

Interviewer: Tru Leverette Hall

Interviewee: Thelma Straight

Edited by: Rilencia Moore

T.L.H. 00:00

Well, good morning, Thelma,

T.S. 00:02

Good morning.

T.L.H. 00:04

Here we go

T.S. 00:05

Dr. Leverette.

T.L.H. 00:06

Oh, please, I'm Tru and I added a new name to my last name: Leverette Hall.

T.S. 00:14

Hall Leverette Hall

T.L.H. 00:16

And so you are

T.S. 00:20

Thelma Straight

T.L.H. 00:20

thank you.

T.S. 00:21

Had to think that Who am I right now?

T.L.H. 00:26

Well, I appreciate you taking the time with me this morning. I was saying that after our last chat, I think what we ended up talking about was really, really important in terms of the way you were raised, the way you grew up, the way you feel about nature. You know your your spiritual connection to it. So I would like to talk broadly about those themes with you. And I think I'd like to start by you, maybe sharing a little bit about your background, where you grew up, how you would characterize your childhood, those kind of things.

T.S. 01:00

Sure. I grew up along the Mississippi Gulf Coast in Biloxi. My parents were both Catholic. My mom Creole from Louisiana. She often passed when we needed her to. Together they had 10 of us, five girls and five boys. Two of them were twins. We're all less than two years apart, so because we didn't have much, my parents relied a lot on the land and the water. And as an adult, I tell people my dad literally fished for our supper and how much pressure that had to be to come back with some fish. So what he would do, you know, he had to have enough money to buy the bait, everything else he, you know, he'd catch it, and then my mom would, you know, she'd clean it, then we'd eat it. What a luxury, but we didn't know it then. And then, in the backyard, we had a chicken coop for eggs and chickens, and we had, he grew watermelons. He grew sugar cane, greens, anything we could eat. So that was, you know, pretty much my upbringing. The town I grew up in was very small. I grew up in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, which is a little, it's five miles east of Biloxi. There's a bridge that connects the two. I guess you could equate it to Tampa-St Pete, the bridge. But very few people, very few black people lived in Ocean Springs, and black people were not allowed on one of the two beaches there. We weren't allowed on East Beach. We were allowed on front beach. But my parents generation were the ones who made it possible for us to go to Biloxi Beach. I mean, they were the ones fighting the dogs, the dogs

trying to get their, you know, my cousins and my mom's siblings. So that's how I grew up. I grew up in a segregated town, but you know, when it came down to it, it wasn't the people in Ocean Springs. It was the government in Ocean Springs, because the people, we bartered a lot. If my dad could do some electric work for somebody, and they grew, I don't know, tomatoes, and we needed some tomatoes, then that's how there's rarely any money, because nobody had nothing. That's pretty much my upbringing. It was happy. We didn't have any toys. We didn't have electronics. We, you know, we built huts out of leaves and twigs and all kinds of creative stuff.

T.L.H. 03:28

Big ones that you could actually be in?

T.S. 03:29

Big ones we could be in all 10 of us...all 10 of us could be in the hut.

T.L.H. 03:33

Wow

T.S. 03:33

yeah. And it was a nice, cool shade. We made mud pies.

T.L.H. 03:39

Yeah

T.S. 03:40

yeah. It was wonderful.

T.L.H. 03:41

That sounds lovely. So did your family own the land that you were on?

T.S. 03:46

Not at that time, but you know, of course, now, now they do. I lived on a dead-end street where all the black people lived. There weren't very many houses, not all the black people. I lived on the side of the tracks where people who had professions both kind of black people. So my dad was an electrician. There was a school teacher, a principal, and a couple other people. On the other side of the tracks is where all the other black people lived.

T.L.H. 04:09

Did your mother have a job outside the home?

T.S. 04:14

My mom was a teacher's aide. She was a food prep. And then after my brother died, my brother was killed by a white man. He was 17. He was shot in the head, and it was racial. And luckily, there was a third person there who saw it. But it didn't matter, because it sort of split the town in two without words being spoken. This guy went to our church. His family was very wealthy. He said it was an accident, and that's how it went down. So for the record, nothing ever happened to him. You know, we had to watch him go to church every Sunday. My parents were pacifists, so my older brothers, who wanted to do something. They said, No, turn the other cheek.

T.L.H. 05:02

Yeah.

T.S. 05:03

So once that happened, both my parents turned to alcohol. There was no mental health or nothing. So you know from the time I was nine, which was around Christmas time when he died. He died the week before Christmas. His wake was on his birthday, December 23 and he was buried on Christmas Eve. So that kind of set the tone for several years in my family. You know, oppression is a powerful thing. Where would you like me to go from there?

T.L.H. 05:41

That sounds hard.

T.S. 05:43

It's not hard anymore.

T.L.H. 05:44

Yeah, it sounds hard at the time, you were nine years old.

T.S. 05:47

Yeah, and that's kind of where you get stuck sometimes in your trauma. You know, it's things I work through

T.L.H. 05:51

Yeah yeah

T.S. 05:52

But it's being in nature and water and all of that. It's not people. It takes me being able to go outside and sit under a tree, or, you know, some birds flying by at the right time, anything. Nature's so full, nature's always talking to us. Everybody's in the rat race, and they're not listening.

T.L.H. 06:15

So are you saying that nature is the place where you heal the trauma?

T.S. 06:21

Absolutely

T.L.H. 06:23

And you say it's always talking to us. What's it saying to you?

Speaker 1 06:27

I'll give you another example. So I always have to live near water. I can't function if I'm not on the water, I just can't do it. And if I'm not there, just like during covid, I went to Atlanta, and it damn near killed me. I had to get back to the water.

T.L.H. 06:41

What? Why? What is that about?

