

Queerology: A Podcast on Belief and Being

Episode 36 – Dr. Robyn Henderson-Espinoza

Transcript

Matthias: If you enjoy listening to Queerology, then I need your help. Here's why. I create Queerology by myself on a shoestring budget, recording and editing every episode in my tiny closet. How's that for irony? That's where you come in. Will you help keep Queerology on the air by supporting it financially? By tipping as little as \$1 a month, you can help me improve and keep making Queerology every week. All you have to do is jump over to matthiasroberts.com/support to make a pledge and listen away.

Hey, friends. This is Matthias Roberts, and you're listening to Queerology, the podcast on belief and being. This is episode 36.

Dr. Robyn: Fear and anxiety, for Kierkegaard at least, was connected to a deep awareness of one's freedom. I'm wondering if we have this deep awareness of our freedom in the world, how is that also complicating our notion of living with fear and anxiety in this current political moment?

Matthias: You all, Dr. Robyn Henderson-Espinoza is back with us this week. I recorded an episode with them ... I think they were in episode four of season one. They're back. Dr. Robyn, I think, is quickly becoming maybe our resident Queerology theologian. They hold a PhD in Constructive Philosophical Theology and Ethics. They're an anti-oppression, anti-racist, non-binary, trans*gressive latinx theologian. Dr. Robyn take seriously their call as an activist theologian and ethicist to bridge together theories and practices that result in communities responding to pressing social concerns.

Right after we recorded this episode, Dr. Robyn was named one of the 10 Faith Leaders to Watch in 2018 by the Center for American Progress, which is a huge deal. I mean a huge congratulations to Dr. Robyn for that. We are talking about new work that Dr. Robyn is doing around the Tyranny of the Now, and all of them dive into what that means.

A quick note: Dr. Robyn is leading a workshop/preaching in Seattle, so in my ground here in Seattle, in a couple of weekends, over the weekend of February 24th at Plymouth United Church of Christ in downtown Seattle. They're doing an all-day workshop on this Tyranny of the Now on Saturday, the 24th, and then is going to be preaching at all services at Plymouth United Church of Christ on Sunday, the 25th. If any of you are around Seattle and want to dive in a little bit deeper into the work that Dr. Robyn's doing, make sure to show up at those workshops. They're going to be amazing.

The audio at the beginning of this interview is a little bit choppy, but that only lasts for literally the first minute, and then everything clears up. Don't give up on the little bit of

choppy audio that's right at the front. I'm not entirely sure what happened there, but so be it. Let's go ahead and dive in. Dr. Robyn, hi. Welcome back.

Dr. Robyn: Hi there. Thank you.

Matthias: Yeah. Thank you so much for joining me again today. I'm super, super excited about this.

Dr. Robyn: It's super good to be with you again.

Matthias: Yeah. Just to start, the question I ask every episode, and I'm going to ask you again because I'm sure there are some people who haven't heard the episode, and these answers to these questions always change. How do you identify and how would you say that your faith has helped form your identity?

Dr. Robyn: Yeah. I mean I would say that I have a complicated relationship to faith and religion, and really always have. I tend to lean into being a divine doubter and really hold up doubt, doubting certainty, doubting normative expressions of faith, doubting the regularity of the ways in which we experience religion and Christianity. I doubt all that.

That has led me into an orientation of certainly thinking critically about religion and faith, but also realizing that religion and theology are ... They're both part of the DNA of our society. What that has really, I think, invited me to do is to be engaged in what I call activist theology.

My identity is that of a non-binary, transgender latinx. I don't identify as male or female, I identify as a trans-queer, if you will, and am masculine of center presenting and have light skin privilege bypassing privilege. I'm born of a Mexican woman not of this country and Anglo father, and so I'm a mixed race latinx with skin privilege that gets me into rooms and conversations the darker skinned folks maybe don't have access to or are suspect if they are in those rooms.

This is also a complicated relationship around race, class, and gender and sexuality. My identity is one that is just complicated, I think, which is fruitful. I'm not demonizing myself. The complexity with which I live is one that really animates my greater becoming.

