



Redeeming My Time:
A Conversation with Antonia Coleman

May 23, 2024

Transcript



Sara Hayden: Antonia Coleman, thank you so much for being here on the podcast today.

Antonia Coleman: Thank you so much for having me, Sara.

Sara: I would love to start with something that is important to both of us, and something we've collaborated together in the past on, which is the art of convening – how we convene. I get the sense that that is a particular passion of yours, how we convene.

Antonia: Absolutely. And I like how you said that, how we convene.

Sara: In the words of Priya Parker, "gatherings that matter." People are often in one another's presence with intention and also by accident, and I get the sense that you are driven by the ways in which groups of people can get to know one another and live and behave purposefully when they are spending time collectively. Has that been something that goes way back for you?

Antonia: Indeed, it does. Let me first start out by saying I am Antonia. I am Bill's daughter and I am Joyce's heartbeat.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: I hail from the great city of Chicago in the state of Illinois, where the weather currently is a s-balmy 60 degrees and it is beautifully sunny outside. I am particularly espoused to the idea of gatherings because my family, being part of a family church that had three generations in to a particular denomination at the time, which classifies as Pentecostal in nature.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: So, we were a church that believed in hospitality. We were a church that believed in caring for people where they existed and where they lived. And that in part is my social location-

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: ... as I learned in seminary-

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: ... that formed who I am today. Now, the part is where it comes with what matters, is through my grandmothers. Both of my grandmothers, Mary Alice Bishop Ruth and Mary Elizabeth Landrush Palmer-

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: ... I speak their names, and I speak their names with power and great remembrance. I see them clearly as I see you, as they stay with me throughout this journey.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: And in this journey of gatherings that matter, both of those women were social justice advocates. One grandmother, her belief was not so much doing the work, as it was funding the work.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: She knew that she did not have the patience to stand on the front lines where rocks were being thrown, water hoses being sprayed on, being spat on, in any way, shape, or form. The church that we attended allowed for their members to participate. At the same time, you had to follow the rules that those people that you were at the particular social justice gathering would do. And my grandmother Ruth was like, "I am too violent in nature to allow someone to hit me and not hit them back."

Sara: Yeah.

Antonia: My grandmother Palmer, on the other hand, the one who told me to read *My Antonia*, is the one who would put her body on the line.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: And when she could not put her body on the line, by the time I was 10 years old and she was a member of the Silver Foxes Advocacy Group of the west side of Chicago, she had me standing and walking a picket line in front of an establishment that was unfair to her as an elder woman, and had me, along with her friends who could walk, because she had a broken leg. So at 10 years old, had me holding up placards, and I didn't understand what was going on, but my grandmother said for me to walk the block and say, "Fairness now. Fairness now," and holding a sign.

And so, that birthed in me, when you gather, you must gather with a purpose. If it's for pleasure, you gather for pleasure. What is the purpose for the pleasure? What is it that we're doing? Why are we here? There has to be some sort of intentionality. And intentionality leads to, even if we are going to just sit here at the table, you and I, Sara:, over some tea and some cookies of your favorite kind... Me, I'm a chocolate chip kind of girl.

Sara: (laughs)

Antonia: I don't know about you, what you like, sugar cookies or whatever.

Sara: I like them all.

Antonia: Listen-

Sara: Yeah.

Antonia: ... we will be sitting ginger snapping and chit-chatting away with a purpose.

Sara: Yeah.

Antonia: Why are we there? We're there to rest.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: We're there to . We're there to possibly idea coming up with another name for yet another podcast. As a group, why are we coming together? Time is my most precious commodity-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Antonia: ... next to my health. I don't play with my health. Please don't play with my time, because once we get done with all of this that we're doing in this moment-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Antonia: ... we cannot get this back.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: So this has to be meaningful. The jobs that I take. When I came to that realization, work for me became different.

Sara: That's so powe- what you said contains multitudes.

Antonia: (laughs)

Sara: The pictures you painted of you and one of your grandmothers, her sending you off, she with a broken leg, and passing the baton with these words of what to do in this moment on this block, and the ways in which both of your grandmothers' stories live and abide with you and continue to be present with you even in this moment, informing the way you live your life and spend your time with intention.

