Life As It Is
"Practicing Freedom in Times of Collapse"
Episode #60 with Autumn Brown
November 18, 2026

Autumn Brown: There is dissolving happening. There is collapsing happening. And we're not going to figure it out by thinking our way through it. But there is a blueprint here for what we are becoming, and it is just allowing ourselves to be in that lostness and orient and take responsibility for our immediate surroundings, our immediate conditions, and most importantly, I think for ourselves, that is going to guide us through that lostness.

James Shaheen: Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard Autumn Brown. Autumn is a multidimensional artist, singer-songwriter, and author. Her new book, *Temper: Practicing Freedom in an Unfree World*, draws from Black wisdom traditions and the martial art of aikido to lay out a practical guide for accessing freedom and resilience in times of collapse. In our conversation with Autumn, we talk about what she calls the practice of fugitivity, the interplay between strength and surrender, how the martial art of aikido has transformed her relationship to fear, and how discipline can make way for freedom. Plus, Autumn leads us in a guided practice. So here's my conversation with Autumn Brown.

James Shaheen: Okay, so I'm here with Autumn Brown and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Autumn. Hi, Sharon. It's great to be with you both.

Autumn Brown: Wow, great to be with you as well. Thanks so much for having me.

Sharon Salzberg: Hello.

James Shaheen: So Autumn, we're here to talk about your new book, *Temper: Practicing Freedom in an Unfree World*. So to start, could you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Autumn Brown: Mmm. Yes. Thank you for this question. So the book is a guide for conditioning the soul in the time place of collapse in a collapsing world. And I would say it grows out of many years of movement work, and when I say movement work, I mean both my background as an organizer inside of social justice movements and movements for liberation, healing justice, but also I would say movement in a greater sense of studying myself, developing myself, disciplining myself, becoming the being that I think I'm meant to be. And so I often tell people that the book is about fugitivity, the practice of fugitivity, of uncapturability, but it is first and foremost a guide to self-study and the way that we can study ourselves into freedom.

James Shaheen: So the book begins with a question: How do we reclaim our freedom? So can you tell us about this question and how it has guided you?

Autumn Brown: Well, for a number of years, I found myself thinking about this conundrum, the sort of quandary of is it really true, is it really the case that the systems of oppression that we exist under are limited to this time and place? And if so, is there a version of myself, a version of being human, a free version of ourselves that existed before this time period? And if so, is it possible to access that? Is it possible to access a free version of ourselves? And for me, you know, I think for most people who do any kind of organizing toward liberation, toward freedom, eventually you find yourself really in the question of what does it actually mean to be free? What does it really mean to be free?

James Shaheen: Yeah, just one question when you talk about was there a time when we were free before we were unfree, are you associating that with early life before we had fully absorbed the various conditions that have made us unfree? How does that work?

Autumn Brown: I'm thinking of it more in terms of, you know, I'm born in 1983, so into the '80s, into the beginning of late-stage capitalism, and in the wake of hundreds of years of a particular type of structural oppression. And there's a version of my people, you know, my

people include a lot of different lineages because I'm a mixed race Black woman, but there's a version of my people on all sides of those lineages that know a version of culture or know a version of life, a version of being, being in community, being with one another, that preexists the structures that inform this time that we're in now. So I mean more that there's a proximity to source, a proximity to culture that exists before these particular systems of domination. And I've started to wonder, is that memory inside of me, right? And then the question started to change when I was introduced to fugitivity and to fugitive practice and to a particular way of thinking about the struggle for liberation, and particularly through the story of Harriet Tubman, who, as far as we understand her, seemed to be able to do what she did, which, you know, so much of her activity as someone who made herself fugitive and freed herself and then returned over and over again back into spaces where enslavement was legal to free other people, so much of why she was able to do those things appear to be in relationship to something that she could access, right? She could access a belief in her own freedom despite living under conditions that said she wasn't free. And so hearing that story, you know, it was a story that I had heard a few times, but I think it landed at a particular time in my life where I was ready to be thinking differently about my own liberation work, my own relationship to freedom struggle. And it invited me to consider that it could be a practice, that accessing a state of freedom or accessing a lineage of freedom could be something that I could be practicing in my body, not just an idea.

James Shaheen: Right, so you talk about fugitivity, that's the word you used, which runs through the book, as a revolutionary practice that requires tapping into multiple ways of knowing, including forms of knowledge that are often dismissed. So can you talk about what you mean by fugitivity here as a practice? You touched on it just a moment ago.

