

EPISODE 178

[INTRODUCTION]

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And as he starts talking to me, I'm letting them know. I'm like, 'Do you have a kid, man?' 'I got two kids.' I'm like, 'You know what? Your most important thing that you can do tonight is make it home safely to your kids. Not getting into it with this cop.' And he's like, 'The reason why I need to get into it with this cop is because I don't want my kids having to go through all of this same stuff all over again.' As he's shouting this, he starts weeping.

And so, it's moments like that where people are just so amped up with this rage that talking it out or being held by someone, it's like, 'I hear you, man. I hear you. I got kids too. I'm a dad too. I got five little ones. I get it. But I want to make sure everybody gets home safe.’”

[0:01:17] LW: Hello, friend. And welcome back to The Light Watkins Show. I'm Light Watkins. And I interview ordinary folks just like you and me who've taken extraordinary leaps of faith in the direction of their path, their purpose or what they've identified as their mission in life. And in doing so, they've been able to positively impact and inspire the lives of many other people who've either heard about their story, or who've witnessed them in action, or people who have directly benefited from their work.

And today, I have peace activist Ken Nwadike Jr. back on the podcast. For those of you who are longtime listeners, you may remember Ken from episode 85. Ken is the Free Hugs guy who began to show up at conflict zones, mainly in America, with his Free Hugs t-shirt in an attempt to

facilitate peace between the two factions. Whether it was Black Lives Matter, or Antifa, and/or the police.

And while everybody else was running away from the chaos because the rubber bullets were flying and the tear gas had been released, Ken found himself running towards the chaos. And then he started speaking at schools and universities about cultivating peace in the midst of conflict. And he's been at this now for about 10 years.

Ken also grew up in homeless shelters in Los Angeles during the LA riots after the Rodney King incident. And that's when he first came across the principles of nonviolent protesting. I thought who better to have on the podcast to talk about navigating the conflict that we are all experiencing today? Obviously, this is a very challenging time with everything happening in the world.

And during this recording, most of us are currently focused on the conflict in the Middle East. But there are actually about half a dozen major conflicts happening in various places around the world. Conflicts that are very dramatic to the local population. And I wanted this episode to become timeless and applicable to really any conflicts that are happening now or in the future.

Ken and I talk about our own personal experiences as leaders trying to navigate conflict. And most importantly, we talk about the principles of navigating conflicts in general. I'm sharing the spiritual perspective and Ken is sharing the perspective that he has gleaned from his experiences as a father, as a family man and as someone who's very much on the ground and standing literally in between the various sides.

I think you're going to get a lot out of this episode to help you find your own place in navigating conflicts. It's one of the most impactful podcast conversations that I've had recently. And even after we finished recording, I found myself so excited to share this episode with you because I think it's genuinely going to give a lot of insight and usefulness to a lot of people. And mostly with allowing us to become more understanding, which is what I think the world needs more of. People who are less prone to jump to conclusions, and snap judgments and to talking at one another. And people who are more prone to do the harder work of really trying to understand one another. And that takes listening. It takes allowing people to feel seen and heard. It takes a

lot of patience. And so, it's not about choosing a side. It's more about how do I inspire people to help me in whatever my cause happens to be for this moment in time?

I think you're really going to like this episode. And I encourage you to go back and listen to my original conversation with Ken where we go really deep into his backstory growing up in the homeless shelters and how he got into becoming the free hugs guy in the first place, which again is episode number 85. Because that's going to give you a lot more context also into why I wanted to bring Ken back on for this conversation.

All right. Without further ado, let's get to my conversation about navigating conflict with Ken Nwadike Jr.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:05:42] LW: Thanks again for coming back on to the podcast. There are a lot of people who probably haven't heard about your story. I guess we should start with just bringing them up to speed. We do go into great detail the backstory, your superhero backstory in our first episode. Let's just do the truncated version of that story and give people context into why I'm talking to you as opposed to anyone else about this.

[0:06:07] KN: Absolutely. I'm known as the free hugs guy. Ken from the Free Hugs Project. And I travel around the country. I go into riots in protests to de-escalate violence on the front lines. I've had some very viral moments just from being out during times of conflict jumping in between police and protesters. And people don't understand how significant of a role that is. But when you can get law enforcement officers on one side to stand down, to allow a peacekeeper to step in and say, "I know these people. Let me talk to this group of people before you guys deploy tear gas, pepper spray, whatever."

And vice versa. When talking to protesters, letting them know, "Hey, look. There's a better way. We don't always want to rush to violence or rush to judgment in ways that some of you could end up arrested, some of you could end up shot." There's like a variety of things that can happen by people reacting on impulse.

And so, the whole idea and concept about free hugs and the reason why I go out there, it's just that reminder to be more loving, more kind, more empathetic. Even though I'm in some pretty heated situations, when it's time to go down, it goes down. And I'm not afraid of any conflict. I think that's the very truncated version of who I am and what I do with the Free Hugs Project.

But again, today it's all about peace. It's all about letting people know there's a lot of conf going on everywhere. And we have to remember how important peace is during times like this.

[0:07:41] LW: You didn't just wake up and get a free hugs t-shirt made. Well, you did one day. But you started off with marathons. Before you got into conflict work, you were just at a marathon and you were just giving hugs to people who were running marathons.

[0:07:56] KN: Right.

[0:07:57] LW: And how did that transition to the whole conflict zone work?

[0:08:03] KN: As a runner and event organizer. I ran track in high school. College on a scholarship. And with Nike for a little bit. I was training to get to the Olympic trials. I wanted to compete in the games in Beijing. That's what kept me connected to the running community. Even still right now, I'm a track coach for high school and youth kids. I love the sport of running.

When the Boston Marathon got bombed back in 2013, that was a wake-up call for me in the same way that for a lot of people September 11th was a wake-up call for them. I had college buddies who dropped out of school to go and join the military because they felt like they needed to respond to that conflict.

My way of responding to a sport that is so dear to me getting attacked and bombed was I need to figure out a way to spread love and remind people to be more loving, and kind and empathetic in the midst of this chaos. At the following Boston Marathon, when I missed qualifying to run for the race or run in the race, I said, "I'm going to go out there. Set up on the race course."

That time, rather than peace on my shirt, it said free hugs on my shirt. And I wanted to remind people it's all about love. It's all about kindness. And that thing went crazy viral not even like days later. It was like my flight from Boston back to LAX, six hours, and it was a viral hit.

[0:09:28] LW: But you got to tell the part of the story, you stood there for quite a while with nobody hugging you. You thought it was a failure at first.

[0:09:35] KN: Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. When I first went out there, granted, at this time I was mentoring some kids at a homeless shelter. And so, I'm talking with them. I'm talking with my wife about, "Yeah, I'm going to go out to Boston and I'm going to give free hugs." Imagine telling your wife I'm going to fly across the country to hug a bunch of strangers.

[0:09:51] LW: Black dude going to Boston.

[0:09:53] KN: Exactly. Go to Boston. Not going to happen. Waste of time. Don't embarrass yourself, right? I get out there. I'm standing there. I had a sign and a t-shirt and I'm waiting for somebody to give me a hug. And people are just running by. And I realized now the people who were running by are the more elite runners who care about their time, right? But as soon as they got out of the way, then it became all of the – I wouldn't say slower. Middle of the pack runners.

[0:10:20] LW: Recreational runners.

[0:10:22] KN: Exactly. The recreational.

[0:10:24] LW: Not the competitive ones.

[0:10:25] KN: Exactly. And so once that first person broke the ice and took the hug, then it was nonstop for like 8 to 10 hours that I stayed on the race course of just people coming in for hugs. Thanking me for doing it. They're crying on my shoulder. It just became a very special thing not only for them but for me also. Because a part of my backstory is growing up in and out of homeless shelters. And I struggled with a lot of things coming up.

And so, when you're in a place where there's just this outpouring of love, it's like, "Man, this feels good. I wish the world can be like this all the time where it's just this outpouring of love." That's what led to the creation of the Free Hugs Project.

And, yes, you're right. It started there and somehow it transitioned into what you see back here. The video is flipped. So I pointed that way first. But what you see back there on the front lines. I'm standing in those pictures. It's cut. So you can see both sides. But there's riot police on one side, Antifa and protesters on the other side. And I spent the entire day out there just the same way I spent the entire day at the Boston Marathon trying to separate these two conflicting sides who, when protesters are throwing rocks and bottles at police, police are firing on the crowd with tear gas and pepper spray, and I'm in the middle like, "Whoa."

