



**The Athena Wellness Podcast**  
**Episode 182 – How to Keep Your Inner Flame Burning with Damian White**  
**February 19, 2023**

[music]

**[00:00:05] Kathy Robinson:** Welcome to *The Athena Wellness Podcast*, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

**[00:00:30] Kathy:** Today's episode is brought to you by The Athena Wellness Academy, your resource for wholehearted living.

The Academy's featured offering is an online course called, *From 'Type A' to 'Type Be,' How to Mindfully Descend the Corporate Ladder and Invite What's Next*. This course is perfect for you if you're contemplating or navigating a professional transition, and it's available as a self study or with a small cohort of students facilitated by me, Kathy Robinson.

To learn more, I invite you to go to [AthenaWellnessAcademy.teachable.com](https://AthenaWellnessAcademy.teachable.com) or click on the link in the show notes.

**[00:01:21] Kathy:** Hello and welcome. Thanks so much for joining me.



I'm thrilled to bring you today's episode because it's about the essence of who we are as human beings. It's about our inner flame and the things we do to keep it alive at all costs, even when the odds seem to be stacked against us. It's about coming home to ourselves weathered and fractured but resolved to reclaim our identity. And it's about turning our life experience into a form of expression that not only heals the artist but those who experience the art as well.

I'm joined today by writer Damian White, who just released his debut collection of illustrated poetry entitled *I Made a Place For You*. We go long and deep in this conversation talking about his journey from PhD student to being homeless, living on the streets of San Francisco to his life today as a writer, husband and stepfather.

Here's what we cover:

- Damian's compelling backstory and emergence as a writer;
- How he kept his inner flame burning during challenging times;
- The importance of mental health and well-being;
- How creative expression can be healing; and
- The paradox of spirituality.

You'll also experience the power of Damian's words as he reads two of his poems for us and speaks to the beautiful illustrations from artist Francesco Orazzini.

You can learn more about Damian at [damianwhitewrites.com](http://damianwhitewrites.com) and I'll put links to his website and his publisher's website in the show notes.



And now onto the show. I hope you enjoy this thoughtful and inspiring conversation.

**[00:03:18] Kathy:** Damian, welcome to *The Athena Wellness Podcast*. Thank you so much for being here today.

**[00:03:23] Damian:** Thank you. I'm super happy to be here. It's actually my last day of vacation, and I was like, "How better to wrap up this vacation..."

**[00:03:30] Kathy:** I love that. That's perfect.

**[00:03:32] Damian:** "...then on this podcast?" I've been blabbering to my wife all day long.

**[00:03:34] Kathy:** It makes me feel really good. I get just as enthusiastic about these things, so I'm really pleased. I think it's going to be a wonderful conversation

Please tell our listeners a bit about who you are and what you do.

**[00:03:46] Damian:** Absolutely. I'm a writer and creative from Columbus, Ohio. I recently published a collection of poetry. It's an illustrated book with Francesco Orazzini, who's a talented illustrator from Livorno, Italy, and the book is titled *I Made a Place For You*.

So right now, I'm basically trying to get that book into the right hands, get the message out, share some of my life experiences and the overcoming of struggles with others in a way that shows solidarity, empathy and understanding. That's why I'm here talking to you.



**[00:04:17] Kathy:** Perfect. As a reader of your book, listeners know that any author that comes on, I really do read the books and I want to bring the best there is to our listeners. And as we get into the conversation, I think certainly your poetry and your book speak for itself.

But before we get into that, what brought you to the writing that you do today? How did it all come about?

**[00:04:38] Damian:** I've always loved writing. It's been a passion of mine since I was a kid. I still have my first poem on my mom's refrigerator at her house, which is hilarious because I was in kindergarten. The poem is about a beetle and not being afraid of a bumblebee flying around. It rhymes. It's great. It's just great that it's still there.

I think that I've always found that there was some craftiness in wordsmanship. There's something about it that was intriguing and curious for me. I think that it allowed me to play around with ideas in a safe way where it's like you could write something funky and people can vibe with you and understand. Because people, that's what we do.

A lot of us are trying to find ways to capture stuff and there's not always language to do that. Poetry, and many other forms of writing, are a way to create that language for yourself.

So for me, I've always done it on the side. I think I took it more seriously after college. I started doing poetry slams and spoken word nights and some of those



things, which it's a different feeling because then I started to get the crowd participation. I got to see if my words were resonating with folks, if people were paying attention, or asking me if I was going to come back next week, or if I just was there and I could dissolve in the background, and nobody chatted with me afterwards.

I got a sense for what it looked like to be a poet in public spaces. And I think I liked the feeling. It was my first time not just having poetry that I put on a WordPress blog that maybe my mom and her friends, you know, they gave me a nice little comment on Facebook. But it's not the same as getting that visceral actual reaction and seeing people's faces while you're reading.

