

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Jody Moore

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I'm Jody Moore and this is *Better Than Happy*, episode 434, How to be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner.

This is *Better Than Happy*, the podcast where we study what the healthiest, most successful people in today's world think, feel and do. And we leverage this knowledge to create our best lives. Are you ready, little bird? Let's fly.

Hello everybody, welcome to the podcast. I have a really special guest, I asked a long time ago to come on the show and was finally able to track him down and get him on here and his name is Conlon Bonner. The Bonner family, if you're not familiar with them, you must go check out the Bonner family. Just go to the internet and search up the Bonner family. They are known, probably best for their musical talents, their artistic talents.

The Bonners performed, this is how I first met them is that they performed a lot of the music at Time Out for Women, which I was able to tour with over the last couple of years. And so we worked together on many of those events. And I was able to meet a lot of members of their family, but they've done a lot of their own work as well in all different capacities in music and the arts. They are amazing people.

I have so many stories I'm constantly telling to my family and friends about different members of the Bonner family, the things that I've learned from them both formally and just in informal conversations that we've had on the side. They truly are a gift to our community. And so when Conlon told me that lately what he's been up to is doing this work of helping organizations and just anybody who wants to be more inclusive.

He's helping to bring the tools of diversity, equity and inclusion in a way that is available to everybody, in a way that doesn't politicize and look to offend or take offense. It's a topic that I think we're all aware is important and relevant. And I think we all have really good intentions of being more inclusive and yet so many of us don't even know where to begin and are afraid to ask because it feels wrong that we haven't figured it out yet or that

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

we don't know where to begin. I don't know. Maybe that's just me, that's how I feel about it.

So when Conlon agreed to come on I was so excited. The work he's doing is so important. And I know you're going to get some really good takeaways from this conversation with Conlon Bonner. And you'll learn how to get more help from him if you so desire. So without further ado, here's my conversation with Conlon Bonner.

Jody: Everybody, I'm so excited to introduce you to my friend Conlon Bonner. Say hello, Conlon.

Conlon: Hello. Hello, Jody. Hello everybody.

Jody: Yes, thank you for being here. So let's just, I'm going to have you introduce yourself because you do so many fascinating things. I want you to explain it. But I'll just say that I met Conlon through Time Out for Women. We both got to be at several events together as well as some of the rest of the Bonner family who is the most amazing performers. Every time I hear you guys sing church hymns. I think yes, this is how it's supposed to be.

Conlon: You're so great, because we really do love singing in the way that we do. We grew up in a Baptist root, so to speak. My mom and dad, their Baptist roots, but being able to sing just even church hymns in the way that we do, it's been beautifully freeing to express our heart and our testimonies in that way. So, thank you.

Jody: So are your parents converts to the LDS church then?

Conlon: They are, yeah.

Jody: Was that a shock for them to go from the way a Baptist church worships to the way we do? It's just a lot more reverent, we'll call it at our church.

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

Conlon: Yes. And yes, it was absolutely a shock and if they were to tell it, it'd be a three hour conversation. But no, they were very strong and even served a mission in Liberia on a Baptist mission. And they knew how to tap into their connection with Jesus Christ and with the spirit to give them direction of what they should do, and it led them to taking those steps into the church and hence eight kids later, yeah, so.

Jody: Eight kids later, one day I'm going to have to have them on because Harry and Deborah are awesome. I love talking to them and I'd love to get some of their stories. Now, where do you fall in the eight kids?

Conlon: Yes, I'm number six. I'm number six. Yeah, there's four boys and four girls. And so I'm considered one of the babies but I have the most kids. So now I get some respect, some [**crosstalk**].

Jody: Yes, there you go. Alright, well, you do all kinds of things. Tell us a little bit about what you spend your time doing. And then we're going to dive into the reason we brought you on the show here today.

Conlon: Yeah. Well, I love to sing. That's one of the side things that I love to do. I love to sing with my family, love to perform in musicals and plays occasionally. I love to backflip, hope to do a backflip. I know, why am I even talking about backflips?

