

A Conversation on Compassion With Andres Gonzales

Transcript of Andres Gonzales on Mindfulness in Schools, on the Power of Love to Heal Communities

Hello, thanks for listening to Conversations on Compassion at the University of Arizona College of SBS Center for Compassion Studies! I'm Leslie Langbert, and today I'm having a conversation with a superhero of love. I'm talking with Andres, 'Andy' Gonzales.

Andy is a co-founder of the Holistic Life Foundation in Baltimore, Maryland. Andy and his friends, Atman and Ali Smith created Holistic Life Foundation seventeen years ago, and I've been following their work for a long time. They are deeply inspiring. In these times especially, it is so important to elevate voices of people who are really sharing love in communities – sharing love with everyone. These guys have been bringing meditation and yoga practices into schools and afterschool programs for the last 16- almost 17 years. I hope you're ready for your heart to grow three sizes, because listening to Andy talking about his work, and what inspires him, deeply inspired me. I feel like I'm still on a high from it. So, enjoy! Get high!

L: Speaking of extremely talented...what about you? (laughs)

A: Holistic Life! Yeah!

L: Yes, I want to talk about everything, but let's start with the incredible vision that you and Atman and Ali had in college to create this (HLF). Catch us up on how Holistic Life Foundation got started.

A: For sure. When we tell the story of how Holistic Life Foundation got started, we usually start with a little bit about Ali and Atman's background, since they did have a foundation of yoga and mindfulness. If you ask them, they'll say "yeah when we were younger, we'd go downstairs for Saturday morning cartoons and our dad would be in a headstand." Just sitting there.

The whole time they were eating breakfast, he'd just be sitting in his headstand. And he would make them meditate every day.

They're funny, sometimes they say, 'when we were younger, sometimes we'd take it seriously – but most of the time we'd just try to get the other one to laugh so that we'd get the other in trouble' (laughs). But they had a practice. And they both went to a Quaker school – the Friends School of Baltimore, so they did a meeting for worship that was an opportunity for them to sit in silence, so it was a form of mindfulness that they had every single day at school as well, and if they wanted to speak, they could stand up and speak. So they had their foundation, and then their parents divorced, they split apart, and I think the practice fell by the wayside just because they were really focused on being householders.

We start there, because I think it all ended up coming full circle back to their practice that they had when they were younger.

So...fast forward a little, they get older, they meet me in college. We would love to say that they met me at a meditation class or something like that, but we met at a bar (laughs).

And it really just came to us, like this immediate bond, where we were thinking of the same philosophical concepts and questions – why are we here? What's the meaning of life? What's the purpose of all this? As we started going inward and studying, and reading – this is our priority, this is 2000 or 2001 – instead of doing as much studying as we should have been doing on our majors, we were reading everything else – philosophy, creation theory, astronomy, astrology, ancient history – just thirsting for knowledge and having these questions, why are we here? What's the purpose? Eventually, it came to us where everything seemed to be going back to these ancient texts from yoga that we had seen. We were like 'aha!' and Atman and Ali had their foundation in it, and I was thinking 'that's interesting', but we still weren't really sold, that wasn't the direction we were going.

One day we were hanging out at their godfather's house, and we're sitting there, having a beer, watching some basketball, I think was what it was, and Atman looks on his little table there and he had this book by Yogi Bhanjan – he's a Kundalini Master – and he had these meditations in the book. We were blown away by these meditations. I was like 'what's this? I wouldn't mind learning this!' and he's like 'you wanna learn some yoga?' And the three of us were like 'what we're seeing in this book isn't yoga like we've seen; there's no bending and stretching, it's all sitting and meditating.' And

he's like, 'that's yoga!' And we're like 'really? Well we want to learn this'. He says 'alright, no problem. I'll make a deal with you. The only way that I'll agree to be your teacher' (and he still doesn't really like that term 'teacher', he says he's a conduit, that he's just a reminder. We're having interactions with each other, and in our interactions, we move each other further along our path, ourselves and him as well).

He said to us 'I won't teach students, I will only teach teachers. Rule number one is that if I teach you this stuff, you have to go and teach other people. Rule number two is that you have to show up at 4:00 in the morning'. And it's midnight, mind you, with a Heineken in my hand, and I'm like 'OK, uh...we got you, no problem!' I mean, we're college kids, we're used to doing this stuff, right?

