

Renee Bracey Sherman

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SPEAKERS

Renee Bracey Sherman, Omkari Williams



Omkari Williams 00:20

Hello, and welcome to Stepping Into Truth. I'm your host Omkari Williams and I'm very glad you're here with me today. This is the podcast where we take on the issues of race, gender and social justice. My guest today is Renee Bracey Sherman, someone whose work is directly focused on one of the major social justice issues of our time. Renee Bracey Sherman is the Beyonce of abortion storytelling. She's a Chicago born Midwest raised writer and reproductive justice activist. And she's committed to the visibility and representation in media and pop culture of people who have had abortions. Renee founded We Testify, the only national and intersectional leadership program for people who've had abortions in the United States. Created by and for people who have had abortions We Testify centers race, class and gender identity. She's trained hundreds of abortion storytellers, including elected officials and mentored over sixty We Testify storytellers whose voices have been featured in articles, interviews, books, media, comics, events and legislative testimony. She holds a bachelor's degree in economics and sociology from Northeastern Illinois University, and a master's degree in Public Administration from Cornell University. And I am so happy to have Renee on the podcast today. Hi, Renee.



Renee Bracey Sherman 01:46

Hi, thanks for having me.



Omkari Williams 01:48

Oh, it's my pleasure. This is one of the issues that really deeply matters to me and I am always happy to advance the conversation on it. So, yeah, this is going to be great. Now, people who listen to the podcast regularly know that it's my habit to dive right in. And I'm just going to do that right now.



Renee Bracey Sherman 02:08

Let's do it.



Omkari Williams 02:09

Okay. So you wrote something that resonated really powerfully for me, well, actually you've written a whole bunch of things that resonate powerfully for me, but this particular thing was when you wrote about abortion as a rejection of patriarchy, white supremacy and oppression. And I would love for you to talk about that.



Renee Bracey Sherman 02:30

Yeah, I think 1) your listeners should know that the majority of people who have abortions are people of color. I think for me growing up, it was kind of portrayed as something that white girls do. And I didn't see people talking about abortion, debating abortion, discussing it, having abortions, talking about their abortions openly, that were people of color. It was always white people discussing it. And so when I had my abortion, I felt like I was extremely alone. And I swore I was like the only black girl who had an abortion. But then when I found out that the majority of people who have abortions are people of color, I started to think differently about who is pushing anti abortion rhetoric and anti abortion restrictions on to whom and what is their larger function and doing that, and it made me think a lot about controlling of bodies. And the ways in which laws are applied differently to bodies of color versus white folks, and how the reproduction of people of color is controlled differently for people for people of color than it is for white folks. And with abortion being a piece of that, right? The anti abortion movement often uses race to say like, well, if you're having an abortion, you're committing genocide or you know, you're, I've been compared to slave owners, right? They compare abortion to slavery or the Holocaust a lot.



Omkari Williams 04:11

Yes.



Renee Bracey Sherman 04:11

And I think that what we're pushing back on is 1) we actually have to understand that nothing is like slavery other than slavery. So it's completely inaccurate, to compare abortion to slavery, but also, that we are pushing back on white folks saying that this is actually what we should be doing with our bodies. And this is what our bodies are for keeping, us in poverty, not allowing us to make these decisions. And I also think that it's kind of funny because people don't really think about abortions happened during slavery. And at that point, having an abortion was quite literally this rejection of what your slave master had done to your body, whether it was through rape and that also producing more children, who are then just going to be property. So it is this, it's been this long time rejection of all of these things of people, of white folks trying to tell us what we can and cannot do with our bodies. I also think that the people who are pushing anti abortion policies are deeply steeped in misogyny and patriarchy, they tend to believe that the man is the head of the household, that is who should be making all the decisions. That a cisgender woman, her role is to have children and to get married and to serve her husband and nothing more. And so I think that queerness, I think that abortion, I think that polyamory, all of those things, is that rejection of that patriarchy because we are saying that this is no, this is not what we are going to use our bodies for. We are going to decide when we have those children. We're not just going to be told when to do it. We are going to love whoever it is that we want to love, and however many partners that we want to have. And that it is okay to, you know, have a child with one person and then later actually get to, like, not be in a relationship and move on and date other people that all of these things are okay. And that we don't have to be subservient to this white supremacist patriarchal view of what a family should look like and how a family should be built. And I truly believe that having an abortion is a rejection of all of those things at once because someone who's having an abortion is saying, I am not going to take this path that society says I have to take simply because I have a uterus. And I think that's quite powerful.





