



The E36 Podcast

Episode 4

Holding Space for the Cultural Shift with Kemi Illesanmi

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Cultural shift, creative risk, African diaspora, community creation, leadership, cultural expression, black imagination, diaspora weaving, self-determination, values alignment, planting season, cultural institutions, diasporic stories, art and culture, global perspectives.

SPEAKERS

Speaker 1: Ayofemi Kirby

Speaker 2: Kemi Illesanmi

00:00

Music.

Speaker 2 00:12

Welcome to this episode of the E36 Podcast where we explore the ideas, stories and strategies shaping culture connection and collective imagination. I'm Ayofemi Kirby, founder of ElevenThirtySix Strategies, and your host. And today's episode features a conversation that I've been holding close since February of this year. It's a rich and deeply grounding exchange with the incomparable Kemi. Illesanmi.

Kemi is a cultural leader whose work has consistently centered artists, public space and the power of creative risk in shaping more just and creative and equitable futures. When we first spoke, the conversation felt immediate, relevant and full of resonance. Kemi even asked me when I would release it, and I said soon, I was planning on sending it out in the next week, but something inside me, and even in response to her question, said, Wait, honestly, the world felt noisy, and I was feeling reactive to everything. And so there was just so much happening, particularly in or in and around communities and institutions in the world as we continue to experience and even though the conversation was powerful and even relevant and resonant in the moment, I didn't want it to land as reactive or overly didactic or preachy, you know, I really wanted it to land and to mean something at the right time, three months later, it even feels more timely than it did in February.

You know, we've seen continued shifts in the cultural sector, moments of reckoning and forced redefinition for our creative communities, our creative ecosystems. And we even saw a pivotal moment at the Met Gala right that has reminded us just how much cultural expression, symbolism and black imagination matter on the global stage, you know, right now we are navigating real tensions and on the other side, real possibility, you know, and this conversation feels like the kind of grounding and visioning we need at this moment, at least to me. So, I hope you feel the same way.



You know, Kemi and I talk about leadership, inspiration and the rise of African and diasporic futures, not as emerging ideas, but as essential, generative centers of gravity. We've been seeing a lot of articles, even over the past few days, about black art and how institutions are responding to it or not responding to it. So I just think that this conversation at this time, is perfect for cultural discourse. So, you know, we talk about community creation and what it means to hold space through transformation, which we are personally going through, going through as a country, as a world, and so much more.

So I'm honored to finally share this conversation with you. Thank you for your patience on the delay. I just never want these to feel super reactive and energetically aligned. So let's get into it. I hope you enjoy.

Hello everyone, and welcome to the E 36 podcast. I am extremely excited today as we welcome our first conversation guest, Kemi Illesanmi who is for a friend of mine and a former client of ours at E 36 and an all around amazing human creating and connecting people across the globe. Welcome to the show, Kemi, and thank you so much for being here. Thank you. Thank you. If you don't mind, I'm going to read your bio first, and then we'll jump into the conversation.

03:47

Sounds good. Sounds good, okay.

Speaker 1 03:51

Kemi Illesanmi is founder and principal of KGI projects. She was the executive director of the laundromat project, a nationally recognized and community-based arts organization in New York City from 2012 until 2022 Under her leadership, the LP grew its staff, budget and impact 10-fold, including a significant award from MacKenzie Scott and attaining a long-term community Home in central Brooklyn. Kemi led development of the organization's pioneering POC people of color, color centered principles and create Change Institute for ethical and joyful, community responsive art practices in 2021 through 22 she was a founding partner of Hue arts New York City, a catalytic map, directory and report focused on POC Arts Center organization, organizations in New York City. Before that, Kemi has served as Director of grants and services at Creative Capital foundation and visual arts curator at the Walker Art Center. Kemi contributes to scholarship through speaking engagements and platforms, including the Brooklyn Museum creative time, the new school art net and the art world. What if, among many others, Kemi was also appointed to the mayor of New York by the mayor of New York City, to the Cultural Affairs Advisory Commission for seven years, including two years as chair, she's been featured in The New York Times among Brooklyn magazine's 50 most fascinating people on the observers annual list of arts power 50 and many more. She's been honored at the museum, the Met Museum and Project for Empty Space. Currently, Kemi serves on the boards of the Brooklyn Museum of Art Joan Mitchell foundation and nonprofit New York, as well as several advisory boards. She is a graduate of Smith College, New York University and coral leadership New York. Kemi is proudly Nigerian and of black American descent. She lives in Brooklyn with her spouse. She has traveled to more than 50 countries,



and in 2023 Kemi took a gap year to visit India, Mexico, Italy and 10 incredible African countries, from West to East to South, immersing herself in the unique art, architecture, culture, nature and history of each place. Thank you so much, Kemi. How are you feeling today?