Matthias: Yeah. I think there's times that we have to lean into complexity, I think, because so often we want to just stay in the simple. To be forced to lean into the complexity, I feel like we can learn so much more about the world and God and who we are as people. There's so much in complexity.

Dr. Robyn: Yeah, yeah. So much complexity. I feel like we're really living in a moment of deep complexity in our political moment that is really impacting the ways in which we understand religion and spirituality, especially for queer people. I have to say that I have just finished up some work in Washington D.C. at the National LGBTQ Task Force, their annual conference, Creating Change. I did some pastoral accompaniment work there.

Around five to six hours a day, I would be in deep conversation with LGBTQ identified people, and folks would express to me their deep fear and anxiety.

I think what I learned from just hearing about fear and anxiety is that this is not isolated to people of color, this is not isolated to white people who are really trying to figure this stuff out, this is not isolated to LGBTQ-identified people. This is really a current orientation of fear and anxiety that, as a society, we are enflashing.

I've been calling this moment the Tyranny of the Now and that we are living in the tyranny of the now. We are trying to figure out how to eradicate violence against trans women of color, we're trying to figure out how to really live into what it means to say black lives matter. We're really trying to figure out how to live out a faith in action that is for our collective liberation.

I think part of some of the work that I'm doing is coming to Seattle to talk about the Tyranny of the Now both in the pulpit and both on a panel with my colleagues to really try to connect the dots for people that if this is fear and anxiety that, as a society, we are embodying, what are the pragmatic and the practical steps to take to really live out a more liberatory vision of what we can be together in community?

That is hard work, that is slow work. I feel like you're doing some of that work with your clients. I am certainly doing some of it as I do spiritual direction with people and engage in one-on-one conversations. But my hope is that we can have a larger conversation around fear and anxiety and the complicated nature of those things, because I think that fear and anxiety, for Kierkegaard at least, was connected to a deep awareness of one's freedom. I'm wondering if we have this deep awareness of our freedom in the world, how is that also complicating our notion of living with fear and anxiety in this current political moment?

Matthias: That's so interesting. You're seeing Kierkegaard connected this sense of freedom to ... Did a higher sense of freedom go alongside a higher sense of fear and anxiety, or were they inversely...?

Dr. Robyn: Yeah, I mean the heightened awareness of freedom. It produced the existential angst that then gets lived out as fear and anxiety. I mean I think he's right. I think there's something to a deep self-awareness of freedom that then shows up as folds of fear and anxiety. I think the question I have is because we are living in what I'm calling the tyranny of the now, how do we face oppressive structures that are death-bringing to all of us? How do we face those, not with the existential angst of what freedom can bring, but with the vision toward the liberating horizon that we can't yet put into words?

On some level, it's like the eschatological vision of the beloved community. We don't really know what it looks like, but we have a sense that it may look like X or it may look like Y. How can we do that work without perpetuating the fear and anxiety that is often at the root of us trying to dismantle oppressive structures?

Matthias: That is such a big question. I'm thinking about this fear and anxiety, and I think you're right. I think no matter where we are in society, I feel like if anyone's even remotely paying attention, there's that sense of fear and anxiety. What is going on? Where are we moving? As oppression has become more and more maybe obvious, I mean it's always been there, but as it gets in our faces more, or maybe for some people, in our faces more, how do we work to dismantle those? I mean that's what you're asking. I guess do you have ideas around that? What is-

Dr. Robyn: I mean it's such a big question, right? I think this is why I often have a complicated relationship to faith and spirituality and religion is because I just keep bringing questions to the table. I'm trying to live the questions, and I'm hoping that the embodied work, the embodied life of living the questions helps us get a little bit closer to the answers.

I don't have any hard and fast answers, but I'm a person of deep, deep hope. I know that there are lots of people who don't have hope in the system. I'm not saying I have hope in the system, but I have hope that humanity, that you and I, will learn how to be human again with one another, and that that shift in relationality will help animate ... Not fear and anxiety, which we are embodying now, but will help animate a deep sense of togetherness in community that then lays a foundation for collective liberation.

