

Tiana ([00:00](#)):

Thank you zoom. Hi everybody. It's Tiana, and I'm here with a guest and I'm really excited about this guest because this is somebody who forced me to put on my big girl panties and get serious about what I'm doing here because she's busy. So hey guest.

Desiree ([00:27](#)):

Hi.

Tiana ([00:30](#)):

Can you tell the people who you are?

Desiree ([00:33](#)):

I sure can. I am Desiree Adaway, she/her. I'm a consultant, trainer, coach, and speaker. I am the principal owner of the Adaway group.

Tiana ([00:47](#)):

That's super. I'm really excited because I've been a fan, I would say of you and your work for plenty of years now. I remember that you were doing the conversations about...

Desiree ([01:06](#)):

Race, class and gender.

Tiana ([01:07](#)):

There we go. I was like, "Oh, this is an opportunity to talk to you for free? Yes." And that conversation was really important to me in a lot of ways because you asked these questions and I recorded the call. I asked to record the call because I have no idea what's going to come out of my face and I want to record it and I've never listened to it back, but I came across it the other day when I was trying to clear space on my phone and I was like, "Oh yeah, that's right. You did do this." I remember being asked questions on that call and having to go back in my memory and figure out what my experience was and finding that sometimes I didn't have a good answer.

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

So, the call happened. I started doing it like I just feel like I'm talking to the same people. So the first series of calls were just me getting to know people. I was like, "I want to expand my network. I want to meet new people." So I just asked folks, "Hey, if you like me, you think I'm decent, introduced me to people." So I was just talking to folks like, who are you? And what are you doing? What do you love? And I loved those conversations and this is what always breaks my heart. When I say this, another Black man was killed by the state and I actually can't remember which one it was.

Desiree ([02:53](#)):

So then I said, I'm going to continue these conversations, but we're actually going to talk about things that matter about race, class, and gender. I did not do any recording. I had over a thousand people by the time. I did not record anyone. I did not write any notes. I did not write a book. I did not write any blog posts. I did that for my edification, but I also did that for myself. It was a way for me to model for other people. How do you invite folks in for some difficult conversations? And how do you paint the

space in your own life for that to happen? Absolutely. So, over time, I did these things. They were 30 minutes. If you remember, I asked a few questions like, what did your parents teach you about race?

Desiree ([03:58](#)):

What was the first time you heard or sad or racial slur? Things like that. So it was amazing. People shared and were so generous. They shared so much with me. It's been really helpful for me. As I do my work as a trainer and a teacher. Is that for so many of us? These conversations are so new. We've been taught not to talk about these things. By us continuing to do that, we allow these systems to continue to work just the way they were set up to. So, we were one of many amazing folks who were generous and kind and made space and time for me to be with them. I appreciate it.

Tiana ([05:07](#)):

Thank you. I just got amazing. I am such a fan of anybody who is inviting folks for generosity, like just out of generosity. I'm doing this because I honestly want to have a conversation. I want to hold a space for you while you plumb these steps for yourself and I think that's amazing.

Desiree ([05:40](#)):

What was moving for me was the level of folks who were like, I was in first grade and you know, some little girl, some little Black girl, bumped into me at the water fountain and I called them a name because I'm six, when I had no idea what that word meant. But now I'm 46 and I still hold so much guilt and shame about what I did or which was so common when I would ask people of color. Like the first time you were called a racial slur and I am not lying. Second grade, kept coming up for people. Again, doing things that kids do, and then someone said something and no idea of the word or the language they were using or the hurt that they were putting on other folks but we remember those things. So clearly just like they were yesterday.

Tiana ([07:04](#)):

So, how did you get into this work? Like what was your path and trajectory besides living experience?

Desiree ([07:13](#)):

As part of the living experience, before I had children, I used to be an activist. I was the kid at 14 who would have the list of groceries that I allowed my mother to purchase. We don't eat table grapes because we're boy coddling. Because of the farmworkers. Right? We don't have Nestle products because of the global ban. I guess I was that kid. I was a kid whose mother wanted her mink coat more than anything in life because we were solidly lower-middle-class, a mink fur coat, and I would put pictures on the refrigerator of the ways that they killed the animals for furs. I was that kid. So, I always had a call that there was always something. So before having children, I was in the street. Combat boots on protesting person. Then I had children and I realized I actually couldn't get arrested.

