

The Role of Thought Work in Living with Racism: A Conversation with Erika Royal



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Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *Unf*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard law school grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Kara: Alright, my chickens. So this is a very meta episode because normally, you hear a conversation and then you might hear a follow up about the conversation. We're going to do that in the reverse order today. So I have with me my former student, now certified life coach in her own right, fabulous lawyer, Erika Royal, and we recorded a podcast to talk about using thought work in the context of racism, to have that conversation.

Erika is a black woman. Obviously, I'm a white woman. And so we recorded the podcast and then we both freaked out. And so as we were processing our freak-out, we realized that talking through what our brains did afterwards would actually be so educational for you all.

So we're going to tell you the story of what happened after we recorded before you actually hear the conversation. So I do a fuller introduction of Erika and she gives a full introduction of herself in the actual conversation, in the main part of the podcast. Right now, we're just going to talk about what happened after we recorded it. So Erika, tell me what happened in your brain after we recorded it.

Erika: Okay, so we had this great conversation, we talked for like, an hour. And I thought, okay, that was great, it was great talking with you, we kind of explored things. And then the next morning, I woke up and I thought, "Oh my god, what if I got it wrong? What if I said something that people are

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going to take the wrong way? What if people feel like I made too light of the situation?”

So then I was immediately texting you like, “Hey, when you listen to that, if it sounds too simplistic, can you just let me know? Give me your feedback.” And then you responded like, “Oh, I too was thinking I hope we got it right.” So I’m glad we’re doing this because I think that people need to know, this is exactly what happens.

Kara: From my side of it, I was laughing at myself so much. I posted in my mastermind Slack being like, “Did you guys know if you change your actions to change your circumstance your thoughts and feelings don’t change? Were you aware of that?” I totally thought that was going to work this time.

Because I, of course, my students see me being vocal and they probably think like, oh, she feels great about it. And I’m like, no, of course I’m terrified, which is neither here nor there. I don’t think that emotion matters. But when I was thinking about how to teach about this, I had all the thoughts you would expect of like, some of which are totally legit and valid of who the fuck am I to tell people of color how they could use the tool to think about racism or whatever, right?

And so this is actually a perfect example I think of what I call the mixed motivations and not trying to have pure motivations. I didn’t ask you to do this conversation just from that, right? Of course I was like, of course, Erika as a black woman is going to have a very different life experience, and that means a different way of using the model and of thinking about racism in the context of thought work, and so I want to bring her wisdom and insight to my audience.

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And I also had the thought, “I’m scared to do it alone. It would be better if I did it with Erika.” So it wasn’t either or, it was an and. And then of course, so we recorded it, then I was like, well now I’m sure I’ll feel great. And then shockingly, I still had the same thought because you can’t change your thought by changing your action.

But what I think is so striking is you had it too. It’s like, all the people thinking there’s a right way to do it or that the white people thinking because I’m not a person of color I don’t know what to do, as if people of color somehow don’t have human brains, don’t have thoughts.

Erika: Everybody is struggling. And one of the reasons I said yes when you asked me, even though I immediately had all those thoughts of what if I do it wrong, all of it, but one of the reasons I said yes is because I’m out here in the world telling people don’t be afraid to get it wrong. It’s more important that you speak up.

And so for me to be saying that and then knowing that I have the same feelings and I have the same things holding me back, I’m like, let me also get out there and do it. Let me just put what I have to say out there and maybe it will help some people, maybe it will resonate with some people. Maybe some people won’t, and that’s also okay.

I can only say what I know to be true. Even while we were having the conversation, I was feeling kind of nervous, kind of - you know the feelings. And then when it was done, when we were finished, I did feel like, okay, relief. And the next morning, all of that nervousness, all of that pit in my stomach, all of that was back. Like, no, silly.

Kara: You did it wrong.

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Erika: You did it wrong and everybody's going to find it. It is what it is. I mean, people I think who are really looking to do this work and really willing to go deep and spend time with it are going to realize that it's not about getting it right.

Kara: That's just literally impossible. That's what's so fascinating. I was thinking about this today like, I want to be so careful in how I say this because I'm not saying this in a like, poor me, there's no way to get it right, someone will always be upset at white people for how they do it. That's not what I mean at all.

What I mean is like, having spent 20, 30 - how old am I? 25 years, let's say, in social justice movements, and the feminist movement particularly, which has its own inclusion problems for sure and its own intersectionality problems, but there's just no movement or group of people is monolithic. And that's what's so insidious about the self-doubt I think, right? Like, you're a black woman and you're worried that you're talking about racism wrong.

Erika: Correct. Absolutely.

Kara: And people are going to think you're doing it wrong, but it's a no win. If you had shown up - and you just, because I know you, you tend to not present super emotionally. That's just not your presentation, whatever the million factors are for that. But if you had presented super emotionally, then you would have woken up worried that you were too emotional.

