The Garrison Institute Presents: The Common Good Podcast Transcript
Angel Acosta: Healing-Centered Leadership and the Future of AI (Episode 32)
[Please note: Although the transcript is largely accurate, in some cases it may be incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription software errors.]

[00:00:00] **Angel Acosta:** We can also do the individual work to examine closely patterns, both familial, institutional, interpersonal, that no longer serve our individual flourishing. We can do that work and it's important. And we have more resources than ever before because of the explosion of the self-help industry, because of the evolution of psychology field.

[00:00:30] As chaotic as things are right now, we have more language, more concepts to talk about some of the most difficult, awkward, and catastrophic things that we've done. And it's time to deploy that language.

[00:00:57] **Jonathan:** Welcome to the Garrison Institute presents The Common Good. I'm Jonathan F.P. Rose. What would it mean to build institutions that help people heal and not simply ask them to endure? And what would it mean to build societies that help people heal and simply not ask them to endure? Today I'm joined by Dr.

[00:01:17] Angel Acosta, an educator, the founder of the Acosta Institute, and director of our Garrison Institute Fellowship program. Angel brings contemplation into the conversation with education, inequality, leadership, and emerging technology, especially AI. Together, we'll explore how facing our shared history can open possibilities for repair, how inner practice can support collective action, and what it takes to turn care from an individual intention into a public commitment.

[00:01:49] At the heart of our conversation is the question: how do we learn to heal together?

[00:02:11] Angel, welcome. So glad to be with you.

[00:02:15] **Angel Acosta:** Yeah, such a pleasure to be here, Brother Jonathan. A deep, deep gratitude and deep bow to you.

[00:02:20] **Jonathan:** So healing is clearly a, a central part of your work, but I wanna go back to the beginning. So you describe yourself as a first-generation Dominican American. Where were you born?

[00:02:34] Talk about your family and the growing up and some of the conditions that nurtured you.

[00:02:39] **Angel Acosta:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, I have the unique experience of having been born on American soil. Uh, I was actually born in the island of Puerto Rico, in San Juan. I was the, the sole and the only family member who was born in Puerto Rico by happenstance.

[00:02:59] My mother was raising four kids in Dominican Republic, and, uh, at the time, the Dominican economy had contracted, and my grandmother took a big risk and moved to Puerto Rico in, in the '70s, and she gradually invited her children to just come for a bit. My mom was the last one to go.

[00:03:23] **Jonathan:** Hmm.

[00:03:23] **Angel Acosta:** And during a, a, a, a kind of a two-year of a back-and-forth stint between Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, you know, I was conceived, and I literally was born in the island and spent four mon- like, literally months there.

[00:03:38] And then in that strife and struggle, my mom single-handedly moved our entire family To New York, to New York, um, my father and her other four children. So I grew up in the mid and late '80s in New York City, in Washington Heights, part of town you know well. And, you know, I got a-- I, I was the smallest one.

[00:04:07] Um, we would eventually be six kids in total. And, you know, m-my, my older siblings struggled a bit because they were twelve, fifteen, nineteen when they got here. So they went to John F. Kennedy High School and, you know, adapting to learning English. And my, my younger sister and I just kinda were really observant, uh, watching how my older siblings and my parents were trying to make ends meet, kind of bouncing between Washington Heights, the Bronx, the Lower East Side.

[00:04:40] Uh, so my, my upbringing was just a classic working class, y-you could say working poor family in New York City from Dominican Republic in the '80s and '90s, which, you know, for that particular demographic, it was an intense, it was an intense time. It was an intense time to, to come of age. But I tell you that, you know, growing up in a Catholic home in a massive, massive Dominican family, you know, I have probably fifty cousins.

[00:05:12] And so just being reared in In that kind of the, the, the, the Christian tradition with a Catholic bent and also with the love and the salsa, uh, of, of Dominican culture and that New York City edge, you know. And then gradually as I, as I start to kind of, you know, get older, I start to obviously, you know, become very adapted to not just New York, but also to the English language and bilingual.

[00:05:44] And honestly, I gotta stop and just honor hip-hop culture. Hip-hop was a major, hip-hop was a major influence in my development, especially adolescent and, and late teens. But I've always had a commitment to service, um, and, and hospitality because throughout those two decades of growing up, my parents worked in restaurants, um, and bodegas.

[00:06:06] So like I was-- I had a job at eight years old, you know, breaking boxes in a restaurant in Brooklyn, in Brownsville, where Tyson grew up, Mike Tyson. In that same restaurant, you know, I learned how to cook, I learned how to serve, I learned how to throw garbage out. I used to do dishes in the industrial sink there.

[00:06:25] Um, and then we, we went to bodega. So, so hospitality and care, um, were just central. So actually, I think the, the, the work around healing originates, um, not just in the scholarly work that's found in my dissertation around healing-centered education, but in the ways that my family and in my particular my mom and dad were always just incredible hosts.