T.S. 06:43

I felt enclosed. I couldn't see beyond what people get stuck in. Even downtown. I can drive 10 miles and be on the ocean. So when Hurricane Katrina came, 2005 I was living here. I was visiting Liz in Tampa, so I wasn't really paying it much attention. But when I got to Tampa, I started seeing, Oh, my God. I called my sister in law. I said, are y'all leaving? And she hesitated. She said, No, they were in New Orleans. No, they some of my family was in New Orleans. Most were in Biloxi or Ocean Springs right on the water, but they didn't realize they were right on the water, because most of the houses had tons of trees behind them, but the bay meets the ocean. So they decided, because my mom and her siblings had witnessed Hurricane Camille, they wouldn't see anything worse, and so they weren't going to leave the elders behind. So they found the sturdiest houses and they stayed. And I was at UNF at the time. It was a Monday morning. I was in the Dean's office working, and I got a call from my niece in North Carolina. Her dad is my brother, and she said, I just got a call from my dad, and it was about nine women and two children, you know, two children and nine women trapped in the attic. It's like Monday morning at 10, and the water was already in the attic and the storm hadn't even come yet. And my first thought was I know they're dead, so I left work. My family in New Orleans had already left, and they evacuated here to my house. And when I tell you, we waited for days. We waited for days. I waited three weeks to find out one of my brothers was alive, and when I got a call asking me if I was his brother, I just sat down and prepared for what was coming and when they said he was alive. So I was

very angry with the ocean. I went on purpose, much later, to Jax's beach. And, you know, I went to Jax's beach about two weeks before the storm, and I was at that crab place, and the ocean was just talking to me. It was, I was like, damn, the ocean is like, mad about something. It's like, enraged. But you can't just sit and tell somebody that that you're eating crabs with and look at you like you're a lunatic. But I knew in my head something was coming. So after the storm, I went and I just talked to the ocean, and I was like, I hate you. You make me sick. How could you, you know, take when as a child, you gave that day. And it just made me realize that as beautiful as nature can be, it can also be pretty, pretty evil but for a reason, you know, I think there's a purpose in what nature does a language that we don't understand.

T.L.H. 09:52

Did they indeed die, the nine?

T.S. 09:55

No, they prayed the hail Mary. They called 911, and gave them, you know, all their names. They heard from my got from my brother, where to cut the roof in case they need to get on top. And eventually, the prayers worked. The water went down, and my brother came and rescued them in a boat. But the damage lingers, but anyway.

T.L.H. 10:20

Terrifying

T.S. 10:23

In a way, they understand it. They took a risk, and they knew what they were risking, and they understand, you know, they lost that battle, but they had won all the other ones against the hurricanes. This one got them.

T.L.H. 10:37

So how long were you angry with the ocean after Katrina?

T.S. 10:44

Until I didn't have it anymore, when I went to Atlanta, and I was like, my god, if I could just get back. I'm so sorry.

T.L.H. 10:51

And you missed it. What was there any substitute? I mean, does it have to be the ocean, or can it be another body of water?

T.S. 10:58

Because there's a lot of lakes in Georgia

T.L.H. 11:00

yeah, yeah

T.S. 11:02

No messages there

T.L.H. 11:03

And it is the water itself that speaks to you. Land, trees

T.S. 11:09

Trees

T.L.H. 11:09

Creatures

T.S. 11:10

Yes, creatures, I would say no, trees, absolutely. Trees are like my mother. Literally, trees are my other mother.

T.L.H. 11:22

How would you characterize the ocean?

T.S. 11:28

As all powerful representation of what people name God or Buddha or God is mine. I mean, the ocean is like my religion. Even when I go to sleep, I got to listen to the rain. It's got to be water.

T.L.H. 11:49

So you say trees are my other mother. Do you think of the water in terms of kinship at all?

T.S. 11:59

No, I see the water as much greater than than me. We went to I took my kids, Dina and Franklin, when theywere probably nine and five, when you could finally get to Biloxi, maybe in November.

T.L.H. 12:16

oh, after Katrina

T.S. 12:17

After Katrina, and we stood at the foot of the bridge that connects Ocean Springs to Biloxi, and it was just in big chunks all the way across, like five to 10 miles. All you could see was water and just blocks of concrete and wire. And I was like, Okay, get it?

T.L.H. 12:37

What did you get?

T.S. 12:39

That nature can be a beast. You know, people shouldn't have been building that close to the water. There's reasons why it happens. But I'm okay with the ocean now. The ocean's my friend again.

T.L.H. 12:53

And do you fault now? Do you fault the ocean? You were angry, and you said, you hated it.

T.S. 12:58

No I fault my family for not leaving.

T.L.H. 12:59

I gotcha.

T.S. 13:01

It's not their fault. They didn't have the money. All the cars didn't work. It's systemic, but it's okay. They know now they have a hurricane fund.

T.L.H. 13:09

Oh, that's good. That's smart. Are they still there?

T.S. 13:12

Yeah, same spot.

T.L.H. 13:13

All right, all right. And you visit?

T.S. 13:20

I do I visit often, but they're repercussions. You know, long term health, they've never been the same

T.L.H. 13:29

Since the storm?

T.S. 13:30

Absolutely

T.L.H. 13:31

Was it the mental and emotional trauma or physical stuff?

T.S. 13:34

Physical stuff. Having to get down, having things fall on you.

T.L.H. 13:37

okay

T.S. 13:38

Having to climb over refrigerators and push sofas out of the way to get out.

T.L.H. 13:39

You said there were two children and a group of women. What were their age ranges if you remember?

T.S. 13:46

Okay, there was a baby in my cousin's belly. Elliot was four. Summer was 12. Ariel was 12. Gina was a teenager older, and the rest were grown women.

T.L.H. 14:03

How old was the oldest?

T.S. 14:07

70 something

T.L.H. 14:07

My goodness

T.S. 14:09

All my mom's sisters, but my mom was with my brother.

T.L.H. 14:11

Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. What do you do in a hurricane now?

T.S. 14:20

Me?

T.L.H. 14:21

Yeah

T.S. 14:23

I watch closely, and I'm prepared and I'm ready to leave. And whatever they decide to do, they decide to do.

T.L.H. 14:29

Do you live near the ocean or the river now? Or?

T.S. 14:32

No Driving distance

T.L.H. 14:33

Driving distance? Yeah yeah

Speaker 1 14:35

I always get that fear. And you know what was crazy watching when you're watching things like that on the news, and your family's not involved. It's more of a spectacle. Sure, I was watching to see if that was my brother floating across real fast, or my cousin and all those people that were on the Interstate in New Orleans, all those people were related to me somehow. That's where my family but you know, the book that I wrote, all those kids tell their story

T.L.H. 15:01

Which was probably healing for them.

T.S. 15:03

Oh, yes, very healing for them. So, and that's why I did it.

T.L.H. 15:07

Yeah.

T.S. 15:07

So they could heal.

T.L.H. 15:08

Did it help you heal as well?