Jody: That's a thing now. My teenage daughter, she said at FSJ, she went to FSJ this year. They have dances and there's a rule. You can't have your feet above your knees. And I was like, "What? Why is that a rule?" Because backflipping is a thing, especially the guys like to do now, I guess. And it's considered dangerous at church dances. So I mean, you're right in there with the young kids, Conlon.

Conlon: And for some reason, for the first time ever yesterday I tried doing, I did a backflip and then I was like, "Let me do a back handspring backflip." And I over-jumped my back handspring and it was terrible. It was ugly. And I don't want to talk about it. My fingers hurt.

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

Jody: That's no good. After age 30, I heard somewhere that you start having car Advil and downstairs Advil and upstairs Advil.

Conlon: Yeah, there you go.

Jody: You just have to have it everywhere. And Conlon's done so many amazing things if you look him up. He's been in Les Mis with your daughter I saw, and High School Musical, the musical, the series. I mean, that gets some good cred with me.

Conlon: That's so fun. It's fun living different lives that I've always wanted to tap into in a way. I'm like, "Yes, I get to be in High School Musical. Yes, I get to sing with my children." And then being able to do Time Out for Women. And then to speak, our families and through a ringer of different experiences and so being able to share those as well has been beautiful. And hopefully it has helped others along the way. So I really appreciate what you do because you are constantly inspiring others to live a best life. So, thank you. Thank you.

Jody: Yeah, thank you. Okay, well, so Conlon and I had a kind of side conversation backstage at Time Out for Women once. And he shared with me that he had started working in this space of consulting with different types of organizations on the topic of diversity, equity and inclusion. And I immediately was like, "You'll have to come onto my podcast." Because this is a topic I feel strongly about. And as a member of a community as well as a business owner and mother, it's a topic that I feel I still need a lot more education and consulting on.

And I know a lot of people understand the importance of this topic and are sort of, for lack of a better word, afraid of it at the same time. It's a sensitive issue and it's become a politicized issue. And it's just, I just want to have you come on because I love the way you talk about it. And I want us to dive into maybe some of the sticky points for people today and just empower us all in this area.

Conlon: Thank you.

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

Jody: So do you want to talk a little bit about how you got into this work, what you've been doing lately around it?

Conlon: Yeah, so how I began, well, I was teaching seminary, minding my own business and learning about gospel truths and everything. And being able to share it in these ways that I've heard of church leaders being able to share about belonging and inclusion. There's a whole talk with some of these leaders that talk about the doctrine of belonging, the doctrine of inclusion. And then you've got this President Nelson talking about we must abandon prejudice and be leaders in this work of unifying and creating harmony.

I just love, I love that and we needed tools for that. So with that, as the precursor of my heart a little bit. I had this opportunity, someone over at Hale Center Theater, they asked me to be their Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. And I was excited about that but it was hard because I'm like, "Okay, I'm leaving this other job to do this." And in a way, I felt like, you know what? I feel like it's doing the same thing. It's helping people to be more kind, to be more accepting and more respectful towards another, more empathetic.

And so I was like, "Okay, let's do that." So I stepped into that role as a Director of Diversity and Inclusion and Outreach. And as I did that I started thinking, it's great to do it on a theater level, but man, I feel so passionate about this. Let me see what else I can do. Can I do this for more organizations to influence others beyond the scope that I was in at that moment. And so as a result, I began doing consulting and I began doing it at Murray City, being their diversity, equity and inclusion consultant.

And then I went over to West Valley and then they wanted me to help out with cultural events. And so I got into two different cities. Then I got into school districts, Jordan school district to Provo. And then decided to do more theater as well. So there's some more non-profits that came up. It began to take off and it happened very quickly. So hence as this was happening, I brought on a business partner. I got my business partner Jon Niu on there.

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

And then I got some additional consultants to also work for the business. And so it's moving quickly. And I think the key thing is how we are approaching it. It's not a shame or blame type of process. It's not a politically driven way, because yes, as you said, diversity, equity, inclusion, those are loaded words now. I think people associate that with some negative connotations when really inclusion, that's such a beautiful word of, yeah, let's include people.

