



REV. DR. JACQUELINE LEWIS INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON ONE

Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lewis, Author
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Interviewed by Nancy Steiner
Total Running Time: 33 minutes and 3 seconds

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

It's interesting to me that almost all the world's major religions have some kind of love neighbor, love self parallel in there. So in that dynamic, there's a you and other. So I'm sorry, how are you in love the other If you don't love you, you just can't really do it. I want to raise a people who know how to love themselves. That's the work.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories

Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lewis

Pastor and Author

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NANCY STEINER:

In everyone's life. Childhood is the creator of character. How would you describe your childhood and how it informed your character?

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

My childhood had many facets to it. I'm the oldest child in a family of five. Later in our life, we ended up finding our half brother, so that made me second. There were lots of years when it was just me and my sister Wanda. Living on Air Force bases with my parents and there was this kind of idyllic ever evergreen spaces around the base while the blueberry patches around the base places to hide and seek lots of beautiful quartz rocks that my sister and I would collect and play rock family with, you know, big, beautiful rocks swinging on our swing set, watch her mom bake, listening to Dad scream at the football games. This was the first chunk of life was just wind. And Jackie. How much trouble could we get in without getting big trouble? Let's make coffee for Dad when he gets home from work by putting water in the Maxwell House kitchen and just stirring the wider up and see what happens. Let's. Let's take the Avon samples and go decorate Mommy's bed and face with that just mischievous girl stuff. The second chunk of childhood was the entrance of the boys, three little brothers. The first one was just magical to me. I was only six, so I became a big sister really, in that space. And all through it is a lot of deep, fierce love from our parents. Protective love, demanding love. This is what Louis kids do or memorable. We mind our teachers, we study hard. We're going to go to college. Lots of expectations of excellence, quite frankly, and lots of giggles and laughter and dancing.

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NANCY STEINER:

Lots of excellence was expected of you almost as there's a certain perfectionistic quality that you had growing up. You felt that you had to be perfect.

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:
Absolutely. Yeah.

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NANCY STEINER:
That must have been very difficult.

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:
Oh, no, it really wasn't, because that's what you're supposed to do. It's like, you know, we we were. We were. Your grades are posted on the refrigerator. How did you do? How did you do in those exams? Lots of celebration for the excellence. So I don't think it was a burden. It was just was. And you live in to what you learn you're supposed to live into. So we did. I mean, we've got Grammy Award winning singers, Army general, top of the law class folks. We really lived into the parents expectations. And honestly, I have no regrets about that. I don't.

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NANCY STEINER:
Tell me about what you learned in kindergarten and why it resonated so powerfully for you.

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:



I love that book. Everything I learned in my life, I learned in kindergarten. What I learned in kindergarten. In the idyllic place that was the Air Force base was that I was the N-word. The first time that someone ever said that word to me. I was in kindergarten in my happy, well-adjusted little Air Force life with two friends Tommy, Holly, Tommy Hollister, blond, whit haired, great guys, my buds. And then Lisa came. She moved from Mississippi to New Hampshire and brought with her her caste system and stage whispered to one of the Tommies. I don't know why you're sitting next to this nasty N-word. And don't you know she gets chocolate milk from her mother's tits? Now, I had not heard the N-word and did not know that milk came from Tet. So both of those were like a queer, yucky. I felt really traumatized by that. Went home and tell my parents about that. And they had the most amazing reactions that shaped my personality. My mother says, Isn't it silly that people will think you're not as good as them because you're black? I think I was a Negro in those days. I'm eating myself. But isn't it silly that people will think you're not as good as them because you're a Negro? Yeah, that is silly. And she took me to prayer like, we're going to pray about this. So in the middle of the night, lay me down to sleep prayers. We also prayed that I prayed that no matter how anyone looks, they'll know they're loved. That is my core mission, right? My dad was furious and went to the base commander and demanded an apology to him and to me. Now, this is 1963. And my dad is an activist, a Black Lives Matter activist in 1963 in this all white Air Force base. I was totally turned on to. You can speak the truth in love and you can challenge things and they can get better. And I was totally turned on to prayer changes things.

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NANCY STEINER:

So you're called the N-word. Your parents explain it to you. Your mother really sort of diffuses the power by saying, that's so silly. That's so silly. And and let's go to prayer here. And the high road is instantly taken. There's no corresponding attack.

