

# WYF\_Ep87\_BestOf\_MarkCharles

**Rasool Berry:** [00:00:00] Hey y'all, it's Rasool Berry. Thanks for joining me on this special *Best of Where Ya From?* episode. We went back and selected some of our favorite conversations to share with you so that no matter when you started listening to *Where Ya From?*, you could check them out. Today, I want to share our episode with Mark Charles from season one of *Where Ya From?*.

I still remember the first time I heard Mark Charles speak about American history from his perspective as a Native American Christian. I was riveted in my seat. His bold presentations about American history, and his gracious vision for what can still be, left an unforgettable impression. Mark is a powerful and challenging speaker who taught me so much about the Native American experience, and trauma, and hope. Shout out to Mark who also has told me that he continues to share this episode as an introduction to his work. Thanks for listening and enjoy this best of episode of *Where Ya From?* [00:01:00] with Mark Charles.

**Mark Charles:** That community had no running water and no electricity. And so we move there completely prepared and ready to live off the grid, right? We're prepared to use the outhouse 50 yards away from the hogan. We're prepared to cook over a camp stove or an open fire. We're prepared to live by candlelight. We're prepared to haul our water. What we weren't prepared for was the intense marginalization of the native community. And the only way I can describe it is it felt like we dropped off the face of the earth.

**Daniel Ryan Day:** This is *Where Ya From?*, a podcast for those who believe it's important to stop and listen before we speak. Join us as we ask another Christian thought leaders, "Where are you from?", and discover how their life experiences and expertise, even if we may disagree with something they say, offer us an important perspective that's worth thinking about.

**Rasool Berry:** Welcome to *Where Ya From?*. I'm Rasool Berry. [00:02:00] When have you stopped to think about the people that came before you? The family members who traveled to the place where you now live? Or the people who made memories in the house you currently live in? Or even the people that lived on the land that you now live on?

Well, that's part of where we're going to go today. Today we're talking to Navajo American Mark Charles about his life experiences. His own childhood inspired a passion for educating people about the pain and trauma Native Americans have been going through since the first European settlers came to America.

He is also the co-author of *Unsettling Truths*, as well as a journalist, blogger, and pastor. He grew up without realizing the full extent of the hardships that his family was facing, and the trauma of the Native Americans all around him. Let's dig into that as I ask Mark Charles, where you're from.

**Mark Charles:** Yá'át'ééh. Mark Charles yinishyé. Tsin bikee dine'é nishkí. Dóó tó'aheedlíinii bá shíshchíín. Tsin bikee' dine'é dashicheii. Dóó tódich'íi' nii dashináí.

In our Navajo culture, when we introduce ourselves, we always give our four clans. We're matrilineal as a people, and our identities come from our mother's mother. My mother's mother is American of Dutch heritage, and that's why I say. . . Loosely translated that means I'm from the Wooden Shoe people. My second clan, my father's mother, is Toa Higlini, which is the waters that flow together.

My third clan, my mother's father, is also Tsin P'kei Dinah. And then my fourth clan, my father's father, is Toa Dichitini, and that's the Bitter Water clan. It's one of the original clans of our Navajo people. We are living today in what's now known as Washington, D. C. I moved here with my family about five years ago from the Navajo Nation in the Four Corners area. And I want to acknowledge that the lands I'm on now are the traditional lands of the Piscataway. The Piscataway are the nation that they lived here. They hunted here. They fished here. They farmed here. They raised their [00:04:00] families here. They buried their dead here, and they are still here. I've had the honor of meeting some of the Piscataway. I've been blessed to be welcomed to these lands by the Piscataway. I am deeply humbled that I'm living on their lands, and I want to acknowledge them as the host people of these lands and thank them for their stewardship of it.

**Rasool Berry:** Hmm. Wow. There's so much there. And I have learned too. I did my little bit of my research. I am talking to you from what we know is Brooklyn, New York, home of the Canarsie people, the Lenape group in Manhattan. What's the significance of acknowledging that history in that full context?

**Mark Charles:** There's many reasons for it. The first is, it's protocol. It's the proper and the right way to do things. And second, there's so much about U.S. history that tries to erase any history before Columbus and colonization coming in. And so, I make it a point whenever I speak publicly, whether it's online or whether it's in person, to [00:05:00] try and do my research before I get to there. One of the sites I use most frequently is [native-land.ca](http://native-land.ca).

You can type in your address, your zip code. It will tell you the treaty signed in that area, the languages spoken, and the nations that were there originally. And I

use that usually as a place to start my research. And then I acknowledge the people who were there. This is important to, if nothing else, counteract everything we're told by the rest of society, which is these lands were empty.

You know, in the first sentence of the first chapter of our book, we point out that you cannot discover lands already inhabited. The fact that Christopher Columbus is identified in our history books, by our politicians and proclamations as the discoverer of America, it reveals the worldview, which is they viewed these lands as empty. They did not see us as human. I go out of my way to make sure that I acknowledge the people who were there [00:06:00] first, so that their history is not erased.

**Rasool Berry:** Wow. That's good. And that's something we're going to return to this idea of identity and land as we talk. But you also mentioned, not just a lamb, but you mentioned people that you represented, family members. And the wooden shoe people, I couldn't help but notice that, tell me a little bit more about your family and what was it like growing up?

**Mark Charles:** Yeah. So the wooden shoe people, the Dutch are known for their clumping. Their wooden shoes. And so sin means wood or sticks, but care means shoes. And the net means people. So when I say Simba kid, the net.