06:20

I'm feeling great. Thank you for that great intro.

Speaker 1 06:22

It's all you. All you. So let's just start off the conversation. There's a lot going on. How are you generally feeling about the political climate as it relates to the people of New York, people of color and the diaspora, which is, I know is really important to you

Speaker 2 06:42

Absolutely. Well, it's a bit of a roller coaster, so things go up and down. Certainly, I think that's just the reality of the situation we're living in which the phrase of the moment is that they're flooding the zone, and we're just, you know, completely overwhelmed with what is coming our way every day, on a daily basis, and the twists and turns could not possibly have been written by Hollywood like we're even beyond what might have been imagined in a holly Hollywood Writing Room. At the same time, I'm taking a lot of art in that, while themes look very different than they did in 2017 at the beginning of Trump's first term, it's a very different world, a very different Yeah, just the context has shifted, and their strategy has actually shifted, and ours has To adjust as well. And some of what I'm seeing and and taking heart in is people coming together to support one another, everything from WhatsApp groups, where people are, you know, sharing information, the latest strategies, talking things through, etc. So informal kind of networks, which I think are really important, as well as more formalized settings. So there was a safeguarding New York City gathering that was sort of the title of it, put together by the local nonprofit association, nonprofit Lawyers Guild and a couple of other partners came together to talk about, how do you make sure you're compliant and don't attract attention, or if you do attract undue attention, that your audits and your your filings everything your eyes are dotted and your T's are crossed, And also about bringing people together in the room so that they could begin to talk to each other, have someone they can call, recognize if you know something goes down here, the different resources available in the city, including each other. So just the thing I feel I've learned in different crises, having gone through COVID, having gone through the very first Trump administration, is don't weather a crisis alone. Do it as much as possible in community building a net for each other. And I feel like that is something we all learned last time, and that people were able to kick into gear even earlier this time.

Speaker 1 09:25

So, I mean, in, I would say, in sort of a perverse way, it could make our communities stronger in many ways and making sure we have our ducks in a row and that we're even more reliant, you know, for the present and the future. Would you feel that? Or how do you feel about that being a result? I think



Speaker 2 09:45

if I were making choices, I'm like, I'm not sure that's the one I'd be choosing the way to get to that, but yeah, I just feel like it's a muscle that the 21st century had just given us one opportunity. Opportunity after another to lean on, to lean on to each other and that you really just can't go wrong with, leaning on each other, leaning into collective advocacy, leaning into collective learning, and just supporting each other and getting through crises, particularly when we're all going through the crisis together.

Speaker 1 10:21

Mm, hmm, absolutely. You know, one of the clear focuses or priorities of this administration is to destroy what seems like our civic institutions. And you know, that affects our cultural institutions as well. You know, how do we face you've already kind of said this, but is there anything specific you would say about how our institutions should be facing this current environment and preparing for the future, any conversations that you've had or things that you've heard that you would want to share?

Speaker 2 10:53

So the interesting thing that feels very different about Trump 2.0 versus Trump 1.0 is in Trump 1.0 there were every year the administration tried to kill the National Endowment for the Arts, the NEA, and every year there was such strong bipartisan support that they never succeeded. And in fact, the budget went up here and there, like incrementally, but there were some increases, and so they sort of didn't put their heart into it as an administration, and yes, they would make a move to to shut it down, and there would be this bipartisan support that basically, you know, defeated that, that notion, what has struck me, among the many things that are flooding the zone this time in 2.0 is that they've changed strategy to something far more, just a much more interesting strategy, which is to actually just take over the cultural arms. So the Kennedy center firing, followed on by resignation to people's self, you know, Issa Rae and Shonda Rhimes and others followed like, Oh, everybody is fired that I cared about. And coming who had been democratic government nominees to the board and, you know, etc, so I'm going to resign, and at the NEA level they are. They cancel the challenge grants that really affected underserved communities, and they change the regular grants to ones that are about the 200 upcoming, 250th anniversary, so using the arts on purpose and pointedly towards the state project, right of celebration, unfettered, unquestioned celebration of The American project through the arts and our 250th anniversary as a nation. So that's a really different way of going about it. It's co-opting as opposed to shutting down. And that just feels like, oh, okay, that's, that's, that's something different to kind of begin to maneuvers. I think it's just going to all into play for people kind of what their values are, what they need to do, versus not, how much money is coming from the NEA. How did that impact? How they move forward again, how boards and senior leadership might just be responding to what parts of the system they want to opt into, and what parts don't feel aligned, and how that's all going to trickle down, because the feelings of fear are high and justified, and we have different relationships to government entities, particularly monetarily. So for some, or I would say for many organizations that I'm familiar with, Nea money is not large. It was more about or it part of the seeking NEA funding on some



