

Yes, and Cafe
Episode 1
Guests: Dr. Lois Holzman, Tucker Daniel

Nadja Cech: Welcome to the *Yes, and Cafe*, a podcast where we explore, learn, and create with ordinary people who do extraordinary things.

Omar Ali: 'Yes, and' is the powerful, intentional, and creative practice of building with other people. The name comes from improvisational theater. So, what is it? One, paying attention. Two, affirming. And three, building on what others give you. That's it! Yes, and.

Nadja: I'm Nadja.

Omar: And I'm Omar, and we're broadcasting from the University of North Carolina Greensboro.

Nadja: We are here in the studio with Dr. Lois Holzman. Say hi Lois!

Lois: Hi! Hi!

Nadja: We are super lucky to have her here today. Dr. Holzman is director and co-founder of the Eastside Institute, a research center for developing and promoting alternative and radically humanistic approaches in psychology, education, and community building. Lois received her doctorate in developmental psychology and psycholinguistics from Columbia University. She's the author of four books including most recently *The Overweight Brain: How Our Obsession with Knowing Keeps Us From Getting Smart Enough to Make a Better World*. Lois is currently at the UNCG campus in her role as the distinguished visiting fellow in Vygotskian practice and performance in Lloyd International Honors College. Lois, welcome! We're so honored to have you here.

Lois: Thank you so much. I feel very privileged to be here, especially with the two of you.

Nadja: Thank you!

Omar: Lois, in your lecture at UNC Greensboro last night, you mentioned how we've compartmentalized play and learning as if they're separate. Learning becomes associated with work and play with having fun. You're a major proponent of the idea of blurring the lines between work and play, of bringing play back into education. Can you tell us a little more about why you think play is so important for learning?

Lois: If you go to our beginnings, not as a species so much but each of us as a human being, how we function in the world and how we've learned anything, and how we've developed, and grown is through play. There are no times for learning when you're a baby, you're learning all the time, and you're also playing all the time except when you're sleeping, although who knows. [Laughs] And when you're crying, although many, many parents are very playful when kids are

crying and that's one of the ways you get them to stop crying. It is to play. So I and many other people around the world, play researchers, I can just speak about the most famous play researcher, a pioneer named Bryan Sutton-smith who's an Anthropologist originally from New Zealand. And his famous book is *The Ambiguity of Play*. And in there, he talks about many many things, but the line that gets me is "The opposite of play is not work. The opposite of play is depression".

Nadja: Wow, that's heavy. I got chills when you said that!

Lois: And yesterday Omar, you and I were talking with some of the students, the honors student ambassadors, about the increase in referrals to the mental health clinic of college students. Not just here but around the country. And I just think of Bryan Sutton-Smith's comment constantly. One more thing is that there's a very prominent researcher and psychologist named Peter Gray whose written many, many books, and he looks at the increase in mental health issues in children and the decrease in play and the correlation in between those two.

Nadja: So this idea of play is really interesting and I know a lot of your work is informed by performance and improvisation. How do you come to that? Are you trained in theatre? Do you have to be a performer to perform in this way?

Lois: I think you become a performer by looking through the lense of performance. That's a characteristic of human beings, that we're in some way always performing. And that when we're very little, we're supported to perform and we don't even know we're doing it. As you get older though and you're discouraged from performing, and continuously told to learn, and to work, and to be yourself, be true to yourself, we're not supported to perform so much anymore and to try out new roles and try out new things to do and new ways to do them. So I am a performer and you're a performer in that sense. In the sense of was I trained on the stage? Absolutely not! Do I even like it? No! But that's not the most relevant thing. I mean it's wonderful how so many people have come to embrace performance and to learn to perform on the stage who haven't come from the stage, and they're mixing with people who have been trained and love to be on the stage but in real life don't perform. They're job is to perform and to be other characters, and to be different from who they think they are. So that mix of the kind of opposites, when you get them together, magic happens.

Nadja: I'm thinking, you're talking about being a kid and performing and I'm remembering my son who's now 15, when he was little, would always be wanting to do skits and scenes with us all the time. I think that's really typical of little kids. One of his big things was he was Bob the Builder and I was Wendy, and that's what he would do all the time. Or he was Ernie and I was Burt, and that was constant. And then at some age, we stopped doing that. Like they get embarrassed, they don't want to have that or play that game anymore.