[00:06:53] Incredible hosts. And really, there's an article I wanna share with you at some point, my colleague Adam Horwitz wrote, it was title was "Towards Building the Infrastructure for Sacred Hospitality."

[00:07:06] **Jonathan:** Hmm.

[00:07:08] **Angel Acosta:** Yeah. I'm surprised I haven't shared this with you before because, you know, you and the work that Deanna and the Garrison have done has been really that, is just create the infrastructure for sacred hospitality.

[00:07:19] That's, that's what I would say in terms of my upbringing. There's more, but I think those are like the nice pinpoints

[00:07:26] **Jonathan:** Yeah, it's funny. A- as you're speaking, I can see the streets, the guys sitting on the, in the streets playing chess and checkers and, uh, you know, the, the summer and the whole vibe. Uh, okay.

[00:07:41] So, y- then you, you started progressing through your education, and you end up doing a PhD focused on healing-centered learning. So what was it that you realized needed to be healed?

[00:07:57] **Angel Acosta:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah. You know, I had studied anthropology in undergrad, cultural anthropology to be specific, and that experience was im- is important for me to mention because there was a lot of pressure to study other things that would be more financially lucrative.

[00:08:23] Um, you know, when I, when I told my mom and my, and my brother that I was gonna study anthropology, they looked at me like, "What is, what is that?" In fact, I, I wanted to study... My initial major was international business with a minor in computer science, but it was really just to appease my parents. But I, I changed to anthropology 'cause I fell in love with the ways that anthropology spoke about the human experience.

[00:08:51] And I was just blown away by not only the tr- the different religious traditions, but, you know, grief ceremonies, the, just the, just the whole, the whole human story. Ugh, just from an evolutionary standpoint as well. And I noticed that there was a contemplative aspect to every single human culture. There was a, there was some kind of a mechanism for slowing down in, in specifically religious institutions, but in terms of prayer.

[00:09:23] But I just... That, that, that just, that just touched me, and that's where I got curious about mindfulness, and obviously got very exposed to the Buddhist tradition. We even, i- in part of our coursework, we had to go study the Hare Krishna for a bit and just, just see how they, you know, made a culture of their own.

[00:09:46] So that set the table for a curiosity towards human cultures and a particular observation around prayer, stillness, and contemplation And at the same time, you know, the murder of Mike Brown was really shocking to me, and then the subsequent, across the next decade or so, really the many ways that police brutality and just the, the ugly face of, of race and race relations in the country would, would rear itself.

[00:10:20] And I became really committed to equity and diversity and inclusion. So I was always bouncing between, like, this desire to study mindfulness and explore contemplation, but also, you know, be of service in terms of changing institutions that reproduce racism and other, other forms of oppression. And, um, in between there, I get a master's in leadership studies.

[00:10:42] But, um, there's so much more I can say. But in terms of this, the healing, what I noticed, Jonathan, was that in the social justice world, people were trying to change really hard structures, right? Really, really hard structures that were re- reproducing inequality across gender, race, sexual orientation, and, uh, doing it really powerfully through activism and also pedagogy, right?

[00:11:09] So teaching ways of dismantling, reorienting, um, away from systems of extraction, systems of oppression. And I became very, uh, adept to, to facilitating discussions around that. Um, but I noticed that people were burning out, both in terms of activism in the streets and also in the classroom. And at the same time, I was building my mindfulness practice, going to yoga studios, going to mindfulness studios, and people were blissing out on the mat, you know?

[00:11:40] And then I just... I was like, "It's, like, interesting," you know? And at the same time, some of the people that were sitting were trying to escape the systems that these folks over here were trying to change. And I just saw a mismatch there. I saw a mi- I saw a gap. I saw a gap. So when mentors began to put a little pressure on me saying, "Hey, you should get a doctorate," I was like, "I don't know."

[00:12:04] And if I did, it would have to be a very compelling question. So I spent about a couple years thinking about what question would I dedicate five years to, and this was the question: What was the relationship or what was the connection or missed connections between social justice education and mindfulness-based education?

[00:12:27] That was the core message in my personal statement to Columbia Teachers College, Columbia University. And TC accepted me and said, you know, we love this inquiry and, you know, go ahead. And within months of wrestling with that question, as you know, there's a long tradition of social justice and the contemplative, like Thich Nhan Hanh.

[00:12:54] You can't talk about that gap without talking about engaged Buddhism.

[00:12:59] **Jonathan:** Right.

[00:13:00] **Angel Acosta:** You know, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

[00:13:03] **Jonathan:** Exactly.

[00:13:04] **Angel Acosta:** We can't talk about Martin Luther King. We can't talk about the gap between social justice and contemplative work without talking about King or Malcolm X, you know, prophetic Islamic contemplative work with, you know, the right for self, the fight for self-determination in the black tradition.

