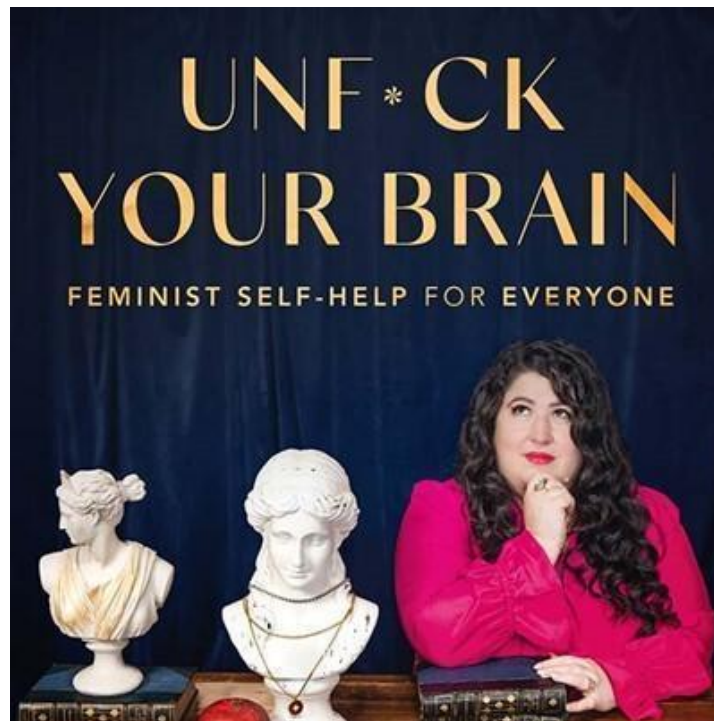


**UFYB 323: Unpacking Socialization and Myths about Dating:
A Discussion with Damona Hoffman**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *Unf*ck Your Brain*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and founder of The School of New Feminist Thought. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence, and create a life on your own terms. One that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Kara: Alright, hello, my chickens. I am really excited today because we're talking about, I honestly think that talking about kind of dating and love and relationships is one of my favorite areas to talk about because it's a place that socialization just is such a mind fuck on women. It feels like in ways that women aren't even aware of. So it really feels like there's some places that we are, I think a lot of women are aware that what society tells me about how my body should look is pretty fucked up.

But I think we don't even recognize how much goes on in the way that we're socialized around relationships. So I am here with Damona Hoffman, who has been on the podcast before. So you guys know her, you know she is smart and amazing. She's got a new book coming out called *F the Fairy Tale*, which is such a good title. Before we get into the book will you just tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Damona: Of course. I am a certified dating coach. And gosh, I've done so much over the last 15 years that I've been coaching singles. I started out originally as a dating profile writer. But now you can see my advice on shows like the *Drew Barrymore Show*. I'm the official love expert of the Drew Crew. And I access daily with Mario Lopez and Kit. I write for a bunch of different magazines and newspapers, LA Times, The Washington Post.

I love, love, I came from being a love cynic to now I'm a love evangelist. So I'm excited to be here to talk with you about all of these changing norms and they are changing fast.

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Kara: I love it. So tell us about this, what brought you to write this book?

Damona: Well, having done this for as long as I have, I've been through a lot of cultural shifts and I really felt like the pandemic was a flashpoint. It was a time when people were starting to reevaluate what they wanted in relationships. We saw big shifts in cohabitation trends. We saw big shifts in marital status and people waiting to get married or choosing not to get married at all. And a lot of these norms that we came to take in and look at as truth, all of the rom coms, all of the fairy tales that we consumed as kids. We started to realize they didn't necessarily fit the life that we were living right now.

So I really felt like there was this growing attitude towards dating overall that people were really losing hope and losing faith. And at the same time, were going, especially women, were going on this internal journey of self-discovery. And I wanted to give people both an understanding of how we got here in this new phase of relationship evolution. And also how to move forward to be able to design the relationships that we actually want that are serving our lives.

