

Engage360 Episode 153 | Stories and the Role of Empathy in Racial Reconciliation

Latasha Morrison

[00:00:00] **Tim Koller:** Hi, friends. Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. I'm your host, Timothy Kohler. Thank you for joining for today's conversation. As we go through our life, there are these different stages of maturity that we enter into, and as you get older, you start to go see maybe a mental health therapist, or you go to your doctor, and they give you a form to fill out that helps you to get some understanding of I'm healthy in these areas, or, oh, I thought those things were normal, but now, I've done this assessment. I'm realizing there might be some things I need to change about my thinking patterns or my lifestyle. And I am so excited today to have on the podcast, Latasha Morrison, to talk about her book, *Brown Faces, White Spaces*. Because as I went through this book, I found it to be a really helpful diagnostic tool for individuals like me to understand that the things that are operating in the world don't necessarily have to operate the way they are and things we may have thought were normal actually can be addressed and change. So in the same way that your doctor or your mental health therapist might say, Hey, here are some things that you should be aware of and some things you can do in order to make these things better. Latasha has done this for us. So Latasha, thank you for being on the podcast to talk about your newest book, *Brown Faces, White Spaces*.

[00:01:32] **Latasha Morrison:** It's great to be here. I love that intro. I think I may give you credit maybe the first couple of times, but I love that how you described it as a diagnostic tool. I love that. being from a family of car mechanics that just rings true and I've never thought about it that way. So thank you.

[00:01:53] **Tim Koller:** Oh, absolutely. It is such a joy to be able to discuss this book because for someone like me who's been in white spaces, it's really helpful to have someone put up a mirror and say, are you aware of these kinds of things? And there's a number of resources out there that I've encountered that have been helpful in my journey. But this book brings together such amazing research and you're such a good storyteller and you weave it together. You forget sometimes reading through the really great content, how rigorous the research is because you're citing some really great information and material. So thank you for the rigor you put into this book.

[00:02:29] **Latasha Morrison:** Yes. Thank you. Oh my gosh. it was a lot of work. That's why it took so long after the first one. It was a lot of work.

[00:02:37] **Tim Koller:** And the work that you've done to serve our community, to serve the American church has been such a beautiful thing. And so I'm curious, could you give us a bit of an understanding of why you felt it necessary to write this and to put yourself through that level of rigor and scrutiny in order to, produce this? Why go through this?

[00:02:57] **Latasha Morrison:** Yeah. I think, several years ago when, before I wrote *Be the Bridge*, that was my story being a brown face in a predominantly white space. And, in meeting new friends, one of the things that I found out was, A lot of the errors were from more so ignorance or, people just haven't been exposed. It wasn't really a matter of heart conditioning. It was just a matter of just no one has ever told you and those are the people that you can really work with where they lack the information. And so that was, the story. But, So I, I had this, I think I wrote a blog, years ago entitled this, and I wanted this to really be the first book, but really *Be the Bridge* had to be the first book because it is the, it was the cornerstone for the, organizational transformational pathway. And so that book had to be written first. This one, was the idea about it being about systemic racism,

actually came about really 2020. I started writing in like 2021. But, you Really, it came about after the George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, after all of that was going on and people were paused because we were in the midst of a pandemic. And what I noticed is I like to fill in the gaps as a writer, as an educator, I wanted, I like to fill in the gaps where people lack understanding. And try to give them the information that they need. Like, they're saying this because they don't have the full context because we do trainings all across this country, denominations, with churches, with organizations. And one of the things when we're presenting and we give this information, at the end of our sessions, most people are like, Why didn't I know this? And you see their eyes go brighter. You see that there's this level of empathy and compassion and just it fills in the blank spaces of historical truth that people just didn't, weren't privy to. And once they're given that information, they're like, wow, like I'm on board. We got to do something, And. And that's really the condition of a lot of people that we encounter, as we've been on this journey. and so this book was, with a lot of things happening, I heard someone say, there's no such thing as systemic racism. And that was so offensive to me because my parents, I'm only one generation removed, from, Jim Crow. And so my parents were born into a world where they could not, sit where they wanted to sit, go in the stores they wanted to go into. they could not go to schools. and, some of the schools that were closer to them because of Jim Crow because of segregation and, being from the south and North Carolina, it's like saying it was really someone saying that it's like a slap in the face, where you're saying that the experience of so many millions of, folk in our country that is all a lie and that, that there's no, residue. from, just a few generations removed, there's no residue of the legacy of that. And so I tried to, there's so many systems that I've could have really diagnosed. but I, looked at the nine that I feel that we interact with the most. And, And each system that I look at, actually could have been a book by itself. And yeah, and so I, try to fill in the gaps to give people the tools that they need so that we can be better humans. So that we could be better brothers and sisters, so we could do, this, reconciling work, which means the flourishing of all better, and, so that is the reason why I wrote this, book, because at the end of the day, , I want people's story to be, what, I was missing information, someone told me, and I made better decisions because of it. That's not going to be the story for everyone. Some people's story would be, someone told me, someone tried to tell me, but I refuse to listen. That's a totally different, responsibility. That's a totally different accountability, there. And so at the end of the day, I want people to at least be able to say, you know what? There was a book that helped me to understand and now that I've been given the information, I'm making better decisions because of it