It's the people whose shoes are made out of sticks, are made out of wood. So I began using that and the history of even how my parents came together. The Navajo Nation and the Southwest has been the focal point of missions for a long time. [00:07:00] So in the early 1900s, all the way through 1970s, 80s and 90s, the government and churches ran boarding schools.

The purpose of these schools was to forcibly assimilate native peoples to Western European Christian culture. The stated goal was actually to kill the Indian to save the man. They, just like all the other boarding schools, they would take native children from their homes. They were punished for speaking their languages. They were punished for practicing their culture. The stories that I've heard personally of abuse, physical, mental, emotional, psychological, even sexual, that happened in these boarding schools is absolutely gut-wrenching. And the last of them didn't close until the late 70s and early 80s and even into the 90s.

My grandparents on my father's side were both boarding school survivors. My grandmother became a Christian in the boarding school. And the gospel that they were presented said that to become a Christian, you have to essentially [00:08:00] become white European. You have to let us kill the Indian to save the man.

You have to give up your language, give up your culture, give up your understanding of the sacred and embrace Western European American Christian culture. And so my grandparents, along with most indigenous Christians around the world, were colonized by the gospel. So they grew up, even though my grandparents spoke the language fluently, had grown up traditionally, they didn't teach the language or the culture to my father. So he didn't know what to teach to me.

**Rasool Berry:** Okay. Okay. So what was it like growing up? Like, in what ways did you have aspects of your culture that you were connected with and maybe aspects that you didn't?

**Mark Charles:** I grew up on this mission compound started by the Christian Reformed Church. It was called Rehoboth.

**Rasool Berry:** Okay.

**Mark Charles:** And my grandparents were actually serving as translators for the missionaries. But my father had come out of the Marines. He was actually back at Rehoboth as well. And he was helping doing some teaching in the school. [00:09:00] And my mother was, had grown up in Denver as a part of the Christian Reformed Church.

And she had gone to school for nursing. And she wanted to be a nurse in the mission field. And it was during that time that she met my father, and they began dating. And then she ended up staying, and they got married. And then I was born in 1970. I probably grew up the way most any average white American would grow up. With the same sort of teachings, the same Sunday school classes, the same, you know, even at that point, the school was transitioning from being a boarding school into a day school.

Okay, so I was there as a day school student. There were other students there as boarding school students. And learned later that frequently their experiences as boarding school students in my experience as day school student were vastly different. But yeah, I grew up. I mean, for all I knew, I was going to a private school, right? Not knowing the roots of what really that school had been [00:10:00] doing and what their goal was. Which was to essentially kill the Indian to save the man.

**Rasool Berry:** Yeah. When you look at your own, like growing up, who were the relatives that you connected with the most? And as you look at your current trajectory, it was like, yeah, I probably have a lot of them in me.

**Mark Charles:** Yeah. So my parents and my family, my sisters, my brother, very close. You know, we did a lot as a family together. I remember, you know, my father was a teacher, my mother was a nurse, but we never had much money. Like if you would have asked me when I was growing up, were you poor? I wouldn't have described my life as poor. My father taught at a school almost an hour to an hour and a half away. And so he was staying there for most of the week. And while he was gone, we would play games at home of how many days can we go without using electricity?

**Rasool Berry:** Ah, yo, I sound like where I grew up. Okay.

**Mark Charles:** And I'm like, wow, I thought this was a game. I didn't know it was because we couldn't afford to pay our [00:11:00] electric bill. You know? We would sleep as a family on the floor. We had a fireplace in our living room and we would sleep. I thought this was just the way we, we had fun in the winters. I didn't know it's because we couldn't afford to pay the heating bill.

And so just with my family, you know, my mom, my dad were very close. My brother. My brother passed away when I was a senior in high school, we were in a car accident. And I actually write about this a lot in our book on *Unsettling Truths*. And we never had this huge sibling rivalry, right? We always got along fairly well, but we were just getting to the point where we were probably becoming best friends when he died. And so his death was a huge loss for me.

**Rasool Berry:** Yeah.

**Mark Charles:** And so even my parents marriage, it wasn't until the late sixties. That biracial marriage even became legal in the U. S. at a federal level. And my parents got married, I think, in 67, 68. So they were one of [00:12:00] the first people in line, you could say, for a biracial marriage. And their marriage was hard on both sides of the family. My mother's side of the family were, you're marrying this native guy. And my father's husband, you're marrying this white woman. Like there was controversy on both sides. But I would say there was still this kind of understanding of the status quo was all Western European, right?

Because of the faith that was adopted, which was the Christian faith. And because the Christian faith in the area is highly colonized, right? So even though they had this intentionality, we didn't speak Navajo at home. My grandparents didn't even teach me Navajo. I didn't grow up with any of the culture, any of the ceremonies, any of those things. So I was very much shielded from that type of exposure into our traditional Navajo culture.



**Rasool Berry:** Oh, and so Christian doesn't just mean like what they believed. It sounds like you're saying [00:13:00] that it would tell more about them than just their particular beliefs or faith.

**Mark Charles:** Well, so again, if you were native and you were Christian, it meant you were very assimilated to Western European culture. So, none of the ceremonies, none of those traditions, the language wasn't mostly spoken in the home, all of these types of things. So, because of that, I didn't grow up understanding much of my culture at all. And I actually didn't grow up thinking there was a large divide or chasm.

Between the two cultures. I mean, I knew the history was bad. I didn't know how bad, but I knew it was bad. But my experience growing up was, well, things are much better now. So then when I graduated from high school and I went to school in LA, that's where I began getting exposed. And that's where I actually, A, began taking my faith a lot more seriously, but B, also began looking more at my own culture and what did it mean to be native. What did it [00:14:00] mean to be Navajo?