Kara: Yeah, I love that because it sounds like the book is kind of my favorite type, which is how I have written mine as well, which is there's both, yes, concrete, actionable things you can do. But you're learning more about the context and what goes into the way that you think the beliefs you have about romance or about dating. So I feel that's always more effective than just follow these rules and then you're going to get this outcome.

Damona: And I talk in the book about how I'm really more about tools than I am about rules. And especially with relationships, it's so dynamic and ever changing and personal and ephemeral and there's so much nuance to it. That even though I have been writing profiles and coaching people on dating, I have tons of systems. I've worked behind the scenes at OkCupid and match.com. So I know a lot about the technical aspects.

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But I've also seen that I can give you all the data that you want to hear, but it doesn't necessarily mean that those trends or those specifics apply to you. And I'd rather use that knowledge to sort of hack your own dating life and give you the tools to be able to figure out what's going to work for you individually.

Kara: Yeah. I was just on a podcast yesterday and the person kind of said offhandedly, they were talking about someone else. And they said they just haven't found the one yet. And I just felt like I internally cringed a little bit. And I know you have strong thoughts about the idea of the one and the sort of instant chemistry you're supposed to feel when you lock eyes with the one on your first date. So can you talk a little bit about that, why do you think that is kind of counterproductive or sets us up for failure.

Damona: Yes. So the whole book, *F the Fairy Tale*, but it's really about unpacking what those stories are. We all have our own different fairy tale stories. And they really show up as I see four big myths and you just touched on two of the major myths that complicate the dating and relationship process. There's the chemistry myth and then there's the soulmate myth. And that's the, there's one. There's the one person out there who's going to complete me.

We've all seen that movie, *You Complete Me*. And we're looking for a needle in a haystack if you subscribe to the soulmate myth. And look, 70% of people say that they believe in soulmates.

Kara: Wow, that's high.

Damona: Yes. And I know we have different definitions of what soulmates are, but I thought that was high too, Kara, and I thought that can't be true. It just can't be true that there's one person out there who can satisfy all their needs. And you have probably known people who have had multiple great loves in their lives. And I think this quest for the one keeps a lot of people

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from seeing what's right in front of them. And it keeps us questioning, well, I like them and I enjoy their company but are they the one?

And then we're always sifting through and we're always second guessing the relationship that we're in, because we're like, "Well, I don't know what it's supposed to feel like. Were angels going to come down from the heavens and play a harp." But it didn't happen like that and it doesn't.

Kara: And also as we're talking, I'm just thinking, it also collapses all the different kind of types of even romantic or sexual love that there are into this one thing that's supposed to be the same for everyone. So when we think about having many great loves. I have had several great loves in my life and they were very different types of connections with different strengths and weaknesses.

So I think about my current partner, my fiancé, we have a lot of things that work really well in our relationship. They're not necessarily the same things that worked really well in other relationships I had. And it doesn't also take account of different people's priorities. Some people might feel what matters the most to me is whatever, sexual chemistry and lifestyle. And I'm willing to put up with a bunch of other stuff to have that.

And for somebody else, it might be what matters to me the most is that we're really good co-parents and friends, and I'm willing to compromise on other things. It's thinking of it as the one and we'll all know who it is when we find them. We're all supposed to be having the same experience that we can quantify as that chemistry of meeting the one. It's weird, it's like a fantasy, but it's also almost sort of sterile as though there's only one way to do this.

Damona: Well, it adds a lot of pressure.

Kara: Yeah, for sure.

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Damona: To me it makes the dating process, it burdens the dating process. And it keeps you from being able to experience the joy of discovery. In *F the Fairy Tale* I talk about the real definition of platonic love. Plato said, "Love is the pursuit of truth." And I feel any relationship that helps you discover more of your truth is a relationship that has value. And so platonic love is not a love that is just a friend, it is a love that transcends. It transcends just sexual romantic chemistry.

