



## **EUDAEMONIA** **Belonging, with Dr Lindo Bacon**

November 11, 2020

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Kim Forrester 0:00

Oxygen, water, food, shelter and safety. Beyond our basic survival, there is one thing that humans need more than anything else in the world - the need to be seen, accepted and included. You're listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. I'm Kim Forrester, and today it's time to explore the most basic element of human flourishing. It's time to talk about belonging.

Intro 0:30

Welcome to Eudaemonia, the podcast that is all about flourishing. Plug in, relax and get ready for the goodness as we explore the traits and practices that can help you thrive in life ... with your host Kim Forrester,

Kim Forrester 0:50

Dr. Lindo Bacon is a celebrated scientist, author, professor, speaker and advocate for body liberation, who is fostering a global transformation to a more just world where all bodies are valued, respected and supported in compassionate self care. Lindo's message takes us beyond size, to shaping a culture of empathy, equity and true belonging. Their latest book, released this month, is titled *Radical Belonging, How to Survive and Thrive in an Unjust World While Transforming it for the Better*. It is my absolute honour to be connecting with Lindo today to discuss the vital importance of acceptance, acknowledgement and inclusion, and to learn how we can all contribute to the transition from a culture of othering to one of profound belonging. Lindo Bacon, welcome to the Eudaemonia podcast. It is such a delight to have you with me here today.

Lindo Bacon 1:45

Oh, and it's mutual Kim. I've really enjoyed listening to your podcasts and all the great work that you're doing.

Kim Forrester 1:50

I am flattered and grateful. Thank you so much. Now I, in return, thoroughly enjoyed your book, *Radical Belonging*. It was confronting, it was perspective changing, it was healing and truly quite wonderful. Reading through the book, I came to see that belonging is like breathing in that, for those of us for whom the system is made, Lindo, we walk through life inhaling our belonging as effortlessly as we inhale our next breath. As someone who's not afforded an effortless integration into society, what does belonging mean to you?

Lindo Bacon 2:31

That's a great question. And first, I want to just thank you for your kind words about my book. It actually brought tears to my eyes because, you know, this is the impact that I want my book to

have. And it's a highly vulnerable book, because what I'm doing is I'm telling the world, "Hey, I don't feel like I belong." And part of that is, I blame it on the culture. It's not a character trait for me or a problem that's inherent to who I am. It's because I've gotten real messages from the culture that shut me out. And I think it's important to recognise that everybody, to some extent, experiences of feeling of unbelonging; a way in which they're not really seen for who they are and they're not valued for who they are. But for all of us, that shows up in different ways and to different degrees. And it's really important for us, in those ways in which we do effortlessly belong, to recognise how we tend to bond around that without even being aware of it or knowing it. And thus, we participate in creating that sense of unbelonging for everybody else. So a lack of us being really thoughtful about the ways in which we're privileged in this society, means that we're hurting other people. Unintentionally, of course, but you know, we all want to be good people. And so I think it requires ongoing practice, then to look at the ways in which we may unintentionally exclude people, and how we can all participate in making this a better world. And this is valuable, not just because we're compassionate people and we care about others, but it's also valuable for really selfish reasons. If we shut people out, like, our world is less rich because of it. So if we want the world to be a better place and more exciting and more fun for us, what that means is, we've got to look at this issue of belonging and how we can create it. And just to give you a little example of this, I think about a friend of mine, who, when they moved to the United States, and before that they had lived in a country in a very small village and they didn't have any restaurants there. And they were very limited in, kind of, food choices. And when they came to the United States, they were like, totally blown away with the options they had, you know, when they went to farmers markets, or just seeing restaurants and just, like, how exciting food can be when you open to all of the different cultural traditions. And I think it's parallel, right now, when we think about the sense of belonging, on a greater cultural level, that most of us are going through life, like, not aware of just how much exciting and amazing things are out there - how much our world can benefit from all of its peoples - and how sad that is. So there's real excitement and possibility here, when you start to think about how your world can be opened up with a sense of belonging.