So I satisfied my foreign language requirement by actually studying Navajo at the University of New Mexico. I shaped a few courses through both the psych department and well as to the history department that allowed me to study Navajo culture and Navajo history. And then after graduating college, I went to work with this group at the university of New Mexico called Southwest Campus Christian Fellowship, which was a student ministry, much like CRU or much like InterVarsity, um, but it was specifically geared towards native students

**Rasool Berry:** Wow. So one of the things that I always am intrigued by in your story is, and even in spite of all the history, and we're going to get into that in a second, you still believe in Jesus, walk with him, like, you know what I mean? I have that. So where did that start? Looking back in your life, when did Jesus become a part of your story? And how did that continue?

**Mark Charles:** I would say it wasn't until I got to college where we actually, we went out and [00:15:00] we took food to people who didn't have homes. I remember we just spent one day trying to engage in conversation with people who were not like us. And I had never done that before, right? I had never thought, okay, Jesus said this. So that means I now go out and try to do something like this. And I would say that year, the difference in my faith is Jesus went from being my luggage to becoming my Lord. Prior to that, I had this sense of my life and my future of, okay, I have my plans and Jesus will come with me. He's in this nice box I have here and I can take him out.

I can show him around. I can talk about him, but I'm definitely the one going this way and I'm taking him with me. And it was in college, where I began wrestling with the fact that I actually want to be led by my faith. and I want to be led by the Spirit, and I want Jesus to lead me. And so, I would say that was the year [00:16:00] where my faith became much more foundational in not just how I live day to day, and not just being good, nor just being obedient. But you know, actually living out values of justice and of things like that.

It was in college where I went in and Jesus was my luggage. And I came out and he was my Lord.

**Rasool Berry:** Wow. That's a powerful word picture. And it's also something we have in common. I really began following Jesus my freshman year in college. And by my senior year was really when things really took off. And I feel like there was that sense of integration of faith and vocation, you know, like you said, going from luggage to Lord.

And one of the things that really did touch me in the book, and I think it set a powerful framework for how to think about some of the deeper issues that you get into, was the turning point you mentioned in your life of the experience you had with the loss of your [00:17:00] brother. Please, you know, tell us more about that.

**Mark Charles:** We traveled as a family to Denver for my grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary. And he was supposed to start his job after we returned from the trip. And he and I were traveling in our own car in my car, and my parents were ahead of us in their car. And we had a car accident between Albuquerque and Santa Fe and that car accident took my brother's life. I was the driver of the car. It was a single car accident. And I lose my memory before the accident. I lose it about an hour before the accident. I, now I had a massive head injury. And so the head injury explains my memory loss. But because of that, and because it was a single car accident, because no one was pressing charges. So there was never this, this conclusion of what happened, what caused the accident.

That was never concluded. And I actually had to wrestle and it took me five or six years probably to come [00:18:00] to a point where I could acknowledge the fact that I was the driver of the car. The accident most likely was the result of something either I did or didn't do. And as a result of that either action or inaction, my brother is now dead.

And one of the hardest parts during that period, because I remember after the accident, I would ask people what happened in the accident. You know, one of the ways my body coped with this tragic loss is I lose my memory an hour

before, and it comes back in segments, days and weeks later. So I never woke up to the shock, right, of, oh my gosh, my brother's dead.

It's like I woke up into a new world where suddenly I just didn't have a brother anymore. And it's, it's like just this new reality that you're, oh, this is new. When did this happen? Like what, what, you know, you kind of miss it.

**Rasool Berry:** Yeah. Like a detachment to it. Like. . .

**Mark Charles:** Absolutely. And as a result of that, I never [00:19:00] cried. This happened in October of my senior year of high school. And that whole year I didn't cry. And I kept asking my, my family members, people around me, When am I gonna cry? Like, when is it gonna emotionally just blow me over and I'm gonna just start weeping?

And, well, maybe, uh, when you go back to the accident site. So I went back to the accident site, nothing. Maybe when you see the damage to the car? I went and saw the car, nothing. Maybe at the first anniversary of the accident? That came and went, nothing. I knew something wasn't right, psychologically, but I didn't know how to make myself connect to it. And so I was looking for that experience, but at the same time, terrified of it.

The summer after my sophomore year in college, I had had a very difficult year that year as these emotions begin bubbling more to the surface. Like I couldn't be in denial of them as much anymore. And I actually took a quarter off of school so I could start going to a counselor. And that summer I was in a prayer [00:20:00] seminar.

And one of the leaders asked us, they said, who of you has something, something you're angry about, something you're mad about, some unresolved issue with another person that you need to forgive them for? And they said, we'd like to pray for you now, if there's any issues of unforgiveness that you want to bring before God or wrestle with.

So the moment they said that, my mind literally started racing. I'm like, I have to stand up, but I don't know why. And I go through all these relationships. Okay, friends, uh, you know, teachers, who have I offended? Who has something against me? And I, nothing that warranted standing up. And then suddenly I had this thought that had no emotion connected with it whatsoever.

But I had the thought of, I've never forgiven myself for being the driver of the car that claimed the life of my brother. So I stood up, and I felt like I [00:21:00]



was dragging this melon out of my gut, through my chest, and out of my mouth. And within maybe two minutes, I was just flat out on the floor, just weeping.

Again, this is almost three years after the accident, and I had not cried once since the accident. And this was the first time I actually was allowing all of that bottled up anger, emotion, frustration, fear. . .at myself, at the situation, at everything. First time I ever let it out. And it was a very both terrifying, healing, and beautiful moment. All kind of wrapped into one.

