

DOIN' THE WORK:

Frontline Stories
of Social Change

Anti-Racist, Anti-Oppressive Mental Health – Hayden Dawes, LCSW

Episode 41

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Shimon Cohen:

Welcome to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change, where we bring you stories of real people working to address real issues. I am your host, Shimon Cohen.

Shimon Cohen:

I'm excited to let everyone know about the Doin' The Work Collection in partnership with Things Social Workers Say. We've got hoodies, tees, mugs, and tote bags. Now, you can rep the podcast you love while you're doin' the work. Check out the link in the show notes and head on over to the store. Thanks for supporting this work.

Shimon Cohen:

In this episode, I talk with Hayden Dawes, who is a PhD student, researcher, therapist, clinical social worker, speaker, and compassion warrior in Greensboro, North Carolina. Hayden talks about his work on mental health disparities and equity, training clinicians with a cultural humility and anti-racist focus, and how all of this connects to policy.

Shimon Cohen:

We discuss the need to talk about race, racism, and other forms of identity and systemic oppression within the clinical setting, as well as work on ourselves. Hayden explains some of his approaches to teaching and talking about racism, White privilege, and homophobia, rooted in a structural analysis. He shares how he looks at how internalized oppression affects him, particularly negative internalized messages, and how he has done that work clinically with clients - who are primarily people of color and LGBTQIA - to identify when "the oppressor is speaking."

Shimon Cohen:

Hayden emphasizes the need for White therapists to talk about race and racism with White clients and how racism should not only be a conversation for Black and Brown folks. We get into a discussion about identity, spaces, and different ways of pushing for change. Hayden also shares about how he got into this work. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Shimon Cohen:

Before we get into the interview, I want to let you all know about our episode's sponsor, the University of Tennessee Knoxville College of Social Work. First off, I want to thank them for sponsoring the podcast. UTK has a phenomenal social work program with the opportunity to do your bachelor's, master's, and doctorate of social work online. Of course, they also have excellent classes in-person in both Knoxville and Nashville. UTK is committed to preparing social workers who will support human potential and dignity and challenge racism and all forms of oppression. Scholarships are available. Go to www.csw.utk.edu to learn more. And now, the interview.

Shimon Cohen:

Hey, Hayden. Thanks so much for coming on the podcast. I'm really excited to have you on here and get the chance to interview you. I've been following your work for a while. So, just want to welcome you on to Doin' The Work.

Hayden Dawes:

I am so thrilled and excited to be with you and to share myself with your listeners. I've been following your work for a while as well. So, I, too, am excited.

Shimon Cohen:

Awesome. So, let's just start out with you sharing a little bit about what you currently do.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. So, my journey has led me currently to be a PhD student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I primarily look at mental health disparities and inequities, and how can we create better mental health systems that serve more people, especially people of color, and LGBTQIA-identified folks, and people that live at the intersection.

Hayden Dawes:

I also do quite a fair bit of training of clinicians on cultural humility and cultural competency, and anti-racism, and having people look at their own stuff while they're sitting across and helping others.

Hayden Dawes:

Of course, that leads to thinking about policies and how certain policies impact access and who's not included. So, those are the things that I'm primarily most steeped in. So, I'm learning to tighten up my research skills, and to ask better questions, and find better ways in which to answer these very important questions so we can push forward the agenda that we social workers do.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. You really do a lot and you covered so much, and I'm like, "Okay. Where do we go in this conversation?" Hopefully, we're going to hit on all of it. Something I wanted to ask you based on what you just said is the trainings that you do, and we will hit on all of it, but how do those go for you? What's the response like because you're talking about topics that are typically pretty challenging for people to talk about even, let alone put into practice? So, I'm just wondering your experience with that.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. I think as I've gone about, I've had to definitely make it my own, and use my own voice, my own clinical intuition when I speak to, and particularly, different therapists, they might be LCSWs, LPCs, psychologists, trying to situate it in the work that they do for them to understand why talking about race in session with sensitivity really matters and why them doing the work outside of session is really important for the therapeutic alliance.

Hayden Dawes:

I have found it to be very gratifying. I come out of those feeling pumped and ready to take on more. It is challenging work, and I have to take care of myself with that because it can be really draining to look at

people who have not thought about this stuff ever in their life and you're like, "How long have you been serving people?"

Hayden Dawes:

So, it honestly can be a dose of humility for me to think about, "What are my blind spots and stuff that I'm not thinking about?" It's really easy for me to sit in judgment. So, I just try to slow down and be with all of it, and be that container for folks to work on their biases, and to look at them.