Autumn Brown: Yeah, so maybe it would be useful to share a story about these ways of knowing. Is it okay to share kind of an intense story in this environment?

James Shaheen: Sure.

Autumn Brown: Okay, great. So I had an experience a few years ago where I was feeling, across a day, I was feeling an increased sense of anxiety in my body. And it was building over the course of many hours, just this feeling of anxiousness. I have three children, but I'm in a shared custody arrangement with my co-parent, and so my children weren't with me the day into evening that I was experiencing this anxiety. I was feeling this increasing, growing sense of anxiety intensity. And then around 10:00 at night, I got a distress call from one of my children that there was someone in their building, in their father's building, who was having a mental health crisis. And my three children were basically terrified, kind of locked in a room trying to figure out whether it was safe to stay there or not. And the child who called me was like, "Can you come get us?" And before she had even asked the question, I was already pulling my shoes on and putting my jacket on and on my way there. And by the time I arrived, there were already paramedics on site, and there were other supports arriving. But they called for me, and I answered that call.

It wasn't until several hours later after I had gotten my kids back to my house and they had settled and started to go off to sleep that I remembered this growing sense of anxiety that I had had across the afternoon into the evening, that by the point I was receiving that call from my children, I was feeling a level of anxiety in my body that I would consider to be kind of similar to a panic attack. And I realized I was feeling, there were a lot of things happening, right? I'm feeling both the thing that my children are experiencing, I'm feeling it from ten minutes away, but I'm also feeling it in advance of it happening. And this kind of way of knowing, our ability to intuitively experience that there is something happening beyond our field of immediate awareness, that is something that I think many people experience but are told is not a legitimate way of knowing. It's what Toni Morrison refers to as a discredited way of knowing. "Discredited ways of knowing that discredited people have always had" is how she put it. And these discredited ways of knowing, these other ways of knowing, I think that if we can credit them and



align ourselves with understanding that there's more ways of knowing than what we've been taught under structural oppression are legitimate, then we can actually hone those ways of knowing as a practice, learning to trust our intuitive experience, which isn't to say that every time I'm experiencing anxiety, I need to then go start scanning my life for who's in danger, but rather to say that if I'm experiencing anxiety in my body, it may not be my own. It may be an indicator that there is something more that is requiring my attention, that I don't have to be afraid of my anxiety, that my anxiety could actually be a teacher. It could be a guide.

Sharon Salzberg: I'm wondering if you would say that these ways of knowing feel connected to the practice of lostness. You say we have to accept being lost in order to be found, which is such an amazing statement, really. So there's an element, it seems, of releasing certainty and attachment to knowing what comes next. So can you talk about practicing lostness?

Autumn Brown: Yeah. Yes, I do believe that we have to be willing to be lost in order to be found. I also believe that lostness is maybe more proximate to our true state anyway. I think our attachment to certainty is very understandable. It's very understandable. And when I look at my own life, most of the things that I have felt a rigid attachment to certainty of are things that I have at some point had to release with humility.

So in my own life, and I want to say with all of these practices, these are lessons that I am continually trying to learn in my own life. I don't by any means want to present myself as an expert in lostness because I don't even believe it's something that you can have expertise in. But I have found for myself that rather than attempting to feel certain, I'm better served, and my relationships are better served, and my work is better served, by instead practicing orienting.

If I'm lost, if I understand myself as lost, then my first responsibility is to figure out how to orient myself in space and time. And there's so much more information there, I think. If I actually practice orienting myself to what is around me, there's a lot more information that I can avail

myself of than if I try to hold rigidly to what I believe to be true. And I think that there's a lot, in my mind, there's a lot of medicine in that lesson, especially in the time that we're living in now, right?

We're living in a time where, as more and more of the systems and structures that have held a particular way of life in place, as those systems and structures continue to go through their collapse, there is an understandable desire to rigidly hold on to whatever appears to still be working. And I think some of that comes from a fear that we will not have the agency, the creativity, the capacity to create what needs to come next. But I think a practice of orienting, like recognizing things are collapsing, there is lostness, we are in lostness, and we actually don't know what we're becoming, we don't know what our society is really becoming. That's probably true of any generation in time, I would imagine, right? You know, we have a lot of ideas about what the future is supposed to look like, but we don't really know what we're becoming.