Kim Forrester 6:17

Lindo, that is just truly beautiful, what you've shared there. And it does lead me to several other questions - the first of which is that it can take bold self reflection to recognise this (and I know this personally, because it took me bold self reflection) but I'm sure that many of us actually have a sense of belonging that is contingent on the marginalisation or the exclusion of others. Right? That we only truly feel safe and included in our environment, if certain others are excluded from our space. And, like you say, we're all good people. This is not necessarily something that we can accept in ourselves without a sense of shame and guilt. But I think it's important for us to at least reflect on it. Because if our sense of belonging is contingent on the marginalisation of others, it seems to me to be a very fragile form of belonging. You sort of alluded to this in your last answer there, but is it possible for us to generate a more robust sense of belonging that doesn't just include others, but is actually enhanced the more we acknowledge, and accept, and celebrate the vibrancy and diversity of the human race?

Lindo Bacon 7:32

It's a powerful question. And I suppose first is, like, context for that. I think feeling safe in the world is really important. And sometimes it's really valuable to go back to that safe place with other people that look like you and act like you, to get affirmation that who you are is okay. So, I hope to remove the shame, sometimes, that comes from going to safety and, at the same time, help people to recognise that that can bolster us and give us confidence to also leave safety, so that we can

expand our world when we take risk and get to know other people. So both are true, you know. And I think about, for example, I have a primary relationship; my partner and I've been together for 27 years. And that's my base in the world, where I have my unconditional acceptance and love and safety. And I can truly be myself and I can go out in the world where it feels a little less safe, and get other things, knowing that I always have my ground to come back to. But if I only stay with my ground, I don't think life is worth living if you limit yourself that much. As much as I love my partner, it would be pretty boring if I didn't challenge myself and grow and be exposed to so much else in the world. And our relationship could never survive that either, unless you bring in other things. So the stability of our relationship depends on us getting excited about new ideas and meeting other people and, you know, getting our needs met other ways, too. So I think both are true all the time; that it's great to acknowledge that we all need some safety in the world, and to recognise that that's not enough for us either. And alone, that's not going to keep us fulfilled. I realised, too, that when I was talking about having a primary relationship to come home to that, like, that's a very kind of traditional, conventional way of looking at it. And, you know, having a primary marriage works for me. But there's also a lot of other ways to do that kind of home base that don't look like the conventional way that has been working for me. So I just want to honour that too; that there's lots of different ways for you to find your home base.

Kim Forrester 10:47

I love that. Here in New Zealand, there is a word 'tūrangawaewae'. It literally means 'place for the feet' but the meaning of it is obviously far deeper and far more profound. It means the grounded space where you belong, that you are referring to there. And I hear you saying that it is good for us to have our tūrangawaewae; it is good for us to have that place where we feel safest and rooted into the earth. And yet, it's also important, perhaps not just for us as individuals, but for us as a society, to agitate our sense of belonging sometimes. Is that what you were saying?

Lindo Bacon 11:22

Everything sounded great, until I heard the word 'agitate'. Because, and I'm not really sure why I felt a little uncomfortable with that. But maybe we can just change the language a little bit there to recognise that if our belonging is really insular, that that's not enough. Like, we need community in so many ways, and different communities,

Kim Forrester 11:48

You write of the relief and the validation that you felt when you discovered that there were actually words that define your experience of life; when you realise that there were labels like transgender and genderqueer. Do you feel it's beneficial, Lindo, for us to label ourselves; to claim the words that define who we are, and where we stand in the world? And is this different from accepting the labels that others ascribed to us?

Lindo Bacon 12:19

I think language is tremendously important to help us make sense of our world. And at the same time, language can also cause us to get stuck and limit us. But I think to, like, bring out the point of how important it is to kind of own all of the language and identities, I can tell a story which I wrote about in the book that was really, in retrospect, a kind of profound turning point for me. And that was going back several decades, when I was a young student in college. And it was a time where I didn't