So I really enjoyed that. And I think just doing that told me that I will have a book in the future. I didn't know when that was at the time, but I knew it was something I should do. I wanted to see my name on the spine of a book on my own bookshelf. I think that coming out of all the experiences that I know we're going to dive into later, just coming out of all of that, it was the penultimate moment just of getting what was inside of me outside.

It's hard to describe the journey sometimes. You know, I don't have like a checklist of I did this, this, this and this. A lot of things led to me realizing that I was the only one that was going to be able to write this thing I wanted to see in the world. The day came where I decided I was going to start doing it.

**[00:07:01] Kathy:** There's so much in that as you were talking about the poetry slams and spoken word. Given the type of poems that you share in your book, I'm



trying to reconcile... You know, when you're at a slam or when you're doing a spoken word event, that's a very different place than getting to some of the places that you got to with the book.

So tell me a little bit about... I can understand that reaction and you can see whether or not there's something to what you're writing, so I get the response. But just from a personal standpoint, what's it like to stand up in that situation? I mean, it's a very vulnerable place to be.

**[00:07:40] Damian:** That's a phenomenal question. I like the first part you were getting at, too.

Just the transition from writing longer three-minute pieces to writing what became this book, I had to grow as a writer to do that. For me, that was very hard. That was one of my insecurities for a while. I didn't know how to pare my words down into page poetry.

Because with spoken word, there's so much emotion. There are little tricks and tips for pacing. There are these other performative aspects that I think allow you to fudge the writing a little bit sometimes where you can add those fluffy words. Great writers and great poets they know, but for the majority of people, you can get away with like the *ofs* and *thes* and the *extra a* and the filler because it adds to the performance element.

But for this project, I had to completely evacuate that way of thinking. I had to figure out, "How do I take what I have and pare it down into the best of what's



there?" And that's completely different than saying, "I need to fill up three minutes. Whew, I've written 2 minutes and 30 seconds with this stuff, but I still have 30 more seconds." Then you start to just add stuff.

This is the complete opposite of that. You've got to cut stuff out. You have to make it the meat and potatoes of what you're trying to get at. So that's one part of it.

I would say that actually standing up in front of people-- There was another fear that I had, which you're getting at my insecurities. You're getting at all my insecurities now. [laughter] You're digging deep. There was this fear of public speaking because I actually used to have a stutter. It was because I think that my mind was always moving so fast and I was not practiced in getting that out vocally.

And so for me, I had to figure out the balance between - how can I... I felt really good at describing myself on paper and not so good at describing myself or talking about myself or talking about my work in person. And so for me, there was a level, there was a ladder I needed to climb in terms of just level of comfort.

So the first couple of times I did the poetry slams, very interesting because I won them both, but I was nervous. I was so nervous, I was shaking. I remember doing so many things wrong. Now that I'm more seasoned, I think I did a bunch of stuff wrong, but I wouldn't have known that at the time.

How do you balance that? You're getting the reward, which is winning first place. You're getting the reaction, the good scores and yada yada yada. But inside, I feel



like a furnace on fire, just all nerves. I didn't know what to do with that, but I think that the combination is actually what I needed.

You need to have that little bit of discomfort because that discomfort is sometimes jarring and necessary because it tells you like, "Hey, you can thrive here, but it's going to be a little uncomfortable. This is a space where you are welcome and you can build something, but it's going to be different than what you're used to." The playing field is not as level as maybe as when you're just performing poems in front of the mirror, there are other poets that are here, there are other people who are sharing their craft.

And so I think participating in the community became a driving force for me to want to improve. I had favorite poets that I'd watch on YouTube and I went to New York a few times to go to, just to watch poetry shows. It was phenomenal because it's just not a thing that you can go see everywhere all the time. I can always go to a movie. I can go grab a ticket to a movie any day, but I can't go watch the best poets perform every day.

And so, I had to build the excitement for myself. That little movie I kinda made in my head of what it looked like to be a poet and expressing yourself. I just loved it.

**[00:11:13] Kathy:** Yeah. You know, as you're talking about whittling down these three-minute performances into what you have now, which is very distilled and very expressive, it just shows the growth, and it's almost this feeling of sculpture I get. You had to chip away at all of this stuff, so it's this wonderful growth arc and our listeners will be able to hear some of this in a little bit.





But before we get there, I know this has also been quite a healing journey. And so I'm wondering if there's anything in your background that would help as we start to talk about some of these poems to put them in perspective that you'd like to share before you read the first one?

**[00:11:51] Damian:** Absolutely. I'll give you the abridged version. I think that it's important for people to know I spent three months homeless in San Francisco in 2015. So that time of my life was very transformative in a multitude of ways, emotionally, spiritually, mentally, personally, physically. And that came off the heels of me losing my job and having the fear— I don't know if fear is the right word.