Let's see people as people. Let's consider all of their background and utilize it and see the value of each individual. And so that's the work that I'm in.

Jody: Can we talk through some of these terms and concepts? And I want to maybe have us speak to both sides in terms of why maybe some of the terms may be useful, or why maybe some people think they are. And then why they for other people lead to what you're saying of shame or blame and then create actually disconnection instead of unity and inclusion. The one that comes to mind first of all for me is this term of white privilege.

And I'll just say that from my experience as a white woman in 2020, when everything sort of erupted around the topic of racism and Black Lives Matter and everything, and as an online personality. I was like, "Wait, what? What am I supposed to be doing?" What I did do is start reading some books just to try to better educate myself about what I didn't even know that I didn't know. And that's when I was first introduced to the term of white privilege.

I know for a lot of people again it triggers shame and blame. I personally view it as, it's been a really useful tool of awareness for me, but I'm interested what your thought is on that. And when you go into these organizations, what approach do you take and what terms do you use? But specifically I would love to hear your thoughts on that one.

Conlon: Yeah. Thank you so much for all of that, because there are two different things we have to consider. There is the idea that no one wants to feel like if I say something then, oh, no, I'm scared, I'm going to look like a

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

racist, sexist or a homophobic. I'm going to look a certain way. So therefore, I'm not going to say anything and hence it stops their learning and their growth and their desire of unity. It's let me not get into it because it just gets all hairy. So I'll never talk about it. So there's that side that's detrimental in that type of way.

And then there's the other side to where people won't say anything about their need for inclusion because they feel like they'll look like a victim. Their feelings won't be validated. And so they don't say anything because this is not a safe environment to say something because they'll just be pushed down. And so now we're in this kind of place where people feel so stifled. And then eventually it starts to fester to where it becomes a toxic environment.

And so it's so important that we approach this in a way where there is some grace and understanding. And that we are creating a space where people can feel heard as well. I love that you mentioned this desire of learning about, you mentioned white privilege.

Jody: I just like to jump right in.

Conlon: Thank you for doing that. Those are one of those words that put up a wall automatically. My approach is not to put up walls. I try to say things in a way where people can hear it so that as soon as somebody says, "Microaggression or explicit bias or tokenism", and all these phrases that have become so politically driven and also been so polarizing. And even white privilege when you hear that phrase, it's like, okay, I don't want to get into this. And so I love the idea of let's learn. Let's learn so that we understand another person's perspective.

One of my trainings that I give, I use this analogy of an iceberg, which I love because when you're traveling on the sea and you see an iceberg, you only see the tip but there's so much more underneath. And studies have shown that it's 90% beneath the surface. And I think for a human being, when you see them, their appearance or hear their way of speaking, or if you see their hair, just something that's just observable. There's so much

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

more that's underneath or about somebody. I would say even more than 90% because of all that they have lived and their experience.

So it's so important that we deal with the individual, individual experiences and circumstances. Of course, we sometimes group ideas together and so it's easy to do that. But I hope that we can start checking those moments so that we can see a person for all that they are, for who they are. I feel that when we do those things, we start seeing a person and recognizing that they are real.

Jody: Yeah, definitely. I love that. I think that is true. I always say it's really tough if you really get to know someone it's harder to judge them or not care about them. What is your thought and how would you guide someone around this idea that we should just, because when I was growing up, it was skin color doesn't matter. And so therefore we shouldn't even notice it or acknowledge it. And please educate me about this, but from what I've learned over the last couple of years, skin color doesn't matter in the way that people mean when they say that.

But it is okay to notice our differences. It's okay to notice. And I notice with my young kids, they, because they haven't been subjected to all of the whatever, we're all subjected to that then alters our view of the world. They will say things, my daughter who is in second grade, came home just last week. She just started school. She's like "Mom, I met two new friends at school today." I'm like, "You did. That's so great. What are their names?" And she's talking about them. And she said, "They're brown girls, they have brown skin."

And immediately as a mom, I'm like, it is okay that she notices that. I don't want to make it weird. It doesn't bother her at all. She's just telling me about her friends. How do we address that topic? What is the, like you said, unifying in Christ like, because on the one hand I think that with best of intentions, many of us were taught, don't even notice skin color. And yet it is an obvious difference that seems okay to notice, so help me understand this.

