



245: Voices of Lament with Natasha Sistrunk Robinson and Mariah Humphries

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 245. This is a podcast about making decisions, but it's also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information, and the sometimes delightful, but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. Today, I'm glad to explore a topic that doesn't usually make the headlines in our news feeds, but one that certainly deserves some air time in our souls. We're talking about lament. What it is, why it matters and who some of our best teachers are in this practice. And so I'm glad to welcome two guests today.

The first may be a familiar voice to listeners as this is her second appearance on The Next Right Thing. Natasha Sistrunk Robinson is a sought after international speaker, consultant and leadership executive coach. She's also a former US Marine Corps officer and federal employee at the Department of Homeland Security. Most recently, Natasha is the editor of a collaborative project inspired by Psalm 37, called Voices of Lament, a collection of poems, liturgy, essays, and prayers written by 29 well known and new Indigenous, Black, Asian and Latina contributors.

One of those contributors is our second guest, Mariah Humphries, a Muscogee Nation citizen, writer and educator. Through her experience navigating the tension between Native and white American culture, she brings Native awareness to non-native spaces. With over 20 years of vocational ministry service, Mariah's focused on theology, racial literacy and reconciliation within the American church. And I'll also say both of these women are dear friends of mine. I'm grateful to bring them on, to learn from them today. Listen in.

Emily P. Freeman:

Well, Natasha and Mariah, thank you so much for joining me here today. I'm so glad to have you with me.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

Girl, we glad to be here.

Mariah Humphries:

It's great to be here.

Emily:

Well, because there are three of us in the room just as we get started, I would love it if you would each just take a quick minute and introduce yourselves so we can know who you are, but also, so we can hear your voice. So everyone will know who's who. Natasha, why don't you start us out?

Natasha:

I'm Natasha Sistrunk Robinson, a friend of Emily and Mariah. I write books, and I do leadership consulting, and coaching, and I have a nonprofit. So that's what I do as far as work.

Mariah:

And I'm Mariah Humphries. And I am also friends with Natasha and Emily, which are amazing people. And I am more in the educational space where I work with racial reconciliation and conciliation, and just being able to help people have a little bit more of a racial awareness. So that's kind of where I focus my time.

Emily:

Wonderful. And Mariah is coming to us from Texas. Natasha is in North Carolina, not too far from me, so we're kind of a little bit spread out, but not too much. But it is such a joy to have a conversation with the two of you today. And you both are representing many voices actually today, as we sit down on the very day that a brand new project is releasing into the world. It is called *Voices of Lament*, and I invited these two ladies to represent. Natasha, tell me, is it 29 contributors?

Natasha:

29. 29 women of color.

Emily:

29 women of color have come together to add their voices, their poems, their liturgies, their essays, their work, their prayers to a project that I have been so excited about ever since I heard about it. So I'd love to hear a little bit from you Natasha. The book is based off of and inspired by Psalm 37. Why is Psalm 37 and why now?

Natasha:

Yeah, thank you. So Psalm 37 speaks about how God deals with the righteous and how the God deals with the wicked. And so when I think about everything that's happened over the last few years, not just with the pandemic, which is part of that, and a lot of how people are or were, and continue to be impacted by the pandemic, has to do a lot with classism. So that's an injustice there in healthcare and whether or not they're getting education and those type of things, but also the racial injustice that we've seen rising over the last few years. So right in the middle of the pandemic, we had what I call George Floyd Summer. And then we had a rise of acts of violence against our Asian American sisters and brothers. And then we are getting all these reports of history, stuff that some of us knew about how Indigenous people were treated in boarding schools and that report, and those researchers are starting to come out.

And so it seemed like a lot of trauma, intergenerational, racialized trauma that was happening. And I thought that women of color, people who are not new to this, we true to this as they say. We had the ability to speak with authenticity into this present moment and to really guide and lead the church through this difficult time.