T.S. 15:10

No, because I wasn't in it for that, and I was in it to capture their stories in the moment, you know, as that part of myself.

T.L.H. 15:17

Yeah

T.S. 15:18

Yeah finding them and capturing their stories

T.L.H. 15:19

Hmm wow. I did have a question, if we could go back, you were talking about your childhood and your connections to nature, and I've never asked you, like, what era, what year? Because I have no idea how old you are.

T.S. 15:34

I was born in 1965 okay, and I'll be 60 in March. But the thing about being born in 1965 and you know, I grew up, I graduated, I don't know, 1981 82 83.

T.L.H. 15:46

From high school?

T.S. 15:46

Yeah, but it was still Mississippi. Like everything might have changed everywhere else, but Mississippi had not changed at all you know. You knew your place. The laws might have changed, but you better still follow what we got going on.

T.L.H. 15:59

Where did you go after high school?

T.S. 16:01

I did a brief stint at Tulane University. I graduated early. I was a teen parent. Liz is my teen parent baby, and I went to Tulane and initially was going to do pre med, until I hit calculus and chemistry.

T.L.H. 16:15

Okay

T.S. 16:16

And discovered Shakespeare and I dilly dallied, between the French major and English major, but English seemed more practical.

T.L.H. 16:24

Oh, interesting. Do you speak French?

T.S. 16:26

I do. I'm rusty, but I in middle school, I teach, like, French culture and introductory to the French.

T.L.H. 16:32

Nice, nice.

T.S. 16:34

But I do want to get back to it.

T.L.H. 16:36

That would be, yeah.

T.S. 16:37

Yeah.

T.L.H. 16:37

I'd love a little side story, side chat about that sometime. Wow.

T.S. 16:43

I just had a flashback, because you asked me about bugs.

T.L.H. 16:46

Okay

T.S. 16:48

And remember those insect collections you used to have to do? Used to think that was so they made us do it. I'm like

T.L.H. 16:51

Yes. Who did?

T.S. 16:56

The teachers.

T.L.H. 16:57

Okay

T.S. 16:57

So in elementary school, this was a huge project. Besides the science fair, you had the insect collection, and you had to kill them, and you had to get Styrofoam and put them in a glass thing and put them in formaldehyde, and you had to poke them into the Styrofoam with a pin and label it, and you had to find 10 insects. So here I am killing grasshoppers that I talked to, but I wanted the grade.

T.L.H. 17:20

Right.

T.S. 17:21

So I put little pins in them and display them.

T.L.H. 17:25

Is that hard?

T.S. 17:26

Yes, I didn't think about it till the other day.

T.L.H. 17:29

Oh, even in the moment when you were a kid.

T.S. 17:33

Of course, I was thinking about it, but I as a kid in Mississippi, you did whatever anybody told you to do, period that wasn't even on my mind. They said, Do it? Do it.

T.L.H. 17:41

Okay, so you didn't feel guilt or?

T.S. 17:43

Sure I did.

T.L.H. 17:43

Oh, you did

T.S. 17:44

But it didn't matter.

T.L.H. 17:45

right

T.S. 17:46

So anyway, I was just thinking the other day, damn, they made us kill kill them and put pins in them.

T.L.H. 17:52

How many years did you have that project?

T.S. 17:55

Oh, I had that all the way through, probably about four or five years.

T.L.H. 17:59

What did you learn from that?

Speaker 1 18:03

That I'm very connected to beings and nature, and this ain't right? That's what I learned. They don't make you do it anymore.

T.L.H. 18:14

Well, there are other mechanisms, aren't there? Photographs and they're more accessible, I suppose, but that's an interesting story. What is your fondest memory of your childhood connected to nature?

T.S. 18:29

My dearest memory, would be playing outside all day, because we had to from morning till night. We got snacks and water at the door. You can't replace that for a childhood. We had a whole baseball team. We had a football team.

T.L.H. 18:47

There were 10 of you?

T.S. 19:00

Yes

T.L.H. 19:00

Yeah.

T.S. 19:01

We built things. We swung from vine from the top of the garage, and played Tarzan until my mom's younger sister busted her head open on the tree.

T.L.H. 19:12

Oh.

T.S. 19:13

We had so much fun. And there was no medicine. You didn't go to dentist. If you had an earache, they put a little something in your ear.

T.L.H. 19:20

Do you know what they put in your ear?

T.S. 19:21

It was some kind of oily stuff. And then you had to do some kind of cod liver oil in a spoon.

T.L.H. 19:27

Was that a daily supplement?

T.S. 19:29

No, just if you had some.

T.L.H. 19:31

Okay

T.S. 19:31

Then there was some kind of red clay mixture, a lot of red clay in Mississippi. Oh, I love playing with red clay. It was everywhere. Red Clay was everywhere.

T.L.H. 19:41

What did you do with it?

T.S. 19:42

We made things. It was clay.

T.L.H. 19:43

Yeah.

T.S. 19:44

But nobody told us it was clay. We just like, oh, this is some dirt that you can do. I didn't know what it was.

T.L.H. 19:49

Did you make, like, pots?

T.S. 19:50

Oh we made all kinds of stuff.

T.L.H. 19:51

Did you keep them?

T.S. 19:52

No

T.L.H. 19:53

okay.

T.S. 19:54

We were little just digging in the dirt. And sometimes it was black dirt. We got worms. And if it was sometimes my daddy made us dig for worms. So he could fish. You know, the dirt was the dirt was it?

T.L.H. 20:04

The dirt was

T.S. 20:05

notion, you know

T.L.H. 20:06

Provision

T.S. 20:07

And the reason, you know, people make fun when you don't wear shoes. Of course, the stereotype. She's from Mississippi, she don't wear shoes. I was at Tulane walking over rocks in the parking lot with no shoes on, and they knew me as the girl who wore these thick, poofy sundresses, no shoes.

T.L.H. 20:23

So you didn't wear shoes just in general? It wasn't that you were carrying them with you. You just didn't have them.

T.S. 20:27

I just didn't have them on. I had to wear them in high school, but I said, hell, I'm in college now. I'm an adult. I don't have to wear shoes.

T.L.H. 20:28

And so what was your reason for that? Can you explain that reading the ground?