Desiree ([08:34](#)):

Then I couldn't do that. So my activism began to look different. Then for years, I worked for-profit and nonprofit for large international nonprofit organizations. I worked and lived all over the world. I ran huge teams, global teams, and what kept popping up as I was managing these teams where we didn't have the conversations we needed to have and a lot of these conversations that we needed to worry about race, class, and gender. So I was the person that would say the thing. I was the person with my teams that talked about those taboo subjects. So, I got this reputation. 11 years ago, I sent my youngest

off to college and I took off and started working for myself. So, that was when I began to pull all those pieces of my life together and work for myself.

Desiree ([09:59](#)):

I was a single mom raising two kids and I say this all the time when I teach where are the times I took it? Because I had to because I had two kids to feed. Absolutely. That's the reality and when they went off to school I think a lot of people would have still been pretty conservative like you got to pay for them to get through school. Why are you quitting your good-paying job? And I was like, now's the time. Now's the time to go for it and it was perfect, then I started doing coaching for activists. So a lot of the BLM activists that you saw or folks who were doing on the ground stuff, I was helping to do a lot of strategies, and behind the scenes were fundraising, things like that.

Desiree ([11:02](#)):

As I said, my street days were over, but there were other skills that I had that I could help utilize some of the movement work with. About 11 years ago, I started the group and we took off and we've not looked back and it's been a real gift to be able to do the work that supports Black and brown folks. I mean, I tell people all the time I go into organizations, not for white leadership. I go in there for Black and brown folks for having to work or who have to stay in there because they got families to feed. That's right. So I show up in those spaces for them.

Tiana ([11:56](#)):

That's amazing. I love how at the very beginning she was like, "Yeah, you know, I had kids and I realized I couldn't get arrested any more like that in there at the end.

Desiree ([12:11](#)):

Well, because in the US depending on what state you're in, you're literally putting your children at risk of the state coming in, and like in Minnesota, you can get a felony for protesting, which is my constitutional right to protest. But once I have that, it's hard for me now to find housing.

Tiana ([12:43](#)):

And you're a Black woman.

Desiree ([12:44](#)):

So it's a system that's set up. I'm out here protesting for my right but that can also lead me down a path. That's really difficult for me to get off.

Tiana ([13:00](#)):

This is amazing. I mean that's something really important and I think a lot of people don't understand that the system is against us.

Desiree ([13:10](#)):

Absolutely. The folks that I truly admire like not these kinds of superstar activists, but a lot of them are amazing. But these folks would just solidly do the day-to-day work on the ground.

Desiree ([13:35](#)):

Those folks, there's no retirement; there's no 4-1k for helping your community, for organizing, and a lot of these folks put community ahead of everything, and I always like, how are we going to help make sure that when they're ready? When they are our elders and they're ready to pass on the Baton? How do we make sure they're taken care of? That they have housing. They have health care; they have access. So for me, that's a real issue. How are we taking care of the people who are frontline taking care of us?

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

That's a fantastic question. I appreciate the groundedness of that question for the simple fact that I think that a lot of us who are working towards liberation, we're like "visionary type of people". You know, we're thinking about what it's going to look like when it arrives, but we're not necessarily thinking about what are the actual steps that must be put into place? What are the systems that are going to have to be created? What about the infrastructure? You know, we're not thinking about those concrete things. We're just thinking about tearing it down and I think that that's super necessary. We do need to think about how do we tear it down? How do we get the people? How do we get that critical mass to make things move forward? Yes, absolutely, but also what happens next?

Desiree ([15:23](#)):

Well, I always say, I don't talk about tearing it down if I'm not talking about what we're building. We don't get to tear something down and not even have an understanding of what we don't. So the question is not just, what are you willing to destroy? The question is, what are you willing to build? And who do you need standing beside you to make that building happen?

Tiana ([15:52](#)):

This is yes.

Desiree ([16:02](#)):

I mean, just destruction for me is what supremacy does, right? Its supremacy is all about, so we can not just be all about destruction. So one of my court mates in my work is that I will never treat people the way white supremacy treatment, anybody. I am going to try my very best to never replicate those systems apart, which means that I make space for forgiveness. I create. I believe in redemption. I believe in the app. I have to fully believe in these things. I don't believe that you throw away anybody. So I have to then believe, I don't just get to destroy if I'm not willing to feel like a part of this ethos.