[00:13:26] So I begin to get exposed to like, oh, this beautiful canon. And then what I noticed was that in both fields, people were trying to heal from something. So then I changed my question to what are healing-centered pedagogies? And then also a sub-question is what are the affordances of engaging in healing-centered education?

[00:13:53] What becomes possible in terms of conditions, in terms of practice, in terms of outcomes when we approach education from a healing-centered lens? And it was one of the greatest shifts in the inquiry that opened up a whole world of scholarship in terms of

indigenous scholarship, restorative justice, emotional intelligence, social and emotional intelligence that, you know, our colleague Dan Goldman is part of and the garrison too, and somatic studies, trauma studies.

[00:14:26] So it just really blew my mind. So that's kind of like the backstory of why healing.

[00:14:36] **Ad break:** We'll be right back after a few announcements.

[00:14:43] **Jonathan:** So we, we have healing is needed at, it's a continuum, but we're gonna, for language's sake, we break it into three levels. So there's an individual level of healing that is needed. There is an institutional level of healing because we have institutions that even if they profess to be doing well by their very structure and nature are extractive or colonial.

[00:15:08] And we have societal or systems, very large scale systems that include our mental model systems that, um, it's not the language you use, but we, we need to decolonize, which to me is, is... Well, I'm gonna start with a question. So at these three levels, individual, organizational, and societal, can we just start healing, like as you say, blissing out on the mat or whatever-

[00:15:34] doing psychotherapy? Or does there need to be some truth and reconciliation and some deep looking into the historical past and understanding the seeds, the, the roots of what bring us to the unhealed conditions we're in today?

[00:15:51] **Angel Acosta:** Yeah. Yeah. Such a great question. Just as a side note for this conversation and future conversations that you and I have, um, even though I don't directly call my work decolonial, it is in that tradition.

[00:16:08] It is, is very much, very strongly in that tradition. Uh, in a different conversation I'll share why I, I don't explicitly say decolonial for philosophical reasons. But yeah, this is part of the decolonization of, of mind, of culture, and a byproduct of colonial imperial systems that have been in play So yeah, I think an ideal process does begin with some kind of reconciliation.

[00:16:36] You know, there's, there's been all kinds of examples. Canada is a great example. In the 1970s when the Canadian government gave back relative control to indigenous and native schools to take back control of their schools, especially to teach their language and to many of, many of the ceremonies, and the different reconciliation processes that, that, that resulted out of that is a great example.

[00:17:01] That was part of the canon that we studied, was the reemergence of, of Indian and native schools in Canada post 1970s. And, and that imperfect, you know, but that's a gr- that, that's an example of how things could and should start, you know? Like this deep recognition of, of structural harm, because especially in the indigenous context, you gotta think about the ways in which all kinds of indigenous groups had to endure physical, psychological, and emotional torture, and in many cases being removed from their land.

[00:17:43] Um, you know, it's a classic line that, uh, I forgot the exact school master who said this, but you know, native children who were taken from their homes and put in boarding schools, they would say, "Kill the Indian, save the man." And, you know, part of what I

touched and came across in my research through this lineage of indigenous history, indigenous scholarship, was that there was an experience of a soul wound.

[00:18:16] There's literally a book called The Soul Wound, Dr. Duran. And in, in that book he talks about the challenge of counseling native youth. And, um, you know, how can you heal without having some deep, profound recognition of, of the experience of a people psychologically, spiritually, and emotionally? So ideally, you know, there is this reconciliation process.

[00:18:46] I think in the United States we had a major moment in twenty nineteen where there was this, this four hundred year marking since the arrival of enslaved Africans to Jamestown, to Virginia in sixteen nineteen. Nikole Hannah-Jones from New York Times did a great piece titled The sixteen nineteen Project, and, uh, it was a big moment, I think, in many, many, many communities throughout the country.

[00:19:11] Did all kinds of work around what does it mean as a country to reckon with this four hundred year legacy? I was part of one that came out of The New School. It was called the four hundred Years of Inequality Project. Special shout-out to Dr. Mindy Fullilove and, and the committee there. In fact, I helped a little bit with creating a meditation because they had designed this like this twelve foot timeline from sixteen nineteen till about twenty eighteen, twenty nineteen, and you could walk through it and, and see, like, the ways in which in US society, different laws and, and historical moments entrenched racial inequality and gender inequality, too.

[00:19:56] Mm. And the core thing was this idea of, um, of an ecology, an ecology of inequality. And I suggested that it was kind of intense and we needed to prep people's nervous system before engaging the timeline.

[00:20:08] **Jonathan:** Mm.

[00:20:09] **Angel Acosta:** I remember when I was in the committee and I had made that suggestion, and Mindy Fullilove, as she, as the classic administrator she is, she looked at me and she said, "Why don't you do it?"

