

309: We Need to Talk About Race (with Celeste Headlee)



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Jen Riday

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You're listening to the Vibrant Happy Women podcast. I'm Dr. Jen Riday and on this episode we'll be talking about that oh, so important topic of how to have conversations about race. Stay tuned.

Hi, I'm Jen Riday. This podcast is for women who want to feel more vibrant, happy, aligned, and alive. You'll gain the emotional, physical, and spiritual tools you need to get your sparkle back and ensure that depression, anxiety, and struggle don't rule your life. Welcome to the Vibrant Happy Women Podcast.

Hey there my friends. I was reading a magazine a while ago and came across an author that I knew I wanted to have on the podcast. Her name is Celeste Headlee. And we are talking today about race. Celeste is the author of the book, *Speaking of Race: Why Everyone Needs to Talk About Racism and How To Do It*. So often we want to say something to that crazy racist uncle or that mail carrier that makes the rude comment. But we don't know quite how to do it.

How do we do it without looking like that angry person? Or how do we say something without causing a fight or defensiveness? Well, in this episode I talk with Celest Headlee about how to do that. And I came away with a huge aha after this conversation, namely that the same principles that apply in any relationship, trying to avoid those Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse that John Gottman talks about which are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Well, those same principles can apply in any conversation about race.

My goal at home and in my relationships with friends and family is to create emotional safety. What would our world look like if everyone truly felt heard, and seen, and like they belong? What would our world look like if everyone felt emotionally safe? Celeste leads us through some thoughts on this and I

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think you're going to be intrigued. If you want everyone to feel emotionally safe on the topics of racism, you could extend this to the topics of sexism and even politics, what do you need to do to create that safety?

We all need to be a part of this to end some of that divisiveness that we have seen in society as of late. So go into this episode with an open mind and an open heart and think about how can I create that feeling of belonging, allowing others to feel heard and seen, valued and emotionally safe. This is so important. Let's dive in.

Jen: Hey, everyone, I am here with Celeste Headlee, author of *Speaking of Race: Why Everyone Needs to Talk About Racism and How To Do It*. And I'm so excited because I heard about Celeste and love what she's doing, and wanted to have her on the show and she said yes. So, Celeste, I want to have you go ahead and give us a deeper introduction.

Celeste: I am a journalist and author, if you have listened to NPR or PRI for the past 25 years you've probably heard my voice. And I have a TED Talk and conversation that has 26 million views I think and three books. The most recent one is the one you mentioned.

Jen: Okay, so everyone does need to talk about race. I couldn't agree with you more. So, start us out on that conversation, where do we begin?

Celeste: So, I think that the most common thing is that people avoid conversations about race if they're talking with someone who doesn't look like them. So, a white liberal feels perfectly comfortable talking to another white liberal about race. We know quite a bit through research studies, we know that as soon as that same white liberal gets in a conversation with

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say an African American they're going to focus all their energies on trying to appear not racist.

Jen: Oh no.

Celeste: And we know that that affects their thinking so much that if we test them, if we quiz them on anything afterwards, they fail. It affects their ability even to perform, they're focusing so much of their energy on behaving in a non-racist way. So, understanding this, that most people either avoid the conversation or they don't approach it with authenticity or any kind of enthusiasm, I wanted to focus a book not so much on educating people about race. I don't want to explain to you what privilege is or why you don't touch a Black person's hair, or whatever that may be.

There are so many books that do that for you, and they are great. My book is literally like let's take the best, not just of my experience but of neuroscience, and social sciences, and psychology, take the best knowledge that we have and let me help you get through it in a productive way.

Let me give you the actual skills and strategies that you need to go into these conversations, whether they be three minutes long or whether they be a half hour long. And come out of it feeling like, huh, that wasn't so bad, and I feel like we did something productive. So that's what this whole book is, I just walk you through the whole thing.

Jen: So, having the conversation about race with people that are of a different skin color than us, or with our same skin color, or both?

Celeste: All of them. It's actually pretty rare when we have these conversations with someone who is a different race than us, that's relatively

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rare. I would like that to happen more, but I understand why it's not happening more. I mean number one, people of color are tired, they're subject to microaggressions all the time, white people especially. And I'm going to talk in a binary way, I'm not talking so black and white, understanding that there's all kinds of different varieties of culture, and skin, and experience, and heredity.

