

Forgive: The new practice and mantra for Black Men
HOST | Tamara Hamilton
GUEST | Ulysses 'Butch' Slaughter

Tamara:

Well Ulysses, thank you so much for joining us today. When I found out that you were my guest today I was very excited, and I was excited because I have your book. The book is entitled *Forgive: The new mantra and practice for Black Men*. Before we talk a little bit about the book, Ulysses, tell the audience what you would like them to know about you and who you are.

Ulysses:

Well, I'd like for them to know that I am a practitioner in the practice that I call forgiving. And in everything that I do, Tamara, is about forgiving and reconciliation. And I distinguish forgiving from reconciliation, and I can talk more about that, but I'm a father. I should mention that. I'm a father of six wonderful children. And a Navy veteran and I'm a man who believes that forgiving is the ultimate practice.

Tamara:

Wow. Thank you so much. I'm glad I asked that question because you can help us understand much better who you are and why forgiveness is so important. Can you tell us how you came to have a central focus on forgiveness?

Ulysses:

My central focus begins back on June 25, 1978, and probably some years before that. We're coming up on the 40th anniversary, this year's the 40th anniversary of the passing of my mother Clarice Slaughter. At the age of 12, growing up in Chicago, I listened as my father shot and killed my mother. I was in the apartment when it happened. I wound up being the lead witness in the criminal trial against my father and literally had to step over my mother's body to get out of my room the morning that she was shot and killed. And Tamara, I use the term "killed" just to make a connection with people who understand that kind of language. I always tell people that my mother is alive and well and one of the reasons why I'm here today is because she is alive and well. Her messages to me have made me the man that I am.

When I was 12, it was a profound awakening for me and oftentimes I think of that moment and I can see it in my mind's eye right now. I think of that moment where I was confronted with a visual that always seemed to be the logical conclusion. It seemed that it would be the logical conclusion to years of domestic violence that I witnessed as a child in our home. And so coming into June 25, 1978, I have to say I was not as shocked that my mother would wind up being shot and killed. What was more shocking to me was that 33 years later that I would get an opportunity to forgive my father was more shocking than what actually happened on June 25, 1978. The only way that I could change that was to create a powerful counterbalance to that moment, and forgiving became that counterbalance.

Tamara:

I would just like to take a little moment to hold a space in honor of your mother, in a brief moment of silence, because it is the 40th anniversary and because she is Clarice Slaughter, the woman who

always taught you to be better. So I'm going to have our listeners also pause for just a few seconds as we honor your mother.

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Thank you everyone around the world who took time to honor Clarice Slaughter. So when a young person witnesses such a horrific tragedy, you use the word madness, I know sadness is profound. Tell us, what did you have to unlearn about the reaction to what happened to you and what was happening to you as you say for years as a witness to domestic violence and to have your mother be killed in your home while you were there. What did you have to unlearn in order to move towards forgiveness?

Ulysses:

I'm really, I like the way that we're using the word "unlearn" right now, because Tamara in many ways forgiving is about unlearning.

Ulysses:

Forgiving is about transcending. Transcending the kind of every day common usual approaches, social approaches to what we see as infractions. To what we see as pain. So it was important for me to unlearn forgive those kind of preset ideas in the things that I had been taught about what the normal response should be to something like that. You know, we're brought up in a way that says, if this happens, this is the way you should respond to it. If that happens, this is the way you should respond to it. And the response, oftentimes is a trap. So you have what we would call a tragedy and then you have the trap. The potential trap that is the response. And the tragedy is not transformed through a trap.

And so it became important for me to ask myself, "What do I want?" If I could have it my way, "What do I want?" There was no personal choice and no freedom in anyone telling me what I had to do. So then people would say to me, "You're going to have to forgive your father at some point." And then when I forgave my father, Tamara, some of the same people who told me I had to forgive my father were like, "How in the world could you forgive him for that?"

And so what this left me with was that this was a personal choice and that that choice, the choice that I made was the liberation factor for me. That is where my freedom lie, is in the choice to decide how I was going to be and that I did not have to deal with my father through a committee of people. We talk about justice, and I think that justice is a very intimate thing. And my father and I, the work that my father and I were able to do in the 18 months between us reconnecting and his passing away, the work that we were able to do, represented the justice.