I think that maybe one of my answers would be we need to learn to be human again with one another. We need to lean in to building a togetherness in community. We have worked really hard to build community, we've worked really hard to build capacity in our organizing, but have we actually curated a togetherness in community?

If we can do that work, I'm wondering if the fear and anxiety that we all seem to live with and that impacts us, I wonder if that will help mitigate ... If we can learn to be human with one another, if we can learn to build togetherness in community, will that help mitigate our fear and anxiety and actually help us live into a restorative, liberative reality where we don't polarize the race conversation to black and white, that makes latinx people indifferent, but that we bring together a deep richness of what it means to be a humanity with one another and weave together this togetherness? That's one of my answers. I tend to be an idealistic person that hopes against all hope. I find myself curious of is this possible?

Matthias: Yeah. I'm hearing this. I'm hearing relationality, humanity, togetherness, community, this real sense of people coming together and truly coming together. I think this is bringing me back to our last conversation where I think we were talking about radical flourishing and particularity and how all of those things have to ... There has to be space for the particular in the midst of the communal.

I think I'm curious about ... My mind is going into a lot of different directions, but this even makes sense from a psychological perspective of thinking about fear, anxiety, a lot of those things that we use ... Those are feelings that oftentimes we self-medicate and we'll use all sorts of things to try to fill. When we look at so many addiction cycles, so many of those stem from a lack of connection with other people, a lack of being able to see humanity. I think those things tie hand-in-hand of what does it look like to come together.

Dr. Robyn: Yeah. I mean I'll go back to my earlier comment about we are failing to be human with one another, we don't have a togetherness in community. The work around shifting relationality and enacting a deep sense of radical flourishing, I think it starts with ourselves and it starts with us asking the hard questions about who we are and how do we know.

I have done this workshop in various places and really asking the hard questions: who am I and how do I know? Then how do I take that information and then create a relationship, a friendship or a comradeship or something, some sort of relationship, from that information of who am I and how do I know? How do we begin to chart a new liberative human relationality from the place of the 'I' that is connected to the 'we'. That is critical work and that is also slow work, and then it's for the long game.

Matthias: If I'm hearing you well, it sounds like the first step is to come into a deep relationship with our own selves and our own stories and particularity and ... Not to overuse that word, but that relationship comes first in order to be able to enter into a communal relationship. Am I hearing that right?

Dr. Robyn: I think for many of us, we don't know our own stories. Figuring out how do we narrate our own stories, how do we love our self into our story, how do we be reconciled in our own story, that is deep, deep work that is real slow.

Matthias: How do we love ourselves into our stories?

Dr. Robyn: Yeah.

Matthias: That's beautiful language around that. Could you maybe talk about that process a little bit? It sounds like that's a journey you've maybe been on a little bit.

Dr. Robyn: Yeah. I mean I moved back to the south last year, and have really been charting my journey around getting to know who I am and where do I come from and figuring out what are the roots? What are the roots of my story? How have the roots been estranged from the now? How can I suture the roots back together? How can I really love myself into the story by being grounded in love of myself, in love of my story, and where I come from? How can that ethical orientation to one's self that is for ... I'm for the deep liberation of my people. How can that ethical orientation to self and other help propel me into the deeper work of reimagining our more horizon and reimagining our theology in the public square and reimagining our activism that, at root, is about revolution and contours of love, lovemaking? How do we make love with our self and with each other so that we can all get free?

Matthias: I noticed on your Facebook page recently you've been talking a lot about embodiment as being something that you're working on and working into, and that movement out of our heads and into our bodies. I'm curious if you can maybe talk about how embodiment might tie into all of this as well.