Tiana ([17:08](#)):

That's a fantastic reminder because I realized, a lot of us that we come to this work because we've been propelled here by our lived experience and the big feelings that we're feeling by our grief, anger, and our rage, and these are important feelings to have. This is an important energy to harness, but the problem is it burns hot, it burns fast, and it burns you out. We need to titrate that. We need to figure out how we can continue to hold on. How do we make this sustainable? And I need you all on the other side.

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

I tell people all the time, I stay at a nice summer. I live in the summer time. I'm that all the time. But I try to use my aunt, sometimes I can't, and then I go on Twitter and I start fighting with people, but I try to use that anger and service. Right. That's right. I try to use it in service. These systems will use you up and

spit you out pretty well. I mean, that was what they were created for capitalism was created to use us up physically and emotionally and that destroys throw us away. We have to think right. We have to hold these things with nuance with both hands, right? That's destroying capitalism, but guess what? Capitalism ain't going away tomorrow. So how am I going to navigate this, where we are, and in what ways can I be transactional with capitalism? Can I use it? I always say, I will use the out of a system, but never people. I am transformational with the people in my world, but capitalism, I will use it. I will use it up because I know it was made to destroy me.

Desiree ([19:37](#)):

I think we just have to understand that we can use systems, but we don't ever use people.

Tiana ([19:51](#)):

That's right. What body trust got to do with that?

Desiree ([20:02](#)):

Body trust gets everything to do with her. Well, do you know literally what just happened? And timing is always perfect right before I've been trying to buy some long-term care health insurance because at some point capitalism is going to use me and my body. So I've been in the process working with a broker and trying to get all these health insurance policies and some other pieces in place and had to fill out, I don't know, 50 pages worth of forms, where they ask you everything about your life and it's a lot. I've talked to these people a couple of times via Zoom. They've seen me, I've seen them and I just literally got a message before I talked to you where the broker said, "Hey, I see where your height and weight is on here."

Tiana ([21:01](#)):

Oh no.

Desiree ([21:04](#)):

The estimates I gave you, they're going to charge way more than that, and it may be prohibitive for you to buy the bench, to buy this policy. Then I said, that's my weight. That's my height. That's who I am. That's right. Just let me know. So what does body trust have to do with it? For me, it's I could have just filed down to this whole "Oh, you're fat because of that, and in my mind, "I'm like these people." I'm sorry.

Tiana ([21:47](#)):

That's right.

Desiree ([21:47](#)):

That's what I said to myself. I said they do physicals, that's reality. That's how much I want and they don't know me. They're not taking an account, how much I exercise or how I live my life, or what I do. They just see two numbers and they try to tell me who I am and they try to tell me what I'm capable of. If I didn't trust myself and my body, I would fall for that. I would believe everything they say about fat Black women. How I'm undesirable or useless, or only here to work or to raise somebody else's children. So yeah. I'm just like, "Okay, do you and I do me in this big oh buddy because that's the body I got."

Tiana ([22:58](#)):

That's right.

Desiree ([23:03](#)):

So it's important because it is just one more way that these systems want to control who we are and how we show up in the world. It's one more way for them to destroy us.

Tiana ([23:22](#)):

That's true. I noticed that this is a difficult topic. I know there was an adage going on around the mid and early 2000s where people would say things like fatphobia were the last acceptable form of oppression and now all the other forms of oppression are back in fashion. So we can't say that anymore. But what I notice is, when you're over here on the left and in progressive spaces, and we're talking about liberation, folks still be talking about trying to get people to be thin or larger bodies are completely left out of the conversation. We're not being accommodated and we're not even being considered. So there's a real problem here, and I'm curious because you were somebody who was doing this laboratory work and found that this belongs there too. What was your connection? How did you find that out?

Desiree ([24:52](#)):

I think I made that connection with ableism, like fatphobia or ableism. When I teach about ableism, we talk about universal design, right? If we use and lead with a universal design, then we don't have to worry that that chair will hold butt because we're going to make wider chairs. We're going to make chairs that don't have an arm, or movable arms, like we're going to make it so that the most human bodies, no matter what they look like can sit in that space and feel comfortable. When I understood universal design and really started connecting to ableism. The other thing too is, five years ago I had a major accident where I broke my leg in three different places and I was laid up for a year in an apartment that was on the second floor. I was on a walker and achieved all this. But you know, it became so apparent to me that those things can change in an instant.