T.S. 20:36

Because we grew up not wearing shoes on purpose. It's like a way of reading the ground. No, but it happens. You know, I know how to get where I'm going in the dark. You know, there are no words to it, but I have a much better sense of self. I feel more centered. And the messages I'm getting, you can't spell them out from characters that man made up to make words.

T.L.H. 21:10

So the message is, how do they if you can put words to the process, how do they come to you? Or how do you receive them if they're not in words? Sensation?

T.S. 21:24

Organic sensations that sometimes come in voices, like

T.L.H. 21:34

You snapped your finger.

T.S. 21:35

No, that's how quick the voice comes.

T.L.H. 21:37

Okay.

T.S. 21:38

And it's like I heard it,

T.L.H. 21:41

But that's not in words, a voice in words or?

T.S. 21:44

The voice is in words, and it says something very clear.

T.L.H. 21:48

Very clear and very quickly.

T.S. 21:50

Yeah, and I might not absorb what it was right then, but before the day is done, if I sit and think long enough, I say, Okay, I heard it, I know exactly what to do.

T.L.H. 22:04

What's the ----

T.S. 22:04

But when I'm not tuned in, I don't hear when I'm stressed out, I don't hear,

T.L.H. 22:09

Okay, So tuning in means being relaxed.

T.S. 22:11

It means

T.L.H. 22:12

Being grounded.

T.S. 22:13

Being grounded, being relaxed, not letting outside forces that are distractions keep you from walking your path.

T.L.H. 22:24

How long have you recognized that ability?

T.S. 22:29

Well, it goes way back. Because in my first book, The stories my foremothers told me, they talk a lot about being able to communicate with people who aren't present anymore. And my mom tells a story about how her mom sent her out to the mailbox to get a newspaper, and she came back with it pretty quickly, and she says, There's no way in hell you made it to the mailbox and back that fast. She said, No, Mama, Aunt Edith gave it to me, and Aunt Edith had been dead, but those were things that weren't questioned. That was just us. That's how I grew up, you know, and I have that same ability. It's just not things that go around telling people, you know, I saw my first person who's not here when I was probably about seven. Was, I know, it had to be after that, because my brother had died. After my brother died, the little bit of money we got, my dad took off the front porch of the house with the big screen porch. We used to peel these big sacks and vegetables and all this stuff. We had to sit there and do that all weekend. But he took that off, and

with the money he got, he built a den with a fireplace and a little step down. So I remember the first time I saw it was a lady behind me. We had white lace curtains in the living in that living room, she's laying like this in a coffin. And I went back upstairs. I wasn't afraid. I went back upstairs. And all day I went to see if it was the way the light was shining or this, and that never said nothing about it. She stayed there. And you know that's not the first time I had that happen less than five years ago. Is it something you want me to talk about?

T.L.H. 24:13

Sure, happy to hear that

T.S. 24:18

It was probably around 2017 ish, I was in my apartment. It was middle of the daytime, before noon, I was completely coherent, just sitting in my bed. I blinked and there was a black man standing in front of me. He was facing away from me. I knew he wasn't going to harm me. I kept blinking. I kept going like this. He never went away. He was there. He had his hands behind his back like this. He wasn't cuffed. He had on a black durag. He had his head down. He had on a sportsman's jacket that was black with yellow sleeves, and it had yellow ribbing around here

T.L.H. 25:06

Around the cuff

T.S. 25:07

Yeah, and around the neck, and he had his head down. And so I'm like, okay, he's not going to hurt you. But why is he here? And he wouldn't leave.

T.L.H. 25:18

How long did he stay?

T.S. 25:20

I would say, a good long time, five minutes.

T.L.H. 25:26

Did he-

T.S. 25:26

And then he disappeared.

T.L.H. 25:28

Did you have any indication of why he was there or who he was?

Speaker 1 25:32

Well, it was well before the black man in America Project. And I kept trying to figure out, what is it? And I said it's, he's asking me for help. And that was probably right around the time I started thinking, I got to do something for Black boys and Black men. I don't know if that's why he came, but I was just, you know, telling you that I have those experiences.

T.L.H. 25:53

And the one when you were a child, the first one, who was the woman?

T.S. 25:56

I don't know, she appeared white, but all my mom's my mom appears white and a lot of them passed to get commodities. They pretend we didn't know each other and then share it when they got there.

T.L.H. 26:09

Did you ever ask your mother who that might have been?

T.S. 26:12

No, because my mom and I had a contentious relationship most of the time, until I interviewed her for this book, because she she's an alcoholic, she didn't go into the rooms until she was 60. She got her 30 year chip the day before she died.

T.L.H. 26:26

Wow

T.S. 26:27

Yeah

T.L.H. 26:27

That's meaningful.

T.S. 26:28

And we thank the little yellow house for giving us 30 more years.

T.L.H. 26:32

What's the little yellow house?

T.S. 26:34

It was where she went to AA.

T.L.H. 26:35

Oh, okay, okay.

T.S. 26:36

Every day. Never missed a day.

T.L.H. 26:38

My goodness.

T.S. 26:39

But anyway, that was the first woman, that was the man. And as far as nature goes and talking to trees, I think anybody who can communicate with trees, if they can explain it they're unique.

T.L.H. 27:04

Sure

T.S. 27:04

And you know, even growing up with things instilled in you, like you ain't got no watch, you ain't got no clock, you can't- you're not allowed in the bank to go see what time it is. Figure it out. I know people who can tell you if it's 3:12 and 42 seconds. I know people who can tell you if it's gonna rain on Tuesday, you can't explain it.

T.L.H. 27:27

Well, that's a it's an awareness. It's another language.

T.S. 27:30

Yes it's an awareness, another language. And that's why I can find my way in the dark.

T.L.H. 27:36

When have you had to find your way in the dark? Yeah.

T.S. 27:41

A lot of times. But I know how to do it.

T.L.H. 27:47

I understand. So how often are you in nature now?

T.S. 27:56

In Atlanta, I used to have to drive a long way. When I was-

T.L.H. 27:59

What's a long way?

T.S. 28:01

30 45 minutes to get

T.L.H. 28:04

To get to the water?

T.S. 28:04

To get to a waterfall. Might have been a lake, but at least it had a waterfall and a brook or something. But I did it on occasion. But now that I'm back here, I don't go a day without. I might have a few days where I say, have you even looked up today? Have you looked down? And a lot of times I'll come out just on the balcony and just take a few breaths, remind myself.