Omkari Williams 06:47


Yeah, it really is. And something you said struck me very powerfully. I mean, this is just yeah, this is that conversation for me where I always my mind just sort of leaps from one thing to another because there are so many intersections. But one thing, there's so many, but the nature of social justice issues, and the abortion battle, when I think back to the 1970s, and feminism and the 1970s, and how feminism existed in the 1970s. And you you

listen to people speak and you read the writings and you, you watch the TV coverage, what you continually see is white women in the forefront of that conversation. And Black women are really not in the picture.

 Renee Bracey Sherman 07:45
Yeah.

 Omkari Williams 07:45
And they're certainly not in the picture on reproductive rights. I mean, which is part of the reason I think most people think that abortion is an issue for white people, not for people of color because where were those faces when this issue was first really coming into the public consciousness in a meaningful way? So now I feel like the narrative has sort of shifted and that this time, I think we can reasonably say that Black women, Black people, people of color, are leading this conversation. And I'm wondering, first, whether that's your experience? And if so, how do you think that shift impacts the conversation?

 Renee Bracey Sherman 08:37
Yeah, that's a really good point, I think, a couple things. History is often remembered by the pictures that are taken and the stories that are told. So when you go back and read an article from the 70s, and they're talking about abortion, what did the reporter capture? Who did they choose to interview? Same thing with the photographer right. The photographer has a lens. And if they're taking a picture of the march, and they only take a picture of one side, then you will see you might only see certain people but not know that just outside the frame there are other people there. And I think that that is really a perfect analogy for how race is kind of thought about when it comes to abortion rights throughout. People of color have always been there. We've always been fighting for access, but because of power and privilege and who chooses the lens, who chooses the direction of who to interview or the direction of that camera, they get to decide who actually is memorialized in this work. And who is seen as a leader. also say that in being able to protest then and now there's a lot of privilege that goes with it. You have to be willing to often first for a lot of folks, right protesting in the street, particularly you have to be able to leave the house.

 Omkari Williams 10:06
Yes.



Renee Bracey Sherman 10:07

So that often means that folks who are disabled don't always get to make it and not to say that they don't because they, they're, the folks at Adapt are always doing some badass work at the Capitol, right? But if a march isn't accessible, that means certain people can't come. If the people who are organizing it don't think about inviting communities of color, that means certain people won't be there. And if there's fear or threat of arrest, that also means that certain people aren't able to come. We see this a lot, when with Black Lives Matter protests, right, that the police are really ready and willing to arrest anyone. But same folks go march for the Women's March, but you add a lot more white women, the police are very nice and they're not willing to arrest you. Right?



Omkari Williams 10:56

Right.



Renee Bracey Sherman 10:56

That privilege makes a difference of who was able to be out there, and then in turn, who gets memorialized in history as the people who are marching. And I think that that's really frustrating to know that our ancestors were doing this work, but they didn't get the credit for it. I definitely think that this is shifting with today's work in that, especially with the reproductive justice movement, making sure that they're heard and changing the conversation. And with the inventions of cell phones and having cameras on cell phones, people can memorialize for themselves, who is at this rally and who is doing this work and the pictures just become more inclusive of who is actually doing it and who can be participatory at home and not necessarily at the march. However, I do think we still have a challenge in that when articles cover abortion, they tend to mention race and class as an afterthought, not as the center point of the issue. And that fundamentally changes how the issue is talked about, right? Who we are centering? Whose experience is the default. And so we're still fighting that we are still trying to deal with that today. I definitely think it's getting better. And reporters, journalists are starting to understand that more. And we have a lot of work to do. I also think that we can't just talk about abortion in a silo. And this is the point of reproductive justice. It's not just about access to abortion, we need to also make sure that folks who, when they decide to continue a pregnancy, that they are able to stay in school if they're a student. That they are able to have trans affirming care if they are a trans person. That they're able to have queer affirming care if they're in a queer relationship right? If they are a person of color that they are able to get a doula for their care and also someone who's really going to understand how racism impacts access to healthcare. We need to also have that conversation, because these are

the decisions that people are making abortion decisions in as well. People decide to have an abortion simply because they know I cannot afford another child or you know what, that last pregnancy, It took a lot out of me physically, and I just don't think I can do it again. We need to have all of those conversations wrapped up in one. And siloing the issue, does it a disservice and again, actually stigmatizes it. And people think that abortion is something separate, not part of the larger reproductive health spectrum.