Next day, the three of us show up at his door, 3:55 knock on his door, lights are dark, and we're wondering if he took us seriously, then lights come on and he opens the door and says 'Oh! You came!' He took us out to a park and we started our practice. We started with a lot of the postures, breathwork and meditations and then he started getting into what we call the 'off the mat' concepts, the philosophical content. You could be on the mat and meditate for two hours a day, but he would always say to us, there are twenty-two hours left in the day, so are you just not going to be mindful? Compassionate? Loving? Is that it? That you only do your 'mat time' and the rest of the time in the day you can be a horrible person and just do bad things (laughs). So he started getting us into that way of thinking.

And those first two years after we graduated from college, really is when we became like, hermits. Hermits like in a sense that we were a three man team of hermits – some people say ascetics, we don't know the word for it, but the three of us together, that's all we did – studying all these practices he was teaching us, sitting down and having conversations, meditating and just having discussions with ourselves, and the transformation starts occurring within us. We were pretty wild guys in college, and we could see that we were calming down, we could see the world completely differently, all our senses – I felt like I was seeing differently, I was smelling differently, hearing differently, it was the entire concept of life and the world was transforming. People around us started noticing it as well.

At this time in the story, we're at 9/11 occurring, this really dramatic stage of what's going on in the nation, the world, fear...and we're happy. We're just buzzin' and people keep looking at us and asking 'why are you guys so



happy?' and we'd be like 'why *aren't* you happy?' Especially people are wondering why we're happy because they know we're broke. We don't have a job, we're just going inward, and they kept looking at us like, the three of y'all just graduated from a great college, you got great degrees, why don't you want to go make a lot of money? We were like, that's not what we're shootin' for here, we know that this is what we're supposed to do.

I think once we had the transformation occur within us, and the realization that *so many* people needed...I mean we *knew* they needed it, because when we were having the conversations in college, all we were talking about was all of this suffering, and what are we going to do about this? How are we going to help? We just want to help. We're into superhero comics, so we thought that we were going to save the world! You know? The three of us, we can make our superhero team! We can do this! (laughs)

Then we got an opportunity with an elementary school. One day we picked up Ali and Atman's mother while we were in our practice mode still, and the principal saw us and asked her 'what are those guys doing?' This is 2001 when yoga and mindfulness aren't very popular yet, so she wasn't going to say 'oh they're just meditating every day - don't worry they're a little weird', but she said 'Oh they have this plan, they're doing their own thing, but why do you ask?' And the principal said, well I have this group of 'problem' kids and I'd like them to help in the afterschool program maybe to be football coaches. Me, Atman and Ali looked at each other and Atman said, 'you know, teaching football to these problem kids is teaching them to bash into each other, so how about we teach them some yoga?' The principal was like, look, I don't really care what you do, I just need someone to do some free aftercare for me, so whatever you want to do, sure'.

The first day I remember the kids ran into the yoga room and we had these old-school gym mats with Velcro to connect to each other, and they just picked them up and shouted "wrestlemania!" and started smacking each other over the head, and me and Ali are looking at each other like 'uh...what did we do? What did we get ourselves into?' because we had never taught a yoga class before, we just had our own practice. That's really where it all began. That group of gentlemen, ten of them in detention at the beginning, weeks passed....7, then 5, 2 and eventually, none of them had detention anymore. The principal, teachers, parents are like 'look, we don't know what y'all are doing, we don't care what y'all are doing, just keep doing it', because they could see the transformation happening with these kids. We could as well - it was the same transformation that happened within us. We knew we had something here and so we stuck with that group, we connected

with them and found out what middle school they all went to, and we picked them up at their middle schools, brought them to a centralized location, a YMCA here in Baltimore, and kept teaching them the practice, and stuck with them. That's basically how it all really began.

I could go on and on about different stories about how we pulled in more kids from the neighborhood, we lost a group of kids because they went to high school and afterschool programs aren't cool anymore...but we started an afterschool program, and there was an opportunity, again.

Ali and Atman's mother is an amazing woman, and she was working for a social emotional learning program created by Mark Greenberg at Penn State University. She tells him about this amazing program we have, and he's like, 'OK I want to come check y'all out!' He comes, and all the kids are on our porch at the end of the day, this one kid is cursing, fighting everyone. He's just completely off the hook. I think he had a delay from all the lead paint in his house, he had lots of stuff going on, again, a very low income neighborhood, parents in and out of the house, so understandable why he was a little off the hook. We get into the afterschool program, go into the yoga room, and Mark Greenberg sits down and the same kid sits right next to him, and says 'hey man let's get your back straight' and fixes *everything*, because we always do a reciprocal teaching model, the way our teacher always said to us 'I'm not teaching students, I'm teaching teachers' we do that with our students, we always let them guide...so he fixes everything, and this just blows Mark's brain and he's like 'I can't believe this, this is awesome and I need to help you – what do you need?'