level, is credentializing. It's what I'm doing is important enough that I'm able to get national funding, but not necessarily the amount of funding. And of course, that's going to depend. For some folks, 20 to 50,000 could be really quite instrumental in their budget and irreplaceable. And for others, it might be more about kind of the signaling of being having this kind of stamp. And in this moment, maybe that's not actually the stamp that people may want, because it actually begins to signal something else. So just be interesting to see how that plays out, how shift will. What's lasting, what's not and what can be rebuilt, what is on record for future administrations to rebuild in particular ways. So those are some of my thoughts. I think my bottom line is that we're so early in it that we're still figuring out which side is up. Mm,

Speaker 1 15:21

hmm, yeah, what you said about the sort of stamp of approval, the credentializing of the government, the federal government, even if the financial support wasn't substantial, I think, is really interesting. It's now, in many ways, all of the prior symbols of status, or, you know, the box that people are placed in those, all of those categories are starting to disappear, you know, and it becomes definitely, I think, in you know, we've been talking to our clients about The importance of reinforcing your values and what that means, and making sure that what you do is aligned to what you say you do, and that there's actual community response and need to the problems that you're solving, and that at the center of it becomes the most important thing, rather than this, this attribution to what society says is important, as far as, like the NEA, or all sorts of things that you know that we look to for, for status, or for the word I'm looking for, for affirmation that what we're doing is valuable. It doesn't come from that. It comes from the people that you're serving. You know,

Speaker 2 16:35

Absolutely, very well said, and, and again, one of the big learnings of Trump 1.0 and COVID times even more specifically, in the George Floyd summer and its aftermath was that leaning into one's values and really knowing one's values beforehand makes it a lot easier to lean into them and kind of gives you a roadmap forward. And I think the organizations that are much clearer about what their values are will be able to weather this in a way that is responsive and respectful of the communities that they serve way more easily than those that are not and and it's going to be a really interesting time, because the every value that I can me support, and the organizations that I'm a part of, or have been a part of, every value that we hold dear, about what it means to be welcoming, what it means to create places of belonging, what it means to uphold Diversity Equity and include and inclusion in whatever language we use. That was, it's not like I actually don't use ei language personally, but it's I support what it means and gets towards. I just prefer less jargony language, and all of those are things that we have held dear and are in the line of fire of this current administration, and we'll have to figure out how to continue to hold those things close to us. And I am in deep support of seeking there will be there are times to be legible, and there may be times going forward to be illegible. Mm, right, and that's something I think people will have to navigate as well. Like, when is it? Does it make sense? And when is it important to be upfront and to be really clear? And one value that I do think should be incredibly clear and how we navigate and move through might actually require some eligibility, some undergroundness and some non transparency, which feels counterintuitive or counter to what we call our values of transparency, but we I think we just



are going to have to be smart and strategic about certain things, if we can figure out what the values are that hold us firm and then figure out Different ways to navigate, even if it means substitute Subversion and not being legible

Speaker 1 19:25

Absolutely. And you know, even thinking about that, the language of DEI wasn't ours, right? And I'm speaking as a person of color, right? We've been marginalized by that language, you know, and so we weren't labeling who we are and the contributions of our culture to American society, as DEI sure maybe we can call it that you called it that, you know. So there is a way of I think the appreciation and the actual value that we contribute have always contributed to be heightened. Right in this way, right? Because it's outside of the box, or the acknowledgement of it is outside of these labels that we didn't place on ourselves anyway, you know, exactly right? And so I'm not, in any way, a half glass full type of person, you know what I mean, like I am definitely, you know. But I do see the limitations that we are placed, that are placed upon us with that type of language and that type of additional marginalization, you know. So it just offers the opportunity for us to be a bit more creative, I think, at least in how we approach these and how we recognize our own value first, without having to have someone else's stamp of approval or affirmation, you know, when it doesn't exist anymore in some ways.