I had friends around me. who were holding me, praying for me, comforting me. I had a very deep [00:22:00] sense of my faith in that God was holding me and comforting me through that. And yet, I also had these very real emotions and memories that were terrifying. And that began the process of me coming to the point of actually being able to acknowledge some of what had happened.

And the challenge was, is before when I would ask people, well, what happened, who's, you know, and I would try to share some of what I felt is guilt and people would say, no, it's not your fault. It wasn't, you know. . .well intentioned people.

**Rasool Berry:** Yeah.

**Mark Charles:** It's not your fault. This was God's timing. Yeah. But it didn't give me the space to deal with the guilt that I was wrestling with. And that I knew I had to somehow find a way to acknowledge. So whenever I tried to talk about it, people were just like, no, no, no, no, don't, don't go there. Don't entertain that thought. And so it took years for me to even find a space where [00:23:00] it was not only safe but allowed for me to say these things.

**Rasool Berry:** Man, thank you so much for sharing it. How do you think that experience has informed your work, particularly looking at *Unsettling Truths*.

**Mark Charles:** Yeah, there's so many ways this connects. As I began learning about the Doctrine of Discovery, and let me bring us back around to this by telling a few stories to get us there in the first place, okay?

Early 2000s, my wife and I conclude, and our church concludes with us, that our next step in this journey is to move back to the reservation, right? If I really want to be involved with decolonizing the Gospel for the Navajo culture and for my own people, I, who never lived on the reservation and didn't grow up with the traditions, if I was going to be a part of that dialogue in any significant way, I had to actually be on the reservation.

And so my wife and I decided to move back. And we were looking for the most traditional [00:24:00] space we could move into. And one of the members of our church had a hogan on a sheep camp that she grew up in. That was empty. And she said, we could live there.

**Rasool Berry:** Okay. Hogan. Explain that for those that don't know. . .

**Mark Charles:** The traditional Navajo dwelling. It's a log dwelling and it's on a sheep camp. It has log walls, dirt floor. Usually it has a mud roof. It actually works very well in the Southwest. It keeps things warm and dry in the winter, and it keeps things cool in the summer. And their Hogan was traditional in the sense that it was log and it had a dirt floor, but it had a more modern roof.

But it still had a hole in the middle where the chimney from the fire pit and the wood burning stove in the middle would go up. So it was open air. It was six miles off the nearest paved road, on a dirt road. That community had no running water and no electricity. And so we moved there completely prepared and ready to live off the grid, right?

We're prepared to use the outhouse 50 [00:25:00] yards away from the Hogan. We're prepared to cook over a camp stove or an open fire pit. We're prepared to live by candlelight. We're prepared to haul our water. What we weren't prepared for was the intense marginalization of the native community. And the only way I can describe it is it felt like we dropped off the face of the earth.

**Rasool Berry:** When we come back, Mark Charles will talk more about how his brother's death led into his understanding of trauma and how trauma impacts us all, even if we don't realize it. That's coming up after the break. I'm Rasool Berry, and you're listening to *Where You're From?*.

**Midbreak:** If you're enjoying *Where You're From?*, would you take a moment to write a quick review and give us some stars? Podcast platforms like iTunes and Google promote highly rated shows. So, a one sentence review of what this episode or show means to you and a quick 5-star rating [00:26:00] will help these important stories reach more people. Thank you for your help, and keep listening for more of *Where You're From?*

**Rasool Berry:** This is *Where You're From?*. I'm Rasool Berry. And in just a moment, we will hit play on part two of my conversation with Mark Charles. But first just a quick note that if you think you've missed anything in today's show, the show notes are available in the podcast description or on our website at [where you're from dot org](http://whereyourefrom.org).

The show notes contain today's talking points, links to connect with us on our socials, and they contain a link to purchase the book Mark Charles wrote with Soong-Chan Rah titled, *Unsettling Truths: The Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery*. And you will also find a link to a free docuseries I was part of called *In Pursuit of Jesus*. Specifically check out episode three where I spend some time in Sweden with the indigenous Sámi people. And I think you'll hear some of the similarities that they share with today's [00:27:00] interview with Mark Charles. So click on the link in the podcast description or on our website at where you're from dot org. That's where y-a from.org. Let's get back into our conversation where Mark points out the unsettling truths of North American history here on *Where You're From?*.

**Mark Charles:** This hogan was located in a sheep camp. It was six miles off the nearest paved road. On a dirt road. That community had no running water and no electricity. And so we moved there completely prepared and ready to live off the grid. Right? We're prepared to use the outhouse 50 yards away from the hogan.

We're prepared to cook over a camp stove or an open fire. We're prepared to live by candlelight. We're prepared to haul our water. What we weren't prepared for was the intense marginalization of the native community. And the only way I can describe it is it felt like we dropped off the face of the earth.

One of the first things I began observing and learning [00:28:00] was that by and large, the only group of non-natives who ever came to the reservation were people who came to give us charity or people who came to take our picture. Nobody was coming to get to know us as people. We could account on one hand, the number of non-natives who came to visit us in that hogan, in that first two years outside of family.

And this was striking because we had friends from all of our college and other parts of our life who had come to visit us in Albuquerque. Come to visit us in Gallup, come to visit us in San Francisco, come to visit us in LA, come to visit us in Denver. Very, very, very few came to visit us on the reservation. So, we literally experienced that the only people who came to native reservations were people who came to either give us charity or who came to take our picture. No one really wanted to get to know who we were and understand who we were as people.