We were like 'we need data.' We have all these anecdotal stories, all these schools and teachers, parents, families, everyone saying this is amazing, this works, and not to mention it's a thousands years old practice – we *know* it works – but we still need data. So he puts together a study with Johns Hopkins, and it's the first randomized control trial study of urban youth and mindfulness practices. Results showed that it assisted with focus, concentration, and one of the main things it had showed is that it decreases rumination. Decreasing ruminating thoughts allows children to be more present, so they can be more mindful. That's when things started snowballing.

We could go into a school and say this is amazing, this works, and they (school personnel) might be like, 'Oh, I don't know if we have it in our budget...' and we'd say, 'OK, think about it, look at this study that we did with Johns Hopkins and Penn State...' and those 2 names come out my

mouth and they're like ' Oh! Well maybe we can move stuff around and make something happen' (laughs).

And it just kept spreading and spreading. It's amazing that from three of us, and that initial group of 15 – 20 kids, half of them are still with us now, 16 years later. They're our staff, our senior staff. We're up to over 50 programmatic staff now and over 10 administrative staff. It's unbelievable. We serve over 7,500 kids a week, right now, for the first time ever, actually, currently, we've done a residency program the last six years in Madison, Wisconsin, this is the first year it wasn't Ali, Atman and I (teaching) but it was four of our senior staff that are right now leading programs in Madison, Wisconsin.

It's amazing when I describe this and talk with you I get so excited because, you know, to think and to picture me and Ali and Atman in college thinking 'we want to help', to now see that we're making these impacts in Baltimore, the city we love, and all over the nation even, going around doing the work, and that's the goal of us is providing the visuals with these techniques whether it's mindfulness techniques, breathing exercises, meditation, yoga postures...that allow them to regulate themselves.

The world, this external stimuli, just constantly bombards especially now with all the social media stuff that they're dealing with- I couldn't even imagine that when I was a little kid. It allows them to be able to be aware of their outsides, their insides, to know when they're getting a little off-balance, enabling them to use these techniques to center themselves so they can be present and so they're not impulsive and reactionary, that they're more responsive to what's going on. I think one of the overall factors we've noticed besides allowing them to be able to be in control and be present is they gain a larger sense of self-worth, and they learn to love themselves. We really stress the concept of love and we've found that when one learns to love themselves – really, really love themselves – it leaks out of them, you know?

L: When you talk about how the kids that you first started with are still with you now and are holding the seat as teachers, I want to talk about that a little bit, because you know there's so much mindfulness curricula, schools wanting to bring mindfulness into the classroom in some way. I'm sure you hear this – I know I hear this a lot – that a lot of instructors are interested in it, but maybe haven't yet found their own practice, and see it as a technique. I want to give you some space to talk about the role of deep care

that all of you are offering and what you feel is really essential to the impact that your work has.

A: You know, that's a great question, and I think we get into this a lot because we go around and we do trainings for individuals who want to start implementing similar programs in their cities. Like I said, that's our ultimate goal, to get love zombies everywhere, infecting everyone, right? All over the nation. And we want to go in and train people how to do similar programs, and we step back and let them continue to implement them. So we're always asked 'how is this going to be successful, how is this going to be sustainable? Are there any tips you can give us?'

The first thing we always say is - you have to have a practice. First and foremost, you have to have to be authentic. Mindfulness isn't something you do, it's something you are. It's about your being all the time. Like we were talking about earlier, those two hours on the mat and the other twenty-two hours in the day...so the first thing we really stress with our staff and with individuals when we're doing the trainings - once you do this, you can't just leave tomorrow and start teaching the kids this. You need to incorporate this into your life - and the majority of times they have their own practice already so when they ask me 'what meditation should I use, do you have a technique I should use?' I always say 'What do *you* do? What works for you in your life?' because that's going to resonate. It resonated with you, and they're going to see that you did it, and see how it impacted you, and think 'wow! Maybe I'll take this a little serious', you know?

