



Guest: Dr. Mmatshilo Motsei

Host: Mounira Chaieb

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Episode 5

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Transcript

00:00:05

I.

00:00:10 Mounira Chaieb

She's intrigued by the idea of leadership as a spiritual calling.

00:00:14 Mounira Chaieb

She's an author, healer, midwife and social science researcher with a keen interest in integrating indigenous wisdom with modern innovations.

00:00:25 Mounira Chaieb

In the fifth and last part of the leading feminist voices project, exclusively launched by the Africa Leadership Center, we talked to Machilo Machi from South Africa first of.

00:00:38 Mounira Chaieb

All mattilo. Can you explain the idea of what you call spiritual calling to our listeners please?

00:00:45 Mmatshilo Motsei

I'll explain it by you know, taking lessons from the elders.

00:00:50 Mmatshilo Motsei

According to indigenous beliefs.

00:00:53 Mmatshilo Motsei

It is believed that a child is born with a unique gift that they're bringing to the world. So for me, spiritual gift or spiritual calling is being aligned to that unique and innate gift that you have been born with.

00:01:11 Mmatshilo Motsei

So I approach spirituality broader than religion.

00:01:15 Mmatshilo Motsei

For me, spirituality is not just.

00:01:18 Mmatshilo Motsei

Religion is one way of expressing your spirituality.

00:01:23 Mmatshilo Motsei

So spiritual calling, therefore for me is the special gift that you have been born with your mission in the world.

00:01:35 Mmatshilo Motsei

What I would describe as a spiritual calling.

00:01:38 Mounira Chaieb

So you believe that every child has a mission in the world?

00:01:43 Mmatshilo Motsei

Yeah. And, you know, usually when we think about mission, it's not necessarily a big thing.

00:01:49 Mmatshilo Motsei

Not like an Oprah Winfrey.

00:01:52 Mmatshilo Motsei

Teresa, you know Barack Obama. Nelson Mandela, kind of a mission.

00:01:58 Mmatshilo Motsei

Because usually when we use the word mission immediately our head goes.

00:02:02 Mmatshilo Motsei

Like the big, humongous thing that you are born to do in the world, each of us is born for a purpose. Of course, some people don't believe that.

00:02:12 Mmatshilo Motsei

Each of us is born for a purpose that maybe if a purpose is something that you find.

00:02:17 Mmatshilo Motsei

And once you are born, my belief is that when I look back at my life.

00:02:24 Mmatshilo Motsei

That the family that I was born into, the community that I was born into, the challenges that I experienced in my life, were shaping me for kind of honoring my spiritual colleague, which is like honoring my purpose and mission in life.

00:02:39 Mounira Chaieb

First of all, you talked about challenges that face you in your life.

00:02:43 Mounira Chaieb

What were the main challenges and how did you go about practising what you believed basically?

00:02:51 Mmatshilo Motsei

I can think of two early in my life as a young woman and then later on in my life when I was already in activism. The first one was.

00:03:03 Mmatshilo Motsei

Experiencing domestic violence early in my life and at the time I was working at Vets University as a researcher.

00:03:13 Mmatshilo Motsei

But then I remember I was sitting in a bus stop at one point.

00:03:18 Mmatshilo Motsei

After one of the kind of horrible experience of abuse.

00:03:23 Mmatshilo Motsei

And my mind at that point went to a community in Alexandra Township, which is a community just outside of Johannesburg.

00:03:32 Mmatshilo Motsei

I had been working with the community on another project and I decided at that point to resign from the university and went to set up an organization called Afsanang domestic Abuse Prevention and Training.

00:03:48 Mmatshilo Motsei

In, in short, it's called. Adapt.

00:03:50 Mmatshilo Motsei

It was in the early 90s.

00:03:52 Mmatshilo Motsei

I hope for the whole year without the salary, because at that point I was a young person.

00:03:58 Mmatshilo Motsei

I didn't know writing proposal how to raise money, how to work in the community and all of that.

00:04:04 Mmatshilo Motsei

My family were very supportive. My mother would send money to me when I was in Joburg for me to buy food for my kids.

00:04:14 Mmatshilo Motsei

Another challenge in the community, obviously, when you are a young person working with communities is that there's the politics of development like some people would not want you to do the activism that you're doing with community members.

00:04:29

But that.

00:04:29 Mmatshilo Motsei

So that's something that I had to learn on the ground.

