

Interview w Bishop Rawls Part 2

Tonyia: That experience was obviously intense, it was about a year process at a young age. I think I told my sister Sabrina. I think I may have mentioned to her what had happened. Fast forwarding about five years later my Mom remarries and she married Peter Toussant, who was from Trinidad. It's interesting because my father is American, Dad two was Puerto Rican, Cuban rather. Cuban and Black and then Dad three was from the Caribbean, Trinidad. My younger sister Jewel came though that relationship. Now there's the four girls, four of us. He happened to be a pedophile as well.

Monique: Oh no.

Tonyia: With one of my other younger sisters who will go unnamed. We did not find out about her until many years later also. It was just insane, like gunpoint kind of stuff, literal gunpoint. They were divorced before we knew about any of this. Totally destroyed her inside, just in terms of emotion. In fact until today we still grapple with that, her challenges around her survivorship. I remembered going to therapy when I got ... I guess I was just out of college. I got out of therapy and I'd, my therapist had asked me this question because I was doing work around my survivorship. She had asked me this question. She said, "Tonyia you speak a lot about the fact that if your mother knew about you or your sister that she would definitely have done something." I said, "Absolutely. If she had known, she would have. She was all about her girls." Then she asked me this question. "What if she did know?"

Tonyia: It just blew my world up. It was a simple question, what if she did know? I had a conversation with my mom and in the conversation when I told her what had happened, her response was, "Well something similar happened to me." Her similar was the uncle touched her leg or something like that. It offended me that she would even compare the two scenarios to what my sister and I had gone through. As I was infuriated. I'm talking to my therapist about ... I talked to her and this was the response. The two things she said was so impactful. What if she did know, number one. She has a right to deal with it in her own way. That's profound because we're both women. She said, "Your mother has the right to deal with this or not deal with this. The last thing she said, "So are you going to hang your healing upon whether or not she responds in a way that you consider appropriate or not?"

Tonyia: It was really fortunate to have, she was an older Black woman, psychologist. I was so fortunate to have her because it was all the right stuff. Because what she did was she allowed me to free myself through the fantasy and to also see my mother as a woman, to see her as a human being who was in unimaginable pain as a result of the fact that these things had happened. I just never looked at her as anything more than a mom. I didn't look at her as this Black woman who was trying to raise these four girls the best she could in a world that wasn't always kind and generous. I was able to move past that. In the process for whatever reason, I took on my sister, my sister Cynthia, the news about her was very difficult for me. What I did in that process was ... Everybody has those friends back in school.

Tonyia: I was one of the good kids. We also always had those other friends. I connected with some of those other friends. I talked to Sabrina and I said, "Listen, we need to kill him." I literally said this. Went to try to find somebody that could help us with this. I know this is a lot of

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disclosure, but I don't care. My mom is dead, so I could care less about him. We did that. We went looking for one of our friends who were more gangster like who could take care of this guy for us. As God would have it of course, the Lord didn't let that play out. The very fact that I thought it even. Even the next year brought me such ... I was just like, "Oh my God. Look what I was about to do." The reason I want to include this statement, this conversation is because it taught me to never say never. Just never say never.

Tonyia: Under specific circumstances you have no idea what you have the capacity to do. I had the capacity to be a killer and wanted that done. Now what I find interesting is I didn't feel like I could do it myself, which was a whole other conversation, but the capacity was there. That floored me because I'm close to a pacifist, so to be able to say, "I want you to kill this nigger right here. This is what need to happen right here." Years later, in fact actually about five years ago, because he's still alive. He's the only one that's still living. All the others are dead, my mom's dead, he's the only one that's left standing. He was at my youngest sisters house who still ... He's her only surviving parent, so for her it was important to maintain that relationship.

Tonyia: We respect that. We weren't interested in a relationship with him. I was at the house. I had an opportunity to face him for the first time since I found out the news, which was 20 years earlier or however long earlier. I felt it important to let him know I forgave him, because at this point I'm steeped in my ... I was at least a reverend at that time. I knew that he was the one piece I had not been able to forgive and that I couldn't preach forgiveness and not forgive the unforgivable. How do you do it? What I also had to own was the act or forgiveness, yes toward him, but it was also critical for me. I hadn't realize how chained I was to that. I found it fascinating I didn't link on it like that with my own abuse. It was with my baby sister, because I felt like I should have been the one to notice it.

Tonyia: I should have been able to see and to know that this was happening right under our nose. Not thinking about the fact that I was just a kid, but how did I miss it kind of thing. In talking to him, and I shared with him, "Listen we had first found out about this. We wanted to hurt you and I talked to him about the plan and everything. I said, "God blessed and we did not go through with that and I'm grateful today, because my sister wouldn't have her father. My niece and nephews wouldn't have a grandfather or whatever. And I forgive you." He said, "Well, okay. I had my own plans for your mother and I had actually put somebody out to kill her." Because my mom caught the train every day from New York to New Jersey, which is common.

Tonyia: He shared with me that he had hired someone to push her onto the train track. Because he was like, "We're going to have full disclosure, let me tell you about my failed effort." The person wouldn't do it because she was a mother of four and that was the only thing that saved her. I had to sit and hear this. I had to sit and listen to this, because again I knew when I was willing to put myself in front of this person to say what I was going to say, that I also had to be open to what was on the other side. The essential lesson I learned with that from that experience. In fact, I actually preached about it the following Sunday was it is possible to forgive the unforgivable, the seemingly unforgivable, it is possible but not on your own. You cannot do that. God's grace must abound in order for a

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heart to move beyond trauma, move beyond a seemingly unforgivable thing, but it is possible.

Tonyia: What's ironic is through this horrific situation, the Lord exploded my heart and just flooded my heart with compassion, and love, and grace, that I carry until this day because that was the unforgivable thing. To see God get me to the other side of that and not that I would ever want to have dinner with him or anything like that. There is not hate, there is not ... This was another one of the ironies of this was the lesson learned was he had enough time with our family. He had enough of our time. As I had in my journey in ministry, there are other times my heart had been broken, but never like that. The capacity to go back to that moment and say, "You know what? As bad as this is, just help me because I know I'm not trying to carry this." And the Lord did in all those scenarios.

Tonyia: Little did I know that part of what God had built was a foundation that enabled me to see some of the darkest parts of humanity and somehow find grace enough to not condone it, but to also not have to immediately reject it. To sit with, to hold these hard parts of our humanity that one must is strong, I don't like absolutes. But it's very difficult to think about how we pastor, how we are bishops, how we are leaders. Without this capacity to hear unthinkable things, to see things, to feel things even that if we're not careful we'll think is our own, as opposed to saying, "God, that was so messed up. God hear." So much of this is ... I really don't care actually because that's what those things are. They just are, and that you can move through it. I've been able to help others though their seemingly impossible forgiving times. How do you do that? That's my young, young, young kind of world up to that point.

Monique: Let's skip ahead to high school.

Tonyia: High school.

Monique: As you're becoming an independent self.

Tonyia: High school was really pretty ... High school was weird for me a bit. It was among the most exciting times in a sense that I was a top student, I graduated 12th in my class. I was in every honor society, whatever that you could think of. I was that kid. I was that Black kid that would get these varied opportunities. I was an environmentalist for a while. For my junior year I became a part of the Youth Conservation Corp. I would spend every summer in Stokes State Forest in New Jersey and would do timber stand improvement and actually I became very good at roofing, so I taught roofing. In terms of maintaining some of the varied trails and those kind of things. My Saturdays were white water rafting and that kind of stuff.

Tonyia: In terms of someone who's this kid from Newark, New Jersey who didn't even have a swimming pool in her neighborhood to white water rafting and climbing mountains and being on top of cabins to repair roofs. Thinking about water and timber and all of these kind of things. It was so rich for me because everything fascinated me, just life fascinated me in general. I was curious about everything. From the time I was about five, I always wanted to be a doctor. Once that bug hit, so for Christmas, it wasn't dolls, it was chemistry

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sets. It was science classes, math, all of those things for me were absolutely amazing. I was on the chess club. Things that weren't typically Black kid stuff at my urban school. My school was Black and Puerto Rican. These experiences were not experiences that a lot of my classmates had, had in the same kind of way. Then it came time to get ready for college.