Erika: Right, exactly. You can't win. And also, I think that for me, generation X black women who maybe don't feel terribly connected to the civil rights movement that came before us, but feel connected to just these incidents that keep popping up, so these things that keep happening, and you'll have a little time period where maybe it's not in the news and it's back.

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I just feel like over time, you kind of develop a very flat approach to it where it's not that you don't feel it every time. It's just that you can't go there every time. You just can't. It's like self-care, self-preservation. So I think that was part of what I was worried about, that people would think, "She doesn't even care. This is a person who doesn't even care. Listen to how cavalier she is."

And it's not that I'm cavalier. I think that it is very helpful to have the thought that racism exists to the extent that it makes me take steps to protect myself and my children. But I don't think it's terribly helpful to have the thought that racism exists to the extent that it would keep me from pursuing my dreams and my career goals and things like that. So that's how I think the model works in this.

Kara: Thank you for recording this second installment that they will hear first of this conversation.

Erika: Yes, and I'm going to go and now do some thought work about this second part that we've done because you know...

Kara: Turn it into a whole meta situation where we just have to keep releasing extra podcasts about our thoughts about the podcast.

Erika: Yes, yes. I look forward to it.

Kara: Yeah, we will spare the rest of you from that. We'll just keep that between ourselves.

Erika: Thank you, Kara.

Kara: Thank you so much.

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Kara: Hello my chickens. I have an amazing episode for you today. It's a special bonus episode. So you know I've been teaching a lot about how white people can use the model to uncover their own internalized racism and I've actually heard from many women of color who are not black women that it's also been helpful for them. So that's not to say that you should only listen to that episode if you're white, but that's what I've been focusing on in those episodes.

But today, I wanted to talk, really delve even more into how we can use thought work to deal with experiences of oppression, and I have an amazing guest on to talk to me about that. And that is Erika Royal. She is a former student of mine, now a certified coach in her own right. And also, a brilliant lawyer.

And we are going to just talk about it all and dig into the hard questions. I wanted to give one kind of preface, which is that you're going to hear us talk about the model. Many of you are familiar with the model, either because you've come to one of my free webinars where I teach it, or you're in The Clutch, but just in case you don't know what I'm talking about, for the purposes of this conversation, it's a very deep tool that we can use a lot of different ways.

But for the purposes of this conversation, we're really focusing on basically how what you think creates what you feel, and that drives the actions that you take, and then what kind of result you end up getting in your life. So that's really what we're talking about.

I talk all the time on this podcast about how there are circumstances out in the world and then our human brain is what gives them meaning, is what

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gives them their interpretation. A tree just exists and then we think something about it, and that creates a feeling, an action, and a result.

So when we talk about the model, that's really what we're talking about. That kind of process of encountering a thing, having a thought about it, feeling a feeling, taking an action, and then creating some kind of result for yourself in your life from that action. The shorthand for all that is the model, so that's what we're going to be talking about. So, you want to tell us - I told them who you are basically, but tell us a little bit about yourself.

Erika: Okay, so thank you for the great introduction. Thank you for having me. And thank you very much, by the way, for all of the work and content that you've been putting out over the last week or so. It's been so spot on and so helpful and so - just helpful to me, so thank you.

Kara: I promise I didn't pay her to say that.

Erika: Like you said, I'm one of your former students. I'm a lawyer. I've been a lawyer for 20 years and I came to you and to Unfuck Your Brain because I was somebody who had a lot of anxiety, a lot of stress, a lot of - all the things.

And I've got three kids, I've been married for 17 years. The last time my husband said that I called myself a mother and not a wife, so I want to be clear. But I have found this work, coaching, to be so life-changing, and so I really welcome the opportunity to talk to you about how people can use it in these times to deal with the things that we're dealing with now.

Kara: So let's kind of start here because I, obviously, have not experienced racism personally. I will say when I came to learn this work, the dimensions that I felt oppressed on, like as a woman and as a fat person, when I heard my teacher say that distinguish between circumstances and thoughts, I had

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a lot of feelings about it, so I'm curious if sort of when you came to this work, I'm sure a lot of people have that kind of response or experience of like, hold up, what are you saying?

Erika: Yes. And I think that particularly, when we're going through things like we're going through now, it's extra hard to think that racism is a thought because racism for a lot of black women, myself included, it feels like reality. It feels like a circumstance.

And as you go through life and you encounter it in your everyday life, and I do mean every day, it doesn't feel like a thought. But then through learning the model, learning coaching, you come to understand that it has to be a thought. It has to be something that somebody came up with in their own mind, because it doesn't make sense otherwise.

And because there's no agreement on it, and that's what I'm learning big time on social media and elsewhere. There's no agreement on it. So it must definitely be a thought, but knowing that it's a thought, I think where people get stuck is they think, "Well, then I'm just going to tell you change your thoughts." That's not it. That's not the point.