T.L.H. 28:34

So you say the ocean is your religion. Do you go there regularly?

T.S. 28:38

Yeah, when I had well, when I first got back, I need to get back to it. When I first got back, I would go every Sunday morning, and I would, you know, do my thing, and then I make a big old part in the sand, and I'd write what my message was. Usually it was love and peace. But I said, everything you left here stays here, keep it moving.

T.L.H. 28:54

So that's what you if you had a type of ritual there on your Sunday mornings, it was to process.

T.S. 29:01

Yeah, I just sat and looked out at the water and processed. And I said, anything that you're holding on to that you can let go of, you need to leave it. And then I look back one time and I say, Bye.

T.L.H. 29:14

And you need to get back to that you say.

T.S. 29:16

Yeah.

T.L.H. 29:16

You'd like to. So what are you doing now? What's taking its place, if anything. That sounds nice.

T.S. 29:23

Music and water sounds, water sounds, or I sit by the pool, you know the water's there, it's just not But yeah, I'll get there. By the weekend I'll get to the beach.

T.L.H. 29:36

You said you were dancing the last time we talked. So that's what you mean by music.

T.S. 29:41

Yeah, dancing. I like to dance to music. Movement is good.

T.L.H. 29:45

Yeah.

T.S. 29:45

I listen to it.

T.L.H. 29:46

Oh.

T.S. 29:47

So instead of just listening to the music, I dance to it. And, you know, I just remind myself that most of troubles are manmade. The Earth is not, you know, destroying itself. The glaciers aren't melting themselves. None of this is happening because the Earth. Its man, and just in relationships with people in the course of every day, I always have to go back to nature to remind myself that we're all beings and people just aren't in tune. But what I have learned is that I'm not ashamed of being attune, and I don't care if you make fun of me for being attuned, and I know who to mention it to and who not to.

T.L.H. 30:43

Yes.

T.S. 30:43

And that's all that matters

T.L.H. 30:44

Right.

T.S. 30:44

As long as I got the message.

T.L.H. 30:46

I'm curious too. You said earlier, nature can be a beast. You said the ocean can be evil, and that the ocean was angry. So is that, you know, quote, unquote, evilness? Is that in response to these things you're talking about with human habits and human disregard of nature? Or do you think that there's something in-

T.S. 31:11

No because look how I mean, hurricanes have been around since 'Their Eyes Were Watching God' before all that stuff existed.

T.L.H. 31:20

So you think there's something inherent then in nature,

T.S. 31:22

Absolutely, just as fires happen, you know.

T.L.H. 31:25

And you would characterize those things as evil?

T.S. 31:29

I'm talking about, particularly after Hurricane Katrina.

T.L.H. 31:32

Okay.

T.S. 31:34

And probably because it was my family.

T.L.H. 31:36

I see.

T.S. 31:36

They happen all the time to other people, but it doesn't happen to me.

T.L.H. 31:39

Yeah.

T.S. 31:40

And you know, perhaps evil is the wrong word. I don't even want to say vengeful. It's just they can use its power.

T.L.H. 31:47

It is powerful. Yeah, yeah. I'm curious too, your relationship to trees you've talked about and you've talked about your family, your dad fished. Your dad gardened, or your whole family gardened?

T.S. 32:04

It's my dad.

T.L.H. 32:05

Your dad. Okay, and was your mother connected to nature in those kinds of ways and those practical ways?

T.S. 32:13

she didn't have time.

T.L.H. 32:14

okay.

T.S. 32:14

She had 10 kids.

T.L.H. 32:15

Yeah, so she was cooking, so she was using the produce.

T.S. 32:19

Yeah, you know, what else? What inspired me to write my first book about the women in my family was Alice Walker's 'In Search of Our Mother's Garden'

T.L.H. 32:30

Yes.

T.S. 32:30

And how, back in the day, you know, they could have all done what we're doing.

T.L.H. 32:35

Yeah

T.S. 32:36

But instead, you know, they gardened, and my mom sewed.

T.L.H. 32:38

Yeah.

T.S. 32:39

Because she had to sew all our clothes.

T.L.H. 32:40

Right.

T.S. 32:41

So that was her thing.

T.L.H. 32:43

Do you do any of that?

T.S. 32:46

No, my job is to record the truth. I've just been waiting to get this is the process.

T.L.H. 32:55

Well, I think you've been doing it.

T.S. 32:57

Yeah, but I needed to get right here.

T.L.H. 33:00

Yeah.

T.S. 33:00

Until I'm not going to be here anymore, and then I'm going to go tell even more truth.

T.L.H. 33:04

yeah

T.S. 33:04

On my own

T.L.H. 33:05

Somewhere else. So that's

T.S. 33:07

Or even if I'm here doing it, you know, I have parameters around me, but once they're gone.

T.L.H. 33:11

And so you think that's, that's your purpose?

T.S. 33:15

I don't think it I know it. So a funny story, my sister in law grew up in Van Cleve, Mississippi, which is about as the most country place you can ever imagine, and that, you know, not to be making fun, but rural that way, where they buried the church family in the behind the church. Even she, who passed a few years ago, is buried by her parents that kind of go down this rock road way out from nothing. So one day, she stepped on the nail. She's telling the story to me and my sister. She steps on the nail, and we were talking about country stuff. Remember back, I'm so and so she was telling the story about when she was little and she stepped on the nail, and her mom put a piece of pork fat on it, and she said, Now we gonna strap this on your foot. Don't take it off after the third day, your foot's gonna be fine. So Brenda said she went to her mom the first day, she was like, Mama, I don't think this working. My foot is turning green. It's okay, baby. You just gotta let the you just gotta let it work. Don't take it off. She said, the second day, she's like, Mom, my foot is killing me and it's oozing. It's swelling. She said, It's okay, baby, just wait till tomorrow. And she said, the next day, her foot looked like nothing ever happened to it. My sister, a couple of weeks later, gets a boil under her arm. By this time, she's gone back to Atlanta, where she lives. We were home for some kind of function. She's lying in the bed with her husband. Her arm is killing her. She says, I'm gonna try what Brenda said. But she didn't have any fat back or pork or whatever it was, but she had some frozen bacon. Okay, so she defrosted it. It's like, middle of the night, she puts it under her armpit. Her husband wakes up and says, Why do I smell bacon? She said, its a long story, just go back to sleep. So then she wakes up. She said she's got this big fig under her arm from the bacon, but she had to go to the emergency room. So the doctor says, what happened? And she had to- and why do you smell like bacon? She had to explain. She said he just rolled and rolled his eyes at her and gave her an antibiotic

T.L.H. 35:30

I see.

