

EPISODE 004

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:06] ANNOUNCER: You're listening to Ten Thousand Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world, with Rick Torseth and guests.

[00:00:20] RT: Everybody, this is Rick Torseth, and this is Ten Thousand Swamp Leaders, the podcast about leading, and leaders who choose to make it their preoccupation, their obsession with leading on difficult challenges in the world so they can make a difference.

Today, it is a great pleasure for me to have a friend or colleague, a partner in this kind of work, Nita Baum. She is originally a New York girl. But she now is residing in Washington, D.C. Nita brings two conversational focuses, two bodies of work to our conversation. So we'll impact both of them. The first is she's a cofounder of an organization called b*free. They have an incredibly interesting and ambitious mission to transform workplaces to healing spaces where people and culture center humanity and equity so that greater freedom, wellbeing, and sustainable prosperity for all people happens through the work, not because of the work. And Nita, there's a lot of stuff there. So we got to play with that one.

And then more recently, she's taken on the lead on a mission called solar responders, which is a not for profit organization that's maximizing first responder capacity to save lives by providing renewable backup energy. And for most of us, we might think, "What's the point of that one?" I mean, because is that an issue in the world? Well, it turns out, it is a big issue in the world. And Nita will help us understand how she came to be in that process, and what she's committed to doing there. So Nita, I want to welcome you to the swamp. How you doing?

[00:01:52] NB: Thank you so much for having me, Rick. I feel my feet are firmly entrenched in the swamp at the moment on many fronts, and I'm happily slogging my way through.

[00:02:03] RT: Good, good, good, you're in the right spot. So as a way to get us started, why don't you just tell us your story, wherever you want to begin in that story, we can pick it up

from there and we can go backwards. We may go forward. We will go forward. We may go backwards. But where do you want to begin? What's your story that you want people to know about you?

[00:02:19] NB: Yeah, thanks for this question. And I think I'm going to go with the first thing that comes up, which is a bit about my roots, which is maybe a bit about my parents. So I am the daughter of two East Indian immigrants to the United States. And sometimes I like to summarize my perspective on my parent on each of my parents, both of whom have passed at this point. And they're present for me. And they've been present for me for quite a while, in light of the caregiving role that I played in the last phases of both of their lives, but also a consciousness as I get older about – And specifically as related to leadership as eldership. And there's something about being an adult orphan, which is sometimes how those of us who are in this position frame it, that makes you or that has made me more aware of my role in what I sometimes think of as the second phase of my life. The first phase was sort of mucking around in discovery. Phase two is how to bring those lessons and that experience from the first phase to bear in the second phase as part of an ongoing learning, but also as part of an emphasis on contribution to the generations that will follow me.

So just briefly, about my parents, they were both interesting people, as most people's parents are. And my dad was the guy with whom I think much of my orientation about the globe, about systems and about looking at the big picture, the context in which we move and live, and a consciousness of interdependence. Like all of that was seated with my dad, and I think from a pretty young age. So from the time I was like probably that I can remember, five or six, we were having conversations about the fact that the water that's in front of me that I get to drink every day is not there without the work of many, many hands to make it so. And we were always together in the inquiry of like, “Wow! This world is a crazy place. There are a lot of people who are suffering, or who are struggling,” and very much in the inquiry of questions like why. What is it about us as humans, where we do struggle and suffer? And how do we think about what's possible in new and different ways? So I say some of that, some of my idealism, my optimism, but also a strong sense of pragmatism started and was seated very young with my dad and the conversations we had.

And my mom, my mom brought this kind of real – It's really interesting. If like my dad was the big picture guy. My mom, there was this centeredness and like how a real consciousness of like everything you consume shapes who you are. So whether that's food – And we grew up with a lot of consciousness around the science of food, and nutrition, and an Ayurvedic diet. Or whether it's the conversations, the media, the dialogue, the people you're in relationship with, they shape who you are. And when I put my parents together, I think this idea of like the individual as very much part of the collective. And the idea that what you do at an individual level in terms of how you change and how you learn and how you evolve is deeply interconnected to what happens at the collective level. And the sense of agency and kind of sourcing a sense of internal power, I think it came from the marriage of the two of them, for me. Putting together the lessons from both of them. So, yeah, that's a little bit about how I began.

[00:06:07] RT: Thank you for sharing it from that parental perspective and influence. I think that makes me think how infrequent we human beings are, is about understanding the shoulders we stand on called their parents. Whether we take them for granted, or other reasons, they're there every day in our lives. So they don't seem all that special in some ways. But it turns out they are. So I'm struck by how present you are, and probably were earlier to that happening while it was happening.

So I'm wondering if that all must have happened in “your phase one of life”. So if that's so, talk a little bit about this phasing before we get into b*free and the work you're doing there and Solar Responders. Invariably there's been some moments of truth, some intersection, some crossroads where you've made choices, and deliberate in ways. So take us a little further down the road in this phase one to phase two so we understand a little bit about who you are today.