The point is not for you to think racism is a thought and that if you change your thought, racism will disappear. That's not it. It's really just so you can understand, so it can take some of the power away, first of all. If racism is a sentence in somebody's mind, how can that be ruining my life? How can that be something that's holding me back? So I think that when you think of it that way, it's really just about empowering you more than anything else.

Kara: Yeah, I think it's so important to talk about what we mean when we say racism is a thought because of course, that sounds to people like what you're saying or any ism, that what you're saying is like, oh, it's all made up, it doesn't exist, which is of course not what we're saying at all.

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I think when we talk about what thoughts are, it's like, any idea that humans came up with, it's like racism is a word that we use to describe a set of thoughts or feelings or actions or results that other people or ourselves are creating in the world. And so it's like, because it's a word in the human language, it is a thought.

But that doesn't mean, as you said, that it isn't true or it doesn't exist. And all of the measurable manifestations of it, like I think of as facts or as circumstances. We can have a study that shows that black men are disproportionately killed by the police compared to white men in America. That's a fact.

So I love that you brought that up. It's so important because this is one of the things where people get turned around, I think. So I'm curious kind of, how do you think about the real-world impacts of models in other people's brains? There's some thought going on in somebody else's brain that makes them feel and act a certain way and then there's an impact of that, so I'm curious how you think about that.

Erika: So I think that what I meant when I said it's just a thought in somebody's brain and that can't hurt me is that when you think of racism as this just big amorphous reality that's right outside the door, it seems very much like it could hurt me at any moment.

And I remember you coaching me when the whole Parkland thing happened and I started to have these feelings that my children were in imminent danger because Parkland is about 20 miles up the road from me. And you said to me, "Your children are in no greater danger today than they were yesterday." And I was like, "Yes, but no. I mean technically yes, but." And I just had all these...

Kara: But I have a very intense feeling that seems true, so...

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Erika: Right. I couldn't just accept that. But when I really sat with it for a while, I was like, okay, this is part of what we signed up for. So if we're going to live in this world and try to do what we're going to do, it can't be that every time I walk out the door, this is going to happen.

So thinking this is a sentence in somebody's mind instead of this is this thing that's out there that's coming to get me, it helps me feel a little bit better. And then also, it takes away some of the power of it. There are going to be bad cops like the one in Minneapolis, but the overwhelming majority of them in my opinion are not.

I mean, I've been pulled over many times, I have a little bit of a lead foot. I have encountered the police. I've not ever had an experience that was particularly horrific. It was inconvenient and sometimes a little bit rude, and I know that my husband and my brother have had horrific experiences with the police, but not every time, because it's not everyone.

It's some people. You can't be in the world thinking that everyone is against you, that everything is against you because you're black. You can't do anything when you think that. So I have to believe that is a thought in some people's minds and not reality.

Kara: Yeah, it's such an interesting point. It's sort of like when we think about - and actually, it makes me think about when I'm doing a model with someone, it's like I always want them to get specific about the circumstance. And it's sort of for the same reason.

It's like, obviously correct me if I'm wrong, it's like if you think about it as just racism is out there, it's this big amorphous thing that could get you at any moment, and that creates all of this constant fear, as opposed to thinking like, okay, these are the ways that racist thoughts in other people's brains do produce real world impacts and I need to plan for those.

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Like you said, you speak to your children about them. It's like, I need to know when and what we might encounter. It sounds to me like - let me know what you think - that it makes it easier for you to actually plan how to deal with the things you do need to deal with and then have some emotional resources the rest of the time.

Erika: Yes. Because to go back to the Parkland example, when you were coaching me on that, that fear was paralyzing for me. I was not home. I was in California. So I had traveled for a meeting the morning that it happened and I was literally sitting in meetings with tears running down my face. I was a hot mess. And I was like, please help. Please.

And you were like, listen, maybe you're going to cry, but this is the reality of the situation. And so I think having that specific example, I am upset because this thing happened when I was not home. And my children are this far away. It just felt so real to me. And I couldn't do anything.

And so I need it to be something that I can think about rationally with clarity and then deal with, because otherwise, the fear is overwhelming and I'll just sit around crying all the time.

Kara: Yeah, and it's such a balance of that allowing and processing the emotion and not trying to rush yourself through it, but then like, when you're ready. How many times can I say this? We're definitely not telling anyone how they should feel about current events or racism or anything else.

Erika: Absolutely not.

Kara: But it's always like, this is a tool, if and when you're ready or want to think differently. And I think what I love about this conversation is I think you're illustrating all the nuances of it. It's not like your only options are either I believe racism exists and every terrifying thought I have is true, or I

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have to believe nothing exists, there's no problem, and it's just bad vibes. Those are not the only two options.