If you've never done it, and you're trying to teach a kid to do it, the kid's gonna call you out! Kids are very good at that - they'll be like 'You tell me to calm down, I just seen you yell at somebody! Why don't you calm down?', you know? Stuff like that, right? I think first and foremost, you have to have a practice. Because they can *smell* the authenticity and being genuine on you - they can smell it and they can see it, and say 'wow' and when they are going on their path towards it, you can relate to them, and be able to say, 'yeah I can remember when I first did that too - I had that same issue - it's tough! The mind is like a drunk monkey on LSD, you know? It's all over the place! It happens sometimes, no worries, just try this' (laughs).

So first and foremost, we say, have a practice - number one. I would say the second most important thing we like to say is make it fun. It has to be a good time. [My] Teacher used to always say that to me - if your class isn't laughing, you're not doing anything. I think the reason we got so excited about our practice is because of the person who was showing it, and the way

in which he was showing it to us. If the three of us had gone to a regular class, with little mats...and yoga pants, and hot yoga or pose instruction- and I think it's all great stuff , but for *us*- that wouldn't have been the path for us, we would've been like 'Man, we're not doing this' the same way kids are like 'we're not doing this'. So – you've gotta make it fun, you've gotta make it entertaining.

I remember this one time we led a retreat at the Garrison Institute, for adults, and I led the morning session, the yoga class. And everyone's having a great time, everyone's laughing the whole time. At the end of class, this one lady comes up and approaches me, and she says "I really like this, this is a lot of fun, I can see how this can work with kids. Can you change some of it when you're working with adults to be a little more serious?" and I'm like 'not at all. Not one bit. This is *exactly* how we do it, every single time.'

We have a great time. Especially when you're working with youth, you can't make it so serious. They're told all the time what to do, and what not to do. Discipline ... 'Straighten this, do this', ahhh...they don't want to hear that anymore. It's not going to work with them if you do it that way. You've gotta make it fun, so they're willing to try it again.

Have your own practice, make it fun, and then the thing that we talked about briefly, and I'm sure I'll talk about throughout the entire time we talk is...come from a place of love, you know? You've gotta be there for them. I mean, like really there for them. We've always said...people are like 'oh I was there! I showed up for them from 12 -4' but where you *really* there? Did you leave all your baggage at the door? Did you put your phone away and not pick it up while you were with them? Did you meditate in the morning so you could settle your brain so that you're not going through everything so you don't have those ruminations where you're in every other place, or were you really one hundred percent present for them? I think that's where the love comes in. We really love what we're doing, we love everyone we work with, and we want them to feel what we feel. And I think they feel that. I think oftentimes, we walk into a room and people are like 'we feel the love from you guys' and we're like 'Alright!!' that's what I'm talking about – that's what we want! Is the love, you know? I think that 's the main thing.

When we were growing at such an exponential rate, that was one of the things we were so worried about, is not watering down the practice; not making it 'McMindfulness'. You can think it's fast and 'everyone's doing this'...but no, no, no, keeping it to the way that it kinda grasped us...took us, into this place, and reminding people that *they're in control*. That's so



powerful. Especially with a young kid who is going through trauma, facing all of these high anxiety scenarios, and they learn that it's within them, their practice. They don't need to access something, anything outside of themselves, you know? It's within them. They have the power – and that's when stuff really transforms them. You can really see it. Like in our Mindful Moment program where there have been zero suspensions in the last three years. They don't even have that anymore. It's like when you're getting in trouble, or you're going through something – go to the room and talk to the staff of Holistic, and we just listen to them and say 'that happens, we get it' instead of punishing them, and using punitive practices, we're saying 'hey here's some tools for the next time this happens, and maybe you'll get it right. Maybe you won't, but hey! We're here for you, we love you, we care for you', and that's what we bring with these techniques and when the kids start being like 'Wow! So you're not going to yell at me?' Not only are you not going to yell at me, you're not going to punish me, and you're going to try to help me out?' Wow, education, huh? (laughs).

I think that's the main thing we always try to remind people; have your own practice, make it fun, and come from a place of love. Those three things will really make a dynamic impact, whatever you're doing in life, but particularly with the mindfulness and the yoga techniques that we've been practicing along with them. That's why we've been so effective, and then we're kinda cool too, know what I mean? (laughs)

That comes with the part of being authentic, not only having your own practice, but being yourself. Not trying to change for anybody. The audience can't see but I have a SpiderMan t shirt on, you see, so we always have, or we're always wearing our comic books or old 80's TV shows tshirts – we look like the kids, we don't change who we are. We made that decision early on, that when we go into business meetings, we're not going to have suits and ties, we're going to be us – always. Our staff are the same way and I think that resonates with people as well. They think 'hey, they're just keepin it real'.