Omkari Williams 13:49

I couldn't agree with that more. And you just referenced something that I think is so important for people to understand, which is the intersection of reproductive rights and the generational economic impact when there isn't easy access to family planning services and when people cannot get an abortion when that is what is going to be best for them. And I think people just, they understand, yes, kids are expensive. But I don't think they necessarily understand how that gets played out long term over generations when if you are constantly being forced to bear a child that you cannot afford or you do not want. Whatever the reason, that you your economic stability is consistently being undermined, and that this is one of the ways that people of color have been kept to the margins because it's been much harder for us to attain any kind of financial stability. We have no control over the size of our families and when we choose to have a family, and I'd like you to discuss your experience of that with the people you've worked with.



Renee Bracey Sherman 15:16

Yeah, I think um generational poverty is real. Right. And I think a piece of that is disinvestment in our communities, whether it's through health care, jobs, all those things, but also education. One of the things that I find really frustrating in our movement, that the pro choice side actually kind of furthers, is that people think that everyone should have an abortion when they're a teen because you know, they're not ready to have a kid. And they're going to be poor their whole life, if they just have that if they become a teen parent, so they just shouldn't. And instead of actually thinking about what are what's the real Cause to systemic poverty? Or how do we also make sure that this young person, if they have a child, if they don't want an abortion, and they have a child, how do we ensure that they can finish school and do all of the things that they want to do? Still reach every single one of their dreams, that they can do it with a child? I think they put a lot of times they put those at odds. And it ends, what ends up happening is that someone has a child that they maybe did not want, or they weren't really prepared for. And they don't get the support that they need to be able to continue their education to be able to reach their dreams. And then they end up having jobs that are not going to pay as well, do not have health insurance, do not have access to contraception and other things that they need.

And then it begets a cycle. And I think part of it is this, what's at the core of this? Is this stigma towards people who get pregnant outside of this, like perfect, you get married, you have a great job, you buy a house, then you have kids like anyone outside of that, and we get punished for it. And so I think to take a reproductive justice lens for me, is to make sure that when someone gets pregnant, that they have access to all of the things that they need, that they can continue in education, that they can access an abortion that they need it, that they can earn enough money to care for their family. Because when they can't, along the way, that is actually what's keeping this cycle of poverty going. And that it's not necessarily just, oh, you had you were forced to have a kid when you're ready, and that's going to put you in poverty. No, it's the larger systemic issues that our nation refuses to see. People as human beings, worthy of respect, and housing and food and education and money. That we withhold those things from people, when they don't kind of follow this patriarchal trajectory of when to get married, when to have kids, all of these things. And I think abortion is a way for people to kind of escape through that and say, I'm not going to have a kid right now. Because I cannot afford one and get and feel like they can get to a place that feels good for them. But the reality is, is that the majority of people who have abortions are already parenting, and they're already in poverty. So they're still probably going to be living in poverty, even if they have the abortion and with their children they already have. So this is why I think we have to do all of these things at the same time. We have to improve people's circumstances and offer support for people who are caring for children, for young people who want to continue their education, while parenting all of those things. Because people have abortions and people have children are the same people, it's different moments in their lives and sometimes in different orders. Sometimes you have an abortion, and then you go on to have six kids. Sometimes you have six kids, and then you go on, you have a couple of abortions, like it's different things or sometimes you have a kid, abortion kid, abortion, all of these things. And I think that people misunderstand when and why people have abortions. And if you decouple it from race, class, economics, all of those things, then you're not able to serve people who need who have abortions need abortions as well as you possibly could.



Omkari Williams 19:50

That's really interesting to me because I have friends who are adopted. There are three of them siblings who are not birth siblings, but adopted siblings and for each of them the reason that their parents gave them up was a different reason. And one parent was not married one parent was married already had kids and you know and this they are they are old enough so that their their mothers did not have access to legal abortion at the time. And but it's it's very interesting because it expands my understanding of that whole dynamic in a way I honestly hadn't thought of as deeply as I should have before.

But it also makes me wonder how the right justifies denying services and denying people the right to an abortion if they want one at the same time the idea that if you are on welfare you have to work. But who's going to take care of the two children that you already have? How if you're working, how are you supposed to go to school and take care of the kids? You have? And and, and, and I, I'm wondering if part of the problem is that we on the pro choice side of the equation haven't really framed this well enough and with enough depth and breadth to move people from some of their really rigid stances.