Tonyia: I only applied to Ivy League schools because the message that had been driven in because I'm part of this ... I was at the tail end of the Baby Boom. The adults in my world wanted me to go to a good school. A good school was code for a white school. They never said the words. I was very clear what they meant was, you had the capacity to go to one of these schools and I expect you to go to one of those schools. By the time I was after third grade, my mother really couldn't help me with any of my homework or anything like that, but her expectation was high. Was that you will get exceptional grades or you will get your butt beat. There wasn't an in between of that. I was accepted at several Ivy League schools. Then my fifth grade teacher, who I loved happened to see me when I was applying to schools and said, "Well, have you ever thought about Duke University?" I was like, "Where's that?" I knew nothing about the school and it was late in the application process.

Tonyia: She said, "Well you know, my niece is going there. I think it would be an amazing school for you to consider." Because she said it and I had such admiration for her I applied and was accepted. I was left with these two choices, it was Cornell or Duke. The thing that let Duke win out, I hate cold weather. It was really that simple. I could not imagine winter in Ithaca. I was like, "Who would pick this? Who would do this to themselves?" Nothing in my mind could wrap around that. I decided North Carolina and I came. But it also started one of the most challenging and profound and powerful seasons of my life. Some of the harshest and some of the most powerful. The harsh came because I was accepted.

Tonyia: My mom obviously couldn't afford to send me, not obviously, but she's working poor. I had between work study and scholarship money and those kind of things I was able to afford to go and stay on school. I went in pre-med. My first semester was pure hell. You've got to understand my classmates. John Kennedy Junior was one of my classmates. Everybody had been to private school and prep schools all their life, not like, "Let's just go for a year." And to add insult to injury my high school to incentivize those of us who were bright students to keep doing well, they would exempt us from final exams. I went through high school never having taken a final exam, a cumulative exam.

Monique: Oh.

Tonyia: I'm like, "Who thought of this stupid idea." I get to Duke where everybody is smart and had known how to take cumulative exams. Not only was I ill prepared for the environment, which at that time there was only 2% students of color, of any color, Asian, Black, whatever, 2%. I'm in this all white environment with these kids who are living these lives. I had no sense of, in a part of the country that I had never been, in terms of the South. Just had no sense of how I was going to survive this. We get to my what they called their freshmen advisories. After your first semester, freshmen year, we all had an appointment with an advisor whose job it was to help ensure that you do really well

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moving on. It also gave them a chance to see how we were doing and where we fell and all this kind of stuff.

Tonyia: I had gotten my first F and I had three of them. I got my first D and I had one C. I was spinning. I was just like, "What the hell?" I was studying as hard as I knew, but again I'm alone. I would talk to my mom, but I didn't want her to know how bad, bad was. I get in front of this white woman and I'm sitting down, so happy that my turn has finally come to have my freshman advisory. She opens up my file and she looks and then she sees my grades. Then she says, "Gosh, I would say this is a pretty tough semester for you." I said, "Yeah it was." She said, "Well I also see that you did extremely well before you came, you were a candy striper, you were with the Youth Conservation Corp, you're doing all this stuff. She said, "You know Tonyia, if you were to go to another school, like a Howard, you would be an A student again." That was her advice to me.

Monique: Oh dear. Well gratefully I'm a Duke alum. We don't do that anymore. I'm an alumni recruiter. Gratefully and thankfully that is not our story.

Tonyia: Gratefully, but there was a time where that was our story. She said it was in the most well meaning way from her per view that clearly I'm outclassed. Clearly this is beyond what I have the capacity to really pull off. I remember thinking, I'm 18 1/2. I'm sitting in front of this woman who in my mind was holding my future in her hands. She just closed her hand to say, "There's nothing I can really advise you around. You're not going to make it through." Somewhere inside of my 18 year old self I said, "Number one, she's not going to get the satisfaction of seeing me cry." That's the first thing because everything in me wanted to fall on the floor and roll around. I'm not going to give her that satisfaction.

Tonyia: The other thing was immediately I was like, "If you're going to do this, you're going to have to figure how to make this on your own. Immediately I said, "Okay, so I hear that Howard is an option. It wasn't about the fact that Howard was an HBCU, it wasn't the fact that it was ... It was the fact that you think I can't be here." That really was what offended me. "Then it doubly offended me that you felt Howard was somehow so much lessor than your school. That also offended me." I said, "Okay, you've told me what doesn't work. Tell me what can work? What are my options here?" I began talking to her very differently. This was not like, "I'm sitting in front of Auntie. This was like, "I'm sitting in front of somebody, and I need to pull up my personal agency to figure how I can do this thing."

Tonyia: Then she started kind of counseling me. She said, "You did really well, relatively speaking with your history." She asked me, "What did I enjoy?" I said, "I really loved my history classes." We started talking a little bit about that. She said, "Maybe the pre-med major is not where you should start. Maybe you should consider another major." I never knew that was an option for me. She made some recommendations and shifted some class stuff around. Second semester I survived. Then I get to my freshman, my sophomore year, the first year of my sophomore year and somehow I'm still surviving. Then junior year comes, I switched my major. I became a double major. You know how Duke does the double major thing a lot. I wound up changing to a double major in history and sociology. Because at that time we were very much tracked.

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Tonyia: I don't know if they still track as much as they used to. We were very tracked. You were either going to a business school, you were going to be a lawyer, a doctor, or an engineer and it was nursing also. There was the nursing school. We didn't hear about a whole lot of other options. I said again going to my core thing, I want to help people and this could help me help people being a lawyer. I started doing actually well in that track. Then junior year comes and my mother was going to relocate from New Jersey to LA because LA was looking for New York artists who were willing to go there and work with their studios. She was accepting that post, but of course because my family didn't have a ton of money, I had to take a semester off from school to take care of my younger sisters while my mother was relocating our family.

Tonyia: Here we have ... I have flunked my first semester. I had to take off my first semester junior year and figure out how the heck I was going to get out of this school. As God would have it, and I wanted to pledge Delta, that was the other thing. I wanted to pledge while I was in school. My friends were pledging junior year, but I couldn't pledge because of course I was not in school at that time. As God would have it, I graduated with my class. Summer school, doing whatever I had to do to get my work done. Where I survived, I have to ... Most of the Black people I knew who were in my generation, all of us use the same language of surviving our experience at Duke. What helped me survive it was two things. One was you know how the chaplain ... Have you ever been to the crypts in the chapel?

Monique: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tonyia: That's where I spent my years was in those crypts with the dead presidents. In fact, I preach a sermon about that, Living With the Dead Presidents and how dead presidents brought me life, because it was in that space that I could find the familiar. That was my familiar. My familiar was God and the things of God and the church. It was hardly anybody there. It was almost like ... I remember the first day I found it. I found it on a day that I was devastated. I was like, "Oh my God, this class is so hard." This was other thing too Monique, I never utilized, took advantage of the tutors, nobody talked to me about tutors. I was just thinking, "Oh my gosh, to have to have done all of this without the support of tutors and all of these kind of things."

Tonyia: I was always reluctant to talk to my professors, almost as if I don't want them to see how much I'm struggling. All the things that could have helped me, I did not take advantage of and somehow with God's grace, this is where I learned my relationship with God deepened so much. The second thing that I did was I found a church in Durham, because I knew I needed my Black church experience, but it was a mixed bag because at the time Duke was next to Liggett and Myers was the largest employer. Most of the people that were at the church that I found, this Baptist Church, worked for Duke as maids and groundskeepers and these kinds of things. Then here I come rolling up in here. Number one, I was a Yankee. That's the first thing, with this Jersey accent. Then I was a Duke student because you know how they have you stand and introduce yourself. When I tell you, I got the coldest shoulder you could even ever imagine.

Monique: I never found a church for that for that very reason.

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Tonyia: It was terrible and I was seeking. That first stop though, listen I was like that puppy that the mother tries to push the puppy away. I was like, "Listen, you're going to have to beat me out this door." When I tell you I held on to that tit tight. I held on. At some point they were like, "She ain't leaving. She ain't going." I was just like, "Throw as much shade as you want. I would come on Sundays. I would sit there. I needed to hear the music. I needed to see the elders. At some point slowly, but surely when they realized I wasn't going to go, there was another level of support that got provided. Those two things, one is when you know you need something whether others can receive it or not, you know what you need. Don't give up on that. The second thing was after the scenario with the teacher ... I'm kind of bouncing. That woman when she spoke to me. I made it back to my room Monique without crying, but when I hit that door, I fell apart.