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

Conlon: You're so great. This is a great question. There is the classic phrase and I think it's such coming from such a great place when they say, "I see everybody the same. I don't see color."

Jody: [**Crosstalk**]. That's the line.

Conlon: Yeah, thank you. And it's coming from a beautiful place to where what they're trying to say is that, "Yeah, I love you." And I deal with basically kind of what I was just talking about of dealing with the individual and seeing all that they are and connecting with that. And so that's where grace needs to come into play because on the flipside of a person who might be, if I can go back just for a moment.

Another way of saying that type of thing could be connected to, you're one of the guys. I don't consider you to be like a girl. You're one of the guys here.

Jody: And you're like, "But wait, I'm a girl. I want to be one of the guys."

Conlon: You don't see color. This is a beautiful color. I love white. I hope it's not a disregard of it of my color or of my heritage, background all that is. We're all the same. No, we have a rich culture, those type things, but that's where grace needs to come into play because we have to understand where their heart is. And maybe even ask them to rephrase it. So "Wait, are you saying this?" Or it's like, "Oh, no, I mean this." So that they can be able to explain a little bit.

So we don't want to set anybody up to look like, again a sexist, racist, homophobic or even someone who doesn't like disabilities or any type of background or anything. We want to be able to recognize the individual. I sometimes use this as well of, instead of a melting pot, this is something my business partner John even mentions. He does this so beautifully. He says, "We kind of consider this, New York, that's a melting pot. There's so many people there."

But really, what a melting pot does, it melts everything to be all the same. But one thing that I love to use is the idea of a mosaic, to where each

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

individual piece creates this masterpiece. Everybody is different. Everybody has a story to tell, has value, has a part to play in this beautiful picture. And we recognize all the differences and the good that you give. And so that's something that I love to incorporate in this idea of when we notice the phrase of, I don't see color. Okay, well, hey.

And maybe another way of saying it is like, "Wow, I love all that you are. I am excited about what you bring, the assets that you bring, the background, the experiences, the culture, the perspective." And I've heard a lot of this idea of diversity of thought, that is connected to inclusion and diversity. We need differences in all the types of ways so that all that can be used. And so yes, diversity can be found in a whole group of Black people, Hispanic people, a whole group of white people.

But how great it is to even infuse all of that as well. So that we can have more than just the thought process, but we can have more culture experiences, just background in general. It's just rich with a whole bunch of different things, gender, it's all connected. So anyway, I love that. Thank you.

Jody: Yeah, that's beautiful. I love that concept of a mosaic. That is a great way to think about it. And recognizing that because, again back to just the example I was giving with my daughter. I think that in the generation I was raised in where if I would have said, "I met this friend, she's a Black girl." They would say, "Don't say that. That doesn't matter. We don't notice that." Which, to a kid you're like, "Oh, we shouldn't say that. Why, is that bad?"

We're not supposed to, it plants the idea in your head that there's something wrong with that. It was just, again that was never the intention I don't think with most of the people anyway that I grew up with.

Conlon: That's an interesting thing, because honestly, even on the flipside, where on my family, then we'd be like, "Yeah, who's the white girl that was there?" Doing that the same thing because it just...

Jody: That's an identifier.

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

Conlon: That's an identifier, of course. And of course, nobody wants to be labeled as that friend, the Black friend, if that makes sense, or the white friend.

Jody: Right. Or the one who's different, none of us want to be different. We all want to be like you said, we want to feel included in the tribe in whatever way. And different doesn't have to mean excluded. I will say that, again in some of the education I've tried to do of my own self. It was really useful, I think, for me to try to put myself in the position of someone who's a minority, because I guess being a woman, you might say I have a little bit of bias there. But for the most part, I've always been in the majority.

The only thing I could relate it to when I started hearing stories over and over again about, imagine if you go in even just let's think about hair products, because for women, hair is a big deal for us. So if you go in the grocery store and there's a full aisle full of hair products for white women and then a tiny little section for someone with an ethnic texture of hair. And that's just one example of over and over again in the world, it starts to send the message, you're not as important. It can be interpreted that way.