[0:11:46] LW: Ken, what gave you the audacity to go to a highly-charged racial conflict zone as a black man with your "people on one side and the oppressor, the police on the other side" and get in the middle of all of that? What made you think that you were qualified to do something like that and that you would be taken seriously by either side?

[0:12:10] KN: Great question. When I was a boy in LA, 1992, I was living in a homeless shelter in South Central Los Angeles when the Rodney King riots, the LA riots broke out in '92. And I remember at that time wishing I could do something. But I was a kid, right? Just probably 10 years old at the time that it happened.

But when you're homeless and it seems like the whole world is collapsing around you, it felt like we were in a war zone. And I wished I could do something about it. And then when my mom started teaching us about these ideas of Dr. Martin Luther King. You're learning about him in school and you're realizing the power of one, right? The power of an individual to rally up the support of people.

Obviously, I couldn't do that back then at 10 years old. But fast forward in my life, those same values, same ideals are in my head. As now when conflict is happening, I'm thinking about the power of one. What if I go out to this place and I try and spread kindness and remind people to be more loving or empathetic towards one another? And so, I said, "Yeah, I'm going to go out

there and see what I can do,” even as just one individual. And I was surprised that people respond well to it.

[0:13:27] LW: Were people afraid for your life? With your wife and friends like trying to talk you out of it that first time, “Are you crazy?”

[0:13:36] KN: Yeah, I think naturally people think there's going to be violence, explosives, et cetera. Even I was concerned for my safety, right? And you can see in that picture there, I'm not wearing a bulletproof vest. It's a t-shirt, right? And so, I'm out there, jeans and a t-shirt knowing that the most powerful weapon that I have is my voice. Talk to people. You can use that weapon as a tool to disarm. And I knew the conversations that I could have with people on both sides can save lives.

Although, yes, it is a very violent and hostile environment. But if you use your words properly in those spaces, you'll be safe. Other people will be safe. And that's the goal. It's not just how am I preventing protesters from not being attacked. But it's also when protesters are attacking, I make sure that these guys get to go home safely as well. Because at the end of the day, everybody just wants to get home safely. Including myself, right? And so, the more that I can help facilitate that, then that's why I do it.

[0:14:42] LW: I'm really curious about the very first time you did that. Was anybody expecting you? And can you just walk us? Okay. I think you flew there. And you get a rental car, you drive up, you find the conflict zone, you drive. What happened? How does it work? You just walk into the middle you find the leaders on both sides? Or what do you do?

[0:15:00] KN: Yes. All of that, right? I would say the first time – I wouldn't even say the first time. Let's go to when it became very viral. Because, of course, there were a lot of small protests and riots that I would go to. And I would just start having conversations with people. Protesters, police, et cetera.

And I think that's where I started to learn how to do that. I think initially it was political rallies, right? I'm showing up in rallies. You're going to places like Ferguson and things and you're starting to learn that there are leaders on both sides of these things, right?

And if you can find the leaders on the protest side, who's organizing this thing? And find the leader on the law enforcement side, who's the police captain, or chief, or whoever that I can talk to? And once I'm able to identify who those leaders are and I can figure out what their primary objective is, if I can relay that to the other side and be this bridge of communication to both sides.

And so, when I started doing that, then, yes. Moving forward, people do start to expect me. And so, when we think about one of my most viral moments on the front lines, it was in Charlotte in 2016. In Charlotte, North Carolina. And so, just to kind of paint the picture of what was going on there. I was speaking at the University of South Carolina. On that same day, the viral video, which everyone saw on Facebook, is a woman who's filming Facebook live as she's saying, "Please don't shoot my husband. Better not have shot my husband." Boom. She shoots him. That's all we see. We didn't see all the initial – what led up to it.

And so, it wasn't until later on, not that night, for sure. Because the riots started that night. But it was days later. And that's why sometimes I try and caution people about rushing to judgment. Because there's more information that comes out that can change the way we view an entire thing.

And so, we only had that angle of her Facebook video. Turns out later on, the police weren't even there for Keith Lamont Scott who was shot that day in Charlotte, which led to the riots. The police were there to serve a warrant to someone in the apartment complex behind him. He was struggling with some mental health things. Whenever that becomes an issue for him, he goes out to his car to read a book.

He's sitting in his car. He's reading a book. He sees these police. Weapons drawn. Rushing up to the apartment complex as they're going to go and serve a warrant. He sees them. Grabs a gun out of his glove box. Because he's like, "What's going on?" Right? He's going through some mental health things. So he's holding his weapon.

The police, now they have to shift their focus to him. Because why is he brandishing a weapon towards us in the car? So they get behind the vehicle. They're asking him to step out. Put the

weapon down. Mental health issues. Why are they all putting this attention on me? So he steps out with the weapon. Cops shoot him. Kill him. That's the angle that we see on Facebook. That's what led to the riots that night.

If you look up some of the protest signs from that night in Charlotte, there's people holding signs saying, "He was only reading a book and the police shot him." And for the most part, we know that that doesn't make sense. Someone's not just sitting in their car, reading a book and the police shot them.

As I'm speaking in the University of South Carolina that night, I come offstage to kids in like the cafeteria area watching the news and I'm like, "Where is that happening right now?" They're like, "That's right there in North Carolina." And so, like you said, the rental car, I jump in the rental car. I race across town. Soon as I get there, everyone is running out because a protester had just been shot in the face.

Again, people rushing to judgment. As they're all running out, I'm like, "What happened? Why is everybody running?" "They said the cops just shot a protester in the face." I'm like, "Cops aren't going to use lethal rounds." As they're running this way, I'm running in to go and find out what's going on. I see the body being moved into the Omni Hotel. I'm like, "Shoot. Did they really shoot this guy in the face?" I didn't know yet what was going on.

Come to find out, of course, the next day, we find out that was just some beef of vendetta that somebody had. They saw the opportunity with the crowd there. Pop the guy. Cops had nothing to do with it, right? And so, that escalated tension that night to where now people are jumping on cars, they're breaking into stores and buildings. Became full-blown riot. Which then took me back to a 10-year-old boy, LA riots, 1992. Wishing I could do something about it. And now I'm the free hugs guy already because of the Boston Marathon, other things. I'm like, "Let me spring into action. Start talking to my people."

I'm like, "Black people are going to listen to me. I'm black too." You know what I mean? I could talk about, "Hey, look I get it. I understand why you guys are all mad. But let's pause a little bit on being so quick to judgment. Because some of these things don't make sense just yet." And everyone's all upset. And I'm like, "But, wait." And so, these were the conversations I was having

with people, which is what led people to listen to me. Because when your message is the opposite of the masses, you're either going to get opposition from people like, "Shut up. We don't want to hear it." Or you're going to have people that are like, "Wait, let's hear him out. His message seems to be different than the masses." And my message is always peace. And so, that's why I feel like maybe people will listen. Maybe they won't. But it's always going to be about peace.

[0:20:28] LW: I imagine at these situations the leadership, let's call it, on the black side, they probably feel like, "I got this. We don't need this clown with this free hugs shirt coming up here trying to run the thing. And we're already running the thing." Was there like ego battles when you were first getting out there and trying to have an impact?

[0:20:47] KN: You know what's interesting? I think, initially, when people see the free hugs on the shirt they do think like, "Oh, what is this? Is he an opportunist? What's the whole objective behind this?" But then when they start seeing the way that I move, right, when I'm out there, it just simply says free hugs on my shirt. If people want to come up and hug me, cool. That's all good. Right? It's an open invitation.

But really when I'm there, what's happening, I'll give you some examples of some hostile situations on the front lines that I've helped with. Right there in Charlotte that night there was a point where – there were some protesters who said, "We don't want white reporters telling our story. Any reporter that you see who is white, knock them out. I heard this.

I'm like, "Are they really going to act on this?" I'm walking with some of the guys who had said that and they're literally squaring up with reporters, throwing their cameras on the ground, beating them. I'm not okay with that. Right? And so, there's times where I'm having to jump in the middle like, "Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. Not cool. This is not how this is going to go down." Right?