Tonyia: I remember I was just like, "She was supposed to help me. I have no help. What am I supposed to do?" I called my mother. It took me 10 minutes before she could even get a clear word out of me. She said, "What is happening honey?" I said, "Mommy, they're all too smart. These kids are just too smart. They're so much smarter than me and I can't do this. I want to come home." She paused. And said again, this is another one of those profound moments. She said, "Tonyia, if you choose to come home, I want you to know I will welcome you with open arms and be so proud of you because what I know is you have done your very best, so you can come home. But let me also say, that I also know that you can make it there. You can succeed because You know what? You're smart also." Because somehow I had distinguished their smart from my smart. Their smart was way better than my smart.

Tonyia: All my mother saw was, "I've got a bright daughter who can do anything." As soon as I know she was okay with what had happened and these grades and this trauma and all of this. She settled me down, calmed me down, prayed with me and said, "Now go on out there and do the thing." Four years later, three and a half years later I graduated with my class with two majors. That was with me working through school, with me having to take off and take care of my younger siblings, all of these kind of things. Nothing, Monique to this day has ever risen to that moment, nothing. In terms of me feeling like I overcame something. The gift of that was in my young life I saw that all things were possible. I never should have been able to win in the natural. It never should have worked out. How did this kid from Newark, New Jersey in this lower performing school with Black and Hispanic kids wind up in North Carolina with all the obstacles, all the lost time and get out with all the other students who came with every benefit, how did that happen?

Tonyia: It was that experience that gave me bold audaciousness. I felt like anything was possible. Anything, anything can be done. That was the launch of my new life on the other side. The last thing it taught me was how to work with white people. I learned about white people, intimately. I learned about how they think and I learned from them, my classmates whose parents were talking to them about stocks and bonds and trust funds and, you know the drill. I was just like, "What is that?" I remember one friend of mine, it was spring break and she had to take her car back to her family because she was going to be traveling in the summer or whatever. She said, "Why don't you come with me to my parents place?" I said, "Sure." She was Indian or something like that. Saudi Arabian, she had one of those little MG Midget sports cars.

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Tonyia: Her family lived in Boca Raton, so we drive to Boca Raton, Florida and we catch the elevator up to where her parents live. It's a beach front condo building. We get off on the door and I only see two doors. I said, "Where is the other doors?" She said, "Oh, we have this half of the floor." I walk in just seeing things I had never seen like, who has a whole half a floor? You have a half a floor. My brain just ... This half of the floor is your family's? Her family was out of the country so this is just these two 19 year olds. I was like, "This is how people live?" She had parked the car and then we flew back home, back to Duke. I was just thinking the gift of being exposed to at the very least this other world was so amazing. Duke gave me much more than they harmed me, but harm was a part of it.

Monique: Oh yeah.

Tonyia: Without a doubt.

Monique: That's definitely my story as well.

Tonyia: Isn't it amazing.

Monique: I won't say it gave me more, but I would say [crosstalk 00:33:08].

Tonyia: But we survived it.

Monique: Yes, I survived, I graduated in 99.

Tonyia: Yeah, it was 80 for me.

Monique: Duke is where I worked for a year after I graduated. Where did you work after Duke?

Tonyia: I went to Los Angeles where my family was and I started working. First of all I was spent by the time I got out of Duke as many of us are. I took a proverbial year off. I was planning on going to law school, as the track had dictated. What I wanted to do was something that I didn't have to think hard. I was very clear about what I needed. I didn't want to think hard. I wanted enough money so that I could get my own apartment, because it wasn't about living with my mother at that stage of my life. I needed enough money to party, literally that was my criteria. I was clear that, that was my criteria. I was like, "I'm going to enjoy this year." I got a job working with J Walker Thompson advertising, which at the time was the world's largest ad agency unbeknownst to me.

Tonyia: The reason I got a job there was because they had a position, an opening for what was called a tear sheet clerk. What tear sheet clerks were supposed to do, we worked with the building department. We would go through newspapers around the country to find where the ads were, our client's ads and would literally cut them out with a little X-Acto knife and attach them to a piece of paper. Then it could be billed. That was my job. Of course, they knew my background, I had to give them a resume when I applied. They were wondering, "Why does she come to work so happy?" When I tell you happiness, girl let me tell you, that first Christmas, it is Christmas day. I'm laying in our backyard in my drawers

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and the sun is shining. I said, "I have found Heaven. This is as close to Heaven as it's ever going to get." You know what I'm saying?

Tonyia: I smoked a little weed and here I am I've got this joy and I've got this sun. I'm like, "This is nirvana." Finally they broke down after about six months and said, "Tonyia, we." What happened was, I'd finish my work so fast that I would just float around other departments, "Do y'all need any help with something?" I was bored. I started floating around a little bit after I finished my work. About the sixth month they said, "Listen, you come here happy every day, you do your work really well, but you've never expressed an interest in moving up in the company." Because what I didn't realize was, that was the entry point for people who wanted to enter into big time advertising.

Tonyia: I never expressed the remotest interest in any of that. In my mind I'm thinking, "Well, my year isn't up yet so why not, I can make some extra money." They said, "Well would you consider another position?" I said, "Yes." So they happened to put me with their top female ad executive. Who I realize today, now she was probably a lesbian, I didn't know it at the time because I couldn't pick up the cues because I was very straight at that period of my life, well as straight as I could be, I guess. She, can you excuse me for a second?

Monique: Of course.

Tonyia: I'll just make sure everybody is okay. Bishop Rawls speaking. Hello. With who? No, I don't need insurance. Thank you so much. Bye-bye. I started working with her, and because we were Southern California. I was working in Century City at the time. We were heavy into aerospace, our company was very heavy into aerospace. She was working on the launch of the Apache helicopter. We were a recruitment ad agency. We would do all the recruiting for these massive projects and stuff. They were having difficulty with an ad campaign that they were doing. Basically somebody in desperation said, "You've got this new kid over here. Why don't you see what she can do." Because I was working at this time as an assistant with this woman, assistant account executive.

Tonyia: I wrote the ad and it hit. We found I had this aptitude for copywriting. Because of course with history and sociology I wrote a ton of stuff, that was so much of what we had to do. Then I messed around and fell in love with advertising. I was so devastated. I said, "I don't messed around and got sidetracked." Because I promised myself I would not do that. That would not happen. I was committed to always finishing what I started. About a year and a half in I was just a mess and so I called Duke because I wanted to talk to an alumni, because you couldn't throw a rock and not hit an alumni because the attorneys that were there in that area. I wanted to talk to an attorney. I wanted somebody to help advise me about this conundrum I'd found myself in. They had connected me with this really high powered, of course white guy.

Tonyia: Who was working, I want to say he was an entertainment attorney of something like that. He takes me out to lunch at the top of this skyscraper. It was one of those revolving restaurants and stuff. We sit down, we're having lunch. He was charming and wonderful older guy. He said, because I told him why I wanted to stop. He said, "Well tell me about what you're doing now." I talked to him about the advertising. I'm like, "Oh my gosh, we're working on these amazing projects and I'm getting a chance to put my footprint in

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this." I'm moving up fast in the organization and on and on and on. He said, "Okay that's good." He says, "Now tell me about what's the deal with law school?" I said, "Well, I was going to finish law school. I was going to go to law school." My whole countenance changed.

Tonyia: He said, "I want you to do something for me." He said, "Look around the restaurant, and what do you see?" I said, "Well it's a beautiful space and the food is wonderful and on and on and on." He said, "No, I want you to look closer." He said, "All of these younger people that you see walking around here, most of them have law degrees and they're doing this because the market is so saturated. They just want to stay connected to high powered attorneys, like here because this is a place they would go for lunch." He said, "So the thing I want to say to you is, you say you want to help people, but you don't have to be an attorney to do that. He said, "The way that you can really be most successful and helpful to the world is follow your passion. That is how you will win, follow your passion. And Tonyia if that means letting go of something that you thought for so long was going to be the thing you had to do, I want to say to you it seems to me like you have found passion."