00:04:32 Mmatshilo Motsei

The second big challenge was in 2007, when I published.

00:04:39 Mmatshilo Motsei

I released a book about Jacob Zuma's rape trial.

00:04:43 Mmatshilo Motsei

Pick up Zuma is the former president of South Africa.

00:04:46 Mmatshilo Motsei

And and.

00:04:47 Mmatshilo Motsei

Wrote a book about his retrial, and I remember before I even wrote the book, it was in 2007, was a very volatile time in South Africa. That was the time when Zuma was challenging former President Mugi in Poloquani and the atmosphere was kind of 10.

00:05:06 Mmatshilo Motsei

And I remember, you know, during the trial, I was just watching the news that were coming out.

00:05:13 Mmatshilo Motsei

Reading the newspapers and just feeling this thing in the pit of my.

00:05:18 Mmatshilo Motsei

That what does silence mean? If I'm someone who has been working actively in the area of sexual violence and there's this kind of high profile rape trial going on and none of us is doing anything about it.

00:05:32 Mmatshilo Motsei

I decided to write a book.

00:05:34 Mmatshilo Motsei

There was something that pushed me from inside and maybe that was part of living my purpose.

00:05:38 Mmatshilo Motsei

Push me from inside to write a book. I wrote that book in four months and when the book was released, obviously I went through.

00:05:47 Mmatshilo Motsei

Lot of fear.

00:05:48 Mmatshilo Motsei

What is going to happen when it's released?

00:05:50 Mmatshilo Motsei

That and luckily I was not attacked physically, but I was attacked economically because at that point I was already working out as an activist in the society.

00:06:02 Mmatshilo Motsei

Activists don't have like regular in times, and it was easy for me to be silenced economically.

00:06:10 Mmatshilo Motsei

So the biggest.

00:06:12 Mmatshilo Motsei

My life.

00:06:13 Mmatshilo Motsei

Is the isolation that I experienced after I had written that book. It took me like over a decade to overcome the isolation, house repossessed and auctioned cars repossessed.

00:06:29 Mmatshilo Motsei

Kids out of school, no place to stay.

00:06:32 Mmatshilo Motsei

So I survived.

00:06:33 Mmatshilo Motsei

That's one of the main things that I have experienced in my life.

00:06:37 Mounira Chaieb

Probably that gut feeling that told you to do something about the high-profile rape trial was your own spiritual calling.

00:06:46 Mounira Chaieb

But even with all that punishment that you received.

00:06:49 Mounira Chaieb

Saved from the state, the system did not stop you.

00:06:53 Mounira Chaieb

Decided to write and publish another book.

00:06:56 Mounira Chaieb

Tell us about that. The second book, what it was about and what was the reaction you faced?

00:07:02 Mmatshilo Motsei

In that book on the rape.

00:07:03 Mmatshilo Motsei

Was my second the first book that I wrote.

00:07:07 Mmatshilo Motsei

Is called hearing visions, seeing voices. That was a book about me as a girl child who grew up in a village and who went out to do some work in the world, only to find that.

00:07:22 Mmatshilo Motsei

You know, I've left myself at.

00:07:24 Mmatshilo Motsei

You know the idea that we always have a feeling that you have to go to a foreign country.

00:07:29 Mmatshilo Motsei

Find yourself.

00:07:30 Mmatshilo Motsei

And then when you get there, you recognize.

00:07:33 Mmatshilo Motsei

No, you've left yourself at home and that's the way you will find yourself.

00:07:37 Mmatshilo Motsei

That was the Facebook.

00:07:39 Mmatshilo Motsei

And then the rape trial book was the second.

00:07:41 Mmatshilo Motsei

Third one, how it came.

00:07:43 Mmatshilo Motsei

It's called relieving the soul of the nation.

00:07:46 Mmatshilo Motsei

The third one is a collection of essays on African politics, African humanism.

00:07:54 Mmatshilo Motsei

How that book came about?

00:07:56 Mmatshilo Motsei

Was that during that time of isolation, the only time when I felt alive was when I was writing.

00:08:04 Mmatshilo Motsei

So I wrote essays and just put them away.

00:08:09 Mmatshilo Motsei

And many years later, I went back to those essays and I realized that writing saved my life from depression at the time.

00:08:18 Mmatshilo Motsei

So that's when I then edited the collection of essays into a book.

00:08:24 Mmatshilo Motsei

And that's how the Fed book came about.