But same on the flip side, when you have police and they're mean-mugging people, right? And they've got their hand on their weapon. They're ready to react. Sometimes I can go to the officer and I'm like, "It's all good, man. It's all good. Don't even trip." And the person that he's mean-mugging who's already taking off his shirt ready to square up with this cop. And I'm like, "What

are you doing man? They have weapons. They have their whole army here. Is that how you want to go out?"

And there was one time actually on the front lines here in San Diego, there was an incident that happened and it was exactly that where the riot cop, he's mean-mugging this guy. The guy is yelling at him. Dude takes off his shirt and he's like, "What's up then? What's up then?" He's yelling at the cop. And now as I see the cop go to start to reach for his weapon, then I go and grab the guy. The guy who'd taken off his shirt. And I grab him and I'm like, "Talk to me, bro. Talk to me. Talk to me. What's going on?" And he was just like, "He can't be looking at me like that, man, trying to test me like I'm a sucker." I'm like, "Talk to me. Talk to me."

And as he starts talking to me, I'm letting them know. I'm like, "Do you have a kid, man?" "I got two kids." I'm like, "You know what? Your most important thing that you can do tonight is make it home safely to your kids. Not getting into it with this cop." And he's like, "The reason why I need to get into it with this cop is because I don't want my kids having to go through all of this same stuff all over again." As he's shouting this, he starts weeping.

And so, it's moments like that where people are just so amped up with this rage that talking it out or being held by someone, it's like, "I hear you, man. I hear you. I got kids too. I'm a dad too. I got five little ones. I get it. But I want to make sure everybody gets home safe."

And having those conversations with people, I think that's where things change from, "What is this dude out here with a free hug shirt – what's he supposed to do?" And then when people start seeing how I move and even the police officer who was mean-mugging him, later on he sees me, he's like, "Thanks for intervening on that situation. Thanks for stepping in. Because that could have gone bad."

I was in Arizona. Trump rally. Police, they were waiting for a reason to charge on Antifa because everyone had gone into this Trump rally in Arizona and Antifa was now surrounding the Convention Center. They didn't know how everyone was going to come out.

[0:24:21] LW: Let's define Antifa for –

[0:24:23] KN: Antifa is the anti-fascist group. A lot of them are probably middle-aged college kids. Sometimes the media tries to blend them in as Black Lives Matter, but they're actually not. Black Lives Matter is predominantly young African-American protesters. Antifa is predominantly white kids, but dressed in all black like ninjas, gloves, faces covered, everything. From a distance, the media can't tell the difference between Antifa and Black Lives Matter. But they're two very separate things.

Because Antifa, they have no problem with resorting to violence, destruction or chaos. That is not Black Lives Matter's objective when they're out on the front lines. They are protesting an injustice. Antifa, they're just anti-capitalism. They have no allegiance to any like political group or side. To them it's just destruction, right?

And so, sure, they do try and side with the oppressed, which is why they're standing on the same side as Black Lives Matter. But the objective is not the same. The objective for them is F the police, F capitalism, and big business and all of this stuff. They're two completely separate things. When there's an opportunity, they aim to take it.

And so, when they were anti-Trump at this rally, what appeared to all of us – because so many of us that were at that protest were wondering. You got all the people safely into the Convention Center. But what happens when they all come out to try and get to their cars? There's not enough police to protect them from how many protesters and Antifa are here as they were walking into the Convention Center chanting Trump. They're flipping off the protesters. And everyone's like, “Okay. We'll see you when you come outside.”

And so, I think, to the police in Arizona, one of the ways when they're like, “Oh, shoot. How do we handle this? We're outnumbered by far by the protesters in Antifa.” No joke. I was standing there and you watch as someone who was not part of the protest, was not part of Antifa takes a water bottle, throws it to the front entrance of the Convention Center. I'm standing there right on the front line. I'm watching peripherally everything that's going on. Water bottle goes to the front door. Water bottle is not going to hurt anyone. And immediately, the police say masks down. They put down their masks. They deploy pepper spray and tear gas on everyone.

I'm watching young children up on top of their parents' shoulders at this protest. I'm seeing people in wheelchairs at this protest as the police just, boom, pepper spray, tear gas on everyone, right?

And so, again, I switch instantly from, "I'm not the free hugs guy anymore. Now it's grab this child who just fell off this parent's shoulders because he can't see. I immediately grabbed my goggles out of my backpack. Throw my goggles on. I keep a mask, a gas mask and I'm trying to help get people out of this plume of pepper spray smoke.

When people start to see the way that you move, it's captured on the news, it's captured by protesters, it's captured by police. They're like, "Wow, man. This guy is really out here on some different stuff than what anybody else is on." And so, that's why I do those things. And I always have to remind people, don't let the free hugs on the shirt fool you. Because I'm going into extreme situations.

[0:28:02] LW: You started doing that. And then, obviously, the Black Lives Matter stuff happened. Talk about how your own personal involvement with that evolved over those years and over those experiences. And where is it now? Because it makes sense for you to be in the middle of a black crowd, white police officer conflict, right? But, obviously, there's conflicts all over the globe. Just talk about your evolution as an activist in that way and kind of where you are today when we see all this other stuff happening around the globe.

[0:28:41] KN: Yeah, absolutely. I think there have been steps along the way in how I pay attention to issues going on around the world over doing this. It's been 10 years now since 2013, the Boston Marathon bombing took place when I started to pay attention. Prior to that, I was organizing races.

I didn't care that much about what was going on in the world. Because I'm like I'm a race organizer. A race director. I put on events to help the homeless. I can't have any impact on the issues going on around the world. But then as you start paying closer attention to injustice as it applies to black people especially, then I'm like, "Wait. Whoa. There's some serious issues going on."

And you have to remember, 2013, that bombing was also the beginning of so much of the great divide that we see right now. People may not remember this. But right around that same time, George Zimmerman shot Trayvon. And that was a pending case. That began the conversations about black Lives Matter being born, right?

Around that same time, Mike Brown was shot in Ferguson. Now Black Lives Matter is a full-blown machine. What happens as soon as Black Lives Matter is born, Blue Lives Matter and All Lives Matter become counterarguments to that. Now you've just created three separate tribes as social media is growing in subscribership, right?

Before, back then, 2013, people were just hanging out on Facebook. We didn't understand Instagram. It was a photo app. Now Instagram is far more than a photo app. And then Snapchat comes. And then now, recently, TikTok and everything else, right?

You think about the evolution of social media during the same time that all of this Injustice and the divide as people are choosing sides and joining tribes, it's all happening at the same time. Crazy recipe from 2013 to where we are right now. 10 years.

During that 10-year period, as I'm paying attention to all of these things, whoa, all this is going on on social media. Now my social media subscribership is growing. Million people following me on Facebook. I think it's 50,000, 80,000 somewhere on in Instagram. People are paying attention to these things. Now it's causing me to have to pay attention to things going on around the world as well.

Before I used to say, "No. It doesn't concern me. I'm a runner. I'm a race organizer." How can you turn a blind eye to all of these things happening, right? When the Israel and Palestine thing – the conversation started, I only knew so little about the conflict based on Biblical history, right? Not even – everyone is talking about 1947. Do you realize this stuff dates all the way back to – if you're paying attention to religious text, Abraham, right? Abraham. Everyone knows the song Father Abraham had many sons. Right? But there was a point when Father Abraham couldn't have any sons.

Abraham, his wife, when they were barren, said, “You can have a child with my servant. Abraham has a child with the servant because he thinks he's not capable of having a child. And then later on he ends up being able to have his own child and then the wife is like, “I don't really know about this boy that you had with the servant.”

This boy Isaac or Ishmael. I mix up the two names. Let's just say it's Ishmael, right? This son Ishmael gets casted out of the home. Goes on and becomes the leader of the Arabs, right? Moves over in this direction. His biological son, Isaac, stays close to him. Goes on and becomes the leader of the Jews. This is how you get conflicting religious text about who is supposed to be in charge of the Holy Land and all of that, right?

When people are thinking all of this conflict is 1947. No, keep going further back and further back and further back. Which is why you have so many people even so-called experts that are like, “I don't have all of the information.” None of us do. It's not possible to have all of the information. Because some people are looking at historic things that they learned in school when it goes back much further than what you're being taught in academic space.