But I think about the caterpillar that's going to become a butterfly. It enters a chrysalis and it literally liquefies. It dissolves. And then there's this one cell, the imaginal disc, that's carrying the blueprint of the thing that it's going to become. But the caterpillar has nothing to do with that. It's not thinking its way into becoming. It's carrying the blueprint of what it's going to become, and it has to liquefy in order for it to become what it's supposed to become.

And so to me, I think that there's something in that metaphor that I think is very useful, this idea that there is dissolving happening. There is collapsing happening. And we're not going to figure it out by thinking our way through it. But there is a blueprint here for what we are becoming, and it is just allowing ourselves to be in that lostness and orient and take responsibility for our immediate surroundings, our immediate conditions, and most importantly, I think for ourselves, that is going to guide us through that lostness.

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Sharon Salzberg: I want to say first that I love that you're using the word collapse because as I write workshop descriptions and things like that for myself, it's like meditation in times of adversity, in times of distress, in times of—

Autumn Brown: Right. It is bad.

Sharon Salzberg: Right, but I've never used the word collapse, and as soon as I heard you say it, I thought, "Oh, right," you know?

Autumn Brown: The collapse is happening around us. It's also, you know, there's a whole part in the book where I talk about the way that we internalize collapse. Because we live under systems that subjugate and dominate, there's a way that collapse is—we've internalized that as a safe way to be. Under subjugation, it can often feel safer to be in a state of collapse ourselves, and I think that the interplay between the collapse that's happening around us and the collapse that happens internally is also a part of why this time is so disorienting, which for me then that is what guides me back into practice always is, okay, that's what's happening, you know. Subjugation wants me to be collapsed. Subjugation wants me to not be powerful. These systems of dominance want me to not be powerful. Well, who benefits from me being collapsed? So then what can I do? What are the practices that help me orient and help me take responsibility, help me kind of stand back up in my dignity and feel my body inside of the chaos?

Sharon Salzberg: One of the practices you discuss is the martial art of aikido, which is a practice you came to by chance. So can you tell us the story of how you came to aikido and what initially drew you in?

Autumn Brown: Yes. Thank you for asking. I love talking about aikido, and I absolutely came to it by chance. I'm sure an ancestor was acting to make me do what I did. But I was attending a fundraiser for an organization that I used to lead as executive director, and now I'm just a donor.

And I was engaged in the silent auction, and I saw in the silent auction that there was an option to bid on a one-month membership to a dojo. And I bid on it, and I set my bid so that no one could outbid me, that it would just increase if someone tried to outbid me.

And I don't know why. I really, to this day, I don't know why I felt so strongly that it was supposed to be mine, this membership was supposed to be mine. But I knew that it was supposed to be mine. I won the item, and it took me a few months to go check it out. But I remember I walked into the dojo and I observed a class, and even without doing it in my own body, I immediately felt very hooked into the practice, and I remember the first class. Well, I kind of barely remember the first class because it was a lot of, you know, where do my hands go? Where do my feet go? How do I fall safely on the ground? You know, there was a bit of a whirlwind to it. But I remember this powerful feeling after I finished my first session, just doing things I had never done with my body before. Now I've been training for five years, and it's completely changed the way that I exist in my body.

James Shaheen: You know, since you like talking about aikido, I'll ask another question.

Autumn Brown: I don't want to bore you, but I'll talk about it for the whole rest of the interview.

James Shaheen: Okay, well, we'll give you that opportunity. So the art's philosophy is influenced by a process known as tempering a blade, and this is where the title of the book comes from, *Temper*. So can you talk about the process of tempering and what it means to temper oneself?

Autumn Brown: Yes. Yes. Yes. This is a core concept of the book, and just to not bury the lede for the listener, the connection I want the listener to make here is between the idea of tempering a blade and the idea of conditioning the body and conditioning the spirit.

So in the process of making a sword, the process of making a sword is an alchemical process that is about taking this type of metal that is actually quite brittle and making it into something that is durable and supple, and that process is what we call tempering, and it involves heating and cooling, extreme temperatures, extreme heat, extreme cool, and a lot of banging. We can't forget the banging. It's very important.

And I should say, too, aikido arises from a study of both sword forms and how we defend ourselves from swords, so there's a lot in our practice that is about the blade itself. And in my lineage, we often think about ourselves as trying to temper our bodies to become durable and supple, to be strong and rooted, have a strong core, but to be supple enough to encounter an attack and move with and blend with the partner who's attacking us.