Tonyia: Nobody ever talked to me about passion before. Nobody, Duke doesn't encourage you like, "Go inside and see what you're feeling. Because he'd been out there so much and seen so many kids who had just ... Who were me, just driven. I said I was going to do it. It doesn't matter that I don't like it particularly, but this is how I'm going to make money. Because of course we're taught to do the things that will help us make money. So he freed me to pursue that. I wound up getting into advertising and marketing. Moved back to New Jersey, my mom had gotten sick with cancer, breast cancer. Moving back to New Jersey I wound up with a firm there. In the process of working with that particular firm there was ... I had one Black client, because working with larger ad agencies, you really need a pretty significant budget to justify having us because we're ridiculously expensive.

Tonyia: What I noticed was something started happening in the 80s and early 90s where there was this explosion. It really was Baby Boomers that were doing it, but the Boomers who were ahead of me started opening their own businesses and their own practices. The entrepreneurial bubble had just blown up so big. I had noted that there was a growing number of companies who needed agency caliber support, but without the agency budget because they were smaller. They were in a position now where they could compete with major companies. I felt a niche was present there and decided I wanted to consider starting my own practice, my own consultancy. I had talked to this, my one Black client who was working in, of all things the finance industry. This is just when real estate, when all the red lining and all those scandals and stuff started coming out, hearing about banks. They dealt with interestingly enough selling loans that had defaulted because they were everywhere. The whole REO thing, real estate owned.

Tonyia: I talked to them to see if they'd be interested in coming with me. They said, "Well Tonyia, first of all what took you so long? Because we were clear that you had the capacity to do this. We weren't understanding why you were working with this firm." These two Black guys. Then they said, "But the caveat is you would need to be near one of our offices." One was in San Francisco and one was in DC. I was not interested in going back to the West coast because it was too far away from my family. But I did say, "Okay, well I can do DC." Which I did. They were a client, but they also provided space for me to have my own

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office. See I was getting paid, having an office with them. That was my address. In addition to them being one client I could build up and have other clients of course.

Tonyia: Excuse me. That went on until I was able to get my own space. I had a marketing and advertising consulting business in Washington called International Concepts Group. The way that we worked, it was ... I was kind of a Black female version of the white haired guy in Mission Impossible, the old Mission Impossible. Where I had recruited some of the really top talent in the city because Washington is such a consultant town. It wasn't difficult to find that. Public relations experts, marketing, graphic design and in pulling that team together. They all had to be doing whatever they said they were good at full time. That was the other thing. I didn't want the bus driver who does artwork on the side. If you're good, you're going to be doing this how we're doing it. I would assemble these teams. We would work for varied clients. Everything from finances to ... It was all private sector. I had never been exposed to the public sector yet and wound up getting a client. This client called Umba Collectibles.

Tonyia: It was the country's largest Black greeting cards manufacturer at the time. They hired us to help expand their brand because I didn't work with start-ups. Our focus was on companies that were interested in taking the next step, whatever that next step was. No start-up businesses, businesses that were already established and were ready to expand. They had been doing this work for years. They had a little shop, but they did wholesale. It wasn't like most people come buy a greeting card, stores bought from them. I go to them, I had on this suit. I'm meeting these people that are the most earthy, crunchy people I've ever found. They've got dreadlocks, their kids are schooled at this Nationalistic school. They had this house, everything was happening in the house. The press was on the lower level, the upper level they were living.

Tonyia: I said to them in our first meeting, I said, " This is so exciting." They had this data base, that was without a doubt the most extensive database of Black retailers and manufacturers in America. It was just sitting there, just sitting in their computer, nothing they were doing outside of periodically staying connected to them. I said, "We're going to grow this so big that before you know it, you all are going to have a big operation downtown." I'm going through this whole thing. I was wondering why they were staring at me like I had three heads. They looked at me very seriously and said, "That's not our fantasy. We're not interested in downtown. We want to build something that's going to build the nation for Black people. That's what we're interested in. Can you help us do that?"

Tonyia: I said, "Yeah." But of course it took me aback because I had never worked with somebody that was that Black. I was down for my people, but never that Black. I didn't know anything about Black social building and nation building and all of these kind of things. Where would I have been exposed to that? My recommendation was that we host, we create the thing we want that didn't exist, which was a trade show for Black retailers and manufacturers. It just didn't exist. In order to participate in this thing, the businesses had to be at least 51% or more Black owned and operated. It wasn't enough for it to be Black owned and then white people running it or white people own it and Black people were behind the desk or whatever. Black owned and operated. We had 25 retailers and 25

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manufacturers that we brought together in the basement of this church in Northeast Washington DC.

Tonyia: One of the things that we also thought was important to also help them have tools that could help them grow their businesses even bigger. Among those tools was learning about merchandising, learning about public relations, learning about how to use the media, learning about branding. What would happen is if you could envision this it was held in the fellowship hall in this church that had a little stage where you have your little small events and stuff. We would hold classes up there. A person could go and say, "Oh I want to take that merchandising class." Then come back down and go and man their booth in addition to learning. We always felt that it was critical to teach and to provide space for commerce. We finished this, it was extremely successful for my client and we used their database to send the word out about what was going to be happening and all of this.

Tonyia: Everybody that attended thought it was amazing. We then start getting phone calls about people saying, "We want more information about this trade show that's being held in Washington." Because word had gotten out around the country that there was this group that has established a new trade show for Black retailers and manufacturers, which nobody had heard of before. They come to me telling me about all these calls they're getting. They said, "Tonyia, we're clear something needs to happen. We want to do it with you, but we don't want to do it with you as a consultant, we want to go into partnership. We created the International Black Buyers and Manufacturers Expo and Conference.

Tonyia: Which became the world's first trade show for Black retailers and manufacturers. We started with those 50 in that basement and we grew it to over 1,000 businesses gathering annually from throughout the United States, the UK, Caribbean, all different parts of Africa and the Diaspora that would come to the Washington Convention center annually for this amazing trade event. Everything we did to the extent we could was all Black owned and operated. The next show we did after the one at the church, was one of the last events held at the Howard Hotel, because Howard University had a hotel. Their hotel and our classes were held on Howard's campus. Everything was about paying them the money instead of paying a hotel and on and on. Then we just grew too big for those kind of things and Howard the hotel closed and all of that.

Tonyia: Our food came from Black vendors, everything. While that's all happening, I've got the consultant practice, it was called IBBMEC [01:03:11] and we were growing IBBMEC, which was doing amazing things and providing just incredible opportunities. If I could tell you the number of white retailers that were trying to get into this show, because of course in one place they would have been able to do the shopping that would have taken them years to gather all of these hand crafted items and greeting cards and clothing and home decor. It was just crazy, it was like a big store. They couldn't come to the store.

Tonyia: They couldn't come to the trade event, but what they could do was partner with those who were there and we brokered the partnerships, so that we could have people have bigger contracts and all of this stuff. We knew and we cautioned people about the fact that listen, "What's going to happen is they're going to try to learn as fast as they can what you do and how you do it." What we wanted them to do was to be aware of that number one. Number two, you could make a lot more money than you could individually, but

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you've got to be clear of what you're signing up for. True to form, you know the Mahogany collection that Hallmark has?

Monique: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tonyia: Mahogany was birthed from working with Black greeting card manufacturers and bringing those greeting cards that they produced into the Hallmark stores. Then that shifted to Hallmark then having their own designers create Black cards and thus Mahogany was born, which totally swallowed up many of the smaller Black greeting card manufacturers because people would get their cards that looked like them from a little store that you would go to. Those stores, how do you compete against Walmart? How do you compete against Hallmark? How do you compete against these manufacturers who are doing this massive stuff. TJ Maxx was another one, [Mar Maxx 01:05:04] is the parent company. They started, that was international relationship thing. They were working with people who were particularly in Africa.