Shimon Cohen:

That's really powerful and incredible because that's hard to do just in and of itself. I personally get challenged with that when I'm educating around these topics. Have you found certain ways to approach the topic of racism, of White privilege, of homophobia, those topics? Have you found some ways that seem to work better than others?

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. Absolutely. I think one of the things is we have to make sure that people don't ... We really definitely go through the critical race understanding that we are all in the social context full of these isms, and it's not personal, it's not about you John Doe White man. It's not about you, and yet it does impact you, and there's certain things that you've acquired in your life just by the nature of what family you were born in to.

Hayden Dawes:

So, I really try to depersonalize that as much as possible while at the same time holding people accountable for the ways in which they are being complicit and the ways in which they're perpetuating these systems of oppression.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. I found similar, where when we explain how this is a system and it's been around for a really long time, it can take it away from the individual. Although, there's always, and you probably see this in your work, it feels like there's always that push where racism gets talked about as this interpersonal issue and not a structural issue. So, how do you address that?

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. I think that's a great question. I think we have to understand that in the way in which I'm looking at it right now is there's definitely three levels to it, right? So, the interpersonal issue, and I also think about the group affiliation piece, and how people of color, disenfranchised folks, marginalized people understand themselves as part of a group, part of a larger community.

Hayden Dawes:

White folks have not had to slow down long enough to think about that they are affiliated with a group that's largely been based on Whiteness, and whatever that might mean. So, helping them understand that people that look like you made certain policies that benefited them and created disadvantages for everybody else.

Hayden Dawes:

So, I definitely try to help them understand that you didn't create these laws, you didn't create the system, your grandparents didn't create the system. It is so embedded in the soil and in the policies, and the ways in which we do the project of this country, and largely this globe that along the lines of race. So, really slow down and really look at that.

Hayden Dawes:

Of course, we can talk about redlining, and we can talk about policing. We can talk about all of these really big structural issues, but you have to find a way then to make it personal. That's why I think really important narratives can really highlight this for a lot of White folks for them to understand how this really impacts people on a day-to-day level even though it's systemic.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. Absolutely. One thing that I've been seeing lately is the concept of privilege talked about in this neutral way, and this is problematic, and it's talked about like, "Oh, yeah. I have privilege, and I'm going to use my privilege," or whatever, but it doesn't also get talked about like me having White privilege means that people of color are oppressed. Those privileges come at the expense of someone else.

Hayden Dawes:

I mean, absolutely. I mean, what else is there to say? If you need that superiority for whatever reason, there is someone that's inherently inferior.

Shimon Cohen:

Right.

Hayden Dawes:

I'm going to say that again. If you need the superiority to deal with your own insecurity, someone else will be inferior, period, and subjugated.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, and along with that comes a host of laws and policies that keep that happening everyday.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. It keeps the structure and the status quo in place when, really, there are other ways in which we can share power. I'm going to need for you to deal with your insecurity about not being enough, and I'm going to need for you to understand that for me being empowered doesn't mean that you're necessarily less than, and that we can create policies and systems and structures in which they're far egalitarian than this.

Shimon Cohen:

Right, which benefit all of us.

Hayden Dawes:

Absolutely. To some of the things, I'm like, "Don't people realize that if Black folk and other people of color were treated better, if there was better structures for them that White folks would be better, too?"

Shimon Cohen:

Right, right. Yeah. There's such a disconnect there.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah, and I think part of the disconnect is because the system of White supremacy really has people thinking that we're disconnected, that we're not connected to one another. It really is such an affront to the interconnectedness of humanity.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. That really gets me thinking about your clinical work, of taking these really harmful systems and what does this then look like in a clinical session.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. When I was in private practice, I primarily saw people of color and LGBTQIA-identified people, and one of the things that's really important for me in that work, and including with myself, is helping them see where that system was operating within them, and helping them to dismantle that system from the inside out. Seeing where my own internalized oppression and stigma, the ways in which I'm supposed to walk down the road, what clothes I'm supposed to wear, who I'm supposed to love.

Hayden Dawes:

Me silencing myself in whatever way and not being able to use my voice because people that look like me shouldn't use their voice in a certain way. There are certain ways to perform Blackness. I'm not Black enough or I'm too gay or I'm not this enough. Really slowing down and confronting how those systems of oppression dwell within me.

Hayden Dawes:

So, when I sit across from clients and we're talking about the internalized transphobia, let's talk about it. Let's see where you had to inherit that in order to be adaptive in some way, to try to understand yourself, but booooo, it is no longer serving you. That is just the inner oppressor in you that is constantly wreaking havoc. What can we do to turn down that noise so you can hear something else that's happening inside of you?