Lois: Yeah, so how can we encourage them and you? I mean you may have not wanted to play too much anymore.

Nadja: Right! I may have been relieved to give up my role as Wendy.

Omar: It seems like it requires a kind of intentionality as adults. You have to be very kind of intentional to do this, there isn't a methodology. The name of this podcast is Yes and Cafe and it's something that we embrace on this campus to some extent. And in your work, you draw on this concept of "Yes and..." as a guiding principle of improvisational theatre. And you say Yes and enables what you call "practical-critical activity. So what is practical critical activity and how does Yes and make it possible?

Lois: Great Question. I will be discovering the answer to that I as respond to you, which is the best kind of question! There is no bad answer to this one, I'm going to create it. Okay so practical-critical activity is a synthesis of the practical, people who do things, say "let's just do it," and the critical which, maybe as many listeners know, there are fields in just about every discipline. There's critical pedagogy, there's critical psychology, there's critical economics, there's critical history, there's critical science studies, which look at the assumptions of a particular discipline and critique it. Critique it from political perspectives, from philosophical, foundational, all different ways, but they're called critical in their fields. I have many colleagues that are critical psychologists, critical educators, and they don't do anything except that!

Nadja: Except criticize what other people are doing?

Lois: It's what other people and the institutions [are doing]. So, in education, there's so many people who criticize how education runs from a foundational level, like what the theory of learning is, why other people who are similar to each other are put together, they should be all mixed up, blah blah blah. Then there are people who start new schools, and who homeschool their kids, or whatever, you know, they do the practical, they say, "I'm not involved in that." Practical critical is the synthesis of those things, where what you're doing is creating something, you're doing something, and that something is at the same time a critique of what exists. So the therapeutic work that we are involved in at the Institute is a critique of traditional therapy, but it's not a critique in and of itself, it's a practice, and in the practice, is the critique. So if you come into therapy and it's a group therapy, and the questions are something like, you know, "I had this horrible day and I feel like killing myself," and then some group member or the therapist might say, "What kind of help do you want? Why are you telling us this now? What would you like us to do?" That in and of itself is a critique of the traditional approach, which would be taking notes and saying, "Have you felt this way before?" and diagnosing. So that's one example of the critique. I think the work that you're doing in bringing play and performance into the higher education, into your classrooms, in your seminars and outside and--it's called play Monday? Monday Play?

Omar: Monday Play. Yeah.

Lois: ... is itself a critique. But it's not nasty, it's not negative, it's not putting anybody down. It's saying, "We're going to do this thing and in it we'll discover some of the things that are problematic about how they're usually done.

Nadja: And at the same time build something new.

Lois: Right. So, the question was about improvisation, right? And how it's a practical, critical activity. Well, I think--and I owe this to Cathy Salit, my colleague who runs a company called Performance of a Lifetime that brings improv and performance into... you take a situation like a dating scene. So it's taking the critical activity of creating something ridiculous and fantastical... They are creating the environment for the scene at the same time. [The] thing that happens on the stage at the same time, that's practical critical activity.

Omar: Instead of going negative, you go positive by building and that is the critique. And to me that just feels so much better, just on a basic human level--

Nadja: Than pointing out all the things...

Omar and Nadja: ...that are wrong. Right.

Nadja: To say, "Let's just do something different."

Omar: Exactly.

Nadja: And it's sort of, the problem vanishes.

Lois: Exactly.

Nadja: So, just getting a little more into the the personal history here, our listeners may not know that Lois, you and Omar have actually known each other for a long time--about 30 years--and have worked together on community-building projects for a long time even before Omar was here at UNC Greensboro. And I just wondered if you might share some snippets or highlights of that work together. Maybe one of those things would be the presidential campaign for. Maybe one of those things would be the presidential campaign for Dr. Lenora Fulani, maybe we something else, maybe talk a little about your experience together?

Omar: Sure!

Lois: Yeah, you go first.