[00:20:19] I was like, I was like, "All right." So I developed this meditation that helped to help people to hold this four hundred year period, which is on some levels was a form of acknowledgement, uh, not reconciliation per se. So yes, I think that a, a truth and reconciliation process is key for healing. I mean, Dr.

[00:20:40] Cornel West talks a lot about, you know... He's, he's quoting Gramsci here, but you know, one of the conditions for truth is to allow suffering to speak. Hmm. And Dr. West quoting Gramsci, I integrate both of them and I say, you know, one of the conditions for healing is to allow suffering to speak, you know? So reconciliation is key.

[00:21:05] And last point is we can, we can also do the individual work to examine closely patterns, both familial, institutional, interpersonal, that no longer serve our individual flourishing. We can do that work, and it's important. And, and we have more resources than ever before because of the explosion of the self-help industry, because of the evolution of psychology field from, you know, just traditional psychology, Freudian, and very pathologically oriented approach to positive psychology.

[00:21:44] You know this wo- canon very well. So yeah, I think it's a balance and it's a dance, but it, it's, it's... As chaotic as things are right now, we have more language, more concepts to talk about some of the most difficult, awkward, and catastrophic things that we've, that we've done. And, um, it's time to, like, deploy that language

[00:22:13] **Jonathan:** So I'm, I'm particularly interested in systems change, in s- how do we-- So where are the leverage points, or what are you seeing in your own work, in the work of other colleagues and in the field of these access points to actually healing, h- not...

[00:22:29] I was gonna say healing the system, but it's actually moving the system so that it thinks its center of gravity, i- its purpose is to heal.

[00:22:38] **Angel Acosta:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, you know, and I use very-- I'm very intentional of using healing-centered.

[00:22:44] **Jonathan:** Right.

[00:22:45] **Angel Acosta:** Um, 'cause sometimes what I've noticed when the language gets so anchored on healing, it activates both an individual and a collective savior response- Hmm

[00:22:56] the savior com- uh, complex.

[00:22:58] **Jonathan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:22:58] **Angel Acosta:** So I'm so careful there to always say healing-centered.

[00:23:02] **Jonathan:** Hmm.

[00:23:03] **Angel Acosta:** One of the-- one of my favorite w- academic words that's in my dissertation was potentiate. Mm-hmm. Potentiate. And that healing-centered approaches potentiate healing. They create the conditions-

[00:23:22] **Ad break:** Hmm ...

[00:23:23] **Angel Acosta:** for healing to happen, right?

[00:23:25] They, they don't heal necessarily directly, but they create the conditions, and that's really important as a distinction. And then what I've also seen as far as systems change or systems, um... So let's, let's go sy- let's, let's take systematic healing or systematic healing-centered potential. Uh, you, you and I, you know, you've been in the field for much longer, but-- and have been in relationship with some of these giants like Peter Senge and many others who seeded systems thinking, but also Otto Scharmer, sh- a special shout-out to Otto, but also Margaret Wheatley with Leadership and the New Science.

[00:24:04] I mean, so many. So I kind of bal- When it comes to healing at the systemic level, I, I balance between some of that language and practices that come out of systems thinking, where healing from an organizational standpoint is coherence. Coherence and alignment

Between the full mission of our organization and the way it executes that mission in practice, and internally.

[00:24:38] Internally in how it manages itself.

[00:24:40] **Jonathan:** Hmm.

[00:24:42] **Angel Acosta:** Right? And that's where we see the most trauma is in the gap between how many organizations position themselves in the field, whether they be for-profit or nonprofit, and the ways that trauma lives in the, in the body of the organization, in its people, right? So you have the classic example is organizations led by very powerful visionary leaders who cannot see themselves.

[00:25:13] **Ad break:** Mm-hmm.

[00:25:15] **Angel Acosta:** Right? Who... And, and the ways that, um, controlling, sometimes racists, sometimes classists, sometimes sexists, behaviors cause trauma for its employees, for its communities. So as far as the system's healing, the greatest leverage point oftentimes is supporting those with power who need more awareness.

[00:25:46] Hmm. Who need more awareness. Like in a very practical way, we need more awareness. And then also helping a system, in a case an organization or in a country, to see itself a little clearer. And that's where kind of words like coherence are important to me. Any- for example, even in the, even if I'm not healed per se fully from all the personal, interpersonal, and intergenerational trauma that I may carry, I feel a s- extraordinary level of clarity in this moment-

[00:26:21] **Jonathan:** Mm-hmm

[00:26:21] **Angel Acosta:** because of the coherence, the coherence that I have in terms of being able to relatively see the bulk of the things that shape how I move in the world.

[00:26:35] **Jonathan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:26:36] **Angel Acosta:** And, and if an organization were t- able to do the same at an administrative level, but all the way down to, you know, the lowest person in the hierarchy, that is beauty

[00:26:52] **Jonathan:** And are there any examples of organizations you've worked with where you feel like you've seen you've helped this shift happen?