Shimon Cohen:

That's so powerful. I know there's not a simple answer for this, but what does turning down the noise look like?

Hayden Dawes:

Turning down the noise, for me, I think, first of all, is let's see what it's actually saying. What are these voices saying? Let's write them out. Let's put them on a piece of paper. What have you internalized from the media about who you are? I literally might get a sheet of paper and let's write it down, boo.

Shimon Cohen:

As you're saying this, I'm like, "I have a feeling you probably didn't learn how to do this in social work school."

Hayden Dawes:

I think that's a very good point. I probably didn't learn it in social work school, but I think my favorite clinicians and I think the best clinicians are ones that you got to find stuff that work. I've been surrounded by Black women, other disenfranchised folk, White folks that are interested in other ways of doing the work, and I can think about some colleagues that were like, "Hayden, when I'm working with certain people, I just have them write down what are some of the internal voice is saying about them."

Hayden Dawes:

So, that's one of the things I love about social work is that, truly, when it's done well, we are passing down lessons to other social workers, and we are inheriting lessons from social workers that came before us.

Shimon Cohen:

Absolutely. Yeah, which is a big reason why I wanted to get you on here because I know there's going to be social workers listening who can think about, who want to know, "How do I do this?" because it's one thing to read about systems and structures and racism, it's another thing to then understand it on another level, and then it's even another thing to be able to engage that therapeutically, clinically.

Hayden Dawes:

I think you're absolutely right. It takes trial and error. It takes getting it wrong. Some clients can't have the conversation that I'm having about systems of oppression that live within them. They may not be ready. So, sometimes it's about checking our own need to be right and our own need to push too soon because we have to pick our opportunities wisely, especially when we're talking about working across from another individual or another person.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. So, if you're getting the sense, you're hearing someone who's saying some of these internalized messages, these harmful messages, and you hear them coming out in session as they're sharing and you fill it out, right? Do you just call it? What would you literally say to them?

Hayden Dawes:

It depends on the person.

Shimon Cohen:

Right, right.

Hayden Dawes:

I actually have a quick story. I have a friend that was coming out to himself as being bisexual, and he said what his therapist told him as he was talking out loud. She started waving her hands. She's like, "Oh, my gosh! There's just so much internalized homophobia in here. I can't stand it."

Shimon Cohen:

The therapist said it?

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. He said, "Hayden, it really had me slow down and be like, 'Oh, my gosh! She's so right.'" Sometimes we definitely have to reflect what we're hearing so people can actually see themselves in the mirror.

Shimon Cohen:

Totally.

Hayden Dawes:

So, if that's literally what you're hearing, sometimes that's the most therapeutic thing you can do. It's like this whole trope about Black girl magic, Black boy magic. I'm like, "Yeah. That's cute and all, but Black boy magic and Black girl magic will get you dead." We are working way too damn hard in order to just understand that we are worthy and enough.

Hayden Dawes:

So, some of it, to me in my mind, is an overcompensation at times. So, we often think about internalized stigma in this way of not feeling enough, sure, and then there's another side of feeling like we have to the most. I think a lot of hustle, a lot of grind culture comes from this place that is really deeply seated in some insecurity that people have like, "Why do we all have to feel like we have to perform a certain level of being professional, of being business owners?"

Hayden Dawes:

I'm like, "Because if we really felt like we're okay as we were, would we have to do all of that?" Because I don't care how much money you make, you're not going to not be Black. You're not going to be in this really toxic system that is just hellbent on taking away your humanity. No, you're not worthless. You're not dumb. You're not stupid, but you also don't need to be on the cover of Forbes Magazine to be enough either.

Shimon Cohen:

These are the kind of conversations that you'll have.

Hayden Dawes:

You know it.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. I love it. I love it. That gets me thinking about something else I wanted to bring up. One of the things I know you do from your writing is you really put it out there towards White therapists as well, right? So, your clientele, the people you've worked with have been, as you said, mostly people of color, people who are LGBTQIA-identified, and then you put it out to White therapists like, "Hey, what are you all doing around racism clinically with White people?" I just wanted to bring that in, too, because I think it's such an important perspective that you've been putting out there and pushing.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. The reason why a lot of this work when I started writing about that came about is because I was looking for someone in the social work, psychology, counseling canon to tell me we could go further than this idea of cultural competency, that we can literally put it away ... Talk about the elephant in the room.

Hayden Dawes:

I couldn't find that person. So, I was like, "Well, I may have to become that person." So, that's when I started to do my own thinking and my own emotional labor to start asking some of these questions because White colleagues largely don't think about the stuff.