And that's the kind of love that I like to guide my clients to experience. And when we have this idea of the soulmate that's going to magically unlock the rest of our lives, it keeps us from being in that discovery. And I've been married for 16 years. I met my husband online. We're an early online dating success story. And I really feel I am still in discovery with him. And that's what keeps us, yes, we have romantic and sexual chemistry and all of that too, but it's not just because he's hot.

We change, our bodies change, our brains change, our situations change, and it's that commitment to that higher level of truth seeking and self-study that actually I feel makes relationships really interesting.

Kara: Yeah. And I think when you think about it as the one it makes dating very goal oriented, which is the opposite of that process, of that discovery you're talking about. You're just sort of like, "Okay, I'm going on dates to figure out if this person is the one." If they are the one, then this will need to proceed in this certain socially set out way where we need to date and then meet each other's families and then cohabitate and then get engaged.

And I think it also makes people devalue. Some relationships aren't meant to last forever, and they can still be really beautiful and meaningful. But if what you're believing is, well, there's the one, and that's supposed to last forever. So even if I had an amazing 15 year relationship with this person and now we're not growing in the same direction or now we want to do different things or whatever.

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Now that just means this whole thing was a mistake. They weren't the one. I thought they were the one. Now it was all a waste. Now I missed my chance to meet the one. There's no upside basically to thinking that there's the one. I can't really think of an upside.

Damona: Yeah. I say you want to develop a relationship growth mindset, it's never finished. We're just continuing on that journey of self-discovery. But a moment ago, you also touched on a really important element of this process. And that's in really figuring out what you need in the moment now. When I look at somebody's dating profile and they're like, "Oh, I made it five years ago. I haven't updated the photos. I didn't know that we were supposed to." I'm like, "You're not the same person that you were five years ago, your needs change."

But all of this whole process has to begin with your own mindset, how you're thinking about dating. Just what you're bringing to the table, emotionally, what your goals are for a relationship at that moment and what you have to offer in a relationship at that moment. We have to begin at that clarity. And there's so many people out here, I think one of the reasons dating has become so transactional, the way that you described of just, are you the one? You're not the one. Next.

It's because a lot of us have this, the list myth. We have this mindset of, we're going down and checking a box, and yet we never really stop to say, "What do I actually want in the relationship? What do I actually need? What do I have to offer?" Because that is going to guide you through all of the other myths and all of the other steps of the dating evolution process.

Kara: Yeah. I think the list is so interesting because when I think about how I ended up with my partner, I had a list. I think through dating him, I learned how to have a useful list versus a non-useful list because there were things on my list that were external, that were about life circumstances and he met

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none of those. He's divorced. He has two children. He was not location dependent. I mean, now he's retired.

But when I met him, not only did he have two small children and he had to live within a few miles of his original residence in Brooklyn but he had a nine to five office job. He couldn't have had less flexibility in his whole life. And I was like, "I'm going to find someone who can live anywhere and is a digital nomad and doesn't want kids like me, so he met none of those things.

But the things I had on my 'list' that were about values and characteristics of the kind of person that I wanted to be with in terms of somebody who values growth also. Somebody who's willing to talk about their feelings or learn to talk about their feelings. Someone who adores me, someone who I can adore. Those things, because I feel a lot of what happens in dating when I see people dating with a list is that the list is not about, what are the right ways to say it?

Sometimes it has characteristics, they're funny, they're smart. The list is about the person, not the kind of relationship you want to be having. The relationship is this thing you're co-creating. We're like, "I'm going to do a project with someone. I have no idea what kind of project, but I have a lot of ideas about the person I should do the project with." But if you don't know what kind of project you're trying to create, how could you possibly know if somebody is a good fit for that project.

Maybe this person checks a lot of boxes, but they want to build a skyscraper and you want to build a farmhouse and now you've been selecting the wrong way.

Damona: And you don't have the right materials.

Kara: You don't have the right materials.

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Damona: I love that. I remember talking with you about how this relationship sort of reframed so many things for you about what you thought you wanted. But it actually speaks to, in the book I give the sort of antidote to the myths are the four pillars of long term compatibility. You mentioned values. And also I see goals as one of those pillars. So I love that you broke it down into this life that you're creating.