And at the same time that this is [00:29:00] happening, I'm witnessing and observing the historical trauma of our people. Whether it's the PTSD for our boarding school survivors, or the historical trauma that's happened to their children and their grandchildren both from the boarding schools and from the removal. I'm seeing some of this history that I knew growing up was bad, but I

hadn't really seen what it was doing today. And now I'm beginning to see it in my community around me. And I'm actually beginning to study and learn more about this history as I'm going through it. And in the midst of all this, there's all these things going on in me. Like I'm feeling for the first time, the only way I can describe it is insecure.

And I would not describe myself as an insecure person growing up. Especially not racially. Like I would never look at something. I didn't get this thing. I didn't, that didn't happen because I'm Navajo. I never felt less than because I was native. And now living on the [00:30:00] reservation, and only seeing non-natives who are there to give me charity or take my picture. And seeing the trauma of my own people, I began to experience an insecurity.

So, while I'm trying to sort through, I'm trying to understand all these things that are going on in me. And I'm talking to some of my closest friends from college and from other churches I've been at and places we've lived. And they're not native, but we're good friends. They're not coming to the reservation.

So, we're talking on the phone or over email and. Every time we get into the conversation about Native Peoples in the history, I can feel this anger and this insecurity and all these emotions start to bubble up. And I began to see I, it's affecting how I'm talking. It's affecting what I'm saying. It's affecting the approach I'm taking.

And soon I'm like, I have to hang up the phone before I start yelling at my friends. So, I realized, okay, I have to learn how to temper myself. I have to not [00:31:00] be so close to the edge. So, I literally tell myself, I train myself how to talk about these things. Like I read them in the newspaper. When I do that, I can stay in the conversation longer.

I don't get as angry. I don't get as insecure. And I can talk about it a bit better. But the longer I can talk about it, the more I see my friends are becoming defensive. It wasn't my family who did that to you. It wasn't our church or our city or our group that did that to you. And soon they're looking for ways to get out of the conversation.

And I'm realizing I'm not articulating what I'm feeling, and they don't know how to respond. And so there was one day, I'm sitting down, this is like the 10th time I'm trying to think through how do I communicate this to my friends in a way that adequately expresses what I feel, but allows them to participate in the dialogue.

And I'm writing a letter, and in my letter I said, being Native American, and living on an Indian reservation in the middle of our country, [00:32:00] it feels like our native communities is this old grandmother who has a very large and a very beautiful house. And years ago, some people came into our house and they locked us upstairs in the bedroom.

Today, our house is full of people. They're sitting on our furniture, they're eating our food, they're having a party inside our house. Now, they've since come upstairs and they've unlocked the door to our bedroom, but it's much later and we're tired, we're old, we're weak, we're sick, so we can't or we don't come out.

But the thing that hurts us the most, what causes us the most pain is that virtually nobody from this party ever comes upstairs. Seeks out the grandmother in the bedroom, sits down next to her on the bed, takes her hand, and simply says thank you. Thank you for letting us be in your house.

I wrote that and I'm like, that's it. That's exactly how I'm feeling. I started sharing that with non-natives, not just my friends. And they would come back and they would say, [00:33:00] how do we say thank you? How does my family, how do I, how does my community, how does my church, how does my city, how does my nation express gratitude to the host peoples of the land?

That was one of the most shaping experiences of what led into the writing of *Unsettling Truths*, which is, it's not just about do you have the facts and can you make your point? Because that's easy, right? The facts are easy. Making the point is easy. The hard part is understanding how to frame it, how to articulate it, how to express it in a way that is honest and truthful, and gets to the heart of the matter, but still allows the other party to stay engaged.

**Rasool Berry:** Shoof. And that was where that story of your own personal [00:34:00] drama to looking at the conversations, or a lack of conversations, involving the history of this country and its dealings with Native Americans, where that all kind of came to head to go wow. So that same sense that you shared just now, like you were experiencing the personal trauma of those things being unlocked, and the legacy of those things being unlocked. And then when you kind of found a way to keep yourself in the conversation longer, you saw that those who you were talking to were also experiencing the trauma of that same situation.

**Mark Charles:** Well see, that's where it gets even more interesting Because as I'm laying these facts out and talking about this history, I began to have after each presentation, I have literally two lines of people to talk to me after I speak.



One line is a line of white people, and their faces are like a sheet. And their [00:35:00] responses are almost all the same.

They're like, I had no idea the history was that bad. Tell me how to fix it. On the other side, I have a group of people of color. African Americans, Native Americans, other people who have been marginalized. And they're almost giddy. I didn't know the dates. I didn't know the policy. I didn't know that exact quote, but you just given me the ability or the tools to demonstrate what I've been told was a conspiracy theory my entire life.

Like I actually understand the depth of it now. And while it's horrifying, it's actually very satisfying. And they're almost excited. And as I am walking back after each of these sessions, experiencing these two very specific reactions from two very distinct groups of people. And I'm seeing it over and over and over again. Like this isn't just how I saw it once, and it was. . . I'm [00:36:00] seeing it happen everywhere I'm going. It's the exact same scenario.

And I'm realizing the more I look at the white people, I'm telling myself, I've seen that look before. I've seen that sense of panic. I've seen that desperation. Finally, it dawned on me. I've seen it in myself. This is the same emotional reaction that I had when questions of my brother would come up.