[00:08:08] **Tim Koller:** And there's got to be an intentionality about this work because it's not going to happen haphazardly. It's not going to happen because, well, I meant well, it actually are competencies that we can gain. And so you unpack a number of different competencies that are companions to not just learning history and learning how things came to be the way they are. But now in light of this. What now will we do? And it's such a beautiful, redemptive arc. And I love that you say in the beginning of this, you tell us that I love this. You say, now take a deep breath. And in that breath, remember that if you are breathing, you have the agency to bring about change. The issues in this book are layered, painful, and uncomfortable. We didn't cause systemic racism. It's not our fault that unjust systems exist, but it is our collective responsibility not to uphold those unjust systems. And there is plenty of hope. And I love that. You're inviting us into this shared redemptive work. And you share a lot of stories from be the bridge. And so how has your work with be the bridge informed this work and given you hope?

[00:09:18] **Latasha Morrison:** Yeah. be the bridge is the central focus. I always called be the bridge, my accidental nonprofit because I didn't start out to start a nonprofit. It was never in my goal even going to college that I would end up doing this type of work. the first 12 years of my life was spent, in corporate America. I worked for, three fortune 500 companies and I didn't realize that I was being groomed at that time to be able to run an organization. I had no idea that was in the plans for me.

and then after that ended, I think the last job I worked at was Ernst and Young. one of the big five. And I went into full time ministry from that standpoint. And. Going into full time ministry, I noticed when I was in a predominantly, African American church that there was this, really bridge building effort to reach our community and even people who didn't look like us. there was just really strong effort to do that. And, and, I noticed that even in corporate America, some of the trainings and different things that we would have to go to. I was like, wow, I wish I would see more of this in the church. And so when I went into predominantly, know, white churches, I noticed a difference. And so the work of be the bridge really started from me trying to make sense of the brokenness and to bring about solutions for the brokenness because we could sit back and say and complain about a problem. But I've always modeled my life and okay, do the next thing. Do the next right thing that you know to do because all of this could be overwhelming. And that's why I even tell people, even when I teach, I tell people, I wrote that because I tell people to take a deep breath because that's even how I'm able to, take in and to comprehend because sometimes things can be so overwhelming, but when you take a deep breath and you realize that there is something that I can do. Like I make it, maybe I can't fix everything. And, there's this organization I follow and, Africa, called African new life. And one of the things that, pastor Charles says is like, do for one what you can't do for the many. And so reaching one child, like it's overwhelming to see such a need, but if you can just reach one, And that one could turn into five, that five can turn into 10 and it multiplies. And so that is what, would be the bridge. It's like it started with a group of 11 women, that were just, I was just a church, local church girl, seeing the brokenness and trying to figure out, what was my part in it? And I started with just things that I knew that, dissecting movies, being open to having, cross cultural, cross racial dialogue. and finding like minded people who wanted to have this conversation. And there was a few people involved from the church that I was on staff, but I wasn't even like limiting myself just to My church and my staff because sometimes those things are not welcome. And I just, it was community, other Christians, that, we begin to meet and have this dialogue. So that is the hope, I think, is, is that there are people who are aware. there are people who are acknowledging and that those are our target people and be the bridge or people who are aware. and acknowledging that gives us a starting point, but they just don't know what to do. And be the bridge serves as an on-ramping for them to go deeper and understanding, our role as Christians, as brothers and sisters, this collective responsibility that we have, and also the historical context that many of us are missing because we're not taught, taught those things, within school, seminary, college, and a lot of, in a lot of cases. So unless you're like majoring in, like, indigenous and Asian American and, African American history, although it's a part of American history, those, a lot of those, parts are left out intentionally.