And I always tell my clients that you might not know it when you see it. I hear that so many times, people write into my podcast all the time, "I feel like I'll know it when I see it." I'm like, "Well, have you seen it yet?"

Kara: That's such a good example of a thought that is not helpful.

Damona: You won't know it when you see it, necessarily, but you'll know it when you feel it. So that's what I try and do is get people into how do you want to feel in the relationship. Because you'll recognize when that feeling is repeated. And so I would kind of get underneath that list that you gave originally and say, "What does it feel like for you? What does it mean on a deeper level to have someone that has the flexibility."

Because I would assume that you figured out that it's not just about having that flexibility. It was about you feeling like you're a priority. I don't want to put words in your mouth.

Kara: No. I mean what's funny is that, no, I actually did just want the flexibility because I like to travel, but it just turned out to not be. It turned out to be a lifestyle preference that just was not important compared to the depth that was available. So I actually think in my situation, I think that the difference was that because I hadn't been in a relationship with somebody who was truly, really emotionally available and willing to do the work to meet me at the level of emotional growth I wanted.

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I didn't have an adequate understanding of the value of that so these other things seemed more important. I think that that's what was going on because it was sort of this vision of the outside of my life in some way. And I think this is something that women don't recognize enough in themselves. Because we're all very aware that men are socialized to judge women's bodies and to see women's physical appearance as status symbols.

But I don't see the women that I'm coaching having spent enough time off and thinking about what ways are they also looking for the status in a relationship and the status symbol of a romantic relationship. In ways that are maybe not as obvious, maybe they're not as fixated on his appearance, or often they're fixated on height, though, or something like that. Maybe he doesn't need to have a six pack. But in what ways are we sort of like, "Well, the person needs to be."

Women are always coming to me who are, my clients are often very smart and accomplished and whatever. And they're like, "Well, I mean, I met this guy and he seems great, but he's a guitar teacher. I need somebody ambitious." And I'm like, "Why? Why do you need someone ambitious?" Which is what you're saying, what's under that? You're already ambitious. You're already traveling four days a week for your job. You want to have kids.

If this guitar teacher would like to stay home and take care of them, that's a good match, not a problem. So there's all of this, and I think this, I mean, I'd love to hear you talk about this. Because I know you do a lot of thinking about how sort of the new norms are impacting how we're dating, the kind of advent of technology and changing gender norms.

This is one of the things that I see from my side of it is that a lot of women who would say they're feminists and don't want traditional gender roles are still importing their ideas of kind of the external, what a male partner should be like on the outside in some ways from those old norms.

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Damona: You are so astute.

Kara: I should be a life coach.

Damona: You know, you can really, you should write a book.

Kara: I should write a book on something. I feel like I've got some thoughts to offer.

Damona: Do something here. But you really hit the nail on the head. So much of this, and this is what I was trying to embody with *F the Fairy Tale* is it's not our fault that we have these beliefs. But we've got to acknowledge that they're there and that these expectations, we didn't just come up with, they should be six feet tall and make a quarter million dollars a year. And then have the flexibility to travel and have an ambitious career. We didn't just come up with that.

That is so woven into the narratives that we've consumed forever. Forever. And I work with a lot of very ambitious, successful women as well. And I see that they actually have developed so many amazing skills that somehow there is a disconnect between using those skills and those things that make them great in business, in their friendships and relationships, in so many other areas of their life that they can't use that. That is no, no, you've got to be in the divine feminine.

Kara: Oh, Jesus. I could have an entire podcast called Fuck the Divine Feminine. And then every episode would just me be me saying, "Here's another stupid thing, [inaudible]."

Damona: But I feel so many of us are so exhausted because we've been on the push for so much of our lives. And we feel, well, I don't want to also have to do that much work, Damona, to find love. I want it to just magically

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happen. I know that soulmate is out there. I want them to land on my doorstep. And actually, I have found that when women apply the same skills that have made them successful in other areas of their life, to dating, that's when things magically fall into place.

Kara: Can you give an example? That's really interesting. What's the kind of skill and how would it apply to dating?