And so, that's what caused me – when I started paying attention. And I'm like, “Hmm. I've heard of this conflict before, but not in the context that everyone is speaking about it.” And so, I had to start paying closer attention. And I realized this is too big for any of us to fully understand, which is why I decided to take a step back and lean more towards a message of peace.

Because I'm like, “You guys expect me to figure out how to solve conflict that goes all the way back to biblical texts? Nah. I'm good. There's no way I can take a stand on this.” Right? And so, sometimes people are quick to judge and say – I think Frederick Douglas said, “If you're neutral during times of injustice –”

[0:33:54] LW: You're on the side of the oppressor.

[0:33:55] KN: Correct. Right? And so, people are trying to put people in that box right now for being silent. You're siding with the oppressor. You're complicit. When so many people are saying, “Do you know how big and confusing all of this stuff is?” And then put on top of that the

amount of misinformation that's getting put out in the media, it's better for me to take a step back and worry about the kids.

[0:34:24] LW: I feel like people also always want to make their side the exception. It's okay to be silent with all this other stuff that's happened. But with this thing that's happening, we can't afford for anybody to be silent. So you have to pick a side. And that brings us to what you talked about earlier, which is this idea of tribalism and how there's a narrative that every tribe has, which obviously puts them right in the middle of that narrative as the good guys and then the other person are the bad guys. And what we've seen with almost every conflict is that things evolve and new information comes out. And you see that it wasn't as one-sided as we thought.

And so, what are your thoughts on navigating that sort of landscape as someone who very much has made their whole livelihood out of being in the middle of conflict? Because I think a lot of people want to feel use, you know? But how do you navigate those very strong narratives?

[0:35:33] KN: Yeah. It's very difficult to do actually. Before we bring it back to the context of the war that we're talking about right now, if you were to even just take a few steps backwards to let's say racial injustice, especially as it pertains to police versus the black community. By being a black man, a dark-skinned, black man where people were like, "Of course, you're supposed to be on our side." And I'm like, "But wait. Every single incident that comes out, there's a lot more to it if we just wait a little bit." Right?

And people are like, "Don't tell me to wait. I saw what happened. I saw the video." And sure, there are times where it is just blatant. It's racism. It's injustice. But what I like to do is go and get as much information as possible. Let's say, for example, the woman right after the George Floyd thing. She shoots this kid in the car. She thought she grabbed her taser. You remember that?

[0:36:31] LW: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

[0:36:31] KN: Thought she was going for her taser. First thing that I did in a situation like that, obviously, I'm mad, I'm enraged. I'm like, "I can't believe she just shot this kid numerous times over a traffic stop." Right? I was like, "That's crazy." Of course, she should have just – even if

the kid was getting away, give chase. But to just shoot him? And then the first thing that goes through our head, if this was a white kid during a traffic stop, would she have done that? Blah-blah-blah. All of these things go through our mind.

But there's times where I have to check myself and say, "Before I rush to all of that, let me talk to an expert on this." Sit down with my buddy who is a sheriff. A white, male sheriff, "Sheriff, makes sense of this to me." And he goes, "Actually, I can't make sense of it. And the reason why is because we are trained that you wear your taser on your weak side. If you are right-handed, your strong side, that's the side where your firearm is." He goes, "It's really hard to make an accident with that. Because like for myself, I'm left-handed. If I try to punch you with my left hand, I already know I'm going to give you a weak punch. If I try to kick you with my left leg, I already know it's going to be a lame kick. That's my weak side of my body." He's like, "We train that way with how we handle tasers."

He goes, "But then on top of that, you factor in the weight difference between a firearm and a taser. And then this big yellow front that is on a taser versus a firearm." He goes, "I can't make sense of it. Because we're trained better than this."

Great. Now I'm equipped. Because I've gone to an expert before I just rush to my own judgment as a black man. Sure, some people will say, "It's blatant. It's clear as day." But still, let me talk to an expert on this, right?

And so, for me, now when we bring it back to the context of the war there were in, when I start thinking about Palestine, and Gaza and the Muslim Community there, and I have conversations with people on that side and they're sharing with me about how this isn't new. We've been oppressed for how long. They're not trying to justify Hamas's decisions. But there are reasons why they formed as an organization just as much as the Israeli State and government who does all of these things, there's a reason why they have done these things when I'm speaking to the other side. And I'm like, "Hmm, both sides think they're right. Both sides think the other side started it."

It's very hard for me to take a hard stand when this isn't even my fight. Aside from the fact that I'm a human being, I don't have a dog in this fight, right? Culturally, I can't identify. My people

came from Nigeria, in Africa, right? My situation is very different. But I still try to empathize with what both sides are experiencing.

And so, I always have to strip away some of the layers and say, "What matters the most to me in this situation right now? Civilian lives." Right? Because if men's egos over territory cause them to want to kill each other over war, and over space and over dislike of one another – what's the quote? "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind." You guys want to kill each other? You go and do that. But leave the civilians out of it. Leave the kids out of it.

That's where it starts to become easy for me to take a stand on these issues because I can pick a safe space that I know that I can stand hard on based on facts and say, "I can fight tooth and nail that civilians, babies, the elderly should have nothing to do with this." Right? I could stand on that. And no one can come after me and say he's promoting Islamophobia, he's promoting anti-Semitic talks in his videos or his content. No one can say that.

When I'm like, "Look, I care about the lives of people on both sides. I can't figure out who started it. This is a very confusing situation." Right? Some would say Israel is the oppressor. Someone say Gaza started it or Palestine started it. Who am I to be the person who stands in the middle as a judge and says, "It's this side versus that side."

If other people want to do that, that's for them. But I don't think that that is my role on who specifically I am. I don't judge the next person for being pro-Palestine, pro-Israel. But I know for me, what helps me sleep at night is knowing that I'm working on building a bridge for both sides to see each other as human beings. I can sleep well with that. To know that I speak up for the innocent. I speak up for the children.

When I put out a post or a video and I'm reminding people that you want to talk about innocence, innocent, it's the people who live right here in the United States who, because they are either Muslim or Jewish, are afraid for their lives right now because of things that are happening over there. As we just saw a six-year-old boy from Chicago who was killed by his landlord who was consuming too much of this anti-Islamic media and goes and acts on it, we want to talk about innocence. That's why I do the things that I do and I go on stages now.

And back to your question about the evolution of where I am with it right now. Every single week, I'm on stages somewhere in the country. Last night when you and I were communicating, I was on a plane flying back from an event that I spoke at in Pittsburgh. Days prior to that, I was in Chicago. Tomorrow I'm leaving to Buffalo, New York. I'm all over the country, on stages talking to young people about these same issues.

Be careful about how you treat one another, especially in response to what's happening over there. People are innocent. We have to really be cautious of the message that we're putting out there because it's causing people who we actually know and live with to be afraid for their lives. That's where I am with it today and how all of that has led me up to this point.

[0:43:12] LW: During the whole Black Lives Matter social justice movement, you had a lot of non-black people who were also being accused of being silent. And black people are like, “Yeah, you need to be on our side. This is obviously something that has been affecting us for a very long time.” And you could obviously make the case for slavery and find connections and all of that. And the slave capturers or whatever they were called. The original police officers.

[0:43:39] KN: Right. They were calling them slave patrols.

[0:43:41] LW: Slave patrols. Yeah. But now it's interesting because I feel like we are – where American white people are looking at the Middle East conflict. And again, there's conflicts in Southeast Asia. There are conflicts in Myanmar. There's conflicts in West Africa happening right now. Obviously, Ukraine-Russia conflicts. And people aren't necessarily losing sleep in America over those other conflicts. But with this one, it's highly charged – we're in that space where it's super highly charged. Just like the Ukraine.

[0:44:17] KN: Why do you think it's so heavy with this group or this conflict right now?

[0:44:22] LW: Well, that's the thing. I think people are drawing parallels to their own experience. Obviously, you have a large Jewish presence in the West. And so, they feel attached and connected to Israel. And you have the TikTification of conflict, worldwide conflict, where you start to see other people's opinions instantly. And it makes it seem like you have to have an

opinion as well right off the jump. And if you don't, then you're automatically on the side of the person who has the most power.