Dr. Robyn: Yeah. I mean I think that ... 2017 was the year of getting into my body. For those who don't know, I have really lived in academia since I started college. I have a PhD in Constructive Philosophical Theology and Ethics and really came out of my PhD program as a thinking machine. What that means is that my body was subordinated to my mind, and I was severely disconnected. Last year was the year of the body. This year, I'm continuing that, the year of the body, and slow living.

What I'm trying to do is I'm trying to body my feelings. Someone offered me that phrase, and I was like, "Yes, that is brilliant." I'm trying to body my feelings. When I think about embodiment, I'm thinking about how do I do the deep integrative work of thinking, of feeling, and of heart work that helps animate a becoming being that connects with both theory and action? That work of bodying my feelings, I think, is actually the deep translation work of living theory into action. That work is like the deep embodiment work of reimagining, reimagining embodiments from a queer standpoint that holds together both thinking and feeling in deep ways.

I really actually like the term "enfleshment" over embodiment because I think flesh, flesh is the largest organ that we have, and it's porous. It takes in stimuli and it takes in liquid, et cetera. Our flesh is constantly absorbing. What does it mean to actually absorb our self and the world around us in a way that helps us all get free? That's, I think, what I'm trying to get at.

Matthias: What I'm thinking about is as we talk about fear and anxiety and bodies, those are sensations that ... I think both fear and anxiety are very somatic sensations. We feel them deep in our bodies when they're with us. I guess I'm wondering as you've done this work of really trying to enflesh and get into your body, have you noticed a shift in your own fear and anxiety, or do you have a different relationship with it?

Dr. Robyn: Yeah. I mean I feel like my motto for the past two years has been trying to help the movement at large learn how to take siestas. I think that the literal act of laying down, putting my on do not disturb, of closing my eyes, and of coming to a standstill, finding the peace within the chaotic moment ... There's always going to be email, there's always going to be text messages, there's always going to be social media, and for a minute, at least for an hour for me, for an hour, I unplug.

That practice of unplugging, the deep intentional work of unplugging, of taking a siesta, has radically shifted how I think about who I am. It's radically shifted how much anxiety I bring to the work. I think it's also helped me learn how to be both compassionate with myself and that sometimes there's not enough time in the day to get everything done, and that's okay. I've learned how to have compassion on myself and I've learned how to have compassion on others. That has really come from taking a siesta.

This year, not only is this year the year of getting into my body, embodying my feelings, but this year's theme is slow living. How do I really do the deep intentional work to build traction to really live into the work of what it means to take a siesta and really hold that space? I mean it's really revolutionized my relationship to the fear and anxiety and to the work. I stay very busy.

What I want so bad for folks is I want us to be free from the fear and anxiety that animates how we are in the world. Many of us live with PTSD and hypervigilance that will never go away, but my deep invitation to folks is to learn how to hold space for yourself ... For me, that's the siesta ... and then embody life from that place. I don't know if that makes sense to you.

Matthias: Yeah. I mean it does. As you were talking, I'm getting these ideas of talking about the tyranny of the now and fear and anxiety. I think oftentimes those feelings make us feel like we have to keep doing more. We always have to do more, we always have to keep going. As you're talking about siesta, even the concept of Sabbath came to mind, of very intentional breaks that are built-in in a rhythm and consistent way. That's vastly different from feeling like we have to keep going and keep piling. It sounds like a very different way of living.

Dr. Robyn: Yeah. I mean I'm trying to live differently in a world of fast-paced production that constantly demands my investment in the work. I think if we capitulate to neoliberal capitalism, we'd actually don't do the deep relational work. It's the deep relational work that I am trying to do both as a theologian in Ephesus and help us reimagine how do we think about ...

I mean I am trying to help people reimagine how we think about our relationship to the divine, to God, however you want to name that, because I think there's been a religion imposed on us. We've been colonized. Our minds, our spirits, our hearts have been colonized. This is part of the Tyranny. It shows up in our policies, it shows up in our politics, it shows up all over our government. How do I help people reimagine their relationship with their selves and spirit or divine? Some of that is the slow work of getting to know your story and learning how to be compassionate with yourself, which for me has been the siesta and. It very much is a Sabbath, like how do we hold Sabbath? How do we create and curate the practice of Sabbath? What does that look like?