Tonyia: We would build these things, but when all was said and done, the goal was to just make sure white businesses succeeded. We had built the network. It was just amazing to be able to have something like that. The same time that was happening my faith was also growing and deepening. When I was in California, I was a part of the Church of God in Christ there. It was a church that was in my neighborhood, I didn't realize I had never been exposed to the Church of God in Christ. I just knew it was a church I enjoyed. It was a lot of young people. It was West Angeles Church of God in Christ. The bishop at that time was now the head of the Church of God in Christ, Charles White. I also fell in love with a woman while I was in LA. That was my first love experience with a woman. My truth wasn't to ... I wasn't thinking about girls.

Tonyia: I really enjoyed my relationships with men. That's all I'd had up until that point. I was always tomboyish. Then if I go back I can realize I actually did have a little college attraction to somebody, but it was not anything I would act on because, "I'm into dudes so I wouldn't do that." I fell in love with this girl. She was a dancer and I fell in love. It was absolutely amazing. I just didn't even know. When I say to people all the time is I thought ... What was the distinction for you? I said, "The distinction was, I found home for me with the woman I fell in love with." I had loved a man before, but I found home with this relationship. As amazing as it was it presented also a lot of complexities. I found an amazing community of lesbians that welcomed us in. It was both our first experience.

Tonyia: We were just ... It was just crazy amazing, but then it bumped into my faith. Nothing in my history had suggested that this could happen. I knew I jumped over my faith formation, but when I was younger, I loved the church, everything about it. That's why when I went to Duke, when I said I wanted to find something familiar, I was raised Baptist. I loved the church. I was one of those kids, my grandmother would always take me to church. I would call her and say, "Are you coming to get me for church? Sometimes I would be the only one because everybody was like, "I want to sleep longer." I was like, "No. I want to go to church." I loved the sounds. I loved the smells, I loved the stained glass. Everything about it just brought my life, gave me life. That's why no matter where I was church was always important to me. It was important to the point that my friends, we partied.

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Tonyia: I was young working in advertising. My friends we all had jobs, we had a little bit of money. We just did all the stuff that 20 something year olds would be doing in those times. What my friends also knew was on Sunday, I don't care how late we partied on Saturday I was going to be in church. On New Year's Eve, I was going to be in church. Now mind you I would leave church and go finish partying, but they honored that part of me that I never let go of. I never tried to act like my faith wasn't important. I never tried to act like my faith wasn't important. Whether I was drunk, high, whatever we are going to church. At some critical point I had a crisis of faith because I knew God was really calling me deeper into my walk.

Tonyia: At this time I'm a licensed evangelist missionary with the Church of God in Christ, which is the furthest a woman could go. I was on this fast track with growing in ministry and all of this kind of stuff. Again, something I'm really glad your person can piece this stuff together, because your mind jumps. I had a profound experience. What I wound up doing was I became celibate actually, because I began growing deeper in my faith and in my service in the church, I just fundamentally felt both things could not coexist. I could not be same gender loving and have God. I did what I would do today if God told me it was wrong. That was, it's a wrap. I was celibate for seven years actually.

Monique: With the girlfriend or broke up?

Tonyia: We broke up. I had to leave. I left all of that. I left my LGBTQ life. I left my straight life, because I wasn't married, it wasn't about being sexual with anybody. I wasn't even kissed for seven years. There was no kissing, there was no touching, there was none of that. I had let it all go so that I could have full focus on God and the things of God. I was of course focusing on my work in advertising and that was pretty much it. My life consisted of work, six AM prayer every morning. We had a prayer room and I was there with the elders at six AM, and a short bible study. I would go to my advertising job and then I would come home. Once a month we would have a shut in. I was fasting twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I was--shut ins were three days with no food, no water.

Tonyia: You would stay in church for three days. You would only leave to go and go to work or come back from work. We're taught to really freshen up. You go home and change clothes or whatever, but the goal was to stay there as much as you could. That was incredibly foundational. What ultimately wound up happening though, the bible says, "When a man finds a wife, he finds a good thing." Myself and many of the younger 20 something women that was around me, late 20s at this point. We were taught that we don't pursue men, they should find us. I was found by a man 25 years my senior. He was an elder in the church. People were convinced that they knew God's hand was on me. I was being called.

Tonyia: I probably shouldn't have said the name of the church, but anyway, they knew God's hand was on me and that I was called. But they felt I was being prepared to be a first lady. That was what God was readying me for. I just was yielding to it because at this point I wasn't thinking sexually. I was like, "God, whatever your will is, let your will be done." I said, "Yes." To marriage to this man. Who by the way was a "deliberate pedophile" let me add that part. Which was amazing every time I say it and think it. The church knew about that. They knew about him and his past and condoned this marriage because he was a high profile elder. I had a conversation with God that I'd never had before or since.

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Tonyia: I went to God pretty pissed off, because several of my friends had gotten engaged at a similar time. We were all evangelist missionaries. We were all attractive girls who were doing nice stuff. I went to God and I said, "Listen, I don't get it, because it seems clear to me that you do not love your daughters as much as you love your sons. It's obvious to me. I don't see anything that suggests you really care about your daughters, because if you did you wouldn't stand by and allow this stuff to happen. I'm going to yield to it because I've been praying to you about what it is you would have me do next and this person has come forward. But I'm done. This is just ... I don't get it." I was so angry.

Tonyia: It was the most honest conversation I've ever had with God, because I didn't know I could talk to God like that. But it was a situation. God literally spoke to me, not audibly like that, but we were literally communicating. The Lord said, "Tonyia, what would a human father want for his daughter if she came to him and said, "Daddy, I'm about to get, somebody has proposed to me and I'm going to get married." I said, "Well he would want to make sure that the guy could care for her, could provide for her." I was making twice as much as this guy. "He'd want to make sure that, that was the case, he could provide for her. He'd also want to make sure she was happy and in love." I think he'd want to be sure that ... I went through this list of things a natural father might want for the man to be. Nothing physical mind you, I never brought anything physical up.

Tonyia: The Lord said, "I am not human. If a natural father could want for his daughter, what you have to know is what I want for you far exceeds that. If you decide to marry him, I will bless you. But I'll also bless you if you decide not to marry him because what I want is your highest good and your joy." Nobody ever told me God thought about things like that, because nobody had ever said to me actually thinking about my feelings and thinking about my joy and my happiness in that context. Because what I was taught was my happiness would come through faithfulness in God. The other thing, two things God wound up saying to set the trajectory for this next phase in my ministerial life. The Lord led me to know number one, "I need you to know I did not make a mistake in creating you just as you are, as same gender loving. That was not a mistake. The second thing was and I will use that to my glory one day." I'm just thinking, "What are you talking about?"

Tonyia: I can't tell anybody that I'm still attracted to women, that never went away. God knows as much as I prayed, fasted, "Just take this away from me Lord. Take it away." It never went anywhere. The Lord was like, "Well there's a reason it didn't go anywhere because there's nothing wrong with you." The thought of God using it to God's glory, I had no point of reference for that. How could this ever be used for good? It was one of those things I just had to file away and ponder. It started my journey of growing in my understanding of who I was as same gender loving and others like me who loved God and loved the same gender. It helped me to have permission, and I have to use that word to actually ask questions of the scriptures because I was not taught that I had permission to do that.

Tonyia: I was freed to grapple with text, which I was not ever taught that I could do that. Then through that journey, Monique I began to find myself in the text. I didn't feel free enough yet to teach anybody else, but I felt freed of myself, which was huge. Then I began that walk. When I came back to Jersey after LA, I joined a Unified Freewill Baptist Church. Again my pastor was a Bishop. All my pastors were Bishops, which was ironic. It makes total sense now, but they were all Bishops. It took a year, but I said I was interested in coming

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in and being a part of the ministry. They asked me about my background, and I wanted to come in as an evangelist because I was a licensed evangelist. My pastor at that time said, "Why are you coming in as an evangelist because all of your training and preparation is that of our ministers, because they were very strong in terms of women in leadership and had been for a very long time.

Tonyia: Here I had this Black male Bishop saying to me, "Why are you basically settling?" I told him I didn't feel freed to do that because I didn't think women could preach. I didn't feel women had license to preach because that's what I had been taught. He said, "Well what are you talking about? Of course you do." That so happened to be down here. "God gave you a voice and an anointing for that to be used." He said, "Well, I want you to do this. I want you to be prayerful." I've been so blessed with so many wise people who came into my life at just the right time. He said, "I want you to be prayerful. I want you to leave. I think you should be a minister, but I want you to go and see if God confirms that for you because God doesn't have communication problems." I said "Okay."