T.S. 35:31

In her butt.

T.L.H. 35:32

Oh, wow.

T.S. 35:33

But that's funny.

T.L.H. 35:35

That is very funny. I wonder if she kept it on for three days, if there would have been relief.

T.S. 35:41

I'll have to mention that to her. We'll never know.

T.L.H. 35:46

I'm very- well, unless something else happens. And we can, you know, see what, what the remedy is. You did mention if you have an earache, perhaps it was Mullen oil that people were using. And

T.S. 35:58

I have another funny story.

T.L.H. 35:59

Okay, please.

T.S. 36:00

My daughter braided her daughter's hair.

T.L.H. 36:02

Yes, Dina.

T.S. 36:03

Used a well, this story, she probably doesn't want her name.

T.L.H. 36:07

Oh. We'll, strike the name

T.S. 36:10

She used a garlic pod for a yeast infection. And then she couldn't get it out.

T.L.H. 36:18

Oh no, you gotta put it in a cheese cloth. Well, that's a little scary.

T.S. 36:25

But then she goes for a walk with her coworker, and the co worker says, 'For some reason, I'm craving, Olive Garden'.

T.L.H. 36:33

Oh, funny. Oh, that is very funny. Well, yes, that is a that's a recommended remedy. So what other remedies did your family use? Herbal healing or natural?

T.S. 36:54

I know we use tobacco for something.

T.L.H. 36:56

Interesting

T.S. 36:57

Bee stings.

T.L.H. 36:58

You mean tobacco plant, the leaves?

T.S. 37:01

Yeah, you put it to draw the stinger.

T.L.H. 37:03

Okay, would you wet it? Or?

T.S. 37:05

Yeah, they would wet it and pack it.

T.L.H. 37:07

Okay, like

T.S. 37:08

Take the burn away.

T.L.H. 37:09

Gotcha.

T.S. 37:10

Yeah. I have to think about it. We never went to the doctor so, and we're all alive.

T.L.H. 37:19

Yeah, and I am curious. I had asked you if you sewed or cooked, did the things your mother did?

T.S. 37:26

I did cook, but I cook now a different way. I used to cook because I had to feed my children. Now I cook when I'm full of love and compassion and I

want to be really close. I'm really careful. When I don't order my groceries, I go pick them out, look at them, you know. And I cook all my mom's recipes.

T.L.H. 37:51

Oh, how nice.

T.S. 37:52

Yeah. And I put that trinity in there, the garlic, the onion, the bell pepper, and then I just add my own stuff.

T.L.H. 37:59

So in some Latinx cultures, that's sofrito, and in French, it's mirepoix, right?

T.S. 38:11

You mean the Trinity?

T.L.H. 38:12

Yeah, did you have a name? Or you all called it the Trinity?

T.S. 38:15

Oh yeah.

T.L.H. 38:16

Okay.

T.S. 38:17

Cause everybodies Catholic.

T.L.H. 38:18

Oh gotcha, okay, I'm curious about that. That's nice. And yeah, onions, garlic and bell pepper.

T.S. 38:28

But, you know, it depends on what kind of Creole you are. Some people, everybody does the onion and garlic, but some people add the diced tomato. Just depends on what you're making.

T.L.H. 38:34

Yeah. And so you enjoy cooking now. And it's

T.S. 38:38

It's a ritual.

T.L.H. 38:39

I love- It is a ritual.

T.S. 38:40

It's meditation.

T.L.H. 38:43

Do you cook daily or only when you have other people to feed?

T.S. 38:47

I don't cook daily because it's just me, and I can't really eat that much, because everything I cook, of course, my mom's recipes are all for large amounts of people.

T.L.H. 38:55

Yeah.

T.S. 38:56

So when I cook jambalaya.

T.L.H. 38:58

yeah, you have a lot.

T.S. 38:59

I have a lot. Do you think about compiling the recipes and any other way? Well, you know what's crazy is my mom gave me the family gumbo recipe, but when I was living with her for two years, so Franklin to get through Brown I was staying in the kitchen and watching, she gave me everything but the gumbo recipe. So one day she's making gumbo, and she let me see her do everything but the root. So then, right before I was getting ready to move back here, she wrote on a, you know, those things that come inside of a picture frame, just a generic picture.

T.L.H. 39:34

Yes,

T.S. 39:34

Of two people, that's how shiny it is on the back. She took a ink pen, and she wrote it out in her penmanship. No measurements. She wasn't going to give me the whole thing. She said, I'm giving this to you because you're the only one who doesn't know how to cook. I didn't know how to cook back then anyway. My siblings were mad. I ended up giving it to my older sister.

T.L.H. 39:54

Sounds like a treasure.

T.S. 39:55

But everybody in the family bases their gumbo off of stories they've told. And my nieces and nephews will call the older ones and say, 'Now what do I how long do I stir the rue again?' That kind of thing.

T.L.H. 40:07

That's so nice.

T.S. 40:08

Yeah, Gumbo is a centerpiece in our family,

T.L.H. 40:10

And it's a big family still I mean

T.S. 40:13

Because it all came from the sea, it was a poor man's food that's now a luxury, just like crab and lobster shrimp.

T.L.H. 40:21

So you do enjoy cooking. Do you use any herbal remedies yourself, or have a garden of any kind, a container garden?

Speaker 1 40:29

No. But when I moved back to Florida and left Atlanta, I needed peace all around so when I decorated, and even when I wasn't trying truly, I went to get some candles, and they were all like a seafoam green or sky blue, and I didn't have a lighter. I go to the gas station and say, Can you give me a lighter? She handed me a seafoam green lighter.

T.L.H. 40:54

So all ocean ocean colors.

T.S. 40:56

Yeah. And I got a bunch of plants Dina repotted. All I have is plants and ocean colors.

T.L.H. 41:02

Oh, lovely.

T.S. 41:03
Everything I have

T.L.H. 41:04
That sounds beautiful

T.S. 41:05
My forks, my spoons everything I have.

T.L.H. 41:08
So you can be surrounded by the sense of the ocean.

