

Jerry Colonna:

Welcome, Nicole. It's great to see you again. And thank you for coming on the show. Before we get started, just take a minute and introduce yourself.

Nicole:

Yeah, my name is Dr. Nicole Marie Ortiz. I work as the director of leadership and belonging at Denver Zoo. I'm also an adjunct faculty member at Metropolitan State University in Denver. I'm a farmer and a mom to a pretty awesome kid.

Jerry Colonna:

So I'll share the story from my view of how we came to know one another. I got a random note. I think it was on LinkedIn. Is that right?

Nicole:

Instagram, actually.

Jerry Colonna:

Instagram, that's right. From someone with the most intriguing title I've ever seen, the Director of Leadership and Belonging, from the Denver Zoo. And I can't help but be fascinated by the combination of all those things.

And so the request slash invitation was to connect, talk a little bit about my book, Reunion, but also just a visit. And I and my colleague, Margaret Hendricks, who's the podcast producer, shout out to Margaret because she's a magician, came to visit.

And I got to witness an extraordinary experience of this group, a book club, which was actually much more than a book club, facilitated and more specifically held gracefully by you. And so that's how we came to know each other.

Am I remembering correctly? Is there anything you would add or alter about that?

Nicole:

Yeah, maybe I'll start with the intention of the invitation, which was in our book club, we go seasonally. And so each season will have an area of focus based on one of our leadership competencies. And our area of focus for the season happened to be I prioritize learning about myself. And so we were reading a collection of books and your book was one of them. And I thought just on a whim, I know Jerry is here in Colorado, just a stone's throw away from where we are. What harm will it be in putting out this invitation? And so the invitation was received so gracefully and with such generosity.

But really that place of spending time learning about ourselves and having someone arrive who could speak to us in a way that helped us really explore that idea at a deeper level and to see that it's not just us here at Denver Zoo who are curious about cultivating leaders who prioritize

learning about themselves, that this is actually a movement out in the world, and so it was really lovely to be able to feel like we're not alone on this really beautiful and somewhat scary journey.

Jerry Colonna:

Yeah, and as I'm remembering more clearly now, I think we had been talking about my first book, *Reboot*. I think that was the book that you all had read in the book club, which of course builds upon the notion of better humans make better leaders. And what does that really mean and that sort of thing. And you dangled the offer that was an offer I could not refuse of hanging out with some of the creatures whom you are privileged to help care for.

Tell me about the relationship between how you see your role, the book club, and tell me, why is it so important from your perspective, from your seat, that leaders kind of know each other in that way.

Nicole:

Yeah. Hmm. Maybe I can walk us back a little bit, which is when I started my role here at Denver Zoo, I was hired on as the DEIA manager, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Accessibility Manager. And leadership development was maybe one component one small piece of this role.

And as I really started to jump into the work, I proposed that maybe there was a shift in the title, which is us thinking about what is our approach to DEIA at Denver Zoo? And I invited us to think about it from the lens of learning and belonging. And so my role shifted to the manager of learning and belonging. And we were then thinking about, if we host spaces where people can learn, learn about themselves, learn about others, learn about the world, that is how we move closer to this place of belonging. And then I really started to bring my passion for leadership development and create this portfolio of leadership development and developing this framework around what does leadership mean to us here at Denver Zoo. And what ended up happening was there was this beautiful pathway that was created, which was that we were going to focus really deeply on leadership and how that connects to belonging. And so I get to help create and cultivate these containers, design these spaces where we are developing ourselves as leaders in service of this concept of cultivating belonging in our organization. And it's cultivating belonging for ourselves and coming back to ourselves. And in doing so, we start to see people. We start to see whole people. And I think my assertion here is that is what leads to belonging.

So the book club happens to be one of those containers, one of those spaces where we can live into some of these principles of emergent strategy, Adrienne Marie Brown's work of less prep, more presence. out enough of an intention and a provocation and then see what happens.

And what's been really beautiful about that is as we've cultivated this space with that intention is that the right people are showing up and more and more people are showing up. And the way that they're showing up is there's almost some like unspoken agreements about when you arrive to the space, you arrive as a learner, not a knower, you arrive ready to contribute in whatever way makes sense for you that day. And it's a space that when people miss it or when they can't

make it to one month's gathering, they miss out, they're maybe disappointed, or they send their reflections via an email because they want to respond to the provocation and they wanna make sure that they continue to stay connected to the space.

