



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

- Ai-jen Poo: Welcome to Sunstorm, where we get real about what's happening in the world and what we're doing about it, because we are the light in the storm.
- Alicia Garza: Hi, I'm Alicia Garza.
- Ai-jen Poo: And I'm Ai-jen Poo, and today on the pod we have my dear, dear friend Heather McGhee. I'm so excited.
- Heather McGhee: Hi.
- Ai-jen Poo: Heather I know a lot about you and I love you dearly, but tell our listeners who you are and why you're fresh?
- Heather McGhee: I'm fresh because of my sisters, that's why I'm fresh. My name is Heather McGhee. I was born on the south side of Chicago, and when I was 33 years old I became the president of a think tank called Demos, that advances solutions to inequality in America. Last year I stepped down to become a fellow, to write a book, to have my now 14 month old son, to do more media have more conversations like this and I'm living my best life right now.
- Alicia Garza: I heard that.
- Ai-jen Poo: You really are living your best life. [crosstalk 00:01:14] your very best life.
- Heather McGhee: I'm living my best life.
- Ai-jen Poo: Alright, so we're going to get this conversation going with what organizers do to get a conversation going which is the icebreakers-
- Alicia Garza: Icebreakers.
- Ai-jen Poo: All right, who is your favorite historical figure?
- Heather McGhee: W-E-B.
- Alicia Garza: You know what you better come through with this black reconstruction. Yes, come on with it.
- Ai-jen Poo: What's your comfort food?



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

Heather McGhee: Biscuits

Ai-jen Poo: Butter?

Heather McGhee: No, just butter. Just give me the butter.

Alicia Garza: No honey?

Ai-jen Poo: No jam? No.

Heather McGhee: No.

Ai-jen Poo: Okay.

Heather McGhee: A good biscuit needs nothing but butter.

Ai-jen Poo: But it's got to be a good biscuit can't get stuck in your throat.

Alicia Garza: Okay, what is your favorite... You're going to be good at this one. What is your favorite inspirational quote?

Heather McGhee: This is funny. I thought I said this-

Alicia Garza: HAHAHAAH. my favorite quote is mine.

Heather McGhee: Allow myself to introduce myself. I thought I said this but then I was listening to Bryan Stevenson talk, and he said it and I was like he probably said it first. But it is something like "think of our ancestors who had to face so much more with so much less."

Alicia Garza: I've got goose bumps.

Ai-jen Poo: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And what job would you have if you weren't an activist?

Heather McGhee: I'd be a childcare worker.

Ai-jen Poo: Wow.



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

- Heather McGhee: I really would. Every time I drop my son off at daycare, I just want to sit cross legged on the floor and stay.
- Alicia Garza: Yes.
- Ai-jen Poo: French fries or tater tots?
- Heather McGhee: I think tater tots are a microaggression.
- Ai-jen Poo: Oh, wow.
- Alicia Garza: I did not see that coming.
- Heather McGhee: I'm exaggerating but it really reminds me of flavorless institutional food.
- Alicia Garza: It's just too good, it is too good.
- Ai-jen Poo: God that is severe.
- Alicia Garza: Okay, so then let's get into your french fry game. Are you a skinny fry or a steak fry person?
- Heather McGhee: I think it's really hard to get a steak fry that isn't dry in the middle.
- Ai-jen Poo: And then a condiment for a fry?
- Heather McGhee: I don't think a good fry needs a condiment. Maybe I'm like an anti sauce person-
- Ai-jen Poo: Oh, anti sauce.
- Heather McGhee: Or just I'm real abstemious with the sauce, it's like judicious.
- Ai-jen Poo: Yeah.
- Alicia Garza: I would just like to point out that you used a word that I have never heard before in my life.
- Heather McGhee: I know that is a word.