T.S. 41:10
And my shower curtain is not ocean, but it's like an Amazon forest, birds and bright colors.

T.L.H. 41:16
Lovely, yeah.

T.S. 41:17
Yeah. So when I walk in, it's peace.

T.L.H. 41:19
It does sound peaceful, it definitely does yeah

T.S. 41:22
Put my rain music on 10 hours no commercials.

T.L.H. 41:28
That's beautiful, yeah. What other rituals do you have?

T.S. 41:38

I talked to Mary a lot.

T.L.H. 41:42

I was going to ask you, if you have retained any Catholic

T.S. 41:46

What I love most about

T.L.H. 41:47

traditions

T.S. 41:48

the Catholic religion is that they gave women, somebody to pray to. And I just talked to her like I've talked to a tree, I guess.

T.L.H. 42:01

Is hers one of the message givers that you?

T.S. 42:07

No, I talk

T.L.H. 42:08

Okay

T.S. 42:08

To Mary.

T.L.H. 42:10

Does she talk back? Or send you signs? Or

T.S. 42:14

She sends me signs. She doesn't talk back. I don't know what she sounds like, but she talks. I talk to her, and I feel her presence.

T.L.H. 42:24

Where do you feel her presence?

T.S. 42:26

Every- all inside me. Because when I asked the women in my family what they were doing, well, when I asked the children who were in the attic what they were doing, and they said, well, the grown ups were just hanging on to the pillars in the attic, and everybody was praying the Hail Mary. Every time something happens, every chapter in my first book, every chapter that's about my family who was in that attic in the second book, every story I've ever had heard about my family, Death, whatever, anytime it involves tragedy, pray the rosary, and it brings such a calmness that repetitive. It just brings a calmness. It's a constant reminder that you're covered and you're protected. So me and Mary are like this.

T.L.H. 43:13

Nice. So there are a lot of African diasporic traditions that, do you know, create that kind of syncretic blending of more, I guess, what we might call pagan traditions and Catholic in particular traditions. So do you is that something that resonates with you consciously?

Speaker 1 43:43

You know, I know my academic self, knows what the Catholic Church was and is. I don't belong there. I never belong there. Life would have been so different had I grown up with my people. But there are a lot of things I appreciate, because it taught me to walk in peace. It taught me to have discipline during Lent, can't have meat on Friday. It made me know what Easter was about, not an Easter egg hunt.

T.S. 44:19

And it made me understand that even if you don't belong, even if the where you are sitting in church, you're not welcome, spirituality is not confined to a building. It was when I walked out that I could breathe. You know, it's like the opposite. But getting back to that, there's a lot of things I wouldn't give up for, anything growing up Catholic, especially walking in peace. If you rile me up and it's visible, it's a it's a real bad day for me. My daughter says Dina says, Mama, you're not just down to earth. She said, You like under the rocks and stuff where like all the worms and stuff. Nothing don't bother you.

T.L.H. 45:10

That's a compliment.

T.S. 45:11

It is. And I think it's funny

T.L.H. 45:13

Yeah.

T.S. 45:13

Because it took a lot of practice. And my mom says, you can't have fear and faith at the same time. And I am a woman who does not walk in fear.

T.L.H. 45:24

You had just said life would have been so different if I had been with my people. What would have been different? And where were your people? What? What

T.S. 45:33

Across the reality

T.L.H. 45:34

Spirituality were they practicing?

T.S. 45:36

Either AME or Baptist or but they were all the other black people I couldn't help my parents were going Catholic, you know, and we'd be coming home from church, and they'd all be standing outside the church, hugging and singing, and I'd be looking out the window like damn I need to be over there.

T.L.H. 45:52

Did you get to attend their services? At any point?

T.S. 45:55

They didn't. We were, they treated us like the white people. you're too good to go to that white church. But you know, my parents look, yeah, so, but you know, as adults, we all get it now how we were intentionally pitted against each other, and now as adults, as a matter of fact, I'm getting ready to go back and do an oral history on Ocean Springs from a black perspective, because when I was talking to my sister-in-law one day recently, and she started talking about this project, I asked her a little bit about her life, and she said, and then your brother was killed, and everything changed. She said, the town was silently cut in two. There was tension, but nobody said anything. And I said, that's interesting, so I'll pursue that. But all my family's connected to nature. All my brothers have boats. They all go fishing several times a week. Even if they don't catch anything, it's about the fishing.

T.L.H. 46:49

Interesting. So everyone is connected to water in particular or all nature?

T.S. 46:56

All nature. My sister in Atlanta is very, very she hikes. She goes to different countries. She's been to Peru. She's been all over the world, but she only goes to those places that you see on TV where people are trying to survive with no

clothes on, like New Zealand and remote areas of you know, she goes to really cool places she went to. What was that earthquake? Was it in Morocco? Was there an earthquake in Morocco years ago?

T.L.H. 47:20

I don't know

T.S. 47:21

It was a huge earthquake, but yeah, she was just on her way there for her birthday a couple years she travels internationally only to places that promote nature. She wants to see it all.

T.L.H. 47:32

Oh, beautiful

T.S. 47:33

Yeah.

T.L.H. 47:33

And so your siblings then are recreators in nature?

T.S. 47:40

Yes

T.L.H. 47:41

Yeah.

T.S. 47:42

And the ones who aren't just they can we can all speak to nature.

T.L.H. 47:47

Sure, yeah. And does anyone maybe rely it's it's not the same era. But does anyone rely on nature in the ways that your family did growing up? Anybody in agriculture? For example or any ask, okay.

T.S. 48:07

No, only because we don't have to no more.

T.L.H. 48:09

Yeah.

T.S. 48:10

It's hard work. I mean, all my siblings worked in the shrimp factories. It was a fishing community.

T.L.H. 48:14

Sure.

T.S. 48:15

You know, they all came home smelling like crap with those boots on and

T.L.H. 48:18

Right and so

T.S. 48:18

Cleaning shrimp to make a little extra money.

T.L.H. 48:20

It's progress then, in some ways, to be able to

T.S. 48:23

Yeah, because the casinos came and you could work indoors and

T.L.H. 48:26

Yeah

T.S. 48:26

and make decent money.

T.L.H. 48:27

I do. I mean, there are a lot of people that I talk to who are returning to some of those traditional ways, the practical skills that your parents had, and even to, you know, urban agriculture and things like that. But that's not where your family's connection to nature is.