[00:07:05] NB: Sure. So other facets of phase one, I think that my orientation to learn led me to education. So while I was a student at Columbia, my first touch points with education were teaching ESL to adult immigrants, which I think also had to do with my parents. It was like how do I build empathy for this experience they're having that's so different from my own as somebody who was born in the United States? And I remember that being just a real joy. Like being with people who, as adults, we're choosing to learn something very intentional much later in life. There were folks – I was probably 19, 20 when I was teaching them English, and

they were anywhere from 30s to 75. And there was also something about being in that intergenerational conversation that I can remember quite a bit.

And then on the flip side, I taught students who were – I taught remedial math and English to students who were in elementary school. And I did that in Harlem. And I would say the majority of those students were black and brown. I studied under a mentor who was just a little bit – She was maybe a senior when I was a sophomore, and she came from St. Croix. And I remember, her name was Amanda. And she was this amazing teacher and mentor for me as I was learning to teach these kids and kind of bring them along over the just the course of a summer.

And what I learned in that experience of teaching, of learning how to teach – So Amanda would circle us up every day. We would all sit in a circle, me, one of the teachers, and then probably like 8 to 10 young elementary students who came from rough backgrounds. They didn't have parents. They were maybe living in foster care or with grandparents and, accordingly, we're struggling educationally. And we would sing, and we would just get grounded together. She'd sometimes lead us through a little bit of play, a laughter, just something that made everyone laugh, and then a kind of emotional check-in.

And I haven't thought about her in a little while, but I remember how struck I was by the ways in which she brought both a great deal of humanity and a lot of art into the lives of these very promising youth. And we moved – One of the things that really struck me about that experience was we moved many of them from not being able to read or pass their city-wide test by the end of the summer to being able to do that.

And when I look back on myself in that early phase, I was like, “I was a kid learning how to teach.” And I was really struck. I was like, “Wow! Impact is possible here.” And what I also think I took from that was our social emotional well-being, the state of our body minds, is so fundamental and it's so essential in our capacity to learn. And learning, for many of these kids, observing them, it wasn't just about the knowledge they were acquiring, but it was about what they already knew, and how to bring that to bear in the world. So that was a formative experience in college. I was a student while I was learning to teach. Yeah.

[00:10:18] RT: It's sometimes amazing that the thing that I'm learning to do, because I want to be active or do something turns out to be more rich as a learning environment than the thing and paying tuition for to go to class and read out of a book.

[00:10:32] NB: So true. So true. I mean, that's so connected to what b*free ultimately became. But the way I'll summarize that is to say, I think that the value that institutions place on knowledge, the acquisition of it, is beautiful, and has a great deal of merit. And I also think that, at times, what there isn't space for in more institutional and kind of traditional forms of knowledge. And maybe it's not fair to say there isn't space. It's just sort of less overtly valued, is like what happens when there's a lot of space in your life for discovery in a way that looks much more free and emergent than it does prescribed, or sequenced, or scoped in the way that curricula are. What happens when we trust humans enough and trust our own sense of direction enough in what becomes possible for us to learn and how much like those non formal learning experiences can be, as you said, transformative or deeply impactful in our capacity to learn?

[00:11:43] RT: Not to force you down your road to phase two here. But you brought up b*free, and you've been at it for eight years in this network, I'm going to call it. You probably have a more accurate word. So how did the world give birth to b*free? And why does the world need b*free doing what it does?

[00:12:03] NB: Oh, I love the way you framed that question. So the beginning of the end of phase one, I will say, just to pull the thread through, was I did go into a career in education. I was a teacher. And then I ultimately worked as a consultant, and in the government world focused on education. And before b*free, I ran an education-focused consultancy. And a lot of what we did was what I described as equity-driven inclusive stakeholder strategic planning processes. That's a whole mouthful. But basically, the essence of it was summarized by a professor of mine in business school, who said people support what they helped to create.

So what we, at Alight, which was the predecessor to b*free, and I started that. I started it unofficially in 2006 while I was still working in the government, and then officially in 2008. But what we were doing there was we were working with senior execs of school districts, major schools, New York City Department of Ed, Chicago public schools, some of the largest school

districts in the country, and we're working with them on five-year strategic planning processes. How are we going to transform this district from a place where only 40% of our kids leave reading at some acceptable level to a place that's producing results and outcomes that we're really seeking.

So the thing that I was always driving there was how do we bring the voices of students, teachers, families, parents, faculty, administrators to the table as we – And we, primarily being executives, folks in the Deputy Mayor for Education's Office, people who are on the board of education who tended to be people who had a great deal of wealth or power in the world in various ways. Like how do we build these processes in a way that are inclusive of the people who ultimately are going to be living these plans, right? And to me, it seemed really obvious. Like if you don't have them at the table, why would they choose to agree with your plan? Why would they choose to be involved in this?