really have much of a sense of my sexual orientation and what was important to me. And I was feeling a little bit lost in the world in that way. And I remember that there was one woman in particular that I tremendously admired at the time, and she was in many of my classes and she was really, like, an outspoken person who had a lot of friends. And she and her friends would ... it seemed like they have a bit of a clique and they really formed a great community, and were always having fun together. And I was always kind of jealous and wanted to belong, but never really felt like I did. And I remember one time - like, being the nerd that I was - seeing a group of them on campus in the evening. And it was a night that I was about to head back to my dorm room and I was going to go study alone. And like I was kind of curious, like, "So what do the cool kids do on a Friday night?" And so, instead of going back to my dorm room, I ended up following them. And they went into a lecture room, which wasn't too unusual on a Friday night at school. And usually that meant that someone had come to speak at campus and there was ... you know, it wasn't a conventional class but anyone can attend. And the doors were just about to close and so I had no time to kind of find out what was really going on - because you know, they were going to close the door and not let anyone else in. So I ended up just going in and I took a seat. And there were very few seats left, and so it was dead centre, right in the front. And a few minutes later, the speaker walked out. And she was this woman with just incredible presence that just, like, terrified me. She was this like large, black woman wearing robes from a culture that was very different than mine; bright colours. And she just exhibited this, like, sense of strength that was so different from, you know, what I was expecting from the typical stuff that we see on campus. And she started her lecture and the first thing she said was, "My name is Audrey Lorde, and I'm a black lesbian feminist poet", or something similar to that. And I had never heard of Audrey Lorde at the time. I know now that she was just an incredible woman with a legacy of amazing stuff. But at that age, I had never heard of her. But I heard that word lesbian. And suddenly, like, in my mind, it just panicked me. Because it was a word that, to me, was a word of, like, an insult of somebody. Right? Like, that was something I was taught; they were a bad person. And there was this sudden awareness that maybe she's talking about me. And incidentally, there was a time that identified as a lesbian. I don't anymore, as you'll see in the book, but so, at that point, there was this sudden realisation that, "Oh oh". You know, like, "Are people gonna think because I'm here that I'm a lesbian? Is she asking me to say in front of everybody that I'm a lesbian?" And it was just, like, so scary to kind of, like, have every eye on me. And then I suddenly had to take labels. And I remember, like, I just mumbled something like, "I'm a Caucasian woman." And that didn't satisfy Audrey, you know. And she just said, "Is that all? Come on, give us more." And, you know, and I'm mumbling things like, "I don't want to take on labels, you know. I'm so much more than any simple identities." And anyway, finally, she just got frustrated with me. And then she went on to other people, who were like, proudly proclaiming themselves with all these identities that were stigmatised identities. Like, whether they called themselves queer, or trans, or homo. And they seemed to have no shame for things that I thought were bad. I didn't understand this at the time, but what Audrey Lorde was telling us was that, if you don't own your identities, you're giving other people the power to define them. And back then people were defining lesbian as an ugly, bad thing. And so therefore, that couldn't be me. And it took a long time for me to recognise that, you know, my following those people around campus, and that woman in particular was because I had a crush on her. And that that wasn't something to feel ashamed of, you know. That it's beautiful to be attracted to somebody and, you know, to want to form connection with them. And that's a source of strength for me. But yet, at the time, I let somebody else own that label and what it might mean. So it's very profound for me to kind of now recognise that I can take control of my identities and choose to openly own them and take pride in them and not let other people define me as bad or wrong. So I can take on labels like queer, or trans, or gender-queer, and recognise that, hey, all of those things, they're part of my uniqueness and my beauty in the world. So yeah, reclaiming labels and taking the power away from other people to define them as negative, I think is really, really valuable.

Kim Forrester 19:04

I'm going to take you back to that lecture room. Because there is a conversation out there in society these days about being vulnerable and about being authentic. Right? And if we spoke to 'young you' in that lecture room, we would have said, "No, be vulnerable" and, "Your power is in speaking out and being authentic." But you actually write in your book that authenticity - and the vulnerability it takes to be truly authentic - is a measure of privilege. And you explain that being vulnerable to that degree is simply not an option for many individuals whose bodies, or lives, or livelihoods are in danger if they do actually speak out to that degree. For those who are unable to actually strive for authenticity without putting themselves at risk, what do you recommend as an alternative? What is the trait or the characteristic that is going to imbue the greatest sense of health and well being, for the individuals who are not able to be authentic?

Lindo Bacon 20:10

Okay, yet another really great, probing question, Kim. You know, first, I imagine this is obvious to the audience that's listening, but I just want to give an example of what's behind your question. Like, I can call myself trans and I'm not scared somebody's going to murder me. But people who are much more marginalised than me don't have that same privilege. For example, in the United States, where already in 2020, thirty black trans women have been murdered. Or at least that we know of; I'm sure the number is actually much higher than that. Just because, you know, people hate transness so much. So yeah, if the aspects of your identity are things that are valued in society, then being authentic is easy. And you'll get valued when people actually see you. But it's not something that I want to ask of everybody, because I think that we all need to recognise that it's a luxury to be able to be authentic and not all of us have that luxury. So I really just want to support everybody in recognising that, who you are is okay, and that we all need to find safety in the world. And look for those pockets. And it may be that you recognise - rightfully so - that the outside world isn't safe. But search for those places where you can show your authentic self, because we all need to feel loved and valued by other people. And if we never show ourselves to other people - if we hide our authentic selves all the time - we never have that opportunity to feel that love and acceptance. So I want to just support people in recognising how important it is that you honour the fact that the problem isn't in you - that there is a real problem in society that sometimes will make it safer for you not to show your authentic self and to protect yourself. And, at the same time, to recognise that as much as that sucks, like, you still need to be seen. And you deserve that. Like there are pockets you can find your community in this world. For some of you, it's just going to be smaller and take longer to connect with. But it's out there.