Tonyia: Before I left the office I had confirmation, but I couldn't tell him because it was too fast. I went and I prayed and the Lord led me to know, "It's true, it's me and yes, go for it." And I did. I remember preaching my trial sermon and this old mother from the Mother's Board was sitting on the front row, you know how they sit and rock and stuff. I'm delivering this word and somewhere midway through my sermon. She's being extra quiet she was totally, "I'm not going to make a noise, I'm just going to sit here." Don't give her the eyes or you are in for that [crosstalk 01:20:24].

Monique: [crosstalk] see what we're doing.

Tonyia: Oh Lord. Oh well that's it.

Monique: We're not going to make money for that one [crosstalk].

Tonyia: Are you serious?

Monique: Let's see if we can hop up.

Tonyia: Lord, Lord, Lord somebody is going to take up the space because he doesn't like to share, so that's why he would go sideways so she can't get up. She's like thank you so much. I did it. She yells out from the floor, "You better preach, preacher." Monique, I almost fainted. Literally all the blood left me. I got stuck, I got just stumped. I could not speak because she was saying this thing that wasn't supposed to happen because I was in it. I'm bringing it thinking I'm speaking, not preaching. That was the first time somebody ever called me a preacher. I didn't have a box to put it in. I had to grow in my understanding of what that meant. One thing led to another, but I wouldn't become a reverend because when it was time to advance my next steps through the training, I wouldn't do it.

Tonyia: I didn't do it because I was closeted still as a lesbian. At this point I had a relationship and everything. I didn't feel I could do it with integrity because I wasn't out to him or my congregation so I didn't. Then I found Unity Fellowship Church, and Unity movement.

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Bishop Zack of course was pastor in New York. I would date women in New York, because we were in Northern New Jersey. I would date a woman in New York so that I couldn't get caught because I lived in New Jersey. One of the girls I was seeing at the time said to me, "Have you ever heard of Unity? It's a LGBTQ church." I said, "Get out of here. It's a real LGBTQ church? I remembered going to a service and I saw this little guy because his body wasn't massive. This cute little guy literally flying through the air. It was Bishop Zack.

Tonya: The church was packed. We had to stand in line to get into the church because they were at the old LGBTQ Center. I was floored, I was just amazed. I remember this whole world opened up to me. I'm like, "Are you kidding me?" All of these people. I'm in there with my girlfriend and we're sitting, not having to worry about hiding. I saw families and then I heard him say, "God, gay and good" in the same sentence. The world was never the same because there was this place that had found me in the word and opened that up. It was amazing. It took about another year or so, but when I was in DC I found my way to Unity Fellowship in Washington once I had relocated there and that was the beginning of this next phase of my life.

Monique: As you took appointments with Unity, you were ordained in Unity?

Tonya: Unity is where I accepted the call of reverend. We go through our training and all of that stuff and then I became an ordained reverend. Then I was given an opportunity to ... And I'd been with Unity DC for I don't know how many years, maybe six years, seven years. Archbishop Dean who was the founder had commissioned me to open our first church in the bible belt. I had two options, one was one part of the South, it already had somebody working there, the other one was North Carolina, the whole state. I was just thinking, "I know I don't want to be ... I don't want to compete or impede anybody else's work." So North Carolina it was. Then it was just a matter of finding where in North Carolina.

Tonya: Initially I thought it would be Durham, because I was familiar with Durham because of Duke. Well people kept asking me, "Have you ever been to Charlotte?" I said, "No, outside of flying through Charlotte for business or whatever." They suggested that we go through. I was going to name our church Freedom Unity Fellowship Church. When we would go back and forth driving up and down between Georgia and North Carolina, I kept seeing Freedom Drive. One day I said, "Honey, let's just drive down this street and see what this is all about. This Freedom Drive. We get off and we go to Freedom Drive. I felt to go to the Visitor's Bureau so that I could learn more about the city and all of this.

Tonya: It was as if I had been raised in Charlotte. I knew my way around. It felt familiar to me. I had never been to Charlotte. I found my way to ... We didn't have a GPS at that time. Somehow just through driving and looking around, I said, "Oh my God, look that's the visitor's bureau." We see the Visitor's Bureau. We go in and they're totally affirming and the like. Then I noticed these little crowns on all the signs. I'm like, I said to the woman at the center, "What are those?" She said, "Oh we're called the Queen City." I said, "Honey, we've found our home. This is it right here." It was so ... I can't even explain the experience. I was so clear I was where I was supposed to be.

Monique: Was this the first pastorate for you?

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Tonyia: This was my first pastorate. I became a pastor here. I then became an elder shortly after that. Then in 2008 I was consecrated with Bishop Jacqueline Holland as one of the first female Bishops in Unity. It was an incredibly painful time for us as a denomination because we just weren't ready for it. We were a denomination of old Black church kids who had men as our leaders were the backgrounds we were coming from. We just I think underestimated what it meant to have women in the Bishopric, to have women as leaders at that level. It was incredibly painful. It really was, but on the other side of it, some of the rejection and resistance was a stronger denomination. We had to do the work. We all assumed, "We're so progressive, we're so amazing, but nobody ever talked to us about the woman issue fully." And definitely not women with power.

Tonyia: I pastored, I continued pastoring until four years ago. Time is going so fast. I was led to start to leave Unity. I had been in it maybe 20 years already by that time. I was led to leave and I was clear that I was headed towards the United Church of Christ. Part of it had to do with, it was several reasons because at that point I was vice president of our national board and working with the day-to-day operations of the denomination, and all of these things. I knew that there was another direction that I was heading. I talked to the archbishop, then House of Bishops about it, the Board of Elders, the National Board before I even talked to my congregation about what I wanted to do, about what I was going to do. Part of this was because I had just never seen churches do a clean break.

Tonyia: I'd never seen that play out that way. So I said to myself, "We can pull this off. We can do this without having to have messiness and break ups and all of this kind of stuff, it's doable. In my naivete, because I was naïve about this. We had property to contend with because Unity Charlotte had bought a building in our third year, we were growing fast. It was all of this stuff going on. We were working very diverse and across a lot of lines of difference. I've always felt vested in the church working intersectionally with community in ways that weren't just about LGBTQ issues.

Tonyia: I was concerned about poverty. I was concerned about reproductive justice. All these other issues that are queer as well, but it's bigger. We did that and unfortunately I didn't get an attorney. I was doing everything by word of mouth, personal agreement. All of us made mistakes in the whole process. Lots of pain. We're just getting through some of it to be quite honest. I was really grateful that Unity decided to keep a church here. One of my former reverends pastored it. We have done a walk of healing between the two congregations. We had held a vote and originally, I don't know if these the kind of things to talk about?

Monique: It's your history, you talk about what you want to talk about.

Tonyia: It's my history... I'm going to slow down some of my narratives. I want to go on and get to other questions. The work was challenging, but we made it to the other side.

Tonyia: Anyway. We have since, the majority of the congregation came to the UCC with me. We were able to find our way back to each other is the best way to put that. That's also my family. I found basically two churches here in Charlotte. I'm just grateful that they're both alive and doing well and go from there.

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Monique: I read in something, in preparation. I'm not sure if it was your article or something else that one of the ways that you were growing the Charlotte church initially was by helping people acknowledge their call as religious leaders and that was really fascinating for me.

Tonyia: Absolutely.

Monique: I was curious what that meant literally and in practice. What does it mean to see oneself as a religious leader that doesn't preach or a religious leader who sits on the pew? A question.

Tonyia: I focus a lot on calling. Again all of my experiences cue onto leading up to this moment, really prepared me for this kind of pastoring where I genuinely believe everyone exits the womb with a call. With particular giftings for the ways we are called to serve the world. Anybody that ever came through our doors, I assumed they had a great call. It was just a general assumption, and that my job was not to give it to them, but to help nurture it. We did a lot of things that weren't things that people would typically do for themselves or even see themselves as leaders. That was who they understood themselves to be. As leaders it was also important that we understand the points of how we also follow. In practice, what that looks like is enabling people to listen for their callings and then to also trust it and to be willing to have the support that's necessary to walk in the fullness of it.