Desiree ([26:33](#)):

Like I was absolutely able bodied and all of a sudden, now in a second, I was not.

Tiana ([26:41](#)):

Yeah.

Desiree ([26:43](#)):

I think what that means for folks. Like I could get sick tomorrow, lose 150 pounds, and I have a million people telling me that, "Oh my God, I looked so great." I'm battling some illness or I can gain a hundred more pounds tomorrow. That's right. Again, that changes nothing about who I am. My values, my intelligence, my ability to move, my ability to be happy, my ability to love and be in a relationship. None of that changed. But again, we've created a society that will tell us the patriarchy, which has told us that as women, we are unworthy.

Desiree ([27:50](#)):

The other thing or the other teacher for me was Toni Morrison. I think she's probably my greatest teacher because Toni Morrison taught me to not give two for the male gaze or the white gaze. But they

hold no power over me. So I know sometimes I'm on Facebook or I don't fight on Facebook like I used to. But there'll be some random person who will come up and have an argument on something, and then when you go back with it, the only thing they can say to you is, that's why you're so fat or ugly. I'm laughing hysterically. I'm like, let's be clear. I have many things. I am ugly then, so what? Is that all you guys got me? I need you to come to something like the best Peewee version. Bring something. That doesn't hurt me. It doesn't hurt me because your gaze is nothing to me.

Desiree ([29:14](#)):

I didn't learn that from my mother. I learned that from literally reading Toni Morrison. So why am I giving my energy, time, and attention? Something that has no value will never love me the way I need to be loved. Will never care for me the way I need to be careful. We'll never have my best interests at heart; never once, not ever. So I am giving it that and I'm talking to live. Of course their individual life. But collectively, no. Collectively the patriarchy will never allow a woman to be fat because as long as she's thin and all of her energy is put towards that gaze, then you don't have time to push back against these systems. You don't have time to ask questions, and it's a lot. But I was fortunate that that was the lesson that I got, and I never forgot it.

Tiana ([30:40](#)):

There is a quote by Audrey Lord and I love making some Audrey Lord.

Desiree ([30:46](#)):

The only Lord and savior that I know. There was only one lord and savior of my life and that's Audrey.

Tiana ([30:57](#)):

It's just amazing. I'm going to butcher the quote because I haven't thought about it in a while. What did she say? She said nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me.

Desiree ([31:17](#)):

That's right. I always name it first. I'm fat, so what? When I introduced myself when doing training and talking about identity, I used to go in front of crowds and I'd say, what did you see? And they'd be like, "Ooh", you know, everyone's trying to be all and I'm Black. We can say that. Right? I'm a woman and I'm fat. You all can say fat. It doesn't hold any power. It's a descriptor. That's all.

Tiana ([32:06](#)):

Right.

Desiree ([32:08](#)):

But what's amazing is when I'm working with groups and we're talking about identities, about these avatars of the people who are successful in these organizations. Do you know how many times I've had folks say, Desiree. I don't fit in here because I don't want to sit around and talk about diet. I've had folks come to me and say, I have an eating disorder and there are these three female leaders who they think they're trying to make a connection with younger folks and that's how they're talking about his diet.

Desiree ([33:03](#)):

I'm like, got it. So it's the same thing. Right? People were really crappy at communicating. But we just suck at it. We don't know how to make friends. I've always talked about when we first heard, like when we're meeting people. We need to shut up more people to talk about themselves and share what they want to share. When folks do the microaggression, like, where are you from? No. Where are you really from? I'm like, "You know what? You could have said hey, where's home for you? And they would have told you where home is." They may have told you where that extended home is from, but, where are you from? Where are you really from? These are people who think that they're honestly making connections. I think I need to teach a class on actually how to make a friend.

Tiana ([34:22](#)):

Oh my gosh. That would be really beneficial.

Desiree ([34:25](#)):

We don't know how to talk to people who look like us. We especially don't know how to talk to people who don't look like us. We don't know how to do.

Tiana ([34:32](#)):

No. I mean, the cultural blueprint that we all have is that we need to bond over our mutual hatred of ourselves. Totally. That's not a good relationship. That's not a good place to start.

Desiree ([34:50](#)):

People don't know what to do. I think it was Wendy Kaylee who said it. They don't know what to do when they meet a confident person.