Yeah, I think that's how that book club connects to that journey.

Jerry Colonna:

Well, I appreciate that. And getting more of the background really helps me understand, what's been the most surprising aspect of the journey. And even beginning, if you will, as someone holding the chalice of DEIA and morphing that..what's that been like for you?

Nicole:

I've been in this work for a while and I have evolved in this work. And a lot of that evolution is my emotional maturity that has defined how I show up. And so I would say that the place that I've arrived in now is that I work at an organization that has decided to prioritize this work through the allocation of resources to people and to experiences.

Now, are we perfect? No, because I don't even know what perfect would look like. Like, I can't even imagine what a perfect organization would look like in this work.

Jerry Colonna:

It might not be human. You're right.

Nicole:

It might not be human. It's idealized organization. And so, in that imperfection is where we're invited into our greatest experiences of humanity. I would say that has been maybe the most surprising in all of this work is to really see humanity. And the beautiful, most inspiring parts of humanity, because we get so many stories about the parts of humanity that we might call ugly or problematic.

And I continue to turn my gaze towards the beauty and dare I say practice loving all of humanity because the way I've chosen to do this work in my journey and emotional maturity is to approach it through love and compassion always.

And so I don't get to choose who I extend that to because I've chosen that it is everyone. I don't get to delineate. You get love and compassion, but not you. And that can be hard sometimes in this work where people want to say, no, but you need to decide who's right and who's wrong. And you need to decide who gets that amount of compassion and who doesn't. And so as I'm talking through this right now, I think the most surprising thing is our innate capacity when we decide to do so, which is to love with a fullness. And how when you choose that, you can really love people that you thought maybe you could never love or extend compassion towards people that you never thought you could extend compassion towards.

Jerry Colonna:

We're at an interesting moment in the work associated with DEI, JEDI, Jedi work, sometimes it's called Justice, Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity, and Accessibility as you...as the Denver Zoo was referring to it, we're at an interesting inflection point, aren't we? Where these efforts are really being challenged. And I'm finding it to be heartbreaking. And I'm curious how you're holding it because I suspect I may be able to learn something in that regard from you.

Nicole:

I get to guide our diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility committee here at Denver Zoo as well. That's a component of my work. And our employee resource groups. And one thing I continue to invite our members of both of those spaces is that it's not about always what we do. It's about how we do it. And so when I think about these, these challenges that are arriving in this sphere right now is, I think we're being invited into thinking about the 'what' we do might change in certain ways. The 'how' we do it is the core that we get to continue to come back to.

So how do I show up in spaces? How do I as an individual choose to show up in every moment because every moment matters in this work. I often talk to my people about what it means to be infinite and how each of us are infinite. And what I mean by that is there's you and I in this moment, physically we are connecting in this space. And you and I exist in so many other rooms and so many other spaces based on the interactions that we've had before this moment. And those people that we interacted with and the spaces we interacted with, they carry us with them. And so every moment matters. Every time, every interaction, every space I choose to show up in or I show up in, how I show up matters.

And so I think about this place in the work is, okay, yes, we might need to start using different language and some of our strategies might shift. And how will each of us as contributors to this to this movement continue to show up from the place of where this work the intention of what this work is about? And I think that's for all of us to start to get curious about and really define and refine.

Because we're not going to be able to depend on the things of the past or the activities that we did on the past. So how do we come back to ourselves and really think about that? And you talk about the strong back and the open heart. That's what we're really called into right now. Strong back. Who am I in this world? Open heart. How will I receive others in this work? So that's my approach to this.

Jerry Colonna:

Mm-hmm. And I hear that and I'm thinking back to our time together in circle. And it's helping me understand the openness that I saw in the group and the curiosity that folks had.