Speaker 2 20:42

I am so co sign on that, because what has become clear is, yes, that we have to make our own rules. Like self determination is one of my greatest lean on values, and like the thing that I wish the most for people of color and women and LGBT folks, like all of us that are not usually at the center of the mainstream, but are at the center of our own lives, like in the communities and the ways we set up our lives and our institutions, just getting to a point where more and more we're able to live and experience self determination feels to me where to lean, one of the places to lean in recognizing that we're in a system where resources and money, included in that number of resources, is real. So one of the things that I don't necessarily have the answer to yet, but I think that could is a framing or a question mark that we should be asking ourselves, is okay? This administration, this time, is about breaking things, really like just destructively breaking things okay. Things are being broken. What are the opportunities in that break? What are ways we can change how we move in the world or support each other in the world? Are there new funding mechanisms, support mechanism, new networks to lean into, which is why I continue to be really interested in diet, what I call diaspora weaving, because I think folks on the African continent and in some other Latin America and other settings have so much to teach us about what it looks like to live under autocracy, to still create, to still move within those systems. And one of the things that I've been really thinking about is Cheryl Lynn Eiffel, the incredible Sherilyn Eiffel, lawyer and advocate, wrote an essay right after the last election. So sometime in mid, early to mid November after election, she wrote a sub on her sub stack, she wrote a beautiful piece about, we may be in planting season right now, not harvest season. So if we recognize the season we're in, then we might move differently. So there everything is being destroyed, things are being uprooted, and all kinds of things. But right after the uproot, there's soil there. What are we planting? What are the seeds we're planting that when things switch up, will be there and those things will start to grow, and they might be new things and new ways of moving. I read another article this morning, really fascinating piece about AIDS



activism in South Africa in the early 1990s under President Mbeki, who was a HIV denier, and it was a really a stain on the country at that time, because they were really struggling as a country with HIV and AIDS, and they had a president and a Health Secretary that sounds familiar, who were complete in complete denial that HIV was a killer. They were like, no, just drink beet juice and some ginger juice and you're going to be fine, which obviously wasn't real, and the country really suffered for it. And literally hundreds of 1000s of extra people died that may not have died if there had been a different administration. So it's real damage will be done. But the argument that this article made was that at the local level, activists HIV AIDS activists on the ground in South Africa, despite what their presidential office was doing were planting the seeds that went and Becky got out of office, they were able to immediately go into moves to reverse and elevate people who had been quietly working to learn about retroviral medicines and where they were and how they could help, and all that, you know, they were teaching each other and making connections across borders that the minute the blockage of the President was out of the way, they were able to immediately go into high gear and actually do the things that the country needed to do and begin very quickly to save lives. So both of those, this idea of planting seeds is something I'm really leaning into, like, what is it we can plant? If things are broken, systems that we recognize, then what are systems we can begin to plant new versions of

Speaker 1 26:00

I love that. It makes me take a deep breath and just hearing it's sometimes it's planting season, sometimes it's harvest season. Recognize the season that you're in. I love that. And talk a little bit more, if you don't mind about the diaspora weaving, or the diasporic weaving work that you're doing amongst different countries and places throughout the world. Yeah,

Speaker 2 26:22

It's definitely information. So as you mentioned in my intro, after I left, the launch of my project, which I had led for 10 years and really helped to build and work that I really loved and knew that, but knew that I was ready for a new chapter and a new way to kind of show up in the world. And for a year. Right afterwards, my husband, I traveled for a year, and we spent six months in different parts of Africa. And before that, 2023, I had been to four African countries, one of which is my own Nigeria. My father's Nigerian. I grew up. My formative years was spent in Nigeria. I spent a month there, which I hadn't done since I was a teenager. And lived there, I used to go for much shorter trips and and I was able to lean into it as a professional space, as well as a space of learning and curiosity and exploration, and I was able to take that same energy to the other nine countries I went to, eight of which were completely new. I returned to South Africa. So that was a repeat, but I hadn't been in 20 years, in fact, when I first visited and Becky with the President, and being learning. And so the things that we kind of focused on, which sort of picked different themes, and, you know, just this stuff we love doing when we travel, but we really leaned into history. It was such an opportunity to learn about all these different histories of different everything from Togo to Namibia to Ethiopia. You know, just like all of these countries, like, who are you? How do you talk about yourself in historical terms? Then we leaned into their art and their culture. So we ate amazing food everywhere, and we visited incredible cultural spaces, museums, performance, performing arts centers, galleries, community spaces like chimerenga and Cape Town, which has been doing incredible Pan African cultural work and magazines and publishing and events



