



Essential Alchemy

The Ancient Art of Healing Naturally

Season 2, Episode 16: Speaking and Living your Truth with Leah Zaccaria, E-RYT

Jodi: Hello. I'm Jodi Cohen, your host. And I'm so honored to be joined by one of my personal mentors and favorite people, Leah Zaccaria. She's the owner of three successful yoga studios.

Two in Seattle. One in my neighborhood called hauteyoga Queen Anne. One in a neighboring neighborhood called Shefayoga and an amazing hotspot in Venice Beach also called Shefayoga.

She's also the author of this unbelievably vulnerable memoir that we're going to talk about, *Seen*. And the founder of-- how do I say that? Sendatsu?

Leah: Sendatsu.

Jodi: Sendatsu Evolution which I did her first teacher training, and it's evolved amazingly since there. She holds teacher training, leadership programs, retreats, and other programs. In her free time, she loves to dance, travel, go to the movies with her daughter.

And just a little backstory. She opened hauteyoga Queen Anne in the summer of 2009. That fall, my son started preschool. My daughter started kindergarten, and I had free time for the first time ever. And as all the moms dropped their kids off to kindergarten and were crying in the playground, someone said, we should go to that new hauteyoga studio. I had never been.

I went. It changed my life. I did your yoga training. And then when Max died, I didn't know what to do. And so I just showed up and kind of-- I decided I could cry on my mat the whole time, but it was the most amazing, most healing. I really do think that yoga and your studio got me through my darkest hour and my darkest days. So thank you and welcome.

Leah: Yeah. Thank you. So beautiful.

Jodi: So you have so much wisdom and beauty and knowledge to share, but I want to start by asking you, how do you define resilience?

Leah: Well, it's such a powerful word, a powerful thing. Resilience is just getting up over and over and over again and staring failure in its eyes and learning from it. Because I think so often when we are in a place of failure or things don't go our way, we can easily just like want to just stay down. And for me, I'm always like, in whatever situation I'm in, how can I get back up again and again and again, and what did I learn from that? And/or how did I contribute to whatever the situation is, and how can I be better the next time?

Leah: And so resilience for me is just constantly being adaptable, willing to look at yourself, willing to make changes, willing to evolve, willing to listen, willing to see yourself. And it's really a self-reflective process is resiliency.

Jodi: Yeah. And I mean, you're kind of the poster child of resilience. And this book, Seen, and even the word Seen, you said by allowing myself to be seen, I gave others the inspiration and permission to be seen.

And then seen means so many things. It's kind of like seeking validation from others. And then, at one point, you say, what is seen cannot be unseen. So can you speak a little bit about the book, the title, the intention?

Leah: Yeah. So I wrote that book because I wanted to reach people potentially beyond the yoga mat. So I've been teaching yoga for over a decade now, and I know that not everybody else is going to come onto the yoga mat. So I wanted to write down in words on a book to potentially reach a bigger audience because my mission in the world is to help people live their truth.

And so I proclaimed that I wanted to write this book, and really what it was about was to truly show myself. To let myself be seen. To stand in that face of vulnerability and all of my mess and all of my glory so that people could identify with my story. And a lot of people did in that way. It was just like, me too.

So like, I didn't cure cancer. I didn't do anything profound. It was really just being vulnerable with my honest truth. And I'm a story of many people's stories. And I wanted people to have a chance to have that moment of like, oh my gosh, me too. I've been through that, and thank you for allowing to have permission for that.

And so that was really the goal behind it is just for people to see my own vulnerability and inspire them to do the same. And me by doing that myself was like, it was highly vulnerable to put myself out there. I mean, you read the book. I'm raw. Even my editors were like, are you sure you want to put that in there?

Like, how filtered do you want to be? And I was just like, no, this is about being seen. This is about telling the raw realness of all of it. And I'm going to step into that light, and I'm not going to filter to make myself look a little better.

Leah: So that was a huge exercise for me. And I really had to come up against my own fears and my own worry of judgment, and it was such a beautiful process because I just let myself walk through it. And then, through that process, like the book, I was just on a quest of truth, of resolve, of evolution. And then I didn't even know how the book was going to end. And the end, whoa, one of the biggest truths of my life was revealed by writing this book.