Tonyia: That's what we did and through that process, so many people have come through who are now doing just amazing things in the South and in the nation. Our first out elected official was one of our former members. All of the Prides were in this area were started with someone in the South Carolina Black and Latino Pride, Black Pride, Charlotte Black Gay Pride. They are doing amazing things in terms of building bridges also in reference to everything from domestic violence to education and working with youth and the like. That has been probably some of the most exciting work I've had the opportunity to do is to see others thriving who were like me. Where I didn't have anybody that I could talk through some of my stuff with. That's been really rich.

Tonyia: Then the other thing has been having a congregation that's committed to social justice. That Jesus really was a revolutionary and to be okay with that. With us being revolutionaries. In the ways that love drives that action. Love drives that work, that's a lot of what we do as we're focusing on that kind of building and the like. It is assumed that Black people in particular are powerful and that we have much to offer the world. That I can be a have not, but I'm also a have in many ways. The goal is finding where those connections are and then walking in the fullness of it.

Monique: Yeah, so in 2009 when you founded the Freedom Center, you had been working full time for Unity. Then were you also coworking as pastor and as founder?

Tonyia: Yeah. When I came to Charlotte, I needed a job because we didn't know anybody in Charlotte. We started from scratch. We knew one person. Actually a friend of Gwen's from DC. I actually started working with Grassroots Leadership as their first director of communications because I needed a paycheck. But beyond that, what I also ran into and again God's divine intervention. It was an organization that worked to abolish for profit

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private prisons. That immersed me in really deep Grassroots organizing work because we worked all over the South. I worked with people in the Mississippi Delta who were fighting a private prison coming in, but their only options were that or a pig farm, or working with people in rural Virginia, all these areas. It was an amazing balance to my very corporate leaning prior life experiences.

Tonyia: That combined with my work with IBBMEC where I was working with Black counter nationalists and the Black retailer and manufacturers and then going to this work. It was a beautiful blend. My boss, the founder of Grassroots Leadership, Si Kahn is a international activist...[lets dogs out]

Monique: We were talking about Grassroots organizing.

Tonyia: Oh yes, yes, yes. That's where I learned some of the core principles of Grassroots organizing. Because they were so supportive of me in ministry, it was not difficult to hold the two pieces because they were so complimentary in the way that they showed up in my life. I felt they were both ministry, because there's always been a part of me that always had this dual track thing going on. Always very deep in my faith and always deep with this other kind of work that was about the world being better somehow.

Tonyia: When it was time for us to have the church, we also followed those principles of the fact that if I am to be a true Christian caring for my neighbor is a core part of what we're called to do. In caring for my neighbor that may mean and likely means I have to step outside of my comfort zone. Yes, I even had to step outside of the church. Everybody in our congregation understands that's who we are. Somebody had said to me very early on in my ministerial life, it was an older pastor. He said, "You know, I see that you're very active in the social justice efforts and in fighting the school system and all these kind of things." He said, "I get all of that, but I want to suggest you'll need to make a choice and the choice is this, you can have a large church or you can have an active church."

Monique: Before I open, do you have a peanut allergy?

Tonyia: No. No. You can have a large church or you can have an active church. What he was saying was, but it is nearly impossible to have both. I didn't understand it at the time because I was such a young pastor. But I later grew to understand what he was saying. What he was talking about was some people just want to come to church. They don't want you challenging them about doing stuff. They don't want you dragging them to marches and stepping on their toes about life and these kind of things. That's not what they want. They just want to feel good. They want to hear some good music. They want to hear some exciting preaching and go home and just write a check. But if that's not who you are, then know there is also a price you pay for that. It was definitely a price I'd never regret it. We wound up having to rebuy the building back from Unity again because I hadn't done the stuff I really should have done legally on the front end.

Tonyia: They had 10 people, the rest of the congregation came with us. But because of the fact, that I had stood on what the verbal agreements were that whoever the largest amount of people went to, that's who would have the church. I was afraid I would walk away with

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nothing, for real. That was agreed upon, but when the moment came to say, "Okay, now we make this transition." We had to buy the church back. That was extremely painful as you can imagine, especially since it was almost paid off. The fact that we could so early on. We did that in our first year, bought the building. I have the fortune of having to buy the same building twice. Which I don't need to tell you was a little bittersweet, but we all survived it and I'm better for it I have to say. I grew a lot as a leader through that process. I think people are called. I think everybody has a calling, I fundamentally believe that. The question is finding it and growing in it.

Monique: For your social justice work specifically with the Freedom Center, how do you see that as different than what you do outside, within your church?

Tonyia: Freedom. It's the freedom I have with being an executive director and founder of the organization is that there's a freedom I have. It's a non-profit, I get to walk differently with it than I do as a sitting pastor. I think that I've always been bi-vocational as a pastor. I've never had a time where I wasn't bi-vocational. I'm thinking about retirement years, I think I'd like to see what it's like to just do a thing. It'll probably bore me to death or to life. I've always been bi-vocational. And the gift of that is God knows me well. I'm even cleaned up for you.

Monique: Come on.

Tonyia: She can get up.

Monique: You said it's your turn.

Tonyia: Princess says, "Oh yes, yes." She's a licker, very affectionate. Is he trying to push you out of the way? That's usually what he does. He uses his body mass. She back up and then she'll come to you.

Monique: Here we go, and up.

Tonyia: And we're up.

Monique: And we're up.

Tonyia: And her tail is going. She is happy.

Monique: Hello.

Tonyia: There's a freedom and the other thing with this piece too is I get to be unapologetically activist in that kind of way. As a pastor, which I love pastoring, but it comes with certain kind of responsibilities and also some limitations in terms of what is reasonable to do.

Tonyia: With the non-profit, I have an opportunity to build that team, build that body of work and it's all similar in that it's all freedom-based work. Culture shift work, because I consider the faith work I do culture shift work. The compliment of the two is wonderful, it really is. It's

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a lot of work, but it works for me in terms of my commitment to helping to ensure that the poor, LGBTQ, people of color, trans people, that's my primary groups that we focus on and people of faith. That those intersections are where we've been able to accomplish some amazing things. It's an unlikely place, it's an unlikely intersection, but it is one that actually I find quite beautiful, challenging, yes but beautiful. Again-

Monique: I want to ask specifically about the Do No Harm campaign and that merging? Did that campaign come out of Freedom Center?

Tonyia: Yes.

Monique: But was targeted towards faith leader outside, so secular religious merging?

Tonyia: Yes.

Monique: For you, why take all the work of working with faith leaders.

Tonyia: Like Black preachers in particular at the Black church, because she's mine. She's mine, she's my home.

Monique: That hit me right.

Tonyia: Black church is my home and always will be, always has been. It is my lifeline. I never gave up my card. I never gave up my Black church girl card and I don't feel I need to. Just like I'm not going to give up my lesbian card. I'm not going to give up my social justice card, all of those are parts of who I am. The gift of me, and any of us is our full authentic self, so that's what I bring into all of the experiences. I wanted for me and this was simple goal initially, but complicated. What my hope was and still is, is that the Black church would beat science in the issue of the LGBTQ child of God. That was my fundamental hope because throughout history science was the thing that settled arguments. There was the woman question, about what does women's brains have the capacity for and on and on and on.

Tonyia: Now we have more women graduating from colleges and seminaries than men, but at that time it was thought that our mind literally could not handle as much knowledge and information as a man [crosstalk 01:48:24]. Science just proved that ... With Black people, same thing and then Jesse Owens and those games blew it physically out of the water. Then we've had many others who have blown it out of the water in the areas of science and other areas of sport. You give us an opportunity, we're going to show. Science ultimately showed there is no real distinction in the races. I love what Dr. Peter Gomes said in his book *The Good Book*. He said, "The LGBTQ issue is the last great prejudice for us to overcome." I wish I could agree with that fully. It's last of what is before us now.