Emily:

I wanted to read something that you wrote in your introduction to the book. So for those of you listening, Natasha has pulled all these women together. She's the editor of this project, and here's something. I'm going to read your own words back to you, Natasha. If I would've been better prepared, I'd have you read it. But you wrote, "By and large, Christian, denominational, parachurch, seminary, missionary, and non-profit leadership in the American church, like every other system and sphere of cultural influence in America is dominated by men. Most of them white, and just like in Jesus' day, although women have been faithful companions on this journey, supporting the work of ministry in our lives, resources, wisdom,

and hospitality. Generally we are not sitting at the tables and we are not the last ones in the rooms when critical decisions are being made that impact our lives, churches, communities, and families.”

When I read that in your introduction, something that struck me is that you really talk about this work and these words written by these women as words of leadership. And in a book about lament, leadership is not the first place my mind goes. And so make that connection for us listening. How, and in what ways do you see these voices of lament as voices of leaders?

Natasha:

Yeah, I think that’s a really good point. And the reason why I leaned into it, the way that I did. So one, I think lament is a spiritual discipline and a practice that we are not great at in the white evangelical church, for sure. I think the Black church, a traditional Black church has a better posture for lamenting and worshiping God in the midst of suffering or in the midst of mourning. But in these other congregations, particularly those that are majority white, that’s not the posturing. And so that’s one thing I wanted to be clear about, that lament is a spiritual discipline. It is for the benefit of the church. It’s normally something that’s done communally. And so if you don’t have a history or a practice of it, then the people who have done it and have a history and a practice of it are the ones that lead you through it. So I think that’s number one.

But I think the other part is just a biblical theological conviction of the presence of women and how we see them show up in the text in the Old and New Testament, leading in various ways. And I think one of the things we need to do is as far as our discipleship is get people out of the mindset of thinking about leadership as only one type of thing, or one type of way, and there’s a one size fits all. And so I think women have always led, we’ve led in different ways and I just want to acknowledge that various forms of leadership,

Emily:

Mariah, when you were approached by Natasha, I’m assuming Natasha invited you and approached you in some way. What was your first thought when you were asked to contribute to a book about lament, leaders contributing to a work that was going to go out into the marketplace, out to the church, out to the people with this kind of call to action in mind?

Mariah:

A great question. And the first thing I thought of was thank you, was thank you for recognizing that the Indigenous voice also needs to be at the table. I think we’re still in a process even within our own non-white communities of the Indigenous voice being thought of to be at a table to talk about lived experience. And especially in this form of lament, I was excited that Natasha wanted to be very focused on that and very intentional with that. I mean, if you know Natasha, she has the details planned out, and she was like, I need to have this number of women, at least, from this community. And she was not going to stop until she found these women. And so I was very grateful that that voice was being brought to the table, and that I was going to have the opportunity to not just search out myself spaces where I can share a lived experience, and even within the light of scripture, but I was being invited to that table.

And so I was able to talk about the historical things that we have gone through that really do tie into lament so beautifully. And I was excited about Psalm 37 because of exactly what Natasha was talking about. I was thrilled that we were looking at a part of scripture that we so often just kind of read and then just move on. We see it as this beautiful statement, and then we just continue with our day. And so I was excited that we were able to stop everybody and say, no, let’s pull this out and really think about this, and being able to have so many different voices speak into that, I was just really excited to be part of that.

Emily:

I love that the means and the way that this work is presented is communal. And as I read the Voices of Lament in this book, I get that same sense, each contribution feels like a rising tide of voice, of leadership, like we've said. Also of beauty, of pain, of suffering, but also of hope. And I think that's one of the things that surprised me the most. It shouldn't have, because I know a lot of the women who contributed to this work, but when we think about lament, we don't often also think about, we don't think about leadership and we don't think about hope. But as I've been reading, there is that thread that comes through, even though the words are deeply honest and Mariah, just kind of continuing with you. I'm curious, could you share a little bit about your own experience of actually putting words to paper, words of lament. You wrote a liturgy in this book, and just from your own cultural lived experience, what was that like for you?