That's when you allow yourself to be seen, when you allow yourself to see what you cannot-- when I say like you can't unsee what you've seen, it's like when you journey on, and you start to see things, what are you going to do with it?

And you know you can't unsee it, but you get the choice to do something with it. You can push it back under the rug, or you can rise to the occasion and do something with that truth of what you see and shift things around.

Jodi: That's one reason you're one of my role models. I mean, you really embody personal responsibility in every form. Your family of origin was complicated. And so you just went out and were such an overachiever for so long.

Leah: Yes. I was, but that was my dysfunction. One of the big realizations in my life is that because I had such a dysfunctional family, my two sisters ended up going off the other way of like addiction and alcoholism. And yet, I was overachiever. And in this society, that gets accolades. That gets validation.

And so what I realized though through my journey of healing was I was just as dysfunctional as them, but in a societal way, I was accepted, and I was actually encouraged, but I was miserable. I was a control freak. And I was trying to keep everything just so that nobody could leave me.

And I was miserable. So that's, again, a lens that I hoped to show people as well. It was just like just because the outside looks all bright and shiny-- and when I was going through my transformation and leaving the corporate world and all of the things that I did, people literally thought I was straight crazy. Because I looked the part. I looked so successful, but I was miserable, just like so many that are living from that space.

Jodi: I mean, that's my default too is to overachieve and also to overdo. Like, do things for other people thinking I was helping them and not realizing that really wasn't of service to them.

Leah: Yes. For sure. I mean, I think that's one of the things that we do and especially even as women, because that's what we're trained to do is nurture and take care of. And so we're easily swayed in that way.

And then you put a woman in a man's world, a corporate America man's world. Then you overlay, overdoing and doing stuff for others as well as trying to keep up with the role of a man and also feeling valued or equal to that. So there's a lot that can go-- that layers on that when we over function.

Jodi: Well, and you've been amazing in your boundaries. You say at one point that you lost some relationships, some voluntarily, some involuntarily. Some people came back. Can you speak a little bit about that?

Leah: Yeah. Ultimately, one of the reasons why people resist transformation or change is because we're afraid of rejection. We're afraid that we're going to lose love. We're afraid that we're not going to be lovable. And so we just hang back and say, you know what? I'll just rather stay back here for the risk of not being rejected or losing love. And so that was one thing that I just had to walk through. It was just like, yes, some people were going to not want to be around me anymore.

And so those were the voluntary people or the involuntary ones that people were like, no, I'm going to go to this side. They are not going to be friends with me anymore. And then others, it was a huge choice on my end for a lot of the relationships that I ended because they were highly dysfunctional. And one of being which was my journey with my mother. And so that was just such a difficult decision, but one of the biggest things that set me free in my whole life. And the thing that I learned about this is that that's the process of uncovering the truth, though.

Is that we have to really look at the relationships that we're in because we've heard that before: you are who you hang around with. You are the people that are in your life that are feeding you and projecting on you. What you are is what you become. And so, I really had to look at each and every relationship that I was in. I'm like, is this true for me now? Was this true for me ever? And is this healthy for me, even if it is from my own family?

And that is so hard for so many people because we're taught, respect your mother and your father at all costs, whatever. But for me, I was just like, no, I really want to be able to have-- I'm an adult now. I'm an adult human being that gets to now make a decision of what's healthy in my life.

Leah: And not to say that I'm not grateful for those people that came in my life because they taught me so much and how to be, but that doesn't necessarily mean I need to be in relationship with them still. And so that was a huge acceptance and a philosophy that I embodied that I was like, this is how I'm going to forge this path. I'm literally going to have the relationships in my life that I feel are true for me, healthy for me.

And not with malice, not with anger. With full forgiveness and actually gratitude. And no, I'm not going to be in their lives. And so, interestingly enough, I went through that journey. Some people did come back around, and that's the beautiful thing. It's like, anytime somebody leaves in your life, it's going to be a mirror. And that's what I realized.