And there was a ton of resistance to that approach. It was like, “No, like top-down – We’re a top-down hierarchical organization. We make the decisions. We have them down and then they're going to get executed.” It's like, “Cool. Okay, that doesn't seem sustainable to me. But that's one way to operate.” So while Alight went really well – And I was the founder and I would hire team members, subcontractors to work with me and kind of grow teams as needed for the projects. I almost came back to that same lesson that I learned with Amanda. It was like most of the adults in the school systems that I was working with were struggling in some way or another with their own social emotional well-being, with the crazy the hours they were trying to keep, because they were dedicated to this mission of trying to improve the state of education. And also due to politics. There was just like a – I think there was just a way in which the environments where it felt like high-pressure and stressful.

And I found that it impacted people's ability to think differently. And so think about approaches, like maybe we should have more people at the table who you wouldn't typically have. It impacted their capacity to send your students in the conversation. So frequently, the conversation that was centered was around politics or was around how we're going to communicate what's going on to the public. I think the number of times I would hear the word student in our conversation in these large school districts whose mission ostensibly is exclusively about that was super limited, right? So some of these things converge for me.

And I decided too – This was me as a freedom seeker, I decided to pause Alight when we were probably at the peak. I mean, we were doing really well financially. We were kind of on the map in the little small world that we were moving through. Because I was starting to feel really misaligned with what I was seeing. And I was also like, “Wow, if there's this much resistance to our approach, maybe I should take a pause and a step back to really sit with that resistance and think about it and see what it means for me and for us as an organization.”

So I started this – So to go back to the birthing, I did something I'd never done before, which was I stopped working intentionally. And I made up this little process that I eventually called curating your inspiration. And it became a module in a program that we ran at b*free. But the idea was going back to my parents who were also both in the science field, I was kind of like, “Well, if you can mess with what you're consuming,” which is to say, if you vary the inputs, then what might happen? What might that result in terms of the outputs? So what I mean by that –

[00:17:05] RT: Yeah, give some examples here. This is interesting.

[00:17:08] NB: Yeah. I was like, I no longer – I don't want to listen to media that doesn't resonate with me. What if I only listened to media? I only read books? I only surround myself with people? I only do things that look like work? Because I was also in this experiment of taking time off from work. What if I only consume art and do things that are deeply resonant with not just my mind, but like at the soul level? Things that really, truly moved me, and I cut everything else out. So I did that. I did that for almost nine months. And I was terrified, because I was like, “Where the hell is this going to lead?”

And I had some savings that I was living off of, but I was also like, “Where's this going to lead? And what happens if it doesn't lead anywhere?” So that was the constant fear that I was sitting with as I was going through this long pause.

And literally, nine months later – And this was funny. I had not had had an experience like this ever in my life. But I woke up one night, in the middle of the night, it was about 2am. And this was like January of 2013. And I had the idea for b*free. And I sat down the first night, and I

wrote like a 40-page curriculum that would form the core program, which was the first part of the program.

[00:18:28] RT: Hold on a second. You did this in one night?

[00:18:31] NB: Yeah. Because I was so buzzed and energized. But then I went to sleep that night. It was a Saturday night. And I woke up the next night again. And the next night, I wrote the business plan for b*free. And it literally came as this download. And I kept joking with myself, because I timed it. I went back and I was like, “Wow, this was nine months.” I guess something was happening and being birthed. Because it was not clear to me what was happening at the surface. So yeah, that's a little bit about Genesis of b*free. And I haven't said what we do yet. But that's how it came about.

[00:19:00] RT: So should we just ignore the gestation period of nine months? Or is that more metaphoric than we want to go with?

[00:19:06] NB: I actually think somebody should do a study about this, because one of the things that the b*free did in our original iteration was we worked with people who were leaving the workforce, or were seeking to leave the workforce. And so we were working with freelancers, or would be freelancers, and equipping them with a holistic set of skills, which included personal development, what we called embodied wellness, and business skills, to live their purposes into the world. So you could be an artist. You could be a lawyer who had worked in a corporate context, but had no idea how to launch your own legal practice. And you could come to us. And we ran a five-week program that we call the core program.

Yeah. So the idea of supporting people who had this desire to be free, we watched people and we sort of track their cycles. And it was amazing how frequently the nine-month thing came up. It was like, “Wow, from the idea stage to the fruition, the launch.” It was crazy. So I would love if somebody did a study about that one day.

[00:20:16] RT: Okay. So I want to get into the work of b*free. But I want to go back now to something you said about, because there's people listening to thinking, “She quit her job. She didn't know what she was going to do.” You made some choices about what you consume

mentally, emotionally, physically. You had some doubts, it sounds like, down the road. Where is this leading to?

As you look back on it? What did it take to stay in that ambiguity for nine months before you woke up two nights in a row and had this stuff come out? And what were you relying on inside yourself in your life to stay in that place until something happened?

[00:20:57] RT: Yeah, I think that I was learning to recognize that merit and the wisdom of my own deep discomfort. So, specifically, like I often would describe that period of coming online to the idea of like, “Wow, this company I started, Alight, is doing really well. And it seems crazy to take us off a trajectory that we're on.” However, literally in my body, and I would feel it very specifically in my gut, like this feels misaligned to me. It's like the business is going in one direction and we're doing really well. And something in me feels like it's moving in a different direction. And it has a voice. And I haven't really – I don't know what that voice is saying. And I don't feel like I can do that until I quiet some other parts of my life to be able to really listen in.