[00:14:11] **Tim Koller:** Absolutely. And so the work that you have been seeing through be the bridge, the work you've been leading through that organization, it gives you hope that we can actually do this work.

[00:14:23] **Latasha Morrison:** Yeah. Yeah. Because, we've had so many, and that's why I try like when you're writing about, just, just the racial division in America that could be very depressive. when you look at the history, you look at, the present, all of that could be very depressing. So I try to write in a way where I'm pulling back the covers and this, removing the scales on the hard issues, but I also, I'm a person of hope and I like to give people hope. And so You know, at one point and be the bridge, we had over 2000 groups happening globally. be the bridge is not just in America, but we have be the bridge groups that were in New Zealand. in other parts of the country where Italy, there's people that are taking our courses from our academy all over the world. And so that is hopeful that there are people who want to listen and I'll never forget. this was an important moment for me as I was in Florida and, years ago and I was doing a training at a church. And at the end of the training, an 80 year old woman came up to me and I didn't know what she was going to do. I was like, okay, she's like, Come here. And she was like, I gotta tell you something. And I was

like, Oh Lord, what did I, what are, I'm trying to prepare myself. I thought I don't know what she's going to say or what she's going to do. And she grabbed my hand and I was like, Oh Lord, she's about to hit me. Is she about to spank my head? And she grabbed my hand and she said, thank you. Thank you. And she just grabbed my hand. She said, I just didn't know. I was blind to it. And I have not forgotten that. I was like, if a 80 year old woman could kind of admit, just her ignorance of not knowing. And now that she knows if she goes out and does something different. if she educates her, if, she educates her grandchildren, our great grandchildren, if she makes a business decision, if she, changes ideologies, like there's something there. And that is hopeful that an 80 year old woman was not so far gone or not so blind. because I do believe when you connect this work to the message of Jesus, it's, When we're talking about the least of these and thinking about the things that Jesus addressed, what Jesus did, how Jesus moved, who Jesus lifted up. when you connect those dots for people, I think it, there is this collective lament, that it leads us to. And, and there's a conviction. And I believe that the sustaining power in this work is that of conviction. Yeah. and not of guilt or shame.

[00:17:37] **Tim Koller:** It's interesting that you are drawing us into. The conviction of the Holy Spirit that there are things that are out of alignment with the way of Jesus, and we're being invited in so that we can be part of a redemptive solution. And you talked a bit about hope. And one of my mentors many years ago was like, you need to do it spend time in Romans 15, 13

[00:18:00] **Latasha Morrison:** Yeah.

[00:18:01] **Tim Koller:** How to trust in the Lord so that you can be filled with joy and peace and then ultimately overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. But we first have to acknowledge before we enter into this work of reconciliation that something is broken. And one of the things you do Well, in brown faces, white spaces is to give us snapshots of nine different areas of life where we have seen injustice occur. And before I ask my question, I want to read a bit from the book, the color of law. So this is a book that I found

[00:18:33] **Latasha Morrison:** I love that book. Yeah. It's so good.

[00:18:36] **Tim Koller:** It's clear that in your book, you're shaped by the work that came out of this. But he says in his book, he says, as citizens in this democracy talking about America as citizens in this democracy, we all of us, white, black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American and others bear a collective responsibility to enforce our Constitution and to rectify past violations whose effects endure. And I want to say to that. Yes. And how much more for those who are called in the name of Jesus? Because yes, we're blessed to be you and I to be born in America and to have the Constitution protecting us. And you're the first in your family. You make note to be under the full protection, which is incredibly notable for us as America to be listening to that. But how much more as followers of Jesus are we to be ministers of reconciliation? And so I'm curious, how do you see your following Jesus, shaping this work of reconciliation and naming where things are broken. How does your faith in Jesus compel you to do this?