So that requires a lot of conditioning because the way that I have to learn to move with my body as a martial artist is not how I've been conditioned or trained or programmed to respond to threat. The way that most of us are conditioned, programmed, trained to respond to any kind of threat, whether it's low-level stress or high-level violent threat, most of us have been programmed to cower, to brace, to contract, to run away. We have not been conditioned to encounter, to blend, to receive, to neutralize, to redirect. These are all things that you have to be conditioned to do because you're literally having to retrain your nervous system to have a different response to the same kind of stimulus.

So for me, that conditioning has been the trajectory I've been on over the course of the last five years, and I will be continuing. Conditioning is a continuous process. My teacher recently said to us that we're always conditioning with where we are. We're not conditioning toward something else. We're conditioning with where we are, and conditioning with where our body actually is at this point in time then makes it possible for us to continue pushing our limits.

So I don't even think of it as a metaphor at this point. But the metaphor of tempering is this notion of conditioning. And for me, this feels like a very able metaphor when I think about what does it look like to act toward freedom under conditions of systemic oppression and subjugation. When the conditions are fundamentally violent, it's actually really important for me to be able to condition my spirit, to be able to fortify myself in the face of violence, in the face of threat, in the face of that kind of stimulation, so that I can stay present, aware, self-responsible, agentic. So it all ties back to this idea of fugitivity. To me, that is what a fugitive is able to do is to remain present, aware, self-responsible, agentic, even inside of conditions of overwhelming violence and terror.

James Shaheen: So you say that aikido helped you rethink pain, particularly the balance between strength and vulnerability, and you give the example here of the time you first learned to roll forward and you talk about the space that opened up for you when you did that. So can you talk about that experience and how aikido balances strength, say, and surrender?

Autumn Brown: Mm, great question. So the first ten months of my training, I could not bring myself to roll forward over my head from standing, which is a really important thing to be able to do in our training because we get thrown. One of the things that happens a lot in our training is we get thrown by our partners, and sometimes we get thrown in a way that requires that we can back-fall onto the mat, like falling backwards onto our backs. But sometimes we are thrown in a way that means that we have to be able to roll forward from standing over the head, and I was terrified. And then at some point, my terror just became, I just think, resistance. You know, there came a point where, after the first few months, I was like, I was scared, but now it feels like I have a block, like I can't do it or I won't do it. And I struggled. I struggled. I mean, my teachers and practice partners can attest, like my first year of training, I was often frustrated to the point of tears because I would watch other people on the mat who just seemed to be doing this thing with such ease that I knew was fundamental to our training, and I couldn't bring myself to do it.

Then one day, and I would always, I had this process where I would start to roll, and then I would just go down on one knee and then do it from as low to the ground as possible. I would get scared, and I would go down. And one day, I was training with a partner, or no, I think I was just practicing *ukemi*, which is rolling and being thrown. And my teacher was kneeling on the mat next to me, and I was about to roll forward, and I was about to go down on one knee, and he just reached out and put a hand on my knee and said, "Don't go down on that knee." And then I just rolled, and then it just happened. And I stood up, and I looked at him, and he was like, "Okay." And then I just continued rolling. I just continued rolling.

I remember it feeling so liberating, so liberating to have experienced this thing that inside me, I had gotten to a point where I literally believed my body couldn't do this thing. And then one day, because of my conditioning, because even though I wasn't quote unquote "doing it," I was still conditioning myself to do it, and then one day when I was ready, it happened.

And this has been, I mean, this to me is one of the interesting things about conditioning and this notion of discipline, which for me is very embedded in the practice, that discipline and conditioning makes way for spontaneity, right? So we condition ourselves by being very disciplined in our training, and then that makes room for spontaneous action and spontaneous movement to happen, including spontaneous moments of growth.

So for me, the connection back to strength and surrender is that strength and surrender are really, I don't want to be too binary about it, but in a way they are two sides of the same coin, right? I have to develop enough strength to trust and surrender.

James Shaheen: Was rolling forward then a kind of surrender?

Autumn Brown: Oh, yes. And a relief. And a relief. And then it became this amazing thing, James, I'm so glad you asked, because what I notice now, now that I'm more years into my

training, if I have to take a break from training, like if I'm off the mat for a couple of weeks because of travel or something, I feel like I have to roll. I feel the need. Like as soon as I get back to the dojo, one of the first things I want to do is do a whole bunch of rolls over my head because now my body is really accustomed to that form of movement as a part of my regulation. This thing that I used to be so afraid of now helps me feel normal, helps me feel regulated, you know?