Kim Forrester 23:04

Lindo, that is just beautiful. Thank you. Many individuals who are highly privileged - many individuals who had read your book and realise that they are highly privileged - are also struggling to belong in very personal ways. Right? They're fighting for recognition in the workplace, or fighting for acceptance within a social group, fighting for acceptance within a spouse's or a partner's family - I think that's one that's quite common. And these personal struggles can also cause a lot of angst, and stress, and worry, and concern. And I do wonder, for people like me, who are highly privileged in ways that we don't even fully understand most of the time, we can spend a lot of time, and energy, and emotional well being trying to find belonging at the local PTA, or in that social group where we seem to be fairly excluded. Once we have a general sense of belonging and well-being in society, which many people still do not have, are we simply just creating drama in our own lives trying to find belonging everywhere? Are we better off understanding, appreciating, and being

grateful for the belonging that we already hold - that we already inhale effortlessly - and just let these smaller instances, just let them go for our own wellbeing?

Lindo Bacon 24:31

Yeah, like we all have to make choices about what's important to us and where we're going to put our time and energy. And there are endless ways that we can all be acting to make change in the world and we can't take every opportunity. So we all have to make choices about where we're going to put our energy. And I think that that's really important self reflection. So for example, like, I think about how I was on a Zoom call not long ago. And there were about five of us on the call and none of us knew one another but we were working towards a common project. And the moderator wanted to kind of, you know, get us to all bond. And so they were using really, like, familiar language, like, "Come on, ladies, let's all talk about..." And that, like, hit me in the gut. Because, like, I'm not a lady. And it was a real sense for me that I'm not being seen right now. Now, I could imagine what was going on for everybody ... what was going on for that person, or if I had called out that person, which I did not do in that phone call. Because they were really well intended, you know, and they used the language to actually bring us all together. And they were taught that this is a binary world. They're taught that there are certain clues that they look for, and I fit into all of them. And so they were taught 'everybody must be a woman on that call', right? So I get that they were clueless, and it was completely unintentional. And that I can't have expectations of this world right now, that everybody always includes me, because they don't know better, you know. A lot of people, they've grown into this, you know, pink or blue world. They haven't been exposed to other stuff. Right? So I can't have expectations that I'm going to be seen. And so part of it is that I need to build my defences and recognise that, you know, there's still good people, it's not intentional, and this is going to keep happening until, you know, the world catches up to what we really know about gender and sex. And so I would just encourage people to just be reflective about where it's important for them to belong. It might be, for example, that they make a decision that they're just going to make use of the PTA to advocate for their children's school needs. And that's not going to be a place that they're going to look to feel loved and accepted for all of their great qualities.

Kim Forrester 27:32

That's really eye opening - your answer there. And I think that's helped me understand that we can't necessarily expect to be able to feel belonging everywhere in our lives, all of the time. And it's obviously something that you have come to accept; it as a part of your everyday. That you know, that you have a space where you truly belong - within your relationship, for instance, and in other spaces - and we can all learn from your experience and from others that, we will belong in our belonging spaces and it's okay if we don't feel like we integrate fully in every other space in the world.

Lindo Bacon 28:14

Right. And to go back to that Zoom call that I used as an example, I made a choice in that call that I wasn't going to name it, because it would have distracted from the bigger common purpose that we were working through. And when I was able to, kind of, check myself and let go of the need to be seen in that way, I could relax into feeling belonging in our shared goal, and enjoy and appreciate the people and being part of that community.

Kim Forrester 28:50

So it was a choice. Rather than this vision of ultimate belonging, it's actually about deciding where to place our energies, where to drain our sense of well-being, and to choose otherwise in situations like your Zoom call.