This isn't some crazy rocket science, it's your breath. It's your mind., it's your body It's you, be aware of it, and understand how powerful we are. That's when the transformation occurs, when people *experience it...* I can't tell you how many times after leading people just through some belly breaths or a breath meditation, when they blink their eyes open, the look on their face, of like 'WOW'. I'm always like, ' You did that, I ain't do that, but WOW, huh? That feels real good, right?' (laughs) It's amazing, you know? A little bit of presence and reminding people to appreciate the now. I say it all



the time, the now I just said is already in the past. Now is always now. Appreciate every single second we have. Let's not worry about the past, not worry about the future and what's coming, because the past just usually causes anger, you know? Someone rented space in your mind and said something or did something to you, something occurred for you to get upset about. The future causes anxiety. What's coming? What am I going to do? Anger and anxiety don't sound like fun people for me to hang out with! Let's stay in the now moment. Let's be human beings.

L: You guys have grown so much this year, it's incredible, and amazing. It has to be in some ways something that makes your heart feel so full, but maybe in some ways, as you grow, you have to trust more people to do what you do. For people that are thinking about creating something similar, or they're thinking 'we have this organization, and we have great people, and we'd love to bring people in to try to do this', what are you looking for? What are the qualities of your staff that you bring in to entrust to share these practices with more young people?

A: You know, I think I touched on it before a little in saying what will make it successful, and I think it goes back to some of those things again, but the majority of our staff have been in our programs before, right? So we know that they have been doing the practice, so that authenticity is there with it, that they have a practice. We know it because we've known them since they were little kids. If not, then they're either volunteers that have come into the program, so they have big hearts because they've decided to volunteer their time in the program or just help. We've seen the relationships they've built with students, the way they interact with the kids and how the practices have grown on them. I mean, basically, it's almost like the universe has just given us the staff (laughs). We don't even look anymore, and every time we're like 'god, we're getting a bunch more contracts and programs and we need more teachers', and then more teachers just end up appearing. So, whether they've been in our programs, been in our trainings that we've done at Omega and Garrison and throughout the nation, or volunteer their time, that's the usual pool that we get most of our people from. The main things that we tell them that we need out of them is; to have a practice, to be professional, and again, to come from a place of love. To know that they're really doing this because it's transformed them and they want to help. The majority of the time when I ask them 'why are you doing this?' that's what they say. They say 'you know what? I did it myself, when I was on my own, or when you were teaching me when I was a little kid and a real butthead - sorry Andy that I always ignored you' and stuff like that (laughs) 'and it finally hit me, and I saw how it impacted me and my life as I was going



through college and the world, and I use it all the time and I want to give it back. I want to be the steward that you were for me, I want to do it in my neighborhood, and I want to uplift my neighborhood. I want to empower people like you empowered me.' That's what has happened most of the time, they just come to us. And we just basically see that they've gone through one of our programs and then we put them through our training program, it's a workforce development program. We just want to make sure...a lot of these people, they may not ever have had a job, and so professionalism is really big with us. We want to make sure that they understand that hey, you can wear the Superman t-shirt, that's fine. You can wear sweatpants, that's fine. But, we need to show them that we are professional. That we are there, this has been 16 years now – we know what we're doing, it works, and people are going to test you because of the way you look. It's that simple. So you have to know your stuff. And they do, I mean, we won't send them out there unless they do know their stuff. We would be quite remiss if we ever sent a team out to teach something and they weren't ready to do it. It's important that they are able to provide the same quality programming that myself, Ali and Atman provide when we go out there.