And there was the beginnings. And I call it the beginnings because I was deeply uncomfortable with trusting my own discomfort. I don't think we're not conditioned to do that. That's not societally something we're down with. And so I was like – It was not the first time in my life after college. I was pre-med in college, and I chose to defy my parents' wishes, which was that I go be a doctor. And instead, I moved to Japan to teach English. And I told them a week before I was leaving that I was going there to do that.

So I had had trusted my own discomfort, and I was deeply uncomfortable. I was like, “I don't know. They think I should do this. They're probably smarter than I am. They probably know what I should do. I don't know what I should do. All I know is that I have to do it.”

[00:22:40] RT: I do think that one of the tough decisions about leading, including probably most importantly leading yourself, is disappointing people in doses they can handle as you move forward, and particularly your parents, particularly your parents.

Alright, so now we got a business plan we got, we got a curriculum, and we got a business called b*free. And that was – Is that 2013 then when this all happened?

[00:23:09] NB: Yeah. So, b*free started in 2013. And I can color it in a little bit. It was basically a response to both what I saw in the education system, as well as what I saw in those who are trying to reform the education system. And ultimately when I was first conceiving of it, I was like, “This is kind of like an alternative to business school.” And it's sort of like a hybrid of life school and business school. We had the business part, because we knew that for people to – For the initial group we were serving, which is people who are trying to leave the world of work and align their work with who they were, and align their work with a greater sense of purpose, or at least being the discovery of that, that they would need support. And because businesses the language of the marketplace, we were like business needs to be part of this.

At the same time, what I observed in all of these systems was we don't – We're much less conscious of our well-being and our potential holistically as humans than we could be. And I think those two things are inextricably linked. It's like we don't recognize that our potential lives in our nervous systems as much as it lives in our minds. We don't recognize that our potential lives in our capacity for well-being as much as it does in our financial or material means externally, right? So we were like, “There's this opportunity for self-development. And there's this opportunity for personal wellness.” And the sort of simple frame we offer people was like, “If you're a solopreneur, and you're going to start your own business, the well-being of your business is going to be contingent on your own well-being. And you're going to feel that very quickly. So how do we foreground that in our alternative to business school for you?”

[00:24:56] RT: Hold it. Foregrounded it? Foreground it?

[00:24:59] NB: Yeah.

[00:25:00] RT: Yeah. It make sense to me. Foreground. I had not heard this before. Okay. So what kind of receptivity did you have in the world to this premise?

[00:25:09] NB: So, when we talked about well-being people are like, “Why are you talking about well-being in 2013? It seems so far and desperate from work in people's minds.” And I

remember, and I still feel, I find that fascinating. I think that as a culture, we have traded our well-being and backgrounded our well-being in service of what we call productivity. I often harp on the idea of like humans as resources. We've decided that humans are resources were a means to an end. And the end is something not about – Like the end is profit, or the end is production. And we feel the same way about the planet, right? We consider the planet an externality, as a resource to be utilized in service of some means, accumulation or production of capital and so on.

And there was an agenda in my – There is an agenda in my orientation around b*free. My belief and my purpose is to support the healing and the wholeness of people, and to recognize that our worth is not contingent on our capacity to produce, or to accumulate money, or accumulate anything else. It's like we are inherently worthy. And so that doesn't reconcile well with the idea that we are a means to an end. Like we are the end, in my mind.

[00:26:33] RT: To what extent – I would never know to ask this question two years ago. But it strikes me. What you're saying, Nita, in the middle of this pandemic, or wherever we are in it at this point, in this ongoing debate about work from home or go back to work. It's going on. It's going to go on for some time. It strikes me that what you're taking on and what you're offering to the world has suddenly got more resonance and more people interested because of the pandemic than would have had not the pandemic occurred. Are you seeing that in your work?

[00:27:07] NB: Absolutely. Yeah, I think people are no longer – It's funny. In the last two years, with the pandemic, and I would say slightly even before that, the notion that we need healing in the workplace, whether that is directly connected to well-being of the physical, emotional and mental kind, or healing of the relationships between us. I would say, there's been a greater cognizance of that probably since President Trump was elected. I think a consciousness of the breakdowns in our relationships and the personal impacts that many people felt as a result of that. And then increasingly, over time, the rise in conversations about race, equity, and a number of places where we in the United States feel disconnected from one another, and where we feel rupture and conflict. I think people were increasingly coming online to the idea of the connection between those things and their own well-being. And the convergence of those forces in the workplace, which, interestingly enough, is one of the few places where we actually have intentional conversations around who we are as a culture, or who we are as individuals,

right? We don't gather as much in spaces that are designed for us to be self-reflexive. And interestingly, work has become one of those places where we actually do that. We talk about culture in the workplace.