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

- Alicia Garza: And this is like one of the reasons I love you, but break that down for me say the word again, abstemious?
- Heather McGhee: It's like judicious it basically means I will often abstain from it. I'd use it sparingly.
- Alicia Garza: Abstemious, Heather just gave me the screensaver word of the day, and today's word abstemious. I can tell by this lightning round that we're about to get it on today. So, let us jump right in. Heather McGhee, Heather is one of my all time favorite, favorite people she's totally brilliant.
- Ai-jen Poo: Beyond.
- Alicia Garza: Beyond brilliant. But sometimes brilliant people can be like annoying because they're like too smart for you. Like you just can't like catch a vibe, you know what I mean? I've never had that experience with Heather. Heather I caught a vibe and then I was like Oh, damn she's really smart. Now, I want to hang out all the time because she's heck of fun. So, because you're so brilliant and so fun I just need to know like, What are you up to these days? What's going on in your life? How did you get to this point?
- Heather McGhee: Well, I'm living in Chicago right now which is so great because I grew up here, but I've lived in Brooklyn for the past probably 10 years or so. But I'm in Chicago this fall for a fellowship at the University of Chicago's Institute of Politics, it's what David Axelrod started when he left the White House. And I'm doing a seminar on policy advocacy for these students who are... I mean when in doubt just give the keys to the young people. I remember college like it was yesterday, and these young people whether they're freshmen or grad students are just spitting fire all the time, it's just really inspiring. But anyway so that's why I'm in Chicago at this moment, my multi year project right now is I'm working on a book.
- Heather McGhee: I came to Demos... Really I was a 22 year old I started working there, and I was obsessed with the question of what is wrong with the economy? And why is it that families... like the families I grew up with on the south side of Chicago and the de industrialization that had hit their first thank you very much, before it has rolled over rural America with similar turns to drugs and violence, right? I wanted to know why and what was going on and why it was so hard for so many people to get ahead, and over the course of my 15 years working in economic



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

policy advocacy kept running up against racism. Not racism in the ways that I sort of walked into it thinking, which was people of color fair worse, right? I mean I knew that. But what I kept running into was racism wasn't just a multiplier effect, it was a motivating mechanism for so many of the policies that were screwing everyone over.

Heather McGhee: Over and over again I looked at the financial crisis which was something I sadly had a front row seat to because at Demos we were working on the issue of debt, and trying to stop the subprime mortgage crisis before it became the financial crisis. And I remember standing on a street in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood of Chicago, it's a black middle class neighborhood so familiar to me, and yet this side there were foreclosure and for sale signs flapping in the wind on almost every street on that block. It started there and nobody cared, nobody with the power to stop it cared because people like us shouldn't have had those homes anyway, and then look what happened. So, the name for my book that I really want to use is "Ya played yourself."

Ai-jen Poo: Oh, my god.

Alicia Garza: Maybe you could name mine too, when you're done with yours.

Ai-jen Poo: That is so good.

Heather McGhee: "Ya played yourself, the cost of racism to white people."

Alicia Garza: You know what that is actually really, really good. Heather Charisse McGhee for president, please.

Heather McGhee: Oh, yeah. I'm ready for that.

Ai-jen Poo: So, one of my favorite moments in history was the moment that I opened up my social media and all over my social media feed was posting and re-posting where you were randomly on CSPAN It was a moment of what I think is radical empathy, that is the kind that we need more of, right? Of deep listening and like profound presence with another human being. And just tell us like what is it like to go viral?

Heather McGhee: So, yeah I was on this call-in and television show. It's like a radio show on TV called Washington Journal. But so I go on this show people are calling and asking



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

me about jobs and wages and trade and taxes, the things I normally talk about and then someone called in and the host identified him as Gary from North Carolina. And his first words were, I'm a white male and I am prejudice. And now this is live TV and the entire shot it's just a close up of my face as I'm listening to this man-