[00:19:41] **Latasha Morrison:** Yeah. It is the essence of my faith. It, there's no separation of it. I do this work because of Jesus and that is the guiding, light for me. I feel like, that this work is being led by the spirit of God. and so there's no separation. Like my faith informs this work, there is no, this work, there is no be the bridge without, my relationship with Jesus. There is no, no reconciling work without the, first reconciler, which is Jesus who, because of his death and resurrection that we are reconciled to the father. And I think that is, the foundation of this work. When we talk about the bridge, what sustains the bridge is the abutment. That's what keeps it in place. The message of Jesus

in this work that I'm doing is the abutment is the foundation of this work. It is the accountability is what I point to when, I'm, compelling people to do this work, not doing this work because it is the right thing to do doing this work because Jesus calls us into this reconciling work. He calls us into healing. He calls us into unity, and I think that is the power of that. And, and you talk about, you mentioned Romans 15. It's so funny because I was, I think it was Monday or last one day last week, that was like, a devotional, scripture for me, just, hoping these times and, I, looked it up because in one of the versions, I think it was the message Bible and in Romans 15, it calls it green hope. And I was like, what is green hope? like. And it's like life giving hope is like saying that there is life after death. that the idea that life can return from death. hope is about anticipation. It's about waiting.

And so that is the sustainability in this work. And that is why even as this work is rejected. and labels are put on this type of work. I'm sustained and I remain hopeful because I know this work is about the spirit of God. There are so many people that, that want to hear, and, there is a remnant. And so that's my encouragement, in this work. Yeah,

[00:22:18] **Tim Koller:** The work that you're discussing, you have such a joy that emanates. And yet I know, based on what you've written in this book, thinking about education, health care, the justice system, the marketplace, military property, ownership, entertainment, sports, and the church. Through all of this, it is not as though there is some large establishment that is just clapping and cheering for this work. There are people who are very much opposed to this work and who are going to. They're not going to engage in the work, but they're going to be vitriolic toward this work. And so how do you sustain yourself and your organization in the midst of such contention?

[00:23:00] **Latasha Morrison:** Yeah, that has been the hard thing. I think, finding a seminary like Denver, been life given for me and the people, the professors, all of that has been life given people cheer me on, people that are open and read it and really fully, committed to the work of God, and I, and, I'm taking this class on, on the doctrine of God, with Dr, Don Payne. And that has been incredible because when I look at, the, the issues that we're facing in our society, and as we look to the antidote, we know the antidote is Jesus. But then you, look at how are we getting these outcomes, continuously in our society. And when we talk about as we're as we've been studying the doctrine of God, understanding who God is, is really important because in order to get the outcomes that we've dealt with in our society, there has to be a skewed view of who God is.

There has to be a skewed view of the image of God. So we're dealing with a theological issue in our society, and the only way to fix that is through better theology, and that's discipleship, for spiritual formation. and This is why I found myself, here at Denver, Seminary. I can't really focus on the naysayers. Some of that has to be, to give me peace and to not, to help me sustain in this work. You have to let some people go. you, I, always think back to, this work, I'm surrendered in this work. I hold it with the open hand. This is God's work. Like this is not the nonprofit that Latasha wanted to start, but this is the nonprofit that God, has started through me and keeping that perspective keeps me committed and also keeps me focused on. the people, the remnant, the people who want to hear the people who want to go. And that's who Jesus focused on. You think about that, the very people that should have recognized the very people that should have been able to connect the dots of who Jesus was. They were blind to it. The most elite, the most educated, were blind to it. but it did not stop the message of Jesus. It does not stop the work of Jesus. Jesus went with those who wanted to go and those who answered the call. And, so that's what I have to do in this work. And I have to believe God for his, protection, and for his, provision in the midst of this.

And you know that even through the midst of all of that, you think about everything that the church has withstood like we are here. think about all the different, empires and, and kings and all these

different leaders, like, from Eastern culture to Western culture. Just think about what the message of Jesus have survived. and it was all done through a remnant, not through a majority, but through a remnant. and so that is the part that gives me, encouragement that everybody's not going to get it. But the right people will get it.

