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MBS ([00:01](#)):

Does the work you do in the world harden your heart or open it? Do you feel your heart tightening and contracting, or growing larger and more generous, and kinder? I have days when I feel I'm just getting meaner, and grumpier, and snarlier, and smaller. And I'm always grateful when something nudges me back the other way when I laugh rather than I frown, and I think this is most important, when my connection to others makes me more than myself rather than less. Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS, the podcast, where brilliant people read the best two pages from a favorite book, a book that has moved them, a book that has shaped them. Loretta Ross is a speaker and an author, and a woman whose human rights activism has spanned decades, not two, not three, but five decades. As you'll hear, her heart is open, her laughter is wonderful, her generosity is deep, and honestly I hope one day that I get to carry the same elder energy that she holds.



Loretta ([01:12](#)):

I'm what I would call an OG now, I'm an old girl in the movement, but I enjoy my elder status. I started out in the 1970s working at the first rape crisis center in the world, which was the DC Rape Crisis Center.

MBS ([01:28](#)):

Loretta also worked with other social justice causes like housing gentrification and anti-apartheid work. But as so often happens, it was stumbling over the truth that revealed itself, perhaps herself, to Loretta.

Loretta ([01:44](#)):

I became a professional feminist without intending to do so, because I majored in chemistry and physics. I had no idea that my life would lead me into feminist activism, where I found my home and my voice.

MBS ([01:59](#)):

Loretta spent over 50 years tending this flame. Now currently she's a professor at Smith College in North Hampton in Massachusetts, and she runs what is most likely a contender for the most intriguing and provocative course title of the year.

Loretta ([02:14](#)):

The course I teach is called White Supremacy in the Age of Trump. So I'm trying to explain to the students and the world how we could elect someone like Donald Trump.

MBS ([02:26](#)):

Now that is a great question, and we're going to come back to it a little bit, because whatever you're thinking about that course it's probably different because this is a course with a twist. And Loretta has led a life wholly dedicated to others, a life of service, and I had to wonder where that commitment and



honestly that resilience stemmed from. Was it something that drove her, or was it a spark someone else ignited? And the answer is, of course, both.

Loretta ([02:55](#)):

My parents were certainly my greatest influence. I became pregnant at age 14 through incest. A cousin decided it was a good idea to get me drunk so that he could have sex with me even though he was married and 27 when I was 14. And so in the 1960s it was very common to expel girls from school who became pregnant, and I chose to keep my son because abortion was not an option back then, and because of that, my school would not readmit me into the 11th grade. And so my parents had to sue my school system for my right to continue my education.

([03:39](#)):

So I guess I owe that seed of activism to my parents, even though they were very conservative, but the only thing they did believe in was making sure that their eight children got educations, and so they showed me that I could take on a big institution I was afraid of and win, because the school was forced to readmit me because it was so clearly sex discrimination, because they weren't expelling the boys who made the girls pregnant, just the girls, and so they taught me how to fight for my rights.

MBS ([04:15](#)):

That's quite the story. I loved that, look, I'm one of the OGs of activism, and I certainly see that. How do you see activism now after 50 years? Has it changed in terms of what it takes to be an activist?

Loretta ([04:32](#)):

I am so overwhelmed, and I really enjoy how what they call the non-profit industrial complex has grown. When I first started out, we were lucky to be sleeping in a church basement floor in a sleeping bag. When we had to do trips



to go to other cities or to other countries, very few people got paid, and what we got paid was not a living wage. And so to see these nonprofit institutions grow up, some are conservative, some are liberal, some are radical, but they're able to provide jobs to people, and healthcare benefits, and hotel rooms when they go. I actually remember fighting about 10 years ago with my staff at one of my women's organizations because they were complaining about having to share a double hotel room with someone else, and I couldn't help but compare sleeping in the basement of a church with a whole bunch of strangers in a sleeping bag.

MBS ([05:33](#)):

I had to share a sleeping bag with somebody else, so it's quite the different thing.

Loretta ([05:35](#)):

But I really do enjoy the energy that young people are bringing, their creativity, the fact that they don't know how to take no for an answer, that they are really working to change the conditions they can't stand. They're not willing to put up with the status quo. I like the fact that they're more intersectional, that they read a lot. They ingest a lot of information. Probably reading is not the right word, but they ingest a lot of information through a lot of medium that I would not have thought about. How much they're learning from TikTok, that kind of thing.

MBS ([06:12](#)):

I know.

