Durryle Brooks: So, one of the places where I do the most work with leaders is to help them understand that how they see the world and how they understand a conflict or the drivers of it is just their perspective. And, until we create space to engage what the roots of that conflict are, and to do that in a way where we can hear multiple perspectives on the same incident, then we can't make an end road, we can't begin to repair, we can't be in the right relationship because we haven't been able to hold that just because you understand it that way doesn't mean that it's actually what is being experienced on the other end.

Sam Fuqua: That's Durryle Brooks and this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. In this episode, we talk with Durryle Brooks about centering love in racial justice work, and about how he approaches diversity and social justice learning opportunities for leaders through his organization, *Love and Justice Consulting*. He's also the author of *Reconceptualizing Love: Moving Towards a Critical Theory of Love in Education for Social Justice*. We spoke with Durryle Brooks at the 2024 White Privilege Conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Alexis Miles. Hi, Alexis.

Alexis Miles: Hi, Sam.

Sam Fuqua: So glad to be joined for this episode of Well, That Went Sideways! by Durryle Brooks. Welcome.

Durryle Brooks: Hi, thank you so much for having me.

Sam Fuqua: Great to be with you here at the White Privilege Conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Durryle Brooks: Yeah, it's been a great experience so far, so I'm looking forward to, sort of, sharing a little bit about my experience and talking about, sort of, what the day's been.

Alexis Miles: Well, I had the great pleasure of being in your workshop earlier today.

Durryle Brooks: Thank you.

Alexis Miles: And you did two things that really grabbed me. One is, you had us get centered and grounded in the room by having us talk about how we were physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually, and it changed my experience. So, we had four minutes each to share our experience with each other, and afterwards, there was a sense of safety and intimacy created with a person I'd never met before. And, we were able to engage in your conversation and in your teaching much more easily and with much more presence. So, thank you for that.

Durryle Brooks: Thank you.

Alexis Miles: Can you talk about that format and the importance of doing that?

Durryle Brooks: Absolutely. So, that was my session called *Operationalizing Love and Centering Love and at Racial Justice Work*. Um, and that particular activity is called *The Personal Compass*. I created it in 2014. I was in grad school at the time, and there was an emphasis, an over-emphasis only on the intellectual ways of being. Um, and, uh, because I'm a black man, a black, gay man, I knew that there was something else that my body was needing and telling me. And so, I needed a framework to begin to allow my mind and body to exist, and, uh, and so I started doing my work around understanding both the importance of knowing in multiple ways. And so, there's one cognitive way of knowing, uh, but our body knows too. And so, in that activity, I invite everyone to check in with themselves from the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, um, and physical such that we can start to push back against white supremacy, which suggests that we need to live a bifurcated life, that intellect is more important than what my body and my heart and my soul feel. Uh, and so that was my attempt at resisting. I think that splintering that is a part of this culture and this society and most systems of oppression. And so, it was, for me, an important starting place because when we feel connected it creates space for other people to, sort of, both relax and then to create some connection and intimacy between the persons who are sharing real things about their lives and to do it in a way that feels like they can share their truth, however they feel necessary to share it. And I think, for me, that's a really important part of holding space for people, holding space for ourselves, and doing the important work of social transformation.

Alexis Miles: Well, it really made a difference, especially when you modeled what that looked like and you gave some examples like, "I didn't sleep well, I think it's the mattress." "My shoes are a bit too tight, but they're cute." Things like that. And then you talked about how you're feeling spiritually, emotionally. That made a difference to the rest of us in the room. It made it feel safe to be in there and to be open, and to actually allow ourselves to look each other in the eyes and have deep conversations about things. And it prepared us for listening to you.

Durryle Brooks: Yeah. Thank you for that. And I think one of the things that I've learned partly because of my father, he's one of the co-founders of the *Social Justice Training Institute*, which is celebrating 25 years, which is a racial immersion where folks get to spend five days just trying to be present. It's a learning lab. It's not a place where you go to tell people what to do, but it's a place where you be. And what I've learned from watching and participating with those sessions over the years is that if I don't model a pathway, a possibility for us to be whole or for us to be well, for us to really, uh, co-create a space where, um, everybody, bodies matter, whether it's around race or gender or class or sexual orientation, uh, if I don't set the standard, people have a hard time imagining. And so, if I can't be vulnerable and tell the truth, um, how can I invite you or even expect you to do that in my space? And so, I always believe in telling the truth about who I am in hopes that it creates space for people to tell the truth, a deeper truth that they might not, wouldn't share if I just asked them how they were doing on any given day.