- Alicia Garza: And describe your face to my face. Describe your face... I've seen it but-
- Heather McGhee: It was appreciative listening, I had zero expression maybe my eyebrows went up a little.
- Ai-jen Poo: But what was going on in your mind when he said this.
- Heather McGhee: There was a little bit of Oh, it's on right? Because C-span has like racist callers right? That's like a thing in the Obama era particularly.
- Ai-jen Poo: Mm-hmm (affirmative)
- Heather McGhee: But then it was also like well, hallelujah thank you for admitting it. I mean you could have come on and said prejudice stuff and not said I'm prejudice.
- Ai-jen Poo: Right, right or denied that you were a prejudice.
- Heather McGhee: Exactly.
- Ai-jen Poo: Mm-hmm (affirmative)
- Heather McGhee: Right, and called me racist Right?
- Alicia Garza: Oh, yeah that's the truth.
- Heather McGhee: For saying anything in response, right? So, I was open I was like where is this going to go and bring it. And anyway he went on to talk about why he was prejudice, black men and gangs and drugs and crime and what he saw on the news, and I'm like okay, okay, okay. And then he said something that is just like slapped me across the face and broke my heart all at once which was, "But I want to change and I want to know what you can do to help me become a better American," he said. I just opened my mouth, I said the first thing that came to me which was thank you for admitting your prejudice. And then I went



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

on to just give him some ideas off the top of my head. I mean I'm not like a racism coach this is not what I do, but I am a black woman in America-

Alicia Garza: What do you mean you're not a racism coach, you're a black woman in America.

Ai-jen Poo: Right.

Alicia Garza: You don't have the answer to how to solve racism for white people?

Heather McGhee: But I don't think it's that hard, and I think if more of us got to the place of saying I want to do this, I think we do ourselves sometimes a disservice by acting like it's so intractable. We've had the public will to get over it to truly, truly uproot it for a collective like dozen years in the course of our American history, right? And every single generation it's a fight. So, I think we need to have a little bit more "We Shall Overcome" optimism in this moment, because there are more white people than certainly in recent memory and maybe ever who are signing up for the project. So, let's just say yes we can do, we put a man on the moon, we invented the solar panel, we can do this. We invented racism, we can invent anti-racism.

Ai-jen Poo: Let's just sit with that for a second.

Heather McGhee: So, I answered Gary actually gave him some tips. I was like get to know these black people who are marauding through your imagination, right? Integrate your life. I told him turn off the news which over represents black crime and under represents white crime. Advertisement for a Color of Change who does great research on this Alicia and I are both on the board.

Alicia Garza: Gang, gang.

Heather McGhee: And then I said basically get involved in something that's bigger than you, where you're doing so shoulder to shoulder with people of color. Moment went viral it was 8 million within a couple of weeks, this Gary from North Carolina ended up finding me on Twitter and Gary from North Carolina and I talked on the phone. He told me that he had followed my advice. He'd gone to the used bookstore in his town and gotten a whole bunch of books on black history and put them down on the counter, and told the young woman behind the counter that he was working on his racism.



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

- Alicia Garza: Wow.
- Ai-jen Poo: Mm-hmm (affirmative)
- Heather McGhee: He took some pride in this, this was like okay I'm doing this. And this woman on the television has told me how to do it and I'm going to do it. He said on that first phone call, he said it was like I had wiped the dust from a window and let the light in.
- Alicia Garza: I can't let these moments pass, we need to dissect these right?
- Ai-jen Poo: We do, we do.
- Alicia Garza: I mean I think I Ai-jen's description of radical empathy is really a strong one. And I want to just dive in really quickly to some of the things that he was talking about beforehand, right? Gangs, crime, thugs, all the things. Can you just talk a little bit about these code words that get used to describe bigger problems in our country? Like there's 1005 Gary's out there in every community who are seeing the same things. They're hearing the same messages. Where do those messages come from? What purpose do those kinds of narrative serve? And how do they create more Gary's?
- Heather McGhee: The idea that people of color and particularly black people are inherently criminal is a very old well marketed idea. And I am more interested in laying blame at the people who are selling that idea for their own profit than the people who are desperate enough to buy it. So, to me Gary is just someone buying this right? Why is he buying it? It's making sense of a world that is confusing to him. Now who's selling that idea? Someone selling something follow the money. We know that local news over represents black crime and under represents white crime, and then you've got Fox News, right? You've got the hate for profit machine that made for political and economic profit.
- Heather McGhee: And the formula is Muslim terrorists for breakfast, Mexican gang members for lunch and black thugs for dinner. Like that is what they are feeding white Americans as an explanation for inequality as an explanation for de industrialization for the jobs going away, for society changing in ways that make it harder for working people to get ahead, and it's an old explanation and yet it's not true. But it's a very good scapegoating tactic, and I think things will really



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

start to change when we start following the money and looking at the plutocrats in whose interest these messages are and-

Ai-jen Poo: And plutocrats are?