Hayden Dawes:

There's a big generational shift, but when I'm in places where I'm with clinicians that have been practicing for 30-40 years, I mean, we were talking about a whole new universe in terms of race and understanding racism than we were back then. They weren't being trained to even talk about what was happening in the room unless a client brought it up. So, I'm like, "Harm is being done by not at least extending an invitation to talk about this."

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. I've wondered why it isn't part of more assessment tools, to be honest, to look at how does racism affect your life, how does sexism affect your life, and just right there, the conversation has started.

Hayden Dawes:

Well, yeah, and I think this is where understanding history is really important, and recognizing that largely there's been this big socialization not to talk about these systems of oppression, and it allows me to have a lot more compassion for those that came before me, who even in their well-intent made huge mistakes. I know I'm going to do the same thing. I hope we're in a place where 30 years from now someone is like, "Hayden Dawes wasn't talking about X." I really hope we're there because I remember writing an invitation to White therapists and a White clinician that had been retired was working on a Native American reservation for years with children in their families, and she wrote me an email after I put that out there. She said, "Hayden, I feel such regret and sadness. Even in that context we did not ask how has intergenerational trauma and racism impacted you."

Shimon Cohen:

Wow. Wow.

Hayden Dawes:

It's easy for us to be on our high horse and be like, "How could you not?" but my thinking is one day we will be that person, hopefully, that we would progress as a people and as a society that there are certain issues that we are not thinking about today that can be named, and so that we can say, "I'm sorry I didn't do it right. I did the best I could."

Shimon Cohen:

Right, and that willingness to listen and learn, and continually that it never stops, that we never to some point where we've got this figured out.

Hayden Dawes:

Right.

Shimon Cohen:

Another thing I wanted to bring up, I want to read you actually something you wrote and get your thoughts. I'm hoping you'll elaborate on this. We've already talked about this, but this is from Racial Reconciliation: Do White Therapists Talk to Their White Clients About Race that you wrote for the North Carolina Society for Clinical Social Work. This is your quote right here. "I fear that conversations in our field focus too closely on how to assist marginalized and disenfranchised populations in adjusting to the harms caused by an unjust society rather than treating those privileged folks who unwittingly cause the harm." Care to say more?

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. So, I work with the basic assumption that most of us don't mean to cause harm in the world. I really believe that even the worst actions are driven by positive intent. When we think about peoples, White clients out there who are in places of power, they're board of directors, they're CEOs, they're executive directors, they might be supervisors, they're teachers, they're other clinicians, and they're working within a heterogeneous society that is known this United States of America, how are you equipping them to see where their own Whiteness and the ways in which they've been socialized into being White is causing harm to someone else, that some of the policies that they are creating, that literally don't see a whole swath of human beings in the world because they're not slowing down long enough to inquire and to ask questions?

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. It's interesting because the typical clinical model, and it depends, of course, if you take insurance or don't take, I mean, there's a lot of layers to this, but that model of you do an assessment, you work on a treatment plan, you come up with some agreed upon goals, how many White clients are going to have as their agreed upon goals like, "Oh, I really want to look at my own racism," or "I really want to look at my own White privilege"?

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. I mean, you're absolutely right. So, we have to put this in context. If someone can't hear it because they're going to shut down and not come back to see you again, of course, don't bring it up then, but I think talking about racism in America, especially in 2021, is far more relevant than you maybe talking about your dog at home. I'm not saying that sometimes we don't need to put in something a little bit light just to ... I sit with some of my clients and I'm like, "Let's talk about what happened on Drag Race. Let's bring the temperature down a little bit," but you ask something like, "Oh, so I noticed these headlines in the news. I'm just wondering if there's something that you make of that," because here's the thing, and this is where I might get a little bit on my high horse.

Hayden Dawes:

I think a skilled clinician can use everything that's happening in the outside world in the clinical container to address those goals on the paper. So, maybe the goal is how to be less anxious. So, I noticed when I brought this conversation up, your face started getting a little bit flushed. I'm wondering if we could do some deep breathing around that. I'm wondering if we could do some grounding activities to bring the temperature down. Well, I wonder what is this about talking about these murders happening in the

news that make you feel really anxious. Let's talk about the context of what is it like to be a White person and for two White people to talk about this. Yeah, we feel anxious. I wonder why we feel anxious.