I would say that anyone who wants to do this, anyone that's like, I've got this group of people, if you're getting nervous, or your trying and it's not working, just do the work. Don't expect results, just do the work. All the listeners out there, we did this work for eight years, completely for free! We do not recommend people to do that (laughs). We were just 3 guys who were extremely compassionate, and wanted to save the world, and knew that this was our mission in life, so we didn't care! We just decided to keep going, and it wasn't until we started really going on and got our first bit of funding, and some people were like 'look, you're going to burn out , you need to get compensated for your time.' It's a give and take. You can't just give and give and give and never receive anything. And that's what we were doing, we were giving and giving and we were teetering on that edge of burning out until we realized that, hey, we need to pay bills. We need to eat food. We need to have a roof on our heads. We were used to living humbly and going to Whole Foods on free samples day and getting our dinners – Ooh! Those Wednesdays were like the best days of our weeks. I remember knocking on Ali's door like 'Free samples today, Ali!! We are gonna get our eat on!' (laughs) We would just do laps, and the people in Whole Foods knew us so they'd give us a few extra samples. So we were used to not having anything, but always at the same time, we could always hear the voice of our teacher saying to us 'just do the work. Don't look for results.

Just do the work. Everything's coming. Everything will be given to you when you just do the work. People are going to doubt you, people are gonna talk trash'...I mean I've had some of the most unbelievable things happen to me personally, us together as a group, our organization, to where you would just be shocked – things were I'm like, I can't believe someone would do that to us, but you know at the same time, since we have our practice, it just kinda falls off.

Light within you, when it's shining, everything just kinda falls off, like a scab. It's just 'huh. Another person doesn't believe that we're doing this for real – you're gonna give us a grant and we're gonna just what – fly off to Jamaica or something like that. I mean we've been doing this for 16 years, we're not going anywhere. Or another person is going to look at us when we walk in and immediately stereotype us or judge us because of our appearance, and the big beards, Atman's dreads, you know, the way we look. We've been called 'the band' now for sixteen straight years. (laughs). We'll go to a conference, and we'll walk in, and the people will be like 'Oh! Y'all must be the band!' and we'll look at each other like, we have no instruments on us, and we always just kinda laugh it off. But, we'll be sitting at a table, and behind them will be a picture of our 3 smiling faces as the keynote speakers from the Holistic Life Foundation and they'll still be like 'y'all are the band!' and we just roll with it! We're now in an aboriginal folk band – is what we tell people when they ask us. Ali plays the didgeridoo I believe, and Atman plays the bullroarer, and I'm vocals. We've had people ask us for our CDs and everything (laughs) after we tell them this preposterous story about our band because they ask us if we're the band (laughs). So we have fun with it, you know? Again, back to having fun!

Just do it – there's going to be so many people doubting you, and if your heart's in it, and you know for sure it's what you're supposed to do, there's such a need out there, there are so many programs that are so similar to ours, and you know, we always say 'hey, we're a resource, we want to support you'. You know, our goal isn't for Holistic Life to be everywhere – that would be nice - but our goal is for mindfulness to be everywhere...for everyone to meditate. Everywhere. If I could have that, around the entire world every morning, of families sitting together, they just take a moment, and they're just being, and they start the day off and at the end of the day, they do the same thing, I think the world would be drastically a better place. So many more compassionate individuals.

L: I've been wanting to ask you, is your teacher still with you?



A: Yeah, actually yeah! He's an amazing man. I see him once a week still. He is the definition of a hermit, so he's by himself all the time. He doesn't ever...we used to have camera crews come in and want to interview us and him, and he was always like "Oh no! Don't you mention my name, don't you talk about me...no, I'm just a conduit...y'all are the ones doing this, not me."

I still have talks with him weekly, and they're a little different than before. Before there was a lot more study – assigning us books to read, or new meditation techniques, anything. He's always into it. He has been since the '60's, just studying, studying, studying. Now our conversations really are just about...uh, I give him just a business update, cause he used to always joke with us about the 'business of yoga'. He used to say, 'prepare yourselves, the business of yoga is coming'. And we'd look at him like, 'The business of yoga? What does that mean? Huh? Business of yoga...' (laughs).

So now whenever I walk in, he always laughs because he knows that we're stuck in an office most of the time now, and everyone else is doing the teaching. He's like 'How's the business of yoga going?' and I just laugh and say 'God, you were so right!' I always let him know 'hey we did this, we spoke to a thousand people, you know you were there, you were there with us, you spoke to a thousand people too'. And our conversations basically now – and this is by far the best part of my week, every week- is within 3 or 4 hours, we just talk about oneness and love, how are we going to continue to do what we're doing, how are we going to continue to ignite everybody. Especially now, with the turmoil that's going on, our political situation, the natural disasters that are going on.