There is this yearning not to come back home. I had this desire to be independent still to make the point to everyone that I could take care of myself and that I didn't need to be dependent on family and friends and borrowed money and using your car and staying in your place and can I crash on your couch? All of those things.

I had been the model student and I had gotten the great job and I had done things in the order that people said you should. And then my life took a just catastrophic tumble.

And so for me, it was rebuilding my identity with the people who knew me then was challenging because I had this sense of fracturing, I'd say, where now I feel embarrassed, disappointed a little bit in who I'm presenting to those people who knew me a certain way before.



And I think that this book was the place I put those insecurities and those fears and that disappointment and those emotions that I didn't know what else to do with. Understanding that that came from a reckoning of my identity and just a true identity crisis. I really went through what I believe was rock bottom.

I mean, I can't imagine it getting lower than that. Just to the point where I'm in the homeless shelter, I'm sleeping in parks, I'm eating out of the shelter, I'm getting my clothes from Salvation Army. It was like *The Pursuit of Happyness*, the movie. In *The Pursuit of Happyness*, Will Smith's eating at the exact same shelter, it's called Glide. He's eating at the exact same shelter that I was eating at.

I saw the movie after my experience. I didn't notice that the first time. But then when I came back home and I watched the movie, I was like, "I walked down the same street. I stood in the same parking lot in order to get into that same shelter. I went to those same offices for those same state resources to see if I could get housing."

It was this meta feeling when you're like, "That was me," but you're watching the movie glamorized version of it. I feel like there was so much of it in that movie, I feel like if there was a sequel, my sequel, I could literally film in the same spot and make a new version of that movie with my story from just those three months.

It was just a very challenging time. The glorious moment that came out of it was this book. This is the catharsis, this is the reckoning, this is the self-understanding, this is the part where I say, "Hey, I overcame that, and here's the physical tangible manifestation of what that was."



**[00:14:50] Kathy:** I'm wondering when you're at this rock bottom looking up, what was the hand that you were able to grasp onto, and what made you willing at that point to do so?

**[00:15:00] Damian:** I think it was just a fight-or-flight response. I think that's truly the best answer. I think the question becomes very weighty when your back is against the wall and you feel the pressure. I think in those times, I had to be my own fan. I had to be my own gas tank. I had to be my own propeller jet. I had to be my own engine.

Because a lot of the family and friends from my old life – basically old life is everything before homelessness – all those people I had shunned. I had thrown my phone in the ocean, literally. I had done so much to keep everyone out of my business. I wanted to do what I was doing, and I had a plan, and I knew I was going to be okay, and I knew I had it figured out.

And so, I had to depend on myself. I think that self-reliance prevailed in that fight-or-flight system. And I think that also just accepting that if nothing happened, then death was the imminent possibility. I didn't see any bumper rails. I saw I can continue along the path I'm going and I see the outcome, or I'm going to have to make a change.

That's the back up against the wall moment that I'm describing. And in that moment, I had a choice. And I chose that it's time to go home.



**[00:16:13] Kathy:** Wow. That's a big inflection point, especially when you've come so far in a particular way of thinking and then that has to change. And that takes a big man to do.

That actually leads us beautifully to my next question, which is, would you read a poem for us, because I would love it if you would start us off with your first one.

**[00:16:39] Damian:** Absolutely. Would love to. This poem is titled *Post Mortem*.

*We abracadabra our flaws into a mausoleum of deceit  
For a semblance of redemption in shelling our leprosy inside  
I always loved the ones we bury, our uncanny trove of white lies  
When I expire, inscribe my epitaph on Pandora's decaying box  
Hum melodiously as you adorn my headstone with pastel foliage  
Let it read: "Here lies a man who never died inside."*

**[00:17:21] Kathy:** There is just something about that line, that last line, it just gets me every time.

And it's this idea of this inner flame that you really started to describe so beautifully. Somehow you were able to keep your essence as you were going through this experience. I think that's so remarkable.



In those three months, what was it that kept that flame alive? Something was fanning that. Do you have any idea what that is?

**[00:17:51] Damian:** It had to have been curiosity. I think that if I go back to that time, I remember feeling like I had been in school for so long that I had lived in that bubble that everyone talked about.

I remember I asked my professor in grad school, my advisor, I said like, "How did you get the life experience to write the--" The book he wrote, I really loved it, and it was an ethnography. And he had done these qualitative interviews with these black kids from New York and it was just like so rich, full of culture, and you could feel it.

I was like, "How do you write that?" I didn't have that. There was something about my writing, even in my after school writing. I was missing something. I think, in my opinion at the time, it was a lack of exposure to certain environments, experiences, people. I had been sheltered in a sense.

And so, when I was out there for the first month or so, it didn't feel scary. It felt like Willy Wonka's chocolate factory or something. It felt like going to Disneyland and you're just there like, "I'm going to see what's over here at the Goofy Mountain. I'll be at Mickey Mouse Island for a while." And you go to the park and then you go to this area and you meet these people and you do this thing and you find out about this other place. It felt like an exploration in a sense.