Hayden Dawes:

So, there we are. We talked about race. There we are. We're starting to talk about some of the physical symptoms of anxiety, and we can also talk about the historical pieces of why we don't really talk about this stuff. So, boom, boom, boom. It ain't that easy, but I'm just trying to illustrate that I do think there's a way to weave this in and out. I do agree some models of brief treatment, I'm going to see you for four or five sessions. It's not going to work.

Hayden Dawes:

I don't know. I'm still trying and thinking about clinicians coming in so much with their own agenda. Of course, you don't readily go in there saying, "We're going to talk about X, Y, and Z today." No. Sometimes you do have to leave space to see what's happening, but the question for me is when the opportunity comes up, are you running away from that piece of when they say a racial slur in session because you are uncomfortable by it or are you worried about them? What is this about? I think it's important to ... because that's a really important message for me.

Hayden Dawes:

I used to do domestic violence offender groups. Sometimes when some of the men, in particular, there was other groups for women, would say something really disparaging for women. To me, I took that as a really important opportunity.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. Absolutely. I mean, it connects to relationships like you had said earlier, right? This idea that we're so all disconnected from each other, that segregation is just some natural occurring phenomenon, which we know it's not, that there's a whole bunch of laws that are the reason people live in neighborhoods that most of the people look like them, right? Then going there clinically on how this affects those relationships or like you said, anxiety. I mean, I think that's really powerful.

Hayden Dawes:

I'm so thankful that you asked me that question partly because the other thing it brings me to is this is another assumption I live with because we are so connected. I'm willing to say that even White people have been harmed by racism. They don't see their connection to people. If we want to make it an argument about politics and class, the ways in which poor White folks don't see that more of their economic fates are tied with class struggle along the lines of race. It's been used as such a tool.

Shimon Cohen:

Absolutely.

Hayden Dawes:

They, too, have been harmed from it. That's why we can understand that some of these policies that would benefit BIPOC communities would also benefit them. So, we're all harmed by it in a personal level. I think there's a lot of White folks running around with some trauma in their family versus what

they hear at the dinner table or what they hear from grandpa and uncle or whomever in the family, auntie. I'm not going to pick on one gender, right? When they go to school and they hear something different, there's some discrepancy between what they might hear in certain spaces, and what they know of the world, and what they think of their Black friends, and what they think about what is it like to have a romantic feelings of someone that's not of your race. So, we're all swimming in this stew. I think that's where an opportunity for White clinicians are to unpack some of that with their White clients.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. Absolutely. Kristen Brock-Petroshius, who I interviewed a couple of episodes ago, she talks about deep canvassing and White people talking with other White people. She shared about that, too, the ways that she was able to make those connections within her own family, certain things that were harmful and how they connect to Whiteness, but we don't always see it connected to Whiteness. We see these things as in and of themselves a toxic, abusive relationship, but when you look at what those underlying beliefs are, they can get connected back to Whiteness.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. I'm so grateful to be a systems thinker and to have language and to have tools and frameworks in order to see how this is all connected.

Shimon Cohen:

In terms of what you're learning about mental health disparities and inequity within mental health, what do you see as some solutions?

Hayden Dawes:

Wow. What a big question. I mean, we need a lot of different solutions. I see connection and relationship and systems that create true connection and relationship. It's probably the best tool that we're going to have. Right now, we are socially and physically isolated from one another. I mean, we just are partly because of the pandemic.

Hayden Dawes:

Of course, we can think of the top down approach is we can't tell people they should spend time with one another. We can't really do that. So, from a bottom up perspective, this is why community and civic organizations and group meetings and 12-step meetings, why they're so important because connection, truly, is the antidote to so many of these ills.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. That just got me thinking about ... I know you're talking about mental health inequities and connection. So, when we think of it in terms of systems, and we think of where are the spaces for people to connect, where do they exist? How do we create more, and what gets in the way?

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. I think people are so busy trying to pay the bills right now, so busy trying to pay the bills. It's hard to let go of that constant grind or need to think that you need to make money in order to get to this

certain status, where you can just hang out with people just to be with them and to learn how to play again.

Hayden Dawes:

Think about anxiety and depression. So much is this lack of this understanding of interdependence that we belong to one another, that I need you to do your part so that I can do my part, and I do my part and you can do your part. Our society, because of capitalism and this constant grind, and go, go, go, I think it's really some of the things that's really exasperating and worsening our mental health issues already. I'm really curious to see what it's going to look like once we "come out" of this pandemic.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. I mean, the toll it's taken on teenagers alone is something that I don't think we can really fully understand, and children, and what this has been like for them. I say that as a parent watching that.