R

Renee Bracey Sherman 21:38

Well, I think so I think this actually goes back to kind of the original thing that we started out talking about, about abortion being a rejection of patriarchy, racism, all of those things, right. Because when the anti abortion folks are not there to support, what all conservatives are there are not there to support, the lapsing thing of those really awful Welfare to Work laws, which were kind of were put in there by President Clinton, but this, this so they they have this belief that the role of a woman is to marry a man and then take care of the children and not really need to work outside the home. And they just see it as your role is to raise children. But they only actually believe that for white women, because one, folks of color have always had to work outside the home and include they also work to raise the white women's children so the white women can work outside the home. But if they truly, truly believed that the children deserve to have a parent at home, one they would be in support of men working, cis men working from home as well, which they're not. But they would also make sure that the welfare system was supportive enough so that people don't have to go to work, get a job to be on welfare, which they then turn around and spend on childcare to have someone else raised their children. It is just a vicious cycle. And again, it's punishing them in poverty. And it's not because they actually believe that, you know, folks should be at home with their children is that they believe that white people should be able to have these things. And that people of color should have to work harder. That they should not be able to access any of these supports and these services. They aren't deserving of them. So that is why they constantly cut the SNAP benefits to now it's like a little over \$1 a meal per child. If you were actually pro life and cared about the well being of children, you would try to make sure that children have nutritious meals at home and at school, but again, they think that poverty, you should be punished for it. And so that is why they don't want to quote unquote "reward" you for having children outside of wedlock, outside of their traditional view families, but then turn around and punish you for having an abortion. And it's just it's really just mind boggling. And I sometimes when I talk about it, I worry that I sound like a conspiracy theorist because it's just so many intersecting issues all at once. And it's overwhelming and exhausting. But that's the point is because we then can't really untangle it it it feels like this like ball of string that someone's just like tied into knots and they're like, take it apart

and you're like, but okay, I got this one part but now the other part and yes, do it all at once together, but that is literally the point. The other thing I want to go to when you mentioned about adoption. A lot of people think that the decision if you're not going to parent that the decision is between placing a child for adoption or having an abortion. And that is because the anti choice movement has worked really hard to make you think that. They're always like standing outside of clinics, like there's a family that wants to adopt your baby like you don't have to do this.



Omkari Williams 25:27

That is so not true.



Renee Bracey Sherman 25:29

It's not, it's not true. One, they also talk about foster care which first off



Omkari Williams 25:34

Oh, God.



Renee Bracey Sherman 25:34

Foster Care is to return the children to their family or to a family to family members, right?



Omkari Williams 25:41

Yes.



Renee Bracey Sherman 25:41

So adoption is kind of the last resort of foster care. So their first off they're wrong there. Second, they're about a little over a million abortions. A year in the United States. There's only about 14,000 adoptions? Right and my dear friend, Dr. Gretchen Sisson. She's at the University California, San Francisco, has done research on birth parents, first parents who placed a baby for adoption. And she asked them how they felt about abortion like, did they were they kind of pro choice? And like, why didn't they choose the abortion? And the reality is, is that for the overwhelming majority of them, they were deciding whether or not to parent and they were deciding between parenting and adoption. Very, very, very rarely

were they deciding between adoption and abortion.



Omkari Williams 26:35

Right.



Renee Bracey Sherman 26:35

So actually the first decision that happens when you become pregnant and you're not sure what to do, that first decision is, am I going to continue this pregnancy or not? So if you think about a logic tree, you're at the top, Am I continue the pregnancy Yes or no? If it's no, then abortion is your option. That's the end of that logic tree. If it is yes, then The branches off that logic tree, or am I going to parent? Or do I want to seek adoption? Those are two completely separate decision making options here. And the anti- choice movement has a vested interest in making sure that you think that they are equal, because then they can say, there's no reason for abortion. If you feel like you can't parent and you're too poor to parent, just give your child to another family, instead of actually saying, hey, you feel like you can't parent. What's the reason for that? Oh, you feel like you're not earning enough money, let's raise the minimum wage. You feel like you don't have enough welfare benefits? Great. Let's restore them to the levels that they were in the 1960s. Let's fix these things. They don't want to do that, because that would make their argument irrelevant.



Omkari Williams 27:58

Yes.