People of color, oftentimes because we live in this very racist and sexist society, the number one thing that people are most going to encounter is unconscious bias, implicit bias. Meaning that somebody says something, and they don't realize that what they've said is hurtful to someone else or reflects bias of any kind. They don't know.

So that's impossible to change that behavior if you don't know that you've just said something insensitive, which means my goal is to empower that other person to speak up and say, "Hey, that was insensitive." But to also empower you to sort of inhabit this culture of correction in which you realize you're going to say the wrong thing. It's okay, it's not a catastrophe. And actually, learn from that exchange so you can go forward as a more informed person.

That's my goal is empower this interrupter to say, "Whoa, hold on, we don't say grandfathered in because that's actually a term that's steeped in racism." And this person instead of going, "Oh no, I'm not racist," which is the defensive response. Instead of saying, "I had no idea. Are you willing to explain? I'm happy to do the research on my own. You don't have to be my Google, but do you have a moment to explain to me?" That's the encounter that I want.

Jen: That's great. So, what is it in your experience, your life experience so far that led you to write this very important book?

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Celeste: Well, I mean you see my features and you probably realize that most people don't immediately assume that I am Black and Jewish, which is what I am. Which means the book came from a very personal place which is that I have over the course of my lifetime had to hear a lot of things that were extremely hurtful and upsetting to me. And I had to make a calculation going back to my very earliest days of whether I was going to say something or not.

And when I was young and didn't feel that psychological safety, didn't feel secure in my own identity, I didn't say anything. And over the course of years, I learned not only that it was important for me to speak up but that I could do it in a way that didn't shut the other person down. And that's hard, it's really hard to do. And so that's something, you know, when the George Floyd protests erupted last year. And my editor was like, "Hey, do you want to write a book about talking about race?" My first initial reaction was no.

What I have to say on this, I mean it's been said. If you want to not be racist there's all these books out there that are going to help you not be racist. But then I realized I actually did have something to say and it's this specific thing. It's that you can get through this conversation. It's difficult but it's not as hard as you think it is. And saying something racist doesn't necessarily make you racist. And if it does mean that you have racist, that you make assumptions about others that are based on racial stereotypes, that's not the end of the world.

That's something everybody does. We are human beings, we make incorrect assumptions about people, many of them are based on what we perceive their race to be. And although that's wrong, although we should all be working to stop doing that, it doesn't suddenly make you unredeemable. And so that's something I can tell people. I've had lots of conversations with people because they've said something wrong. And that was information I could share.

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Jen: So, for me, I find it can be most helpful to bring my defensiveness down just to go into conversations knowing I'm racist because we all are to some extent. Would you agree with that statement? Or what advice do you give people to help them going into these conversations?

Celeste: Yeah, in fact I think the first line of the book is, 'Stop and take a breath and understand you're biased,' period. Whether you make assumptions of people based on their weight, the way they dress, the kind of car they drive, the way their hair looks, whether it's a guy with long hair. You may not realize it, but you are probably making assumptions about that person based on the length of their hair and the way that they speak. That doesn't make you a monster. And so yeah, entering a conversation, understanding that there's not really any moral high ground is important.

Now, I want to be clear here. There are rights and wrongs when it comes to systemic oppression and systemic justice. There are rights and wrongs when it comes to discrimination. Choosing, you know, if you look around and you realize the only people you promote or males or they are largely white people, that's a problem and it's wrong and it needs to change. But on an individual level over the course of a conversation the calculus is a little different. Then it can be, I understand why you would say something like that.

I used to say gypsy before I realized that it's demeaning. I used to say gyped out of things. And so, I understand you might say something like that. I get it. I stopped doing it once I learned this and here's why you may not want to do that. That area of sort of we're all works in progress is incredibly helpful in these conversations.

Jen: Okay, so playing devil's advocate. I know some people listening and some people out there who say, "I just don't want to have to think about

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everything I'm saying all the time, it's too much. They should know I'm well meaning." What do you say to that and why should we try harder?

Celeste: Let's imagine you're walking through an office and suddenly somebody says, "Ow, you kicked me." What do you say? Do you say...