There's a whole spectrum of options in between, and again, I obviously do not have this experience. In my experience of working through my thoughts about other isms, I mean, I think part of what thought work can help us do is sift through that. Like, we all know that if we have a filter for something, then we're just always seeing it and thought work is this tool that lets us - it's not about saying, okay, I've decided not to believe anything is ever racist. It's about having discernment.

Erika: But if you think that racism is everywhere, then everywhere you go, you'll see racism. And that's it. And that may be what you want to do, that's fine. That may be what you want to do, but that's not something that I want to do. I've spent a lot of time around white people and this sounds stupid, but those are my closest friends. Those are the people that I went to high school with, went to - I can't just think there's racism all the time. I just can't.

So I want to be super clear that I'm not saying that racism doesn't exist, I'm not saying that things are happening right now that aren't just terrible. Those things are definitely happening. But you have some power in this. How you go through life, you have some power.

Kara: Yeah. Believing otherwise, to believe that we have no power over our own experience is like, the most disempowering thing, and it's so odd how sometimes that gets flipped as somehow being empowering. Believing everything you already think is somehow supposed to be empowering. That usually doesn't.

But it all depends, and that's why I love this conversation. If you're someone who, like, the thought racism is everywhere makes you feel the

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way you want to feel and show up the way you want to show up, then totally keep that thought. It's all individual. For some people, anger produces results that they want and for some people it doesn't. And for some people, there's no right or wrong to it.

Erika: For me, if you put that thought in the model, racism is everywhere, then it's basically like, I put myself in a cage. So that's why I don't want that thought for me, I don't want that thought for my children, I want my children to be smart and I want them to be realistic and all that stuff, and I want them to be resilient. But I also want them to not be in this box where they feel like there are limits on what they can do or what they can be because of racism.

Kara: That's such a great point because I think this is another thing that gets lost sometimes is like, it's not either or. It's and. There are real impacts in the world of other people having these thoughts and having had them for centuries, and so there are those things out there. It's like, some kind of structure where there are some rigid parts, but there's also play in the joints.

Certain thoughts will allow you to find the maximum play in the joints that you can, and that actually might help you eventually shift some of those fixed parts. Whereas some thoughts, if you just believe the whole thing is fixed, that goes back to our conversation about like, well, the world would never change if there weren't some people who believed that you could do things that seemed like you couldn't do.

Erika: I don't know. I mean, I think of it as just in me. I might have just stayed kind of a frantic, stressed out mess. That was okay. I was doing alright with that. I was doing alright.

Kara: I'm pretty good at this, I've been practicing it for a while so...

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Erika: Right. But what I started to think was I want to be able to show my children how they can live their lives in a way where they can feel better than I have been feeling. And so that's what I think you get with coaching. You get to feel better. There are times when you're going to feel bad and there are times where you get to feel good.

Kara: Yeah. I mean, it's so powerful. If we imagine we could have a generation of children who did not internalize the inferiority messages, what would the world look like? And of course, that's impossible in the current timespan, but that's what coaching is about. I love that.

It's like, I mean, I hope that you would have done it for yourself anyway, but I'm glad your children were there to motivate you. These are such powerful tools, I think, for children and for teenagers and...

Erika: Absolutely.

Kara: Imagine what it would be like if instead of only discovering it in your 40s or whatever it is, you were hearing all along, oh yeah, see how that movie or that person or that whatever just told you this thought, that's literally just a sentence in your mind that you do not have to put in your brain, let's work on a much better thought to put in your brain instead.

Erika: Exactly. Yes. I think it's made me a much better mother.

Kara: That's how the world changes, I think.

Erika: So right now, what is most front of mind for people is the incident in Minneapolis and the death of George Floyd. And so that's a circumstance. That absolutely happened, and if you weren't sure it happened, a bunch of people recorded it so we could all see it.

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And yet somehow still, there's a disagreement about why that happened. So a lot of people, like myself, believe that it was racism. That that would not have happened if he had been white. There are people who don't believe that. And so to me, it doesn't invalidate in any way what happened.

What happened is what happened and we all saw it. But to be able to say that racism is what I'm thinking about it and not what everybody's thinking about it really helps me to understand people that I'm dealing with. Because when you believe that what you think is true and it's reality and other people don't get it, you think one of you is insane.

Kara: In a population that's told by society that you're wrong or crazy or stupid, it's like, you think you're insane.

Erika: Right. And so to know that I believe this is racism and I have a number of reasons why I believe that, and I choose that thought and I'm going to keep it, I like that thought for me, I think it's the right one, but I also understand other people don't have it and that allows me to be able to even just speak to them.

Because before, I would be so frustrated. I would just throw my hands up like, I slam my computer down like, I can't, I'm not going to deal with anyone. And that's not helpful.

Kara: Yeah. And I think it's so important also to say like, we all get to choose if we want to do that. It's not mandatory, but I will say I used to be much more of a cancel callout culture kind of person in my 20s. I've been active in social justice since I was 15. Women's rights, reproductive rights, and I have had both experiences of being - I'm not saying one is better than the other. They're just very different experiences.