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Well, that's not entirely true. I have to remember the story better when she called me the N-word. I said, white cracker. White cracker. You don't shine. I'll bet you \$5 I'll beat you behind. I could not tell you where I learned that, how I knew that, how that bubbled up out of my body. But it certainly did. And in that talk with mom, she goes, And Jack, we don't call people's names. We just don't do it. So there was still a high road away from them. She mommy was like, you are not going to bend down into the behaviors of these people. You were going to pray for them. And Daddy was like, These behaviors will get called out in the justice pool. And that's how it went.

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NANCY STEINER:

And that is that the first time you realized that prayer was something that you could turn to?

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

That wasn't the first time that I had turned to prayer in this moment. It was an every night ritual, every night ritual with my mom as soon as I had a bed.



If you had a crib, she was ready. So at night, by the bed, a prayer nailing me down to sleep. Or it started with God, please love everybody. And then the now I leave me, which is a little scary prayer, but then kind of learning that we could just image people like who shall we pray for? So she put that in our imagination. The President You know, my dear grandmother, let's pray for Fluffy like we could pray for the cat, you know. So it was early that she taught a conversation with God, did not need, you know, big ritual. It did not need to be in church. It could be anywhere where you could call on God and chat a bit.

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NANCY STEINER:

In your book, you say that your journey has been one of making amends with yourself. Mm hmm. What do you mean by that?

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Yeah, I have been on a journey most of my adult life to make amends to the little kid inside me. The times where I didn't tend to her well enough if I didn't stand up for her on the playground, or if I didn't teach her that it was okay to swear, or if I didn't say, you know, everybody else is having sex and you don't have to be promiscuous, but you you might want to have sex right now, but that could be okay if I could give her more. Freedom to explore. To explore the edges of what theologically she had been taught was right and wrong. I think I would have loved to do that.

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NANCY STEINER:



And when you say her, are you really talking about.

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I'm really talking about me, little Jackie. You know, one of the ways that I think about human development as a as a psychologist, a religion, is that there is a kind of inner, inner family system. Right. So I'm not talking about multiple personality disorder, but I am saying at the different stages of my life. Right. That girl that got called the N-word at five and the girl who didn't have any breasts when she was 12 and everybody else did, you know, the 22 year old that made love for the first time and was like, what is going on? I don't know what I'm doing. All of those Jackie's are here and they keep moving and growing and they show up and be like, We're scared or that was hot or, you know, let's do better. So I, I think about comforting, encouraging myself. So many of us who've had childhood trauma. Have a piece of ourselves, a piece of our inner life that is that wounded child. That is that her child? And our job as adults is to protect that inner child, that wounded child, to put our arms around that child and help that child feel safe and cared for and help that that child grow up. I've done that for myself. I've cared for myself through therapy. With coating so that the little one in me, my therapist is the little one in me sometimes has a big thing to say. Big voice. So I listen to that and I feel like there's wisdom in that. That comes from my wounding and comes from. Also my growing up. Every single experience that has happened to me has made me me. Therefore, though, it hurt. Though. I wouldn't wish it. I claim it as part of my identity and it makes me strong.

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NANCY STEINER:

So wisdom comes from pain. What wisdom would you say your pain has given you?

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

How I've become wise from my personal pain is sometimes people are doing the best they can and they will just screw you up anyway. They just. Well, they don't have the resources. They don't have the. They don't have the wisdom. They don't have the insight. They experienced something that made them do it again to you. Hurt people. Hurt people. That's really important to me. It takes my hurt so anger and puts a little compassion up in that pot to stir, because that's what happens. I think also I can see in the world better the pain that's causing the behavior. So a staff person might just be out of their mind on a Sunday. And I think, Oh, but because the pain is a teacher about wisdom, I then have a different set of questions about that behavior. What has happened there? Are they remembering their mother's death? Are they feeling like they're not good enough today? Last night, did they have a fight with their partner? You just have a different interrogation. If you let the pain, your pain make you wise, it helps you open your eyes to how other people's pain can be driving them.

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NANCY STEINER:

How did you become an activist?