As weird as it sounds, I wasn't zoomed out. I wasn't looking at where I was necessarily the same way someone from the outside would be. Because I was also feeling the freedom of not having to pay bills anymore. I didn't have a phone, so nobody could contact me. I didn't have to call anybody. I didn't have any more emails to respond to.

There was so much that I let loose when I left grad school and then, again, when I left my work. Like when I left my job, I didn't know how to deal with that feeling. You're like, "I feel bad about where I am, but I also feel good that I don't have any of these other problems I've been having." So I'm reconciling those two things.

So yes, it's terrible that I'm eating at the homeless shelter and, yes, it's terrible that I'm sleeping in the park. But it's also amazing that I literally spent all day with people and we just talked. And I literally hung out at the park and we played music. Like there's those things. It's like that hippie lifestyle you're like, "I don't know if this is real or not," but then you're out there and you're like, "People do do this."

And there's so many homeless people in San Francisco that it's one of those places where you could almost make it feel normal. You could almost make it feel like a community of people who weren't always trying to get out of there.

So there were times where I'll say that I wasn't looking for ways to come home. I wasn't looking for the next way out. I was content. I didn't want to talk to my mom, I didn't want to talk to my grandma, I didn't want to talk to my aunt. I wasn't looking for a plane ticket back to Ohio. I was just living my life.



It's a very challenging thing to describe to people because it's very counterintuitive to the logical, rational, progressive-- the steps we typically take on our path to success. None of them say, "Hey, take the pit stop at homelessness."

**[00:20:50] Kathy:** Mmhmm, but wow, what a deep dive into life experience.

I wonder, you've said that poetry is a way of healing a fractured identity and you wrote your book as a reconciliation. Is this part of what you're talking about?

**[00:21:06] Damian:** Yeah. So I would say a part of my identity died when I left grad school, and I grieved that loss of my identity. I wrote about this in one of my poems, but I find that there's often a strife between faith and fate sometimes. And to me, life can feel a lot like the grieving process where there are various stages and there's agony and there's triumphs of getting out of one stage from going to another. And it's kinda unpredictable and sometimes repeating.

All of the accolades and prestige suddenly no longer mattered. Who is Damian White now? That was the question that I had to answer. I think that I knew that I hadn't forgotten how to write.

I might have forgotten how to be a productive member of society for a while. I might have forgotten what it meant to go sit out and have dinner and be well kept and put my suit on and be politically correct. I might've forgotten those things temporarily during that time, but I never lost my education. I never lost my will and creativity. I never lost any of that.



It was just the only way I knew how to heal myself. I didn't have a buffet of options, "Well, you can do one of these." I knew therapy wasn't the answer. I had been there, done that plenty of times. I knew that prescription, the antidepressants, weren't the answer for me. Personally, I had done that.

For me, it's like I really just had to figure it out. I think that you just go back to what you know sometimes. And I knew that I feel good when I turn a feeling that I have in my stomach into words.

**[00:22:39] Kathy:** How does it feel now that your work is out in the world?

**[00:22:45] Damian:** It feels amazing. I had this *E.T.* almost moment when I received my book the first time. It was like E.T. showed up at my doorstep and you're like, "I made this alien." [laughs]

It was very cathartic, I would say. I had an incomparable sense of gratitude. There was just this moment of realizing what I had constructed in my mind showed up on my doorstep. It's like when you get something you're scared to look at - I was scared to look at my book the first time I got it in the mail.

I got the Amazon package and I opened it up and I was like, "Oh man, I can't." I literally let it sit there for two hours before I decided I will actually read this book. Because I had just seen it on my computer. I'd only seen it on my screen. And now I'm looking at it in my hand. Hard to describe the feeling, but grateful and cathartic would be the emotions I say I felt the most strongly.





**[00:23:42] Kathy:** It's funny when that Amazon box comes and you know something you wrote is in it. I've had that experience as well.

So I have to ask you this. Once you were able to open it up and take a look at it, did you put it on a bookshelf next to some of your favorite authors [laughs] just to see what it looked like?

**[00:24:00] Damian:** That feels like such a natural next step for what I'm going to do with my book after I get off this podcast. [laughs]

**[00:24:05] Kathy:** It feels really good.

**[00:24:07] Damian:** That feels very good. No, I've had it on display in various areas in my apartment. I have one in the kitchen, have one in the living room area. Just people come over.

I have not put it on the bookshelf, though, which is funny because that was actually the bucket list item. The bucket list item was to see my name on the spine of a book next to the other books. That's a great suggestion for sure.

**[00:24:28] Kathy:** Wonderful. You know, I like that you're taking your time - you're taking some time to open the box, taking some time to just let it be. I like that this is an unfolding journey, which feels really great, especially for the type of writing that you do.