Omar: In some ways I feel like I'm such a beneficiary--as we all are--of the many people who came before us and pioneered and created the stages for us and for them to develop and grow. And I feel very lucky because in my twenties I met grassroots organizers who were community builders trying to create something that was positive in the world. When Lois talks about practical critical activities, these were the folks that were doing that under the leadership of philosopher, and actually Lois's chief intellectual partner, Dr. Fred Newman, a philosopher of science. And there was a movement that they were building and one of its manifestations was

the presidential campaign in 1988 of Dr. Lenora Fulani, the first woman, the first African American to get on the ballot in all 50 states. I came around and I met Lois in like 1990; I was actually on my way as a student from Michigan to London, and I was introduced to her by a mutual friend of ours--I think it was Jan Wooten, actually, who made the connection. And I was completely intrigued by some of the work that she was doing in terms of the written stuff, but also the kind of projects and programs that were being created, and some of those projects I still support, am involved in, like the All Stars Project, and an affiliate here in Greensboro called Community Play. And in some ways the methodology was all this that we're talking about--the "yes, and"-ing, the building of environments environment being intentional and that infused everything that was being done and I found it to be incredibly powerful way of helping--well, helping myself to grow and develop--but as I was helping others to create developmental environments and new opportunities. So I met Lois, and I just stayed as close to her as possible even though if I'm not geographically in the same space, I keep reading and I keep in touch with her. That's how we first met. Is that how you experienced when we first met?

Lois: I don't remember. That's as good as anything.

Omar and Nadja: [Laughing]

Nadja: Then you can just make it up.

All: [Laughing]

Lois: Um, I do think the Fulani campaign was a particular moment within that history. It's just such a wonderful long story that has so many twists and turns in an improvisational... "Well, let's try this: Let's try to open clinics in poor neighborhoods, um, well that didn't work, or let's try this, let's go into the labor unions and see if we can help develop leadership there." And then when we discovered performance through the work in the theater that we were doing, and Fred Newman starting an improv troupe at the theater, and the work that I was doing and sharing with Fred--Vygotsky's understanding of performance and play. When they came together and we then started, like "Put these glasses on. These are performance glasses." And then we saw everything that we were doing as performance, and so when people found out across the country to gather signatures to get Dr. Fulani on the ballot--the presidential ballot in each of the 50 states--how do you go to somebody's door? You have to perform. You not only have a script but then you improvise with the script. But you can't just be, you know, Lois Holzman from New York City going into Montana. You got to be powerful Lois Holzman listening; going to the door you don't know who you're going to meet, how they're going to respond to you and you have to be able to "yes, and" them.

[Music break]

Omar: So we thought that we would bring in another guest. Tucker Daniel is a saxophonist and senior at UNC Greensboro double majoring in music and Spanish. He's originally from Apex, North Carolina; he's a volunteer for our campus's Center for New North Carolinians where he

plays music with a group of teenagers from Southeast Asia who are new to our community. We've had the pleasure of having Tucker as a student in our class that we co-taught several semesters ago called "How Do We Know What We Know," and we were always thrilled with his insightful perspectives on pretty much any topic. We're so glad to have Tucker here joining the conversation. Welcome, Tucker!

Tucker: Hey, thank you for having me. Glad to be here.

Omar: So what are your thoughts about the conversation, what Lois has been laying out in terms of play, performance, improvisation, development, learning, everything?

Tucker: Well, specifically talking about my work with the Center for New North Carolinians, a lot of what we did there was developing our students' ability to learn an instrument but not through the sense of, "Let's start with scales, let's start with these basics that everybody does when they first start playing piano at five years old." Most of these students were middle schoolers, some even high schoolers, had never played an instrument before, and we just started straight off with, "Once you get the basics of 'this is how to make a note on this instrument,' let's start playing, let's start making things happen." So I worked with--I myself would no longer consider myself a jazz saxophone player, I perform mostly classical music--but I worked with some of the jazz department towards this. So I would work directly with another--a trumpet player in the studio who was very well-versed in jazz improvisation and we both contributed our relative expertises, his in improvisation specifically and mine in formal education training, and work to find a way where we can integrally build the student's ability on the instrument via improvisation. That came a lot from the discussions that we had in your class, and the discussions that we had in my Colloquium classes, where we read *Vygotsky at Work and Play*, and it's really interesting to see the results of that, like the ability of students to feel comfortable making a fool of themselves in a lot of ways. You know, 'cause we all need to, we all have to, and I do all the time, and a big part of being comfortable with that is improving, and when something goes wrong, seeing happens.