Jen: Oh, I'm sorry. Yeah.

Celeste: Right. You don't say, "I didn't mean to kick you." You don't say, "That didn't hurt you that bad." You just say, "I'm sorry." I mean this isn't about what your intention is. If you've ever been in a court of law you know how hard it is to prove someone's intention. It's not going to happen. So, it doesn't matter what your intention is. What you're trying to grapple with is the effect of your actions. It doesn't matter if you intended to step on someone's foot. Of course, you didn't intend it. But you stepped on somebody's foot, say you're sorry.

Jen: Exactly, exactly. To bring in an analogy from, I guess, relationships in general, lately I've been thinking a lot about boundaries. And I think this will translate well. Obviously, I don't know the experience of being a person of color, but I know the experience of being a woman. I know the experience of being rural, a mom of six. We all have these experiences. Well, I have found there are times in my life I'll have a conversation and in the past I used to say nothing. I used to be the nice person, well, they didn't mean it.

But I noticed I started to have resentment and frustration. And as I've learned about boundaries I have come to see that when I feel resentment it means I'm not speaking up for myself. I'm not speaking my truth. I'm squashing something about my experience. So, I've begun to share just kindly, gently, "Hey, that really hurt me. I don't think that's true about my kids." Or "When you did that I felt this." And in my soul I feel so much more

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true to myself and confident. And that resentment, that frustration goes away.

So, do you think there's a similar thing going on with people of color? And maybe you could speak to that from your experience.

Celeste: So, a couple things bubble up for me. The first one is that this is actually measurable and it's specifically true of harassment and sexism against women. We know that when somebody says something sexist, and a woman is there. Very often she decides whether to speak up or not based on the risks to her of speaking up. Will I be seen as an angry woman? Will I be seen as a troublemaker or a complainer? Those are all justified fears.

What she doesn't often calculate is the actual real risks of suppressing her response. And we now know after years of research that there's a real psychological and physiological cost to swallowing the negative reaction we have to what someone said. It's measurable, it will shorten your life. So, when you are deciding whether to speak up or not, well, it is true that if women speak up about sexism they are usually punished. They usually are often more likely to be denied promotions, more likely to be seen as unlikeable, not leadership material. That is all true.

But at the same time not speaking up has a real cost on your health. And so, this is one of the things and this is obviously, we can use that and assume it's also true for people of color. That in the end, let's say you're in a workplace where you're subjected to microaggressions, which is the most common form of bias, and inequity, and injustice in the workplace. If you're having to make this calculus and you know you're going to be punished for speaking up, that you will be seen as unlikeable or a complainer. And yet you are finding yourself feeling resentful, it might be time to move on.

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I mean if you're in that no win situation there is no winning. It might be trying to find another place. There is other avenues. I'm not telling anybody to quit their job. I'm just saying that you have to calculate that personal and physical cost of suppressing it, and suppressing it, and suppressing it. And if there's no way forward, if there is no supervisor that you can go to and say, "Here's where I am," and have them understand it and be open to that knowledge, and be open to change and reform, it might not be the right place for you.

Conversations about racial identity or gender identity are always inherently subjective. They're always about emotions. They're not logical. So, when you are in a situation in which you are saying, "I don't feel good about this." And someone's saying, "Let's stick to the facts here." You're talking about your feelings, what exactly did they say? What exactly did they do? That's going to be a problem because race isn't real. It's not real biologically. How are you going to stick to the facts about race when it doesn't exist?

Jen: It's hard. I was just having that conversation with my family last night that race is a social construct. And a couple of my kids who should know better, argued. So, there's so much work to do.

Celeste: There is. I mean race is real because racism is real. It's real because people are treated differently based on the color of their skin. But if you try to find the DNA that relates to your race, good luck. Racist scientists tried for hundreds of years to try and prove that you can tell someone's race based on their DNA. And you can't, it's biologically non-existent.

Jen: So, I've been thinking a lot about emotional safety lately. And it kind of goes with that idea of speaking your truth. I'm working on creating more of it at home and in all my relationships. How can we, if we're in a group, in a

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workplace, in a social circle with people of various colors, not just white, create emotional safety for the group? How do we approach that in our thoughts and in our words, and in our actions?

