

Dr. Drea Letamendi, Episode 66, LiveWell Interview

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Wendy Slusser, Dr. Drea Letamendi

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:00

Hi, everyone. Thanks for tuning into live well Podcast. Today I'm re releasing one of my favorite episodes from this year with Dr. Drea Letamendi. We recorded this back in January of this year drays work understanding superheroes and fictional characters through a psychological and social justice lens is a type of bridge and boundary crossing I admire and UCLA is academic world. Also, stories are wonderful, and even more special during this time of year. So let's get into it and enjoy. Drea, what a gift to have you on the podcast today. Well, let's begin by letting listeners know how you ended up here at UCLA?

D Dr. Drea Letamendi 00:50

My pathway has been kind of topsy turvy and nonlinear, I'm being vulnerable and saying that, I don't know where this is leading. But I have a lot of energy and curiosity about this very intersectional pathway. I think like many early career psychologists, we have this vision or this idea, this notion of what our work is going to be. And I know that a lot of us have these overlapping values, right? We want to better the world, we want to be a part of healing, we want to give voice to people who may not have a voice. And I think for me, I was so energized by just the concept of of being a scientist having that scientist identity be a part of my professional capacity. And so I did follow a, what I would consider a traditional scientist practitioner route. I'd say that right after graduate school and my postdoc experience, I started to feel a little bit off track, I realized that I was holding on to this vision or this dream. And I have to also share that a part of me didn't quite fit in or felt that I belonged in those traditional spaces, of course, for a number of reasons, as a woman of color as a child of immigrants, as somebody who leaned into storytelling. And so there was a lot of shame, a lot of invisibility, a lot of self erasure to kind of try to fit in to that classic scientific pathway, when I was feeling passionate and excited was when I was outside of those spaces outside of academia outside of the lecture hall, outside of the lab, comic conventions, podcasts, public spaces, where I actually felt like I was not only helping the field and contributing to the field of clinical psychology, but also bringing bigger communities and audiences into that space. I just busy myself and hustled

and found myself, I started a podcast called the Arkham sessions, and I still run the podcast and hosted it's all about the science of psychology using storytelling using the stories and fictional narratives of superheroes. And I realized that I excelled in that very unique, kind of different space. My real, genuine calling, isn't to be in the ivory tower, or in a lecture hall. It's to be the bridge. It's to be the storyteller. It's to be the border blender, and move through spaces with the intention to share this really vital information with really big audiences with with the folks who I feel really need. The awareness, the knowledge, the healing.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 04:06

Wow, that's a really, I guess, a short version of a long journey that you took, you forge something that wasn't really there, and you made it through to a point where you're doing something you really love and enjoy. You are a hero to be able to leave a track that's pretty well demarcated, which brings me to this concept of eudaimonia, which is living a life of meaning and purpose, right. And you identified your strengths and then you just worked hard at it. And I'm just curious about how you landed on this idea of translating science to be accessible to larger audiences. I'm just curious how you do it.

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Dr. Drea Letamendi 04:46

I'm going to answer this with a Star Trek quote. It was Spock who said exhilaration enhances the absorption of knowledge. I have found when we connect. Over metaphor when we connect over stories, there's an acceleration of empathy, we bridge differences or vulnerability, and even fear, even anxiety, even, you know, whatever masks or walls that we have up, when we can connect over stories, we're able to reveal a lot to one another and to ourselves, it might be sharing of trauma, it might be sharing our own histories, it's that connection that we can have that goes beyond facts, there is a lot of research that shows us when we enhance communication with storytelling, that there is improved awareness, there's improved self understanding, there's accelerated empathy, I find that like, look, I really want to talk about PTSD or depression, or brain trauma or something. But I know, I will be better able to share my knowledge through a story through a character through a narrative that will give us a fundamental sameness, I go way back to my childhood and realize that reading comic books and watching Batman animated series and these kind of pop culture, fictional stories of heroes, really lent itself to the way that I think about human behavior, the idea that the journey is more important to understand and to empathize with than kind of what you see in front of you, or who you see in front of you. Those early experiences, I think, helped me gain the repertoire of seeing the fullness of a person. And that was without any psychological, clinical professional training. I think that that's just the person I am. And luckily, as I said, you know, I absolutely, honor and feel so prideful about my academic journey. And that's kind of what grounded me. You know, just keep learning, keep yourself humble. Yes, get the get the degrees and the licenses and the certification that you need to get through the door at the table to get that voice.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 07:36

You integrate a lot of your interest in super heroes with your work with students. And also, of course, that's a medium that you use to translate science to larger communities, and you've unpacked characters to show their vulnerability, one of the things that we hear superhero,

you're, you know, I'm thinking my daughter used to have a nickname called Little Miss toughy. And so you ended up with like, this kind of expectation of yourself, right? I'm a superhero. I'm there's no vulnerability. And so how do you navigate that kind of superficial look at a superhero versus what you're really trying to translate? Which is something much more complex?