And it took me a lot of hearing stories like that to realize, I mean outside of all the terrible things that in our country have been in our history of mistreatment of minorities of all types. But there also just has been a history of messaging that needs to be brought to our awareness, I think to be corrected. Do you know what I mean? The only thing I could relate it to was growing up as a member of the Mormon church, the LDS church. And so that made me sort of different.

And I would go to school and the things my friends were talking about, the things that they were doing on their weekends in high school were not things that I was doing. And I just knew I'm not like them. And so in certain circles I'm not going to be comfortable, I'm not going to fit in because I'm not like them. Well, if that is a part of, like you said, whether it has to do with a disability and then the way the world is set up is not for you, any number of other minority groups. Who, over time it sends the subliminal

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

message, you're not quite as important as other people who are in the majority.

Conlon: Yeah. If I may speak to that. I was watching this beautiful movie, *Elemental*. Did you ever see that, did you see that new?

Jody: I didn't see that movie, no, I need to see it. Is it good?

Conlon: Okay. This is not too much of a spoiler, but I'm going to say a line that's in there. So of course, there's different elements in the whole thing. There's this particular girl who's fire. And there's a guy that's water. In this land that she's in, it's a very similar situation with the grocery store where there's only a small section for this type of hair products versus the majority of the other side. And for her, she's living in this land of a whole bunch of water. And she said, "Yeah, this city wasn't made with me in mind."

That was kind of an interesting thing to think about. This city wasn't made with me in mind. And so I feel that when we go into organizations, is it conducive for anybody to come in and feel like this is as much my organization as it is yours? Is this as much my church as it is yours? Do I feel like a visitor here? When everyone feels like, yeah, this is my store, this is my aisle. It's like I've got to go somewhere else to get a haircut or something like that.

And so with all that in mind, I remember a time, an experience that I had, just on a flipside. And it doesn't have to do with race. It has to do with actually religion. And I pray, and for me, I believe in Jesus Christ and I was in this gospel choir, who I consider my roots in gospel with my mom and dad being Baptist. And so I remember they're like, "Okay, we need to start with a prayer." That's what the guy said, the conductor's like, "We need a prayer, we need a prayer. Who's going to do it?" And I raised my hand.

I'm the first one that raised my hand. I'm excited to say it. And he looks at me and tries to look for somebody else.

Jody: Anyone but Conlon Bonner.

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

Conlon: Exactly. He's like, "Lindsey, yeah, go ahead, you say the prayer." And he just kind of pointed at somebody for them to say it. And I asked him about that later on. He's like, "Oh, it's because." He used this word, Mormon, he said, "Because you're a Mormon."

Jody: We still pray.

Conlon: Yeah. So I'm like, "Okay." And so I get those moments of I hope that we can consider, we still pray. We still believe in Christ. Those type of situations in the grocery store, we all wash our hair. And maybe we all need that type of product that works for us. And also in the organization, I hope that we can create a space to where it's okay for them to be themselves when they want to. Hey, it's Hispanic Heritage Month even currently right now, is there any celebration? Is there any recognition that this is that type of month that I get to celebrate at home, but not anywhere else? That's the only place that I get to have it.

So that's kind of what I try to help organizations be aware of is that we need to be able to make environments where people feel like this is as much theirs as anybody else's. That's kindness. That's empathy. That's acceptance. That's respect. And it's not political. It's not trying to shame or blame anybody. It's just, hey, how can we be more kind? How can we create harmony, unity and those type of elements? And so let's create these environments with others in mind instead of just the majority.

Jody: Yeah, I love how you say it's not political, it's moral. I think you look at the example that Christ set. He was constantly spending His time with the, we might say, minority populations, with the downtrodden, with the sick, with the outcast, with those that were struggling. And yet Christ was perfect. So He knew how to approach those people, how to support them, how to love them. We are not perfect like Christ. And that's why I love the work that you're doing

It's okay to, I think that I think you kind of nailed it in the beginning, that I think for a lot of people anyway who have good intentions, which I think is most people, they're uncomfortable. I might be having a conversation with

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

someone and learn that they are transgendered, for example. And suddenly I don't have a lot of experience in that area. I don't know the right like you said, the right things to say or not say.