Renee Bracey Sherman 27:58

And it would recognize that at the end of the day, some people just want to have an abortion and that's fine. And they they can't wrestle with that. And it's very frustrating that they're trying to do this. But also, they're really good at making sound bites. And these issues are not sound bites, they are very deep, complex conversations, and I truly believe they should be treated as such. And so we have to force a deeper conversation. And I feel like we can do that, through stories through listening to people who have placed children for adoption for through people who have had abortions. I myself am an adoptive older sister, my youngest brother is adopted. So I mean, I can talk for hours on that too. Yeah. I think that people don't understand what actually goes into it and adoption and what that process looks like, and how onerous it is and for good reason,

right? Because you want to make sure that children are going to families that are caring for them and supportive of them. But you'll also notice that adoptive families tend to be white.



Omkari Williams 29:08

Yes.



Renee Bracey Sherman 29:10

And also they tend to want newborns.



Omkari Williams 29:13

Yes.



Renee Bracey Sherman 29:13

And White newborns. And so that again, racism and classism still plays a part. And to pretend that it doesn't, is just ignorant and will never solve the problem that way.



Omkari Williams 29:28

And additionally, I think that we're coming up against another problem that we see kind of across the board in society specifically in the United States right now, which is what you're talking about requires a level of thoughtfulness and critical thinking, that is not really supported in our conversation. We are in a soundbite world and that that is the one of the easiest ways that the far right has to just keep this discussion exactly where it is. And then when you bring in story, when people start talking about their personal experiences, that's a huge shift. And it's very, very dangerous to that sound bite conversation. And one of the things that I'm happy to see is happening is that on television, we're starting to see abortion come up as story matter, which is something that never was seen before. I mean, Shonda Rhimes has done it on Grey's Anatomy and scandal for for sure. I'm not sure if she's done it on



Renee Bracey Sherman 30:47

Private Practice.



Omkari Williams 30:48

Yes, yes.



Renee Bracey Sherman 30:49

She's done it on every one of her shows. Yes.



Omkari Williams 30:50

And you know, and I am so grateful for her elevating that conversation, especially as a black woman. Elevating the conversation and showing a more complex, more nuanced discussion of it than we're typically having in her scripts. But I'm curious because I have opinions about how what I've seen her do and I'm wondering what you think not just specifically about Shonda Rhimes and her conversations on abortion but how abortion is handled on television and in the fiction realm in general.



Renee Bracey Sherman 31:34

Oh my gosh, this is actually my favorite conversation. Not that I don't love having all the other conversation, but it's one I don't get asked about as much and I love it. So, one myth, one myth, that is people kind of believe is that abortion is showing up on TV now and it hasn't been in the past. That's not true. Abortion has been on television for over 100 years, my same dear friend Dr. Gretchen Sisson, the University of California, San Francisco, and my other friend Steph Harold, are researchers that look at this and we the three of us we watch like all the shows. The challenge is that in the past, before the last like 10 years, abortion was depicted negatively, like stigma took over, you know, they, some of the character would consider an abortion and then all of a sudden had a miscarriage or, you know, just decide to parent which, that's fine. Those are real stories. But where the stigma comes in is that they use that to avoid having the conversation about abortion or showing a character's had an abortion. The other thing is that Dr. System found that characters who consider or have abortions are like more likely to be injured either or killed as a result of the abortion, or just like in the narrative of the show. So the underlying message there, whether or not the person is injured from the abortion or not, it's that even thinking about abortion or having an abortion, it's dangerous and you're going to die at some point.



Omkari Williams 33:19

(laughter) You are going to be punished, God is going to smite you for that.



Renee Bracey Sherman 33:25

So I think that those are the these are these fascinating, underlying messages that we hear about abortion. What shifted and Shonda Rhimes has really been at the helm of that, though there's been a lot of different show runners who've been doing some great work recently. Like the folks at Claws, Dear White People have been doing a pretty good job. They've been just changing the conversation and not just showing you having a character have an abortion. They're having one of their main recurring characters have an abortion.



Omkari Williams 34:03

Yes.