**[00:24:42] Damian:** I was going to say I also found it important to just read the book as a reader when I first got it. Because it's super easy to be like, "The print



quality or the pages, the thing didn't come out how I imagined," and you can look at the project from the critic's standpoint as soon as you get it.

I have to be the biggest champion and cheerleader for my project, for my book. So when I got it, I was like, "I'm just going to read the book." I wasn't looking for like, "How did the cover come out?" None of that. I really just wanted to read it like someone who would receive it in their mailbox.

I think that it was critical that I took those two hours not to open the package because those two hours allowed me to really gather my thoughts and decide like, "What do you do with this thing now?"

You had read it a million times on your computer and the last time you were reading it was just to make sure it was perfect to go to the printer and that's gone. Now, you have to really read it as a piece of work. And so I took that as an opportunity to do that.

**[00:25:42] Kathy:** What was that experience like? As someone who has not read her own book [laughs], I'm really curious, what was that like?

**[00:25:49] Damian:** It was amazing to me because, specifically for this project with the illustrations, I had been imagining the visual element of seeing the poetry next to the images. And so for me, on the screen, it's one thing on screen, but in your face, I think that it really makes it pop.

To me, it was just like I finally brought this thing to life. I finally brought the idea to life, and I couldn't really get the feeling of the heart beating of it until I received it. I



didn't feel that heartbeat in my project until I actually saw-- this was what I intended. I intended for the pages to look colorful and to make you not sure if you want to read the poem or look at the picture and figure out what's going on. I intended it that way, but for so long I was just, like you said, sculpting the poems.

I didn't get a chance to really just enjoy it myself, enjoy the book, be a part of it and read it like I want others to read it.

**[00:26:41] Kathy:** Actually, let's talk a little bit about Francesco Orazzini and how that collaboration started.

For listeners, when you look at the book, to Damian's point, you said heartbeat, that it really brought it alive. I love that word. I had mentioned that the way I was thinking about it was more like this Buddhist koan, each one of them, because they're so complex and they're so multi-layered.

And you're right. I did have to choose. Because the image gets your eyes, but I wanted to read because I just read the poem on the previous page so I really wanted to read the poem. And you do have this moment. And then it just makes you linger on the page, which I think is really beautiful. That's what you want a poetry book like that to do.

How did you guys find each other? How did you start working together?

**[00:27:28] Damian:** It's funny, it started off as just a very regular freelance relationship. I contracted him to draw some sketches for me. This was very early



on as I probably had the first 30 or so poems. Not all of them made it into the book, but I had written all I was going to write.

I sent out a lot of feelers to a bunch of illustrators just to see who had a style that I resonated with and who felt inspired by the work as well. Because it's a big project. It's 25 illustrations and the cover. So if you don't like it, it's definitely not the project for just the person looking for the check.

So he sent me back sketches. And I knew immediately when I saw the little bird figure with the crown in his sketch that he was my illustrator because he had already brought something to the table in a way that was going to only bolster the idea and vision I had for this project.

So once I saw that, I was like, "Hey, let's do some more sketches." We did some more sketches, and then he sketched all of the poems. Then at that point, we're talking about like, "What medium do we use for the art?" We're deciding on watercolor versus different digital methods.

He actually drew those sketches by hand, and then he watercolor painted them, and he digitized the watercolor painting. So, they're actual original paintings for each of these illustrations, including the cover, which is super cool and was important to me because he's a true creative in the sense where he values the creative process.

So we gave each other a lot of space. I didn't tell him, "Hey, for that poem, *Post Mortem*, draw me a casket with wings." I didn't say that. I wanted to really



collaborate. I wanted to have an actual collaborative project where I gave him the space to bring his ideas to the table as well.

And I basically told him, "This is half your book, in content and just in my thinking about it, half of the pages are literally filled with your work. And so I want you to feel like this is an area for you to really start building your portfolio in another way as a published illustrator in this book."

I think that us having those conversations in the beginning really allowed us to bounce ideas off each other and push the envelope. I could be critical of certain things. And I could also bend a little bit and like say, "Hey, maybe my idea for this wasn't--" He took it in a different direction and I like it. And so like, "Let me reconcile that. Let me be okay with that."

I think that just all of that happened together, the synergy of it, it worked out and now we're the best of friends. I talk to him all the time.

**[00:29:58] Kathy:** That has to be amazing when somebody in a completely different discipline can bring another perspective to your own words.

**[00:30:06] Damian:** It's also very challenging as a writer to want that. I heard all these weird things like, "What if people just like the pictures or not the poems? What if this and what if that?" You hear all that stuff, and you're like, these are the lines of thinking that lead people to not give someone the full autonomy to bring what they can to a project.



I could hear it. If this bothered me, if I was afraid of that, then I would've said, "Hey, just make the illustration really small, or do doodles." I would've scaled back his involvement because I would've wanted to make sure I was making my word shine.