Tonyia: He went to anti-Semitism, he went to the woman question. He went to Black question, all these questions. He said, "This one here is the one however that once we overcome it." It's going to be amazing for us in his analysis. I believe it's possible. I believe that we as people of faith can get to a place where we see another part of God's creation and not

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feel the need to invalidate it or to minimize it in any way. That becomes so much of the impetus of my work. I love the church. I want us to win in reference to the core principles of our faith, which is unconditional love for real, for real. It was consideration to the fact that we can't possibly think we know all of human creation. We can't possibly understand love in all of her manifestations. How can we? How can we embrace such a great thing? We cannot. It is arrogant to assume we can and so we go from there.

Monique: Does that attach? It would seem to attach to then rollout of the transgender faith and action to order.

Tonya: Exactly. That work came interestingly enough out of my experience with Unity becoming a woman Bishop. I knew my brothers loved me. I knew that. There was no question about it for me. What I also knew was that we were all blindsided. We were just not ready for what that meant. I think we all naively assumed it was going to be this very smooth transition because we all get along. It's time now for women to be in the big house and that's going to go smooth. It was naïve on our part. What it exposed was a blind spot. Fortunately for us we got to the other side of it for the most part. But it left me with the question, "Where is mine, because I couldn't obviously see one."

Tonya: I went on that quest. Who are you missing? What are you missing and very quickly I got to the trans community and was sobered by what I was met with when I got to that revelation, that understanding. Because I started in my own congregation just asking people simple questions like, "What has your experience been here? How are you doing?" Those kind of core questions. The responses were revelatory and devastating at the same time. The most difficult things I've had to hear as a pastor. They weren't saying it negatively, but it was examples like this. One person, woman told me she said, "Do you remember when I was just going around cussing everybody out, bitching and just being a pain in your behind I'm sure."

Tonya: She said, "What was going on and I didn't feel could really talk about it was I was taking street hormones that had me nearly crazy. I didn't think I could talk about it to you. I felt ashamed at what I was doing." It crushed me because it was an usher of mine. Or another person that said, "You know I was out the night before. I'm engaged in sex workership. That's how I've been able to eat and care for myself and someone harmed me. I didn't feel I could come and talk about it because I didn't want to ..." It was person after person and I realized what many of us in the church had done in these affirming spaces was we would look at the trans community and say, "Oh girl, you better go on. You're looking fierce, you're looking fine."

Tonya: So much of who they are for the mind outside of their true experience was for people's entertainment and people's enjoyment, whether it was to look at them, to have sex with them, to be entertained by them, but nobody was talking to them about their life, about who they are as people of faith. It started that trajectory of my work. Now my work with the trans community is one of my larger bodies of work. Part of it is because my belief is once we make sure trans people are okay, everybody else will be fine. It's like going to that farthest edge and saying, "How inclusive are we really? How loving are we really? How grace filled are we really?" To understand we've got a long way to go. Unfortunately

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a long way to go as lesbian, gay, bi, people we're some of the worst because they're expectation would be that we would be there for them.

Monique: Right.

Tonyia: And we've inflicted some of the worse pain. Yeah, I'm dedicated to that work of hopefully making the church, supporting them in our work of making the church and the world a better place. Then that dovetails with the other marginalized communities that we fight for. Again, I haven't given up my Black card. People see a Black woman first when they see me. Not a same gender loving woman who has been in an amazing relationship for 18 years. They don't see that, they see me as a Black woman. So I'm concerned about issues that impact the Black community. I'm concerned about what's happening with our children. I'm concerned about violence against Black men and Black boys. Those things for me are all also gay issues. I've done a lot of work at that intersection and I'm excited about some of our outcomes like this year the NAACP has just established North Carolina NAACP its first LGBTQ committee and they decided teaching put it on the executive board. Which is amazing as a first step, on the executive board. I'm sharing that work.

Tonyia: As a matter of fact tomorrow we're going to Carrboro, North Carolina to one of the branches that said, "We know we need to learn more about LGBTQ things. Come and teach us." Our team is coming there to talk to them about this. We're doing a listening tour throughout the state. The work that we do with the civil rights community, and how with the civil rights work it's amazing because people have felt that those two groups are so antagonistic towards each other. How do you do civil rights and queer rights. We've challenged that thought and said, "Why do people have to choose? Why are we choosing? We need to do both." That work has now grown and we're helping shape or frame many things that are happening here in the state and other parts of the country. We do national work. We also have a unique program that we've done in partnership with the Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Civic School of Religion in Berkeley, where we're on our fifth round now, our fifth year of hosting transgender seminarians and providing support to transgender seminarians across the country. That has been really exciting work. The goal is to help support them so when people say, "We would love to have a trans minister or Bishop, but we don't know any trans people that are in clergy." We are working to help groom a generation of them who will then go and do amazing work. Yeah, so a lot of moving parts but all of it rich and the cultures are shifting slowly but surely. I like the assignment I got.

Monique: That's good news. We're over two hours. I have one question left, but we can stop.

Tonyia: Okay, I'm good.

Monique: My final question is a question of where you find restoration? What practices nourish you, support you in the justice work? Because if you're animated by the Spirit to do this work, it's also very depleting.

Tonyia: It is. I haven't mastered that yet to be totally honest. I have not mastered it. I am much better than I used to be, but I've paid very high prices for everything I just talked to you

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about. I paid high physical prices in terms of weight and strength and health. I paid high emotional prices, just the nature of doing this kind of work. It's intense, it's dark at times and pastoring by itself is challenging, then you add on this other body of work. But I'm of an age now I turn 60 on Friday. I'm at an age now where I've grown in my understanding that it's not a gift to take care figure out myself, it's a necessity, just like breathing, but it took me time to get there. I do things like for example now, and literally just this past week. My assistant now has blocks of time in my calendar that are for me to walk, to do swimming. I love tennis, but I hurt my knee and I'm looking forward to getting stronger so that I can get back to my tennis. I also do things like what I did last night. I'm part of a philosophy group. I'm the only non-doctorate person in the room. Older philosophers who just sit and we think about things together. Last night, the discussion, one woman's body of work is around end of life matters. We talked about when does life end. When is life over. She's a proponent of doctor assisted euthanasia. We talked about the ethics of those things. A lot of ethical conversations come up in our [crosstalk 02:00:55]. Then abortion came in, rolled into that conversation. Women's life again, but for me I don't get a lot of those places so my mind doesn't get to be ... I don't need to run around with that kind of thinking much. God has really blessed me with this amazing group and we gather once a month. We rotate who brings the subject.

Tonyia: It could be something where a person in some instances were working on the book. We would give feedback on the book. It could be an article, but always it's with the mind toward, "And how does this in turn work for the world?" And sometimes not. One of the hardest things when I started working with this group. It is one of the places that I truly am greatly fed. Was understanding how philosophers work, their minds work because I would always be ... And to what end? Because the activist in me. "I get it but to what end?" All my understanding that the thought is the end. That is the gift, or thinking about ethics.

Tonyia: "Okay so then what do we do with that? Now we have this understanding. "Then what do we do with this ethic around death, and dying, and immigration, and abortion? What do we do? Understanding the gift is what those thinkers get to offer to the world. People get to do what they're going to do with it. The last piece that's one of the greatest is my wife. She is my best friend. Still is my best friend. She has provided this space, safe space with me in a way that I get to truly be my authentic self. That is such a gift that you have anybody in your life that lets you be your authentic self.

Tonyia: I have a few, there's three very close relationships. One is a guy in New York, another is my friend Paul that I mentioned in Atlanta and then my wife. Those relationships buoy me and sustain me. In fact actually she's done her job too well, because she's made it easy for me not to have to go reach out. I'm actually an introvert in my core self. Even though I do so much public work, but my core self really is very introverted. I could be okay just sitting in a room by myself. But because Gwen is so outgoing. God blessed me with the perfect help mate. Because it's like, "We're going out to such and such or such and such is having a gathering or Tonyia what about?" Yeah, that feeds me and of course, God.

Monique: Joy. That's what I had. Any final thoughts? That's a great place to end.

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Tonyia: No. I just ... It's interesting doing this walk back through my life. I haven't done it that thorough in a long time. I find it interesting how much time I spent talking about the beginning. I guess the nature of the questions had me focusing on the beginning more than I typically do versus this latter path of my life. So thank you for the gift of this experience of being able to share and hopefully something that's been shared will help someone else down the line.

Monique: Absolutely. That is our hope. I'm going to turn off the devices and-