I don't even know what questions to ask and so we shut down and that's where the work that you're doing, that your organization is doing comes in is to open up a safe forum for discussion and to better educate us on the things that we're seeing in the world today and how to approach them.

Conlon: Yes, let's have these moments of discussion. Let it be okay to learn from one another and give grace to those who are trying to learn. And let's hear people who are hurting so that they're not disregarded, act like that's just bogus talk, whatever it is. No, their feelings are their feelings and also the other side of being able to allow someone to learn. It's like, can we have this conversation? Let me try to understand. And sometimes it doesn't come off that way.

Sometimes people just say things and they don't think about it. But that's where hopefully a conversation can be had so that someone can be able to express that they might be hurting. Anyway, all these things, it's really good.

Jody: Yeah. And in terms of giving people a real example, I'll just steal a little consulting from you right here on the podcast, because I have a business with a handful of employees and a lot of clients, a lot of podcast listeners. I know I have a lot of work to do in this area, but I'm sort of one of those people that is not even sure where to begin. What kind of things would you recommend for someone like me with a podcast but also I have a coaching program where people come on calls and get coached?

What can I do, Conlon, do you think to better, I want to create safe spaces for people to share, like you said, where do I even begin?

Conlon: One of the first things, and I get that question a lot actually. And one of the first things that our organization does is, "Hey, okay, let's find out. Let's just kind of see what we can identify that could be needed." So first thing is to recognize, okay, I call it an inclusion audit or an inclusion

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

analysis, whatever it might be. But we kind of go through the different areas within the organization and say, “Okay, how can we be more inclusive in social media? How can we be more inclusive in our material that we’re handing out?”

If someone was to come here from a different background, would they feel comfortable? What could be those red flags?” And so I kind of do, I have a whole list. I kind of go through a list of different things to see how our recruiting is, just to find out where the unknown areas are. I called it blind spot analysis at one point. And then someone who really cares about abilities they said, “Whenever we hear blind spot, it makes me cringe.” I’m like, “Oh my gosh, I didn’t even think about it. Thank you so much.” So it’s no longer called blind spot analysis. We want to bring people together.

And so yeah, we try to just identify some of those areas. So I think that would be a great start, doing some type of analysis to where, okay, this is where I would like to start. How can we make those steps? Yeah. So it’s in our, yes, it could be in our employees and I think that’s where people tend to go. But I think it also begins, also with our mindset. How are we seeing these areas and are they conducive for anybody and everybody?

Jody: Alright, well, I sure appreciate you coming on. I think that just having these discussions is really important and necessary. I appreciate you coming on and answering some questions for me. If people want to reach out to your organization, *Cultivate* is the name of it, right? How do we learn more and how do we get a hold of you if we maybe want to recruit your services?

Conlon: Yeah. Well, thank you. Yeah. So we do have a website, cultivateconsultancy.org as people go there and kind of even recognize some of the things, see our team, see all the services that we give. There is a spot at the very bottom of almost every page where people can actually reach out to us via email and also through phone call to be able to see if they want to do an analysis or if they want to do just some trainings that can be done, some hands on training.

434: How to Be More Inclusive with Conlon Bonner

Because I think a lot of times and I've been through it, the workforce, this race and discrimination, that type of, you click through it and you kind of answer the questions, okay. And sometimes for me, how can I get through this as fast as I can? Or our trainings, we kind of do more of a hands on communication and then also implementation, some things that can be done. Instead of just hearing about it, instead of just talking about it, we want to do something, instead of just check a box.

Jody: Give us the website one more time.

Conlon: Yes, cultivateconsultancy.org.

Jody: Thank you so much Conlon. It's been so fun catching up with you.

Conlon: You too, talk to you soon.

Coaching changed my life and I've watched it change the lives of thousands of men and women since, but is it right for you? You'll only know by giving it a try. Try it out today at jodymoore.com/trial.