for you know, a couple of decades now, getting to actually visit chimego is amazing. So all of that and we got to just meet people who are part of what feels like a kind of African moment of cultural renaissance. So our culture has always been there. We always are making art because that's what humans do. But we didn't always have well resourced, visionary, imaginative, post colonial, decolonial spaces to hold these dreams and to hold these culture, this culture. Now in Nigeria, we have the Randall center of Yoruba arts and culture, which is incredible. I've now been twice. It's such a beautiful place of holding this Yoruba culture is spread around the world now, and this is the heart of where this happens, and a space that is capturing that energy, that history. There's zait mocha being remade under Koyo cool leadership, with an incredible team of of curators, some of whom we got to meet. We got to go to the Zoma Institute, which is in Addis Ababa, and they have a gallery, a farm, a cafe, a botanical garden and a school. That's their cultural project. All of that is existing as its own entity. So what I got to do. Kind of learned was the breadth of creativity, the breadth of cultural expression, and the different ways that people were making a way in their own spaces. And what I loved was what some of what I was seeing and the conversations I was having, really resonated with what black and brown arts institutions are doing here in the United States, what different arts leaders are thinking about I was running into American arts leaders and other places, people from other countries as well, including when I was in Dakar in November, and got to see you for a little bit, running into people from around the world who are paying attention to the continent, and the people on the continent are paying attention to themselves. So I think there's this opportunity to build a different NET between each other, thinking about African diaspora and how people of African descent, in the UK, in Brazil, in the United States, across the 54 countries of Africa, and everywhere in the Caribbean and everywhere in between. Because we are everywhere, have an opportunity to begin to build a different NET, to learn from each other, to connect with one another, be that learning exchanges, be that convenings, be that podcast conversations, be that research and writing about one another and by visiting one another. So there's so many different opportunities for this, I think, and one of the ways that I slotted myself in was to organize tour of Lagos around art ex Lagos, which is the biggest art fair in West Africa, which also overlapped with afropolis, a new diasporic Cultural and Arts Festival that will now be annual at the John Randall center for Yoruba culture. But it was way beyond that. It was really bigger. The festival is bigger than just Yoruba culture. It's about black and diaspora culture more broadly, and bringing people from all over to Lagos on the ground, and the opening of the museum of West African art, which is such a major deal, it's in Benin City, which is in Nigeria, so not the country Benin, which is doing its own incredible cultural work, cultural building work. And so I wanted to enter through tourism and through narrative. I wanted to use the curated tour as a way to tell a different narrative of West Africa and of Nigeria, and of this moment that stepped outside some of the frameworks that we think about Nigeria as oil rich and you know, corrupt, but also about the hustle and all this stuff, and tell a different Story grounded in history, and linking that history to art and culture. So that would be one of the interventions that I wanted to make, and that I felt I could make. And there are other ideas I have about, oh, this is what we might be thinking need to be thinking about in this moment to be able to keep propelling ourselves forward.



Speaker 1 33:16

Mm, hmm, what you're saying about your decision to make an intervention that feels true to you, and strengthening this net, and like building this boundary less ecosystem, I think is particularly interesting as related to the that the diaspora, first of all, and then also to the arts and culture world that can sometimes feel very, you know, mysterious, right? And yeah. Gatekeeper, so what would you say to people of any age or any place in their career about finding the intervention that feels the most true to them in helping to move this work forward. And I'm going to keep referring to this and what I now will call the planting season. Yeah,

Speaker 2 34:08

The planting season.. I'll send you the article as well.

Speaker 2 34:23

yeah, I think in the same way that organizations need to lean into their value, what their values are and what their purpose is like, what's the thing that you can do that makes the most sense and you feel 100% aligned and on point, that's the question mark that people need to start with, organizationally and personally, right? So now we're I talk, we already talked a little bit about organization, but I think the same thing hits one of the first things I did after leading the laundromat project, because I had lived within a particular mission and a set of values for. 10 years, which I loved, and because sort of, when you're an executive director, you and the institution are so closely linked that I didn't have a separate way that I thought about myself. I thought about myself within the container of the LP which I loved and felt fully aligned with. So it's fine, but once I was on my own, literally, Ayofemi, I'm not joking. In the first week, I was sitting on a beach in Oaxaca, and I was like, wait a minute, what's my purpose and what are my own values? Because I've had to, I've known what they were for 10 years, and now I was beginning to feel, even though I was going to spend a year traveling, I was like, No, y'all, I'm feeling unmoored. I'm going to need to write some stuff down, and I wrote stuff down, and it's since, you know, kind of shifted, and I've crafted it more. But I actually needed to do that to be able to keep going,