00:08:27 Mmatshilo Motsei

So I always say writing loved me even when I didn't.

00:08:32 Mmatshilo Motsei

You know, it protected me.

00:08:35 Mmatshilo Motsei

It gave me a voice and interesting. In 2015 I went back to university full time after I had come out of a place of isolation.

00:08:45 Mmatshilo Motsei

Why full time? Even when I don't have a bursary and income?

00:08:49 Mmatshilo Motsei

Why do you even go full time as an adult like that with kids?

00:08:53 Mmatshilo Motsei

I went because I realized that I had begun to censor myself.

00:08:59 Mmatshilo Motsei

And as someone who has been through that, you carefully, I'm fear with you that when things come to you, you're even afraid.

00:09:08 Mmatshilo Motsei

Yeah. And when I realize that I'm carrying fear, that's when I decided to go full time and did a master's in creative writing.

00:09:16 Mmatshilo Motsei

I realized that writing for me it gave me a voice when I was buried by fear.

00:09:22 Mounira Chaieb

And writing can be very healing as well.

00:09:25 Mounira Chaieb

You also talk about the concept of indigenous midwifery in South Africa.

00:09:31 Mounira Chaieb

Can you explain the concept to our listeners please?

00:09:34 Mmatshilo Motsei

Indigenous. Obviously, as a term is a term that originated from the UN development system.

00:09:43 Mmatshilo Motsei

In the 90s, you know when the notion of sustainable development was beginning to come out.

00:09:50 Mmatshilo Motsei

And then the UN came up with a term indigenous people and indigenous midwifery.

00:09:58 Mmatshilo Motsei

Speaks to ancient knowledge of birthing that indigenous peoples of the world always had before colonized.

00:10:09 Mmatshilo Motsei

So my work on indigenous midwifery entails going to the rural villages to speak to the elders. Most of them have given birth to 567 kids.

00:10:23 Mmatshilo Motsei

They have never set foot in the hospital.

00:10:26 Mmatshilo Motsei

They have not experienced complications and they are childbirth rituals as well that are done pre conception during pregnancy after birth that they do and believe that it's necessary to center the mother and.

00:10:44 Mmatshilo Motsei

So as midweek free for me is that information that we always had before biomedicine was exported to Africa during colonialism, we had that information.

00:10:57 Mounira Chaieb

Absolutely. And you, you find it in every country, in every culture. You know where, you know, the know. How about caring for a pregnant woman and helping her with delivering the child and.

00:11:02 Mmatshilo Motsei

Yeah.

00:11:11 Mounira Chaieb

The aftercare when the child is born is always there.

00:11:12 Mmatshilo Motsei

Yes, yes, yes. Yeah, yeah.

00:11:15 Mounira Chaieb

Absolutely. You say the role of an indigenous teacher is not to deposit knowledge into an empty mind. Can you elaborate?

00:11:22 Mounira Chaieb

All right.

00:11:23 Mmatshilo Motsei

Indigenous research methodology believes that.

00:11:28 Mmatshilo Motsei

Or rather, let me say indigenous people believe that there is not one person who has knowledge.

00:11:38 Mmatshilo Motsei

They believe that knowledge is a Co creative process in partnership with people.

00:11:46 Mmatshilo Motsei

And other forms of creation.

00:11:49 Mmatshilo Motsei

So when you work with communities, you are not working with people with no knowledge. They have their own knowledge.

00:11:59 Mmatshilo Motsei

You have your own knowledge.

00:12:01 Mmatshilo Motsei

So when we work with communities, I approach communities knowing that knowledge production is a Co creative process.

00:12:10 Mmatshilo Motsei

So that's why when I work with rural communities, I come out being transformed.

00:12:18 Mmatshilo Motsei

By what I'm doing with them in the same way that I also transform them.

00:12:22 Mounira Chaieb

I was going to ask you just about.

00:12:25 Mounira Chaieb

Like, how do people react to, you know, your work with them, seeing the whole process as a spiritual experience?

00:12:30 Mmatshilo Motsei

Yeah.

00:12:34 Mmatshilo Motsei

I am born in a family of.

00:12:37 Mmatshilo Motsei

My aunt was a healer who passed on the healing gift to me.

00:12:41 Mmatshilo Motsei

So I have a way of working with people in such a way that we give ourselves permission to be vulnerable and open, and we approach our work.

00:12:56 Mmatshilo Motsei

Knowing that there is power in vulnerability.

