Corey Andrew Powell (00:02):

I'm happy to be joined today by Reelaviolette Botts-Ward. She's a Jane of all trades. She's an author, professor at Merit, mental health advocate and current PhD candidate at UC Berkeley. Her latest book is Mourning My Inner- Black Girl Child. Reelaviolette, welcome to Motivational Mondays.

Reelaviolette Botts-Ward. (00:19):

Thank you so much. So happy to be here.

Corey Andrew Powell (00:22):

Yes. Well, I'm happy you're here too. And we're laughing to ourselves because people don't know, I just tried to get through that introduction like five times and finally nailed it. So here we are, so let's just dive in your book, Mourning My Inner- Black Girl Child. It really pulls back so many layers of adversity faced by not just African Americans, but African American women specifically. Now, I'm fascinated by two terms you use when you're peeling back, those layers. You use the term ancestral grieving, which is one, and another term, which is embodied remembering. And those are very powerful. So I wanna ask you to explain. Let's just begin with ancestral grieving. What is that, exactly?

Reelaviolette Botts-Ward (01:07):

So, first of all, thank you so much for having me. And you know, this book is really my baby. I call her my book baby, because I poured so much of my life and so much of my ancestors' lives into this book. And so when I talk about ancestral grieving, it's this acknowledgement that I am a continuation of my ancestors, that the black women who came before me carried layers and lineages of grief that they never got to process, right? Now in 2021, as a black woman, I have access to healing tools and healing modalities. I have access to space and time to do this healing that my ancestors didn't have. And my ancestors passed down a lot of their grief and they also passed down a lot of remedies too. Sometimes we talk about healing and we act like we are in this generation today, we got all the answers that our ancestors didn't have.

Reelaviolette Botts-Ward (02:05):

And so what I battle with is like, yeah, my ancestors did have healing tools, right? They were doing root work. They were in the soil, right. They had their ways of healing from trauma. And there was a lot of ways that they didn't have access to other healing modalities. And so what I'm working on in my own healing journey is merging those ancestral remedies and the reality that there was a lot of pain. There was a lot of suffering that the black women before me navigated and experienced and all of that is in me. You know, I think a lot about "Lemonade" when Beyonce talks about, if we're going to heal, let it be beautiful and how that entire visual album is about ancestral grieving, right? And remedy. She talks about what gets passed down from her grandmothers. And also that there's a lot of pain there. We inherit the trauma of those who came before us. And so, so much of this book is about doing my own healing so that the black girls who become black women who come after me, don't carry as much pain as I've carried because I'm doing my healing to try to break those intergenerational curses.

Corey Andrew Powell (03:24):

Sure. I understand. Completely. And, and so when you say embodied, remembering, that's like the part 2, then? Is that when you're actually embracing what that memory means and, and how to apply it to healing and moving forward?

Reelaviolette Botts-Ward (03:39):

Yeah. So the embodied remembering is I'm remembering myself. I'm remembering multiple cells, right? Multiple parts of myself. And I'm remembering the selves who made this self possible, right? I'm remembering the lives of the black women before me. And when I come into my body through sensory healing, I'm able to remember and reclaim the parts of myself that I've been forced to detach from, to disassociate from as a trauma response.

Corey Andrew Powell (04:11):

That's an amazing point for me because the next question I have that resonates through your work is where you say, have to unlearn what we've had to endure from our black women. We revere them, of course, but as you mentioned, you know, there's a lot of great things that we get from our ancestors. And I'm privileged enough to have lived in a house with three generations of black women. I lived with three generations of black women, which was such a privilege, my mom, grandmother, and great grandmother at one point. So speak a little bit about the context in which you speak about unlearning, what we've learned from black women.

Reelaviolette Botts-Ward (04:49):

Yeah. I grew up with a mother who experienced intense depression and she didn't really have the capacity to mother me and nurture me in ways that my little, 10 year old, 11, 12, 13 year old self needed. And so what I'm doing today is learning how to be a mother to myself. To mother those parts of myself that my mom couldn't. What I learned from my mom as a child was a lot of love and a lot of pain and grief and it was okay to miss some meals. It was okay to stay in bed until three o'clock. It was okay to not have friends and be in isolation. Like I learned a lot of ways of navigating life in the world, from my mom that were not healthy. And while so many of the things my mom taught me were healthy, a lot of the things also were not. And so I can hold both of those things.

Reelaviolette Botts-Ward (05:50):

And so as an adult, as a grown black woman today, I'm learning how to reparent myself, to mother, that little girl in me who is still longing. In my healing journey I had to realize that I get to choose the type of woman I wanna be today. I don't have to repeat those same patterns. And I get to name that that actually was not healthy. And I didn't know that before. And the older I got, the more I realized I can love my mom so much because she was depressed. She literally didn't have the capacity to show me any other thing. And I can love her and accept her and affirm that her life as a black woman forced her into silence and submission and retreat in ways that didn't allow her to give me what I needed.