Yeah, I initially jumped in when they were first going to turn the water off and all that. And I was like, "Oh, we need to turn the water on." And I have to be honest I was shocked by how much backlash I got from my Jewish friends saying, "You're making us unsafe by saying this." They started to communicate what I would now consider to be a tribal narrative that I wasn't aware of. I thought I was doing the right thing, right? Because to myself, I was like, "I don't have a side. I just don't want innocent, elderly, mothers, children, et cetera, not being able to have water." I wasn't fully even educated on how the whole water system works over there.

And to me it was just obvious. It was noncontroversial. That led me to become more educated in like, "Okay, let me see why they're so resistant to this perspective that I have that I thought was pretty humane and the right thing to do. And so, I did a deep dive into their experience. And again, I don't think anybody is right or wrong necessarily. I think everybody just has their narrative and they think the other side has been victimized by propaganda. It's just an interesting thing to navigate as someone who wants to make a difference and be useful.

And I keep coming back to the Mother Teresa quote where somebody asked her, "How do we bring about world peace?" And she said something that you alluded to earlier. She said, "Go home and love your family." You're not going to be able to jump into every conflict that's happening around the world and be Superman and Batman. But one thing you can do now is locally just go love your family. And if the world had enough people loving their family, you wouldn't have all this conflict.

[0:46:45] KN: 100%. And that's the stance that not only have I taken with this conflict, but in general, protect what's around you. Right? And my mom always used to say when we would get in trouble with some things or we're trying to take on too much – and African mothers, they always have parables or quotes. And my mom, she always used to say, "Kenny, deal with the work that is closest in front of you."

Trying so hard to – I need to fix this, and solve this, and do this and do that. She's like, “You're missing all the stuff right here in front of you that you're falling over. Deal with what is closest in front of you.”

And so, now in my adult life, 42-years-old, I'm still having to remember things that my mom was telling me at nine and 10 years old, “Kenny, deal with what is closest in front of you.” What is closest in front of me right now are Jewish kids, Muslim kids, black kids. Groups who are feeling oppressed right here around me. I have to ask myself, “What can I do as an individual? Ken, what can Ken do to help them feel more safe? Black kids, Jewish kids, Muslim kids.” Right? kids who feel like society is constantly trying to step on them. Whether it's through war. Whether it's through injustice. Police brutality. Whatever it is. There are groups of people.

Go and talk to some young black kids about how they feel about the police and they'll tell you they're afraid. Go and talk to some Jewish kids about how they feel about the current state of being out in public and going to school right now with anything that even remotely identifies the fact that they're Jewish. They're afraid. Go and talk to Muslim kids right now. It'd be like, “Yeah. Right. Remember just years ago? There was the Muslim ban and all of those things that came with our identity.” People are afraid.

For me, dealing with the work that is closest to me, it's the people that are right around me. The students, the people in various communities, the people who follow me on social media. Most of the people who follow me in social media are right here in the United States. If I could continually put out a positive message that protects those people right here, then that's why I do the things that I do.

And so, when some people are like, “Man, this dude with a t-shirt really thinks he can solve the world's problems?” No. But I think I can solve these little problems right here and give hope to people that are right around me and make people feel safe. I do think that I'm capable of doing that. Very much so. And that's why I do what I do.

And I dare someone to challenge me on that. Then I would have to ask them, “Then what are you doing to make sure that those groups are safe?” Most of those people aren't doing

anything. I'm using my platform, my gifts, my talents to protect people in the way that I know how. Deal with the work that's closest in front of you.

[0:49:54] LW: It reminds me of the starfish parable with a little boy walking down and there's starfish all over the beach. And he's tossing as many of them as he can back into the water. And this older man sees him and comes up to him and says, "What are you doing? You're just wasting your time. There's no way you're going to be able to get all these star fish back in the water." He goes, "Well, I just got this one back in the water." And then picked up another one, "I just got this one back in the water." Just do what you can.

And I feel like the same thing applies to our jobs. Our job is not responsible for the gross domestic product, GDP, of the country. But we make a little bit of a difference with what we've chosen to do and how we've chosen to contribute. And I think that along with having a way of making money, it's also useful to have a way of giving back.

For me, my way of giving back is I send out these daily dose of inspiration emails every morning. So that when people wake up and they start going through their emails and they're getting all the sales emails, and bills and whatever is going on in there, there's a little oasis of a message where they can feel a little bit more hope. They can feel a little bit more inspiration. They could feel a little bit more perspective on whatever they're going through in their life. And I've been doing that for seven years.

And I think everybody, you could have something. Yours is peace. Yours is free hugs. Yours is bringing people together, speaking to kids in schools. And whoever's listening to this, what's your version of that? We know it doesn't work. Sitting on the phone and doom-scrolling, listening to people talk about how horrible the situation is and how this person isn't doing anything. That's not making the world a better place.

[0:51:39] KN: I completely agree. And I love the example that you gave about the starfish when he's telling him, "You're not going to be able to save all of those starfish." And he's like, "But I just saved this one, right? And this one." And it reminds me of – there was a quote by Tupac where he said, "I may not be able to change the world. But I will spark the brain that will go and change the world."

And that's what your email is doing. That's what my talks on stages to students is doing. Because as we're sparking the minds of people with some inspiration, with some hope, then they can go out into the world. And now we've amplified ourselves.

One of the things, the sheriff that I was talking about earlier, he like to use the term a force multiplier. That we're just strong forces and we try and multiply that in any ways that we can. And so, that's what the guy was doing with the starfish. That's what Tupac was doing when he felt like I'm not going to change the world, but I will spark the minds of the next revolutionaries that will. I can spark the minds of the next peacekeepers and peace activists that are sitting right there in these schools, these high school and college campuses. That when they're watching me on stage and they're saying, "I want to be a version of that." They will probably surpass me. Because they're paying attention to things at a much sooner age than when I was paying attention to it. Right? They'll probably surpass me.

And right now, at my age, I have surpassed the age that Dr. Martin Luther King was allowed to live. I may not ever have nearly a frame of the impact that he had on the world, but his influence sparked the things that I feel. Peace. Get that out to the people, right?

And so, I feel like you have all of this time in your life, an opportunity to go and make a difference. One leader, one inspirational person is going to spark the change for the next person and the next person. And that's all the little starfish that are getting thrown back in and being saved and being able to make that difference. I love that example that you gave.

[0:53:47] LW: How do you navigate criticism? I'm sure you receive a lot of it. As I mentioned, I got a lot of it. And a lot of it was well-intentioned, well-meaning. They were just trying to help educate me. But, yeah, how do you deal with that and keep going? Because that could be something that could make people just not want to do anything or say anything.

[0:54:06] KN: Throws you off. It throws you off. I'll tell you an example. When I first started doing this – and I'll always remember this one because it cut the deepest because it was from a black woman. And she had come on to my Facebook and she called me a coward. And I said, "Why?" She said, "Because I'm on your Facebook page –" and at that time I probably had

maybe a quarter million followers on social media. She said, “Because with a quarter million people who follow you on social media, you can lead the next revolution to crush the head of your oppressors, the police. And instead, you're out there telling people to calm down.” She said, “That's so weak of you.”

And I remember at that time, it threw me completely off guard. I'm like, “I would have expected something like that from a racist, a white supremacist.” They are not the people who come after me. Sometimes it's people who look just like me, right? When you're talking about how do you deal with criticism, that's the worst type of criticism that you can get, is from someone who could be your auntie. And she's telling you, “You're weak.” What about the strong black men who back in the day were leading revolutions? You want me to go and disarm the police? You want me to lead a revolution to crush the police? When I become another dead black man who can't take care of my family, are you going to help with that? Right?

And so, I always have to remember and remind myself, the people who are challenging you to do these extreme things are probably not even doing a fraction of that themselves. But they want you to jeopardize all of your stuff, jeopardize your brand, your well-being, your livelihood your ability to provide for your family because of what they think you should do. I stopped allowing that to affect me.

And I was watching Selma. And in the beginning of Selma, same thing happens Dr. Martin Luther King. He's fixing his tie. He's about to go and get his Nobel Peace Prize. He's telling his wife, “Coretta, my own people don't understand me. And they call me these things. They call me a sellout. They call –” I'm in my mind, I'm like, “You're on your way to go and get the Nobel Peace Prize. Do you, man. You have to do you. You can't worry about what other people want you to do.” Because maybe he wouldn't have made it to the age that he made it to if he was doing things as people wanted him to do it. You have to do what makes the most sense for you.

