Thank you.

0:56:37.7 AJ: Yeah, for sure. And I think that one of the feelings that I get a lot is that if I do this, if I give into this feeling then I'll never stop.

[chuckle]

0:56:47.6 NA: Yeah.

0:56:47.7 AJ: Like if I start to grieve the nearly a year that I've "lost", because I don't think that it's actually been lost I think that a lot of really good and interesting growth has come out of this year, and grief and sorrow and sadness. I think that what I've experienced by when I let the grief in, which is of course really difficult, is that it resolves on its own and that it's something that is asking for my attention and that wants my attention, but once it has my attention, it resolves. It becomes a little bit more easy to bear. I feel like there's very much a time for... I'm certainly not, again, like you said, demonizing the Netflix watching because it's a thing that I do, and I want to give more honor, credence, whatever, to the body because you know when you're ready for that sort of thing.

0:58:00.7 NA: Exactly.

0:58:01.4 AJ: And so if you need to watch a bunch of Netflix before that happens, absolutely, watch a bunch of Netflix. I have read probably close to 3,000 pages since the beginning of the year, and part of that is a lot of fiction, and part of that is because I haven't been ready to do this particular round of work.

0:58:29.1 NA: Yeah. Yeah, trusting the timing of your own life and your own process.

0:58:33.8 AJ: Yeah.

0:58:35.3 NA: I think a lot... I'm asked a lot about, usually in the context of sobriety, but also through-hiking then life, all kinds of things I'm asked about the change process, how do you change your life, right? Or questions within that. And something that I think about a lot, and that I talk about a lot is that for me personally, and I know that I'm not alone in this, but for me personally, in order to make those kinds of big changes, I often have to get to the point where the pain of staying the same outweighs the fear of whatever the change is that I wanna make.

0:59:10.0 NA: And it doesn't necessarily have to be that extreme that you have to wait till you're in so much pain, I don't wanna have to get to a literal or figurative rock bottom in order to change my life, but I do think there is something, if I make that less dramatic, there is something really similar to what you're saying of, sometimes we're just not ready, and that's fine.

0:59:32.1 AJ: Yeah.

0:59:32.2 NA: Yeah. So I think that that's a really lovely place to start to wrap up, unless there's anything that hasn't come up yet in this conversation that you definitely wanna mention. I wanna give you a space for anything else that hasn't come up, maybe.

0:59:47.0 AJ: No, I'm feeling really good about this conversation.

0:59:49.6 NA: Alright. Well then, if you are open to it, I would love to ask you some... I hesitate to call them rapid-fire questions because your answers certainly don't have to be, but some potentially rapid fire questions.

1:00:03.6 AJ: Great.

1:00:05.5 NA: Yeah?

1:00:05.7 AJ: Yeah.

1:00:05.8 NA: What's something that you feel like you need to give yourself more credit for right now?

1:00:10.5 AJ: Yes.

[laughter]

1:00:16.6 AJ: So that's the short answer, the long answer is just still being here. So I guess, content warning, I think that it would be really, really easy in this moment, under the conditions that I am experiencing in my personal life to just really absolutely check out and not be in the emotions and the feelings and not trying to listen to my body and to give my body what it needs, but I am still doing that. And I'm still trying to learn, and I'm still trying to get the things done that I would like to get done and that need to get done. And I just don't think that I personally give myself enough credit for doing the work of surviving this traumatic experience that we're all still going through almost a year later.

1:01:39.0 NA: Yeah. Yeah, and particularly now, and also always we don't give ourselves enough credit for just surviving hard things.

1:01:45.4 AJ: Yep.

1:01:48.0 NA: Yeah, yes, yeah. So your first answer, "Yes," is really just perfect for that. What's one of the best decisions you've made lately?

1:02:04.9 AJ: If I can extend lately much more broad than I think we normally think. In the past year... It's been a full year now, I have been doing more regular therapy, and before this year, I had

never gone through the therapeutic process, and I found a lot of heartbreak and learning and joy and growth out of that. And so I am... That's the thing that I'm really glad that I have done for myself.

1:02:43.0 NA: Yes. Hell yes, to therapy, to finding the right fit person. Yeah, all of that.

1:02:48.7 AJ: Yeah.

1:02:48.8 NA: So we talked a little bit about the Netflix comfort binge. What is your go-to, need-to-watch something that's gonna reliably make you feel good, movie or show?

1:03:07.6 AJ: I have really been enjoying new things lately. I used to go back a lot to Steven Universe. I still do go back to Steven Universe and She-Ra and the Princesses of Power, I'm very into cartoons. They make me feel really just joyful often, and I think that what a lot of modern cartoons are doing is really revolutionary in that they're focused on healing and they're focused on conflict resolution, and they're focused on finding ways to not only be there for other people, but also to be there for yourself, and to start to recognize emotions in a way that I was never taught to recognize emotions.

1:03:55.3 AJ: And so I think that's a really cool thing that's coming out of cartoons these days, but I've also been really enjoying experiencing new things and doing more "reality tv." I've done a lot of the Great British Baking Show, but I've also done a lot of the docu-series that are on Netflix, both about the natural world and about this human world that we've built around the natural world, and to sort of use those as a jumping off point to thinking about the ways that we arrange our lives and the ways that we position ourselves as separate from the natural world or different for whatever reason.