But I think that if you value yourself as a creative, writer, author, artist, then you would only want to approach another creative, author, artist with that same level of respect and allow them to expand your vision. I feel like I only benefited from that.

**[00:31:00] Kathy:** I'll tell you, it looks like you guys were working together for years. It's amazing.

Because you had mentioned before and this is really sticking with me – the people that you met when you were in San Francisco who were in crisis, this experience, it feels to me, like there's a lot of empathy that comes from this. I just wonder from a broader-- I'm asking like you a really, really big question, but it just makes me think how might we approach this as a society.

And part of this question comes from, there's a line in one of your poems that says, "Two felonies in my pocket, one to snort, one to shoot. A perilous pair of pastimes." And I noted that because in preparing to speak with you, I'm thinking about the moments of where that could have put me on a completely different trajectory. We all are faced with these moments, and sometimes you can literally feel a hand pulling you back, and sometimes you feel that moment when you're going into free fall. That's just life.



But it's so compounded when there's no safety net. So, I'm just wondering from your experiences, is there something that we can take from that to be more empathetic, to be more compassionate, to solve a larger problem? How do you think about that?

**[00:32:31] Damian:** I think that my experience there was humbling and that's the easiest way I can say it. In the sense where broadly, I think that what we all need to do, probably, is to zoom out.

I think that sometimes we're in the crucible, and we feel like we're heating up, we're good. Our career is progressing. We got the new car. We finally got the mortgage we want and the house and the kids are doing good and school is fine and daycare is paid for and we have 60 presents under their Christmas tree. Whatever the barometer for your measure of success is, I think that those things, people don't often realize that you're constructing an identity subconsciously and consciously based on the things that you're valuing in your life.

So for me, when you're out there, nobody cares about what school you went to or what accolades you have or the prestige of your private liberal arts education. So I think going back to the question of, "Who is Damian White at the time," the humility came in of having to really answer that question. Because...

This is kinda cheeky, but if you're a grad student or you're even in most professional jobs and you go out to happy hours and you're used to going to business meetings and lunches with your coworkers, the conversations are kinda



the same. It's a round table discussion, updates and the good stuff and, "Hey, my kids doing this," a lot of that.

But imagine what those conversations are like sitting around the table with people who are literally living out of trash bags and who are trying to figure out where they're going to sleep. And so if your conversation style and your content has been that for so long, year after year, I had to relearn how to talk to people. I had to relearn how to interact with society.

In a lot of those situations, there's a lot of shouldering, there's edging out. You want to edge out the next guy. You want to be at the top of this food chain, or you want to be the number one grad student at the school, or you want to be the number one employee in your company. And so, there's a lot of that.

I feel like when I was out there, and if I needed a hoodie, nobody had money. I didn't have any money. But there might have been a guy who got like three hoodies from the Salvation Army earlier and he might have needed a sandwich, and I got extra sandwiches from the shelter. And so I could go say, "Hey, I'll give you these sandwiches for the hoodie so I can be warm tonight." And he would probably say, "Yes."

To even get to that type of strategy, I had to eradicate so much thinking because that's not how we solve problems in our regular life. We don't solve problems like that. It's like an ultimate humility I felt. I just felt this deep sense of like, "I have to be connected to people."





Where for so long I wanted to be disconnected. I wanted to show my separation from everybody else. I wanted to feel separated from everyone else. I feel like there's some pride, some ego, there's all that stuff in there.

But, what helped me a lot was just realizing, to use a classic example, not judging a book by the cover. Those people didn't know me from Adam.. I didn't know them. Whatever their assumptions about me could have been - 100% would've been wrong. No one could have possibly predicted who I was based on where I was. And so I assumed the same thing about them.

I assumed the same thing about them and I've carried that lesson into my life now, not to judge people, not to think someone doesn't have something to offer. I assume the opposite. I assume that I'm meeting this person, I'm talking to Kathy today because there's a purpose for this. It's a purposeful conversation. I'm supposed to be talking to you. There's something meant to come out of this. Even if it's just me getting words out and listening to how they make you feel or listening to what questions they spark. I don't know what the ultimate goal of all these interactions are, but I now feel like it's my job to be receptive, to be open, to be still curious.

You know, I didn't kill my curiosity - I want to make a point about that. I never killed my curiosity just because that was what led me to where I went. Because there are parts of that that are super important qualities. Just the yearning to what to know how to do stuff.



You know, I'm not a graphic designer or anything by any means, but I like to dabble with photos and things like that. I'll see a new technique or a new program. I want to know how they did that. Or I'll see a picture I like using this new AI thing and I'm like, "Let me download the app." There's that, and I carry that curiosity into so many aspects of my life because it's constant improvement, it's constant development. It's motivating because you're like, "What can I do next?"