I'm like, there's something horrible back there. I can't even bear to turn around and look at it, but I know it's horrifying. I'm doing everything I can to keep it below the surface. And when it does bubble up, I do my best to push it back down again, because I have no desire to wrestle with it. Now, when we talk about trauma, that most people understand what's called PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

It's an individual diagnosis for someone who's experiencing a single horrifying event. It affects you emotionally, [00:37:00] physically, mentally, psychologically. It's this all-encompassing condition. Now, there's another trauma called Complex PTSD. So, Complex PTSD is still an individual diagnosis, but it doesn't come from a single event.

It comes from a series of events. So, if you can get PTSD from being assaulted, you can get Complex PTSD from living in an abusive relationship. If you can get PTSD from being in a battle, you can get Complex PTSD from living in a war zone. And psychologists don't know how, but they've observed symptoms of complex PTSD in the children and grandchildren of people who've experienced it.

It's been observed that it can be passed down from generation to generation. Now there's another trauma, which I've mentioned before, it's called historical trauma. This is not an individual diagnosis. It was first observed in native communities after the boarding school experience. You can see similar [00:38:00] symptoms in African American communities after segregation, after Jim Crow, after enslavement. You can see it in Japanese American communities after the internment camps. You can see it in Jewish people after the Holocaust. I would refer to historical trauma as a multi-generational and communal manifestation of a Complex PTSD. Wow.

**Rasool Berry:** That's a mouthful. Multi-generational complex. . .

**Mark Charles:** A multi-generational and communal manifestation. . .

**Rasool Berry:** Communal complex PTSD. There it is.

**Mark Charles:** And so you see that in our communities of color, but I'm observing trauma in white people and there's no, there's no way to explain it. Right? And so I'm actually having discussions. I'm literally like debating with colleagues in the psych field of, is there a trauma that happens to the perpetrator?

And I come across this book written by Rachel McNair called *Perpetration Induced Traumatic Stress*. PITS. And she identifies PITS as being like PTSD in every way, except if PTSD afflicts the victim of a horrifying event, PITS afflicts the perpetrator. The person who caused it. She looked closely at this quote by Socrates, who said, the doer of injustice is more miserable than the sufferer.

She looked at a very comprehensive study on Vietnam veterans. She refers to it as the psychology of killing. So, if the state gives you a license to kill, what does that do to you psychologically? How does your psyche cope with that? And she identified it creates a perpetration induced traumatic stress.

And so once I found her book, now I could theorize that if PTSD has a multi-generational and communal manifestation of a complex nature [00:40:00] that we call historical trauma that afflicts communities of color, we could now theorize that PITS might also have a multi-generational communal manifestation as a complex nature that afflicts white people. Because you cannot build a nation on dehumanizing injustice without traumatizing yourself.

**Rasool Berry:** Right. And speaking of that, conversation and work. And I think that really sets a good groundwork, this aspect of trauma. But yeah, so let's talk

about the, the perpetrated act, um, especially from the Native perspective and that you cover in *Unsettling Truth*. So what happened?

**Mark Charles:** Well, so this is, this is the problem. And there's so much we could discuss here. I mean, the first four chapters of the book are about how does the church get from the teachings of Jesus, who said to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, to a Doctrine of Discovery that literally says you have the right to kill people who [00:41:00] don't look, act, speak, or worship like you.

The Doctrine of Discovery, it says things like invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever. Reduce their persons to perpetual slavery. Convert them to his and to their use and profit. It's essentially the church in Europe. Saying to the nations of Europe, wherever you go, whatever lands you find not ruled by white European Christian rulers, those people are subhuman, and their land is yours to take.

So, this is literally the doctrine that let European nations go into Africa, colonize the continent, and enslave the people. It's the same doctrine that let Columbus land in this new world, which was already inhabited by millions, and claim to have discovered it. You cannot discover lands that are already inhabited.

You can steal those lands. You can conquer those lands. You can colonize those lands. You cannot discover them unless you believe the people who are there aren't fully [00:42:00] human. Now the challenge is this doctrine gets embedded into the foundations of the nation. So in 1763, King George draws a line down the Appalachian Mountains and he says to the colonies that are here that they no longer have the right of discovery of the empty Indian lands that are west of Appalachia.

This upsets the colonies. They want access to those lands. So a few years later, they write a letter of protest. In their letter, they accuse the king of raising the conditions of new appropriations of land. They go on to accuse that he has excited domestic insurrections amongst us and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages.

They sign their letter on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776. Literally 30 lines below the statement, all men are created equal, the Declaration of Independence refers to natives as merciless Indian savages. A few years later, Founding Fathers write another [00:43:00] document. They start this one with the words, we the people of the United States.

Again, this sounds inclusive. However, if you keep reading just a few lines later down to article one, section two, this is the section that defines who is and who is not a part of the union. Who is and who is not covered by this constitution. You will find if you read article one, section two, that it never mentioned women.

And this is important because if you read the entire constitution preamble through the 27th amendment, you will find that there are 51 gender specific male pronouns, 51 he/him/his. Who can run for office, who can hold office, even who's protected by the document. Not a single female pronoun in the entire Constitution.

Wow. Second, it specifically excludes natives. Third, it counts Africans as three fifths of a person, so who's left? Well, in 1787, that literally left white men. And technically, it was white landowning men who could vote.

**Rasool Berry:** . Right. Before we get to the solution, because I do [00:44:00] want to expand on another point that you make in *Unsettling Truths*. You basically go through the fact that how the courts use the concept of precedence, and especially in this very document, the Constitution, to continue to basically exclude and marginalize and subjugate, especially Native Americans. Tell us a little bit more about that, like the ongoing ramifications. This didn't just end in 1776 or 1789. It continued going.