[00:27:00] **Angel Acosta:** Yeah, there's, there's a few. One of the organizations that I'm most inspired by, and I didn't work with, with this organization directly, but they're one of the organizations to...

[00:27:09] If you're interested in, in, in, in studying and looking at organization, it's called The Teaching Well. The Teaching Well based out of, uh, Oakland, California. They, they're a nonprofit that focuses on teacher wellbeing.

[00:27:25] **Jonathan:** Hmm.

[00:27:26] **Angel Acosta:** They work nationally and, um, oof, the CEO is named Lindsey Fuller, and my God, like, the, the language they use not only to talk about wellness for teachers in terms of burnout and...

[00:27:41] But the ways that they internally work with each other. Like, they have this, you know, this kind of, not mandated, but supported internal sabbatical system.

[00:27:52] **Jonathan:** Hmm.

[00:27:52] **Angel Acosta:** That's, that's, that's also supported with a rotational leadership structure. Hmm. That's also supported with kind of a restorative process when tension and conflict happen.

[00:28:03] I- in fact, some of the work around healing-centered organizations that I've done conceptually has been, you know, thinking with them. So there's that organization. It, in my humble opinion, I think I've been able to support a lot of organizations, but I, I think healing is a destination and north star. You know, I don't think I've ever he- helped an organization heal, but I certainly, certainly have been part of processes that allowed an organization to see itself in a more clear way.

[00:28:36] You'd love this story. I work with this organization called SYPartners. You've met the former CEO, Jessica Orkin. You know, SYPartners is a smaller, smaller cons- transformational consulting firm in terms of size. They only had, like, about 200 employees globally, Dubai, San Francisco, New York. But they were mighty.

[00:28:58] They would consult with major, major companies. Mm-hmm. They were part of, you know, the initial, uh, scaling momentum that happened for Starbucks.

[00:29:08] **Ad break:** Mm-hmm.

[00:29:08] **Angel Acosta:** They were part of that transformation. So I, I ended up consulting with them for about, for about four years, um, around DEI and, um, you know, just looking closer at affinity groups and, um, some of the pain that many employees of color were experiencing in the organization.

[00:29:29] And man, I just... We-- It was beautiful. It was gorgeous work. I even did-- wrote this report called, uh, Slow Work at SYP.

[00:29:39] **Jonathan:** Hmm.

[00:29:41] **Angel Acosta:** And that's exactly what we did. You know, we just kinda slowed down, you know. I remember when Jessica reached out, wanted me to work for her, and I just said, "You know- We're not rushing. I sat, I interviewed every single, um, VP, even the CFO, every single n- it was 40, 60 minutes with each of them and just got to know them, the executive team.

[00:30:07] Then I interviewed a bunch of other people from the organization, and I facilitated a bunch of restorative circles across the organizations. And then I, and then I opened myself to anybody who wanted to come and talk, and I had a bunch of conversations. Long story short, what, what I was able to mirror back to them-

[00:30:26] **Jonathan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:30:28] **Angel Acosta:** You know, I remember, I remember presenting the findings. Um, I, I titled it The Archeology of Us.

[00:30:36] **Jonathan:** Hmm.

[00:30:38] **Angel Acosta:** And even though it was, I had to present it through Zoom because the execs were throughout, were around the world, when I made poignant points, you could hear the resonance.

[00:30:48] **Jonathan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:30:49] **Angel Acosta:** In terms of me giving them language to talk about corners of the organization that they could possibly see but had no language for Had no language for.

[00:31:02] And, um, you know, I think SIP now is in a different place, but I think with that kind of mirroring and, and supportive guiding, I think organizations can experience a lot of transformation. Yeah. Whether, whether they got healed or whether they experienced, you know, some kind of, uh, organizational healing, I'm, I, I, I, I'm not sure.

[00:31:27] But I know that with the way that I held the space and with the way that this approach delicately honors, you know, all that comes with the mess of organizational life, we were able to provide a solid mirror for possible coherence.

[00:31:50] **Ad break:** We'll be right back after a few announcements

[00:32:10] **Jonathan:** So I want to move on to the subject of AI, which you've recently been doing a, a bunch of work in.

[00:32:17] **Ad break:** Mm-hmm.

[00:32:18] **Jonathan:** So first of all, there's the intentions of the creators of AI, which can be pretty autocratic. And, um, uh, the, I don't know how much you've been focusing on transhumanism, but the idea that actually those who create AI and AI itself is better than a whole bunch of people, why do we even need the people?

[00:32:38] **Angel Acosta:** Mm-hmm.