Lindo Bacon 29:07

Right. And I did end up feeling a sense of belonging in many ways in that call, even if I wasn't seen for everything. Like, we're always going to deal with some form of rejection and unbelonging. And we can also learn to kind of weather the discomfort better, over time, and find joy in the ways in which we do belong.

Kim Forrester 29:36

Oh, I love that. Find joy in the ways in which we do belong. That's the answer right there, isn't it? That's the trick. The desire to fit in, to be normal - you write of the mythical norm in your book - and the desire to be as close to that mythical norm as possible, is incredibly powerful Lindo. And almost all of us will change our behaviour automatically - so automatically, in fact that we don't even realise we're doing it a lot of the time. How can we become more conscious of these types of behaviours? Are there actions, or emotions, or states of mind that are feedback for us that we are trying to fit in, in ways that is actually detrimental to our health and our well being?

Lindo Bacon 30:28

I think any kind of emotion is incredible feedback that is helpful for us to interrogate, and to learn from. So I suppose, yeah, I would just say that you have a gut sense when you're feeling something. And I think it's really helpful to remember that, like, your body might be trained to react. Right? So like, maybe, for example, somebody said something hurtful, and you go straight to anger to, like, kind of defend yourself. I think the most important thing is to learn over time how to put a little pause in between the felt sense of something and the reaction to it. Basically, what I'm suggesting is that we all learn to just kind of breathe a little bit more. And I think that when we put in that breathing space, rather than immediately going to reactivity, we can get a better sense of what the emotion is, and learn from it. And then our response to it can also be, like, more appropriate and helpful.

Kim Forrester 31:52

My final question is one that I ask every guest on the Eudaemonia podcast. I usually ask for a small daily ritual, Lindo - so a mantra, an exercise, or a practice. But in your case, I do feel that is important for us as individuals, and vitally important for us as a society, that we start building an environment of greater belonging. So can you perhaps share with my listeners a habit they can form or a simple action that they can take on a daily basis that will help cultivate an environment of belonging as they go about the day?

Lindo Bacon 32:30

Well, that's an easy question for me, because it's something that this time under quarantine and dealing with pandemic has really brought home for me. It's just - how important it is to hold on to community and love. So I make it a daily practice now, to just reach out to somebody and let them know that I appreciate them or, you know, just remind them of their value. And, like, this morning, for

example, I was reading a newspaper article, and it quoted a friend of mine. And I just sent them an email saying, "That was just so gorgeous to see your name in the paper today. And you know, what a beautiful quote. And I'm just glad to see you spreading the love in the world." And like, my friends reaction was they were totally touched and it was just a nice gesture. And, like, let's all just keep passing this forward. Like, we all need to just keep hearing affirmation from one another. And you can give this not just to your close friends, but to strangers - you can reach out to and just say something kind. Like, let's just keep reaffirming for one another that there's kindness and love in the world and that we're all valued. And it feels so good to deliver that and just like it feels great when people are sending me sweet emails.

Kim Forrester 34:03

Well, Lindo Bacon, your book *Radical Belonging* - as I say, simply one of the most profound, confronting, healing, eye-opening, amazing books that I have read in a really long time. If people want to find out more about the work that you do and your newly released book, *Radical Belonging*, where can they go?

Lindo Bacon 34:24

Well, the book can be found in the usual places books are found. I'm sure it's at all bookstores and I encourage people to support their local indie bookstores. Libraries will probably have it too. And I know too, that libraries are great on, like, following up on requests, so if they don't have it, ask for it. And you can find out more about me by visiting [www.lindobacon.com](http://www.lindobacon.com) and I'm on social media; on Facebook and Twitter at @LindaBaconX, on Instagram at @lindabacon. And you'll also find some information on my website about the radical belonging community where people are coming together to talk about these issues.

Kim Forrester 35:13

So incredibly important and powerful. Lindo Bacon, thank you, truly from my heart, for gifting your time, your intelligence, your wisdom, and your graciousness today.

Lindo Bacon 35:23

Lovely speaking with you, Kim, and thank you for what you do, too.

Kim Forrester 35:27

As the celebrated poet Maya Angelou once wrote, "I long, as does every human being, to be at home wherever I find myself." You've been listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. If you'd like to learn more about how to live a truly flourishing life, please subscribe and check out [www.eudaemoniapod.com](http://www.eudaemoniapod.com) for more inspiring episodes. I'm Kim Forrester. Until next time, be well, be kind to yourself, and remember, we belong to each other.