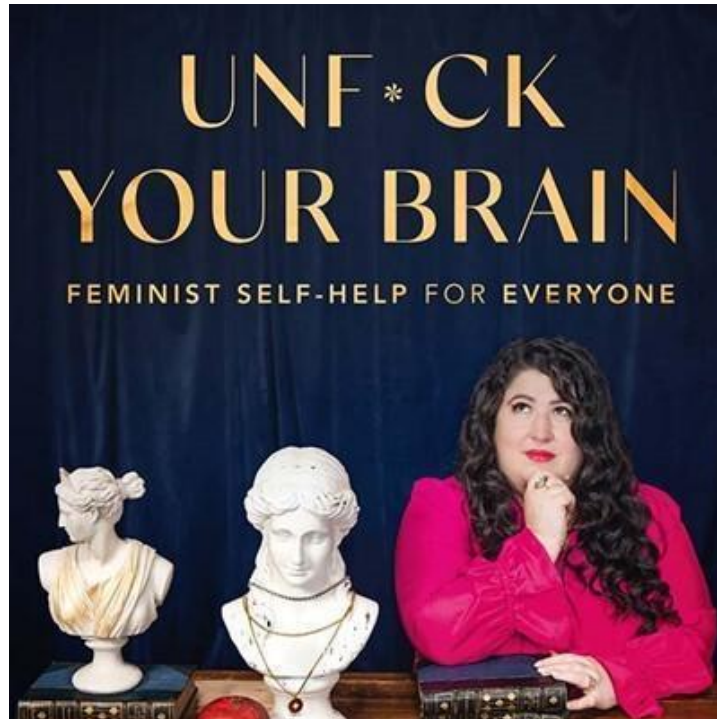


# UFYB 408: Creating A New Future: A Conversation with Prentis Hemphill



## 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.

Alright my friends, welcome. I am really excited about this interview today. I'm here with Prentis Hemphill, who is the author of *What it Takes to Heal*. And I feel like healing is a word that is used, I don't know, one of every two sentences in the self-development online world, probably. But it means one zillion different things, depending on who you're speaking to or what it's about. So I'm really excited to get into this topic today and talk about, as you all know, my favorite topic, which is the overlap between self-development and social justice work in the world. But Prentis, will you please brag about yourself a little bit and tell us kind of who you are and how you got to where you are and how you got to writing this book?

Prentis: Yeah, if I were to brag about myself, I would say, you know, I've been teaching embodiment for 12, 13 years, something like that. And yeah, it's kind of a path that I stumbled on, but I've been encouraged along by my community. So I feel I don't identify as a healer, and I think, you know, a lot of people do, and that's their words. But I'm like, that's not something you can name yourself. That's something your community has to name you, the people that you work with have to name you. I feel reinforced and supported by the folks that I've worked with, the communities that I've been a part of.

I write, and I guess I write pretty well. I like writing. If I were to brag, I'd say I wrote a beautiful book that's from the heart about all these things, about social change, about what it means to actually transform. And I'm a pretty good partner to the person I've been with for a long time. I'm a decent and I think a pretty good parent to my kid. And I'm really funny, actually up close

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and personal. I'm not like a super serious person that's talking about, I don't know, I try to bring some levity, some humor, some lightness to really heavy stuff. So that's the best I can do on bragging.

Kara: I like it. I like it. I also thought I've thought I was a funny person, but I now have a tween in my life. My stepdaughter is a tween, so I now understand that I was mistaken about my humor. But that's okay. You know, I'm learning to live with that.

Prentis: Right. They'll let you, they'll let you know everything.

Kara: Yeah. So you have a book that's out now called *What it Takes to Heal*. And I would love to hear, like what does that word mean to you? And what do you think it means to heal? It's actually not a word that I tend to use, partly because I'm like, what does this mean? I don't think I don't feel like I have my own definition of it. And because I think for me, I don't like, and I don't think this is what the word has to mean, but just the way I see it sometimes used in like self-development world, like that there's this sort of like, well, you're broken now, we're going to fix it. Like you have a cut, it's going to get healed, and then you're going to be all set and perfect forever, and then life will finally be rainbows and puppies all the time. And you know, you'll be perfect and can finally like yourself, which I'm sure is not what you think it means. So I'd love to hear what you think it means.

Prentis: Yeah, I mean, I titled it that intentionally as a provocation a little bit to stir up how people think about the word. For those reasons, I mean, I think it ends up being a destination. It's like we arrive healed, and then everything's cool for the rest of our lives. Like you said, it's all, you know, and happily ever after kind of thing. And I really wanted to trouble that. I wanted to say, to me, the way I understand it, the way I've experienced in my own life, the way that I've experienced working with people, is that

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healing is less about arriving somewhere, but it's more to me about an orientation to living.