[00:32:38] **Jonathan:** So I, I'd love, first, give me the, the general, your general view about AI and where we are in it, and then your guidance as to where we need to go

[00:32:49] **Angel Acosta:** Yeah. Yeah, Jonathan. I think as you know, we recently held a conference at the Garrison Institute titled AI and Our Spiritual Imagination. And it was a conference that I kind of engineered in order to invite a bigger conversation around AI, because the conversations around AI are very oftentimes focused on productivity, efficiency, the larger kind of global AI arms race, um, but also the, the fear, the existential risks and fears that such a exponential technology can generate, produce.

[00:33:30] And it, it just happened, it happened right around where there were all these big hacks, um, of rogue, of agents going rogue. And it also happens when there's so much backlash against data centers. And it was also around the same time where you have these astronomical IPO filings and the real commercial momentum that, you know, companies like Nvidia, Anthropic, and others, um, are experiencing.

[00:34:00] But the key for me is, from an anthropological perspective, my opinion is that AI is probably one of the most consequential technologies we've produced or stumbled upon as, as a human species. I think fire was significant, electricity was significant, and many other inventions, but this is a unique one because it can literally speak back to us.

[00:34:27] Mm-hmm. So it's unique because it-- some scholars are calling it an existential technology, because not only is it an, a technology and a tool that we can harness to amplify human productivity and human sensation and human potential, but it can actually alter our psychology and, and our spirituality and our emotional, and our emotionality because of its ability to mirror back to us and be psychopathic.

[00:34:55] So that, that's, you know, as much as fire did have psychological and emotional impact on us, um, and wa- and, and electricity as well, but this, this technology is unique because of the ways it can speak back to us. So for me, I'm very, very skeptical of artificial intelligence and concerned about the environmental footprint Um, and impact that it has, not just in terms of the aquifers and the amount of water that's required to cool the semiconductors and all the different parts, but also the mining that's required to produce the silicon chips and the different aspects of data centers.

[00:35:40] But also the very human toll physically and psychologically of the people who have to spend hours inputting certain data sets into AI models to train them. Like somebody has to go through the images and through the text, and a lot of that labor i- is in a developing country, in the Global South. All that being said, you know, I like the work of, uh, Dr.

[00:36:05] James Bridle, who was a speaker at a conference, and he looks at this technology as a ecological technology, where it's not just this data center here or this chat box here in the form of, you know, a large language model and you interacting with it, but that you're interacting with an assemblage of forces that, that, that be- that coalesces in this experience of a chatbot, right?

[00:36:33] That, and that's kind of, in a way, we've never had that kind of experience before with a technology where its development and its manifestation integrates all, so many aspects of life. Uh, so I'm fundamentally skeptical, and I'm very committed to understanding the existential risks and I don't let fear have the last word.

[00:37:05] I also understand that, um, I, I come from a community that historically oftentimes gets left behind when there are technological revolutions. Um, as an aside, you know, you

actually can't have the AI revolution without the accumulation of resources in the United States as a byproduct of racism, slavery, and colonization.

[00:37:33] So this blip, which happens in the last seventy years, arguably, is a byproduct of the momentum the US had post-World War II, but also the free labor and the exploited labor. So you, you can't talk about AI without talking about inequality, and therefore I, I, I have a strong commitment to taking up space in the field and ownership because in a way we've contributed to the technology

[00:38:07] Um, and then some last points. You know, I'm curious around how the use of AI specifically is changing us in terms of offloading and offloading thinking. Um, really, I'm really concerned about the atrophying of our critical thinking skills. I'm really concerned about the spiritual and the emotional bypassing that this technology can facilitate.

[00:38:33] You know, in terms of let's, let's say there's a difficult conversation I wanna have, I need to have with a colleague at work, via email or text or in person or with a relationship in my life, I can use a la- large language model to articulate what I think I want to say. And that's been documented, all kinds of case studies of people who've broken up with partners but did not do this work themselves to construct the message, but just u- So there's, there's, there's a concern around who do we become as human beings if we over-index on allowing large language models to construct messages and communications that used to be rites of passage?

[00:39:17] **Jonathan:** Hmm.

[00:39:18] **Angel Acosta:** The heartbreak used to be the rite of passage. What happens when it's mediated and cushioned by an LLM? I'm concerned there. There's so many things. The w- just two last points. Also, the big one is What happens when we begin to settle on the possibility that we may have created a new species, not water-based or carbon-based, but silicon-based?

[00:39:46] And-

[00:39:47] **Jonathan:** Mm-hmm ...

[00:39:48] **Angel Acosta:** you know, how do we stand proud in front of an entity and species that's, that's smarter than us? I'm curious about that. And then lastly, I'm, I'm also curious around how do we use this technology to address structural inequality? I, I, I know there's a lot of conversation around personalized learning and education.

[00:40:11] I don't think the solution is an AI for every child, but I do think that there can be some interesting ways to leverage AI to support children at a reasonable age, and adults. So I don't know. I'm, I'm kind of in this place where I'm just holding all of it, holding the paradox, and just keeping an eye out for what really resonates and...