Loretta ([06:14](#)):

And so they can be a little wearying at time because they have a tendency to believe that because an idea is new to them, it's new to the world.



MBS ([06:23](#)):

Young people today, I think, because I feel that way, I'm like, "I think I was talking about that 30 years ago or 40 years ago," so I hear you on that.

Loretta ([06:31](#)):

But I'm not going to blame them for being young. I want to really benefit from the fact that just working with them keeps me fresh, keeps me informed, and they sure enough can show me how to use this technology in a way that helps me. So

MBS ([06:49](#)):

With the things that have changed about activism, what do you feel has remained true, has remained at the heart of what strong, important activism needs?

Loretta ([07:02](#)):

At the heart of all activism is hope, the belief that things can change and that you can make a difference in bringing about that change. I don't find a lot of pessimists who end up as activists. They have a very fixed mindset, they don't think things will change, and they don't think that they can make a difference. And so no matter the age, the generation, the race, the identity, it doesn't matter, they all have hope, they all believe that things can change. Now I do get a little exhausted by the people who are too cynical for their own good. They think they know everything, they don't think that our work makes a difference, and they're hypercritical, and always wanting to call out other people for not thinking or doing the wrong thing in their opinion, and stuff like that. They're weary, they are really exhausting, but that's not the majority of the people I work with. We believe in hope. We do believe in what Dr. King calls a moral arc of the universe.



MBS ([08:09](#)):

How do you nurture your own hope? Because you've been an activist for 50 years, and you talk about the challenges you had as a 14 year old girl, and you're in a moment where abortion is becoming less rather than more available through the United States, and it feels like things are going backwards in terms of some of the reforms that you might have been fighting for, for half a century. Where do you find the ability to keep hope alive?

Loretta ([08:41](#)):

I find the ability in my analysis, because the people who are opposed to human rights think they're fighting us, the human rights movement, but they couldn't be more wrong. They're fighting forces way bigger than us because they're fighting truth, they're fighting evidence, and history, and most of all, they're fighting time, and those forces are going to overwhelm them no matter what we do. And so I'm concerned that we don't self destruct on the pathway to victory, because with time, truth, evidence, and history on our side, we hold a winning poker hand.

MBS ([09:33](#)):

Loretta, that is a great answer. I love that answer. Thank you. Loretta, tell me about the book you've chosen to read for us.

Loretta ([09:36](#)):

I've chosen to read *The War for Kindness* by Jamil Zaki. And I'll show it to you. It's great.

MBS ([09:43](#)):

It's beautiful. And how did you come across this book? When did it come into your life?



Loretta ([09:47](#)):

Well, I'm writing a book called *Calling In the Calling Out Culture*, and it's about addressing how too many human rights and social justice activists call each other out, criticizing each other's social justice practices, thinking that's the right way to do the work. And so in my research, I ran across *The War for Kindness*, and what Jamil is talking about is how to teach empathy. And until I read his book, I was persuaded that either you were born empathetic or you weren't, and I can't do a heart transplant on people who don't have them already.

MBS ([10:26](#)):

You're good, but you're not that good.

Loretta ([10:29](#)):

Right. And when he demonstrated in his book that empathy can be learned, can be taught, can be generated, can be iterative, I saw a light go off because that means there are fewer people I have to give up on, because the way that they were raised didn't teach them about being empathetic, and I said, "Oh my goodness, if this is a learned set of behaviors and values, then there's more hope for humanity than I thought before."

MBS ([11:03](#)):

What a beautifully articulate thing to say, there are fewer people I have to give up on. That just there so much, Loretta, about, as I see it, the capacity you have to reach out and connect and be generous to people. It's fantastic. What two pages have you chosen to read for us?

Loretta ([11:23](#)):

I chose pages 14 through 16, and I'll get to them in a minute, because I marked it particularly for your show.



MBS ([11:30](#)):

Well, thank you.

Loretta ([11:36](#)):

A lot of people think empathy is beyond our control. If it's a trait, then there's nothing we can do to become more empathetic over time, and if it's a reflex, there's nothing we can do to change how much we feel for another in a moment. And I'm not going to read every word, but he says, "In any given moment, we can turn empathy up or down like the volume knob on a stereo, learning to listen to a difficult colleague, or staying strong for a suffering relative. Over time, we can fine tune our emotional capacities, build a compassion for distant strangers, outsiders, and even other species. We can free our empathy from its evolutionary bonds."

MBS ([12:27](#)):

Beautiful.