[00:27:01] **Tim Koller:** I have this image of Nehemiah doing the work on the wall. And so I'm like, I'm not going to come down from the good work that I'm doing. I'm not going to get distracted. I love

[00:27:08] **Latasha Morrison:** Exactly.

[00:27:09] **Tim Koller:** We don't see Jesus chasing people down and begging them to join into the work. But

[00:27:14] **Latasha Morrison:** Are forcing.

[00:27:15] **Tim Koller:** Or forcing. Yeah, it's a

[00:27:17] **Latasha Morrison:** Yeah.

[00:27:17] **Tim Koller:** I think the invitation for us is to get a little bit more curious, perhaps, and especially for a Denver seminary audience. I would encourage us to lean in on 1st Timothy 4 16 that we should watch our life and doctrine closely. And I think we can convince ourselves. We're really good at watching our doctrine. While at the same time, our doctrine may have been shaped by a limited subset of voices because of the nature of some of the things you identify of how church structures have enabled certain ways of thinking and alienated others. The publishing industry, it's been a bias towards specific areas for a long time. Who was excluded? Who could vote? Who couldn't vote in U. S. politics? All of these things have this impact that is still felt today. And one of the things that is a leadership professor we talk about in our program is that the system you designed is getting the results that it's designed to get. So if you don't see the results, you're not going to be able to go back into the system and make changes. And one of the things that you say is, let's ask questions. How we can reform historically white spaces and create systems that work for the good of all. And I would just like to encourage our listeners that if you're going, what do you mean there are systems that are historically white spaces that aren't working for all? This book, *Brown Faces, White Spaces*, will give very specific details, supported by research, to help us understand the specific ways in which the systems that are operating are creating outcomes that are not truly representative of the person of Jesus, and then enables us to make decisions about how we can reform them, to make them better representations of the gospel. So as we think about this work, Latasha, I'm curious. What are some of the things that you are seeing people resonate most with as they've encountered this book that you've published? So there are nine things you've highlighted, but are there one or two that you're just like, man, I'm just seeing a number of people go toward this thing and find hope.

[00:29:20] **Latasha Morrison:** Yeah. I think *The liberation stories* is one thing that people connect with, just like in the last book, it was the liturgies. It was but the liberation stories, I think when you're reading something, this heavy, people connect with that, like people that are just like them, that are, doing the work of, preparation, dedication, and liberation within the work. And the other piece that people connect with, of course, is, my story. Because when it's someone that you know or someone that you've learned about or you've been following and you're reading how the system has impacted my family or impacted me personally, there's some ownership there because I know

someone now, and a lot of this work is about community. It's about, belonging. It's about collectiveness. it's about togetherness. And I think that, telling my story, allows people to get a glimpse, that maybe they don't have a, this experience themselves. And then for, brown people like me, it resonates with them because they're like, okay, I'm not the only one. I too experienced this. Like I feel connected to you now because our stories are similar or, it brings up, people tell me even more stories that this happened to my mom or, this happened to my grandmother and I never talked about this. So it's opening up, this book is opening up conversations within families, and also, within community. and it's that it's, building bridges, because when someone gives you the gift of listening, that active listening, that's like, that's a gift that we give people. That's how we show compassion. That's how we show empathy, by listening to someone's story and respecting someone's story. And that's what this is doing in groups across, the country.

[00:31:35] **Tim Koller:** It's so good. And those stories are fabulous. So thank you for the work that it took to curate those stories and present them in the book. They're very encouraging and practical examples of the outworking of this gospel centered way of life. And I love that. So I'm curious, Latasha, we've been chatting for 30 minutes or so. Are there any questions that I have not asked you or any topics that haven't come up that you would like for us to discuss?