Celeste: So, when we talk about DEI initiatives we tend to focus so much attention on – most companies focus almost all their attention on that first one, diversity. They might move on to equity, they might move on to inclusivity. But what they're missing is the B, which is belonging which underpins all of it. Belonging is the most powerful inherent need that a human being has after survival is taken care of. Once a human being has food, water, and shelter, the number one most powerful need they have is for belonging. They need to feel like they belong there.

And creating an environment in which people feel included and as though they're accepted, as though they're part of a community, that gives them psychological safety. When you belong somewhere, if you belong in a family and you screw up, people may tease you about it, they may joke about it, but it doesn't kick you out of the family. And that's the kind of belonging that you need in any organization, even if it's your PTA, even if it's your boy scouts' troop, you belong. You are a member. That creates psychological safety for someone.

In a place in which people belong we tend to be more likely to give people the benefit of the doubt. So, this comes up all the time when I'm trying to train especially white people and especially white males to interrupt microaggressions, which I very much want white people to do. They need psychological safety in which to do that. They need to feel as though it's okay for them to speak up and not as though they'll be interpreted as speaking for a person of color. And part of that psychological safety, there's a couple parts to it right off.

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Number one, is owning it for yourself. So, when you're objecting to something that someone has said, you're objecting on your own behalf. You're not saying, "Don't swear, there's ladies present." You're not saying, "Oh God, that's really offensive to Black people." You're saying, "I don't like that."

Jen: Yeah, that makes sense.

Celeste: "That bothers me." And the other one is that you are part of a culture of correction in which you know people are going to say the wrong thing. And so therefore you are assisting them by correcting. You're not criticizing, you're not passing judgment. You're helping them out. And this creates this environment of not just psychological safety but belonging. It's okay if you screw up. We're not talking about major screw ups here. We're never talking about actual hurtful and damaging discrimination, that there's true injury. We're mostly talking about microaggressions.

Jen: So, give us a few examples of common microaggressions you've seen. You mentioned the word 'gypped.' I just gave that one up last year. It was hard. It was such a part of my vocabulary, yeah.

Celeste: Yeah. And there's lots of words like that. I mean grandfathered in I mentioned is a racist term. If you've ever done something good at work, you're a female and someone says, "Good girl."

Jen: I don't like that, gross.

Celeste: Yeah. Or people say, "Go take this to the marketing girls." There's also microaggressions where people in a reporting context, where you'll be headed out to a lower socio and economic neighborhood and someone will say, "Well, we're going into the hood."

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Jen: Yeah, I've heard that one a lot.

Celeste: Or "That's so ghetto." No. No, Frankly, there's other more current microaggressions like the use of the term, cancel culture or cancelled. That one needs to just stop. And for the most part people need to stop using the word 'woke.'

Jen: Tell us why, expand on that, yeah, please.

Celeste: So, it doesn't mean anything. If I were to ask you, what's the definition of a woke person?

Jen: Yeah, I can tell you. I see where you're coming from. It would mean...

Celeste: It's political.

Jen: Yeah, liberals who are taking it too far.

Celeste: Right, that's political. That's not a usable term in any other conversation. So that has become a political term and a way to insult the other side for the most part.

Jen: You're right, you're right, yeah.

Celeste: The other thing is that it's a misappropriation. Woke came from the Black community and it was a way to describe a person that we thought was actually plugged in to racial issues. We'd say, "Wow, she's a woke brother, she's a woke sister, that woman is woke." That was a Black term among ourselves to describe someone that we were like, "Yeah, they're okay."

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Jen: They're safe, yeah.

Celeste: Yeah. It's been appropriated. And it's been appropriated to insult the very people that we were complimenting.

Jen: Oh, yeah, I see. I see.

Celeste: So just, no.

Jen: So, how do we, you know, you have your book, tell us the main steps, if you have steps, that we can kind of think about as a checklist format, if it works that way.

Celeste: Well, I won't be able to get through all of them. There's 10 steps. But the very first one is all mental preparation for yourself because we bring our full selves, including all of our adverse reactions to all of these conversations. There's some things that we know are going to happen when we're in these conversations and so we can prepare ourselves mentally.