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One of being sort of like, I'm not going to - not only be around, but not even engage with anyone who doesn't agree with my thoughts about politics and current events and women's rights and whatever it is. A very high kind of requirement for ideological compatibility. It was like, anyone who doesn't agree with exactly my position on abortion, I'm not even going to speak to because they're denying my humanity.

And I think once I went through coach training, which you've also been through, and once I started coaching people and just seeing like, everybody's living in a model with a thought that makes sense to them and then a feeling, action, result, and how effective it can be to coach someone when you're able to hold space and open their minds, which again, I get paid for it and so should anybody who's doing it. We don't owe that to anyone, especially strangers in our DMs or whatever. But you can't shame someone into truly changing their thinking.

Erika: And that's true. And I also came to understand that a lot of times, no matter what you say, you're not going to change the person. So then understanding that it's a thought and it's something they're choosing and it's a sentence in their mind is also, for me at least, it gives me an ability to find peace. Because I'm no longer just banging my head against the wall trying to make this change.

I understand it's not going to happen and it's not about me, by the way. It's not about me. It's not because they don't care about me as a human. It's not because they don't care about my children. They just have a different sentence in their mind that they're choosing and it's not about me. And that allows me to take myself out of it.

Kara: Oh, that's so interesting. What would you have made it mean about you before?

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Erika: I think that when I have thoughts like, “This person just doesn’t get it and this person is denying what I know to be true, they don’t care about me,” and the one that has absolutely always killed me is, “they don’t care about my children.”

So you know, I have two daughters and a son and I’m raising them in this environment where I need to talk to them about how they are to behave around white people, the police, things like that, and that’s something that every black parent had to do. And when I would meet people who would deny something like this was racism, I would immediately go to, they don’t care about me or my children.

And that is like, blindingly bad. At that point, I can’t say anything, I can’t do anything. Like, cancel culture. So yeah, just being able to put some distance between me and that thought and whatever they think has really helped me for myself. Not even for trying to change them but just to help me for myself.

Kara: Yeah, such a good point. Some people are never going to change no matter what we do. This is something I talked about in - I did a little bonus podcast where I said like, from my perspective, thought work is about the world is often not as we want it, now how are we going to try to show up in it? And how can we increase our own emotional resilience for that?

So I think what you’re saying goes to that. It’s not about saying okay, well, it’s just an optional thought so maybe I’m wrong, but it was racism. It’s about saying, no, I 100% believe that this murder happened because of racism, but if I...

Erika: But what can I do about it that makes me feel like I did something? That doesn’t just make me feel like I’m spinning in rage and sadness and frustration all the time. You know, I have beliefs I’m never going to change

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too. So I understand people have beliefs. I have some beliefs I'm never going to change.

Kara: So tell us more about that. Because I'd be interested to hear - I mean, not in terms of the beliefs you're never going to change. In terms of when you say so here's what I can't change what already happened, what some other people, some people I might be able to shift them, some people I can't. How do you redirect that energy?

Erika: I don't know who I heard it from sometime this week. It might have been Rachel Rodgers who said you need to take action in your sphere of influence. So to me, that means okay, one thing that I can do fairly easily is donate to different causes that are dealing with these issues. So that's something I can do fairly easily.

Another thing is that as a black professional, and I think this is something a lot of people don't realize, I spend the vast majority of my time with white people. That's who I was in law school with, that's who I was in college with, that's who I work with.

So I feel like there's a huge opportunity there for the people who want to change or want to know more, who want to have genuine conversations and really try to move the needle. I think there's a huge opportunity for me to say I'm willing to do that. And so that's something that I've actually done twice this week.

And if you had asked me two weeks ago, I would have been like, no, I'm not going to do it. But even a little change, just a little change. Yeah, so that's the type of opportunity I think I have. And then for me, avoiding the people I know will never change is just a self-care issue. I'm just not going to do it anymore.

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But I do think that for the people who either - you in your podcast this week, when you said that people who've grown up in America need to understand that they have gotten all of these things, that their beliefs are formed by things they don't even know about, that they don't even consider, the media, teachings, things you heard, how you grew up, that there's racism in there.

And you don't have to feel bad for it, you don't have to feel guilty, it's not your fault, but it's your fault if you don't now look at that. Those people who want to look at it, who want to change, who want to know what they can do, I think it's a little lazy. We have Google, so you can find out on your own. But if you want to have that conversation, I'm up for having that conversation.

Kara: You can obviously correct me if I'm wrong, but it's like, the difference that I sometimes teach about, about emotional resistance versus political resistance. And it's like, I always just want to be so clear, but especially in this conversation, well, I can only speak for myself.