Heather McGhee: The men in top hats.

Alicia Garza: The monopoly men.

Heather McGhee: They're the... exactly, they're the wealthy people who organize politically in order to keep the economic status quo, in order to do things like stop climate change action and because it's still a voting democracy, they have to convince a number of people to vote with them. And the way that they do that is by getting the majority of white people to vote with in this case the Republican Party, that's what it is today.

Ai-jen Poo: But the idea that we can and should have more of a we can do this kind of attitude and spirit, I find the fact that your moment of radical empathy went viral.

Heather McGhee: Yeah.

Ai-jen Poo: To be incredibly hopeful. Do you have a theory about what it was?

Heather McGhee: I think it's because millions of people have felt in one moment or another either like me or like Gary, and I think it's because fundamentally as ugly and as barbaric as our country is and has been, it's also profoundly beautiful and hopeful. And I think those two competing instincts live in most Americans, and can just be activated one way or the other and right now we're living in a time with the people with the loudest megaphones are activating our worst demons. But it's not like there isn't another way inside of people that says I'd rather be the hero in the story than the villain.

Alicia Garza: Speaking of being a hero which you are one of mine, I need to better understand how it is that you activate you're a boss lady? And I read recently that you don't unpack between trips. And... you talked to my partner he will tell you that in my house, there are several suitcases that are half assed packed.

Heather McGhee: Yep.



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

- Alicia Garza: Tell us how you activate your boss lady?
- Heather McGhee: So, it's true I'm all over the country. I give speeches at youth trainings, I'm lobbying, I'm interviewing people and of course now it's different because I travel with my son and often with my husband and so there's a much bigger suitcase, but the same principles apply. It started out of laziness out of coming home and not wanting to spend that precious moment when you come home and you're like, I'm home. But now I've made a deal with myself, I keep my dirty unmentionables in a bag, right? And so I just grab that bag throw it in the laundry, I take my ditty bag as I call it... do you call it a ditty bag?
- Alicia Garza: Do you know what, what is a ditty bag? You better give me all this work. What is a ditty bag?
- Ai-jen Poo: I have no idea what you're talking about.
- Heather McGhee: Well, it's like your toiletry bag.
- Ai-jen Poo: I think your speaking in English, but I don't know what you're talking about.
- Alicia Garza: First she comes in here talking about abstemious or whatever that word is. Now, it's ditty bags.
- Heather McGhee: So, you take your ditty bag out. You take your little laundry bag out, and what are you left with? You left with a dry clean only dress, probably a blazer, some stockings that you wore once that you can wear again, like I'm giving... if there any men listening these are women secrets, right?
- Alicia Garza: This is what we do.
- Heather McGhee: And so why would you unpack that, 36 hours later? You put it back in your ditty bag.
- Alicia Garza: I mean my whole life has changed.
- Heather McGhee: And I keep all of my toiletries at all times in the ditty bag.
- Alicia Garza: Oh, yeah.