James Shaheen: You mentioned earlier the relationship between discipline and freedom, and you offer a helpful definition of discipline in this context: to actively seek the experience of training rather than the feeling of expertise. That really interested me. So tell us about this definition and how discipline can actually make way for freedom, because we don't often think of them together, but they go together.

Autumn Brown: Yes, yes. Well, I would love to know more about why that sentence stood out to you in particular, if you don't mind.

James Shaheen: Well, for some, discipline feels like a burden or more effort, say, than one wants to give. And we don't typically understand that it's precisely that discipline that allows us freedom. It's like form, you know? It's the form that it takes, and that form is necessary in order to break the form.

Autumn Brown: Yes. Yes, yes, exactly. Yes. This notion that discipline makes way for freedom, receiving that wisdom from my teacher, which is wisdom that he received from his teacher, that his teacher received from his teacher, I mean, wisdom that has been passed down over many, many generations of martial artists, receiving that wisdom was a turning point for me in my own relationship to training, because it helped me think differently about lineage, right? That, right,

okay, in order to practice something in a disciplined way, you have to be willing to submit to lineage.

And lineage is, in some ways, well, I would say, again, in relationship to living under systems of dominance, structures of supremacy, lineage is another one of those things that gets robbed from us. It gets taken from us in that process. And so for many people, there's a disorientation to like, "Well, what even is my lineage?" or, "What would be a lineage that I could find myself inside of?" So we already have that, right? We have that disorientation. Then we live in a society where because power is so often abused, we feel afraid of anyone having power over us.

But in order to receive instruction, you have to believe that the person has the power to instruct you. You have to actually be able to receive correction. You have to be able to be taught, and that being able to be taught is itself a discipline, right? It is itself a discipline. And counterintuitively, my experience, this is what actually produces the depth of learning, like submitting to instruction, receiving my lineage, committing to my teacher, committing to receiving his instruction despite the fact that he's not a perfect person, committing to my teacher and saying, "You are the person I'm receiving my instruction from," or if I'm training with a teacher in a different dojo, another senior teacher, committing to receiving that person's instruction for the time that I am in their care—that is what makes it possible for me to actually experience the depth of learning that is necessary to actually embody the practice. I have to be able to receive instruction in order to be able to embody the practice. If I can't receive the instruction, I'll only be able to intellectualize it and won't be able to actually embody it.

Not to mention this, there's this other piece of discipline, and I'm really glad that you brought this forward, because discipline is one of those words that people don't like, you know. It's so associated with punishment. But another way to think about discipline is repetition. And so it's disciplined for me, if I'm trying to master a technique, it's disciplined for me to do that technique

the way that I was taught to do it and try to do it the same way over and over and over again so that I'm integrating it correctly.

It's also a discipline for me to always take my shoes off when I enter the dojo. It's also a discipline for me to always bow to my training partner before we train together. You know, these are all things that we do repeatedly that are a part of the discipline that helps us actually embody the training, right? And one of the lessons that comes from that, which we were talking about earlier, is this idea that through a disciplined integration of technique, I can improvise. Like if I have deeply embodied a technique, then I'm able to use it in an improvisatory way when the conditions arise where I need to.

I tell this story in the book, but I'll tell it here as well, about an improvisatory moment where I had to use technique. So one of the things that we practice in a disciplined, repetitive way in my dojo is falling down. We were talking earlier about the forward roll, but we also practice falling backward, and we practice it all the time, all the time, falling backward in response to attack or in response to being thrown. A few years ago, I had this experience where I was walking through my backyard, and I almost walked headfirst into a spider, a huge spider. I don't want to exaggerate for the sake of the show, but it really was big. It was a big, big spider. It was, like, the size of the palm of my hand, and it was splayed on this massive web that it had made on a tree in my backyard, and I was passing under the tree, and it was literally eye level.

At the point that I saw it, that it came into view, it was almost on my nose, and instinctively, I arched my back and fell backwards into the grass without thinking. And then I sat up, and I was like, "Oh my God, aikido works." And then I laughed for days afterwards. I told my teacher, "I took ukemi from a spider." But it was this beautiful integration where, of course, there's no part of me that would imagine I would need to take ukemi in my backyard from a creature, but under those completely improvised conditions, I was able to react appropriately.