It was a cosmic kind of justice. It was not the kind of justice that people, you know, find in a court. People often ask me, "How long did your father spend in jail?" Well my father spent 39 months in prison. And they go, "Wow, 39 months, how could that happen?" And, "How come he didn't get more time?" And there're a lot of reasons I now understand why he did not get more time. But in the end, it didn't matter how much time he did. It didn't matter how much time he did in court, because that was not going to be the healing factor in the reconciliation factor for us anyway.

And there were times in the 30 year period of time between my mother's death and confronting my father, there were many times in there where I was thinking that I had forgiven him and every

time one of my six children was born, and my mother was not there to see them, it dawned on me that, no, I actually hadn't forgiven my father. So there was a lot of back and forth for me in this process.

Tamara:

You mentioned some powerful phrases here Ulysses. A "committee of people." Say more about how other people can get into our heads and block forgiveness?

Ulysses:

I remember as a 12, 13 year old, being told by various people to put him away. They were saying this to me as a 12, and a 13 year old, "Put him away." Meaning my father, "Get up on that stand and do what you gotta do to put him away." And I felt obligated to that collective voice that said, "We are in pain, he hurt us, put him away."

And so me, as a 12, 13 year old, trying to choose sides in some way and be with the living, be on the side of the living, be on the side of that collective, that was a lot of pressure.

Tamara:

I can understand that coming from a large family myself, when there have sometimes been conflict. I'm wondering, as it comes to trauma, and generational trauma, was there any connection with generational trauma in terms of passing on what happened to you, to your children, that you felt a need to forgive? Can you say something about the critical nature of generational trauma?

Ulysses:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I want to speak to trauma individually and I want to speak to that generational impact as well but I'll start with the generational impact. For years I thought that it was my destiny. You know, I thought that it was my duty to kill my father. I felt like if, if my father could do what he did to my mother and that if I couldn't save her as her oldest boy, her oldest son, that I needed to take out revenge on my father. I was clear about that. There were moments where it was just like, in my mind it was just a matter of time before it happened.

And so when I went to his door on December 19, 2010, I just knew that that's what was going to happen. And I felt like, again I had an obligation there. And then I remember thinking, "If I do that, if I should strike my father down, how will that impact my children? If I carry this forth, how will that impact my children." And I remembered how I felt as I watched my father being handcuffed and taken away. I remember watching my mother lie there on the floor motionless. I remember the paramedics taking her away, I remember that. And I remember the pain and I think, "Is that what I want for my children? Are those the images, those the memories that I want for them?" And the answer was, no.

I think trauma is an opening to an opportunity for us to be more. I'm one of those people who believes that God has not given me more than I can handle. And so I won't speak for anyone else.

Ulysses:

Other people may view it differently. But God actually didn't give me more than I can handle. There's a song that I love, it's by Stevie Wonder, I actually talk about this song in my book. You know, Stevie Wonder has a song called, As. And one of the lines in it-

Tamara:

Yes.

Ulysses:

Yeah. He says "We all know sometimes life's hates and troubles. Can make you wish you were born in another time and space. But you can bet your life and that twice its double. That God knew exactly where He wanted you to be placed." Now there were times-

Tamara:

Oh, thank you so much for that! That is a song that is the song my husband and I have lived with for 40 years of our marriage. That's our theme song.

Ulysses:

Is that right? All right.

Ulysses:

I used to scream, and hate, and cry. God why? And as I sit here talking to you today now, I think, "Oh, okay." There was an opportunity here for us to show, for me to represent a possibility for people to take a look at. There are a lot of possibilities out there and God said, "Hey, how about this, would you like this mission right here?" And this is the way that I see it. And I decided, "Hey, you know what. I do. I want this." You know, sign me up.

Tamara:

That's powerful. That is powerful.

Tamara:

Ulysses, your mother died at the hand of a gun or from a gun in your father's hand and we've just recently been traumatized by all of these young people being killed by guns. And over the weekend there was the March for Our Lives, here in Washington DC. What can we share, what can you share in today's world about guns and how guns and collective trauma is being weighed against our children and against all of us? It's been 20 years since Columbine and we're still having to face the tragedy of guns.