Renee Bracey Sherman 34:03

And in the case of Shonda Rhimes, on How to Get Away with Murder, even when the character Laurel is deciding what to do, and she, I mean it, hopefully everyone's caught up on the show. We're like three seasons past, but she actually has the child. She has Christopher, but they show her deciding what to do. And they show her talking to her OB in the clinic asking her, how much time does she had to decide. And so the OB says to her, you know, in Pennsylvania, you can go up to 20 weeks, or whatever she said I forget exactly if it was somewhat accurate, but she walks her through her options. And that is something that we don't necessarily see depicted on television. And I think it was really powerful to show that someone can consider an abortion and make a different decision. Not demonize abortion. And then of course on Scandal there's actually been two abortions where a naval officer was raped and so Olivia Pope in her white hat takes the the naval officer to get an abortion and holds her hand. And then of course, later the mid season the next season. Olivia has her own abortion. And what I thought was really powerful about the depiction of Olivia with the naval officer, as with Dear White People's depiction, is how they they showed characters getting support through an abortion. Claws does this to where quiet man goes with Virginia, in Dear White People. Kelsey goes with Coco. And it shows that people having abortions, we're not making these decisions in isolation. That there's usually a friend or a partner who goes with or supports someone through an abortion. Through the decision or afterwards, right. And what I think is really powerful is that these shows are depicting what it looks like to be that support system. What does empathy look like? And I think that that is something that is missing, to go back to, you know, you said that our soundbite world. The sound bites, you know, the conversation about abortion is missing the empathy. It is missing, centering those of us who are having abortions and our humanity and how we should be treated. The world

constantly shows us or talks about us as if we're terrible people. "We're just making this really bad decision. And even if I support you and making that decision you should damn near shouldn't talk about it." like all of that. And what is beautiful is that these these depictions, again are teaching people how to love us. teaching people how to respect us and teaching people how to support us through that abortion. And so yes, I think it's it's phenomenal that there are so many more depictions of abortion. But I think the lesson that is being taught is a bit deeper than that. And it is that lesson of empathy.



Omkari Williams 37:20

Yeah, definitely. And I think that one of the ways we get to empathy is through storytelling.



Renee Bracey Sherman 37:28

Absolutely.



Omkari Williams 37:29

And I am passionate about storytelling, because even when you have not shared an experience with someone, you have shared some part of their experience because we're human and there aren't that many experiences that we have. There are innumerable variations on our experiences, but they all come down to the same basic things of loss and love and and desire and grief. And you know, the permutations are endless. But you tell me a story and there's some point in my life where I can relate to some piece of your story. And when that happens, I see you differently. And I see myself differently in relationship to you. And I think that's enormously important. Because we're so polarized. It's almost like we believe that people on one side have nothing in common with us. And that's not true. And it's really dangerous. And it doesn't move us towards solving the problems that we are confronting in this world. And story, I think, helps us move in that direction and helps shift not only hearts and minds, which is lovely, but let's shift policy and let the hearts and minds follow along as people recognize that that shift in policy has not actually harmed them. You know.



Renee Bracey Sherman 38:58

Absolutely. Well, and I think I think of my work is as culture change, right? You need to work to change the culture in which people view and treat people's who've had abortions. And it's a bit of this kind of back and forth in chicken in the egg kind of thing, because it was like, Well, if more people would share their abortion stories, then, you know, people

realize that everyone loves someone who's had an abortion. And that I think that is true, but also we haven't fixed the culture to make people want to feel safe enough to share their stories.



Omkari Williams 39:35

Not at all.



Renee Bracey Sherman 39:36

You know, right. We need to shift the culture in order to create a space where someone can step into it and share their stories, and a lot among the backdrop of policies constantly hitting at us stigmatizing us. And I think we're getting to the sea change moment. And I think that once the culture has shifted a bit, then some of the policies will change. And we need some of the policies to change to help change some of the culture. So it constantly feels like this. Almost like a spiral circle that's like a, like a slinky or something that's kind of moving forward. That it's, it's the circle and it's it is doodling forward. But it's constantly it's back and forth, and that all of these things need to happen at the same time. And I think in the, in the meantime, there are so many things that those of us can do to help move the culture forward in our own communities and in our own families and with our own friends.



Omkari Williams 40:40

I agree and I love the slinky image because one of the things about a slinky is you have to you're keeping it in motion.