Loretta ([12:30](#)):

I think the scientist in me just went, "Yeah, it can be done," because I'm not the touchy-feely, woo-woo girl. I like facts and data, and stuff like that. And to hear someone talk about how you craft empathy within people, to teach them out of those primal learned behaviors is just like a light bulb going up in my heart.

MBS ([12:58](#)):

What's your experience of taking his words from the page and trying to teach people in person that shift, that softening of the heart, that building of bridges? What have you learned about what's required in the real world to make that happen?



Loretta ([13:15](#)):

Well, I find that most of us are socialized into what I call kith and kin relationships, that we are taught to only care about people who are either kin to us, or who we can relate to, the kith part.

MBS ([13:32](#)):

Yeah, you're in my tribe or you're not in my tribe.

Loretta ([13:34](#)):

Right. But that's a very small circle of compassion, because that depends on who you know and who knows you. And I want people to be able to care about bombs dropping in another country even if they never meet a member of that country, because it reflects on who they are as a human being that you're able to evidence compassion for people who don't know you and who you don't know. But if your country is dropping bombs in your name, then you need to care about the people of Syria or wherever. And so I want us to go beyond the kith and kin system of empathy and compassion, and learn that it's a tribute to our own integrity and dignity if we learn to care about people outside of a transactional relationship.

MBS ([14:32](#)):

I've got two questions. I'm not sure which one to ask first. One of them is around is there any danger of compassion fatigue? Honestly, I find it hard enough to care about some of the people who I'm closest to, yet alone some of the people in the Dunbar, 150 people who are my tribe, yet alone people in the Ukraine, or in Syria, or wherever it is. So just your reflection on that. But maybe the starting question is how do you reach those people who are beyond your circle, beyond your kith and kin, because it's so easy just to settle in with whom you already know?



Loretta ([15:17](#)):

Well, I don't like most people, so I already start off being [inaudible 00:15:22]

MBS ([15:22](#)):

That's true. That's true with me as well. I totally hear you on that.

Loretta ([15:26](#)):

Most people I know I don't like, and that includes my relatives as well, and so I don't have any trouble setting boundaries because they naturally exist for me. I do feel for people who are true empaths, because they have extreme trouble setting boundaries because they feel what other people feel very easily, even though the feeling of it is not easy. For me, it's not about worrying about my compassion fatigue, I worry about not noticing people who do need my compassion, because I should not be walking through the world so oblivious to the needs around me. That doesn't speak well of my ability to see problems, to help address problems, or to care about what's going on in the world outside of my body and my consciousness and stuff. One of my favorite science fiction writers is Lois McMaster Bujold, and she wrote a line that I'm going to paraphrase because I never get it right, she says, "Your reputation is what others think they know about you, but your integrity is what you know about yourself."

MBS ([16:50](#)):

Ooh, that's lovely.

Loretta ([16:52](#)):

Guard your integrity, damn the reputation, because you'll never ever control how people see you because they see you through the lens of their experiences, not yours. And so since I have to sleep with myself every night, I want to make sure that the Loretta I sleep with every night is proud of what she's done in that day. I want to always be working at being in peace with my integrity so that the interior Loretta matches the exterior Loretta. I don't have



that cognitive dissonance between performing one type of behaviors and secretly having another thing going on inside.

MBS ([17:39](#)):

How have you managed to get clear and strong on what integrity looks like for you? Because you-

Loretta ([17:47](#)):

By not being very honest. Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to jump in.

MBS ([17:55](#)):

No, it's a great answer. But I look at myself and I project onto others, going, "You know what? There are some things I'm clear on, but there's a bunch of things I'm like, "Do I stand for this or do I not stand for this? Is this important for me or is it not important for me?" And to sleep soundly with Michael every night, with that sense of I have acted with integrity about what matters to me and what I think matters to the world, you have to know what matters to you and what matters to the world. And I'm wondering how you've learnt and have pared down to what's essential for you.

Loretta ([18:33](#)):

I think because I make big mistakes.

MBS ([18:36](#)):

That's a great answer.

Loretta ([18:37](#)):

And the larger my platform, the more visible and larger my mistakes. And at some point, every mistake you do ends up in a national newspaper with people talking about it. And so I've learned over time to not do things that I can't look in the eye the next day. It wasn't a natural process. Like any other child, I grew up, I



didn't want to confess that I was the one that broke the glass, I wanted to blame it on my brother, or whatever. And I made many mistakes along this path, but I learned that I liked myself more when I really pay attention to being in integrity with myself, and I dislike myself less. And that's very important. Even if I got away with lying, I didn't like how I felt about getting away with lying. It didn't make me feel better about myself. And so it's a process. I'm not some higher evolved species. I'm the person that has to bite her tongue 100 times a day not to tell somebody what I'm actually thinking of them. So in a way, I'm passively lying.