I have my own theories about what I'm going to ask about, but I'm going to put those to the side for the moment. And really, I'm really curious to hear your connections on these thoughts, because we started off by talking about the importance of and we've been saying this, leaders,

but I'm going to broaden it and say the importance of all of us, in a sense, being grounded in knowing our own self. From where you sit, from the work that you've done, from the work you continue to do, what is the relationship between that and, to use a phrase I use in reunion, systemic belonging? This notion of a systemic approach to that capacity? Is there a relationship between knowing oneself and creating those conditions?

Nicole:

I think my initial thought is that is the starting point. It is without that as the point of emanation. I don't know if systemic belonging is possible. So we are developing a program this idea of developing leaders as coaches and being coach like, and that this is an approach that we're taking here at Denver Zoo is that we want all of our leaders to be able to be coach like for ourselves and for others.

And in this coaching program, the first component is I need to know myself. I need to know who I am, exploring my identity. I need to know how my mind works in that what are my go-to thoughts? What are the biases and the heuristics that I move through the world with? What are the stories I tell about myself? And what are the stories I tell about?

Jerry Colonna:

Mm.

Nicole:

And without knowing that without having that sense of awareness, what I will do is I will move through the world from that unconscious habitual place, causing continuing to repeat patterns potentially causing harm. And so this all starts with who am I? How do I move through the world? What are the stories I tell? And in beginning to understand that I can then see how I then relate to others or choose not to relate to others. So I would say, yeah, it is the beginning point if we want to arrive at that place of systemic belonging, is we have to get to know who we are individually.

Jerry Colonna:

I was just going to reference the notion, which you know well now, of radical self-inquiry that need that ground for actually understanding where we are.

Nicole:

Yes, just that idea of transcendence. I think sometimes we think I need to focus externally first and figure out belonging over there. When really if I get to know myself first and foremost, then I can transcend that ego or that self and realize how deeply connected I am to everything.

Jerry Colonna:

Mm-hmm. How has this message landed within the zoo? I'm imagining that people come from a variety of preconceived notions about how they're supposed to be, a variety of experiences, a variety of levels of openness to ideas like this. What's that been like for you?

Nicole:

Maybe that's one of those surprises, that place of being surprised by humanity. I would say that I choose to do this work from a place of intentionality. And I say that instead of authenticity, because for me, sometimes I struggle with this word authenticity, because I don't always know what it means. So I think for myself, if I were to operationalize what authenticity looks like for me, it is intentionality. With my words...

Jerry Colonna:

I know what you mean.

Nicole:

...with my actions with the work that I take on. So when I decided to approach this work from that place of how I wanted to do the work, and because it came from that place of what might come off as authentic, the response to that invitation to invite people in has been overwhelmingly positive and gracious and curious in that there was, I would say, and continues to be, because it makes sense, is this is another way of moving through the world, some uncertainty, some "why this, what does this even mean? Or I don't think this is for us."

And it makes sense because if you've never seen that model, then I'm looking at another model and the other model makes sense. So this model is different and I don't know. And so I just continue to show up with this model, with this way of being. And then people could put those two models next to each other and say, "oh, oh yeah, I see this. Oh yeah, this actually, this makes sense." I don't necessarily need to change or let go of the old model, instead maybe I can layer it on top of and see how they intersect.

So what I would say is that the people who are responding to the invitation to show up are blowing my mind and they are adding depth and color to this work in ways that I could not do on my own. And they are inviting other people into the work who maybe didn't respond to my invitation, who when I sent out the invitation, it didn't resonate. But when their peer sent it out, it made sense. And so it feels like there's this rippling out of a movement. And I think something we're doing really well here at Denver Zoo in this leadership development work, in this way of being is we repeat it again and again, and we connect it back to our core values. And we draw all of these frameworks continuously through the things that we're doing so it feels coherent and that we're that we really are reiterating that this is what's important to us. And we're going to say it again. And we're going to say it again until we can all embody what it feels like. And, and I have no assumption that everyone will be on board by this date. And I want everyone to know that they're always invited, always invited, no matter what, in whatever shape they come, they're always invited to the conversation. And especially if they want to bring another perspective to the conversation.

Jerry Colonna:

I was just taking some notes, and I was noticing, as you were discussing and describing the

journey and openness and nonjudgmental reaction to what might be described as resistance. And that's the grace that I was seeing to maintain a posture of invitation and maybe even welcoming the resistance that might be showing up and questioning whether or not, you know, is this just airy-fairy stuff? Is this really going to really do anything? Why are we focused on this? And rather than combating that, kind of welcoming that. Am I seeing correctly?