So yeah, we became more interesting and appealing to folks. And what I will also say is like to fast forward on what b&free is today, our big lofty vision is transforming workplaces to healing spaces, whether that workplaces for you as an individual, a solopreneur, or in the context of an organization. And it's really this simple idea of like can work be a place that adds to your well-being rather than detracts from it? And can that be done in a way that is equitably equally distributed across people, irrespective of your gender, your race, your sexual orientation? Again, recognizing that we are all equally and inherently worthy?

[00:29:09] RT: Yeah. Equity features prominently in your language, in the website. And my sense of it is, in talking to you over time, your usage of equity has a more expansive connotation than what we might normally associate with it. And if that's so would, you expand it for the rest of us to see it the way you see it? Because I think this is a distinction that needs more amplification.

[00:29:36] NB: Yeah, thanks for that question. And you ask this question to me at an interesting time, in the evolution of b*free. So the conversation around – I'm going to be US specific for the moment. The conversation around racial equity in the United States I think is an extremely important conversation. I identify in the modern world, I'm a brown woman. So I am in the non-dominant part of the culture, right? And so I can speak to race equity from a personal standpoint and the impacts of racism or the intersectionalisms of – I've had a number of my own experiences as a woman of color who runs a business around what it means to experience bias and the isms.

And I'm saying and as opposed to but, because I want to underscore the importance of that conversation in this country in particular, whose Genesis is rooted in a great deal of inequity, right? I mean, we've written into our Constitution that you can be three-fifths of a human, which is countered of the fundamental premise of b*free, right? So that's incredibly important, literally, in our Genesis and founding as a country who is aspiring to these beautiful ideals of freedom and equality. We began very much not in that place for everyone for the collective.

And at the same time, I believe that the root of our issues in race and equity are deeper and wider than many of the ways that we attend to the conversation around racial equity and equity in the United States. And the way I'll summarize that is to say – It's hard to summarize. But what I will say is like the capacity to oppress the desire and the instinct to dominate, to have power, to accrue power, those are all fundamentally human qualities.

I do believe that for folks who – Like the idea of whiteness, and white supremacy, and white dominance, and colonialism, and the ways in which those are all tied up in the history of this country. And my parents came from India. I believe that that conversation needs to be had, because it is true. It is part of our experience, that the folks who have been in power in the history that many of us are aware of have been white people, have come from Eurocentric cultures.

And at the same time, I don't think that's a complex enough – I often don't think it's a complex enough analysis of power, because power is also dynamic, as is everything we're talking about. Race, if you believe that race is a construct, it's a construct, right? And so I definitely am often in the inquiry of how do we attend to this incredibly important issue, while recognizing that it is rooted in a deeper human issue that is shared, and that it is an expression of that. It's not the root itself. It's an expression of something in our natures as humans, that I think that if we get in touch with that more deeply rooted issue, our capacity to make progress on the issue of equity and on all of the issues where we feel disconnected and polarized from one another, like we will unleash more potential and accelerate our capacity.

[00:33:14] RT: I highlighted a sentence on your website that I think you're speaking to here. What is revealed is right to be healed. It sounds like that's what you're talking about to me?

[00:33:24] NB: Absolutely. Yeah. We go through cycles where the conversation about racial equity is the foreground, or it's in the background, right? And we've been in one. We've been in a conversation for the past few years, and certainly post George Floyd's death, around racism. And it's been really foregrounded. And I believe that now that it has been surfaced in this way, at this time. Like there's a real opportunity for us to heal it. And I believe that for us to heal it, we have to go beyond that conversation to the root.

[00:34:03] RT: Okay. Alright, so for a moment, let's segue here. We're going to come back to b*free and your role in it as a leader. But more recently, you got yourself involved in this organization called Solar Responders. And I'm going to give you a chance to explain what it is, and why you're in it, and what the need is, because I don't think people probably right now have much understanding of this issue. But what I will say to anybody listening is this is a significant departure from b*free in terms of some ways. But in other ways, I'm guessing it connects. So why don't you take us down the solar responder journey a little bit and help people understand why you're investing in this?

[00:34:44] NB: Yeah. Well, I'll tie the two together from the inception, because the way that I got involved is actually deeply connected to b*free. So a good friend of mine, who's the CEO of a couple of education-focused companies. His name is Raj Tucker. He was teaching a course on social entrepreneurship at NYU. And I think this was 2018, early 2018. And he invited me to speak to the class. So I went in there, and I did what we at b*free do, which was we took a different approach. I started the – I made everybody sit in a circle. And I started the class with a meditation

[00:35:22] RT: Amanda would be proud of.

[00:35:25] NB: She totally would. Oh, you're so right. Isn't it amazing how we just move in circles and spirals in life? Amanda would totally be proud of me. You're right. That was for you, Amanda. So we sat in a circle, we meditated, we played a little bit physically. And I do these practices. I scaffold my facilitation of the spaces I'm in in a very intentional way that's based on neuroscience and the science of psychological safety, and helping people kind of come into a place where they can connect to themselves more deeply and each other, and feel more grounded, and actually more present. And also, not just with themselves, but with one another. So we start with some of that play. And we also start with that play to kind of begin with something different and unexpected in the environment and in the context you're in.