**Mark Charles:** Yeah. And this is the thing about, so once you acknowledge, okay, this is what it says. Suddenly the world we live in makes a whole lot more sense, right? Suddenly, the fact that we have the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world and we incarcerate our people of color at three to five times the rate we incarcerate white people, this makes sense.

So, when we move on and we go into the Supreme Court case precedent, which is all about, right, interpreting the Constitution. So in 1823, there's a Supreme Court case. It's [00:45:00] Johnson versus McIntosh. This is two white men of European descent. They're in litigation over a single piece of land. One of them got the land from a native tribe.

The other one got the same land from the government. They want to know who owned it. The case goes all the way to the Supreme Court. They have to decide the precedent for land titles. Who had the right to sell the land, the government or the tribe? So they rule that discovery is what gives title to the land.

And later they reference the Doctrine of Discovery, and they essentially build the argument that says because natives are savages, they are mere occupants of

the land, and Europeans have the right of discovery to the land. They have the fee title to the land, and so therefore, they are the true title holders.

This 1823 Supreme Court case, along with a few others in the 20s and 30s, create the legal precedent for land titles. [00:46:00] Now, that precedent and the Doctrine of Discovery get referenced by the court, by name. They reference the Doctrine of Discovery by name. 1985, and most recently in 2005, and the first footnote of the case, they reference the Doctrine of Discovery.

**Rasool Berry:** By name. Like, you see the words?

**Mark Charles:** By name. It's in the word, in the first footnote of the case. For their establishing precedent, they referenced the Doctrine of Discovery by name.

**Rasool Berry:** Gotcha. Wow. So, so here's the thing. I mean, you hear this and the weight of history, the weight of injustice, it just weighs on you. And yet, you do talk about it. About the idea of truth and reconciliation or truth and conciliation in the book, where do we go from here? And what is the way forward?

**Mark Charles:** Let me just share one more piece, which is one of the biggest, unsettling truths that come out in the book is the legacy of Abraham Lincoln.

Yes. I'll quote of him in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. I have no intention of making voters or jurors of Negroes or allowing them to hold [00:47:00] office in order to intermarry. There's a physical difference between the white and black races, which I believe, said Abraham Lincoln, will ever forbid the two from living in terms of social and political equality.

But as long as they must remain together, there has to be the distinction of superior and inferior, and I, as much as any other man, believe that the superior position belongs to the white race. That is a quote from Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. On top of that, in 1862, he signs the Pacific Railway Act.

This is the act that provides the land and the resources. To complete the Transcontinental Railway. He also signs the Homestead Act, which gives 160 acres to any family that goes west in Homestead for five years. Within three years of signing that act, he has literally ethnically cleared the Dakota and the Winnebago and other tribes from Minnesota. The Cheyenne, and the Arapaho from Colorado. And the Navajo and the me Apache from the state of New [00:48:00] Mexico.



One of the conclusions we have in the book is that the United States of America needs a national dialogue on race, gender, and class. A conversation I would put on par with the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions that happened in South Africa, in Rwanda, and in Canada. There's a great quote by George Erasmus, who's, this is one of my favorite quotes.

It was actually used by George Erasmus when he was writing about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada. And he said, what common memory is lacking, where people do not share in the same past there can be no real community. If you want to build a community, he said you have to start by creating common memory.

I love that quote. It gets to the heart of our nation's problem with race, which is we do not have a common memory. We have a mythological history of discovery and expansion, of opportunity and exceptionalism. And we have communities of color that have the lived experience of stolen lands, broken [00:49:00] treaties slavery, Jim Crow laws, internment camps, segregation, mass incarceration, Indian boarding schools, Indian massacres.

And there's no common memory. And if you are honest, there is no point in our history that we can look back on and say there was a healthy community across racial lines. That point doesn't exist in our history. We need a common memory. We need to be able to acknowledge our history. We have to learn how to deal with these unsettling truths.

And as we conclude in our book also, the church's entry point into this dialogue is through the process of lament. I loved writing this book with Soong-Chan Rah, because his book before this was titled *Prophetic Lament*. He identifies lament as like being at a funeral dirge. There's a dead body in the casket. It's not going to come back to life. The only thing you can do is weep. That's why you're there. And so [00:50:00] the church absolutely needs to be a part of this dialogue. And our entry point into the dialogue is through the process of lament.

**Rasool Berry:** And I think just that last point that you, you made. Like, especially as a native Christian, like what gives you hope in light of the fact that, as you said, the American church was part of the architect and even going back, like you said, to Europe of this doctrine, which has been so destructive. What gives you hope that the church can actually be a part of the solution?

**Mark Charles:** The hope I get actually comes from the book of Acts. We see the Spirit of God. And this is actually something you'll see most clearly in Acts chapter 10 and 11, where Cornelius is told to call for a man named Peter. Peter's out praying, right, and he falls into a trance, and he sees a blanket fall in front of him.

There's all these animals on it, and the Spirit says to him, kill Peter and eat. Now, it's striking that [00:51:00] Peter says, never. I've never eaten unclean foods. That's striking because in Mark chapter seven, Jesus declares all foods clean. But apparently they never ate them. Right? Because Peter, years later, he's like, I've never let those things touch my mouth.

He sees that three times. He's pondering it. Cornelius, his family comes, they invite him. Peter goes. He walks into their house and it's striking that the first thing he says is I shouldn't be here. Right? He's like, I shouldn't be here. You're Gentiles. I'm a Jew. I shouldn't be here. They tell him the story, why he's there, he preaches to them.

As he's preaching, he sees the Spirit of God fall on them. The same way it happened at Pentecost. The same way it happened in Acts chapter 2. And he sees the Spirit of God falling on Gentiles. And what's striking about that passage is it says, the circumcised believers who were with them [00:52:00] were astonished that the Spirit fell even on Gentiles.