Sam Fuqua: So, I know you do a lot of work with leaders of many different backgrounds, right? And, how do you address, uh, because I've found this in some of my own work life, the challenge of bringing the whole self and being vulnerable, uh, when we, at least I, sometimes just wanted to bring my intellectual self, maybe a little bit of my emotional self, but there was a bifurcation that was maybe a protection mechanism or not wanting to "take work home," or, or bring home to work. You know what I mean?

Durryle Brooks: Yeah. One of the things that I've grounded myself in over the years is that there's always a reason that people show up the way that they show up. And, those reasons usually have deep roots, uh, to things that we are conscious of and sometimes unconscious of and other things that we've completely

removed from ourselves. And so, my first thing is to never judge what people bring or not bring, um, to workplaces or their places of faith or wherever they find themselves. And, what I begin to invite people into is that your own story about, sort of, why you felt that you still need to show up like that today, in bifurcated ways or places where you are not bringing the brilliance of your mind, but the knowing of your body and of your spirit and your heart fully into the space. What pieces of your socialization, your history, your context is still having you to feel that that's not something that you should do or is accessible to you. Now, if you do all that work, you know, that self work, and still say, "Well, I don't want to do that," that's great. That's great. Because that's your choice. But my work is really about helping people to interrupt the ways in which they, kind of, operate out of routine and habit. And, I believe Dr. Barbara Love's work, where she talks about liberation, uh, liberatory consciousness, she talks about, um, living in the world with intention and not as an automatic response. And, that a part of us, sort of, disentangling ourselves from systems of oppression is when we get to know when we're showing up is because it is out of our own choice points, our power point, and not because of the ways in which I was socializing to trauma or to pain. And I think that's what stuck with me the most. And so, I invite people to consider often, like, what's your story about what you're bringing and what you can bring? And is there something in your environment that's either rewarding a certain way of being in a space, um, and disenfranchising others, or is it you? And it's usually a little bit of both.

Alexis Miles: So this morning, you presented a framework that you use when you're working with leaders, and it included things like debate versus dialogue, interrogating assumptions, surfacing assumptions, and some other things. Could you talk about that?

Durryle Brooks: Yeah, so I think, um, my work, as I mentioned, is really about helping, uh, leaders, and I mostly work with progressive leaders to provide them with space to do learning and development and capacity building around a number of issues, whether it's around healing trauma, to manage and navigate conflict, specifically around racialized experiences and how they create a lot of conflict and tension in our lives and in our interpersonal relationships and in systems. And so, what I've learned is, is that because we've been socialized into a culture of debate, that we also, in that, inadvertently start replicating white supremacy. And what I mean by that is that my insistence that there is only one right way, um, that the right way to do it is mine, that I have the only singular truth in this space, uh, that I'm often having to position myself as right and others as wrong, all of that is tied to being socialized in a culture, in a context that is about minimizing difference, uh, and disrespecting it instead of inviting us into what I believe dialogue does, which is to create space for multiple truths and multiple realities.

And so, one of the places where I do the most work with leaders is to help them understand that how they see the world, and how they understand a conflict or the drivers of it, it's just their perspective. And, until we create space to engage what the roots of that conflict are, and to do that in a way where we can hear multiple perspectives on the same incident, then we can't make an end road, we can't begin to repair, we can't be in right relationships because we haven't been able to hold that just because you understand it that way, doesn't mean that it's actually what is being experienced on the other end. And so, my work is really trying to create the conditions for people to tell all their truths, and that together we get to come to some common and shared understandings about what's driving either conflict or discord or discontent, uh, in the workplace.

Alexis Miles: Well, earlier, you mentioned that knowing a person's origin story makes a difference, and that that's one of the ways you keep from making assumptions about people.

Durryle Brooks: Absolutely.

Alexis Miles: Could you say more about that and maybe tell us a bit about your origin story?

Durryle Brooks: Yeah, I think one of the principles of dialogue is about identifying and surfacing of assumptions. And, we make them quickly every single day, around the clock for many reasons. And I think what I've learned in my lifetime is that when I spent time interrogating the assumptions that I have about my own body, my own lived experience, it creates space for me to understand what other people might have been socialized into and to not make assumptions about, um, their behavior or the way that they're showing up because I don't have enough information. And so for me, what I believe at my core is that when we spend time creating the conditions for deeper understanding and self awareness, it allows for empathy to show up in really important and powerful places. And I think we're going to need it to help remind us, uh, and to reclaim our humanity. And we won't be able to do that without leaning in heavily in the empathetic space, being fully embodied as who we are and understanding how we've come to be.