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I was almost nine years old when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr was killed. I was on a field trip with my friends out in a nature center. Mr. Smith had us out on the road. My gorgeous, chocolaty brown fourth grade teacher and. We got way to go on the bus back to Chicago, and he was like crumpled and just crying. And what is wrong? Dr. King was killed today. Oh, my God. So we're on the way back to Chicago, which is erupting in violence. My mom and dad are crying. Everyone's destroyed. The city is on fire. I mean, I don't know yet why people loot when someone gets killed that they love. But they did. And it was dangerous in our neighborhood and the guns were being shot. My sister and I were hiding under our bed and we were crying. And I promise, almost like a voice. This is going to be your job. I felt like the trauma of that assassination, killing love is how it felt in my body. Like somebody that good can get killed, traumatized me and activated me at the same time. I found myself thinking, I'm going to be a drum major for peace now. That might be one phrase that I had heard in the world by Dr. King speeches, but a drum major for peace sounded like the job description I was signing up for. And I don't know how I communicated that to my family or my church, but they got it. And they started setting the table for me, like, let's go, you know, on the March for Dimes, Let's go buy a cow from the Heifer Project for the Kids in Africa. Let's support Cesar Chavez. I was like 11 years old sending checks to Cesar Chavez. Right. It was incredible to feel this calling inside me and then have this flame fanned by the people around me. They were like, We see you. We see you. The same Bonta idea that I love, like I was seen by my family and my Sunday school teacher and my teachers as a girl who was going to be an activist and was an activist and they just started throwing activist stuff in front of me. There was a lady named Valerie, and Murphy was the oldest. I don't think



people could live to be that old when I was nine. She was this old, old, old, beautifully wrinkled black lady who decided to take me with her to meetings around the state of Illinois. Let's go down here and talk about the indigenous thing. What? Let's go over here and talk about labor unions. It was crazy. I don't know what she saw, but she's part of why I'm a clergy now. And this last year I got to speak at a thing honoring her. She's dead now. She saw that in a world where a lot of the church says women can't speak in church and shouldn't be preachers. She saw my inner let's make it better and gave a lot of energy toward it.

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NANCY STEINER:

How would you describe that inner person, that inner you, that I'm going to be part of the world and make it better?

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I think inside all of us is something that we're supposed to become. Imprinted on us inside us. Stamped in us. Not saying it's static. I'm not saying it's only one thing, but I almost feel like it's part of the wood gets formed in the womb. I don't know. I feel that way to me. My inner forming toward activism and justice happens because of my birth order. How can I take care of my little sister? We're only 21 months apart. But if she gets sick in the bed, I'm like, I got to take care of her. If she wants to put a pin in your mouth, I might get them. Get that penny out of your mouth like I was her guardian. Like you were not going to hurt yourself. And that same kind of dynamic with my little brothers. And then be my mother's helper in the kitchen, my dad's helper



outside with the car. There was a kind of helping. And and literally we become the thing where farmed being I got so celebrated for being helpful, for having eyes that could see. So then your eyesight gets keen. Oh, let me see what else I can see. And that thing inside me that feels. Heartbroken when things go wrong for people. Like a will. I have real antenna. Empathy for people. But also what got celebrated and nurtured was I know how to do it. So I know how to stand in the gap. I know how to write a letter to the president when I'm a kid. I know how to save my money in a bank and send it to a charity. I know how to advocate for the person and don't do that. That's when you're going to hurt her. Like, I know how to advocate for the vulnerable because of my family system.

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NANCY STEINER:

Why do we need activists? What role do you think they play in moving our society forward?

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

For as long as there's been humans, there's conflict, because wherever two or more people exist, there's different opinions. And I think our default position, sadly, sometimes as humans under stress, under pressure, we get tribal, we back ourselves into a corner. We stick with our own kind, we fuel our own self-interest. This is what's going to make me and mine. Okay. And. In that dynamic, somebody has to say, But that's not a killer for everybody. Like, there's a whole world of us that are connected to each other. I'm inextricably connected to you and you to me. My destiny is tied up in your destiny. So



someone who just raises up a mirror and goes, No, that's not good enough. Women should be able to vote. Two women should be able to have property. Yeah. Queer people ought to be able to live a life of love and get married. Yeah. Now leave no child behind. It's a kind of a vision for a healed world that is implanted in most of us. They can get up blindfolded when we feel under stress and pressure, and we don't think there's enough. We think about scarcity, but someone reminds you that there's enough for all of us. Someone reminds you that we can all flourish. Someone reminds you with justice. Looks like. Activists agitate to make the world that we all dream of come true. Good travel, Good travel. Holy travel. Yeah. Sometimes in a quiet voice and sometimes screaming with their fists in the air, sometimes with the pen. Making a poem, sometimes writing a song, sometimes preaching a sermon, sometimes laying our bodies down on the ground and saying, Black lives matter or I can't breathe. Sometimes getting arrested. Oftentimes getting arrested.