So sitting next to me in this class was a student at the time named Hunter Johansen, who one day sometime after this class – And we spoke a little bit about some work he was doing in Puerto Rico. So he had recently been down to Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria,

which was in the fall of 2017, working on some recovery efforts there. And specifically, he was working with firefighters. So just to continue this in the story, in the vein of the story, Hunter and I meet in this class. We have a conversation about just how he's reflecting on his own purpose and some of what he had experienced in Puerto Rico. And then a couple months passed by, and one day I bumped into him literally on the street.

[00:37:01] RT: In New York City.

[00:37:02] NB: In New York City. Yeah, on 11th Street. Not far from my apartment. And we're both like, "Oh, I know you." So we wind up having a cup of coffee. And we continue this conversation about the burgeoning vision that would ultimately become Solar Responders. And our first conversation was about what was going on, whether it should be a nonprofit or for profit and why.

So ultimately, the work that we do, and the vision that Hunter brought to life along with Captain Richard Burt, who is an early cofounder, and these days serves as an advisor. Richard Burt was a firefighter in Las Vegas. So these guys asked firefighters in Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria, "What do you need?" And the answer was very simple. Without a beat, the response was, "We need power."

And so the beginnings of our work, how do we mobilize to get them solar power? Because you can't use diesel energy because you can't transport fuel in the midst of a hurricane, right? And you have no electricity. There's no way to make it useful for you. So how do we mobilize to get these folks the power they need in order to serve on the critical mission they provide as first responders whose job it is to save lives?

So in the event of a disaster like Maria, you pick up the phone and call 911. You can't do that, because the phone line is dead, because there is no power. And if you did, if you were able to pick up your own phone, nobody would be on the receiving end because the fire station would have no power. The first responders would have no power, right. So the criticality of power becomes very, very evident in the face of these increasingly intense and frequent disasters that we are experiencing, which are on the rise because of climate change, and to which Puerto Rico is particularly vulnerable as our other islands in the Caribbean.

So our solution is we put solar power and battery storage, which helps to capture the solar. So that even if it's not sunny on a given day, but you need solar power. We put those on fire stations and serve as the first source of backup. The one other thing I'll say about Puerto Rico and why the solution makes sense is they have rolling power outages on a regular basis. So brownouts are very common. And that's also – Those of us on this side of the ocean in the states, we're subjected to the very same thing, right. Like we experienced this in Texas. And in the United States, we're also only backed up at the moment by diesel generators, not by solar, which makes sense for a lot of reasons, because it's cleaner, because it's increasingly cheaper, because it's way better for the environment.

So Hunter started reaching out to me. And me as a sort of scrappy entrepreneur was there just providing advice on how to kick up and get this nonprofit idea he had started. And I was so compelled by the mission that I just kept right alongside b*free. Just kept working and supporting Hunter in the ways that I could. Ultimately, what I realized, I was like, "Oh, he's like one of our freelancers, except he's starting a nonprofit, right?" Like he's exactly like the folks whose leadership and sense of purpose we are cultivating and supporting. And I personally happened to be particularly compelled by this mission, and by this person as a leader. And so wound up essentially making it my second full time job. And went on officially shortly after some of those initial months to be board chair. So yeah, that's how that project got started.

[00:40:35] RT: So is this project restricted to Puerto Rico? Or do you have bigger aspirations in Puerto Rico?

[00:40:40] NB: Yeah. So this is where I like to both and the response as well. It's like Puerto Rico itself is a big aspiration. And I go to say this – I say that, in particular, because going back to the conversation about equity, Puerto Rico is a commonwealth of the United States. It does not have statehood. It has a long history of a very difficult relationship with the United States, essentially, sort of as a colony of the United States. Most people don't even know that it's part of the United States. Many people think it's its own country or its own something. So it has a complex political, economic, and social relationship to the United States, where, very often, Puerto Ricans are weary of folks who come to the island who aren't from the island kind of

wondering like, “What are you doing here? Are you here to take advantage of us?” Like it can be a tax haven for folks, right? So people are incentivized to go there.

And I say that to say also, like, anytime you're working on a social justice or a social change initiative, people talk also about scaling it, right? It's like, “Oh, is this a proof point for something bigger?” And what I want to say to people is like, “No, this is the bigger thing.” It's the same conversation, is humans are not resources. We're not a means to an end. Like these folks, they're not lesser, and they don't deserve less. And they are human just like all of us.

So Puerto Rico, unto itself, is very much the mission. First responders unto themselves, right? We don't think about needing first responders until we're in very dire form of need. It's like, “Oh, my house is burning, or there's a disaster, and I need medical help,” right? We don't think about them until then. So part of our mission is to think about them before then and equip and support them.

So Puerto Rico and first responders are the mission. And right alongside that, we know that the need is global, and it's great. And so to the extent that our learnings in Puerto Rico equip us to work with places and people in other places, we're absolutely excited about an open to that as we are able to manage it from a capacity standpoint and a funding standpoint.