I'm not just Durryle. I'm Durryle because I grew up in Baltimore City, in a racialized and redlined neighborhood, in a space that couldn't support a grocery store. I'm, I'm Durryle because I was raised in a homophobic church and there was religious abuse. And so, all of those things came together to produce these really seemingly intractable pain points that were, um, pressuring me and molding me, uh, and resulting in trauma, long lasting trauma that I've been able to work. When I do my work, it's because of those experiences and doing the healing work required that allows me to go and support organizations and leaders in really difficult, um, seemingly intractable disconnection from one another. And, because of my insistence on understanding how I came to be, I also get to invite other people into sort of, "Huh, you thought that, that way of showing up was, uh, right? Okay, so tell me more about how you came to know that to be right? And how that might look different based on your race or your gender or sexual orientation? And how that might be fueling some of the, uh, trauma, the discord, the discontent, whatever is going on in the space of conflict and leadership, uh, leadership teams or organizations." And when I began to do that, I found that it's much harder to just point a finger easily and say you were the wrong one. If we don't interrogate the systems that actually create the conditions of our own beliefs and our world views and the broader context, uh, we, we get to easily point fingers at each other.

Sam Fuqua: You work a lot with progressive organizations where we think there's a unity of mission, we have the right values, we believe a better world is possible, and we have this alignment, and we would hope empathy with one another, and yet, what's breaking down there?

Durryle Brooks: I think we, probably, generalization, are really wonderful, um, wordsmiths. And what I mean by that is, I believe we learn to pick up language and to not interrogate what it is and what does it mean. I do a lot of work with helping organizations move through values, and so, for example, people say, "I value justice." Then I say, "Well, what does justice actually mean?" But most organizations don't go deeper than just, I believe in justice. But it's actually when you start inviting people into sort of, now tell me a story about what justice means to you into what would it look like in real time in the day to day. Then I get to start fielding, huh, there are a lot of distinctions here. Actually, justice is a word with many meanings to you because every person is bringing their own interpretation to it. So, I have to begin to help people design processes so that they can think together and come up with shared language and alignment, and not just language alignment, but real practical embodied belief that I understand when you say justice that I understand it the same way too or close. Because what I see often happens that people like, oh, we're

good. I'm an anti-racist organization. I believe in love or compassion or integrity, but we don't spend time doing the work of like, okay so what does that mean. And, because of that, because we don't have a good skill set that's pervasive in our society, that helps people, um, handle multiple realities, multiple truths, nuance, and complexity, uh, because we're socialized into a debate culture, uh, it's hard to hold. Um, and we don't have a, a, a skill set to do that often or very well. And so, whether or not you're progressive or not, we still are lacking essential skills and tools for us to be, uh, in right relationship with each other.

Sam Fuqua: Yeah, that phrase "debate culture" really resonates with me and I hadn't thought of it in that particular phrase, but yeah, we were willing to debate the point and argue the righteousness of our position effectively. Sometimes with empathy.

Durryle Brooks: Sometimes.

Sam Fuqua: Yeah, sometimes. Yeah.

Alexis Miles: Could you walk us through that framework? There's six components. Could you walk us through that?

Durryle Brooks: Yeah, so that particular body of work is called *The Building Blocks of Dialogue*. Um, and you can go online and look it up and there are actually more building blocks, but I start with six because I think they're really important. Um, and so, what I often say to people is that they, because we've been socialized into being culture to not in the space of dialogue, that we can, we begin to conflate simple talking and discussions as dialogue. And that, that's actually not true because you could be venting at someone or you could just be offloading or dumping, whether verbally or emotionally onto other people. That's not dialogue. Dialogue is about mutuality. It's about coming together and thinking together and that there are actually skills that are required for us to be in a space where it is not dumping but actually sharing and co-creating. And so, those six skills are deep listening, identifying and surfacing of assumptions, uh, suspending judgment, which is really, I believe, a really important piece of life lesson for me, uh, respect, voicing, um, and reflection and inquiry.

And that, I believe we have different and varying levels of, um, skill working with those particular six, and what I often say is that I'm usually strong in one or two of those areas, but I'm trying to also do some work in learning and development and others. And that the hope is that if we began to, sort of, grapple with these six skills and grow in the areas where we might need to and nurture them, that we could actually create the conditions in the container for real dialogue about deep and meaningful things, particularly around, um, the ways in which we've been hurt and traumatized and forced to separate and disconnect from our humanity because of racism or homophobia or transphobia. And so, what I found is that healing has to take place in a dialogic space, right? It has to be a space where I feel seen or I feel heard and valued, that the conditions of the container for me to invite you into reflection is such that you feel like if you say something, it's a truth even if you feel like it's going to cause ripples or, or create discord, you still voice it, um, not because out, out of any ill intent, but because it's a part of your truth. And, until I can create the conditions for me to tell the truth, my truth that is, not the collective truth or the total truth, it's hard for people to do the healing work, to letting the guard down, to letting the empathy in. And, I think that's why I spend a lot of time working through dialogue, uh, as a framework to, to move us towards social justice.