Hayden Dawes:

So, then I think going back to what you're saying, how do we carve space for us to share our stories in a real authentic held, supportive way? When mental treatment works at its best, it's an affirming container for people to be who they are. I've been doing a lot more thinking about bisexuality and queerness, and particularly bisexual folks who a lot of people don't know often face worse outcomes in disparities compared to people that identify as being straight or gay.

Hayden Dawes:

I think it's this bi-erasure, constantly having to hide parts of oneself, and we have to open up. Just by having conversations and naming that, even just right with me naming it, hopefully, it just carves out a tiny bit more space that wasn't there before so people aren't burdened as much by it.

Shimon Cohen:

Absolutely. This idea of carving out space, I mean, everything you said was so important just then and this idea of self-acceptance and self-erasure, and then how to have a space where those conversations can even take place, right? Then I think about access, right? I think about who has access to these spaces. Who has access to therapy?

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. So, one of my friends and I were texting back and forth and he said that people with wealth go to therapy in order to improve, performance improvement. People who are on the bottom rungs of the ladder, they go to therapy to survive. So, we have to understand that a lot of the work that gets done, and I did community social work doing home visits and all of that. A lot of that just offering a little bit of a lifeline because these systems are really, really hard in our country. People are just trying to survive and make a living.

Hayden Dawes:

So, sometimes you might be just, "What can we do? What coping can we give you so that way you can maintain and keep this job and not lose it or maintain this housing?" It really can feel like a little bit like whack-a-mole.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. There's too many issues happening. Again, it becomes this individual problem, which we know is, you're right, there's going to be more problems and more problems. You can't address all of them, especially on an individual level because they're not coming from the individual. Many of them are not coming from the individual.

Hayden Dawes:

Absolutely right.

Shimon Cohen:

So, we've really talked about quite a bit. I wanted to shift a little bit and I wanted to ask you, what do you love about this work?

Hayden Dawes:

I love talking to people such as yourself. It gets me really energized. I really love how there's this self-development process alongside of hopefully being a positive change agent, "Hayden, I have to show up to this party and yet, the party is not about me." So, that's what I really about it. It has completely changed my life. It's completely changed me. I feel very grateful for it.

Hayden Dawes:

It can be really hard to confront this amount of human suffering all of the time. When you're highly empathetic, you feel it all, every headline, every tweet. You feel all of it. Yet, I'm oddly very grateful that I'm able to feel and I'm not just dead. I'm not numb to it.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. Feeling it can hurt, but it's better to feel it than to be numb.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. I know I'm alive because I feel it. At the end of the day, I want to leave a meaningful contribution. I'm grateful that this career in many ways found me and I didn't know how much I needed it for me to better understand myself, understand how these systems of oppression operate within me, and to give me more tools in order to dismantle and disrupt it.

Shimon Cohen:

I love those words, dismantle and disrupt.

Hayden Dawes:

I thought you would like it.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. Do you want to share a little bit about how social work did find you because you just mentioned that? It got me thinking I didn't really ask you your story of how you got into doing this work.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. So, my undergrad is in vocal performance.

Shimon Cohen:

Wow.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. I thought I was going to be an opera singer traveling the world, and then towards the end of my undergrad, I realized I was having some physical vocal issues, and then it's just like, "I don't think this is really going to be the best career for me." Great recession happened and I was like, "You know what? You need to get a job."

Hayden Dawes:

So, I started working for T-Mobile inside of Walmart and Sam's Clubs. I also started doing retail partner sales working out of different big box stores. I remember meeting this woman who I was trying to sell cable to, and I said, "Do you want this cable package?"

Hayden Dawes:

She says, "Well, does it come with C-SPAN 3?"

Hayden Dawes:

I said, "Well, who the heck watches C-SPAN 3?"

Hayden Dawes:

She says, "Well, I do. I'm a political science professor."

Hayden Dawes:

I said, "Okay."

Hayden Dawes:

She says, "Well, Hayden, you told me that you want to go back to school."

Hayden Dawes:

I was like, "Yeah."

Hayden Dawes:

She's like, "What degree do you want to get?"

Hayden Dawes:

I said, "I want to get an MBA."

Hayden Dawes:

She says, "You don't want to get an MBA."

Hayden Dawes:

She herself had graduated with a music education degree. She says, "Well, I talk a lot of people out of MBAs," she says. She says, "Well, what about your job do you love?"

Hayden Dawes:

I said, "I really love connecting with people, seeing how my products can really fit in their life and shape whatever they might need."

Hayden Dawes:

She says, "Well, what about your job don't you like?"

Hayden Dawes:

I said, "I really don't like the numbers. I feel like I'm selling people stuff that's just like, 'You don't need this. You got bigger issues.'"