Damona: I will actually give you a story from my podcast. I interviewed my friend, Erika Ettin, who's a fantastic online dating coach. She used to work in finance. And she was dealing with spreadsheets and numbers and tracking all day long. And she realized that she could actually track what was happening in her dating life. And so she would look at which pictures she was using and which apps she was on, that would get her the best results. And how often she had to message and how many first dates would turn into second dates.

And really actually measuring, what gets tracked gets measured. When you start measuring your dating life and actually looking at it more strategically, things unlock. I have seen this with so many of my clients that I first just get them to track. Let's begin with, where are you right now? How many dates have you had in the last month?

Kara: Oh my God, this also kills me. People will be like, "I'm just exhausted. I've been dating for years." And I'll be like, "Okay, how many first dates have you gone on in the past five years?" And they're like, "Three."

Damona: And you know where that exhaustion comes from? Their brains. It comes from their brains, obviously. And also it comes from all of the other things that are not dating, that are part of the dating process today, like swiping, like sending messages. So many things that we didn't have to do but that really actually make the dating process more efficient if you're doing it the right way and more exhausting if you're doing it the wrong way.

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And so people will say the same thing to me like, “Well, I’ve been on the apps. I’ve been on the apps, but I’ve been off the apps more time than I’ve been off the apps.” And people will kind of stay on for a week, maybe two, get all the new people and then say, “There’s nobody here.” Or they’ll stay on it and not really be doing it from a mindful and strategic place and then they’re just wasting a bunch of time in their DMs.

Kara: It just becomes like social media. You’re just killing time and sort of giving yourself a little dopamine boost and as you say, not actually strategically looking for something.

Damona: And it feels like you’re doing, feels like you’re doing something.

Kara: Right. It feels like you’re trying, you’re like, “I swipe all the time.” I think that point about, that one of the disconnects that happens especially for kind of strong women is that they think that because society tells us that men don’t like strong women and men don’t like assertive women. I mean obviously also not everybody’s straight but right now we’re talking about the kind of straight dynamic, heteronormative dynamic. Then they’re like, “I have to be different than how I am in order to find something.”

And that story about the spreadsheets, I just want to kind of spell out for everybody listening what you meant, which is that doesn’t mean you need to go do a spreadsheet. What are your skills? So if I think about dating with my partner, one of the things that the dating coaches I worked with, we had done a lot of talking about was, okay, well, I’m somebody who really operates based on kind of aligning myself with certain values in the rest of my life. We have business values in my business, we have, that’s how I operate. But I wasn’t using that with dating at all.

I was just like, “Well, I’m just going on dates and hoping something works out.” And feeling terrible the whole time. And so then when I articulated sort of my values in dating, which was sort of for me how I wanted to show up,

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what was important to me in it. Using those is how I ended up continuing to say yes to this relationship that did not fit any of the kind of list criteria of life phase, lifestyle, all that stuff. So I mean you have to do a spreadsheet. It's just whatever, however you solve problems well in the rest of your life or however you navigate well in the rest of your life, you can apply to dating.

Damona: Yeah. And you don't have to do a spreadsheet. However, I think sometimes people forget when they're on the apps that you're dealing with technology. It's a piece of technology. It does not know your attractions. It does not know your heart. It doesn't have feelings. You're not shadow banned, it's not trying to keep you locked away in a tower.

Literally it's just an app and you have to know how to program it to work for you, to do the heavy lifting for you. Because what I really want people to take away from our conversation is that this is actually the best time ever in history for women to be single. I know some people are like, "Oh, no, Damona, I'm turning it off." It doesn't feel that way.

Kara: You have a credit card and have a job now, so it's definitely the best time to be single compared to history.

Damona: Yes. And this is the time when we have the most choice that we've ever had. And you look back just a few generations and most people had to meet someone through their local network. So if you didn't go to church with them, if they didn't know your mom, if you didn't go to school with them, if they didn't live down the block, basically, good luck to you. And we would have to do a lot more effort of showing up and being visible.