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

- Heather McGhee: Everything.
- Alicia Garza: Absolutely.
- Ai-jen Poo: You don't take stuff out of the ditty bag?
- Heather McGhee: No, no my toothbrush, my deodorant always have to live in the ditty bag.
- Ai-jen Poo: Okay.
- Alicia Garza: Otherwise, you'll end up on a trip with no brush or no deodorant, or no face wash, oh the worst.
- Ai-jen Poo: So, we're about to go into a really important year. For all the women who are listening, what do you think that they should be thinking about that might not be obvious?
- Heather McGhee: Oftentimes when I meet usually women on the street, they ask me what's going to happen? They want to know that the movie ends out okay, because the movie is their lives and the lives of our planet. And my answer always to them is, it depends on what you do. This is not something we're watching, it's something we're doing. So, I truly believe that's what we all need to be doing.
- Ai-jen Poo: Mm-hmm (affirmative)
- Heather McGhee: And that's the only thing that's ever won elections, right? It's an engaged enthusiastic transformation of regular people into super citizens that are actually spending their time, their brunch hours, their weekend hours taking off work for weeks at a time, texting and phone banking. It becomes a movement. It happened for Barack Obama two years in a row, two election cycles in a row, and it happened for Donald Trump. We weren't in those rooms but that's what was happening. And I'll be the first to admit right now I did not do that for Hillary, I did very little work. I didn't make it my overriding purpose for the last few weeks of the election, I didn't think of my... I thought of my professional work as the work I was doing and I was wrong.
- Ai-jen Poo: Mm-hmm (affirmative)
- Alicia Garza: Mm-hmm (affirmative)



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

- Heather McGhee: And that needs to happen again this year no matter who is at the top of the ticket, that said who are the people who are inspiring that kind of activism? Is I think the question that a pundit could ask, but I don't think it's a question that voters should ask, because I think voters should just be saying who do I care about like that? who do I see other people my community caring about like that?
- Alicia Garza: So, we were in Virginia for a historic election and I bring that up just because we had a very special guest Kerry Washington who people might know as Olivia Pope on Scandal. And she said something really powerful that has stuck with me. It's very similar to what you've said which is, people come up to her and they say I wish we had Olivia Pope to like fix this election. And she would say to them, but Olivia Pope is not real, she's a character on a TV show this is actually in your hands. You've got to be the one to participate so that we can all say it's handled. And that's really what I heard from you just now.
- Ai-jen Poo: Yeah, and what we saw in Virginia was a whole bunch of super citizens.
- Alicia Garza: When Heather was talking and said super citizen, Ai-jen like you could just tell she found like her happy place. It was like you wrapped her in a warm blanket on a cold Chicago day. She started to sway side to side, she was like really about it-
- Ai-jen Poo: But this is what happens when Heather talks. This is what happens-
- Heather McGhee: Actually, I want to know Ai-jen what is it about super citizen that you like so much?
- Ai-jen Poo: Well, it means that you did everything that you could, so that you wouldn't be in a position of looking back and saying I didn't do enough.
- Heather McGhee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)
- Ai-jen Poo: There were dozens of homes that we visited of everyday people, like they literally open up their homes and volunteers would come in throughout the day in waves to get their addresses where they needed to go knock doors, and all those people on Wednesday after election day, all of those people were like I did that.



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

- Heather McGhee: It's such a good feeling.
- Ai-jen Poo: It's an incredible feeling.
- Heather McGhee: And right now technology is making it really easy. You can go any of the candidates you like, say you like Elizabeth Warren, you can go to her website and you can just get an app on your phone that allows you to organize. What's so awesome about it is that it also restores a little bit of faith in your fellow Americans.
- Ai-jen Poo: Mm-hmm (affirmative)
- Heather McGhee: Because the people you're door knocking with, the people you're calling are not in your club, they're not in your Facebook group, they are random Americana, right? And they're your neighbors, and ultimately they care about the same things that you do. And seeing that and feeling that is very affirming at a time where it's felt like we're just on the verge of a civil war. And that if you're not someone I know I may not be able to trust you.
- Ai-jen Poo: It's also disruptive. Like there was like a list of addresses that Alexis, our Virginia director and I got. And the houses were really far apart and it was kind of in the cut. It was like borderline rural and lots of big trucks and I did not grow up in communities where people drove big trucks. And so I have a set of assumptions about what that's going to be like and who's going to be behind on the other side of the door. So, I would just look over at Alexis and be like okay, we're going to knock this door, does anybody know we're here?
- Ai-jen Poo: And on the other side would be people who are like, Oh yeah, I know I'm opening up the polls tomorrow. I already have a plan to vote, I'm going to leave work early at two o'clock, and it was just incredible. And I thought to myself if I had just seen that person on the street, I never would have assumed that they would be a super citizen.
- Heather McGhee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)
- Alicia Garza: I do.
- Ai-jen Poo: And it's beautiful-