I'm never saying this is how you should handle it. I mean, a lot of the work that we do with the model, especially - I'm so unvisual. I'm trying to think of how to explain this. But it's like, along any identity that you are marginalized along gets some of this and then it's compounded, each of the ones on top of each other.

But there's so much guilt and shame and inferiority and self-judgment and self-criticism. And so, so much of this work is before we even get to how do we want to think about the world, it's like, are we giving ourselves compassion?

Erika: Right. So one thing that you and I were talking about is that when you grow up in a society like this one where racism permeates every

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aspect of society, that if you grow up white in that, you really grow up with white supremacy, which is something that's really easy to accept because it feels pretty good, I assume. And it's not a hardship, it's fine.

Kara: Well, you're even unconscious of it.

Erika: Right, that's what I mean.

Kara: It's not like you're like, oh, I'm in it and it feels good. You're just like, as a white person, you're not educated about it, you don't even know it's happening.

Erika: Right, so that's what I meant, that it's fine. It doesn't feel much like anything. It feels like everything is fine. When you're black growing up in the same space, you're growing up with black inferiority. And so you feel it all the time. I was told this by my grandmother growing up that I needed to be careful of x, y, z, that is how people were going to see me and things like that.

So I knew it as a child. And I think that talking about how I can help people at work understand things, one of the things that I found so interesting when I talked to my white colleagues is that they don't realize that I pretty much know exactly what their life feels like because I have no choice but to.

For me to be able to go to college, to go law school, get a job at a big firm, I've pretty much had to make myself very familiar with all of that. With how people talk, what they like, the things that they like to talk about and what they like to do.

And so when I say to them, "It's not like we're coming to this conversation and we're both going to try to understand each other. I feel like I have a

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pretty good understanding of you.” I mean, maybe I don’t know particular things about your family or your history, but in terms of your experience, going to college, going to law school, I did those same exact things.

The difference was that I was doing the same exact things you were doing and I’m doing the same exact things you’re doing now, except I’m also fighting for my life. I’m also looking at all of this thinking how is this going to affect me, how is this going to affect my kids.

And so that has been a really interesting dynamic that I’ve experienced this week when I tell people, “Oh no, you don’t have to explain to me how you feel. Let me give you the rundown. This is what I think you feel.” And they’re like, oh, yes.

Kara: You’re like, it’s just the dominant narrative in every area of life, so yeah, I’ve encountered it before.

Erika: Right. So then when I say to them, I’m also homeschooling my children right now, I’m also stuck in the house, and I’m also feeling great sadness about these things that are happening in our country and the protests that are happening and when people want to say, what about the looters?

Kara: Can you talk a little bit more about that because I think - and I remember from coaching you and from, please, coaching any human ever because we don’t like negative emotions, I’m wondering - including myself. I think one of the kind of misconceptions of thought work is that it’s this kind of bypassing where we’re like, being sad about racism would be low vibes.

I mean, there are some people teaching that bullshit. But that’s obviously not what goes down around here, and that’s not - I think thought work is a deeply radical practice. So I’m wondering if being someone who knows

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thought work has impacted the emotional side of all this. It's like, we talked about the kind of mental side of what am I going to think about these people having these thoughts, how do you feel like it's impacting the emotional side?

Erika: So my generation, generation X, I really feel like the Rodney King video is such a moment in time for us because for me, I remember thinking it was such a big deal. Because I don't really relate to the civil rights movement. I understand that it happened, I've seen the videos, and I know that they would release the dogs and the hoses and all that.

I don't really relate to that. To me, the really impactful thing about race that was kind of a country-wide thing was the Rodney King video. And I remember watching that, it was on TV every night for like, a month. And I remember thinking it's going to be different now because they have a video. Now everybody can see.

And so I felt like we as a nation saw the same thing, and we were all going to do the right thing and we were going to fix this. And then they let those officers go to Simi Valley and get tried there, and they were acquitted. And so ever since then, there's just been these events. They flare up. It's like having a sports injury that flares up periodically.

Something will happen, and if you're black in America, you just can't put all your emotion and your hope and your sadness into every single event because you just wouldn't be able to function, but you still feel it. You still feel it. And so for me, before, I would feel a rush to kind of get past the sadness and get past the anger.

I'd want to suppress it, resist it, fight it, whatever. And one thing that coaching has really helped me with is being able to sit there and watch something like the video of Minneapolis and sit there and watch it and just

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let it feel horrible. Let it be just impossibly bad that this happened, let it be impossibly bad that all those people watched, and just feel that heaviness and that sadness and that feeling of this is never going to change.

And know that that feeling's going to go away, but that it's okay for me to watch that and want to feel bad. And to go ahead and feel bad. And to be dreading that I have to then tell my children about this and they're going to see the video. But also knowing that at some point, I can stop feeling bad.

I can go ahead and do it and feel it and just sit there in it for a while, and then I can move on to something else. I think that the model really helps with that because I can journal what those thoughts are. I can sit down and I can say why am I feeling - I mean, I feel bad that a man died and I just watched, we all just watched. But I also feel bad because I feel like it's never going to change.