Renee Bracey Sherman 40:47

Yeah,



Omkari Williams 40:47

You know, our actions keep the slinky in motion. So, when we do things like I helped organize an abortion speak out when I was living in Savannah, and these eight incredible women stood up in public and shared their abortion stories. And they were amazing. And the people who were there and witnessing these stories were quite varied. And not all of them had had abortions. Not all of them were aware that they knew people who had had abortions. And they all left a little bit different than they walked in the door. And that felt

incredible. That felt incredible. And it put a human face on something that is really common. And it as you said, Everyone loves someone who's had an abortion. And that is important to recognize because then you can't just say well "those people" and demonize them in the same way because then it's not just "those people" then it's your sister, or your aunt, or one of your dear friends. All of a sudden there's a face that you recognize on this idea. And that is a different discussion than anonymous people and an idea.



Renee Bracey Sherman 42:06

Right. You have to recognize that the way that you're voting, the language that you're using, the derogatory things you're saying, is actually impacting someone that you love.



Omkari Williams 42:15

Yes.



Renee Bracey Sherman 42:16

And I think that, again, this is where it's like, we need to build empathy. I love this person. And I believe that, you know, they generally make good decisions. But I think people have abortions make bad decisions. So how do I rectify this, right? And so then you have to kind of recognize, maybe this person I love did make a good decision for themselves. Maybe I should talk to them about it, so that I can understand where their decision making was, and again, build that empathy.



Omkari Williams 42:44

And even if you don't ultimately agree with their decision, just understanding how they got to the decision that they made...



Renee Bracey Sherman 42:52

Yes.



Omkari Williams 42:52

is important because we don't always agree with every decision people we love make. But if we can understand their thinking that shift something for us, then it's it's not so easy to

just say, you know what a loser.



Renee Bracey Sherman 43:08

Right I, you know, an analogy I kind of use sometimes it's like, we all have that friend who's dating that other person that really, oh God, you're still dating them. I can't believe you're making that decision. But okay, but you still are there to support that friend.



Omkari Williams 43:22

Yes. And you don't want to tell them that. That person is a loser. You just don't.



Renee Bracey Sherman 43:28

You're like, Okay, well, I'll, I'll be here when it all falls apart.



Omkari Williams 43:31

Exactly.



Renee Bracey Sherman 43:32

And then I'll use my I told so (laughter)



Renee Bracey Sherman 43:35

I don't think you should do that was people that have had abortions, but whatever. But I do think that it's like, we all have that level of empathy and understanding and unconditional support in us. Yes. How do we actually translate that to abortion decision making and get out of the place of judgment and refusal to bend and actually listen and be empathetic to the person that we love?



Omkari Williams 44:00

Yeah, because that's what we would want for ourselves, no matter what the decision was around, we would want the people we loved to believe that we were making what we believe to be the best decision for ourselves at that moment. And we would want their support, even if they disagreed with a decision. We would want them to just respect our

autonomy. So our time is coming to a close and I want to get to a couple more things. First, I want to ask you what's next for you? Because I know you are in a place of shifting. So tell us what's coming up.

R

Renee Bracey Sherman 44:37

Yeah. Well, I am in the process of kind of reorganizing the program that I run, We Testify, into its own organization to really truly support people who've had abortions and engage with them on a culture change level, on a policy level. I truly believe that people who've had abortions should be leading this work. When I first started doing the work a long time ago, it's been 10 years that I've been sharing my abortion story or will be in 2020. But I was really surprised to be at policy tables and meetings and things and how many people leading the work and making decisions, one talked about people who'd had abortions as if we weren't sitting at the table, but also how many people like did not feel comfortable enough to say that they'd had an abortion. Or that people who'd had abortions were not in leadership. And that felt really kind of problematic to me. That we are not just people that are served by this movement, but we should be leading the solutions for this movement. So I've really worked hard to elevate the voices and the leadership of people who've had abortions so that we can be the change that we see and that you know, you know, the old phrase, if you're not at the table, you're on the menu. Well we need to be need to be at the table. And like Shirley Chisholm said, we need to bring a folding chair. I am making sure that we have an organization of folding chairs so that we can be in the room and deciding the rhetoric that we use, the campaigns that are out there, so that we are shown with dignity and respect. And not you know, people to be pitied or like, you know, some of our stories are considered like, "Oh, it's too controversial. Let's not actually talk about that". No, all all of our stories deserve to be honored and respected. So that's some of the work that I'm I've been doing and of course, I will keep writing, that is where I feel like I one of the ways that I can get my ideas out there really well and think about things in a more complex way. And blend it with the conversations that I'm having with people have abortions all across this country. Yeah, and and also show my own learning. I can see in things that I've written, you know, six, seven years ago to now how my views have shifted and how I keep even unlearning the abortion stigma that was thrust upon me. So I just hope to keep learning and growing and public.