It's like those mirrors were people like, well, she's leaving my life. What is it that I've done? They have to almost look at themselves. What's going on? And that jars people. Everybody's just like, no, just stay here. Just stay right here because that means everything's peace-y, everything's fine. We don't have to change.

But the moment somebody shakes something up, it makes them look at themselves. And then, again, you can't unsee what you've seen, but what are you going to do with what you see? And so again, some people it's better just like disregard her. She's off her rocker.

But then when they come back around, then they see me living my truth and doing what I was supposed to do, they come back around, and they're like, oh my gosh. I still get it. And I'm so sorry.

And then the people that didn't come back through, it literally just has set me free. I look at some of the relationships that I was in for so long that were just soul-sucking, energy-depleting. And we do that so often again because we're afraid. And we also just don't want to hurt people.

Our inherent nature is not wanting to hurt people, but ultimately, it all ends up where it's supposed to be. And really, for me, the willingness to have the boundaries and have the people that are in my life that are most supportive has really allowed me to see that those are the people that are going to love me and that do love me and accept me. And those are the people that should be in my life.

And the ones that don't, again, I don't have malice. I literally don't. I just move on, and I just let people be what they want to be. And people are in their own stuff. They can do their own work, and if they want to come back around, I'm here. I've always said that. I was like, I'm here. I'm ready. But until then, I'll have the boundary because that's what's healthy for me.

Jodi: I mean, it was amazing. You talked about your childhood sweetheart, who became your husband. When you got this amazing promotion, instead of being happy for you, he was jealous. And he was worried that he'd never catch up. Or even the way your stepfather was always trying to bring you down.

Leah: Yeah. And what I learned from that is just people are in a lack-based mind, so that unworthiness. So it wasn't anything-- my ex-husband, he was jealous, and yes, he was unsupportive. But really, like I revealed in the book, it was just like it really is about having-- they have their own lack of selfworth.

Just like in the four agreements. Don't take things personal. So nothing anybody does is because of you. So for me, of course, at that time, because I wasn't where I am now, I took it personal. But now it's like I can see it's like that was just where they were. And it was their own lack of self-confidence that didn't allow them to be supportive of me or wanted to bring me down.

And that's why it's so important that we have to do our own work, to create, to cultivate our own self-worth and our own bravery and our own courage. And that deservedness of like I have the right to be here. I have the right to have good things in my life. I have the right to be loved. I have the right to have this promotion. I have the right to live my life the way that I want to live it.

But that is cultivating your worth. And if you don't, you're going to get whittled away down into the sludge. And then it's like a downward spiral from there. And then you just start doing dangerous things to try to measure up.

Jodi: Yeah. And the thing that really shines-- so I don't want to give away the ending because it's exceptional. But this betrayal at the end, you're so clean. You really lean into the pain, and then you write this beautiful letter that kind of is so compassionate and so not blaming, so not judgmental—and so taking ownership for how you might have played into it. It blew me away. Can you just kind of speak to that?

Leah: Yeah, because I think this is probably one of the most important concepts of my entire book is compassion and really looking at your contribution to the situation because I think we are so easy to point fingers and to want to place blame. And it's so interesting because I was just having a conversation with a friend today of having the victim mentality.

And it's so easy to be in the victim mentality because we're programmed that way to be in a fear and a lack-based place. So we're already being like, of course, this happened to me because there's already not enough. And so I'm not enough. So, of course, this is going to happen to me.

Leah: So there's that side because this is already programmed into us to already go into that victim mentality. But for me, a big side of this, the second side of this is that if you go into the victim role, then that means you're saying I don't have any responsibility to what just happened to me.

And so it was everybody else's fault. So I'm going to stew in this crap forever because they put it in me. And then I don't have to do anything about it. And for me, it's like, no, this was a huge thing in my leadership and what I do in all my leadership and all my relationships. And this is what ends my own suffering and that angst and anger and the resentment. It is like, what did I do?

How did I contribute to this situation? Where could I have done better, and where from my hurts and my own dysfunction did this cultivate? And big point here, and it's not to condone the behavior because I did not condone the behavior of what happened to me. However, I understand that I had a part in how we got to where we got and why he did what he did.