1:04:37.6 AJ: I just watched one on animal intelligence that essentially said animals are intelligent, we just have been so human-centric that we refuse to look at the more than human world as something that is on par with us when we are a part of it. And so just learning and challenging and thinking and growing, in addition to going back and singing along to Steven Universe's as A Giant Woman so... [laughter.

1:05:09.5 NA: Yes.

1:05:10.7 AJ: Yeah.

1:05:11.5 NA: Yes. Favorite snack right now, what are you eating that's making you feel good?

1:05:19.6 AJ: Okay, so with apologies to the vegetarians and vegans out there, I have really been enjoying making just a really good grilled cheese with bacon and jalapeno, and I... One of the other food luxuries that I love is getting a really nice rosemary sourdough, if I can find it. And so just really, really nice bread and just a really heart-warming meal, often with tomato soup.

1:06:01.0 NA: I was just gonna say it's grilled cheese and tomato soup season in this hemisphere

for sure.

1:06:04.9 AJ: Yeah.

1:06:08.2 NA: Last of these types of questions is about books for all the folks like me whose library wait lists are always miles long and low-key regret asking this questions and 'cause I'm like, "Well, cool. Now I'm gonna have to put more books on my list." Which one to two books would you... Come to mind as either having had a meaningful impact on you, or have been particularly joyful or fun to read, or that you find yourself recommending? Anyway that you wanna take that book-related question?

1:06:34.5 AJ: Yeah. I'm gonna try to stick to... I'm gonna try to keep it short. I'm so sorry, I am a big reader. [chuckle] So I've read several essays and speeches from Sister Outsider before, but I have been getting really into... Kind of deep diving into what Audre Lorde's work means to me, and just how through the months of being mostly alone, how my relationship to those works changes from month to month pretty much. And so I'm reading the whole thing in its entirety, and it's really... There's a lot there.

1:07:28.0 AJ: So you could really spend a solid... Years and years thinking about what's in that work, but also I just read... It's called Ask: Building Consent Culture, and it's edited by Kitty Stryker. And essentially, it's about the idea of consent, not only as something you do in interpersonal or sexual relationships, but as an orientation towards offering the people that you interact with, the opportunity to consent or not consent in any given situation that you're in. And I've gotten a lot out of that as well.

1:08:15.3 AJ: In terms of fiction, I found myself going back to things that I read as a teenager, and I recently started re-reading Lynn Flewelling's, The Nightrunner Series, which is essentially just this high fantasy romp that's all about trying to save the nation like a rogue and a bard, a rogue/bard multiclass, if you will, just basically trying to save their home, their kingdom home. And I feel a way about plenty of things in it in terms of monarchy and things like that, but also it's just really nice to sometimes acknowledge those things and then if there's nothing hyper egregious, just turn your brain off and enjoy the thing.

1:09:17.2 NA: Yep, yep, yeah, sometimes that is absolutely the path to take, right?

1:09:24.1 AJ: Yeah.

1:09:24.6 NA: Yes, yes. Love all of those recommendations. If you could leave folks with one call to action based on our conversation, what would that be, maybe a question to ask themselves or a small action to take?

1:09:38.9 AJ: I hope that in the coming days that you will give yourself permission to feel however it is that you're feeling, and that you'll understand that that feeling is not the entirety of you, it's not everything that you are, and it is a part of you that deserves recognition and compassion. And I just

really, especially in this time, one hope that people will make the choice and the effort, 'cause it can be hard work to be gentle with themselves.

1:10:19.4 NA: Yeah, yeah, that's the emotional pep talk that I need. I appreciate that. What's the best place for people to find you and say hi. Do you have a particular favorite way to connect with new folks?

1:10:31.8 AJ: Yeah. You can find me on Instagram, my handle is @browngirlonthenst, so National Scenic trails. And that's probably the easiest way to follow along with what I'm doing. I don't post a lot because I'm trying to develop a healthier relationship with social media, but I... Yeah, I'd just love to hear from you if you wanna message me.

1:10:57.3 NA: Yes, I will put a link to that in the show notes. Amanda, thank you so much.

1:11:00.7 AJ: Yeah, thank you so much for having me. This has been just really joyful and lovely, and I really appreciate the opportunity.

[music]

1:11:13.0 NA: And that's our show for today. Our music is by Adam Day, who also handles our sound editing. Thanks, Adam, you're the best. And huge thanks as well to every single member of our Patreon community for making this honest conversation, this entire podcast, and so much of my other work, like my twice weekly personal essay newsletter called Good Question, possible. Your monthly funding allows me to keep creating resources and gatherings for folks who crave honest conversations, both with themselves and others, and I fully believe that these conversations can change our lives, our relationships and our world.

1:11:47.5 NA: To join us, just come on over to [Patreon.com/nicoleantoinette](https://patreon.com/nicoleantoinette), our community operates on a shame-free sliding scale, so you can feel good about supporting this work from within your own means. So I'll see you over in the Patreon community. Yeah? And until next time, I want you to know three things. First, that you are enough. Second, that you are not alone. And third, that I'm totally rooting for you.

[music]

Thank you for choosing Scribie.com

Cross-check this transcript against the audio quickly and efficiently using our online Integrated Editor. Please visit the following link and click the Check & Download button to start.

<https://scribie.com/files/ecdce2f6af3f441cbfd0ea8ec3d832902b6c33a9>