Let's say you are a white person who's sincerely committed to racial equity and racial justice, you're a white person who absolutely accepts that you're the beneficiary of white privilege, all of those great things. But I bet if someone were to say you, "Wow, that was racist." You'd have a physical reaction.

Jen: Absolutely, yeah.

Celeste: And so, you know that about yourself. You know that physiologically you're going to have that reaction if somebody says that to

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you. This is mental work that you can do in preparation to learn how to diffuse that reaction.

Rather than to allow the conversation to go forward under defensiveness, which means it will not be productive. You can say, “You know what? I’m going to get triggered by certain things. Certain things are going to make me feel bad or defensive. Let me number one, get used to this feeling so I can recognize defensiveness when I’m feeling it. I know what that looks like and feels like in my body.” And number two, I know how to diffuse it. I know what to do when it happens.

And so, the whole first section of the book is like getting people comfortable with the idea that yes, you are biased. No, it is not the end of the world. And also, you are not going to do the right thing or say the right thing all the time. So, I walk people through a mental exercise of imagining they’re super wrong about something. You’ve just been proven wrong. Okay, sit with that for a moment. How does that feel? And what are you going to say in response? When it clicks and you realize I was wrong, then what? And so again, part of this is sort of getting yourself into the right place.

And then you can make other decisions about how to have that conversation. Is it just a quick intervention where I’m just interrupting the microaggression? Or is this a longer conversation in which I really need to think about what time of day it is that we’re having the conversation. What location we are in. When am I at my best, is it in the morning after breakfast and coffee? Is it in the afternoon? When am I at my most open minded and most patient and compassionate? Most people don’t think about these things.

But I want you to think first about yourself when you’re at your best. And then what do you know about the other person? When are they at their

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best? Can you ask them, “Hey, I want to talk about something, it’s difficult, when is the best time of the day for you? Can I make it comfortable for you? Can we get out of our workplace and into a coffeeshop instead so we can relax?” Do I want to have this conversation where other people might hear? Usually a very bad idea. Or do I want to have it in private?

How can I set up this conversation, so we have the best chance for success, where we’re pushing the odds in our favor and we’re more likely to have a positive outcome? Because the fact of the matter is, and again this is one of the steps, is accepting that you will not change their mind over one course of the conversation just as they won’t change your mind. And so, it’s iterative.

You are trying to set it up so that not only is that conversation okay, but there’s the possibility for more, and more, and more because over time that’s what’s going to change hearts and minds. Not that one sort of Paul on the road to Damascus moment.

Jen: Right. And I like that you said in person over coffee rather than on social media. It doesn’t work. While you were talking, I think we all understand the analogy of marriage is so helpful here because in marriage there are four very destructive things. And researcher, John Gottman talked about them which are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Stonewalling being not even having the conversation, shutting it down. And it’s so funny, all four of those are present in the race conversation in broader society.

If we could all just stop those four things, wow, can you imagine, that’s the same way that we keep a marriage going.

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Celeste: It's simple but it's not easy thought. Because the most common form of response to racial issues in any kind of organization, whether it be workplace or wherever is stonewalling. It's also the most common response in our educational institutions. So, a teacher will say, "We're not going to talk about that right now."

Jen: Really?

Celeste: Yeah. Or we'll get, "Somebody's getting emotional, let's table this until everyone can calm down." Not realizing that it's not going to happen. You're basically negating this person's feeling and experience by telling them they need to be more objective. Well, that's not going to happen. So stonewalling is the number one thing. A version of stonewalling is why does everything have to be about race?

Jen: Oh yeah. Yes. Isn't it fascinating?

Celeste: That's you stonewalling them.

Jen: And just how clearly we can see how emotional intelligence is critical for these conversations, just like it is for any relationship. If we could just broaden and recognize, I want everyone to feel emotionally safe. I need to remove these four things and we need to have emotional intelligence like you said in your book, you're having people feel the feeling of being defensive. That's such an icky feeling. And figuring out how we handle it.

Celeste: Yeah, but accepting that that's part of you. You're going to be defensive. There is an evolutionary purpose to that. It's part of you. It's not like you're going to be able to stop feeling defensive. And I know I'm going to upset people right now but one of the signs I hate is some people have

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those signs that say, 'good vibes only.' And I get the intention of it, I really do, that the intention is to be positive.