James Shaheen: Yeah. I mean, it was only discipline that allowed you to respond spontaneously to something.

Autumn Brown: Exactly.

James Shaheen: So what about the relationship between effort and effortlessness? I think that was a good example probably.

Autumn Brown: Mm. I love that you asked this because this is one, I feel myself struggling with this a lot, especially right now. In the last year, I've been recovering from an injury. And so that has meant having to take breaks from training and then recondition my body when I come back, and then take a break and then recondition my body when I come back.

And then it means that there are things that I feel like I should be able to do effortlessly that require effort. And so that interplay, that interplay between effort and effortlessness is something that I'm actively in right now, this struggle. And what I know to be true is that the efforting, efforting can be so righteous, right? Efforting can be so righteous. And it's neutral. It's neutral. There's nothing good or bad about efforting. Efforting is a state. It's part of who we are. And what I have found is that over time, as I integrate more and more technique into my body, there are things that become effortless in the sense that I don't have to think about them in order to do them. And it's very important that I remember that the things that become effortless only become effortless because I efforted for a very long time.

James Shaheen: With great discipline.

Autumn Brown: With great discipline. And I think the same is true in life, in social justice movement work, in relationship work. I think about this all the time in my relationship with my partner. We put a lot of effort into building a particular culture in our relationship so that loving

each other well becomes effortless. But it only becomes effortless because we're disciplined in the effort that we make to build a particular culture together.

James Shaheen: You know, I think here of Bruce Tift, someone we had on this podcast and whom you cite, and the way he writes about how we're already free, and yet it can take a lot of work to awaken to this truth.

Autumn Brown: Oh, yes. His work has been very, very important for me. I remember reading *Already Free*, and it was such an important book in my own spiritual journey.

James Shaheen: It's a great book.

Autumn Brown: It's an amazing book. It's an amazing book. Yeah.

James Shaheen: Yeah. So there was one moment that really stood out to me, which was when your teacher asked you a question, which his teacher had asked him. The question is, "Do you want to be good or do you want to find out who you actually are?"

Autumn Brown: Oof. Yeah. Yeah. Yes, which happened at a moment in my training where I was, I tell this story in the book. I was really dissolving in jealousy of another student who had come into training at the dojo after me but had surpassed me in his practice as I perceived it. He was testing for the next rank ahead of me, and I just felt so much jealousy and shame about my practice, and I just wanted to be the best.

I mean, it was actually such an important, it was a transparent ego moment that I couldn't really see it at the time, because I was thinking about it more as I want to be the best student. But it was really my ego at work, and my teacher was so kind in how he reminded me that this is not what it's actually about.

The discipline, or rather, I have to give credit to my teacher, because the way that he would put it is that this *is* what it's about. Like, this exact thing that's getting produced, this feeling that is being produced of grasping or desiring something that's about something outside of myself, the ego affirmation of a rank test. Having to be with that feeling is what the discipline is about. And then what do I do? Then what do I do? Oh, it's Autumn Brown being a human being who wants something outside of herself that isn't actually about her training. Okay, what's she gonna do? Because that part of me that wants to be the best, you know, that's working on excellence, she's there. She's always there. She's very alive. And also the discipline, for me, the discipline is really about not letting her be the one who's running the show. You know, the discipline is about finding the real purpose of the training that's underneath that.

James Shaheen: So you also talk about the concept of the gift of death, or learning to live a death-inspired life. So can you talk about this notion of living inspired by death? It feels very connected to the Buddhist practice of death contemplation.

Autumn Brown: Hmm. Yes, it's very, very connected to that. In 2014, I experienced a very tragic loss of my fourth child when I was pregnant, and the time-space of grief that opened up for me in the immediate aftermath of that loss was unlike anything I had experienced before or have experienced after. There was this grace-filled, light-filled time. And I remember this palpable sense that I had been physiologically changed. I had been transformed because I was no longer just a person who had carried a child. I had carried this being while it was dead. I carried this being through the complete iteration of its life. And that experience of carrying a dead child and then giving birth to a dead child, and then the way that I felt myself to be between worlds for about, I would say it was about two weeks, I could feel myself being between worlds. And I felt so alive, and I felt so grateful. Not grateful to have lost my child, but I felt so much gratitude, and so much connectedness, and so much aliveness.