[\(19:59\)](#):

But at the same time, I try not to consciously cause anybody any harm, and I don't want to become what I call a trauma tramp, with all the things that's happened to me then affecting how I deal with other people who got their own traumas and their own issues that they're dealing with, and I don't like self justifying harm that people cause to other people simply because they've been through some stuff. Those are the things that don't make Loretta feel good about herself.

MBS [\(20:36\)](#):

I hear you.

Loretta [\(20:36\)](#):

And so I've learned painfully that I'm more than what's happened to me. I don't want my rapist fingerprints to be forever etched into my life story. I want to be bigger than what that guy did to me long time ago. And it's an ongoing process. I can't say it's easy or it's natural, but I find that I have found much more joy in being me through working on this. Even if I make mistakes, because I make mistakes all the time, and then I found that I can own my mistakes, I can apologize for them, and I can make a plan for doing better.



MBS ([21:20](#)):

I love it.

Loretta ([21:20](#)):

So I'm not afraid of my mistakes anymore either.

MBS ([21:24](#)):

What a liberating thing that is to not be afraid of your mistakes. Loretta, you read from a book about empathy, I'm wondering what the connection is that you see between empathy and activism, because so often activism comes across as almost the opposite of empathy, it's us versus them, we are being activists against those other people who we've turned into the enemy in some way or other. So I'm wondering what you see, how activism and empathy dance together?

Loretta ([21:55](#)):

For me, I spend a lot of time talking to people about making the distinction between anger and outrage. Anger is that involuntary emotion that you can visit on other people, but mostly it eats you up inside, because your heart can't be at peace when it's filled with anger. I think it's Buddha that said, "Anger is the poison that you want someone else to eat, but it's poisoning you first."

MBS ([22:26](#)):

Yeah, that's right.

Loretta ([22:29](#)):

Something like that. I distinguish between anger and outrage. Outrage is what I want to feel and want to manifest against injustices, but I try to reserve my anger for very specific places, because I want to be precise with my anger. I don't want to be like a scanner gun mowing everybody down. And so I tend to reserve my anger for hypocrites, for people who intentionally harm other



people, for people working in bad faith, who know that they're lying and they're manipulating people through their lives, for people who don't show any empathy or compassion for the people who have claimed to those things from them, people who abuse their power over others, those are the ones that I tend to reserve my anger for.

[NEW_PARAGRAPH] And even as I'm angry at them, I don't want to lose sight of their humanity because they're human beings like I am. Because if I lose sight of their humanity, then I will objectify them and think that they're deserving of whatever happens to them, and then my feeling that I feel worse about myself. Maybe I'm so egotistical that I'm fiercely protective of my opinion of myself, but I am.

MBS ([23:48](#)):

So I'm making all of this up of course, but I imagine that as you teach a course about America and white supremacy in the age of Trump, there's a way that some of that anger must be directed at Trump himself. And I also imagine that-

Loretta ([24:08](#)):

I don't know if I'm angry at Trump. I feel sorry for Trump as a human being. He's such a failed human being who apparently has no relationships in his life he can trust. One of the characteristics of everybody who knows him is that he actually does not have friends, no one who would not throw him under the bus as quickly as he'd throw somebody else under the bus. He seems like a miserable human being, and I would not wish that on anybody.

([24:44](#)):

So I probably wouldn't want to take him out to dinner or give him the time of day or anything, but my overwhelming emotion towards him is pity. Now I'm outraged about what he does in his narcissism, and I teach people how to analyze it, how to withstand it, and how to protect their own loved ones from that. And I got into this work because in the 1990s I worked with Reverend C. T.



Vivian, who was a leader in the civil rights movement, and he used to say all the time that if you ask people to give up hate, then you have to be there for them when they do. And because I believed him, I started working with ex-members of the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazi movement and the militia movement, and once I got to know them, I couldn't hate them anymore. And I kept saying, "Well, if a black girl can't hate the Klan, who's left?" And so that was my journey towards this.