But I don't want you just to be positive. I want you to recognize all of those feelings that you have and understand that they're just feelings, they're not you. Because you feel angry, that doesn't mean you're an angry person. It's just you're feeling anger. And you're able to allow that to pass through you. For example, I mean we're talking about happy people, but happiness is just an emotion that you enjoy when it's with you and when it goes it's okay. But wellbeing, that you can have all the time.

You can have wellbeing even when you're angry, even when you're sad, even when you're defensive. And part of that wellbeing is based on what you're talking about, not just our emotional intelligence that allows us to understand other people and their feelings and empathize with them, but understand and be compassionate towards yourself. An interesting field of research is into self-compassion. I've been reading everything I can get my hands on. And it's because here's the thing.

For decades we have focused on self-esteem, thinking well of yourself. But it turns out self-esteem does not help you deal with any of the adverse events of life. In fact, it can make you less prepared to cope with adversity. But self-compassion, that would be saying, "You know what? I screwed up, everybody screws up and I'm going to do better." Having compassion for yourself makes you incredibly resilient. It makes you more likely to take responsibility for your mistakes. That's the kind of emotion to intelligence I want.

You can't have compassion for others unless you have compassion for yourself first.

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Jen: Absolutely. Well said. So, in our social circles, in our workplaces, in our families we start with self-compassion, and we make it safe to talk about feelings. And what would be the next step after that?

Celeste: Then you start getting into how to ask good questions. You start getting into what to do when you've screwed up. Then it starts getting into more of the nitty gritty of how you get through the conversation itself. And I try to use not only my own personal experience and examples but also solid, solid evidentiary science to show you, yes, this has been tested, yes, this has been tried and yes, it works. And the reason I keep bringing that up is because the DEI training where most businesses are using right now, doesn't work. We know that it doesn't work. And in some cases, it's shown to backfire.

Jen: So, if you were to create an acronym, do you have one in mind? Have you thought about that?

Celeste: Yeah, we do, I have a non-profit called Headway and it does these kind of trainings and we say DEIB, diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

Jen: Beautiful. It's so much more heart centered than cold, hard, and calculated. I think that's the missing piece.

Celeste: Yeah, agree. Diversity can be counted, belonging can't.

Jen: Absolutely. Absolutely. Well, one last piece of advice for those who are listening and then we'll say goodbye.

Celeste: My last piece of advice is five minutes is okay. I want you to have that conversation with your racist Uncle Mike every time you see him.

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When he says something inappropriate I want you to say, “That’s not okay, that bothers me.” And if all you can take is five minutes before you say, “That’s enough, I’m starting to feel defensive, or I’m starting to feel upset. Let’s table this.” Put the five minutes in. That’s my last piece of advice, just give them the five minutes.

Jen: Very good. Everyone, Celeste Headlee, author of *Speaking of Race: Why Everyone Needs to Talk About Racism and How To Do It*. Fantastic work, I’m so grateful you could share it with us today. Thanks, Celeste.

Celeste: My pleasure, thank you so much for having me.

Jen: Take care.

I love talking with strong, intelligent, emotionally present women. I loved Celeste and everything she had to say. And I hope it sparked some ideas for you on how you can have that emotional intelligence to swallow your defensiveness and your fear, to allow others to speak their truth, for you to speak your truth. And to do it all in a way that helps everyone feel heard, and seen, and safe. Isn’t that the goal? What a world we can create by applying these principles.

These conversations, speaking up is so important, that’s how we can begin to shift everything. It’s essential that we as emotionally intelligent women lead the way on this. So, grab Celeste’s book, it is fantastic, *Speaking of Race: Why Everyone Needs to Talk About Racism and How To Do It*. She leads you through 10 important steps to have these important conversations.

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My friends, I am so grateful you were here, that you listen, that you're open to helping to do what it takes to hopefully one day make sure everyone feels like they belong and that they are seen, and heard, and valued, and emotionally safe. I love you my friends. Thank you for being here. I will see you again soon, until then make it a vibrant and happy week. Take care.

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