If you want to speak up on a situation, you speak up on it because that's what matters the most to you. If you feel like, “You know what? I might need to sit this one out.” That's what makes the most sense to you. I've gotten myself to a point where, in handling my own criticism – and she was the last person that I ever let that get to me. And that's kind of a tactic that I use where I'm very protective of what I allow to get to me. Sometimes if I have to just take it in, accept it,

process it really quick and then let it go. Get rid of it. Because, otherwise, it's going to affect me long term. I've had to start tuning that out.

And I try and raise my kids the same way. My son, he's 13 years old. Maybe when he was about 10 years old, he was coming home from school or he got home from school. He was being mean to his sister that whole day. He's not usually mean to his sister. I'm like, "Kenny, what's going on?" He's Kenny III. "Kenny, what's going on?" "Nothing." "Why are you being so mean to Savannah? What's your problem?" And he's like, "I don't know. I don't know." I walk away for a little bit, boom. He's bullying her again.

I'm telling my wife, "Something's wrong. He's off. There's something wrong." I go, "Did something happen in school today?" "Yes." "What happened in school? Did somebody say something to you?" "Yeah." "Did somebody call you something?" "Yes." I said, "Was it racist?" And then he just fell apart crying. Called him the N word. He was 10 years old. I said, "Cry. Go through the pain. Process it. And let today be the last time that you ever let that word affect you in such a way ever again." And that's what he did.

And I had to show him a movie where that same thing was done. We watched the Jackie Robinson Story, 42. If you remember, he's going up to bat. The coach from the other side, he's hurling all these racist things at him. I believe he struck out at that point. He goes into the dugout, screams, cries, smashes the bat up against this cement wall. Let's it out. Has his moment. Comes back out. Hits his home run and goes on and becomes the Jackie Robinson that we know of today.

There are times that you have to process it, right? I've recently been called anti-Semitic because I put out a post about how much I wanted to hug this 10-year-old Palestinian girl. I'm anti-Semitic because I want to hug this girl? And this person is saying, "I didn't see you say that about a Jewish girl." You must not follow my work very closely to know that I care about all people, right?

There are times where I let it in and then there's times where I'm like, "You're ridiculous right now. You're being ridiculous." Calling me things that don't even fit who I am. Block it. Don't even let it get to the surface. Let alone beneath it. Out of here. Right?

And so, now I'm training my kids and raising my kids up to be the same way. People are going to say mean things to you. They're going to judge you. They're going to try and put you in a box. But you have to process it really quickly and move on. And so, that's how I deal with it. I don't let it get to me.

And some people might say, "How can you not let it get to you?" It's the same way that when you're trying to stay motivated because you don't want to fail and those feelings of doubt start to set in and you're like, "No. Don't let it come in. Don't let it come in." You can do that exact same thing as it pertains to criticism that people are giving you. Don't let it come in. Don't let it come in. Unless it's constructive.

But if you feel like people are misjudging you, why even let it in? I'm not going to give you that power to misjudge me. I know who I am. You don't get to tell me that I'm anti-Semitic. You're not allowed to tell me that. You don't know the first thing about me. Out of here. Sometimes even blocked. Because I know who I am. You don't get to – now I'm going to have sleepless nights and I'm going to feel some type of way because you misjudged me? No way. Not letting it in. Not one bit.

In the same way that I – now my son, if he ever gets into a situation like that, I guarantee he's not letting it in. He's not going to let it cause him to bully his sister, or cry, or any of those things. Process it. That little bit of time. Give it that much time. Give it an hour. Go off to the side. Cry if you have to. Scream if you have to. And then come back and know who you are. Know who you are. I know I'm not anti-Semitic. So then, it's done. Now I can carry on. I could go to sleep fine tonight regardless of what this person thought of who I am. And so, that's the way I process criticism right now. I just don't let it in.

[1:01:11] LW: I like that. And I think it's good to have some sort of rules for how you personally want to engage. Because you're going to get some feedback. You're going to get a lot of criticism. Most of it won't be particularly constructive. 99% of it won't be from people who are out there doing like real work. It'll be people who are sort of slacktivists. Who are leaning heavily on social media in their own echo chamber? They're not considering other points of views. They're

just doubling, and tripling and quadrupling down on what they currently believe to be the case. And there's not a lot of room for nuance and context in the way that they're messaging you.

And I've been there. I've been one of those people. That's what I'm speaking from my own direct experience. You know what I mean? But for me, my rule is I just don't even engage. I don't reply. I don't engage. I'm very liberal with blocking people. Because, especially with social media, my social media feed, I look at that as my living room. You're in my space right now.

[1:02:17] KN: I'm in here. Yeah. And who's on my couch?

[1:02:20] LW: Yeah. You're on my couch with your shoes on yelling at me. Calling me ignorant and all kinds of names. You got to get out of here. We're not going to mess up the vibe in this space.

[1:02:29] KN: Put your muddy shoes on my couch. It's not going to happen. Yeah, I completely agree with you on that.

[1:02:36] LW: Yeah. And once I did that, it was very freeing actually. Because then I didn't have to debate with myself on whether or not I was going to reply to this person. I did make one exception when I posted that thing about the conflict, about the water. And I got all that feedback from people that I actually personally know. I was replying to that. But I knew that it was an exception.

It's not that I never am going to do it. But when I do do it, I know that I'm going against my own rule. And usually what happens is I end up getting my hand burned from going against my rules. That's why I have my rules. Because you can't have nuanced conversations on social media. And that's what I was reminded of. You just can't do it.

[1:03:21] KN: It gets exhausting, right? And then they're misconstruing things that you said. And then it's like, "Why did I even engage in this conversation? I was going to lose a friend anyway. Or you've already made up your mind of who I am. So it's better I just – I've dealt with it. I tuned it out. I let it go." And so, I completely agree with you.

It's rare that you'll ever see an argument happening in the comment section where someone's like, "Ah. You know what? You're right."

[1:03:43] LW: You have a point.

[1:03:45] KN: You're right. Never going to happen.

[1:03:46] LW: Right. Never ever, ever.

[1:03:47] KN: But why even entertain it in such a way when you can just say, "You know what? You have misjudged me. I'm going to exit this conversation. Not engage." Or sometimes even just block that person to protect your peace. Everything has to go back to how you protect your peace. Because I know how I get if I'm getting into some keyboard argument with somebody. Now you've taken away from joy that I should be sharing with my family because now I'm like, "Oh, I can't believe this person said this to me." Wife's like, "Are you coming to the table for dinner?" "No. I got to deal with this fool right now." Right? Why?

Another night, now the kids are, "Is dad coming to eat?" And you're hearing them yell from the other part of the house, "Dad, dinner's ready. Dinner's ready." All right. I'll be out in a minute." What's going on? No. I don't want to do that.

[1:04:45] LW: It's crazy how we still haven't learned you cannot have a meaningful discussion over text message, DM, comment section. It's not going to be meaningful. Why do we still have to keep relearning this lesson? Get on the phone. Get on a FaceTime. Get on a Zoom. Get face to face. And it's a completely different quality of conversation.

[1:05:09] KN: Oh. And I think something to add to that too is if you don't have my phone number or I don't have yours for us to talk about the issue, then you're not even really worth my time of us talking about it. Right? Because if I have offended you and I know you personally, pick up the phone and call me. Or if I misunderstood something that you said, I'm going to pick up the phone and call you. Right?

I always love the analogy where in the hip-hop industry where when they say if somebody said something wrong about Jay-Z or something wrong about Beyoncé in a song, they get that call, and the call just says, “Hey, it's Hov.” And they're like, “Oh, shoot.” Right? Jay-Z just called and, “It's Hov.” And you already know what it's about, right?

And so, sometimes just being able to confront your situations like that, “Hey, it's Ken.” Because we're not going to have this discussion on social media. For example, if there was an issue between you and I, Light, last thing I'm going to do is get into an argument with my brother on social media because I misunderstood you. I'm going to pick up the phone. I want to see your face. Hop on FaceTime, “Light, what is this crazy stuff that we're talking about? We're acting crazy right now. And people are watching us act like this.”