Sam Fuqua: Picking up on the name of our podcast, Well, That Went Sideways! we always ask our guests to reflect and tell us about a sideways moment for you, like when something went off track, how you reacted then, how you handled it, maybe how you wish you'd handled it.

Durryle Brooks: Thank you for the question. I think one of the things that I've learned is that, um, if I'm not willing to, uh, be in deep reflection, critical reflection about the ways in which I have shown up in ways that I might feel ashamed of today, that I won't do the learning necessary to change. And so, um, as a social justice practitioner, I wasn't always a doctor, and I wasn't always, uh, having the most knowledge or the most sophistication with how to name or understand people and what they're going through. And sometimes, uh, I've learned that because I identify as a queer man or a gay man, I don't always pay attention to the ways in which my male privilege shows up in spaces because I'm often responding from my place of subordinate, uh, marginalized identity as a queer man. And so, I was with a friend whom I love dearly. Um, it was three guys, two cisgender, straight men and one trans man. And we're all folks of color and with one of my dearest closest friends, Sidney, and we were at her house in New York, uh, and we were talking, we were in just simple conversation. And, you know, the energy changes, the, the, the guys are doing, uh, the bro-ey talk or whatever, and every time she'd interject, we would ignore her and keep having the conversation. And she tried three times. And, she then stopped us and said, "You know, I have been trying to get into this conversation for three rounds, and every time I say something, you all ignore it, and you don't see me."

And, I lost my breath because I couldn't believe that in that moment, I wasn't paying attention to my male privilege because I was thinking just from my spaces of marginalization as a queer person, and I was really excited to be in space with other men that I began to, uh, sacrifice, uh, paying attention to her, her needs, her wants and desires to then collude with the straight men, the cisgender men in that space. And I love her. And I support her, and we've been friends for years, and yet, I still, when I'm not focused and paying attention, I will slip back into the ways, and allow my male privilege, and I would collude, in order to be liked by men because that's a part of my trauma. And I, for me, that was one really important turning point for me to say, oh, you have to not only understand the places where you have a marginalized experiences, but I still, we all have privilege and privileges, and so, I need to also be mindful of that. To allow that not to get lost and end up having a negative impact on someone who is a friend of mine. And luckily, she forgave us. But it was, it was a turning point. And that went way, way wrong. To the left, to the sideways. Back around again. Yeah.

Alexis Miles: And, and in that moment, once you had that realization that was going on, what did you do to remedy that situation?

Durryle Brooks: Thank you. First of all, we apologized, and we said we're so sorry. We had not been paying attention to the ways in which we had completely enacted normative patriarchy, male privilege, whatever the language you want to use there. And, that we're going to be paying attention to that and inviting you in. Um, and then, of course, we then apologize. We asked if she would accept it. She did. And then she had the floor. And then, we reconfigured the space so that it wouldn't allow for the easy manipulation or rather the erasure of her experience just because of the positioning. So let's, so like, okay, so how about we have you more in the center of us so that we can be fully present with you and hear you and see you. So yeah, so for me, that was definitely some of the things that we did and, and then I made a commitment to myself to be mindful of the places where I do have privilege and not when I'm called out, respond from my minoritized space, which I've been like, oh, no, I didn't, I couldn't possibly have male privilege because I'm

gay. Like, but that was a thought, and I had to, sort of, wind that back, um, and to know that even though I am gay, I was still socialized in a society that men still ignore, that's what we're, that women's opinions don't matter as much or as equal, uh, equally as others, and inadvertently, um, reproduced it in that very moment.

Alexis Miles: You are one of the few people I've heard who's doing this kind of work that uses the love, the word love, very freely. So, you talk about love and it's included in the titles of some of the work you do. Why do you do that?