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

- Alicia Garza: I love that. I think it's so important when we talk about the power that's in everyday people's hands, and that there isn't like a thing that's going to come and rescue everybody. And that part of that work right? Is like also connecting to the people that we would assume are not getting involved and being inspired by them. I think that if we do our jobs right, that it is going to be those people who are the light in the storm. Each of us can be the light in our own storm where we are taking action, and we have the [bombest 00:25:13] guest ever who is taking action all the time, not just on our behalf but on her own behalf. You're a mom now, you've said that having a baby really enforced for you why you do this work. Can you talk to me a little bit more about that?
- Heather McGhee: So, anyone who has maybe been pregnant and experienced the hormonal shifts that come with that, your emotional setpoint just gets like keyed up. I have suddenly had it where a car comes too close to me as I'm walking the crosswalk, and I go from like zero to well-nigh violent so quickly. It's really strange. I've never been a crier, I'm like my dear friend Ai-jen over here who's crying right now, at the thought of me being hit in the crosswalk. I just... for anyone who has children climate change is... it is the great cognitively dissonant horror show of our time. It's right like we're all sitting here living our lives while life as we know it is ending. I mean it's one of those things that you can't... anytime you let any bit of it in, it threatens to make you just fall apart. And I think having children for whom when they're my age there will be no more coral reefs, there will be cities underwater is just... it's that door in to that feeling.
- Alicia Garza: Mm-hmm (affirmative)
- Heather McGhee: So, yeah it's fricking given me a lot more urgency and emotion about climate change, having a child. I have been very lucky to be sitting in rooms as legislation was drafted a number of times in my life and to fight for legislation like the Credit Card Act of 2009, the Dodd-Frank Act of 2010, the Wall Street Reform Bill, State Level Democracy Reforms. And the thing I really am most committed to now is seeing a great new deal passed in my near, near lifetime and being in the room that happens.
- Alicia Garza: Will bless you for that because-
- Ai-jen Poo: We can do it.



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee

- Alicia Garza: We can and we are doing it. So, we're almost out of time and we know you're the light in the storm. You have definitely demonstrated that to us today. Tell us what is one piece of advice that you would give to our listeners who are trying to shine bright in some of the darkest times in our nation?
- Heather McGhee: See the world you want, and my best moments when I'm really on purpose and I'm really in my power as we say. I feel like I'm in the future and it's a better future, and I'm looking back and I'm telling the people here how we got there. And I think there's so many ways and times that everyday people are focused on a goal or seeing their loved ones get better and have a plan to get there, or seeing themselves graduate from college or seeing themselves to the end of the work day, or seeing the end of a task. And that ability to see what is unseen and to hope, and to really feel what it's like to be in the wishful future is I think a superpower that everybody has. And I think we all do better and do more, and do it with more joy when we're living in the future that we want.
- Alicia Garza: Thank you, Heather McGhee. You are the light in the storm.
- Ai-jen Poo: I love her so much.
- Heather McGhee: I love you too. I'm so excited that you all will be in my ear.
- Ai-jen Poo: We love you so much, and to all of you lovely listeners who we also love. Write to us, tweet us tell us about how you are making your way through the storm. We're at @Aijenpoo and @AliciaGarza #SunStorm.
- Alicia Garza: Represent.
- Ai-jen Poo: We can't wait to hear from you so reach out.
- Alicia Garza: Ciao!
- Speaker 4: Sunstorm is a project of the National Domestic Workers Alliance in collaboration with Participant Media. Sunstorm is executive produced by Alicia Garza, Ai-Jen Poo, Kristina Mevs-Apger and Jess Morales Rocketto. Sunstorm is produced by Amy S. Choi and Rebecca Lehrer of the Mash-Up Americans. Our production team is Jocelyn Gonzales, Shelby Sandlin, Mary Philip Sandy and Mia Warren. Original music composed by Jen Kwok and Jody Shelton.



Episode 2 Transcript: Heather McGhee