And so, if I don't have your phone number to reach you on these things, then that dispute with you shouldn't even have such high importance or priority in my life. I don't know you. And too many people are arguing with people who don't even matter. You're never going to see that person. Why are you so hell-bent on proving your point to that person? You don't even know them.

The people who you do know who misunderstand you, you probably have their phone number and you can call them and say, “I want to see your face. I want you to feel my heart as we have this conversation.” And they can say their point. And you'll say, “You know what? You brought up some things that – I understand.” Because what you're never going to do – you're not going to do that on social media. You're not going to accept getting checked on social media, in your living room. You're not going to do that, right?

But you will accept that if you're on the phone with someone who you care about the friendship. That you'll say, “You know what? I want to understand where you're coming from.” And then you guys have that discussion. And then it ends with that friendship is still intact. Because what you're not doing is hanging up the phone with someone that you care about and then hitting block. It's rare that we do that. But it's so easy to hit block on social media. Because we're misunderstanding each other there. And so, I just hope that more people can remember that.

[1:07:47] LW: I had about half a dozen conversations that took place in the DMs with people that I knew personally from that post who misunderstood my intentions and everything. And we were going back and forth and I'm trying to prove my side and they're trying to prove their side. Every single one of them got diffused in the moment where I said, "Let me stop trying to prove my side and let me just listen and see them." And when I acknowledged them and said, "You know what? Your intentions are so good. You're doing great in the world. I see it now. I see what you're trying to do." Every single one, "Thank you. Thank you. You too. Thank you so much for being compassionate and blah-blah." That's how they all ended. And I was like, "That's what it is, man."

People are upset because they don't feel seen and heard. It's not about what side they're on. Everybody, including you and I and whoever's listening to this wants to feel seen and heard. And that's really the work. The work is can I set my own ego aside and my own narrative aside temporarily if I care about cultivating this bond, and nurturing this relationship and just see this person.

And the quickest way to get somebody to see your side is to see them. That's the quickest way. The slowest way is to keep going back and forth, and arguing, and trying to use logic to beat them down, and trying to make him look stupid and trying to make you look smart. That's the slowest way to reconcile anything.

[1:09:24] KN: Not even slow. You just might not even ever get to –

[1:09:26] LW: Yeah. You're going backwards.

[1:09:28] KN: Totally. Yeah.

[1:09:30] LW: Digging yourself a hole.

[1:09:32] KN: Exactly. The entire time by trying to by trying to prove your point, you know? And now you've lost a friendship or a connection that may have once valued. Yeah, I completely agree with you on that, man. And sometimes I wish that in these moments when the whole

world is ripping each other apart, we're watching things just tear at the seam, I wish that more people can hear these types of conversations about how we process these things. Right?

As two men of color where our background, our culture. We have dealt with the depression. We've dealt with all of these things. And so, to be in a place where we're still like, "It is not my intent to make anyone else feel stepped on. It is not my intent to make anyone else not feel heard." We know what that feels like as people of color. We know that.

It is not my intention to make a Jewish person feel that way, a Palestinian person feel that way. And sometimes we all make mistakes and we say, "I thought I was doing the right thing. I didn't know that that was going to offend you. I'm sorry." Or sometimes even our pride as men, as human beings, maybe it's not that easy to apologize, but we are able to retract and say, "You know what? I thought I was doing the right thing."

And sometimes people don't even allow us to get to that point. Cancel culture or whatever else it is. Screw you. I thought you were this person. You've lost all of my support and all of this. And I'm unfollowing you and blocking you. And I'm going to tell the world that you're anti-Semitic or that you're against Muslims. It's just like, "What? Are you not paying attention to the color of my skin?" Trust me, I've been through it. I get it. My people are still suffering today. Last thing I'm trying to do is make you feel that way at all.

I misunderstood. I thought I was doing the right thing. I'm not a racist person. I not a hateful person. And that's why I have to remind people, check my character, check my work, check my background before you try and put me in that box. Right? Sometimes I don't understand and I think I'm doing the right thing.

[1:11:49] LW: Again, man, hurt people, hurt people. Hurt people say hurtful things to people. And, again, we have to remind ourselves that's a reflection of what that person is going through. And they're going to probably need some more space and time to – they're in their process. It's like your son, in the middle of his process, the last thing you want for him is to be on social media or whatever trying to communicate with people. You have to like give yourself time and space to go through your process. And maybe you're part of a support group. Maybe you have a mentor you can talk to or something like that. But it's very useful. It's very helpful to be able to

do that before you start to engage again with the people who you are projecting that hurt and that pain onto.

Yeah, not everybody is well-read in all the subject matter of whatever the conflict is. And everyone's doing the best they can and trying to work it out for themselves. And we need to be patient for them to have their process as well. I think the most important thing that we can do though at the end of the day is just to hold space. Hold space for people to go through their stuff.

And I'm a strong believer of those of us who have the awareness to understand the complexities of these dynamics when we're in the middle of the conflict and when emotions are highest to not take it personally. That's really the big job when you're in the middle of it and you're trying to hold it all together, is to not take it personally. To understand that everyone's doing their best they can. You're doing the best you can. And it's just we have to go through it. We have to go through this process.

And you see it as a parent, you know, all the time holding your family together, holding your kids together. But I love what you said. When you were navigating your son's emotions, you knew it wasn't personal. You knew it wasn't something that was a defect of his. You knew that he was going through something else that had affected him. And you knew to ask the right questions to sort of give him a safe space to bring that out and to process it. I feel like we can do that with everything.

[1:13:54] KN: 100%. It broke my heart when I finally got to the root of it and I'm watching my oldest son cry like that. And my wife, she's looking like, "How did you know like that was going to come out of him?" Because I know my son and I know his character, right? And I think that sometimes we have to remember that, that when we're passing judgment on people, you know that person and you know their character.

If this thing that you're judging them on seems outside of their character, work with them on that. What's going on? I'm trying to navigate this thing. I'm watching the same videos of war that you're watching. I feel some type of way on the inside. I need to speak up on it. Right?

The easy thing to do is to just stay silent and say, "I don't want to have anything to do with any of this." But then we have to judge ourselves and struggle with going to sleep at night saying, "If I was alive during the time of the Holocaust, would I have said something?" Because that's what this period of war feels like for various groups throughout the world right now.

And so, you don't want to be silent knowing that, if you were alive back then, if you were alive during the times of slavery, would you have spoke up and said, "This isn't okay." And when people are fighting for their civil rights, would you have said, "This isn't okay." Or would you have just said, "I'm just going to do my little bit of work and have my little space over here. And I'm just going to worry about this." No. Some of us are called to do more. Some of us are called to speak up more on it.

The issue that we run into is it's hard to try and get all of the information fast enough. And so, it's almost like as we are leading up to being able to express ourselves in a way that we truly feel about it, we have to wait and get as much information on these things before we can pass judgment on it, which goes back to the example with the racial injustice for the black community.

And I'm always telling the community just wait a little bit. There's probably more information that's going to come out. Right now, if you look at the war, all the misinformation and conflicting information even just about this hospital being bombed two days ago. This group saying they did it. This group saying they did it. That group is saying that group did it.

And so, for everyone who rushed to judgment, took to the streets, did all of these things around the hospital, they all thought they were right. And even still right now at this very moment, it is not conclusive. Yet people have fought each other here. More people have fought each other over who did it than the number of people who were directly affected and killed in it.

There was what? 500 people or so in the hospital. Millions of people are not getting along right now because of their judgment of who actually did it. That's the way hate festers and grows. And we're allowing it to do that. Rather than taking a step back and saying, "I'm not going to be part of the millions that are going to fight each other over something that isn't even conclusive yet." And we're fighting each other over this. Hate loves that. Hate loves that. We're feeding into it. It loves that.

And so, instead we have to get to – let's hone in on the things that cause us to love each other more. What does that? Children. Babies. Can we all agree that those babies need to be held? That those babies need to be protected?

When little Kenny was born, the very boy that I'm telling about right now who when he was – what? Three years ago when this happened right here in my dining room when I had to confront him about how he was treating his sister. The day that he came out of the womb 13 years ago, some fathers cry. But for me, I started laughing so hard, hysterically, that the nurses, and the doctors and everyone else in the room started laughing. And I turned to one of the nurses and I said, “The cold air that's in here, there's laughing gas in here.” And they're like, “No. It's not.” And they're cracking up. I'm like, “There has to be.”