Antonia: Mm-hmm.

Sara: That in itself causes me to take this breath, acknowledging the power behind that framework, and the confession (laughs) of, you know, stupid stuff I'm doing all the time-

Antonia: (laughs)

Sara: ... wasting my time. We've spent a little bit of time together in person.

Antonia: Mm-hmm.

Sara: It's a joyful time. It's a rich time. You strike me as someone who, if you're gonna spend time with someone, you want the relationship to be one of really understanding one another, not being in somebody's presence and not being known and not knowing who they are and what drives them.

Antonia: Absolutely. Absolutely. You can't sit with me frivolously.

Sara: Yeah.

Antonia: Even in the biblical text, it says, "Redeeming the time because the days are evil." That's over in Hebrews.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: And I learned that very early in life, that once you lose time, it does not get back to you. My grandfather, Travis Bird Palmer Sr., I speak your name and I miss you immensely. He was an amazing man. He was a man who took care of home. And taking care of home, I had nothing to worry about. I was so protected. I lost him and his earthly presence in 1985-

Sara: Oh.

Antonia: ... right before my 16th birthday. And to have that lost time with him of someone of value to me, from that moment, at the age of 16, you don't play with my time.

Sara: Hm. That was your-

Antonia: That was my aha moment as Oprah would say, "the aha moment."

Sara: Yeah.

Antonia: That time mattered.

Sara: Yeah.

Antonia: And time mattered, starting at that summer of July 1985.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Antonia: Time matters.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: And because time matters, I must spend it with intentionality.

Sara: Mm-hmm. Who gave you the name Antonia?

Antonia: Oh, that is a really interesting story. So, my mother loved the name Toni-

Sara: (laughs)

Antonia: ... T-O-N-I. And my father, there is a... It was part of the Negro women's baseball league.

Sara: Wow.

Antonia: It was a woman by the... Her name was Toni.

Sara: Wow.

Antonia: Um, my father was like, "Okay, our first daughter will be named Toni." They were young and in love, riding the bus of CTA-

Sara: (laughs)

Antonia: ... up and down the west side of Chicago on their cute little dates right before they got married in 1968. And the tradition of the family was that the women named the children, except for the first male child. The first male child was named after the father.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: If the father wanted that. But those days, black women ran everything (laughs) in the household.

Sara: (laughs)

Antonia: So from what my grandmother told me, was that my mom went to her and her grandmother, and said, "This is what I want to name my child if it's a girl." They were like, "Nope, we need something else." And so, my mom went through the books because she wanted to maintain Toni, and found, I'm gonna say it, Antonia.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Antonia: And my mother said, "What if we changed the pronunciation to Antonia?"

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: And got the approval from her mother and her grandmothers and my father's mother.

Sara: Wow.

Antonia: So, I was named Antonia, and then my grandmother's names were Mary, and my father said, "Her middle name must be Marie."

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: It wasn't until much later in life that I learned what my name meant. My name comes from the Latin name Antonius. Antonius was a Roman governor back in the days of Paul, and Paul actually, from what I heard, is that Paul delivered one of his sermons on the steps of the Antonius fortress. Now, the fortress was built and inlaid with all kinds of diamonds and jewels and everything, and it was impenetrable for years, at least 50 years or more, from any kind of outsider tax. So it was an impenetrable space.

Thusly, the name meaning, and any derivative of it, means priceless-

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: ... beyond value, an impenetrable force. So when I learned what my name meant, I was kind of a little perturbed at the parental folk-

Sara: Yeah.

Antonia: ... because they didn't teach me that- (laughs)

Sara: (laughs)

Antonia: ... growing up. I was like, "How did you miss this part?" Especially being a dark-skinned black girl growing up in myriad spaces where I was not accepted.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: I was introduced to racism at a very early age. I was introduced to colorism at an early age as well. How can you be a dark-skinned black girl with hair down past your shoulders? How did you all miss teaching me about my name? And so, once I learned my name, I started living into what my name meant. And when I did that, I had some time to make up for-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Antonia: ... because I didn't learn about the meaning of my name until I was 28, 29. Oh, but you couldn't tell me nothing then. (laughs)

Sara: Really? (laughs)

Antonia: By the time I turned 28, 29, and I'm armed with what my name meant.