Ulysses:

Right, right. When I think of the day that my mother was shot, I can still sometimes hear those two bullets and they used to really hurt me, used to hurt me to think about that ringing in my ear. That ringing in my ear is now more of a call to action. The thing that I see in our use of guns, my father's use of guns and people's use of guns, there's this perverted way that we view guns as power. And I think guns actually represent a significant depth of fear that we have.

Ulysses:

We really should start to view guns as fear. As a measure of our fear and not a measure of our power at all. And so guns alienate people from one another. Guns separate people from one another. The more we have, the more separation we have. And I can't speak, I don't want to speak to lawmakers, I'm speaking to individuals who either have guns or are thinking about getting guns. I ask what is it that you fear?

I think each one of us can take some responsibility for the way guns show up in our world. Each one of us can do something about that. The owners can do something about that. The people who create them can do something about that. Why do we keep creating fear in this kind of way.

Tamara:

Yes. That is why I asked about the generational trauma because I know that even when we think about slavery, slavery is generational trauma. There are things that we do that we don't even realize that we're doing because we are the descendants of enslaved people. And so there has to be some attention to what happens to pain that is not grieved.

Ulysses:

I think we are living on autopilot too often as it relates to what we're calling trauma. And until we pay attention, until we confront what it is that where we have come from, until we actually take a look at it, it just kind of lives silently within us.

Tamara:

Yes.

Ulysses:

I think bringing it up and looking at it. It's just like you talked about the wound, and the bandage. When we pay attention to it, then we can work with it. When we ignore it, then it actually is just kind of running rampant without any direction and there's a way that we can use these experiences for our advancement. We don't have to be torn down by them. We can actually use trauma for our benefit instead of being used by trauma for more trauma.

Tamara:

And with what's happening with Black men today, the hurt? I mean, I'm married to Vietnam veteran who suffers from PTSD, who cannot forgive his sisters.

Tamara:

For so many family, you know, we all have this family stuff. And this family stuff keeps cousins from being friends. It keeps brothers and sisters from being able to have Thanksgiving dinner together.

And it gets passed on to children. And so I hadn't realized what a big deal forgiveness was until I confronted it in myself. I did a course at church called, Discovering Your Spiritual Gifts. I did it in 2012 when I retired. And I didn't really know what my gifts were and then I took this 164 question assessment and once it came back and I tallied everything one of my top five spiritual gifts was mercy. And I really had to sit with that because mercy is forgiveness. I never realized it was spiritual gift.

Ulysses:

I think that sometimes we feel like we're alone in what we've experienced. And there is always a uniqueness about what we've experienced. But there's also similarities in what we've experienced when it comes to things that create rage within us. And one of the things that helped me was working with other people, being a champion for other people, so that I didn't become so self-consumed, so self-absorbed that I forgot that there was a world outside of me and if it meant that much to me, if this issue was that big of a deal to me, can I help other people. And I think that that's

again where I began to see a shift and where other people can begin to see a shift because then you begin to get new information and new messages about similar experiences and I think some kind of magic happens when you begin to serve other people.

Something opens up and you realize you're not alone and when you realize you're not alone, you realize that there's something that can help to resolve the challenge 'cause you're not alone. And I would certainly reach out to people if I was still in that state. I would reach out to people who have experienced something like what I've experienced. To see what they might be able to offer. To look for resources and I'm not necessarily talking about a therapist. I'm talking about people who have experienced something and they've gotten through it.

Ulysses:

Now, now when my children go back and look at pictures at the one time they had an opportunity to spend with their grandfather and they're smiling in the pictures with the same man who shot my mother, it just, it speaks volumes to the possibilities. And I want my children to be able to have that as a legacy. Not the one that would have had me handcuffed and taken away. And then them asking the questions that I used to ask. "Well, what do I have to do. Do I have to do something wrong now?" The answer is no. I can love even more than I've ever loved before.

Tamara:

Wow. You are giving me goosebumps because there are so many people walking around with open wounds related to so many things and you have taken trauma and use it as a catalyst to create opportunities and I'd like us now to look at what you are doing in the service of Black men and forgiveness? I know you have iForgive University. I know you're doing coaching. You do workshops. Talk to us a little bit about the book and how you focus on the new mantra and practice for Black men.