Omar: I love it. Yeah, I was thinking about how part of what's really important in our development is going with the flow, which is one of those other, you know, improv principles, but allowing ourselves to embrace being--to use the word, foolish, or to fail. It's such a stigma to be a fool or to fail in our university setting and our society. Once you're no longer a child, once you're no longer on to no longer a kid, it's not encouraged, and yet I think that those are the ways in which we continue to develop and grow.

Lois: There is an attraction, however. I was just thinking of so many sitcoms and it's the person who is ridiculous and made to look foolish that people embrace and love.

Nadja: Right.

Omar: It's true, it's true.

Lois: So I think we're conflicted about it a little bit.

Omar: That's interesting, yeah. 'Cause it's sort of displaced, but it's also like, the underdog or something about that?

Lois: Yeah.

Nadja: Well I think there's also that fear that, "Will people actually think it's funny if I go out there," right? So it's also the relationship of the group that's so important, to know that when you go out on a limb there's going to be people there to support you. Because you can only be funny if everyone else is laughing.

Lois: And not to mention how much of improv isn't funny. I mean one of the first things you have to do if you're doing scenes with people, if you're teaching them scene skills and "yes, and" and accepting offers is don't try to be funny. 'Cause if you try to be funny you're going to be thinking and you're not going to be listening and you're not going to be present.

Omar: Counterintuitive, right? We think that we have to be funny in order to be funny but actually you don't, and in fact it can be a barrier to your funny.

Lois: Yeah.

Omar: I was thinking how extraordinary Tucker is. I mean, Nadja and I talk about Tucker; this is what we do in our spare time, talk about Tucker. And I was just thinking, like, how is a Tucker produced in the world? Somebody who is so attentive, pays attention, 'cause that's one of the important things in improvisational theatre, you have to be paying attention. But not only paying attention, but also acknowledging others, and I think that that's a way of giving offers, to use that language. Tucker, how did you become Tucker?

Tucker: Oh, uh...

Nadja: That's not a tough question at all. [Laughs]

Tucker: Well, specifically addressing just the improvisational aspects of, like, how I've grown up in the classroom and such, I've always been really really curious, very much someone to want to understand not only what but why. I would say I got that one from my dad. He would, you know, give me rules, things like that, and I would constantly be like, "Why?" And when I was in middle school it was quite a problem but nowadays it's come to the point where for me, it's gifted me with an ability to empathize to the extent that if somebody believes a certain way, I want to know more than anything not necessarily what they believe but what drew them to that conclusion. And the class, you know, "How Do We Know What We Know?" is particularly abetting in that. It was very very helpful in my goal towards figuring out why is it that we come to the conclusions that we're in. So for me listening to the easiest way to do that, is to hear somebody out and say, "Tell me, in no constraints to what your argument is, just tell me what it is and let's talk about

why you believe that way and why I might come to the exact opposite conclusion with the same information.”

Omar: That’s amazing. It reminds me of the book that you mentioned in your talk last night, Lois, about listening.

Lois: Yeah.

Omar: Could you say something about that?

Lois: Sure. The book is called *Don’t Label Me*, and it’s a personal story and includes very practical ways to do what Tucker was talking about and that what we’ve done is created, in a way, such polarization because we make so many conclusions about people and label them beforehand but how would you--people you don’t agree with, how do you create some kind of conversation with them just exactly the way you were talking about? I really recommend the book, *Don’t Label Me*.