[00:42:48] RT: Okay, so you've laid in place these two projects that are near and dear to you. What I want to get into is you, and you as a leader, and what you know, and what you've learned, and how you navigate the challenges of running these two projects for impact. And you've mentioned a word, tenacity, early in the conversation. So I'm interested in tenacity as it relates to Nita. I'm also interested in what you know – Let me say this before we get into this. You and I've talked about this. But for the sake of the conversation, be explicit. This distinction between leading and authority. Meaning that when we look at is the organizational chart is a map of authority, but not necessarily a map of leadership. Everybody knows that they've been in this hierarchy and look for leadership from the requisite authority, and it doesn't show up. And it's also had the experience of doing what you're talking about, what you've done in your life, where you raise your own hand and choose to lead on something. And therefore, what immediately comes into play is in order to have decent impact beyond my own capabilities, I

need to mobilize, use that word, your word, other people to follow with this purpose, or this cause this, this effort.

So my guess is you've been in the mobilization business for a pretty long time now. So what can you tell people about what's involved with mobilizing? What's it take? What are the challenges? Just the whole function? Because without anybody who's willing to follow along, you're not leading anything anyway to speak of? So what do you know? What can you tell people about what it takes to mobilize people?

[00:44:28] NB: So I'm going to shift the trajectory of this conversation a tiny bit. But I'm also going to directly respond to what you said. So lately, I've been reflecting on my own leadership. At b*free, we've described the work we do when we coach leaders, which is one of the fastest of the work we do. We also help like heal ruptures or heal conflict in organizations who are struggling with culture transformation, particularly around equity.

So we have this whole vision that is workplaces healing space. And I came across – I believe he teaches and he coaches as well. But I they came across a man named Nicholas Janney recently. And there's a concept he has that just resonated really deeply and helped me put language to my own aspiration around my leadership. And also what I would say, summarize as well, my own philosophy around leadership today in the context of his vision for workplace as healing space. The term he is his leader as healer. And it really – Even as I say it now, like I feel it in my heart. I feel the alignment and the resonance for myself. So I'm going to play with that a little bit. And when it comes to mobilization, I think in order to mobilize others, you yourself need to be mobilized. So this takes us from the concept of leader to self-leadership. Like who do I, as the instrument of my own leadership, need to be in order to lead with, lead alongside, lead others? So for me, I root the concept of my own leadership in myself. And tying that to sort of leader as healer, it's like what do I need to be hold so that I have the capacity to actually self-lead?”

[00:46:28] RT: So, be whole.

[00:46:29] NB: Be whole. Be the whole.

[00:46:31] RT: Be complete. Okay.

[00:46:32] NB: Yeah, and I will concretize that. The values we started with at b*free were – We started with these five values, and we describe them as presumptions. And what I mean by that is we were like, “What if we presume these things are true about people, and that our job at be*free, as people who are supporting other people, is to simply unobscure or help illuminate what is already true?” And the values we started with, what we decided to presume about people or trust about people is we come free, we come gifted, we come equal, we come in power, and we come grounded.

[00:47:11] RT: Say those one more time, please.

[00:47:14] NB: Sure. We come free. We start with freedom. We come gifted. We come equal. We come in power. And we come grounded. Like we come this way. That’s present. Those are resources. Those are inner resources that are available for us to mobilize.

[00:47:36] RT: And they're always there.

[00:47:39] NB: They're always there. They're present. And we approach our work with a lot of humility. So whether you believe it or not, what happens if you experiment with believing it? That's the learning that we're always in. So if those presumptions are the case, then the work of leadership for the self becomes about on obscuring, becomes about the development work that helps me, “Where am I bounded? Where I could be free? And how do I get in my own way?” Just a simple inquiry to sit with every day that can be really illuminating.

[00:48:15] RT: Okay. So, hold on, hold on.

[00:48:17] NB: Yeah, sure.

[00:48:18] RT: So somebody is listening, they’re with you here so far? And now you've just suggested that, to quote, “A simple inquiry that you can do every day.” So be a bit more tactically specific here. If somebody's saying, “Okay, so how do I get grip on these five elements every day?” What's your coaching to them about that?

[00:48:39] NB: Yeah, they all come with a rather lengthy explanation, I'll say that, as a way to avoid the question and buy myself some time on how to respond. My fundamental counsel, that is a thread that runs across working with all of those values, is wherever you feel in your body. And I use the body very specifically because that is where so much of our consciousness or our stories about ourselves arise. Where you feel constriction? Where you feel limitation? And, for us emotionally, these same ideas tend to manifest as like, "I doubt that I'm free. I don't think I am gifted. I don't have the talents I need to do what I'm doing. I'm not in power. I get my power from somebody else." Wherever these beliefs or these stories we tell about ourselves arise and live in our body, my counsel for literally a tactical daily practice is, number one, just simply notice. Like where is discomfort, constriction, where does that live in your body? That's one, right? So like do a body scan to notice where you feel tight, where you feel uncomfortable.