Mariah:

Honestly, it took a lot out of me. And I spent so much more time praying ahead of writing on this project because I wanted to make sure that I stayed true to what I know has happened and also stay true to scripture and stay true to the Psalms. And that was really a focus for me. So before I ever even started typing out any thoughts, I spent weeks ahead of time just reflecting and praying. And it actually took a very big emotional toll on me, more so than other writing I've done because I always write about a Native perspective, but this one I wanted to be very intentional and there was a heavy spiritual aspect to it. And the liturgy itself, taking that form of writing, I wanted to make sure that I stayed true to a technical form, but also be able to stay true to an indigenous perspective. And then whenever I started writing, it just flowed. So how would I want somebody to talk to me about their culture in this form of lament.

And the importance of lament, and the beauty of going through lament, because that's something that we so often just skip over with Christianity. We don't want to talk about the lament side and we want to skip straight to the joy and the hope. And there's a beauty in that heaviness of going through this part of our journey as Christians. And so I wanted to make sure I tapped into that and just being able to stay true to an Indigenous perspective that we just so often miss. So it was an emotional journey for me. And I think we all do a beautiful job of adding that hope and squeezing that joy of just who we are as women of color as well. But yeah, it was an emotional roller coaster for me to go through on this because so many layers. I'm one voice of many, and I'm representing a collective, but then also tried to stay within sharing the lived experience of who I am as a Muscogee woman specifically. And so there was the process of representing a group while also representing just myself as an individual, of my own lived experience.

Natasha:

And if you let me too Emily, one, because I want to do this regularly and often and publicly of thanking Mariah and our contributors because I know that. For me as the editor and the visionary on the project, I think there was a certain amount of trust that they gave me. And it's something that I did not take lightly at all, that I was very thankful for their willingness to go through that, to do the hard work. And because I asked them to do that, and I asked them to press in, and I asked them to tell the truth, not just about their personal journeys, but also about their culture, and their people, and their heritage, and with the focus on how God has been faithful to their people throughout time and across generations. That was very, very important. And even to the end, for those that wrote essays of them elevating the voice of a woman of color from their culture who has embodied the passage.

And so we get in this book, 22, for many people, new women of color as leaders that they might not have known about before. And my thing is that number one, I knew what it took out of the women to deliver that to us. Number two, I understand the significance of them trusting me to bring it forth with integrity. And number three, for those who are reading it, I don't want us to take lightly the gift that's been offered to you by these women of color individually and collectively trusting that you will not shame, or abuse, or disregard the gift that has been offered to you as a church body and as a community.

Emily:

You had LaTasha Morrison write the forward, and something that I have held on to hers for years now, she talks about lament in some of her other work. She says, “It’s no secret that we, as a culture, are uncomfortable with lament. Rarely do we look to share our pain publicly. In fact, we are encouraged to mourn quietly and in private.” And I think both of you have just very beautifully said how difficult it was to bring forth this work, not just personally, but also to entrust each other, but mostly to entrust the reader, hello, that we are now bearing witness to your deep inner work of doing this.

And so I guess my question to you, and maybe there’s not an easy answer, but I hope there is, is as I’m reading this, as a person standing in a different social location with a different historical background, but a lot of it is shared just because here we are, humans together. What do you hope for the reader and how would you invite the reader to, while we’re not being asked to write our own lament and share it on a bookshelf. But I imagine that one thing you would hope, at least I’m getting it from, as I read is that this would become more of a practice that we bring forth, that’s more something that we do on the regular rather than something that is strangely only for “biblical times.” So what does it look like to practice a spiritual discipline of lament in our everyday lives?

Natasha:

To me, it’s beyond the practice of lament in our everyday lives. I think that’s part of it, certainly. I think we don’t have a problem with suffering. I mean, there’s a certain part of suffering that’s common to all of us. You all at some point get disappointed or you have a relationship that is lost, divorces happen, kids go away, people get sick, folks die. So there’s suffering that’s common to all of us. What we do with it though, I just taught on Ruth over the weekend, and Naomi, and what do you say about God when all the things that you had hoped for when your life was going together, fall apart? What do you say about God then? So I think that’s just an honest question for us as people of faith, but also as disciples. But for me, the bigger thing I want and hope for the reader is that they will see the faithfulness of God, and how God has shown up throughout time and across history in generations of different people.