Nicole:

I would say that is the essence of it, is welcome the stranger to the conversation. Check yourself when denial and defensiveness is coming up and get curious about the denial and defensiveness. This honoring, like, it's okay if my first thought is I'm disappointed or I'm angry or I'm sad by this person's response...

Jerry Colonna:

...or I'm skeptical.

Nicole (31:33.66)

...absolutely that those things are all valid human reactions. And if I get curious about where that might be coming from for someone and invite them to get curious about it, because I think that's a big piece of our work is that, or at least how I hope to approach my work, which is I want to support people in coming back to themselves, finding their greatness, their strengths, their talents, passions that they bring, the person that they aspire to be in the world, is when we meet that resistance, if we invite that person to get curious about where that resistance is for them, to unpack what's there for them, and we hold them in that space, we don't do that work for them. We hold them while they're doing that work, is that's...where the opportunity for relationship comes in.

If I push you away and say, well, go do your work over there. I don't have space for that. Come back when you're ready to do it this way. We're gonna lose people that way. And it's really hard to do this work by yourself. And so I think as much as possible, it's about this work is challenging for all of us, like the self work, the who I am, the how I'm growing. And if you need a partner or like support, we're here to be there alongside you in that work.

Jerry Colonna:

You know, if I can lift it up even out of the example of the zoo and the container in which you're working, in which we're having this conversation, and I recognize that you move in multiple fronts and multiple worlds, this kind of approach of encountering what I've been calling resistance, to use a psychotherapeutic term, but but it's really skepticism or reluctance or a kind of different prioritization.

There's something, I think, that's really important right now. Here we are. We're talking, and I'll bring in the external world for just a second. We're months into what is, um, a really painful and divisive war. Not that any war isn't painful and divisive. And we're talking in a week where hundreds of students are being arrested for protesting on campuses. And the divisiveness in our

society, just speaking about the United States and the bubble of the United States right now, because I'm not cognizant of the wider world in that sense. It just seems to be accelerating. And as you were describing, the non-judgmental grace-filled way in which I see you responding. I was reminded of Valerie Kaur's book *See No Stranger*, which is a teaching from her faith, from the Sikh faith, about how to approach the other, which is in essence to be hospitable even to that which might challenge me even to that which might cause me to question my own love, safety, and belonging, if you will. To be hospitable.

And I don't say this to place a burden on you. Lord knows we all have our own burdens. But I will say that there is a lesson in what you're saying that I think is broadly applicable beyond organizations all the way through to our communities.

Jerry Colonna:

Can we respond with the kind of graceful openness that you're talking about with love and compassion when the volume of fighting or shouting is so high when there are anti-anti-anti stances everywhere we look.

Except I would say this, there's a stance that I think is missing, which is anti-hate or more specifically, love. I don't know, how do you respond to that?

Nicole:

Sometimes I get the question, how have you arrived at this point, Nicole? How do you show up so grounded and calm and peaceful? And I'm always hesitant to give like "10 step program to arrive at inner peace."

Jerry Colonna:

Right, right. Meditate for 15 minutes. Don't drink coffee. Right.

Nicole:

...because I don't know how I've arrived here other than to say...Living life and observing life is a beautiful teacher of what it means to be human. And when we can take a step back from our experiences and say, what was in this experience for me? How did I learn and evolve and grow? What did I learn from this thing that was hard or uncomfortable? And what does that teach me or show me about my core values or what's important to me? And so, like, if anything, I think if we are all...Heating the call to this way of showing up differently. It's about knowing that we actually have so many tools in our backpack that we're carrying with us, which is our lives.

And if we can take enough time to get curious about the things that have happened and how we have grown and evolved through them, I think many of the things that will come to realize is I do see the way that I want to show up in the world. I do realize how strong I actually am and the harm that can come from those moments being unexamined and just running us on autopilot.