Number two is once you're there, you can literally talk to it, right? And that's where I would invoke trust. If I were to trust you and to listen to you, what do you have to tell me? What is the information you're seeking to convey by being constrictive? By calling my attention to you? That already is a practice of trusting – This is a funny way to put it. But it's like it's trusting the places where you experience a lack in yourself. And recognizing that there is valuable wisdom and information in those places. They're not necessarily telling you the story the way you make it up. Just because I doubt myself doesn't mean I should, right? And then run with that story of like, "Oh, the work you do has no value," right? Like, as opposed to that, like sit with the discomfort itself and listen to the story it has to tell you. don't impose yours.

[00:50:57] RT: Okay. All right. All right. So I have a couple more sort of standard questions I ask at this point in the conversation.

[00:51:05] NB: Sure.

[00:51:06] RT: It's my experience that we tend to learn more from our leadership failures than we do our successes.

[00:51:11] NB: Absolutely.

[00:51:11] RT: So if you if you could point to one “failure”. I'll let you define failure in any way you want. What jumps to your mind when that question is asked that you think about, “Man, if I had to do over?”

[00:51:25] NB: That's a great question. I think I would go back to – Oh, that's such a good question. I want to like really sit with it. I think I would go back to the ways in which I didn't self-lead while I was running Alight and found myself like depleted accordingly. So, frequently, I found myself shapeshifting into the norms or the ways of being the culture of the organizations I was working with. Because I was like, “Well, when in Rome, and unless I morph myself, I won't belong here.” I was coming with all of those fears, right? Like the value of what I'm trying to explain like won't be received. I've got to become what this place wants me to be. And as a result, I left out a lot of my own knowledge, wisdom, practice. It didn't occur to me. I was like, “Oh, the part of me that meditates or that is in the inquiry of like what is our soul's work in this world? What is the purpose of what we're doing here? The part of me that asked the questions about why, and how, as opposed to just what. I did not include that part of myself for almost the entire duration of the time I was running Alight, right? And so to the extent I experienced a deficit or a misalignment, it was me not connecting to my own wholeness, right?”

[00:52:58] RT: Right. Right. Right. Your own short-circuiting. Your own short-circuiting.

[00:53:02] NB: Totally. Totally, yeah.

[00:53:04] RT: Okay. So here's a little easier question.

[00:53:06] NB: Sure.

[00:53:08] RT: What resources would you recommend to people who are on a journey of choosing to lead? It could be any kind of resource you think is beneficial to the journey.

[00:53:18] NB: Oh, man, Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Artist, Young Poet. Yeah. Letters to a Young Poet, I believe. I should know the title because I've read it about 100 times. I think it's an incredible companion for anybody who's a creator of any form in the world, whether you identify as an artist or not. And anybody who's leading anything, you are an artist.

You are a creator. We so often experience ourselves not as creators, but we are, right? I think it's a beautiful – It's got such great wisdom about how to, in particular, navigate uncertainty, and also remain tenacious through the vicissitudes, through the uncertainties of life. So that's a big one. More recently, there's a book called *My Grandmother's Hands*, by Resmaa Menakem, who it is a book about the neuroscience and somatics and has practical exercises around racialized trauma and healing the body and feels very aligned to just a personal interest and awareness of the nexus between trauma, inequity.

And as we started this conversation about you pointed about me grounding and sort of standing on the shoulders of my parents, of those who've come before me, it speaks also a lot about the ways in which we pass trauma down. There's a whole body of work on epigenetics and how we pass trauma down through generations. So I think it's really illuminating about the possibilities for healing.

[00:54:58] RT: Alright, so here we go. This is the question that ends most all of these, if I remember to ask it. And I'm remembering this time. And this is likely to happen between you and I because we stay in conversation. If you and I were having a discussion three years from today, coffee, and you were looking back over those three years, what has to have happened in your life both personally and professionally for you to feel happy with your progress?

[00:55:26] NB: Number one, I have to divest myself of the notion that there is progress.

[00:55:32] RT: There you go. Good. I love it.

[00:55:41] NB: And I will add a number two, is when I make this distinction about phase one versus phase two, and for me personally, there's a number. It's post 40. I'm 43 now. So it's like when I hit 40, I was like, "Alright, let's consider this phase two," is to stay in deep dialogue with and not lose sight of what it's easy to lose sight of, because it's invisible. And I think very often invisible eyes in our culture is like to stay in deep dialogue and relationship with my soul to be moved by my soul.

[00:56:13] RT: Nita, thank you for this time. I have a bunch of notes here that I'm going to take you up on with your counsel. So thank you for joining us in on Ten Thousand Swamp leaders.

There's a good chance you'll be back, if you're willing to come back. I don't think we got anywhere near to cover all the stuff you have to do. Thank you very much.

[00:56:35] NB: Thank you so much, Rick. I enjoyed being in the swamp with you and look forward to doing it again.

[00:56:41] RT: Take care.

[00:56:42] NB: Be well.

[OUTRO]

[00:56:45] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to Ten Thousand Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

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