Here’s the thing. In Revelations, it says to us that there will be worshipers in Heaven from every tribe, language, nation and people group. To me, I don’t take that lightly. And so my point there is if we really want to have a more accurate picture of who God is, then we need to be more intimately engaged with all God’s people. And I think one of the things in the West, we’ve crippled ourself and our own discipleship because our pride helps us to think that we, because we have more money, we have more education, we have more power, we can dictate to everyone else who God is and how we should respond to God and what God is like.

But the irony to that to me is that the number of people that are considering themselves people of faith, or going to church, particularly as Christians is declining in the United States. That is not the case in Asia. It’s not the case in Africa. So I think there’s a certain amount of humility is required to say, what can we learn from the global church? What can we learn from all God’s people, people from every tribe, language, nations and people group? That’s what I think this book does. That’s what I think makes this book a classic, that it helps people see God better because you are engaging God’s people.

Mariah:

Yeah. I agree with that 100%. I think also with when it comes to something like lament, kind of what we’ve already talked about, there is this intimacy in lament, and there’s a seriousness with it. But just as Natasha was talking about, we are able to be in this space where we can feel and witness God fuller than just the high points, than just that triumph, and the laughter and the smiles. And sometimes it’s in those very intimate moments of, and we’ve talked about how, let’s prefer to do lament privately, don’t. Let’s maybe have our moment of public, but then just deal with that on your own, and get that settled and then come back to us when we can move on. And there’s something that we just miss there that is a really intimate and personal part of God to be able to sit in that for a bit and not to stay there. I mean, we don’t

want to stay in this lament all the time.

But there is something that we will need to kind of stop and just think about what is it that I'm feeling here, and how is God just touching me right now, how God is working with me. And not to say that we go through *lait* because God's trying to teach us something. That's not what I'm saying, but in that moment, just having that connectivity with God, and I think that's so important. And as I've read this book, I am learning from every single chapter. Even the other Indigenous women, I'm reading, and this is new history for me. I didn't learn any of this in school. And so I'm learning this from fellow women and there's beauty there.

So I think that's one of the things as we have this book come out, is all of us are going to be in this educational space as a learner of somebody else's experience and a learner of things that have happened in our past. And we just become fuller and we become more aware. And that is something that is always a goal of mine is just to be able to have that awareness that it's beyond myself, and it's beyond you and it's beyond all of us. We just have to kind of stretch ourselves a bit. And this book is really going to provide that for people which I'm excited about because I have been challenged, and I've been encouraged and learning something new on every page. And that's a beautiful thing.

Emily:

I got to tell y'all, or confess to you as I'm reading this book, I can only read a little bit at a time because so much of it is new. It's new lived experiences of those, like you said Mariah, it's history that I don't know. But it's also, I want to honor these stories, and the honesty that you all have put to page and now have allowed us into, I sometimes almost feel like, am I allowed? Is this okay that I'm reading this? But I'm so grateful. And I just want to issue an invitation to anyone listening. And I know you're there because I hear from you in my email inbox and in my DMs on Instagram, who is maybe disillusioned or has experienced some discomfort, or some disentangling, or some deconstruction of a faith that you've grown up with, maybe wanting to discover a God who was bigger than the God you grew up believing in, with the stories that you grew up hearing.

And while we honor our background of faith and the people and the places where we received our faith, where our faith was passed down to us, I think there's a real beauty and an invitation right now for a lot of us to reexamine some of those narratives that we've grown up with. And let me tell you this. I believe this book, *Voices of Lament*, can serve as a great teacher and as a kind, challenging companion for all of us who are in that space, who are questioning, wait, is this thing that I've believed here, does that belong to the God of the universe? Or does that belong to a smaller God that I have somehow come to believe in my mind? I really believe this book is a book for our time right now, for such a time as this.