Sara: Wow.

Antonia: My grandmother Palmer was the only grandparent that I had up until 2005.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: And from that time forward, that forged a relationship between the two of us that has been undeniably the best part of my young adult life.

Sara: Wow.

Sara: You speak about the power of your name, learning its provenance and learning its use, its situation in history, and in particular settings, and living that out, the way that it changed your life. There are so many moments in each of our lives when we step back and we can take out of a situation a realization what we wish to take out of it, right?

Antonia: Mm-hmm.

Sara: And I sense the ways in which that moment gave you a gift of some kind and a sense of loss too at the same time of understanding life before knowing that moment and the life that comes claiming that part of you for yourself.

Antonia: Yeah. Auntie Maxine Waters is a congressman out of California, says, "Reclaiming my time."

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Antonia: The time that I cannot get back is the time that I will spend in doing the work of Matthew 25. That's how I see the reclamation of time, doing the work, caring for the marginalized, to speaking up doing justice work, to ensuring that there is an honorable way that we approach the texts that we hold sacred, and respecting other folks' sacredness. Reclaiming the time is also for me a Sankofa moment, and Sankofa is part of an Adinkra symbol that comes from West Africa that means basically go back and fetch it.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: That's one of the definitions, to go back and fetch it, and the symbol is a bird with the feet facing forward with the egg and the beak looking back, and the egg represents the future and how it holds it in its mouth for protection, and looking back to see the past, but the feet are pressed facing forward indicates a moving forward towards the future that's in the mouth.

So, the reclamation of time is a reconciliation with the past so that I speak to the future and lay in the groundwork to do the work and to ensure that my nieces and nephews, the children that they hold in their bodies when they are produced. I have young folks that I call the gen-alphas that are the children of my coworkers and colleagues. I call those children coworkers.

Sara: Oh.

Antonia: Because they too are doing the work.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: So I- the groundwork that I am laying is the stepstool for them to live better, yes, and to continue to work forward.

Sara: Hm. I'm thinking about the heartbeat that you-

Antonia: Yes.

Sara: ... evoked from your mother, her heartbeat-

Antonia: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... your father's child, your grandmothers who embodied Sankofa in their lives, in the lessons that they unveiled to you, bringing you alongside-

Antonia: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... the work that they did, that addressed systems that they were aware of and you were made aware of, but also transcended systems. There's a sense of transcendence that, when I am with you, Antonia, you evoke so powerfully, it's hard for me to encapsulate in words what I feel when you speak to the system like a dagger, but speak around it and beyond it and transcend the system, moving forward into the future.

Antonia: (laughs)

Sara: I don't think I was explicitly taught by my religion, spirituality, or ancestors to disassociate embodiment from theology.

Antonia: Mm-hmm.

Sara: My life experience was somewhat to dissociate the spirit from the teachings, and I am in, in a different moment in my life been exposed to conversations and moments where I realized that was a false and dangerous dichotomy.

Antonia: Mm-hmm.

Sara: Your story (laughs) you share with me from that moment we were in person was this story of tremendous integration. I felt drawn to and envious of, you know, sort of spiritual envy-

Antonia: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... because of that clarity, the ways in which you knit together, all of the things were knit together-

Antonia: Yes.

Sara: ... and embraced.

Antonia: Uh, let me preface this story-

Sara: Yeah.

Antonia: ... invoking the name of my other grandfather, Emmanuel Sylvester Ruth Sr. I speak your name and you are greatly remembered, for he is the man that was quiet in nature, stature, beautiful, rich, baritone voice in speaking and in singing, so much so the singing voice, for those of you who are listening, Billy Eckstine, it was my grandfather's voice-

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: ... singing voice.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: So when you talked about moving stealthily and knitting, because he was an entrepreneur, so he was masterful in putting things in his business. He would take old refrigerators-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Antonia: ... and refurbish them.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: His MO in the military, Air Force, was not only the singing group, to go around to all the black companies and have a concert, but his other MO was electrical do-dads.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Antonia: Everything electrical, he built his own speakers, a calligraphy artist.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: So when you talk about it takes a creative mind to weave together and build a tapestry, I draw on my granddaddy Ruth in that moment, which brings me to the water. And for those of you who are listening, I have a bottle of water that I have been sipping on as we've been having this conversation, and I probably should have prefaced that for you all to have a glass of water with you so just in case you hear something that resonates with you, you take a sip of water and allow that to wash down and provide a way to reinvigorate, to restore you in the moment, so that you can reconnect and it becomes part of you, and it won't leave you.