And because I saw myself, I could have compassion for him. Because I, too, contributed to the dysfunction and to the ultimate betrayal because of my own stuff. And so from there, when you can see yourself and say, yeah, I had a part in this too, then you can lean more into compassion because you want that same compassion back.

And then also it just leaves it in a place of like, again, not being the victim and just like I love you. I'm sorry for you. And I'm sorry for what I contributed to that situation. And you can go now.

I mean, ultimately, and you can go now. Like physically, emotionally, spiritually set me free. I don't want to hold onto that because I don't want to live in the past. Because living in the past and again, that same victim mentality is where the disease manifests and sits. It will keep you from manifesting your future and bringing you into what you're supposed to bring in your life's purpose.

Jodi: The other thing that you talked about that I thought was incredibly brave was leaning into the pain. You say pain is never permanent. The sensation subsides. We just need to be willing to feel it. And I think most people don't know how to feel it. And I use yoga to feel it. So I'm wondering if you can talk about that.

Leah: Yeah. So fun. I love that when the universe kind of brings. I was just talking about this last week in my classes about feeling pain because, again, ultimately, our psyche wants to protect us. Because our psyche goes to this place of right away of catastrophic mind that, oh my gosh, if I do this, this and this is going to happen, failure is going to happen, blah, blah, blah. And I might die.

Leah: Ultimately, we go there. It's so subconscious, but it's like we go there. And so it's the same thing with pain. It's like, oh my gosh, if I feel this pain, this pain might not end. And then I'm going to die because I can't handle the pain.

So that's an exercise that I do so often is that when you recognize, if you feel this pain, this heartbreak, or this loss or whatever it is that you're going through, and you recognize this is not going to make me die, literally. I'm physically not going to leave this earth if I feel this pain. This will actually set me free if I lean into the pain.

And I think things like anger and pain and rage have gotten a bad rap. I'm a huge believer that all emotions need to be felt and leaned into because that's where you're set free. When we repress pain and anger and shame, that's when they hold in your body. And that's when they become dangerous because repressed anger and shame and pain manifest into disease.

Or they become dangerous, and then you react, and you fly off the handle, and then you do something that you regret because those emotions need attention. They need attention. And if they don't get attention, there's no way of getting around. They're going to come through in some certain way. And it's usually not a good way if you don't feel it.

So for me, I have spent at least the last five, six years training people to feel shame, rage, pain. To teach them that it's not going to kill them. It is actually going to set them free.

Jodi: Is that why you have people who will plank for like seven minutes or whatever it is?

Leah: Pretty much. I mean, yes, I hold plank for at least two minutes in every single one of my classes. And it's not about getting six-pack abs. It's literally to train your mind to feel the sensation, to let yourself feel into the emotions and not let your brain tell you that you can't, that you're not strong enough, or the pain's too much, or the sensation's too much.

Obviously, in yoga, we don't want to be in physical pain, but most of the time, it's the mental anguish. It's the pain of your mind that's telling you, you can't do it. And so I'm trying to train people like, yes, you can. I mean, you can bear witness to me. I can hold it for a really long time because A, I'm not attached to when it's going to be over. And B, I just lean into the sensation.

We do so many hard things in our life. A two-minute plank is nothing but our brain can't wrap its mind around it because it's constantly in this process of I can't.

Jodi: Well, and the uncertainty too.

Leah: And the uncertainty of like, when is this going to be over? She's going to hold me here forever. And there's no way I can do it. I'm going to die if I do. There it is. There it is again. Oh my God, I'm going to die if she holds me one second longer. No, you're not.

And I honestly ask myself that question anytime I'm up against pain or fear, anything like that. Will I die? And I always just chuckle at myself. I'm like, no, I won't. Just move through it. Move, lean into it. Feel the vulnerability. Feel the sensation. Feel it all and see that you might actually be able to do it.

And it's actually really powerful and freeing. And I just love bearing witness to people walk through that door too, and just seeing what they can do because we're powerful beings. And we don't give ourselves enough credit for it because we've been whittled away by the programs of the world.