Omkari Williams 47:20

I love that. And I'm so glad you said that because I think that that is a really challenging thing for all of us is to keep learning and to be willing to say, my understanding on this has evolved because I know more now than I did. And also to being willing to identify where we carry that stigma. It's like internalized racism, you know, we have this internalized

stigma around abortion because the conversation around it has been so toxic for 30 something years at this point. And it's really important to recognize where we ourselves may hold an idea that's harmful. And so thank you. I appreciate your saying that.

R

Renee Bracey Sherman 48:06

Thank you.

R

Renee Bracey Sherman 48:07

I would like to end this conversation by asking you to leave the listeners with three simple actions that they can take to help affect change around this subject. What are the three things that people listening can do to move us towards reproductive justice?

R

Renee Bracey Sherman 48:29

Yeah, so I think the first one is a super, super simple one that I started instituting myself. When you go to the OB GYN, either if you get a new one or just going to see the one you've been seeing for years, ask them if they provide abortions. I recently learned that not all ob gyns provide abortions. They're just not all trained. And that's for a number of different reasons. Sometimes they feel like there's just enough access. Or their medical school didn't actually teach them. So I would encourage you to ask them. And if they say no, ask them, why not? And is it actually that they harbor some abortion stigma or their anti abortion, and then maybe you can make a decision whether you want to see that ob gyn again. And if they say other reasons, like, oh, there's just, you know, there's enough access already, you can remind them that actually, there are a lot of people who can't make it to abortion clinics, and that they should be part of their services. So I find that to be really amazing. My current ob gyn, she is an abortion provider. And so I thanked her for that, which is really awesome. The other thing is to talk about your values about abortion, or even your own abortion story, if you feel comfortable. Start doing that with people you love. They can start out as a conversation. Let's say you're in the car and you see one of those anti abortion billboards. You can say wow, this, this really hurt me and let me tell you about why. And talk about what your values are both around abortion but also ensuring that everyone is able to decide if when and how to continue pregnancies become a parent and grow their family, and that everyone should have access to the health care that they need. And reminding your colleagues or friends or loved ones, whoever you're talking to that you love someone who's had an abortion, everyone does. And then the last thing is kind of a bigger ask, but I think that we are in a time where, you know, we all have to make bold moves and make some huge changes to ensure that abortion is accessible is support your local abortion fund or your local abortion clinic. The

majority of abortions are performed at independent abortion providers. I had my abortion at an independent abortion provider and they are usually the clinic that is when a state is down to one clinic. They're usually the one that's left alone. So support them you can either donate or you can volunteer with my local abortion Fund, the DC Abortion Fund. I do I donate, of course. But I also do what's called practical support, volunteering in DC and California too, for many years, but it means that when somebody needs a ride to the clinic, they don't have a support person to come home with them. Or they're traveling from far away to the clinic. And they have to stay overnight. They stay at my house, so that they don't have to pay for a hotel. So it's really, really important because these are costs that people don't think of when it comes to the cost of an abortion. And it really changes the experience for someone having that abortion. It means the world to them to know that a complete stranger is willing to support them and be there for them in their time of need. And I think that it's really going to be the culture change that brings empathy. To this work and compassion and understanding, and it truly changed my life. And so that is why I still give rides, I house people. It's just the most amazing feeling. And I really hope that everyone will do it.



Omkari Williams 52:15

I love those three things. And I would just like to add that, especially now as we see the assault on reproductive rights, the assault on abortion, there are a lot of women who live in places where the only clinic in their entire state is hours away from them. So it's even more important now to provide that kind of support than it was when there was more ready access. So, I just would like to second that. And I'd like to thank you so much, Renee. This was such an interesting conversation and so informative and it's made me think more deeply about the subject and I hope that the listeners, I'm actually quite sure that they will feel the same way. So thank you very much. I really appreciate you speaking with me.



Renee Bracey Sherman 53:10

No, thank you for having me. It was really a great conversation. I appreciate it.



Omkari Williams 53:14

It really was. And if you out there would like to connect with Renee, you can find out how to do that by checking the Episode Notes. I'll have all that information in there for you. And I'd like to thank all of you for joining me for this episode of Stepping Into Truth. If you enjoyed what you heard, please leave a review or a rating because each positive review helps expand the reach of this podcast. I will be back with another episode very soon.

Until then, remember, change starts with story, so keep sharing yours.