We were just at a conference at Omega Institute where these topics were brought up often. When we spoke, what we really wanted to get across to people was the concept of empowering other people to empower themselves and to empower others, but also, for everyone to just kinda stop for a second and let's just stop hating. Let's stop pointing fingers and blaming. Let's stop being left and right. Why can't we be center? Why can't we be together, you know? It's amazing how many times I see people having these conversations, and when in a conversation did it always have to end up being an argument where both sides leave and nothing's fulfilled? Or now they're just angry at each other. Why can't we speak and talk knowing that the ultimate goal is togetherness? Let's stop fighting! Someone told me, I forgot who it was, 'When you point at somebody, you have three fingers pointing back at yourself'. Stop blaming everyone for everything. When you see something wrong in someone, instead of being like 'Gah! This person! They're really insincere – they're not a good person'. Maybe...that's the



universe telling you to stop and look within yourself. Maybe all those people out there are just mirrors for you to observe and see 'hey! This I can fix within me before I start, you know, casting stones'. Everyone feels like it's a big rock fight right now (laughs). The only way that we're gonna heal the world, I think, is through togetherness and oneness and to start looking again, and past race, sex, socioeconomic levels, political preferences...look past all of that and see that I am you, you are me – we are humans, and we are on this big ball together, right? Let's start treating each other the way that we want to be treated! It's such a basic concept – what, we were taught the Golden Rule when we were little, teeny, tiny kids. I remember in all my elementary school, The Golden Rule, but I just don't think it's being used as much. That's now all we talk about with him. Just love and oneness. It's amazing. Listeners can't see me beaming but whenever I talk about him, I can just close my eyes and just be there with him all the time. He knows that. It was a blessing. They say that when the students are ready, the teacher presents themselves. I think that worked for both of us, because I think that when the teacher is ready, the students present themselves too. I remember that day, asking him about the book – when we asked about the book, and him looking at us like 'y'all want to learn this?' Because Ali and Atman would tell these stories of when they were younger, and they'd be hanging out with him, and he'd be saying 'Oh you know, I know this great exercise called the Breath of Fire that cleans your body' and in the middle of the conversation he would just [start doing it] and Atman and Ali would be like 'Uh...we're gonna leave now, this is a little weird' (laughs). So he had tried to get them into it, so I think when he saw that he had these three pupils that were like 'we want to do this'...and when we would talk to him, we were so eager, we had notebooks, and we'd take notes, and he'd be like 'what are you doing?' and we were like 'we're trying to learn this, we're taking notes!' and you could see that he was so excited to see that he *finally* had someone to listen to him. We were just...I was overwhelmed. He looked into who I was. He would never appreciate me saying that, he would say that I did it all.

L: You and I talked about this before, I was really struck for so long by...what are you doing that is making this so amazing. And that's what it is – it's lineage. It's that love and care that you got from your teacher that you're passing on. I imagine you have a minimum of three other young adults now that are sitting and taking the teachings from you and are ready to pass that on. The power of what you're talking about with the Golden Rule, and how so many of us grew up and heard that in some form of education, or outside of school, perhaps in a religious or spiritual context –



but the power comes in having these really strong, caring figures who actually embody that. I keep coming back to that because I think that it feels like so much of your impact is partly in sharing the teachings, but you're doing it from a container of deep care and sustained commitment over time with young people. I think that's an important thing to emphasize around the 'how' and the 'why' Holistic Life Foundation has been so successful so far.

A: For sure. If I didn't have my teacher, if I didn't have Ali and Atman, our parents, supports that we had I don't think there's a way that we could be as successful as we are. We always talk about Ali and Atman's upbringing, and people ask me, 'you didn't have a yoga practice or anything like that when you were younger?' and I'm like 'Nah, I came from a Puerto Rican family...you know, if anything, we mainly focused on dominoes, a little salsa here and there' (laughs), but...it was amazing. My mother retired about 4 or 5 years ago, and my mother's always been stable in my life, she's always kinda been my lighthouse, my rock, everything I do is for her. She was a single mother, five kids, I'm the baby of the family, so everything I did always was for her. She always supported me, in every aspect. When people were saying 'get a job', she said, 'do you like what you're doing?' I said, 'yeah' and she said, 'OK. Keep doing what you're doing'. I remember a few years into it, we were broke, and I could've gotten this nice paying gig, and she said, 'Do you really want to make the money, or do you want to do what you're doing?' I said, 'I want to do what I'm doing!' and she said, 'then don't take the job' – she's always been a huge support unconditionally, you know? Unconditional love, all the time. I remember going to her retirement thing, and she worked for NSA (National Security Administration) it's interesting going in there, all the security and crazy stuff. I'm walking in, and I never really knew what she did. She was just a teacher. I would give people a good laugh and say she works at the NSA and my mom just pets aliens, that's all it is (laughs). My mom would just shake her head and be like, 'I can neither confirm nor deny that statement' and it would just make me laugh even more! I'd be like, 'c'mon! (laughs). So I go up in there, and all my siblings are like, someone has to talk and say something for mom. And I'm like, 'cool', thinking the oldest one is going to speak, and they're like 'hey, you should do it', and I'm like 'me?! Y'all have been around a lot longer than I have, right?' I have no idea what I'm going to say, I'm super nervous, and people come up and start talking about her beforehand. Person after person walks up and says 'I just want to thank her – without her I wouldn't be who I am today'. Next person: 'without her, I wouldn't have a home'. Without her, I wouldn't have a family. 'Without her...' person after