Hayden Dawes:

She says, "Well, you really need to look at a master's in public administration."

Hayden Dawes:

I said, "What's that?"

Hayden Dawes:

She says, "Well, public administrators, they might be executive directors of a nonprofit, work in local government, all that stuff."

Hayden Dawes:

I said, "Okay."

Hayden Dawes:

So, then I went home and started looking for different degree programs, and I saw a lot of degree programs with a joint master's of public administration and a joint MSW. At the time, my best friend was getting an MSW from UNC, and I still didn't know what social workers really did. I read the code of ethics, and I was like, "This really seems cool."

Hayden Dawes:

I applied for both programs at UNC, MSW and the MPA. Didn't get in either. I applied to NC State for both programs. I was like, "Okay. I'm going to get two master's."

Hayden Dawes:

Both program directors said, "Don't get two master's. Just get one. Get a PhD in the other."

Hayden Dawes:

I said, "You know what? I'm going to get two master's."

Hayden Dawes:

So, then I started taking MPA classes, and I was like, "Hmm, this is okay. City government, ordinances, hmm. All right."

Hayden Dawes:

Started taking the social work classes and my eyes just got so wide and I was like, "Oh, my gosh! These are my people. I can be Black and gay in this space, and it's actually an asset."

Hayden Dawes:

I started doing my internships and I was like, "I absolutely love this." I fell really hard for this discipline, and I have not looked back.

Shimon Cohen:

I love that story. I've interviewed a lot of people and found out their stories of how they got into social work, and I've never heard one where they were selling cable to-

Hayden Dawes:

I was selling cable.

Shimon Cohen:

They're selling cable and the person, their customer is the one who educated them on their future career. I love it.

Hayden Dawes:

Absolutely. Honestly, Shimon, that is the way that I've lived my life because everyone has something to contribute to you if you are willing to open your eyes and ears and hear it.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, I agree. I mean, I think that's so awesome. I really love that story.

Hayden Dawes:

I hated that job. I hated it so much.

Shimon Cohen:

Look at what it led to. I mean, yeah, life is funny sometimes, right? I mean, it really is. Do you still feel like you can be Black and gay in the social work space as much as you felt it when you first started?

Hayden Dawes:

This is a good question. I'm going to answer in a lot of different ways, and you can take whatever you want take it. Now, this is me thinking more on the universal level. I think all of us struggle with the sense of do we belong here. I can talk to the most straightest of straight, Whitest of White, manliest of manliest man, and I can look in his eyes and I can see there's that piece of him that says this world is not for him.

Hayden Dawes:

What I will say is I'm not going to lead you astray, there have been plenty of spaces in social work in other places where I really recognize that my body in that place is a political act, and I try not to forget that because I really can't forget it.

Hayden Dawes:

My partner and I, sometimes when we have people come over to house to do maintenance jobs, we always have that little bit of catch in our breath like, "What are they going to think? How are their eyes going to be?" That happens, but I think the difference for me in a social work place and where I feel like I've become more myself is that I don't really care anymore. I'm not arguing with people on Twitter, on any social media platform or any building. Put me in the White House with 45 himself. I am not arguing with you about my humanity because it is not on the table, booboo. It's just not.

Hayden Dawes:

I think if you constantly, for anyone of us that doesn't feel like we belong in this world, which I think is all of us, if you allow that to be on the table, it forever will be, and it will always be a chip against you.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. Your humanity is not up for debate.

Hayden Dawes:

So, I'm trying to occupy all of the space that is me, no more and no less. I think there's enough space for all of us. So, when I go into certain social work spaces, don't get me wrong, I use my tokenism as much as possible to my advantage and leverage. Does it sometimes full growth? Yeah. Do I hate it? What else am I going to do?

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. It's there. You can't avoid being like that right now at this point in time. That's part of how insidious all of this is.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. I remember sitting on a panel at the institution I go to school at because I didn't get in to UNC for my master's, but I'm here for my PhD. How are you doing?

Shimon Cohen:

Boom!

Hayden Dawes:

Right? I remember sitting on a panel and some of the students were talking about, "Well ..." This was a panel talking about field placements and thinking about finding affirming spaces for queer-identified students, and students were saying, "Really, it's up to the field office to find places that are comfortable."

Hayden Dawes:

I was like, "I can hear that argument. Sure. Fine. I get it, but if there's not certain buildings that I'm willing to walk through, how the heck am I going to expect anyone else to walk in there after me?"