Tiana ([35:02](#)):

Talk about, yes.

Desiree ([35:02](#)):

A confident fat person of color. Like they're confused.

Tiana ([35:13](#)):

That's right. When I started down my body acceptance journey, I worked hard to reclaim the word fat for myself. I started using it to describe myself like the way people would do that. But I'm trying not to look like I'm too freaked out here. It was so amusing to me how common it was. It brought me a lot of joy, actually.

Desiree ([35:54](#)):

When you see Lizzo, these people who are like Lizzo, can't be happy. She must be mad. She can't be happy. I am so confused.

Tiana ([36:19](#)):

Honestly, people are complex. I was probably often unhappy. I think it's very challenging to get a celebrity, especially a celebrity who is different from all the others, but also that girl out there, living.

Desiree ([36:38](#)):

Wait a minute. Look at me, not be happy and nobody expects you to be happy every day, but you know what, miss Liz only be Lizzo up.

Tiana ([36:48](#)):

She is living Liz name.

Desiree ([36:51](#)):

Lizzo is living, which is all we can opt to do.

Tiana ([36:54](#)):

Yes, absolutely.

Desiree ([36:57](#)):

We are amazed when we see other people who live in and are happy and I love it. That male gaze that white gaze, you don't get in here because you don't want me, but I am always amazed by folks who have an expectation, whatever size you are that you can't be confident and secure in those and how you navigate the world. It's a lot

Tiana ([38:16](#)):

I mean, it definitely says a lot about the collective misery of our society that we can't love someone else living and having joy.

Desiree ([38:30](#)):

Well, the reality is that oppression doesn't want you to have joy because joy is the center of liberation. That's why oppression tries to beat it out of you. Let's be clear, there are folks out there who will carry your impressions luggage all day long. They will carry that baggage. They're a soldier for it. They are in line and they're gonna make sure they're not happy, so I'm gonna make sure you're not happy too. But oppression doesn't want us to be joyful, or to be connected, or to have a community, or to rest. So every time you do that, every time you're happy in those moments. I'm 55. I am Black. I am fat in the U S. This world should have destroyed me by now. But it ain't, I am here.

Tiana ([39:36](#)):

Yes you are.

Desiree ([39:39](#)):

Joy is essential. It's a sense of a freedom.

Tiana ([39:50](#)):

That's a perfect segue. I know that you have a hard stop for today. So I'm going to ask you my final question and you just laid out this beautiful red carpet for it. So Desiree, tell me, tell the people, how were you living your best fat life?

Desiree ([40:11](#)):

I am bringing as much pleasure to myself as I can. I think pleasure is so essential to our lives. Some of us are thinking we don't deserve pleasure; we can't have pleasure. Pleasure is not for us. Pleasure is for everybody, and that is whether what I'm eating pleases me or who I'm with pleases me or where learning pleases me. I just started doing more art. I've become addicted to fountain pens. I cannot tell you how much pleasure I get from having ink all over my hands and writing out the bins and just doing art, which is something I'll never forget. Like 10 years ago, a friend of mine was like, you have no art supplies in your house. I was like, I don't live with children. Why would I have art supplies in my house? That's the way I was, just like, I don't have kids anymore. Why would I have art supplies in my house? Now I have, so I adore it. It pleases me. It makes me happy.

Desiree ([41:43](#)):

I live my best life by ensure that pleasure is in it every day, every way I go, whether that's through travel, reading, art or music, I surround myself with things that give me pleasure and joy.

Tiana ([42:06](#)):

I love it. It just absolutely delicious.

Desiree ([42:10](#)):

Exactly. Because life should be delicious.

Tiana ([42:12](#)):

I should be delicious.

Desiree ([42:15](#)):

We've been sold a bill of goods that says it's always supposed to be hard and terrible and I'm like, "Nope, it's not." But I also don't expect it to only be sunshine and rainbows. So I always say nothing lasts forever. That's real. But in those moments I'm going to extract as much.

Tiana ([42:51](#)):

I love it. So you heard it here. You're going to find her moments and extract all the pleasure we can out of town.

Desiree ([43:01](#)):

All the pleasure with him. Every last drop of it.

Tiana ([43:07](#)):

So this has been so good. Thank you so much for sitting here and having this conversation with me Desiree. I am so grateful.

Desiree ([43:15](#)):

Thank you.