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NANCY STEINER:

You write, unless you do the work to understand the places where you hurt, where rejection and judgment have caused you pain, you can take childhood wounds into adulthood. Can you tell me what that work looks like?

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Sure. You know, it's interesting to me that almost all the world's major religions have some kind of love neighbor, love self parallel in there. Islam says don't withhold from someone that which you want for yourself. Judaism



says love the stranger because you were once strangers in the strange land. Christianity says love your neighbor as yourself or do unto others as you have them do unto you. So in that dynamic, there's a you and other. So I'm sorry. How are you in love? The other. If you don't love you, you just can't really do it. It could be infatuation. It might even be tolerance. But I think true love, the the non possessive delight in the unique particularity of the other is how I like to think about that. My professor defined it that way. The non possessive delight in the unique particularity of the other. I want to raise a people who know how to love themselves. That's the work. Like the work of love yourself unconditionally to delight in your particularity, even if you're weird that morning. Because you are. I am like, How can I just receive myself as a gift to myself? I am tired today, therefore I'm cranky, you know, not today, but yesterday. I am feeling hurt. I am sad, I am joyful. I am delighted. I'm insecure. The vicissitudes of our human experience. If we just. Relax and receive and love that about ourselves. That's the best rehearsal for that kind of love for the neighbor. So the work is. Look at your stuff. Don't pretend. Be candid. Get. Get jiggy with your truth. This is me. Here's how I'd like to be better. I'm going to work on that. But don't pretend about you. You can't love your own facade, you know? So the work is real truth telling. Excavating our story with a therapist or a coach or a good pastor or friend. Child. Let me tell you about this part being. Curious about yourself. Not narcissistic. That's not what that is. But like, this is how I got to be a me. And that kind of curiosity grows our muscle of having the same kind of curiosity for the so-called other. Loder used to say, We're in search of the face that will never leave us. I love that I see you. I see you into existence. This Ubuntu to theory. I see you and you become. Everybody wants to be seen. But. We also, I think, as human beings, develop shame, really. I wish that wasn't true, but we haven't had enough



distance from the generations of Shamers. We're shame as an education tool or a training tool. So it's in us, right, to drop that cookie jar. You know, you learn early also that someone's going to see your poops and someone's going to see your mistakes and someone's going to see your your flaws and they're going to drive you. Oh, I want to hide from that. I think the work we want to do in the culture in which we live. Is to make seeing people as they really are. A celebration to learn to affirm that you got little kids in school. How is your friend Bobby today? He was seen down. What did you notice about him? How was he dressed? Had he eating enough food? Like, could we curate? Eyes that learn how to see. And that Judge Jesse.

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NANCY STEINER:

What is fierce love?

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Fierce love. I've been in search of a word to describe my feeling for the world and my feeling for God for almost all my life. And I've found the way to describe it. It's this fierce love that is bold, brazen risk taking. Never say no. Willing to put down your stuff for somebody else's tough, vulnerable, rule breaking love. And I've experienced it. I experienced it when I had a car accident in Canada and I was totaled. The car, my boy, my beau, my husband type human being was being in the hospital. And I wasn't. I had no money, I had no car. I had nothing, nothing except my tears and my fear. And this nice white late season afro wearing black and clearly out of place. Bloody jacket, glass in the hair. Crying. And she walks toward me in a lobby with all kinds of



people. She's the only one. And says, what's going on? And man, that's right here, again, just the what's going on. The bold approach that I'm going to just come to you. I'm going to cross the borders to get to you, to give you what you need. And she did. She took me to get drugstore to get toothpaste and shampoo, and she took me to get food. She checked me into a hotel and pay the bill. She picked me up the next morning and took me to the hospital to get my lover. Like what? Who are you? But she did that. That's fierce love.

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NANCY STEINER:

What did that impressed upon you? What did you learn from that?

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Human to human. Our hearts are linked. She. My tears awakened her compassion. She was fearless and relentless and courageous about taking care of me. It unlocked in me. My own capacity. To reach out to the stranger, to make friends with the one who doesn't have a friend to to to donate. Beyond my comfort level, to make sure that people can recover from storms. To go to Louisiana and pull out moldy plasterboard to rebuild houses. To go to the border and deal with the immigration issue. Her. Rule breaking kindness and her ferocious courage became, for me, maybe the most theologically grounding event of my entire life. That I learned more about that than I did in seminary, about this kind of love that is the fount of all blessings.