And I understood in that moment what being overwhelmed with joy seeing your child come into the world. And there's times where I have to remember that when I'm looking at some of these parents who they see their child and just collapse to the ground screaming and crying. That is the opposite of the joy that I felt when I watched this doctor take little Kenny out of the womb and his first cry. It was the sound of his cry that just triggered me. I just started laughing so hard. Just overwhelmed with love and joy so much I couldn't stop this belly laughter, right? The opposite is watching pain coming from people's belly. That scream, that cry of this is their baby. I never want to feel that. I never want to feel that.

When I'm watching these videos come out of these things happening, of course we want to speak on it. Of course, we do. As adults, as parents, as activists, as human beings that just care about other people. Of course, we want to speak on it. That's where the well-intention comes from. I'm well-intended when I say this about this group.

So now to be judged when I'm well-intentioned on doing this. It came from a good place in my heart. And when you do that, now I'm being called anti-Semitic. You don't understand where this is coming from for me personally. And why I care so much about this child. “Yeah. So you didn't care about this child over here? You didn't care about all these other years that it was happening?” I'm going off of what I'm looking at right now. That's all I have. That's the only

information that I have in front of me right now. And it's unfortunate because we're not able to voice that to people.

And so, I appreciate you even giving me the space to speak about these things. Because sometimes when I'm on stage, I have to be somewhat mindful and sensitive of who my audience is and not to be so extreme in the content that we're talking about. But we're in a period of war right now. And people are dying. Babies are dying. It's like we have to get raw and real about the things that are happening around us because it matters that much to us.

I try and just focus in on the things that I know are very true to me and what I would be worth fighting for. And for me, I would be worth fighting over the protection of children because I love kids that much. And so, I think people have to find what works for them.

[1:20:51] LW: What's your starfish?

[1:20:51] KN: That's it.

[1:20:52] LW: Yeah. And for me, facilitating these conversations. Using my platform in any ways that I can to bring people inside. Because I also – I felt like I didn't have anybody to talk to about this stuff because nobody else in my inner circle is putting themselves out there in the way that I was putting myself out there. I said, “Let me talk to other people who I know and have connections with and relationships with who are also probably catching the same sort of heat that I'm catching and just see it. And why not record the conversation?”

I've been calling up a lot of my friends who are sort of wellness leaders and spiritual leaders and just seeing what their experiences are like. And I think this could be really helpful for people who may want to say more but they're afraid to get skewered by the voices of social media. Yeah, I appreciate this. I did this for me as much as I did this for my listener.

And I think this is a good place to end it. Unless you have any final thoughts. But, yeah, I'm just – even when this conflict kind of does its thing, there's going to be other conflicts. I wanted this to be sort of like a primer that anybody could use to help just get centered, get reset, keep your

mind on the right things, keep your heart in the right place in order to be the most useful and effective.

[1:22:13] KN: Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, we're going into an election year next year. It's like whether the wars are still happening in 2024, we're going to be at war right here in the United States over right versus left politics. And we know that. And all the fighting starts all over again.

And so, people have to really take this time and especially people who watch this, probably my final thought would just be to reminder people take a step back. Exhale. Focus on what really matters. Does it matter to you that much to get that point across? And if it does, then fight for that and stand on it. For me, that's how I am with children. I'm willing to fight for that. I'm willing to stand on it. I'm willing to – when someone says, “You're anti-Semitic because you didn't post this about this other kid.” I'm willing to stand on it and say, “It's this video that I just watched right now about this kid that matters the most to me right now. That touched me a certain way. There may be a video that comes out of Israel. There may be a video that comes from this area in Ukraine or this part of Africa that will touch me the same way and I'll put that out there.”

But people don't get to tell me that every single time that I put out something about one group, that I must address all groups. Isn't that exactly what all lives matter was? Right? When this group is drowning, and I'm like I'm concerned about them because they're drowning right now. Yeah. But all lives matter. But the rest of these people aren't drowning as bad as this thing that I just saw right now. Sorry if my attention is on this thing right now. It doesn't mean that I don't care about the rest. But I'm focused on this right now.

And so, I think, politically, we're going to start to see a lot of that as all the division and victory all starts all throughout the country again. People have to stand on what matters the most to them and what struck a chord with them in their heart the most. Stand on that.

[1:24:06] LW: Thanks, brother. I really appreciate you. And we'll definitely hop on again and keep the conversation going. Thank you for bringing all the peace, and the love and the hugs into the world. And for being a shining example to the kids and to all of us of what's possible.

I changed my name to Light in 2005. And I knew that when I did that, there were going to be certain expectations of my behavior. And I feel like you have the same thing going. When you put that shirt on, paint you into a really beautiful corner.

[1:24:35] KN: Yes. Yes. And you have to live that, right?

[1:24:37] LW: You got to live it.

[1:24:39] KN: Whether it's free hugs or it's peace, whatever it is, you have to live that and you have to exude that. And a great compliment that I just heard from an elderly woman on one of my posts she had commented, "I was listening to one of your videos and my son walked by and said his voice sounds like a hug." He didn't even see who was talking.

And so, eventually, you become your brand. You become – and so, you changing your name to Light, you're called to be that. You have to be that. You've stepped into that. That has become your brand. Just as much as I need to feel like a hug. I need to feel like peace. Anytime that I have stepped out of character, I have to pull back and remember who am I. And if this is who I set out to be, I have to be that.

And so, for you, if you have set out to be Light and people try and put you into a dark corner, you're like, "No. No. I'm not going to let you do that to me. I'm Light and this is how I'm going to make sure that the world sees me. Yeah, man. I appreciate this time.

[1:25:40] LW: Love it, man. Thank you.

[OUTRO]

[1:25:42] LW: Thank you for tuning in to my interview with peace activists Ken Nwadike Jr. You can follow Ken on the socials @thefreehugsproject. And of course, I'll put links in the show notes to everything Ken and I spoke about. You can find those at lightwatkins.com/podcast.

And if you enjoyed our conversation and you found it inspiring and you're now thinking to yourself, "Wow, I would love to hear Light interview somebody like Brené Brown," here's how you can make that interview happen between me and someone like Brené Brown.

You see, I reach out to people like that all the time and some of them accept, but a lot of them don't. And that's because my podcast, while impactful and inspiring, it's still in its building phase. When potential guests like Brené, or Richard Branson, or somebody like that, when they come across my invitation, they pass it along to their gatekeepers, their gatekeepers, to vet the show, are going to go look at my ratings and my reviews. And they want to see how engaged of an audience I have. And that's one of the reasons why you hear a lot of podcast hosts saying, "Please leave a rating. Please leave a review." It's really the best way to support your favorite podcast. And it only takes 10 seconds and it's absolutely free to do.

All you have to do is look at your screen. Click on the name of the show and then scroll down past the first half a dozen episodes and you'll see a space with five blank stars. All you do is click the star on the right and you've left a five-star rating. And if you want to go the extra mile, which would be greatly appreciated, just type one line about what you appreciate with these episodes. And that way you can cast your vote and show that you are engaged member of the audience so that their gatekeepers can see that and go, "Oh, okay. I definitely want to do this guy's podcast. Because, look. Look how much activity he has in his comments and in his ratings."

Thank you very much in advance for that. Also, don't forget that you can watch these episodes on my YouTube channel. Just search Light Watkins podcast on YouTube. You'll see the entire playlist if you want to put a face to a story. And also, I post the raw, unedited version of every podcast in my Happiness Insiders online community, which is at thehappinessinsiders.com.

And you can also access a lot of fun challenges. Right now, we're doing a resting squat challenge. A 30-day resting squat challenge. That means sitting in a squat for 1 minute a day. There's also a meditation challenge. A no complaining challenge. Gratitude challenge. And a bunch of other fun challenges for becoming the best version of you.

All right. I look forward to hopefully seeing you back here next week with another story about someone just like me, just like you, taking a leap of faith in the direction of their purpose. And until then, keep trusting your intuition. Keep following your heart. Keep taking those leaps of faith. And if no one's told you recently that they believe in you, I believe in you. Thank you. Sending you lots of love. And have a great day.

[END]