Speaker 2 35:53

I was so used to it, like this idea of understanding, like just having my own guideposts, and having a certain clarity in the world. And it's continued to be the case. I know that I'm interested. I'm dedicated to supporting and building like Black and Brown Arts leaders and networks and systems like that's what gets me up in the morning and gets me excited. And I'm committed to the diaspora. My Home Base is our United States and West Africa. But it's not limited to those two geographies, because black people are everywhere, and I love them wherever they are. And so that's what I would say. It's hard to know what you're planting unless you ask yourself. So on some level, you have to start with some kind of conversation with yourself about who you are and why you are and it's never too early and it's never too late, and but it will guide you once you have a moment to kind of do that, and then to the point of building a network, you have To start identifying who's in that space with you. They don't have to have identical but they do have to have something that overlaps and speaks to you and it at least complimentary to where you're going. So I'm beginning to like understand who are the folks in the world that for whom, the way I'm trying to move and work resonates, and they are doing something aligned.



Or, you know that I then get to be like, Oh, this is the part I'm holding. Do you want a partner? Or can I connect you to this other person who might be doing something more similar to what you're doing? And over here, there's this other thing and it helps guide what I say yes to and what I say no to, and all of that just becomes a lot cleaner. If you have some sense of yourself, I will say part of that is allowing yourself to explore. So if it doesn't feel 100% clear, then give out a couple of yeses that you're like might be where I'm headed, or it might not, but maybe I should take this opportunity to read this theme, listen to this podcast, take this consulting project, or whatever that is, or try this low level partnership, like, don't put all your eggs in one basket and then if it doesn't work out. But I think exploration is part of that process. So I feel really clear on what my general purpose is. I feel exploratory about how it will manifest. So I still there's still room for me to grow and learn and explore and be curious and test things. But the big picture of like, oh, this is who I'm serving, and why I'm serving them, and what the world could look like and how it could be stronger. Feels very clear to me.

Speaker 1 38:47

I love that. I feel like I've been saying this person's name every time I've done an episode so far. But he's someone I consider a mentor in my head now, and I've done some programs. His name is Dr John Demartini, and he all of his work is really about the importance of exactly what you're saying, knowing your values and taking the time to consistently every month or every three months, reevaluate and do an assessment of what those values are. Because he always says that people are not really committed to each other. We're not committed to things, but we are committed to our values. And that is even physiologically, what gives us the energy that you're talking about for the day to start. And we just want to go at it. We get up with all this energy time disappears. It's those things that reveal your values, you know? And he also says this one thing, he's said, your life demonstrates what your values are, right? So a lot of people say, I value one thing. But then you ask, what does your life demonstrate? And it's something completely different, you know? And so. So this values alignment, process and clarification, is really the core of everything that we do and at the core of everything that we do. His name again, Doctor John D Martini. I listen to him every day, literally, because he's got so much content. He's been doing this for like, 50 years, and I listen to at least one of his talks every day, because it's very confrontational, right? Like it pauses you to ask questions of yourself that will get you to the point where you are clear. And the last thing I'll say about him is you can see I'm I'm a member of this cult. It really is, yeah, the quality of the questions that you ask yourself determines the quality of your life. You know, the process that you went through is, you know, is affirmation of that, right? Like it gets you Yes, you do have this clarity, and you can move and make decisions based on what's really intrinsically important to you.

Speaker 2 41:01

yes. So here's a quote from James Baldwin I was looking for, uh, yeah. Here it is, I literally, as you were saying. I looked up a James Baldwin quote that I love, um, I, but I still believe that the unexamined life is not worth living. Mm, hmm. And then it kind of goes on from there. I know that self delusion in the service of, no matter how small or lofty a cause I'm trying to click on this I can see the rest of this quote in the service of no matter how small lofty a cause is a price no writer can afford. So this idea of the unexamined life is where people run into trouble and the invitation to ask yourself interesting, hard,



curious questions to yourself, the idea of self examination, self awareness, is something that I think is the beginning of a journey that lets you figure out what your purpose is, lets you figure out what your values are, and your life can really shift if you take that on. And I feel like I really started to do that in my early 30s, in a real well, I was doing it without the language for decades, and really started to lean in in my 30s, and then leaving curating and moving to New York City and being like, actually, maybe I want to work with people of color. Oh, actually, I like working with artists in this way. And it was, you know, through the professional lens, and what one of the gifts that the laundromat project gave me, because I was there when we were shaping ourselves, both as a board member and later as a staff member, was this way of like, articulating values out loud. Because we have, we carry our values no matter what. But if we donate to your points, your life will tell you how you are doing things, how you are living. You are telling the story the whole time, whether you know whether you were being thoughtful about the story you were writing, that's where self examination comes in. Oh, I love that.