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NANCY STEINER:

So that's fierce love. Fierce love is having the courage to to cross lines, to to break rules, to to have extraordinary connecting compassion.

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

Absolutely. I mean, you know, my book, Fierce Love subtitle, Ferocious Courage, Ferocious Courage, is Linda Sarsour inviting Sharon Bruce to speak at the Women's March by Palestinian Muslim Activist Invites Zionist Rabbi Woman. That's that's fierce love. A fierce love is. I'm white, but I'm marching down the street for Black Lives Matter and willing to get pummeled right in that in that protest to to die in Charlottesville, because I'm just standing up for the other person. Fierce love is the women in Iran rising up because one young woman is murdered because she doesn't have her hijab on. Right. And those women walking in the street with their hijabs off, taking pictures with their hair. Sean. That's fierce love, not just on behalf of me and mine, but on behalf of all of the humans on the planet. I'm going to stand in the breach and demand justice and love.

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NANCY STEINER:

How did you decide you were going to become a person of the cloth?

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I'm sorry. Oh. I did not decide to be a person of the cloth. I don't know what happened. I. I was eight years old and I took communion for the first time,



which is called Eucharist in some traditions. But like the bread in the Cup, which is a Christian appropriation of the Sabbath meal. But that's cool. I took it for the first time and my mother was sitting next to me on the pew and said, Jacqui, when you take this bread, it means God will always love you. And it was like that sweet, yummy bread the Hawaiian would drink this cup. This cup means God will never leave you. God will always love you and God will never leave you. I was like, I'm hooked. So I was hooked on God. And then I think. I think I was haunted by God. I don't. Why would I want to be a clergy? I mean, that's hard work, but. I did feel early that I was supposed to be a drum major for peace, that I was supposed to work to heal the world. And I thought I'd be a lawyer. But this other thing kept pulling in. The pulling was a feeling of. To be honest, a feeling beyond myself, a beyond my self. Pull to join other people in this kind of march for justice. And being a clergy felt like the best way to do it.

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NANCY STEINER:

You write that we're the ones we've been waiting for to write a new American story to find a way to build fierce love in the world. What are our own individually and collectively? Next best steps forward.

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

I love that June Jordan quote, We are the ones we've been waiting for. She wrote in a poem. After some South African women, we're doing some resistance. It stays with me always. My friend Titus Burgess wrote a song about it. We are the ones we've been waiting for. Feels to me like a reminder



that everybody's got a job to do. Everybody's got a job to do. So what are our next steps for healing a world? One is to be conscious of the way your fate and other folks fates are intertwined. You are not on an island. You are you. We are our brothers and sisters keepers. If we're going to go down, we're all going to go down. And I think the only way the boats are going to rise if we always together so you understand that you're inextricably connected. That means when you go to the polls, you're not just voting for you, you're voting for that person's auntie, that person's uncle, that child's child care, that person's for one K that's disappearing in the stock market. You're voting for Mama Earth. All of the choices that you make belong to all of us. Wow, that's a lot. But it's important. And that then three sends us into like issue, issue, investigation or just learning, right? Like get in the world and read the books written by the people. The books that have been banned. Read the books from the others. Listen to the music from the others. Listen to the radio from the others. Open your mind past your tribe. Open your heart, past your tribe. And you're like, Oh, man, that's why this policy matters. That's why I need to take a stand over here. That's our next step. I am not alone. My fate is connected to other folks fates. Therefore, I need to understand their point of view.

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NANCY STEINER:

In your own story. At this particular point, I want you to repeat and finish this sentence. You know what I learned from my life so far? The big lessons I've learned. The real wisdom for me.

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JACQUELINE LEWIS:

You know what I've learned in my life so far? The big wisdom for me, the big lesson for me. I have so much power to make a difference. I cannot believe that. How you treat somebody in the grocery store line, what you decide to send or not send in an email, the way you pick up strangers on the street or on the subway. Girl, those shoes are fierce. People love being connected with the power. I have to change the weather. My friends call me Storm to change the weather by what I decide to do and say. Is beyond my imagination.

END TC: 00:33:03:00