Tucker: Something to add to that is I also grew up in a community that was very much different than the one I live in now. I’m both in like racial background, income background, it was completely made up of one class of pretty much anything. My parents are conservative Christians, my background is very much like myself--Caucasian, middle income, and then coming to UNCG I saw everything under the sun, all sort of different diversity that represents new opportunities for me to understand where that comes from. And what I had to reckon with was my parents’ ideas that might have been antiquated compared to what I believe nowadays, or at least in my opinion, versus my ability to empathize with the experience of another human and saying, “How can we both be humans and come to this in such different ways?” There had to be a way for me to do something other than just dismiss and say, “Clearly you haven’t read enough.” It’s so easy to say when you got your argument. You say, “Well I’ve read about my argument, clearly you just haven’t read the same articles I have.” But then you find the exception, you find somebody that says, “Well I’ve read this article; have you read this opinion on this issue?” You know, and it brings you to a totally different conclusion and you still might end up on the opposite side of whatever issue you’re on, but the significant part of that for me is having the empathy to be able to say, like, “There’s another human who believes this; therefore it has value of extent and I should consider that value.”

Omar: I appreciate the spirit of empathizing, ‘cause in some ways I think, for me, I’m less concerned about arguments, quite frankly. I’m more about the human being that I’m talking to right in front of me and trying to hear. In some ways that really resonates. But I was thinking about a conversation you and I had, Lois, about your thoughts on empathy. I was wondering if you could say something about that? Because I think that it’s in line with, but it’s sort of a different take, on the word empathy which we use.

Lois: Yeah. I was thinking similar thoughts about, as I was listening to you, and you know I can’t really tell if it’s a difference that makes a difference or not. I think it’s that will be discovered in

conversation. For me, empathy is problematic, although I know it's an everyday word now, and people mean different things by it, so. But to the extent that empathy means, "I recognize your humanity because I feel similarly," that's what's problematic to me, really. So about what you were saying is that what we tend to do when people disagree with us and we're violent, like it's something emotional and passionate, is we demonize them. And I don't think that you have to empathize in order to stop demonizing. In fact, I think it's a deterrent, like, there's no way I could possibly feel what a homeless person feels, and so I don't empathize, I don't think, if that's what that means. What I do do is relate to them as a human being, but I don't need to be in their shoes or imagine what it's like to be homeless in order to think they're a human being. But this new popularity of empathy, it seems to me, is inserting something called empathy between us as human beings to recognize that we're humans. So everybody's getting empathy training-- doctors are getting empathy training.

Omar: But what do you mean by, when you say "relating to the person as a human"? Because I mean, I think isn't the spirit of emphasizing, or putting yourself into somebody else's shoes, an effort to try to get to their humanity?

Lois: But why would you need to get to their humanity?

Omar: As opposed to doing what?

Lois: They are--

Nadja: It's already there.

Lois: They are. I mean, people--everybody relates to a baby, a kitten, a puppy, a piglet, you know? Like you--I don't know, it's like affection, it's love, it's "Oh my god they're so cute," it's how come we lost when they're not so cute anymore? I mean, you have the capacity. You don't empathize with a piglet. You really don't.

Omar: It's true. I do not.

Lois: You do not.

Nadja: [Laughing]

Omar: Although maybe I could try! Just to see what it would be like.

Nadja: One of the things I really like about the conversation about "Yes, and" is that sometimes it's not so much about getting to a point of agreement or the same point, but from what I understand, it's about the activity, of having the interaction is the part that matters. And I noticed--I know that about Tucker, I know him to be somebody who's always engaging with people to build their relationship, because that's what we get.

Omar: Well, we are at the mark of wrapping up our first podcast. Why don't we give ourselves a round of applause, shall we?

Lois: Okay!

All: [applaud]

Omar: And to our crew who has made it possible to do this, so thank you all. This has been fun. What did you all think?

Tucker: I had a blast.

Omar: Yeah?

Nadja: Loved it!

Lois: Yeah, it was great fun. We just got started!

Nadja: Yeah, I know. We could keep going for another five hours.

Omar: That's right. Well, thank you everybody, and I guess we'll catch you next time. Thank you, Lois, this has been a wonderful conversation.

Lois: Thank you very much.

Nadja: And thank you Tucker.

Omar: And thank you Tucker.

Tucker: Thank you for having me.

Nadja: Wonderful.

Omar: Take care.

Nadja: Many thanks to the University Teaching and Learning Center that provided the recording studio; to Ashley Scott, who did our logo; to Lloyd International Honors College; to University Communications, including our production team, Matt Bryant and Ben Peterson. If you're interested in learning more about Lois's work please check out the links associated with this podcast.