Durryle Brooks: I think that's a really great question and I have been doing a lot of thinking as I've been writing about love. What I will tell you is that when I go into spaces, especially progressive spaces, and I talk about love, people are like, "Oh, what is that?" "Why do you need to talk about that?" Um, because we've been socialized and have lived experience of that, that has love be most often a traumatizing, ineffective, and sometimes, very destructive force in our lives. And so, most of us haven't experienced a love that is transformative, that helps us to discover fully, uh, and unapologetically who we are. And when you live in a society that tells us black people that we are unlovable, it is no surprise then that when I say the word love, it invites in, uh, ideas or beliefs of, um, well, that's silly, that's not going to bring about change. What's love got to do with changing these policies? And so for me, from my perspective, I engage love because it feels like one of the least untapped spaces where we allow racism and homophobia and transphobia to go unchecked. Because when you start to analyze the ways in which we've been socialized to love and who to love, they often rely on the same racialized hierarchies, uh, that say that that some people are more lovable than others. Um, but because we don't have a robust discourse in our, our society, we allow people to suffer in silence, to wonder that if every time my relationship failed, it was because something I did inherently versus a society that constantly says that you don't matter and then won't give you any tools to help make sense of the dysfunction that might be, uh, it might be creating in your life, not at the individual level, but also at the systems level.

And so, when we spend time challenging love, and making us think deeply about, huh, where in how I was taught just was about reinforcing white privilege and whiteness and white supremacy, that you actually start to then have an opportunity to redefine the very idea of love itself and to pull it from obscurity and mediocrity into what I believe Dr. King meant and needed it to be when he said, "Love is a love that does justice and it is about acting in ways that produce social transformation." There's a history and a lineage of black folks and black and brown folks doing work. And if you talk to a lot of activists and organizers, they're saying they're doing what they do out of love. But yet, they're getting written off as, oh, well, you're just too noisy or too loud or whatever because we don't have a robust language and a lexicon to hold that love is what Dr. Cornel West says is what justice looks like in public. And so, for me, if we don't do the work of love, we can't provide people with the tools and necessary resources to start stamping out white supremacy and heteronormativity and ableism that's embedded in our very notions of who we love and who we ought to love or can't love, in some cases. But when I talk about love in the political context, it is that love is important to me because it confers value and it determines whether or not someone's going to act on your behalf. And for me, if we begin to reconceptualize love, it'll create a pathway for us to begin to reimagine it in its full power and capacity to really be the intervention that we need in today's society. Otherwise, we just have more of the same old, same old.

Alexis Miles: Could you say a little bit about your critical theory of love?

Durryle Brooks: Yeah. I came to this study of love. I talked about it earlier in terms of desperation. I had grown up in a society, in a family, in a community, uh, that, uh, did not value queerness. Did not value gay. It was in the late 80s, early 90s, during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and people were literally saying, uh, don't touch gay people, you'll get HIV and die. And so, I was coming up in an era where I was explicitly told, because you're gay, you don't deserve to be respected, and you're lucky that we're allowing you to be here. Or, in some cases, I will kick you out. And so, for me, the question of love became such that it was inaccessible to me, that I shouldn't even expect to have it in my lifetime. Or, and if I did, it would be conditional on the condition of what someone else was willing to offer, not necessarily what was inherently mine, um, and what I had deep within. And so, I started the academic pursuit of understanding love actually in undergrad at a small college called St. Mary's College of Maryland, examining Dr. King's philosophy and notion of love and how he used that as a mechanism to fuel and animate the civil rights movement. And that's where I start to get into the relationship between love as not just an individual behavior, but as a social movement builder and necessary force for change. Um, and so my critical theory is such that when we begin to ask questions critically about love, we get to expose all of the ways in which power is used and misused within it, and it also creates a space for us to find our own power, to give voice to it. And so, when I use critical, it just means I'm helping to expose all of the hidden ideologies that are pervasive in this idea of love, and then to expose them so that we get to make choices about how I show up, and do justice and do right by people. It's a six part framework, but that's the, the, the origin of that, and I believe when we spend time cultivating a capacity to engage in those hidden ideologies, uh, that we, we would be better for it as a, as a whole population of people, humans trying to, uh, live on a planet, uh, that is alive, uh, even though we're told that it's dead and it's just a rock for capitalist aims.

Sam Fuqua: Well, Durryle Brooks, great to spend this time with you. Thank you. And thanks for your work.

Durryle Brooks: Thank you. Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Alexis Miles: It was a pleasure talking with you today.

Durryle Brooks: Thank you. Ditto.

Sam Fuqua: Durryle Brooks is founder and CEO of *Love and Justice Consulting*, an organization that provides leaders with diversity and social justice learning opportunities. He's the author of *Reconceptualizing Love: Moving Towards a Critical Theory of Love in Education for Social Justice*. We spoke with Durryle Brooks at the 2024 White Privilege Conference.

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