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Dr. Drea Letamendi 08:20

I love this question because I have experienced pushback and, and some closed doors, some literally being disinvited to certain spaces because of that misunderstanding of this work. I put it that way. And I think our students relate to this, maybe even a lot more than we can. When we look at storytelling. When we when we specifically look at storytelling in the media. In entertainment media, we'll find that there are beloved characters, who are so called Heroes or superheroes, who struggle deeply who have complicated features and characteristics and who show up in terms of their psychology in such similar ways as we do. Recently, I've been speaking to student groups about characters that are more representative. Now, in the media landscape. The recent Star Wars television series and films, for instance, include Latin Nikki's actors, and that's allowed me to talk about really difficult things. Classism, oppression, the challenges of upward mobility in our lives, career choices, the mutability of the self. And I found that this is a starting point for us to be able to have those dialogues to have have those connections, and I've brought those into some of the educational spaces. And of course, for me, this is reparative. This is work that is personal. This is finally a chance for me to decolonize, the field of psychology with also, again, an honoring of how I'm able to even do that, how I'm able to even have a voice. And that's the journey that I continue to be curious about. And I have a willingness to see where that goes. I'm not sure where it's going. But I found that we can use those stories to talk about our cultural revitalization. Tell me a story. Some examples include the superheroes in Wakanda, forever, this recent Marvel movie, and here we have characters who are going through tremendous grief, tremendous self doubts, impostor syndrome, feeling like they don't belong, feeling like they're trying so hard to achieve their dreams and experiencing setbacks, and wanting to give up. And if that's not a story, we can all relate to I you know, I'm not sure what is. There's a Marvel character, America, Chavez and her superpower is to jump from universe to universe. So unlike any of these, you know, the the Iron Man's the, Thor's the Captain America's sure they have their superpowers. Her strength is to essentially go from one space to another, and she happens to be a Latin woman. And I think that that connection to that character, like really sparked this validation and affirmation for me, recently, a show called The Last of Us premiered on HBO, that starts with an outbreak. It's a virus that takes over the world. And we encounter these characters who are realizing the destruction, the devastation, the loss of people that they care about. So whether it's the last of us, or the Walking Dead, or end game, or what kind of forever, all of these different, yes, fictional. Yes, not real stories with not real characters, will actually create something called a mediated relationship for us. And there have been these amazing discoveries during the pandemic during a time of great loss, about how mediated relationships have given us space to grieve to understand our own development, self awareness, connection with one another, and healing.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 12:56

It's clear that you're able to have this epiphany with this work. And are you observing a similar epiphany among the audiences?

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Dr. Drea Letamendi 13:05

The reaction is often more dialogue, the reaction is stepping outside of the mediated relationship, and leaning into real connections and relationships. I can give two examples. One is the ally ship that we can build, where the starting point might be a fictional story, but it evolves into the sharing of ourselves. So for instance, in this conversation, I talked about my career as lending disciplines and kind of stepping out of spaces. And what comes up for me is that I grew up a mixed race child of immigrants. I grew up not being told every day that I'm mixed race, or that I'm a child of immigrants, but I knew that my family is who they are. I am who I am. I'm Ecuadorian and Chinese and American. I have multiple cultures. You know, again, I struggled to fit into the singular identity that I think a lot of us face when we're raised in the US. But I never saw that that experience as negative because I was raised by somebody who just lived her life that way had the authentic experience of multiculturalism. And as I said, we we never talked about, yes, this is where we came from. And this is why we eat this kind of food and why we speak two languages and it was just who we are. Both phrase that comes to mind, is a Spanish phrase, Ni de aqui, ni de alla. And it loosely translates to not from here, nor from there. It's an idea of an in between this. And my mother's experience in the way she raised us, I think really kind of reflects that idea. And then I realized that the skills I have in translational work probably comes from my multiculturalism, I can't just be one thing, I'm never one thing I've never been seen as one identity. And so navigating those multiple spaces from childhood has allowed me the skills to kind of see and discern multiplicity, the complexity of the work that we're doing in Psychological Science, we cannot stay in the lab, we have to be out in the field, right? So I think that, you know, my short answer to your question is like, Yes, I see the ally ship building, I see the interpersonal effectiveness around my peers and around young people who are starting to build a repertoire emotionally, intellectually, psychologically, we see radical joy in stories. Radical joy is when oppressed individuals and communities can foreground happiness, connection, joy, even in the face of real trauma.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 16:28

That's a great example. And something that's come up here at UCLA that we're really going to be addressing in a big way is this grief, especially among the youth, you know, which has had a huge uptick in terms of challenges with their mental health. And we've been alerted that we really need to actually screen all patients, probably regardless of their age, but about whether they lost someone to COVID, or their loved ones were hospitalized or in intensive care units, the grief might be masked by less positive, you know, behaviors, this storytelling will potentially open up the door for some people to share that and address it.