Now, that's striking, right? Because Peter spent three years with Jesus. But if you look back at Jesus interaction with Gentiles, he didn't have very many of them. And now we get to Acts 10, and it turns out, well, Peter's not opposed to it, right? Once he sees the Spirit doing it, he's willing to do it. But he's like, I had no clue.

I had no clue the Spirit of God was meant for the Gentiles. And when he goes back to Jerusalem, the same thing happens. The apostles get mad at him because he went into a Gentile's house. He says, well, wait on, you haven't heard the story. He tells them the story, and it says, wow, so even the Gentiles, so even they are not expected, like, this is something brand new.

So the hope I get is that the Spirit of God is doing something to be [00:53:00] radically inclusive of everybody. And that radical inclusivity even pressed the buttons of people who had spent three years with Jesus. And so this is where I get hope. Like I actually, I want to read you something that I wrote. I wrote this for Kelvin Institute of Christian Worship and I, I wrote this during the height of the immigration crisis that our nation was going through.

**Rasool Berry:** Okay.

**Mark Charles:** Wise is the church that refuses to buy into the trappings of partisan politics. Remember, my brothers and sisters, Jesus did not come to create a Christian empire.

He came to make disciples. He came to offer his body as a living sacrifice. He came to plant a church. When the church merely lobbies one political leader and protests the other, when, for the sake of argument or political gain, the body of Christ turns a blind eye to one sin and magnifies another, we are not representing the headship of our body who is Christ. [00:54:00]

As vile, repulsive, and urgent as the separation of families at our borders, it's not the first time. Indian removal, the slave trade, boarding schools, lynchings, Japanese internment camps, mass incarceration, the list of ways the U. S. government has worked to destroy the family structure of people of color throughout our history is as long as it is depressing.

What our nation needs is not for the Democrats to be better Democrats, nor do we need Republicans to simply be better Republicans. We don't even need our nation to be more Christian. Jesus did not come to create a Christian empire. He came to make disciples. He came to offer his body as a living sacrifice.

He came to plant a church. And wise is the church that refuses to buy into the trappings of partisan politics. I agree with Kenneth Kaunda, the former president of Zambia, who said, "What a nation needs more than anything else is not a Christian ruler in the palace, but a Christian prophet within earshot."

**Rasool Berry:** Mm. Mm. Wow. How did [00:55:00] you get like this? Like you just say things that most people would be very hesitant to say out loud. You've said about a hundred of those things in the context of our conversation. Where does that come from?

**Mark Charles:** One of the things I've, I've taken a lot of time to learn, and I've actually done some teaching on what I call the spiritual dynamics of power and authority.

The church. The world tends to operate on power, which is the ability to act. Jesus operated on authority, which is the permission to act. I spent 11 years on our reservation, literally trying to understand what does it mean to teach with authority? What does it mean to speak with authority, which includes speaking with integrity, which includes speaking honestly to everybody, no matter who your audience is.

You know, when we do this history. The facts are [00:56:00] easy. Finding the facts, building the argument is simple. The hard part is framing it in a way that is both honest and allows people to stay in the conversation. And it doesn't only take, how do I frame it? How do I say it? How do I work through it? It involves how do I get past my own anger and emotions and feelings about this?

Right? One of the things that is crucial in this, if I'm going to go up and speak about any of these truths, I have to make sure that I've already processed and worked through as much of my own junk as I possibly can beforehand. Because if I'm going into a group setting and I'm going to talk about this history, and I still feel very angry or hurt or upset about this, the only best thing to say is, it's this passive aggression, twisting the knife, right? We all know when we [00:57:00] do it, right? We were in an argument and we're winning our point and we're mad at somebody. And so we add one more snide comment at the end of our argument to just twist it a little bit, right? Just make it a little bit more painful. We know exactly when we do it. It happens all the time.

The trick is to learning how to have those debates, how to have those arguments without giving into that impulse. With presenting enough information to make your point with being honest, no matter who is in your audience, with being aware that everyone in this audience is people, we're all human.

No one's better. No one's worse. And then being able to, to have a hope that the goal of this discussion is going to be something healthier for the benefit of everybody. And that's part of the struggle in this work is it's so easy to turn it into an [00:58:00] us versus them. And for native peoples we're the host people of the land and our nation needs us to step into our role as hosts. And I can keep the humanity of everybody in question in front of me. It allows me to treat people better, allows me to speak the truth without using the truth as a weapon, which is easy to do.

**Rasool Berry:** Yeah, I ask every guest who comes on where you're from. But in asking that question to you, you know, as, as, as a native to this land, it's a reminder of the fact that wherever anybody says where they're from in the United States, um, that there's a, a previous story. There's a previous context of, of, of a people whose land that we live on. So we should say thank you and not just thank you, but we also should lament and recognize that there's [00:59:00] a lot of work to do to, in order for us to fully live out what it means, uh, you know, for us to be together. Right. And I feel like your book and your work has helped us do that. So thank you so much.

That was Mark Charles speaking on a difficult topic to remind us all that we need to stand together for the equal treatment of all peoples. He teaches us that we need to be more aware of how Native Americans and other races are being treated within our very own country.

I think we can all take a lot from this conversation. I know I did. I'm Rasool Berry reminding you it's not just about where you're at. It's also about where you're from. This show was produced by Mary Jo Clark, Daniel Ryan Day and Jade Gustafson and was engineered by Gabrielle Bowerd. Thanks y'all.