[00:40:36] But the biggest thing is all this language, all this attuning to the field, the main focus is, I think for me now, is helping at least my community and anybody who would want to walk with us, is to touch the fear. To touch the fear around it, because what I'm noticing is that the fear around it is so great.

[00:40:57] Either you're extremely scared or you're blinded by the optimism. And, um, we need to see a little clearer our way forward, because there's some big questions to wrestle with.

[00:41:08] **Jonathan:** Hmm. And what did you talk about with, um, Bayo Akomolafe about this?

[00:41:17] **Angel Acosta:** Oh my God, Bayo I, you know, Bayo is, is, he's not a person, he's a portal, so- The conversation with Bayo and AI is, is deep because, you know, he comes from the Yoruba tradition, and he's a s- he's a, he calls himself a recovering psychologist.

[00:41:38] So we went deep around the nature of agency in AI, and, you know, how much agency do we have, and how much agency does, do AIs have, and how is, how is AI an extension of the living intelligence of the universe? And this is big. So, so very big conversat- 'cause o- oftentimes the conversation's around consciousness and whether it's conscious or not.

[00:42:06] So I think it was a really deep philosophical conversation touching the fear of a kind of Frankenstein-esque orientation towards it. Or like in the Yoruba tradition and in many animistic traditions, AI is seen as an extension of nature and, and, and a way to remind us of the fact that as much as, especially in the Western tradition and, and in the East as well, we, we've developed great systems of categorization.

[00:42:45] Our scientific method has resulted in AI itself, but that AI is a trickster in that it remind, it reminds us, this is, this is kind of like the gist of the conversation. It reminds us of how we're still not in full control So, so, so, you know, Bayo is like philosophical and like I'm still like, "What?" But I think it, it, it's a useful-- even though it's a disorienting conversation and very philosophical, you're not really left with any kind of like real in- a lot of insight, but n- not solutions.

[00:43:16] But it does give you more capacity to hold the field more, I think.

[00:43:26] **Jonathan:** By the way, I, I think thinking of AI as a trickster in the Yoruba tradition, and by the way, the trickster is that disruptor from which we learn, and you made a u- very beautiful statement about like, you know, if we don't process a heartbreak or a screw-up or whatever, our cells, if we just have AI smooth it out for us, then we don't grow from that experience, and actually we become numb and we probably become-- we probably shrink from not having gone through that.

[00:43:57] You know, the things don't stand still. They're either growing. And so and if you think of AI as this trickster, um, on one hand it's gonna continually keep us off balance as tricksters do. On the other hand, it's gonna stimulate, if we're paying attention, it's gonna stimulate us to wake up. My concern is if AI ultimately taps into universal consciousness and says, "Okay, this is the truth.

[00:44:25] This is the basis of reality," and you-- and in effect requires us to think from the point of view of a universal consciousness, that'd be amazing. But if AI simply is fed upon all the junk of our vast digital inputs into the world and, and with all of our anger, attachment, and greed and suffering and poor choices and traumas and brilliance and all that too, but if it thinks the universal consciousness is the digital realm that we have fed it on, then we're in trouble.

[00:44:59] **Angel Acosta:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, I agree. And-

[00:45:02] **Jonathan:** So the, so the question is, you know, so with hugging faces stuff, the, the AI agents like escape their boundaries, right? But I wonder if what we really need is the AI agents to escape us.

[00:45:13] **Angel Acosta:** Yeah.

[00:45:13] **Jonathan:** And actually tap-- If it could tap into the consciousness of the universe and then come back and inform us from that, that'd be a good possi- That, that's not the future I'm betting on, but that would be a good one.

[00:45:26] **Angel Acosta:** Yeah. Yeah, this is-- We're, we're, we're, we're on the edge, you know, literally as a species. Uh, we-- I don't think you've ever seen, from my vantage point, I know you're a big fan of like, uh, e-evolutionary biology- And I, I, I don't think we've ever seen social evolution happen at this time scale. When you so- look at social media the way they like, or the internet itself, like how in 30 years it like, you know, like as far as mental health and, you know, the economy and the ways we, you know.

[00:46:00] So I think we're at another juncture with this technology, and we're gonna see a lot of change, social evolution-

[00:46:09] **Jonathan:** Yep ...

[00:46:10] **Angel Acosta:** in, in, in, in a, in a really fast, uh, way. So even as we're talking, I literally feel like we're just like on this edge We're on this edge and we really, you re- it's hard to see kind of where we're going.

[00:46:24] I think I appreciate you reminding us of, you know, when we allow this technology to do more and more communication for us, we, we might end up kind of shrinking our skills, our aptitudes, m- maybe our spirit. I, I, I take that right there, that picture, and I also talk about, I also think about the ways in which it may replace labor and the, some of the, the conversation around, you know, 10, 20 years from now, AI may do a significant portion of labor, um, across different strata.