Corey Andrew Powell (06:51):

Very often, culturally African Americans just don't deal with grief anyway, as far as getting professional help, because there's a stigma to it. You know, we don't do that. We don't talk to strangers about our problems or that's for white people—therapy, right? Those are all the tropes we sort of grow up with. And I interviewed the Olympic athlete, Raven Saunders, who won the silver in the Olympics recently, her nickname is the Hulk. She's a shot putter. Hmm <affirmative>. And she tried to harm herself in 2016, uh, after the Olympics, when she was just 19, a lot of pressure on her in the world. But what she revealed to me was that when she went to the hospital, through the work, her mother flew out to see her. And they realized through the therapy that her mother had been depressed. The grandmother had been clinically depressed, but she had never been treated.

Corey Andrew Powell (07:40):

And she was like, so how do I know? Or not that what I'm dealing with is actually hereditary because we had not had those tools accessible. So when you say that it's so profound, because it's been a lack of the ability to really diagnose for so many of us. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. I had the pleasure of interviewing Stedman Graham recently, and he talks a lot about insecurity growing up because of race issues, a lot of things that gave him a lack of self confidence growing up. But one of his platforms now reminds me so much of what you're saying about moving forward. He says, you are not defined by your circumstances. You are not determined by your possibilities. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. And I love the fact that you're saying, you know, you're, despite the ancestral grief that we carry, we have the position to make our lives better and to move forward and sort of like as much as we can resolve some of that ancestral grief, as much as you can. Now, you also speak about a collective experience we all have, which is childhood. And you say that childhood is sacred, right? So what is it about childhood, that period in our lives that makes that a sacred time?

Reelaviolette Botts-Ward (08:50):

It's so sacred because we come into this world untainted, you know what I'm saying? Like when we get here, we get to be our true whole selves. And along the way people put they stuff on us. <laugh> cause who we are, who we are supposed to be. And it's so deep, cuz I just talked to my mom the other day. And she said she had ran into the babysitter, had when I was three years old and told him that I wrote this book and he said, well, I'm not surprised cuz she was always telling stories. She was talking about the person who was down the hall. It wasn't nobody there, but she was telling these stories. And I was like, that was the three year old girl, that little black girl, she was connected to her ancestors. She was telling stories about the spirits that she was aware of and connected with.

Reelaviolette Botts-Ward (09:41):

And the world and society took that out of me. They told me I couldn't talk to my ancestors. I wasn't supposed to be a spiritual being that I was not (inaudible) for what I believed. And as I grew older, I lost my true self. So now the healing that I'm experiencing is reconnecting with Brit Brit. That's my inner black girl, child, Brit Brit, reconnecting with her, loving her and affirming everything that's beautiful and pure about her. Before the trauma, before the awareness that her body was hypersexualized, before all of those messages about what it meant to be a black girl, what it meant to have nappy here and be unworthy. You know, like I get to go back and tell that little black girl that she is sacred and she is pure. And she is the

truest version of me. And I can bring her into my life today as a grown woman and allow her creativity and her imagination and her spirituality to overflow in my life.

Corey Andrew Powell (10:50):

Societally, African Americans have had to really go through this hair journey where if you begin with the 1940s and thirties, you know, the chemicals to process the hair and change it to look more quote-unquote "white" so that they could assimilate into society. I believe that if society understood a lot of those social acclamations, then there'd be a better understanding with race relations, right? About how we have had to sort of assimilate into the culture at the expense of just what grows out of our head naturally. <laugh>, you know, it's really sort of fascinating because this is a chemical free zone in this hair. None. This is all happy to be nappy here, ladies. Uh <laugh>

Reelaviolette Botts-Ward (11:30):

And that's the thing, like as little black girls, it's like your hair is tied to your sense of yourself and your worth. You know what I'm saying? There was something about being the nappy headed sister, the nappy headed black girl that made me feel like a rebel, made me feel unruly, made me feel like I didn't fit into the perfection, the perfect image of my family. And so I've been sitting with that a lot too. Like I'm on my natural hair journey still and just <inaudible> for that little black girl that, like, it's okay to be ratchet and nappy headed and hood and ghetto. And all of that makes me who I am and I can be unapologetic and that I don't have to feel like I'm not as good as my sister or I'm not as perfect as my sister who had the long quote-unquote "good hair." And I was the nappy head sister. And now I can look at that little black girl and say, I love that nappy hair you got on your head girl and you slaying it. And it's beautiful.

Corey Andrew Powell (12:26):

Thank you for listening to Motivational Mondays presented by the national society of leadership and success and available wherever you listen to, to your favorite podcast. I'm Corey Andrew Powell. And I'll see you again here next week.