

## Lesson 2: Imagination and Anti-Racism

Excerpts Conversation with Jason Reynolds and Krista Tippet: OnBeing

Reynolds authored many books, including co-authoring with Ibram X. Kendi the youth version of Stamped from the Beginning called Stamped: Racism, Anti-racism and You.

Jason Reynolds: I need young people — we, the collective we need young people to be able to activate their imaginations. If they cannot, if they don't have — if, by the time you're out of high school, your imagination is shot, we're in trouble, bigtime. We're in trouble.

But how does one keep an imagination fresh in a world that works double-time to suck it away? How does one keep an imagination firing off when we live in a nation that is constantly vacuuming it from them? And I think that the answer is, one must live a curious life. One must have stacks and stacks and stacks of books on the inside of their bodies. And those books don't have to be the things that you've read. I mean, that's good, too, but those books could be the conversations that you've had with your friends that are unlike the conversations you were having last week. It could be about this time taking the long way home and seeing what's around you that you've never seen, because most of us, especially city folk, we stay in our little quadrants. We stay on the five-block radius, wherever the coffeeshop is and the school and the church.

But what if you were to walk the other way? What if you were to explore the places around you? What if you were to speak to your neighbor and to figure out how to strike a conversation with a person you've never met? What if you were to try to walk into a situation, free of preconceived notion, just once? Once a day, just walk in and say, "I don't know what's going to happen, and let's see. Let me give this person the benefit of the doubt — to be a human."

In talking about Kendi's work, Tippet and Reynolds share that it was someone's imagination that created racist ideas about Black people.

... no one's ever talked about it that way. No one's ever talked about it that way, I think. I think usually people talk about, well, this is the history of a thing. And it is, but that history is birthed out of the imagination. It literally was conjured up. We're talking about — imagination is so powerful that it could set forth 400, 500 years of something wrong, which means that it very well could set forth 400, 500 years of something right.

That's sort of the beauty of humanity. James Baldwin, my famous Baldwin quote, and he has a gazillion, obviously. But my favorite Baldwin quote is, "The interior life is the real life." The interior life is the real life. "And the intangible dreams of a person may have a tangible effect on the world." It's basically saying, what one can imagine, internally, what one can think about when nobody knows, when nobody's around — one's secrets — could shift human life. What an amazing thing to think about.

Black folks have a right to have a conscious rage — a conscious rage. I mean, Baldwin always talks about it. If you are a Black person who is conscious in America, then you are basically living in a state of anger. [laughs] You are living in a state of anger. It is a conscious and constant thing.

The other thing, though, I will say, the only thing I will add, and not as a pushback but as an addendum, is that if it is not a conscious rage — meaning, if it is not a rage that we can tap into, a rage that exists within the quiver of our lives, along with the joy — then it can very well poison us and overtake us. And it can become an illness. It can cause illness. So reactionary rage is a dangerous thing. But to be able to tap into a conscious rage, I think, is a gift. And I do believe it is a virtue.

There's no finish line. So there's no finish line. There's this idea that people are going to read this book, or they're going to read all the books, and then, all of a sudden, they're going to "be" anti-racist. And what I'm saying is — and that's also a very American thing, this idea that there are winners and losers, that there's a binary that we live in, a bifurcation when it comes to that which is a failure and that which is victorious.

The truth of the matter is, this is about journeymen, journeyfolk. Our job is to constantly be pressing toward a thing, but that thing is ever elusive. And the reason why it is ever elusive is because the world, and humanity, continues to evolve. And because it continues to evolve, the things that complicate our lives evolve with it. And so we have to be vigilant, to continue to figure out what the new versions of these elements are so that we can continue to tear down that house. But there's no end goal. There's no — and I think that's how humanity and anti-racism connect.

And it's simply — and by the way, to get back to your original question, anti-racism is simply the muscle that says that humans are human. That's it. It's the one that says, "I love you because you are you." Period. That's all. And if we can figure out how to do that — and it feels so simple. And this is why racism has been the greatest hoax ever played on humans. It's the greatest hoax ever, because that element of "I love you because you are you" should be the most human thing we know. It should be a natural thing to say, "Look, I love you, because you remind me more of myself than not."

### **Discussion Questions:**

But how does one keep an imagination fresh in a world that works double-time to suck it away? How does one keep an imagination firing off when we live in a nation that is constantly vacuuming it from them? And I think that the answer is, one must live a curious life.

How would curiosity play into anti-racist work? How does imagination play into the 400-500 years of racist history?

James Baldwin says that the *interior life is the real life*. What does that mean to you? A sociology professor used to say "Be careful how you see the world, because that is how it really is." What would happen if people began to think differently about race in America?

Talk about the difference between conscious rage and reactionary rage.

Reynolds points out that there is no finish line in our lifetime about anti-racist work. It is a journey. How are you going to take care of yourself so that you are in for the journey and not for the finish line?

What does Reynolds mean, and how do you see it applying to your life: “Look, I love you, because you remind me more of myself than not.”