Speaker 1 43:16

I'm going to throw a little bit of a curveball at you, please. How do you confront fear, right? Because I think in this, this whole conversation about values and being clear, and you see something, you're like, Oh, I've been saying I valued this for 10 years, but and then you're like, Okay, now I have to make different decisions if I'm hoping for a different path or different outcome, and I think that's really scary for everyone you know I I admit it. You know myself, it's like, okay, this is this is not true. This is not authentic, and I am seeing the results of that in my life. So like, how do you confront those things that may make you a little anxious or fearful about making a different choice about where you're taking your your life.

Speaker 2 44:08

So one of the things that I love about getting older is that it gets easier to do hard things because you have evidence you've been through something before. Um, and, you know, just it accumulates over time. That is just the reality. The longer you live, the more data you have. So one of my biggest, the first thing I think about when I hear the word fear, is there's no way there. The only way through it is through it. You can't go around it. You think you can, but you in the end, at the end of the day, the only way is through it. So when I like accept that, sometimes, depending on the fear, I get to accept on day one. Sometimes might take a little longer. It always ends up at the same place, like I'm just going to have to go through it, so then I can switch mood to how am I going to go through it? Do I have choices and control? Because you don't always again. COVID will always remain a touchstone for anyone who went through it. I wasn't on my own timetable about how to go through it at the all times. Eventually we got to a place where it's like, we're going to, we're going to wrest control of the situation. Okay, we have a general there's a there's a global pandemic. Now I know what I'm in. Let's figure out similarly, the Trump theme has now been three weeks, four weeks, whatever it is. Slowly, we're like, oh, this is what we're in. So we're in a month from now, or a couple of weeks from now, it's like, Okay, we have the general parameter, and now the only thing to do is figure out how to go through it. So for me, that's really helpful, because I'm just like, it switches my brain from reactionary to proactive. And for me, that's really important, my sense of control and self-determination, which is a nicer way of saying control. It's a value laden way of talking about control, which matters to me is the I need to at some point I'm the



one living my life within whatever the bigger context and container is, and I have to feel like I have some way through and self-determination. I may not be able to determine everything, but I'm going to proactively figure out the things I do have some control around, whether it's the way I treat my team, or the kinds of projects I take on, or what I say on my website, or what blog posts I write, what podcasts I talk to, all of those are things that Trump has not taken away from me. I still get to make those decisions and that for me, is one of the ways I kind of navigate fear, is to I love a good cry. I love a good you know, you know, grief session with friends and colleagues and people I love, and My poor husband has to hear a lot of things. He's like, we still complain about that. I'm like, Yes, we still until we're not. I have a coach. She's also someone I'm all for finding the spaces in vent. I actually think that's really important. And then you move on. And you figure, I move on. I figure out what else I can do, how else I can move who else I can talk to, who I can be in community with. So I have to move from reactive to proactive to be able to move in the world. And I never concede my space for self determination may not be everything, but I will never give that up. I will never concede it to others, and that sort of allows me to figure it out.

Speaker 1 48:18

Yeah, yeah, thank you for sharing that. Another word that comes to my mind and my heart is agency, right? Like, yes, agency. You're not leaving your agency behind or seeding it to anyone. When you, I think you've you've laid out a couple steps, right? It's like, instead of focusing outward, focus inward, right? Really get clear on your values first, and then start seeing how those values align with everyone else, right? And then make a plan and just start doing, doing things and figuring out the how, because that usually shows up in some form or fashion, right? Yeah,

Speaker 2 48:57

yeah. And the advice someone gave me in a completely different context the other day, but I wrote it on a sticky because it was so simple, start somewhere. Literally, two words, there's, you know, there's a great, I believe, some Chinese proverb about every, every journey begins in one step. Start somewhere. There's no other choice. It could be the smallest step. It could just be one toe worth of a Step. Start somewhere, make that first step, whatever that is. It could be a phone call. It could be signing up for a particular you know, resource, event, podcast. It could be meditation every morning like, whatever that looks like for you. But in this, in the in that moment of fear, in that moment of overwhelm, so you've possibly moved through the venting and the crying, which, again, I am an advert. I'm pro those things. Mm, hmm. Then. And you move to what's the thing I can do? And you start stopping

Speaker 1 50:04

absolutely thank you for that. I know we're rounding out the hour. So my last question for you, and you mentioned a couple of places, but, but what's Kemi paying attention to? What's on your like, top five list right now you're watching, reading, you know, following what, what are those things that we should be paying attention to right now?