T.S. 48:45

No and you know, you just brought back something my parents taught me to be resourceful. So what you ain't got no cup? Get a piece of paper and fold it this way, put some water in it. Drink it or you got these,

T.L.H. 48:54

Ah your hands That comes in handy. Did you teach your kids these things as well? And would you say your kids have the same abilities you do?

T.S. 48:58

Even when Franklin went to college, I'm like Frank don't you want to get a little shower caddy to carry your stuff? He says, that's why I got these. So they taught us to be resourceful. Yeah. Dina does, Franklin does not, and Liz does.

T.L.H. 49:20

And what, what changed that?

T.S. 49:23

Frank was born, that he's the generation that was born called Digital.

T.L.H. 49:27

Okay.

T.S. 49:27

Whatever generation that is. He

T.L.H. 49:29

Yeah.

T.S. 49:30

He's no concept, but he appreciates it.

T.L.H. 49:32

Uh huh. But he wasn't in it in the same way because of the technology.

T.S. 49:36

No I would say the only one who was really immersed in it and grew up partly in Mississippi is Liz. Because by the time I had Dina and Franklin, my former husband was in the Navy. Just wasn't that.

T.L.H. 49:41

Okay. What was that like? Did you travel then, because of the Navy?

T.S. 49:53

I tried not to.

T.L.H. 49:54

Okay.

T.S. 49:55

But I did travel up until we made it to Jacksonville. I never did any overseas travel. We did Seattle, we did Philly, we did Pensacola ended up here

T.L.H. 49:58

Okay. And everywhere you could be close

T.S. 50:07

Of course its the Navy

T.L.H. 50:08

to the water. And you're happy here? That's a question.

T.S. 50:15

Yeah, I'm happy here because the people are genuine for the most part.

T.L.H. 50:24

What do you mean? Genuine for the most part?

T.S. 50:26

Because there are people who are going to be hateful no matter what. They can be here, they can be there. But I feel like Jacksonville people as a whole remind me of my hometown. Like if it weren't for those people saying that we have to be divided. We'd get along just fine.

T.L.H. 50:46

And that's been your experience here in large part?

T.S. 50:50

Yes but thats only because growing up in Mississippi you learn how to acclimate to any situation. I can get a white guy as a matter of fact I did.I got an older white man with a mud truck with a Trump sticker on the back to

carry a big ole case of water to my car. He wasn't even gonna acknowledge me.

T.L.H. 51:04

So what did you do? what'd you do?

T.S. 51:11

But I know how to talk to them. I said, 'Hey daddy how you doing'. He said, 'I'm alright'. I said, 'You think you can lift, if I buy some water can you come get it and put it in my car for me'. And he just looked at me. He said, 'I'm in a hurry'. I said, 'Okay, well thank you'. And I went in the store and I glanced over, they were moving cars. They moved vehicles to dealerships and I looked in the front of one of the cars that was in the line, they had several of em', and it was a young girl that looked kind of like you. And he said, 'Oh that's my granddaughter that's in the truck'. And I said hmmm and I turned to walk into the store. And he said, "You know what I'mma get that water for you".

T.L.H. 52:02

-laughter- say so

T.S. 52:02

He said, 'You know why I'm getting it' and I said 'why'. He said, 'I'm getting it because of God cause God ain't got nothing to do with this Trump sticker on the back of my truck.' And he said, 'and thank you for reminding me'.

T.L.H. 52:14

Aww

T.S. 52:15

But you know Southern people know how to negotiate. We have a common bond, we're Southern. Most Southern people will do anything for you,

especially in a crisis. They might call you the N-word the next day but they gone feed you if you ain't got nothing. So, I think that was why I was uncomfortable living in the North also. There's something about being from the South. We all had to grow up on the land.

T.L.H. 52:40

And do you think that's it? That you all had to grow up on the land?

T.S. 52:44

It's the land and the water.

T.L.H. 52:45

The land and the water is what creates some kind of?

T.S. 52:47

If we didn't have nothing else we could grow it and we could catch it.

T.L.H. 52:52

And that translates to some kind of generosity? Sure

T.S. 52:57

You're never gonna starve.

T.L.H. 52:58

Mmkay mmkay

T.S. 52:58

You're never gonna starve spiritually, you ain't gonna starve physically.

T.L.H. 53:03

Yeah

T.S. 53:04

You ain't gonna starve. You gone always be fed.

T.L.H. 53:07

And that's that's faith. You can trust that. Thank you.

T.S. 53:12

You're welcome.

T.L.H. 53:13

Is there anything else you'd like to share on any of these topics, or any other thing that's just come to mind, that that I might not think to ask about?

T.S. 53:30

Yeah, when I lose my connection to the trees, I have to go find one that's large and old, and I have to touch the leaves and apologize and say I'm back, and I make sure nobody sees me but if they do, I don't give a damn.

T.L.H. 53:49

Yeah, yeah.

T.S. 53:50

And I'm to the point my daughter Dina says, you know me and my husband were talking about people who seem like they don't age and they just always seem at peace. And my husband said, maybe it's people who just don't care what people think about it anymore. They're just going to be their authentic self. And we thought about you, momma.

T.L.H. 54:07

Aww another nice compliment.

T.S. 54:10

Oh yeah.

T.L.H. 54:11

Yeah. Have you always been that way? Or did you grow into that?

T.S. 54:14

It took me about seven years to gain self mastery. That's all it is.

T.L.H. 54:19

The last seven years or earlier?

T.S. 54:19

Probably now

T.L.H. 54:25

Okay

T.S. 54:25

Eight.

T.L.H. 54:26

All right, all right.

T.S. 54:27

I'm still a work in progress

T.L.H. 54:29

Sure

T.S. 54:29

And I have lapses. It's like right now. I'm not in tune, but I know what I need to do to get there. I listen to people who remind me that every day's a good

one it's all in how you look at it. My favorite book is 'Change your thoughts, Change your life' and then Marcel Priest has a saying that used to be on my Facebook page. Sometimes it's "sometimes you have to change your perspective, and it changes what you're looking at". The same thing looks differently when you change your perspective.

T.L.H. 55:03

It's a lot of wisdom there. Thank you for sharing.

T.S. 55:07

You're welcome.

T.L.H. 55:08

I really appreciate this time. Oh, I'll pause. Okay.

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