Also, just not thinking that what I've done in the past is my best work or is my last work, or that I've done my best already. I still think there's more to come. If you know that and you walk around like that, there's an empathy that is just bottled up in there. Because you know that if you are still trying to give to the world, you need people to receive it.

And so if I want people to receive it, I need to be receptive to what everyone else is putting on in the world, too. I now feel like I've adopted that empathetic stance on life, and that would be my two cents for a strategy at least for how other people maybe could think about it.

**[00:37:57] Kathy:** So beautifully said. I love this idea that what started this experience was this need to disconnect. Yet, you found that it was the connection that really taught you so much and brought this humble feeling. The fact that curiosity, that's the essence, that's the man that never died. It was that curiosity. It still stayed and if anything else, it's been elevated to drive you in life.

And you mentioned this idea of zooming out. One of the lines in your book, you've said, "The golden rule of speech is to speak when spoken through." With that



gorgeous line as a backdrop, can you share a bit about your spiritual journey and that connectivity that goes beyond the human connection and how that may have shifted over time?

**[00:38:48] Damian:** I find this to be one of life's most intriguing questions.

I think that the question I ask myself whenever I try to get in the mindset to tackle such a topic is like, "Do I feel like the puppet or the puppeteer?" I can say I believe I felt like both at various times. That's tricky because I think that I want to feel like I'm being used by the Universe sometimes. I want to feel like I'm connected, I'm aligned, I'm walking the right path. I want to feel that way. Then sometimes I don't want to feel like the consequences of things are my fault. When things go wrong, sometimes, you want to blame somebody. But when they go right, you want to feel like the architect of that thing.

And so, for me, I feel like I've had trouble with that question because it goes to, "Is there a God? Is there no God? Is there a heaven? Is religion the dominant force in your life, or is it not the dominant force in your life?"

And I feel like I've approached that question from an academic perspective for so long. That these experiences led me to the moment where I had to really realize that ideas are different than feelings. Because it's one idea, it's one thing to think, "I may need God one day." And it's another thing to be sitting in an alley with your back up against the wall and it's raining, you don't have an umbrella, wondering if there's a god that's going to save you. Those are different. They require different answers, you know?



For me, I don't even know that I have fully answered the question, but I can say that I went from believing that I was the person moving the chess pieces to knowing that it's more than that. And so I feel like my resolution has been to make myself a vessel to be used in places where I'm supposed to be as opposed to saying that I need to be in these places and now I'm trying to draw the line in the sand from Point A to Point B.

That's what you're doing when you think you're the chess captain. When you're the master architect, you think that you're moving the pieces, going back to the puppet example, you're moving the puppet around, right?

But it's different when you're like, "Maybe I'm the puppet, and I'm just supposed to be able to be moved." And is there a flow between those two states of being where sometimes I am supposed to make a choice that feels a little more big. And there are other times where I'm supposed to just be in place, so I can show up and be somewhere.

And I think that if I allow myself to believe both those things are possible, I don't have trouble with the question about spirituality. I don't need any more answers. I think that, for me, both of those perspectives encapsulate what I would need to feel I'm making choices based on a moral compass that I feel confident about.

**[00:41:52] Kathy:** Yeah, I was going to say maybe there's a third where you are the puppeteer, made of God, and you're controlling your own strings.



As you were speaking about being in the rain without an umbrella, that's a hard place to see that god essence in yourself when you're in a place like that. And maybe the questions that you're reconciling now is, "Is it possible that I was always that, and what does that look like?"

Because, yeah, that takes a big, expansive heart to be able to see all of that, and then to see purpose and meaning in some of these humbling experiences that it sometimes feels better emotionally to look at it in a different way than to wonder, "To what degree have I been doing this?"

It's this odd paradigm of... it's surrender, but you're still in control in some way, if that makes sense. I think we're both wrestling [laughs] with the question.

**[00:42:58] Damian:** No, it makes perfect sense to me. I think that that makes me want to say that I also had to make the choice about what questions I need answers to.

Because I think that there are questions that I didn't get answers to that I just saw as a spiral going nowhere. It's like when you get on YouTube sometimes and you're going down the little rabbit hole, and you're like, "Oh, man, I've been watching YouTube videos for 16 hours." You're like, "I don't know how I did that. Oh, it all started with that one video back there yesterday."

I feel like there are questions like that in life and sometimes we just are so insistent on getting the answer to unanswerable questions. For me, it's like I had to just



decide I don't need to know the answer to that. I need to be confident in what I believe and what I feel and move forward.

I think that's the faith part. That's the faith and fate struggle. There's a tug of war between faith and fate. That's one of the concepts in this book is reconciling that strife.

**[00:44:00] Kathy:** Yeah. I love that. Your fellow poet, David Whyte, calls these beautiful questions. He always says, if the question isn't troubling, you're not going deep enough.

And it's a wonderful practice. It's something I started a couple of months ago where there are some times where I'll just sit down with my journal and I will just write out beautiful, troubling questions with no intention to answer them. Because it does lead you to a place where otherwise you wouldn't get to that place.