Speaker 2 50:30

That's a that's a big one. Um, see, what do I think we should be paying attention to right now. Please edit these things out while I my brain works. I do. I mean, in the end, for me, art has always been home. So I go to shows and like, artists are still creating, and artists are still making things. So I just went to the Flight into Egypt show for the second time at the Metropolitan Museum, and loved it. And just that journey of of what I one of the things I loved about in this particular moment was there was a reminder of African Americans and other artists here weaving diaspora through this idea of Egypt and Ethiopia, which was a kind of stand in for this kind of blackness of Africa at a particular time, and the ways that we have sought anchor on the continent, even from here and in diaspora, even from here and then, yeah, One of the things that has really opened up space for me is because I'm focusing on this diaspora leaving and as a portal, I get to, like, pay attention to what's happening on the continent. I seek out other kinds of news and vantage points, and I get to both look back at the US through different lenses, and I get to think about the continent. So yeah, there's all kinds of things happening here in the United States, but I get to also pay attention to what's happening somewhere else and think about that, and talk to people in a different context, in a different, yeah, different context. And that, for me, has been really affirming. So one of the things that I'm loving, by the way, because you actually asked me for very concrete things, um, is Lupita and young goes podcast. Um, mind your own and it's 10 episode podcast in season one, which has now concluded. And she gathered 10 incredible, funny, poignant, sad, like all the range of emotion, um diasporic stories. She takes you to different parts of the globe, including the continent and not only and she starts every episode with a story of her own about her life and something she's experienced as a Kenyan woman who has lived in various places, born in Mexico, etc. So she has this really global look at the world, and she knows that Africa and Africans carry the globe in themselves, so I love her podcast. That's, I would recommend that. And then another besides Abbott Elementary, which is, saves my life. Girl, I'm like, I am not going to cry today. I'm going to go and watch an avid elementary episode. Another show that I just started watching, it was recommended to me by a friend, is Rami on Hulu, which is about an Egyptian American in New Jersey struggling with faith and how to be live in the world in a modern, you know, like a contemporary world as a under a TV late 20 year old. I'm not entirely sure of a character's age, but it's really fun. We're about halfway through the first first season, and I would recommend it. I'm going to Egypt on vacation in a month, and this is an Egyptian American So, but it's still like a fun little way into kind of thinking about our, our journey to Egypt in a little bit of time. Those are a couple of concrete I love things.

Speaker 1 54:32

I love it. And also, the way you started sort of just reminds us to look up, right, right. Like, look up and look out, you know, because things are still happening. There's magic still happening. There's creativity still happening. There's all these global perspectives that are still even more so available to us right now that really can be keep us inspired and and connected, you know, and human to be, you know, to be as we you. As the attempts to dehumanize us continue, you know, so absolutely both out. They both Yay. I mean, good. Well, thank you, Kemi. I think we should end here part one, maybe because this is



really fun. I'm like, Oh, you are a delight and Always a pleasure, and I really appreciate you taking the time to speak with us and our listeners, and just for the work that you do in the world, it's so important, and you just reinforce so much how important it is to be true to yourself, I think for me, and I think for so many other people in service of the world. So thank you for that, and thank you for your time and your insights today.

Speaker 2 55:46

Thank you, Ayofemi, and especially because, and I told you this, even you I think, do the same for me, and like when we met, you know, year ago, you were in town and we got to have drinks together, some of our conversation has reverberated through my year. And the way that I kind of thought, like the diaspora, weaving as a place, as a portal, was something that I think was planted in that conversation we have, like, Oh, this is actually something I could be really trying to craft into a way to be in the world. So thank you for being who you are as well. And thank you for inviting me for this conversation.

Speaker 1 56:26

I love it. Love it. Love it well. Thank you. Thank you for listening. If you love this conversation, please share with people who you know would enjoy it as well. Kemi, we hope to have you back again soon, and good luck with all your traveling and your projects. We can't wait to see what comes from them.

Speaker 2 56:46

Thank you. Thank you. Have a good rest of day. Enjoy the car. Thank you.

Speaker 1 56:57

Well, that concludes today's episode. Thank you so much for your time and attention. Every time I listen to the conversation, it just feels more and more grounding to me, and I hope that it felt and feel the same for you. Thank you for tuning in again. You can connect with us anytime at it's 1130 six.com, and on the various social media platforms. We hope to have another conversation soon, Until then, be well and stay inspired.