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Dr. Drea Letamendi 17:15

Absolutely. What you just described, really, is energizing me and has energized me around how important it is to stay in the space of clinical science. And that's the struggle, or maybe the, the blessing that I have is in occupying intersecting spaces, we have a lot of work to do. And even before the pandemic, in 2019, the American Academy of Pediatrics announced that mental health, mental health disorders surpassed physical conditions as the main source of impairment among young people. And I think as a scientific community, we continue to be challenged by this but we're ready we're at the frontiers of this work in order to respond to

those needs. So as an example, we need to evolve and respond to the changing transformative needs of the community as it relates to mental health. And I think, you know, again, that excited me, you want somebody to bridge these spaces, you want somebody to educate, to be transformative. I'm that builder. I got you. But I've had a number of opportunities to be at the table. As we build initiatives, the rise initiative, was one of those initiatives that brought well being and psychological support to students in innovative and cultural ways. And, and so that, you know, I really give so much so many accolades to the university, especially to Student Affairs, because they have that vision to evolve with the student community.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 19:14

Most superheroes have a superpower, what's yours?

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Dr. Drea Letamendi 19:19

I think this is gonna sound super nerdy. But I believe my superpower is curiosity. I will lead with just wanting to know wanting to learn, you know, if we were to translate that to a fictional hero, it's probably very similar to being able to move through spaces you know that that transformative ability. There are lots of characters that do this. Sort of the shapeshifters Mystique from Marvel is one of them. This idea that you can kind of blend in and change and transform. And I think I'm able to be swift and mindful and curious in that work. So that's what I'd say. I think one of the concepts that you're talking about all the way through is this concept of resilience. Right? And clearly, you demonstrate through your lifeline, a sense of resilience, not just from your home life, but your work life that requires some resilience, right? What is resilience as everyday heroism, you know, what does that mean? Resilience is everyday heroism, is the idea that our self efficacy and self awareness is an ongoing journey. It's being able to try solutions, having an openness about what's ahead. And of course, and I know, you have a lot of work in this area, it's anticipating setbacks and struggles. I think there can be a healthy outlook toward knowing there's going to be some bumps in the road, and what are the things that we can learn from those challenges, and adversities? When we see this in stories, this also enhances our own resilience. So there is a process there when we see characters, maybe it's Luke Skywalker, maybe it's no more from what kind of forever maybe it's America Chavez, when we see characters, trying out solutions, experiencing setbacks, forging ahead, you know, that willingness to persevere. We also gain a sense of self and a sense of self resilience around that witnessing.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 21:48


It shows the power of storytelling, doesn't it? Wow. We like to leave our audience with one last question. What does it mean for you to live?

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Dr. Drea Letamendi 21:59

Well, that's what resilience is everyday heroism, is how are we living? Well, what are we doing to show up fully? For me, living well is showing up fully, completely, as myself. And that's not something I can do every day everywhere. Because, like many other people, we are constantly


shape shifting and wearing masks. But I think that's when my wellness is at its highest quality is when I can show up as myself.

 Dr. Wendy Slusser 22:36

That is really great answer to end this insightful podcast with you.

 Dr. Drea Letamendi 22:42

Such a tremendous opportunity to interview you and to learn more about your work. I'd like to thank you for creating space for this conversation, and for embracing this kind of work, and it's something that I really care about, and I so much appreciate that. You care about it, too. I would invite folks to come to my website, drdreapsychology.com. for my podcast and articles about the intersection of science and psychology.

 Dr. Wendy Slusser 23:19

We are so glad you joined us today in this conversation. To learn more about today's guests, and to explore the entire podcast archive, visit our website@healthy.ucla.edu and find the podcast page under the media tab. If you enjoyed this episode, the best way to support the show is to subscribe on Spotify and Apple podcasts. And if you can leave a review or share on social media even better. If you have any guests suggestions, visit our website for the submission form or email us livewell@ucla.edu or direct message us on Instagram at healthy UCLA. Visit the show notes on our website or on whatever platform you're currently listening to and check out organizations ideas or people mentioned in this episode. Thanks for being on this journey with us. This episode has been brought to you by the Semel healthy campus initiative Center at UCLA