Jodi: Can you speak to-- I've wondered. Yoga is the best thing I've ever done in my life. And it shifts me in ways that I can't explain. And I'm wondering why do you think it's so effective?

Leah: Because you're learning how to breathe. Because breath is your life. If you're not breathing, you're not in this earthly body. So we don't give enough attention to our breath. And yoga is a breath practice. So if you're constantly for at least an hour, hopefully, every day, but even if you do it a few times a week, you're concentrating on your breath, you are living. It tunes you into presence.

It tunes you into yourself, and it's the access point to feeling. It's the end all be all of getting you. When you feel like you can't do it, you take a breath. When you want to come back to a calm place, you take a breath. So I mean, that's the secret. It's just like we learn to really breathe. And it's like, of course, we constantly are breathing because it's involuntary. It just goes.

But when you put voluntary intention around it, then you're giving it some attention, and you're actually doing it in a more mindful, connected way that it just opens everything up into-- we're trying to get more present. We're trying to get more attentive, non-attached. We're trying to be in the moment, and that's what the breath does.

And by and large, most people do not pay any attention to breathing like ever because even if you work out, it doesn't necessarily mean you're paying attention to your breath other than it's going faster or it's harder to breathe. Especially the way that I teach my yoga classes, the first thing I say is the breath. I cue the breath.

Leah: So yeah. And I just think breathing moves energy. And when you start to breathe deeper, then it moves the energy even more. And so, when you move energy through your breath, you free yourself. Yeah. And then you start to feel stuff. For me, yoga is about feeling. It has nothing to do with the physical posture. It is literally how do I get myself to feel more through my breath?

Jodi: It's so true. I breathe through all my hard poses. Is there anything that we haven't touched on that you think is helpful to share on living your truth or resilience?

Leah: One topic that I want to bring up, and I think it's just really-- because I call myself a vulnerability seeker is the willingness to be vulnerable. To sit in your truth is to be exposed, to be seen as highly vulnerable. And when I talk about vulnerability, Brené Brown is one of my all-time favorite people who I've learned so much from her.

And even in my teacher trainings, we read the book, Daring Greatly. So that's kind of one of my little Bibles. So she has significant influence even on the title of my book because, in hers, she says about allowing yourself to stand up and be seen in your vulnerability. And so I'm inspired like her. And now, one of her little ambassadors of going out into the world and saying vulnerability is not a weakness.

Crying, feeling, standing, your exposure is not weak. It's the bravest thing that you could do. And so I'm just on this quest for people to understand that to stand in a vulnerability is to be in this place, to be willing to fail, to be messy, to not be perfect, to show yourself, to live your truth. And the more we can do that, the more we're going to be free.

And the more we'll actually be able to see each other or in each other's relationships. Like marital, personal, business relationships if we can be vulnerable with each other by asking for what we want, saying what we need, telling our feelings instead of holding them back. It's so courageous. It's so brave, and it's so important.

So just demystifying vulnerability, demystifying feeling, demystifying telling people I love you. All that stuff is just vulnerable because why? Because what if I don't get it back? What if I'm rejected? And just laying that all down and seeing that at the end of the day, the more vulnerable you are, the more you are truly creating that connection and compassion that we all want.

Jodi: And I will speak to this because I feel like I'm a participant in your first studio. The Venice studio is exceptional. I mean, the energy that you've created there is truly unbelievable. And I strongly encourage anyone who's in Seattle or California to visit your studios. But for those who cannot, can you share how they can find you online and maybe take one of your online classes?

Leah: Yeah. So I do online classes every week. So you can go to any one of my three yoga studios and just go to the class page and sign up for an online class there. I do new fresh classes two or three times a week. So that's a great way to access me if you can't get to Seattle or you can't get to Venice.

Jodi: Thank you so much for your brilliance and your courage. I really appreciate you.

Leah: Thank you so much.

Jodi: The light in me honors the light in you. I love you, Leah.

Leah: Namaste. Yeah.

Jodi: Namaste.

Leah: I love you.