One of the things that I am doing in community is developing a sustainable relationship with food, for example. Believe it or not, it's hard for me to eat three meals a day. Why? Because I'm so busy, and that's impacting me, that's harming me. How do I actually build in social practices that help me care for my body, my spirit, and my mind and my heart? How do I do that in ways that will help me live out a more robust theology and ethics that focuses or hinges on collective liberation?

Matthias: The word "care" came to mind and "care-full". It sounds like a very intentional effort to bring care into your relationships with yourself, with how we consume, with how we work with other people. It's a care-filled step.

Dr. Robyn: Yeah. I mean I think that we are not socialized to be careful with people, or with ourselves. As much as I try, as hard as I try to name what I can do and what I can't do, this is boundary-setting ... And Brené Brown does a great thing around this ... saying what you can and can't do is our work right now.

If we can figure out what we can and can't do, if we can figure out how to draw boundaries both in relationships and in organizing, we can maybe figure out how to both care for ourselves and care for others and be careful with ourselves and be careful with others. But without that, I mean that's deep relational work, but really we're socialized into the transactional relating that has no regard for our self or the other. I think that's our work today. It's our work today in the Tyranny of the Now.

Matthias: Yeah. As I'm digesting all of this, you paint this picture of this idea of a way forward towards collective liberation deals very much with slowing down, tuning into ourselves, tuning into other people, and focusing in on togetherness, community, humanity, those words that you've said. That's the way forward. I'm curious, you talked about a theology of collective liberation and then you've used the idea of love several times. Could you talk more a little bit about that from maybe a theological perspective?

Dr. Robyn: Yeah. I mean so much of our work right now is the work of love, which, in many respects ... Kierkegaard wrote a book on this. I'm not a Kierkegaard scholar, and so I don't want to go down that road, but what I do want to say is that lovemaking in the Tyranny of the Now, finding the folds of love and care, affection, and intimacy, which doesn't necessarily have to be romantic, but loving our self and loving our neighbor is, I think, a first order act when it comes to theology and ethics, because loving our self and loving our neighbor is a direct reflection of our ability to be engaged with the source of all things or God or the divine.

It's something like curating the garden of our life. It goes to how do we tend to the roots of our own self? I mean I said this earlier, if we don't know how to love ourselves into our story, we often don't know how to love ourselves in relationship to other people, and so what happens is our relationships become transactional, and we often perpetuate a politics of disposability over against the deep relational work that needs to be done.

I think loving in revolutionary ways is, in some part, the careful negotiation of curating heart space with people that isn't reduced to romantic love. It's reimagining friendship as a primary orientation to be in the world. I think it's something that latinx people do really well. Friendship for latinx people is taken very seriously. In many respects, the comrades that people have throughout Latin America, those relationships fortify and animate the work in the world.

I think, in this country, we have not taught each other how to be friends well. We don't know how to do friendship. As a result, we don't know how to love. If we don't know how to love, then we actually don't know how to be connected to our self, to our neighbor, or to a divine source of all that is. We are pressed upon at every side in this tyranny of the now. We often find ourselves having to capitulate to the logic of dominance or the logic of white supremacy at the expense of loving ourselves and our neighbor, and figuring out how to suture those roots and suture the relationships, not put a Band-Aid on it but really do the careful healing work is the deep embodied, enfolded practice of loving, I think.

Matthias: It's interesting that you mentioned the work of Brené Brown, because I think as you talk about love, a quote from her came to mind of ... She says in her research we cannot love other people more than we love ourselves, and we cannot have compassion for other people more than we have compassion for ourselves. There will always be a breakdown at the point of our ability to do that for ourselves.

That's so interesting because I think so often we think, "Oh, I can love other people better," like, "I'm so much better at loving other people than loving myself," but when it really comes right down to it, that's not actually true.