I feel like it's never going to happen again. When I have those thoughts, I know that's what I need to work on because those thoughts get me nowhere. But do I want to sit there and go, "This is so sad, that man died." Yes. I don't need...

Kara: That's such a beautiful example of clean versus dirty pain, which is something - I do have a podcast about it.

Erika: There are so many.

Kara: There's a lot of them now, I know. Every damn week. These people in the podcasting groups are like, oh, season. I'm like, what's a season? Is that an option? You know, they only do it sometimes. I'm like, no, no, every week. Anyway, I have a podcast episode called clean versus dirty pain, but I think that's such a beautiful example.

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You're like, yes, I want to feel grief and outrage and sadness and anger, whatever, but when I see that I feel hopeless, and again, anybody listening, if you want to feel hopeless, you are allowed. We're not saying you shouldn't. But it sounds like what you're saying and I know for me also is like, that those feel very different.

And when you look at that thinking, you're like, I do want to keep the thoughts that this should not have happened and it is painful and tragic and all those thoughts, but do I want to keep the thought, "Nothing will ever change, there's no point in trying?" No, maybe I don't want to keep that thought, right?

I think one of the ironies to me, I'm curious what you think about this, about the idea that thought work and social justice should have nothing to do with each other is that I don't understand where people think change comes from. Because anybody who's ever been a visionary or a leader of a movement, that was the person who was able to see and was brave enough to stand up and say, no, things can be different than this.

Erika: You mentioned that this week on your podcast, you said something like there's one thing where you're resisting what is, where you're suffering because you're resisting what is, but then there's a difference when you say the world should be different and I can help change it. So when you're just at the world should be different, hard stop, that feels terrible.

Kara: When that thought ends right there, yeah.

Erika: Exactly. And you're just resisting and you're just fighting against it. And I think that I used to feel like, well, I'm not honoring this man if I don't feel sad, if I don't feel sad all the time. But no, I am acknowledging his life, acknowledging his death, I'm acknowledging that it was horrible what

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happened, but also to really honor him, to me, is what can I do to make some change out of this, to make something come from this.

So I think when you said go ahead and feel bad, but if you just stop there at nothing will change, then you're done. And you're not going to create anything from that. If you go to this should be different and I can help, then you feel hopeful, you feel motivated, you feel like there are steps I can take, which I guess for me is just a really important thing.

Kara: Yeah, and I feel like there's also - exactly what you were saying earlier about how as a person of color and especially as a black person in this society, you internalize all these messages of inferiority. What do you think about that?

Erika: For me too, when you ask me to do this podcast, I had to do a lot of thought work around. I was like, just say yes and then do the work.

Kara: You were totally allowed to say no. I still would love you.

Erika: No, no, it's not that I wanted to say no. I wanted to say yes, but I immediately had all these thoughts about what if I don't say it right, what if I don't do it right. I mean, my whole life I've been told you talk like a white girl, you're not black enough, I mean, it's so great.

For people like me who are kind of walking that line of both worlds where you're not black enough because you don't sound black enough and so where do you get off speaking for black women, but you're definitely not white enough in the white world. It's kind of like, who am I going to be?

But I just thought to myself, okay, so maybe I get it wrong, but maybe somebody will think, oh, that makes a lot of sense, or I want to know more about that, or that could really help me or that sounds like me and that

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would really be great. But yeah, I have the same doubts as everybody else. I'm not sitting here like I'm an authority and I'll just tell you how all the black people think and then we'll just do what we need them to do and then everything will be great. I am definitely not that.

Kara: No one who's white is ever like, "Well, am I white enough?" There's no - that's not a thing.

Erika: I've never heard anyone express that.

Kara: Right. But isn't that so interesting? There's something about the construct for a person of color, it's like, you can't do it right. All of those messages and creating the situation where everybody feels like they're doing it wrong.

Erika: Right. And people talk about switching how they talk, depending on what group they're in, but you really do fundamentally feel untethered. It's not like, I'm like, oh, I'm in this group, I really belong. You really never really belong anywhere. So in this type of work, that's one of the things I dealt with. When you talk about feeling guilt and shame, I'm like, have I said enough?

I didn't take my kids out and go protest when they had the protests in Miami or even eastern Fort Lauderdale. I didn't go out and do that, mainly because I am not trying to be around a group of people during COVID-19. I do not understand that part. But I do have those thoughts like, am I feeling enough here? And I'm just working on not judging myself for what I'm not doing. And just trying to...

Kara: Which is the most radical thing, right? Because I'm coaching women who are like, shaming themselves for being too upset. And then shaming themselves for not being upset enough. And then shaming...

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Erika: There's always room for shame.