Ulysses:

There were many times where people would ask me, "How did you do it? How did you forgive your father?" And there were times where I couldn't answer that question. I knew it wasn't just me. I knew it wasn't like, you know just, Ulysses "Butch" Slaughter did this. It was Stevie Wonder's song, As. It was Gil Scott-Heron. It was Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. It was Les Brown and Ed Bradley. It was my uncle. It was all of these people whose songs I could sing, whose poetry I could recite. That the people that talked to me in various ways and never, not always directly about forgiving, but they were dropping messages on me.

And so these things were coming from Black men.

James Baldwin, is one of the people that I talk about in this book. I remember reading *The Fire Next Time*. I remember reading some of his other work. I remember Kahlil Gibran, I remember Jesus. I remember. When I started to put these messages together I realized that, "Yeah, this is how." Anybody ever ask me how, I'm gonna tell them to "Go back and look at the messages that you were given." The way I went back and looked at the messages. Put those messages together and there is your map and your code for revolution and for transformation.

Tamara:

Well, you have really personified and lived those words that your mother gave to you. I remember reading in your book that you said she always said to you and you mentioned it today, "To be better." And not only are you being better, you're helping other people to be better.

Ulysses:

I would say that one of the things that I had to discover was that I truly had purpose in this world and that the greatest purpose that I had was the purpose to love and that regardless of what happened, the things that happened is that nothing, nothing could overcome love. Love can overcome everything but nothing can overcome love.

Ulysses:

And so I want to respect that there is no one size fits all forgiveness. There is no one size fits all reconciliation. Some people may never get to where they want to get to but, trying, if that's what you want. If you want reconciliation, if you want personal liberation, then again as James Baldwin said, "Not everything that is confronted, can be overcome, but you can't overcome anything, until it's confronted." And I confronted myself. I confronted my father. And I'm just suggesting that people actually take a good look. Take a good look at what it is that you're wanting to confront. Don't look away from it. Don't look away from it. Look at it. Be with it. Work with it. And believe in yourself. Believe in your capacity to love. Believe in your power to love.

I'm talking love as an incredible force of power. I'm talking about transformation as love. And love as transformation, as change. Things are stuck mostly in our minds. They are not stuck in the world. They are stuck in our minds and if we can unstick our minds, the world will open up to us.

Tamara:

Well what I take away from this Ulysses, is that powerful word, love. That love does conquer all. And if we wanted to give, even though it's hard, we've got to try. I want to share with you one of my favorite quotes by Rumi, and I think it's very appropriate for what you've told and shared with us today. And Rumi says, "Don't turn away, keep your gaze on the bandaged place. That's where the light enters you."

And I'll repeat that, "Don't turn away, keep your gaze on the bandaged place. That's where the light enters you."

Ulysses:

I love that so much it reminds me of the warrior's wound.

Tamara:

Yes.

Ulysses:

That is absolutely where the light enters, thank you for that.

Tamara:

And just in closing is there anything that's on your nightstand right now that you're reading, that you could share with us to keep us growing and knowing that it is possible to forgive?

Ulysses:

Well of course my book is on my nightstand. I actually read it every day. It's a practice book. It's not just a, it's not a novel. It is something that I look at every day that reminds me of the men, the Black men in particular, who have contributed to who I am. It's my way of honoring them. I can read some of their stuff over and over again.

The other thing that's on my nightstand constantly is a book called, The Door of Everything by Ruby Nelson. It's a wonderful book that is channeled, it is channeled through a woman named Ruby Nelson, and just speaks to the cosmic possibilities of forgiving and of infinite possibilities to love in this world. Again it's called, The Door of Everything.

Tamara:
By Ruby Nelson.

Ulysses:
Yes.

Tamara:
And I will confess the reason why I know your book so well because it's on my nightstand. I have a husband and I have three sons. And with Father's day coming up, all our listeners out there, it would be a beautiful, beautiful gift. How can people get in touch with you if they want to know more?

Ulysses:
Go to my website, it is my name ulyssesbutchslaughter.com, again it's ulyssesbutchslaughter.com. You asked me early on about my name and I just despised the name Ulysses for a very long time because it was my father's name as well. Butch is a nickname of mine. And so it's ulyssesbutchslaughter.com and I embrace that name deeply.

Tamara:
Wow. That's a whole new show, Ulysses. Thank you so much. It has been my honor and my pleasure to meet your mother through you. To meet the energy and the spirit of Clarice Slaughter through you, her son.

Ulysses:
Thank you.