Sara: Wow.

Antonia: While in seminary, I took a couple travel courses. And the one travel course was to Jamaica, and I announced it on Facebook and said, "I'm going to Jamaica," and da, da, da, da, da, and then I got a email from a dear sister friend of mine who is a Yoruba priest.

Sara: Wow.

Antonia: And she said, "You are going down there to the waters of Yemonja, one of the orishas, Yemonja.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Antonia: Google her. That will tell you all you need to know about Yemonja. It's spelled Y-E-M-O-N-J-A. Yemonja. And so, the orisha Yemonja, she said, "You will take an offering of fruit to the water and go and commune with her and listen to what she has to say to you." Now, this is coming off, I was six months into being a widow. My husband passed away July 9th, 2017. Dana Arthur Coleman, you know I miss you.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: And didn't get a chance, because you know those study travel courses, those aren't for fun.

Sara: No. (laughs)

Antonia: (laughs) While there are levels and moments of enjoyment, there's no time to really truly relax.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: And so, on the last day, I was intentional about reserving some of the food that was served, so I had a piece of watermelon, a couple of cantaloupes, and a piece of tomato. And I asked a group of friends to come with me to the water and I told them what I was getting ready to do. And they were like, "Sure." Violet, my dear sister who is now a UMC pastor in Rockford, Illinois, hey Violet-

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: ... she was standing next to me as I walked to the balcony with intention. She could feel a presence so rich, so much so that she turned to me and said, "Antonia, I'm gonna let you have this moment to yourself." So she goes away, and I say a prayer. I do remember the question I asked, and I tossed the offering of fruit that I had into the water, and I stood there to watch. Mind you, we had a plane to catch.

Sara: Yeah.

Antonia: The question I asked was, who am I to you? And as clear as day, I heard the word "daughter." And in that moment of hearing the word daughter, a huge white bird descended, and it skimmed across the water, picked up my fruit offering, and flew away with it.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: I kind of stood there and was taking all of that in. I didn't understand what was going on, but I just took it in. And I was the last person to get on the bus, and walking to the bus, I could hear everybody having a good time and reflecting and chit-chatting. But as soon as I got on the bus and I looked at everybody, everyone fell silent. And I sat down, and my dear sister friend, she looked at me and did a double take.

And I said, "What's the matter?" She said, "You look different."

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: "You're not the same." I said, "I had a burning bush experience and I wasn't at the bush. I was at the water."

Sara: Yeah.

Antonia: So traveling back, I could see the little spurts of waves, the little white foamy caps, and I'm looking as they were following me back, and I could see dolphins in the water. I immediately had that integrated moment-

Sara: Yeah.

Antonia: ... that you talked about, and that's where it finally connected for me. My history and my present and my future. Because, Sara:, I could tell you, I grew up with no appreciation for the Spirit as I know it to be now. There was no spiritual, because I was taught that it was a benefit for the evangelists to come and take us away from Africa so that we would know about Jesus.

Sara: Wow.

Antonia: And we would have a Christian life. That has been ingrained in my foreparents-

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: ... and all of those particular folks' life, so much so that even to this day in the 5,784th year of Hagar, they are still having this conversation about slavery was bad, but it was for our good.

Sara: Wow.

Antonia: No, no, no, friend.

Sara: Wow.

Antonia: No, no, no. That is incorrect. So, no. I did not have this until much later in life, but you best believe my nieces and nephews were getting it all the time, and they better not think... Y'all listening 'cause I know I made y'all listen to this podcast.

Sara: (laughs)

Antonia: Y'all listening. I know you listening. The work I do, I do for them.

Sara: Hm.

Antonia: I do for them.