Kara: There's always room for shame. It's so true. Brooke and I just did our - my teacher and I were going to do that retreat in Portugal and then obviously because of COVID it got canceled. So then we turned it into an online thing. We just had the first meeting today, and at the end of it, every one, we're like, alright, so you will be working on shame. Who else? It's like, everybody.

Erika: Yeah.

Kara: But it's like, that's, to me, some of the most radical power of this work is that we have to create liberation inside and in order to do anything on the outside. And so much human potential and energy is - I don't mean wasted like we're doing something wrong. It's like, we absorb these messages. But it's just the self-guilt and shame of the, I'm not doing this right, I'm not doing that right, I'm not good enough, I should be more grateful, or I should be more upset, or I should be whatever.

Erika: Exactly.

Kara: It's like, the more marginalized identities you have, the more ways there are for you to tell yourself you're doing it wrong.

Erika: Well, and part of what felt revolutionary to me when I was learning all this stuff in Unfuck Your Brain was that shame was not helpful, that shame was not a motivator. And also, learning to identify it. Because I didn't call what I was feeling shame. I just thought like, no, you're not doing it right.

Kara: You're like, this is just fact that I'm communicating to you.

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Erika: Right. Like, I'm not doing it right and I'm not upset enough and so learning that no, that's just a thought and you're causing shame and shame is not going to help you. So now I actively look for those thoughts because I realize that if I'm sitting in shame, I'm going to be highly ineffective. And so I don't want to do that.

Kara: That's such a good point. We need like, a shame detector. If there's anything in your life - it's like we need a divining rod or a metal detector for shame. It's like, if there's anything in your life - like a scan. If there's anything in your life that is not going the way you want, we got to look for the shame.

Erika: Look for the shame so you can move through it.

Kara: Thank you for sharing. Is there anything else you want to say that I didn't get to?

Erika: I think that for people who are wondering what they can do, I just hear so many people saying I don't know what to do, I don't know what to say, I don't want to say the wrong thing, and I totally understand that. I think that those people should know that there are black people having the same exact thoughts.

And also, by the way, black people have had those thoughts the entire time you've worked with them, the entire time you've known them. So we've had those thoughts the whole time. But one thing that I will say has worked for me as a lawyer is just preparing. It's like preparing for a hearing. Educate yourself, read up, watch some videos, look at some speeches.

See what's going on in the world and you will start to feel empowered to speak on what's going on in the world. I think that part of this I don't know

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what to say is coming from you not doing the work because there's a lot out there.

Kara: There's one other thing I wanted to ask you about if you don't mind. So this came up a lot in the coaching. So yesterday I did a free coaching call for just my community in general where I coached only black women and a lot of what came up for people was sort of a feeling of hopelessness, that nothing was ever really going to change.

You talk about sort of being like, well, this flares up, it goes away, I can't get sort of engulfed by it every time. I'm just curious, how do you think about that part of it? That sort of feeling of hopelessness and do you think thought work has any role to play with that?

How do you think about the connect or disconnect between this has happened before and things haven't really changed and also, I know how I think about things is going to impact how I show up, which will impact what happens in the world? How do you put those together or not?

Erika: So I think that when we have a period in this country like we've had the past few weeks where it started with Ahmaud Arbery, I think that was the first thing that really started this latest wave, if you will, of attention. And then it continued with Breonna Taylor, the one in Louisville, and obviously ending with George Floyd, which has just gathered so much attention and galvanized so many people.

I feel like when those things happen at first, you see them, you see the videos, it does feel very hopeless. So you have those thoughts, this is never going to change, this always happens. But I think that where the model is helpful is that the model for me is about clarity. So when you have those thoughts, this is never going to change and this is just going to keep happening and you feel hopeless, you're able to see it.

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Because I think that before thought work, I would just feel hopeless and that would be it. I'm just feeling hopeless and then eventually it would go away from time. But now, I can see that. I can actually say like, I'm feeling hopeless and put it in the model and figure out why. And then I can decide whether or not I want to keep that thought.

The thought this is never going to change doesn't serve me. And even if in the moment, you want to feel sad and all that, but at some point, you have to go, what is a thought that's going to serve me? And maybe it's, "This keeps happening but I can make a difference," which is why I've been trying to speak up more and be more vocal about things.

I do still want to be angry. I do want to be outraged because I think that those situations are outrageous. But at the same time, I can look at the murder and be outraged but look at the resulting social movement and feel hopeful. And so I think you can have both, but they are two separate models and I think that being able to separate them - because before I couldn't do that. Before, it was just like, all jumbled in here, like what's going on...

Kara: She's gesturing to her head, since people can't see. All jumbled up in her head.

Erika: It was all jumbled in my head and I couldn't keep tab of what was going on in there, but now I feel like the model really helps with clarity. It's my number one clarity tool.

Kara: Yeah, I love that. So good. Thank you for joining us Erika, for being my student and teaching me.

Erika: My pleasure.