00:12:59 Mmatshilo Motsei

So because I step into the space owning my own vulnerability that gives others permission to do so, and as a result there is hardly any resistance when I work with people there.

00:13:16 Mmatshilo Motsei

Is a willingness to go deep inside and heal our multi generational wounds. As a people who have been colonized, who have been affected by so many things. You know multi generational.

00:13:31 Mmatshilo Motsei

So I feel this to be such a privilege for me to do this kind of work because the more I do this work with others, the more my own multi generational wounds.

00:13:44 Mmatshilo Motsei

Healed.

00:13:45 Mounira Chaieb

And healing goes back generations is very true, and looking back, what would you say are the key leadership lessons that emerged from your experience?

00:13:55 Mmatshilo Motsei

Firstly, the kind of knowledge and training that we get with regard to leadership is often leadership.

00:14:05 Mmatshilo Motsei

Based on theories that originate in the West, we do not often use stories that originate in Africa, so working with rural communities helps me to redefine leadership.

00:14:21 Mmatshilo Motsei

Just like what we said earlier, when we start the conversation, we said usually when we talk about mission, we think big. When you think about leadership, our thoughts always go to like political leaders or things like that.

00:14:32 Mmatshilo Motsei

But an elder who is leading.

00:14:37 Mmatshilo Motsei

Placenta burial ceremony.

00:14:41 Mmatshilo Motsei

In her family is leading a process. She is.

00:14:45 Mmatshilo Motsei

She is a custodian of knowledge and knowledge that we don't necessarily learn about in universities, so that for me is a major lesson that I have learned.

00:14:58 Mmatshilo Motsei

Of learning to redefine leadership and that the elders who have not even set foot in a classroom are our leaders. They lead us.

00:15:11 Mmatshilo Motsei

Lesson that I have learned in terms of the work that I do.

00:15:15 Mmatshilo Motsei

Second thing is that as a leader and an activist, we often use the word. We empower people.

00:15:24 Mmatshilo Motsei

What I have learned is that.

00:15:26 Mmatshilo Motsei

When you empower people, you also empower them against yourself.

00:15:33 Mmatshilo Motsei

That sometimes the very people that you empowered code and code can stand up against you. And often people take it very badly that I have done this and that for them.

00:15:49 Mmatshilo Motsei

Now they are the ones who are standing up against me without looking at. Is there something that I may have done that warrants critique from them?

00:15:58 Mmatshilo Motsei

So that is also another leadership lesson and that speaks to one of my favorite phrases is that.

00:16:06 Mmatshilo Motsei

You can't be a good leader if you.

00:16:10 Mmatshilo Motsei

And in my experience, we don't spend enough time.

00:16:16 Mmatshilo Motsei

On dissecting the notion of followership because followers are leaders in their own right, a leader is not the one who's leading people from the front. The followers, each of them, are leading their own lives. Their leaders in some perspective.

00:16:34 Mmatshilo Motsei

So I have learned that to be a good leader, I must also be a good follower.

00:16:40 Mounira Chaieb

And by following people who are inspired by what other people are doing and getting those ideas and implementing them.

00:16:50 Mounira Chaieb

To improve their own lives, right?

00:16:52 Mmatshilo Motsei

And also follow up could mean that if you are a leader, you don't have the last say, you know as an example right now I'm working with a youth group in the community and then being young people, they tend to defer to me to make decisions.

00:17:07 Mmatshilo Motsei

And what do you?

00:17:08 Mmatshilo Motsei

Are we on the right?

00:17:09 Mmatshilo Motsei

This kind of thing. But then I'm saying no, I'm also your follower.

00:17:14 Mmatshilo Motsei

You have to drive.

00:17:16 Mmatshilo Motsei

Of this so I can do that because there is a reversal of roles. Sometimes I lead them, sometimes I follow them.

00:17:24 Mounira Chaieb

Absolutely.

00:17:27 Mounira Chaieb

Thank you so much for sharing your really highly inspiring experience.

00:17:32 Mounira Chaieb

That was Machilo Bose author, he LA Midwife and social science researcher with a keen interest in integrating indigenous wisdom with modern innovations from South Africa.

00:17:45 Mounira Chaieb

You've been listening to five remarkable African women about the inspiring leadership journeys as part of the leading feminist voices project, exclusively launched by the Africa Leadership Center from me, Munira Shayab and the producer Joki Engonier.

00:18:03 Mounira Chaieb

Thank you for listening.