Hayden Dawes:

I think I have a radical acceptance of this is where we are and this is who I am. I'm not angry at anybody. I'm not trying to blame anybody. It is, it is. I really, and I mean it, this is when I'm tapping to all of the ancestors that had done some serious stuff to dismantle and break some systems because I assure you their humanity was not negotiable. If you make it negotiable, people will smell it and they will use it against you.

Shimon Cohen:

It takes people like you who are willing to go into those space, and it also takes folks who have had it and they're not willing to go into those spaces and they want a space that they can be in comfortably right now. I think that's something that is so important that sometimes gets left out of the conversation is it's going to take all of us to transform this.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. I'm nodding my head right now for those who can't see. I absolutely agree with you. You have to understand that there needs to be inside agitators and outside agitators, and knowing who you are when.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. That is big. I saw a presentation once. I was at a presentation once when I went to things like that in-person, and the speaker was talking about being an activist in a non-activist space. It just hit me so hard because it really described what my situation was at the time, and the tensions that I had felt so much of, right? It connects to what you were just saying. We need to know who we are, and we need to know the spaces that we're in, and what that means.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah, and it can, indeed, change. Just to keep it honest, there are times where I compare myself to other folks and I'm like, "Am I doing enough? They're doing it this way," but I do think we have to slow down to listen to our own inner teacher, our own inner guide that tells us where we ought to be to make this work sustainable for us.

Hayden Dawes:

There are certain ways of doing activism that I don't really think would suit me very well, and that's okay because, like you said, there's enough space for us all to do it in a way that makes an impact and makes a change. It's so easy to compare ourselves or to point fingers at other folks as to who's doing it "right".

Shimon Cohen:

Totally. Yeah. As we're starting to wrap up. I wanted to bring up two things because I know you've got a newsletter that we want to tell people about, and I'll put a link to it in the show notes, and then also I know something else that's really important to you is Radical Permission.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. So, in 2018, I started sharing on Instagram 100 days of me writing a permission slip to myself. Today, I give myself permission to enjoy my rest and to not feel guilty about it. Today, I give myself permission to affirm my humanity in the face of all this to humanization. It was just a practice that, honestly, I just started sharing it on Instagram because I thought it was helpful for me to stay accountable, but other people were writing in saying that it was helpful for them.

Hayden Dawes:

So, back in this past summer, as I felt like COVID was making my life smaller, I thought, "I need to recognize that I do have autonomy right now. So, what is some permission giving that I can give myself for the next several days?" I thought, "Well, what if I invited other people to join along with me?"

Hayden Dawes:

So, it was this #radicalpermission. So, I model writing a permission slip to myself, and other people do the same, and it's just become this lovely community of people supporting themselves and listening to their own voice, and doing the things in life that they don't give themselves permission to do.

Shimon Cohen:

It's really cool. it's a great use of social media, too.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. It's been really impactful. I think it's more things like that that I really think will create new systems because the time to gather more data as to changes that need to be made, for me, is largely over. We need to do the things, and that takes a staking risk, calculated risk, inner risk, outer risk, and that permission slip allows you to take that risk.

Shimon Cohen:

That's awesome. That's really great. Yeah. So, for people checking out the podcast, check out hashtag, what is it? #radicalpermission?

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah, #radicalpermission, mostly Twitter and Instagram. Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

Cool. And then let people know about your newsletter.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. So, I write a monthly newsletter. It talks about my research or somewhere where you might find me doing a training. It's become an offering, something that I really enjoy doing once a month. Sometimes we forget, "What did I do this past month?" but week where I'm getting the newsletter together with a friend, it's a great way to start compiling some things. So, you might see some old interviews. This interview, once it's been posted, I will advertise it on there. It's a way to stay connected to the community that I'm hoping to create.

Shimon Cohen:

Great. Yeah. So, like I said, there'll be a link in the show notes. It will be on the Doin' The Work website. Hayden, I just can't thank you enough for taking the time to come on here to have this really amazing conversation. I get energized, too. I feel energized talking with you. I just want to thank you for doing the work in the community.

Hayden Dawes:

Well, thank you so much for inviting me. I don't know if you're a hugger, but I would give you a big hug. I know you're down there in Florida, right?

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, Miami.

Hayden Dawes:

Yeah. So, I've had a great time this afternoon. You asked great questions, had me thinking, and it's lovely to find new ways of explaining things. So, thank you so much for that opportunity.

Shimon Cohen:

Thank you for listening to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change. I hope you enjoyed the podcast. Please follow on Twitter and leave positive reviews on iTunes. If you're interested in being a guest or know someone who's doing great work, please get in touch, and thank you for doing real work to make this world a better place.