Grief is a gift wrapped in shrouds, and it's one that we, I think, in an American context really struggle to be with because American society is very anti-grief perhaps. Anti-death for sure, but also I think a very anti-grief society, and I was supported through my own spiritual practice and through being in a community where I received the space and time that I needed as a grieving mother to just be in the experience and to make ritual with the land in the ways that I felt called to do, to make ritual with my family in the ways that I felt called to do. I was very supported to just be in grief. And I felt so much more in touch with aliveness and with life than I had before. So for me, when I say the gift of death, you know, I believe that death is what teaches us about aliveness, you know?

And I think that's mirrored in nature, right? I mean, we see in nature the cycle, that we literally cannot have life without death. So I think it's biologically true, and it's spiritually true, and it's been true in my own life that death provides so much life to us. And if we can be present with that and less afraid, I think it actually gives us more capacity to be in the world as it is.

Sharon Salzberg: So I want to go back to something you just mentioned in the context of grief work. You talk about the importance of reclaiming ritual and ceremony. So how can ritual help us bring a greater sense of intention and devotion to our lives and to our sense of what matters, even in incredibly difficult times?

Autumn Brown: Ritual comes very naturally to us. I think we are made to make ritual as humans. I think that it's very deeply embedded in us, and it has to kind of be trained out of us. I remember noticing this with my children when they were young, their tendency was to always be creating little altars. They would just create little altars inside and outside, and little places for rituals to happen, something that many children do. And ritual does so much for us. It helps us to make meaning. It grounds us in our bodies. It grounds us in our lives. And when we share a ritual with one another, it helps us to make meaning together, to ground and coregulate together, yes?

Now, ritual and ceremony is one of those places where systems of dominance, systems of supremacy, it's one of the first places that those systems come for historically. That is, if you want to subjugate people, one of the fastest pathways to that is by making their rituals and ceremonies and spiritual practices illegal, or by making them look wrong or seem wrong in some way.

And so many of us, you know, everyone on Earth comes from, at some point, there's somewhere in your lineage where your people made rituals and had ceremonies, and they were not the rituals and ceremonies that are now present-day sanctioned by the state, right? They were the rituals and ceremonies of community, of family.

We all come from that, and we all have a right to it, a birthright to it. It's like what our soul expects. And so we could spend a lot of time thinking about all of the ways that that's been robbed of us, or we could spend a lot of time thinking about how we rebuild it. And there's so many different ways of being in spiritual practice and being in faith practice, and I just strongly support people to find their way into ritual and ceremony that feels really aligned with the way that they want to be practicing. And I believe that you can also bring ritual and ceremony directly into your own individual life, into your own home, that you get to reclaim it inside of your own home. It's not something that you necessarily have to go to. It should not have to live elsewhere outside of your home, right? I think we have a birthright to create ceremonies for ourselves.

Sharon Salzberg: So you mentioned the practice of building home altars, and you actually have a section of the book on how to build an altar. So can you talk a bit about any guidance you might have on how to build altars to mark specific transitions or threshold moments?

Autumn Brown: Yeah, well, altars should be beautiful. I remember walking into someone's home once and they told me that they had an altar and it was, like, not pretty. It was a mess. And I thought, "Hmm, that's kind of representing the chaos that's happening inside of you, my friend."

So I always think, oh, for me, part of our work of building altars that are in service of, like, making our rituals, making our ceremonies, is about honoring. We humans, we like to make things beautiful. We make art. We like to put things in order. We like to make things beautiful. And so when people ask me, "How do you make an altar?" I always ask in return, "What do you think is beautiful? How do you make something beautiful?" For some people, that's about specific colors. For some people, that's about, you know, having candles or stones or feathers or things found in nature. For some people, it's actually about words. I know a lot of people who will build their altars so that it's kind of built around specific texts or passages that are meaningful.

But I think it really begins with how do you pick a space inside of your home that you know that you can put a set of objects and honor them in a particular way that's stable, that's not going to be touched by other people or easily interacted with by others? And then how do you make that beautiful and pleasing to your eye, not necessarily pleasing to other people? It has to be about it being pleasing to your eye. What colors do you want to look at? What are the objects or texts or items from nature that would make you feel grounded to see?

Sharon Salzberg: And in a similar vein, you talk about dreams and imaginal practice, and you describe dreaming as a process of recovering our life ways and tapping into alternative ways of knowing. So can you talk a bit about the generative power of dreaming and imagination?