So, I would say to that is that we all do have that capacity, that we are full of beautiful wisdom



that is waiting to be unlocked. And I would say that none of us can do that alone. And so for those of us who feel like I need to get on this journey by myself, like I need to become this kind of person who is grounded and intentional and seeing the possibility, I would say, and who will help you? Who is in your life that can support you on that journey? Because going it alone is, I won't say impossible because I don't know if it's impossible, but it feels pretty darn close to impossible.

And so how do we start to cultivate communities and supports around us that can help us become the kind of the kind of people we want to become, which again is coming back to myself. Who is the person I want to be?

I borrow your work of the strong back and the open heart as a physicality of something I teach in a training that we do here, which is to find a tall neutral spine to have your tall back, roll your shoulders up to your ears and down your spine to have the open heart and then hold your palm out and hold it lightly. Strong back, open heart, hold it lightly if I can hold my thoughts, my experiences lightly, I can start to get curious about them. And then I can start to get curious about them with other people.

So that's my I think that's my practice, I would say that if we can more of us start to invite ourselves and each other into that. Maybe, maybe we can move closer to this place where we can engage in discourse and meet conflict in a more productive and dignity-centered way.

Jerry Colonna:

You know, I wasn't sure how our conversation would evolve. It was an openness to emergence that the way I ended up approaching it. And what I have to say is I'm finding such deep resonance in the way we are trying to be in the world, each of us, you and I. And I acknowledge that there are times when I live up to that aspiration and times when I don't. And I hold with that open hand that you modeled even my attachment to my wish to be the best possible person I can be. Because I am human.

And I never know when I start these conversations who is going to learn what from whom. But I see the way you have taken some concepts like strong back, open heart, and built upon them, and expanded. Because I just took those concepts from my teachers and built upon them. And so what I feel so strongly in this moment is kinship. I think I used that word when we were together the first time. And I feel that kinship. And

Jerry Colonna:

I think your colleagues, human and non-human at the zoo, are lucky to have you in their lives.

Nicole:

Thank you. I can say not all organizations are ready for a Nicole Ortiz. And I witnessed that as I was exploring my next place to land because I realized that as I have grown in this work, I was done pretending I was done giving out the buzzwords that would land me the job. I decided to

be really authentic and real about who I am and how I was going to go about the work at all, you know, that just no other way. And it felt like sometimes the universe was testing me, which was, are you sure? But this would feel so much nicer for your ego if you just did the dance and said the thing. And when I arrived to Denver Zoo and I sat at my interview, and I said, the thing that kept bringing me back to this work was hope. And that without hope, there was no possible way that this work is sustainable. And then I cried in the interview, um, that they didn't turn away that in fact, they turned towards. And so I do think it's a call for us as individuals to show up. Yes. And as organizations to really start to get curious as are we ready for, for this kind of leader?

Are we ready for this kind of work? Are we ready to open up our eyes and our hearts to the possibility to another way of being? And so, yes, I feel like I've arrived in a place where my work is valued. And I feel so grateful to have the people around me that I have at Denver Zoo who see me and see themselves and continue to show up to this. There's a lot of reciprocity.

Jerry Colonna:

I have a feeling you belong there. And they belong to you. They belong with you in that way. I keep thinking there are snippets of a very long and beautiful poem by David White called All the True Vows. And he says in one point, can you make a vow that it would kill you to break?

And I think we are called in this moment of division and separation. We are called in this moment to make those vows, to lean into the very, very hard work of knowing ourselves so well that we can then do the equally, if not hard of work, of seeing no strangers what Valerie Kerr calls radical love.

Nicole, I want to thank you for reaching out to me on Instagram. I want to thank you for, and for those who might follow me on Instagram, you'll see pictures of Rudy the Rhino that was a delight to meet. And I want to thank you for the work that you do. The work you do matters.

You know, I had a whole bunch of questions about like, hey, how do we measure the outcome and perform, you know, the output of all this? And I just put those to the side because my eyes could tell me, my heart could tell me what the effect of your work has been. So I know that it matters, and I know that I just admire your grace.

Nicole:

Thank you. And thank you for being one of my teachers in this world. You were my teacher before you knew it. I would call you into spaces and I feel so grateful to be able to now call you a friend and a confidant. So thank you for choosing to be the way that you are in this.

Jerry Colonna:

Thank you so much for that.