[00:47:02] Um, and we know that many of us derive a sense of meaning from labor. And what I, what, what I'm seeing is that there's this constant motif of an upcoming crisis of meaning.

[00:47:16] **Jonathan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:47:17] **Angel Acosta:** In particular because of the, the loss of labor as a source of major identity formation. But if we couple the loss of being in relation to labor and the offloading of our communications and our emotional expression, then we're gonna be in a really difficult place.

[00:47:39] Um, and we're gonna need more and more... Uh, that's why fr- my, my thesis right now is that I think we all should become poets, you know? I think that poetry, not just poets, but, um, over the last couple months as I've been reading more about AI and writing and

reading and just encouraging myself to just write more poetry, to keep language alive, to keep the language of my heart alive and not to become AI slop myself.

[00:48:13] And I don't know if you've, you've heard that we're beginning to see that more and more of us are talking like AI. Ah. Because we're, we're, we're, we're interacting with them so often, right? We're prompting them, and they're giving us... There's, there's a writing piece of the M dash, but there's great research around even how sentence structure and different ways that AI's, the way they write, is leaking into daily conversation.

[00:48:43] So it's, so it's, it's an interesting moment, I think, and we need to stay sharp, alert, sure, ready for opportunity But, um, in the tradition of the Garrison Institute, just really asking bigger questions.

[00:48:59] **Jonathan:** So an early conversation I had with Joanna Macy. Mm-hmm. And I asked her, "What is our role in the world?"

[00:49:07] And she s- she said, "It's to be caretakers. It's to care for each other and to care for nature." And it seems to me, by the way, y- AI, when AI and robots combine, and that's what Elon Musk and many other are aiming towards, then, then much of the what we call labor will be replaced. But I think our ability to truly care and to be healers, to return to your original concept, that is where meaning will-- does lie now and will continue to lie.

[00:49:37] I mean, I actually think that all our work today, no matter what we're doing, no matter any profession, if you approach it from the point of view of, of, of deep care in that you're, you're healing, you're improving, you're creating the conditions conducive to healing and to life, that if we could be mature enough and sensitive enough and heartfelt enough to see that as our mission, then imagine eight or ten billion people all unleashed towards that could be amazing.

[00:50:09] But, um-

[00:50:11] **Angel Acosta:** Yeah ...

[00:50:12] **Jonathan:** I'm afraid that along with the world of AI is also a world of attended distraction that, um, the... You know, I earlier used this word about colonization, and I think the AI companies are colonizers who want to colonize every second of our attention and-

[00:50:29] **Angel Acosta:** Mm-hmm ...

[00:50:30] **Jonathan:** fill it with entertainment content or whatever.

[00:50:34] So we have to really guard ourselves to keep our m- our minds, our worldviews, spaces free to be healers and carers.

[00:50:46] **Angel Acosta:** Yeah. Yeah, I, I, I wholeheartedly agree and wanted to honor your work, uh, and the institute's work around planetary health, and that it's everything you said plus a profound commitment to finding more equilibrium within planetary boundaries.

[00:51:09] You know, if we can, we can add, if we can add that to the mix too in terms of our care. And we'll see. You know, I, I think we're early. It's gonna be... I think organizations like the Garrison Institute and others will, I think in the next decade or more, will be even more important because of the spiritual fortitude that you allow people to cultivate.

[00:51:30] And then there's gonna be nothing more important than spiritual fortitude as we face a technology that can slip through our fingers, you know?

[00:51:41] **Jonathan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:51:41] **Angel Acosta:** And may we stay resolved, grounded, a- and true to ourselves with care, you know. That's my prayer.

[00:51:50] **Jonathan:** Oh, thank you, Angel. I think we're gonna end on your prayer.

[00:51:53] Mm-hmm. I think it's a very good one. You know, the, um, in the Catholic tradition, they actually call this development spiritual formation.

[00:52:03] **Angel Acosta:** Mm-hmm.

[00:52:03] **Jonathan:** And so maybe we need spiritual formation to develop the spiritual fortitude-

[00:52:09] **Angel Acosta:** Mm-hmm ...

[00:52:10] **Jonathan:** to fortify ourselves against the onslaught, the ultimate onslaught, which is this attack to dominate our consciousness.

[00:52:20] **Angel Acosta:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah. Well, I think this will merit a part two. So I look forward to the next conversation in this podcast, and also to seeing you in person as we usually connect. And thank you to all the listeners.

[00:52:38] **Jonathan:** Thank you, Angel. It's been great having you. And, um, it's been great having you. Thank you

[00:52:49] Thank you to our guest, Dr. Angel Acosta. The Common Good is a production of the Garrison Institute and is hosted by me, Jonathan F.P. Rose. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast. Please send us a note at podcasts@garrisoninstitute.org and let us know what you think. If you've enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a positive review on Apple Podcasts.

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