And so I'm saying that with my voice, if I could buy everyone a book listening, I would do it because I think that's how important this book is. And I want to say that with y'all here, but also if you weren't here, I'd be saying it too. I think it can really be a turning point for a lot of us and our stories and narratives about God, about who God is, about what God cares, about where God shows up. And in one of the essays written by one of your contributors, Sandra Van Opstal, she talks about the importance, and it's very simple and we've heard it before but I'm just going to repeat it. She talks about this is not a God who keeps us from suffering, but we have a God who is with us in our suffering. And that is a different narrative than some of us have grown up hearing.

And I think we need to be reminded of it and to dive into it and to see evidence of it. And I am here to say that these stories, essays, poems, and liturgies give us evidence of that God, and I want more of it. And I'm grateful to the two of you and your contribution and the 27 other women of color who have contributed to this work. Well, I could talk with y'all all day long and all night about this, but I would love if you have any final words, hopes you have for the reader as they pick up this book, for the church. Anything you want to say before, and then I'm going to put Mariah on the spot and ask you to close us out

with a little reading from your liturgy.

Mariah:

Yeah. I hope that as people read this, that even though they may not be what's represented behind the page as the author, there will be something for everybody in here, where there's the opportunity to be able to connect. My experience does not match up to this, but I can see how God is working in my life in this sort of way, and be able to see us more as a fuller community, which I think that's important. So that would be my goal for this.

Natasha:

My prayer is for hope and healing for us all.

Emily:

Beautiful. Mariah, would you close this out and read just a portion of your liturgy? And then we'll all turn off the podcast and run out and buy the book.

Mariah:

Please do go out and get the book. So this is Muscogee People Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, which is Este Mvskokvlke, paksvnke, mucvnettv, pakse. "God of the removed generations, we are yours. With gentle breath, you formed us to reflect your image and saw that we were good. Through your reflection, we are seen and loved by you. You made us with worth and purpose to glorify your name. From the depth of generational oppression, we hold tightly to hope, you, creator, restorer, mystery. When we are removed, when we are disregarded, you whisper "I am with you" as a reminder that we know to whom we are cherished and uplifted. By your stabilizing hand, you keep our heads raised and our eyes fixed on you. And we see who we are.

We are not poverty to you. We are not addiction to you. We are not retained to the past to you. We are not sanitized history to you. We are not a societal burden to you. Our culture is not mocked by you. You see us as your creation, and by you, we are strengthened. We are [inaudible 00:26:45] made in your image. Our wailing has long been expressed yet we know you are there in your divine timeline, listening. We feel you moving Yahweh."

Emily:

Amen.

Natasha:

Amen.

Thanks for listening to episode 245 of The Next Right Thing.

I hope this simple practice of learning the language of lament can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions. The bigger truth is our daily decisions are making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram at Emily P. Freeman and online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can also find a transcript of this and every episode. *Voices of Lament: Reflections on Brokenness and Hope in a World Longing for Justice*, featuring the writing of Natasha, Mariah and 27 more women of color is officially available this very day. You can learn more about the project and get yourself a copy at voicesoflament.com or wherever books are sold. That's voicesoflament.com.

And then as far as my two guests today, I'll leave links to their websites in the show notes. But just so you

know, you can find Natasha @natasharobinson.com, where you can also listen to a new season of her podcast, A Sojourner's Truth. And you can learn more about Mariah by visiting mariahhumphries.com. We'll include all these links, like I said, in the show notes as well to make it super easy for you. As always thanks to Leah Jarvis for pulling those show notes together and to the team at Unmutable for editing the sound on every episode.

In closing, I'd love to read a prayer from Voices of Lament contributor, Kathy Kong.

“God, creator of our embodied souls, thank you for not being afraid or dismissive of our emotions. Thank you for giving us the imagination to chase justice, without allowing the anger of injustice to swallow us whole.” Amen.

Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.