There is some freedom in saying, "You know what, I'm going to pose this and I'm not looking for the answer to this." Then it gets back to that sense of surrender. And maybe that's it. Maybe the deeper you go, the less answers there are because they're wordless.

**[00:44:44] Damian:** I think also I have just learned that I want to be present. I want to be focused on the present. When you start to dwell in the realm of all those unanswerable questions, you're not in the present. You're either in the past or you're in the future thinking about what it's like when you figure out the answers.

**[00:45:01] Kathy:** Nice.



**[00:45:02] Damian:** For me, I want to stay, when I'm with people I'm around, I'm having dinner, I want to be at dinner, I want to be at the table, I want to hear the conversation and be able to participate in what's going on. I want to be able to make it known that I care about what's being said.

I think it's a look. It's the aesthetic of gratitude. That's how I think about it. I want to exude the aesthetic of gratitude where when I'm somewhere, it feels like I'm happy to be there. It doesn't feel like I'm there and I'm worried about what I'm going to do next week or I'm still mad about the bill I had from last week that I had to pay. I want you to feel like when Damian comes to stuff, it's like, "I'm so happy he's here because I know he's here."

I think that that's been crucial for me because so much time was spent in the past just thinking about all that happened, just thinking about all the shoulda, woulda, coulda - what I could have done. The advice I didn't take, all this stuff. And you're trying to figure out who to blame - still, years later. I knew that was unhealthy. I only saw more destruction coming from that line of thinking. So, I think the aesthetic of gratitude would be the best way I could capture the feeling I'm trying to have, yeah.

**[00:46:18] Kathy:** Beautiful. I want to close with one more poem. Before we do, I think I saw in your bio that you love road trips and you're a big coffee fan.

I'm curious, if you could go anywhere, you had no restrictions, any road trip, anywhere, where would you go? What would you do? And then, as a tack on, what's your favorite coffee joint anywhere in the world?



**[00:46:40] Damian:** Can I drive across the ocean or no?

**[00:46:42] Kathy:** You can go wherever you want.

**[00:46:43] Damian:** Cool. I'm going back to Europe. I think I've been wanting to go to Budapest. The reason, it's funny. I've only seen Expedia travel videos of Budapest, and I've seen pictures of it. I just think it's beautiful. And I'm always attracted, even online, I'm attracted to places that they just look like when you go there, they feel like they're out of a magazine.

And Budapest is one of those places. Prague was on that list of places for me. I went there last year. It was all that and more. So I'd drive to Budapest, I'd be in Hungary somewhere taking pictures and probably having coffee.

My favorite coffee joint? Man, that's tough. I'm going to go local since I'm in Columbus. There's a place here called Crimson Cup. I like that they have a small menu and you can tell they get their coffee beans in small batches. And they'll have a special for just this week and it's like this very cool latte made with the bean, just the outside of the bean.

For me, I go there, and I feel like I'm learning. There's education with my coffee. I'm learning about new places that coffee is sourced and I'm also just learning about new ways to drink coffee. They exposed me to the Chemex, the pour over.

But I will say that my favorite coffee bean, I think, is Papua New Guinea. I don't know why. It's just my favorite one.





**[00:48:05] Kathy:** All right. I'm a big coffee fan myself, so thank you for indulging me. I'd love to close with one last poem before you tell us where we can get your book. Maybe we'll do that so we can actually close with your poem. I think that would be a lovely way to wrap up.

So please tell our listeners where they can find your book, where they can learn more about you.

**[00:48:26] Damian:** Absolutely. My book is available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and at atmospherepress.com. That's the press I publish with. Also, you can find me at [www.damianwhitewrites.com](http://www.damianwhitewrites.com), D-A-M-I-A-N. I have everything, all the links there, too. If you want the E-book or you want the physical copy, you can find it on Amazon or Barnes & Noble there.

If you're in Ohio, Columbus, or local, there are some small bookstores that are supporting the book as well currently. If you happen to find it, grab one off the shelf and tag me, so I can see. [laughter]

**[00:49:01] Kathy:** Wonderful. I would love to just let the words speak for themselves. Would you read the last poem in your book?

**[00:49:10] Damian:** Absolutely. This poem is called *Playing God*.

*I gave myself God's glory. He lent it to me briefly.*

*My shoulders buckled beneath its magnificence.*

*To be Godly is not to be God.*



**[00:49:30] Kathy:** Thank you so, so much. Really appreciate your time, Damian. Thank you.

**[00:49:35] Damian:** Thank you.

[music]

**[00:49:45] Kathy:** Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.

If you'd like to access the show notes, have a question you'd like addressed on a future episode, or would like a transcript of this episode, visit [www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast](http://www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast).

Until next time, be well!

[music]

**[00:50:47] [END OF AUDIO]**