Dr. Robyn: That's not true, yeah. I mean our work is to love, and that love shows up in lots of different ways. Sometimes it means sitting down for tea with people and sometimes it means learning when to give people their space. Both are actions of love. It's the hard work. It's the hard work of becoming, it's the hard work of learning to be human in the world and learning how to be human with others.

Matthias: Yeah, which is so hard.

Dr. Robyn: Yeah, yeah.

Matthias: It requires so much of us.

Dr. Robyn: Yeah. There's no easy answer. I mean our conversation can help animate a conversation at best. It's not going to solve the problem because this is millennia of work that needs to be done, repair work. This is why reparation is so important. How do we do the deep reparative work in humanity? How do we start that work now and not wait? We can't wait for our political regime to change. I mean we can't wait for the police to stop executing black and brown people.

We can't wait for that. We need to begin the shift, do the internal shift in our self, and do the deep shift in community. I think shifting that, that's a paradigm shift around relationality, and I think it helps lay some seed work, some seeds, for building a togetherness in community. I may not see it in my lifetime, but I can sure as hell begin to deeply commit to this work of loving myself into my story so that I can love in the world or love in action in the world.

Matthias: Yeah. I get this sense of great spaciousness in this vision and within you, within this conversation. There's something really wide in it that is beautiful.

Dr. Robyn: Yeah. I mean there's something that comes to my mind that really, I think, is interesting here. In the tradition of theology, Thomas Aquinas recovered Aristotle's philosophy. There were three things that Aristotle talked about, and that they are called the three transcendentals: truth, beauty, and goodness. There's something about those three things, those ideas.

I really believe ideas can change the world. If we begin to live as if those three transcendentals were actually eminent practices in this world, we might see a revolution

of love, we might see a revolution of change, we might see a revolution of bringing collective liberation to the fore. But as long as we relegate ideas to just ideas, then we're actually not going to do the deep relational work that I think this moment in time is calling us to do.

Matthias: It's so interesting. My mind is going to a class I took in seminary called Beauty Brokenness and the Cross. It was all about looking specifically at art and beauty and the ways that it can be used to do transformative theology in the world. But that idea of beauty, I think, is so often overlooked. What is beautiful?

Dr. Robyn: Yeah. I mean the old adage is beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but what happens when the beholder is the dominant form of society that actually demonizes the minoritized? How do we reimagine beauty? What about wounded beauty, wounded beauty? What about beauty that helps animate deeper contours of love and devotion. What about the fragrance of humanity that helps us reimagine beauty? I mean these are just questions that I have, and I don't have any answers.

Beauty is something that can help enact radical social change. I think when we begin to tie together beauty to truth and goodness, to me, it's an ethical orientation. When we allow for truth, beauty, and goodness to materialize on a plane of eminence, we begin to see not only the politics of radical difference, but this horizon of radical flourishing. I think that's our work in this moment.

Matthias: Well, we're out of time. It's always such a pleasure to sit down with you. To wrap up, is there anything else you want to share with us?

Dr. Robyn: I mean I just want to say I love hanging out with you. I love the fact that I'm headed to Seattle to hang out with your people up there. I'm real excited to see both how our people in the LGBTQ community engages with this question of fear and anxiety, and also to figure out how do we animate truth, beauty, and goodness on the ground.

Matthias: Well, I'm certainly looking forward to seeing you.

Dr. Robyn: Yes.

Matthias: Thank you so, so much, Dr. Robyn.

Dr. Robyn: So good to be here. Thanks so much.

Matthias: You can keep up with Dr. Robyn's work by checking out their website over at iRobyn.com. If you're not near Seattle, check out their schedule on the website. Dr. Robyn travels extensively and does work all over the world. They might be near you soon. They also have Twitter and Instagram, @iRobyn.

Queerology is on Twitter and Instagram, @queerologypod, or you can tweet me directly, @matthiasroberts. Queerology is produced with support from Natalie England, Sean McDorman, Tim Schrader, and 45 other Patreon supporters. To find out how you

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