person! And the same thing they all said was 'she saw something in me and she believed in me. She didn't know who I was, but she told me I could do it, and allowed me to be the person I am today. Unconditionally.' I'm in there, and I'm like, I didn't know that this is what she was doing, I didn't know. She was always so tired. She'd leave so early in the morning, by the time she got home, she'd cook a little food, we'd have family dinners, she'd cook a meal on the stove and by the time I'd get home, she'd be asleep, so through middle and high school, I didn't see her. I just knew she worked very, very hard to make sure that we would be supported and that we had food on the table. I didn't know what she did. I think then, that's when I realized, it hit me, and it made me feel so good, because I thought, 'that's who I am, that's who I want to be. I want to be my mom up here. I want to be just like her.' I'm hoping that when this all ends, and maybe when I retire, that I get a line like the things that people were saying about her – 'Andy believed in me, loved me unconditionally, helped make me be the person that I am'. I think if that's where my practice was, that I was blessed...you know like we were talking about before, to have these happiness people in our lives that allowed us to do this, who supported us and believed in us...it's so, so important. That's what Holistic Life Foundation wants to be for people – we're really trying to do this. We want to be that support. We want to be the resource for them. We want to be the shoulder they can lean on when they're saying 'I don't know if I can do this anymore'. We want to encourage as many people to go out there and spread the love, spread these techniques. It's needed everywhere – from low income populations to affluent communities – everyone is facing stress, everyone is just bombarded with the overwhelming external stimuli that we have to deal with. If we could all be reminders that it's within us – within there is no without. That little light of yours, let it shine, right? My teacher used to always sing that song with me, that song is so much fun – this little light of mine (sings) he would sing – and he's got a great voice, I do not. He would sing it and I would love when he would sing that to me, and he would sing that to me all the time. He's like, let it shine, come on, you've got to let it shine!

Without the support of my two brothers that I have – Ali and Atman- to be there when we were broke, to be there when people were doubting us, to always look at each other and say to each other 'hey! As long as we stick together, we're gonna make this work' We have each other and we're going to show the world that they can save themselves, that they are in control. And kind of remove all these misconceptions about what mindfulness and yoga is...they always make it out to be this hoogie-coogie mystical magical

stuff...I guess sometimes I think it is too (laughs) but you know it really is just breathe, and just be. And treat people the way you want to be treated, see yourself within them and just love everyone.

L: As you continue to grow Holistic Life Foundation, you are offering a gift to the world.

A: Leslie, really, this is such a pleasure. Just so all of y'all know, it's always the three of us here, me, Ali and Atman are a three-headed monster, that's what we say, so whenever one of us are speaking, the other two of us are here. All of us from the Holistic Life Foundation are here, and we always like to say the same thing when we end any of our talks, or trainings or whatever it is, it needs to be engaging. We always like to remind people that love is the most powerful force in the universe, we love all of you, and know that we are here to be a resource and a support for you for anything that you need. Have a blessed and beautiful day, OK?

L: Thank you so much

A: No problem, anytime. Anytime you need anything, yeah, you're awesome! We need to hang out when we're around.

L: (laughs) I know! I know, you guys...I need to come to Baltimore and just hang out.

A: We're happy to come to Arizona! You know I was just in Sedona – my birthday was last week and I went to Sedona. It was...ooo! Amazing! Just driving through Arizona in general I was like, this might be a potential place that I could stay for a little while! Just the energy, it was amazing.