Autumn Brown: Well, I'm glad you asked about this because in some ways, the arc of this book is very much guided by a dream that I had in my early 20s when my grandmother visited me for the first time. My grandmother died when I was 2 years old, so I don't have any living memory of her. But when I was in my early 20s, she started visiting me in dreams, and I remember the first dream that I had with her, I remember that I recognized her immediately even though her

back was turned to me in the dream, and I woke up, and it was a powerful experience of realizing, oh, wow, that was my grandmother that showed up for me in this dream.

And I'm someone, you know, I'm not a lucid dreamer. I'm not actively trying to cultivate the capacity to be active in my dreams. That's not the way I relate to dreams. I'm rather someone who listens and pays attention. And I think that our dream life has a lot to offer us, whether it's as a way station, a place for people to come visit us that we otherwise would not be able to be in conversation with, or whether it is just through the ways that our mind is using the space of the dream to process and churn over the various things that need meaning-making done with them

And also, I mean, I think it also bears saying that many, many, many Indigenous communities and Indigenous traditions, spiritual traditions, and ways of knowing rely heavily on dreaming as a way of accessing knowledge, as a way of being in the portal of the more-than-what-is, the more than what we can see and understand with our waking mind.

So I think I wanted to say that just to say that it's not just like, this is not my idea. This is not my idea. This is, I think, well-trodden territory, you know what I mean? But I wanted to bring it in in this book, because I wanted to honor that for me, like for so many people who have lost ancestors and lost children, our dreams are often the only place where we get to be in communion with our loved ones, and so cultivating that space, I think, is a way that we can be, again, less afraid and more in reception of the gift.

Sharon Salzberg: Autumn, would you be willing to read one passage from the book before we close? It starts on page 202.

Autumn Brown: Absolutely, let me get myself to it. Oh, yes. The very last little bit of the book. Okay. "Fugitivity requires that we give up our attachment to our current reality, the one where we source our sense of power from our victimhood. Fugitivity requires that we surrender to

spiritual practice as the intact experience of reality. Fugitivity requires that we move away from analysis and intellect, away from an orientation to trauma as a site of destruction, and move toward the wound as a portal toward our own mysterious powers. Fugitivity requires us to recognize that we do not actually know what we're capable of, but if we can get lost, we just might find out."

James Shaheen: Very nice. Anything before we close?

Sharon Salzberg: Lovely. Yeah.

Autumn Brown: Thank you. No, you guys ask such wonderful questions, and thank you for letting me go on and on about aikido.

James Shaheen: I wanted to hear more about aikido.

Sharon Salzberg: It was inspiring, really.

James Shaheen: It's a little late for me to start aikido, but, you know—

Autumn Brown: It's never too late. It's never too late.

Sharon Salzberg: If it's late for you, it must be really late for me.

Autumn Brown: Well, thank you both so much for being so warm and kind and easy to talk to.

James Shaheen: Oh, great. Well, same, same here. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of Autumn's book, *Temper*, which is available now. We like to close these episodes with a short

guided practice, so I'll hand it over to you, Autumn. And thank you for volunteering, Sharon's always appreciative when she doesn't have to do it.

Sharon Salzberg: Oh, I love it. It's so good.

Autumn Brown: Well, and hopefully this one will, this is also from the book, and hopefully this will also land well with the listeners.

James Shaheen: It's not rolling forward, is it?

Autumn Brown: No. You don't have to move your body to do this. You just have to be willing to breathe. So this is the being with intensity breathwork practice. This short internal practice incorporates the healing power of breathing and visualization. You can do it whenever or wherever you start to feel activation or emotional intensity in your body. Begin by bringing your attention to your breath. Take three deep breaths with me. Imagine a small flame at the center of your torso. If it helps, you can imagine the flame between your lungs, beneath your sternum, and above your diaphragm. Now we're going to take three more breaths together. With each breath, imagine that the oxygen you breathe in feeds the flame and helps it grow. Imagine that the heat from this flame gently warms your heart, lungs, ribcage, and other nearby organs. Feel the heat distribute the intense energy of the flame across the front and back of your body. Let the flame grow. Now take three more breaths with me, each one getting slower and longer as the flame dies down back to its original size. Thank your body for this breathing. Thank you.

James Shaheen: Thank you, Autumn. It was a great pleasure to have you.

Autumn Brown: It was a pleasure to be with you. Thanks for making room for practice.

Life As It Is
"Practicing Freedom in Times of Collapse"
Episode #60 with Autumn Brown
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