And now, look, when we can just get pretty much anything delivered to our house at the push of a button. I am still continually amazed by Amazon. I don't know, I've been an Amazon Prime member since 03.

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Kara: They're going to launch their soulmate order next year and you'll just be able to get your soulmate delivered to your door.

Damona: I know. Can we just add that to the Amazon? It's going to be on Prime Day, soulmate Prime Day. But really we have become so accustomed to want it, get it, want it, get it. And that does impact the way that we search, the way that we swipe, the way that we connect. And I have a whole section in the book about just communication and how texting has affected it and the speed of communication and the speed of dating. That is the thing that has changed the most since I started doing this 15 plus years ago.

Kara: You used to go on a date with someone, make a date with them on the phone, go see them five days later without communicating in between. Go out to dinner, drop you off, maybe call the next day and you'd talk for 10 minutes and make the next date, that was also five days later. And now it's, I haven't heard back in three hours, this person hates me.

Damona: Right, yeah. We are all subjected to this communication crisis, I call it. We're all in the communication crisis. But that is a sidebar because what I want people to really grasp is that we have so much choice. And we are living through the Amazon cart, the great Amazon cart of dating. You can keep searching. You can keep scanning. And you can find the best fit for you right now as we have established already. But that choice is really key for women to be able to design the lives that they want.

However, with great choice comes great responsibility. I see a lot of people in pain who are on the apps, who are off the apps and really craving that connection but not putting any kind of a framework around it. They're living, I say in the book, a lot of people are addicted to hopium. We're just hoping that it'll work out. And I know this because I lived it. I lived it and I turned it around. And as I said at the beginning, I was a total love cynic. I did not think it was going to happen. I turned my nose up at rom coms.

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I didn't want to see couples out PDA, because I wanted that and I had no idea how to go about getting it. And now that I have built the relationship that I want, I realize that there was so much opportunity right in front of me. I could have made so many more changes to my outlook on dating, to my clarity around the values and goals to just how I felt about myself and dating. And brought more discovery and more joy and more enthusiasm to my dating life, years before I met my husband.

And I want to give that to all of your listeners and that sense of embracing choice as opportunity and not getting into the overwhelm of choice. And you know very well what that overwhelm of options does to our brains. So how do we put a framework around that to protect our brains and to let all of that juicy brain power actually fuel us towards relationships that feel better for our body?

Kara: Yeah. I mean, I think this goes back to, this is a good place to kind of bring us to a close because it goes back to what we talked about in the beginning. Which is any goal in your life, whether it's finding a partner, making \$100,000 or a \$1 million in your business, quitting your job, whatever it is. People have this, I'm just going to have to slough out the miserable, slough out is not a word. I just have to tough out the miserable until I get to the promised land where it will all feel amazing.

And dating is such a good example of that where if you are making yourself miserable during the dating process with your thoughts, it's actually very hard to find that partner. Somebody really has to happen to somehow be able to override all the thoughts you've been thinking to connect with you. I don't think you can hate dating and yourself into finding love just like you can't hate your business into feeling successful. The destination is going to feel like the journey.

When you're so goal oriented and you're just like, "This is miserable. I hate this. I've just got to keep doing it until I find." You're not going to even find

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the result that you want. So, good. So where do people find the book? Obviously everybody needs to read the four myths, the four pillars, get some concrete advice on this.

Damona: Get yourself some myths and pillars at thefairytalesbook.com or wherever you buy your books. And I also give free dating advice. Sometimes I feel like in Peanuts, Lucy with the stand, free advice. I give free advice every week on the *Dates & Mates* podcast. So that is where I love connecting with people. But of course the book will give you the roadmap to unpack the things that we've been talking about today and design the dating life that you actually want to have for yourself.

Kara: Amazing. So it's *F the Fairy Tale* and it's the letter F, we're not spelling E-F-F. It's F, the letter thefairytalesbook.com. Amazing. We'll put it in the show notes too. Thank you so much for coming on and sharing your wisdom with us again.

Damona: Thank you for having me.

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