MBS ([25:50](#)):

So I'm just curious to know the experience in your classroom, because I imagine that one of the things you're doing for some of the people, at least in your classroom, is asking them to give up hate, because the people who come to your classroom must feel a certain way about the Trump presidency ship, that's the word, and Trump himself. How do you teach people to be more precise in the anger that they have, to use outrage in a different way to anger, and as you say, the power of giving up hate as a way of being a different type of activist?

Loretta ([26:32](#)):

Well, I try not to persuade them to give up hate. I ask them very pointed questions like, "How well is it working for you? Is it making you feel better about yourself? Does it bring you joy? Does it bring you peace?" So instead of saying what they should do, I ask them those kind of questions so that they realize they have a range of options they can choose. The same way you can't bring somebody out of the hate movement. I hear a lot of people saying, "Well, I convinced so and so to quit the Klan." And I'm like, "That's not how it works. They have their own epiphanies. All you could do is accompany them on the journey out of that noxious underworld." And that in another way is what I offer to students.



([27:23](#)):

I'm not going to tell you whether you're a racist or not, or whether you're a sexist or not, or any of those other terms that may be attached to. I'm going to ask you how well is what you're believing working for you? If you don't know how to forgive yourself for making mistakes and not knowing the right word, or getting a gender pronoun wrong, or any of those kinds of things, then you're going to find it very hard to forgive others. And so I share with them my journey, and I show them that they've got a whole buffet of options they can choose from, rather than the one that continues to make them miserable.

MBS ([28:02](#)):

I love that. It connects very deeply with what I would say is at the heart of the work I do, which is to help people see the choices they have and to make the better choice. And it just feels that if you can have more people seeing the choices and making the bolder choice, the more compassionate choice that tips the world into a slightly better place.

Loretta ([28:23](#)):

But I don't actually do it from the perspective of what they do for others, I really am very focused on why you do it for yourself, because you want people to default to their better selves. You want them to do that as automatically as they pay attention to whether they're hungry, as opposed to be a list of things that you could not think you should not say, or you should not do. Mystical don't work for anybody. Are you familiar with the concept of desire lines?

MBS ([28:57](#)):

I'm not. No.

Loretta ([28:59](#)):

It's an architectural term that I was recently taught. When people plan a public park, they pave these winding paths through that park that they hope that the



pedestrians use. Well, guess what? Most people create their own shortcuts to get to where they want to go. Those shortcuts are called desire lines.

MBS ([29:19](#)):

Oh, that's good.

Loretta ([29:20](#)):

It's the default behaviors that we use when some authority figure isn't monitoring us or some social moray making us do something. And so I want compassion, empathy to become our desire lines. Even when nobody is watching, I want you to wash your hands when you come out the bathroom. Even if nobody notices, I want you to be able to assist the beggar on the street. I want you that to be your default, your desire line. So I'm learning to use the inner goodness that most people feel about themselves in the service of the human rights movement. What makes you feel good about being you is how you serve other people.

MBS ([30:08](#)):

I love that. The concept of desire lines I haven't heard before, but it's wonderful. Loretta, this has been such a rich conversation. You're such a joy to talk to, so thank you.

Loretta ([30:18](#)):

Thank you.

MBS ([30:20](#)):

And as a final question, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said between you and me today?



Loretta ([30:27](#)):

To not give up on the world, because in the civil rights movement they used to say, "When the world is a mess, just start cleaning where you are." And another thing they said in the civil rights movement is stop assuming that you're the entire chain of freedom, because that chain of freedom stretches back towards the ancestors and forward to your descendants, so you need to be the strongest link in the chain of freedom. Just make sure the chain doesn't break with you and you will have done your job.

MBS ([31:09](#)):

Oh, what a conversation. I love this. Now, I'm thinking hard about my own desire lines, you remember Loretta using that term, introducing it to me actually. I used to be pretty good at finding my own shortcuts, getting off the beaten path and going, "I'm just going to take that route, my own route, my own desire line," ignoring the predictable path laid out in front of me. Honestly, I feel like I've lost some of that, that confident disregard for the way things should be done. I think it might be time for me to step off the path a little bit. How about you?

([31:47](#)):

If you enjoyed my conversation with Loretta, let me point you to two other parts of the 2 Pages series, Stephen Jenkinson, "How to Hold Gifts of Responsibility and Grief." He was another elder, he's got that same elder energy, and he's riffing off a W.B. Yeats poem. Wonderful. And Julie Lythcott-Haims, How to Resist Conformity, which connects beautifully to the desire lines that we were just talking about.

([32:17](#)):

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