[00:32:01] **Latasha Morrison:** Yeah. I think, I believe this work begins with prayer, we, we can't do this work apart from prayer and, this work of, racial healing, racial reconciliation. I personally don't understand how you can do it apart from God. Like, that is my sustainability. That is what keeps me. That's what holds me. That's what propels me, in this work. I don't understand. It's too much to bear on your own. And one of the things in the, I think it's in the epilogue, In the epilogue, there are actually some additional prayers that are in the book and also a prayer of, reimagination that I write a lament prayer because I think it's important that we, understand what lament is to have great sorrow and hope. Lament is a worship, is a part of worship. And so I think that's important. So there's a lament prayer, but then there's also a prayer of reimagining because sometimes we see things, that are so bad that we don't, we lose hope in seeing them, flourishing or whole. And so how can we re imagine systems, just re imagine like that can, that helps give you hope and something to really push for when you re imagine an education system that is beneficial for everyone, and what that does in the long term for a community and for a country when we have healthy educational structures. and that's something that we should desire with our desire should not just be that something is good for our family, our community, but I should care about what's happening, in Mississippi and as it relates to education. Because what impacts one, impacts the whole. So I think, getting us to reimagine what could a healthy whole healthcare system look like when everybody is getting what they need.

And they may, everybody may not be getting what they want, but they're getting what they need to have a healthy life. And what does that look like? And sometimes when we start reimagining those things, it gives us hope that things can change. and I always tell people like, we can do anything. None of this is too hard. None of this is too hard. If we get ourselves and our selfishness out of the way, none of this is too hard. They thought enslavement, ending the institution of slavery was going to be too hard. we did it and every, all the entanglement, did we do it perfectly? No, but we did it. And so there are ways to untangle things. you just have to be willing, to do it. there it, there is hope, there is a way to untangle, this, but I think sometimes it's deflection and denial when we, try to say it's too hard and we don't put any effort towards it. We put a man on the moon. You know what I'm saying? We are like voyaging to space. We are floating cities on oceans and cruise ships. Like, there are so many, we are creative, innovative people. if we can send someone to the moon, I think we can deal with a broken healthcare system,

[00:35:56] **Tim Koller:** Amen. what an opportunity to be people of the gospel animated through faith, hope, and love to go and do meaningful work to create beauty. What more compelling vision could we invite people into, the story of Jesus? Because there's a lot of people who are looking at the church and going, they are just as selfish, they're just as self centered, they're out for their own. They're not concerned about the world around us. And as Denver Seminary, one of our core commitments is global concern. And I find that the work that you're animating here is very poignant in the American church, but the lessons can be extrapolated for all humans around the globe. And I think it's a beautiful invitation for us to lean in and get more curious. And I love that the afterword of your book was written by Dr Anita Phillips, a mutual friend that you and I have. She's amazing. But I

[00:36:45] **Latasha Morrison:** she is.

[00:36:46] **Tim Koller:** Thinking through many years ago as a younger married couple, one of the things that when she and I were on a seminary staff, seminary faculty together, she made comment about a marriage relationship and she said, and this was very early on in my journey as a follower of Jesus with curiosity, where she's saying, if your spouse leans in and says the way that you and I are relating, isn't working. There are things you're doing that are detracting from our ability to relate well together. You're going to need to either lean in or you're getting divorced, right? So you have to lean in and listen. And I remember Austin Channing Brown's book where she started, I'm still here with white people are exhausting. And for some people, they're like, Oh, I can't, that's, I can't read that. It's too triggering. I can't handle that. But I would say for me, I'm looking at that going, what? And I think it's important that we have the courage it takes to name that dynamic and say, please listen to this. It's worth listening to this for the sake of the gospel. And your book is inviting us into that same thing of, hey, I'm not saying that I'm creating a problem. I'm naming that there is a problem. Can we have a conversation about the problem? And as we are concluding our conversation, I want to read what Doctor Anita Phillips concludes in her afterwards. She says, I say to you, dear reader, It's time to get to work. The work of generational repair and restoration is at hand. It belongs to us all. And in this book, Latasha Morrison has given us a roadmap for that work. Latasha thank you for the roadmap and the diagnostic tool that you've given. It has been such a joy to have a conversation with you today.

[00:38:24] **Latasha Morrison:** Thank you so much. Thank you for having me.

[00:38:28] **Tim Koller:** Friends, we're grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us. If you get the chance, please leave us a rating or review wherever you listen to podcasts, and please send any questions or comments to us at podcast@denverseminary.edu. In addition, visit denverseminary.edu for more information and resources about Denver Seminary, such as events, degree programs, and other episodes of Engage 360, including full transcripts. We're grateful for your interest, support, and prayers. Until next time, may the Lord bless you.