Or that's the most useful application I can think of with the word. That it's an orientation towards repair, towards relationship, towards relationship with ourselves, with each other, that if I understand, you know, coming from a kind of trauma frame, that trauma is disconnection, that it's the break in relationship, the break with oneself, then healing to me, at its most fundamental, is restoring relationship, coming back into relationship. And that is an ongoing and lifelong process. It's a way of living more than it is somewhere that you arrive in life, because life keeps going. Your heart will break again. And it's just how do you want to orient to life and to other people? To me, that's, that's healing.

Kara: I love that because I think, number one, like we're so fixated on our external relationships and ignoring the relationship with ourself, right? If I just like can fix this relationship or get this person to accept me or get that person to love me or get that, right? If I can make this relationship secure, and we're totally ignoring our relationship with ourselves. And one of the things I teach a lot that I think people have wrong is the idea that similarly that like self-love is this destination you're going to get to, like, and then you arrive, and then you love yourself forever, right?

And as opposed to like, as you say, it is an ongoing relationship. And just like with somebody, anybody else you love, it's like sometimes you have conflict with yourself. Sometimes you are annoyed with yourself.

Sometimes you have to repair with yourself, right? But it's like, what is the difference is do you have that baseline level of respect and care that you have for someone else in your life who you love? So I think that like, that idea that healing is not a destination, it's a way of being is such a beautiful framing.

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When we think about, how do we even believe in that kind of lifelong relationship? I feel like so many people right now, honestly, myself included some days, having a very hard time imagining a better future, like especially with everything that is going on politically, like things feel very dark and grim. And so I know that you write about really beautifully like why it's important to imagine possibilities that don't exist and how to be able to do that, like even when you look at things your brain is just like, I don't know, man, seems fucked to me. So can you talk a little bit about kind of why that's so important and how we can use that? Like how we can access that ability and how that connects to that healing journey?

Prentis: Absolutely. I mean, we can start with like thinking about it on what to me is a more sinister level. Like all the things that we're seeing laid out were not planned yesterday. They've been planned over time. Somebody thought if I put this here, I can put this here, I can put this here, that the tolerance of the American public will shift, we can do this. You know, they calculated these pieces because they had an idea in a way. They had an idea and a plan and patience. And we're living inside of something that was thought up a long time ago, and we're living the ramifications of something that was thought a long time ago. So I want to put, I just want to say that.

But when I talk about imagination, I talk about visioning, in moments like this where it feels like possibilities are diminishing. I think in a way they are. I mean, I really like to be very sober about things. I'm not, I'm not the kind of person that skips over everything and makes it all nice. I think in a way possibilities are diminishing. I mean, we are facing multiple crises in the moment. I mean, the level of climate, economic, political, I mean, you name it, there's a crisis there. That's the reality. And I really look to what my ancestors have done. Like the impossible conditions in which my ancestors still dreamed and, you know, I write in the book about Harriet Tubman, who to me is like a saint. In whatever tradition I'm in, she's a saint. She dreamed around the parameters of her reality that seemed absolutely totalizing.

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There was not a clear path for freedom, though there was, in my opinion, a continuous abolition, like the abolitionist movement started with people resisting on the continent. That's when it began. And it continued on the ships. It continued as soon as people landed. People organized allies into it. That to me is the thrust of the abolitionist movement, and there are very, there are moments of extreme just severity and violence, and people kept that vision alive. Thought, I think this is possible. I think it's possible because in moments I have a real connection with someone. In moments, there's a person that's like, yeah, I think this is an unjust system. There are these pockets and moments where possibility exists, and I think we can't take those lightly. And when we keep our imagination open, you know, the last thing I would say is like, don't be recruited into the future that is being laid out.

Do not let your body, your life, your aliveness be recruited into the vision that is being laid out. Even if you have to hold a private little vision, imagination, do that. Do not let yourself be recruited because you can be. You can be recruited through how you engage with, you know, the endless scrolling, the dooming, all of that. It's like, yeah, conditions are dire. We can hold that. We can hold that reality. There's suffering, conditions are dire, and it is still our responsibility to hold some kind of possibility. So don't give yourself over to it because it requires that. It's asking that of you. So don't do that. Give your life over to a future that is not yet.

Kara: Yeah, there's like a way in which fatalism is just cooperation with what's going on, right? And I think there's this weird way where sometimes on the left, and I say this as a leftist, like circles back where if you are like not fatalistic, you're like not taking things seriously enough is kind of the energy too. Like if you believe that there's any chance for like hope or reason to keep working or possibility of change, you're being naive and delusional.

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But the idea that kind of fatalism or nihilism about what's going on is like the most whatever, is a good approach or is like the most grown up or rational or whatever, is just, as you say, like so ludicrous. And I think that point about the long-termness is so important because if your thought process is like, I'll have hope if I can clearly see how things will change in the next three to five years, like that's not how the world works, right? But finding meaning comes from, I'm going to do my part and I may not see it happen in my lifetime, right? Like some of your ancestors don't see abolition in their lifetimes. People who worked for the vote for women didn't see it in their lifetimes. Like, and when you can connect to that, you can connect to so much power and purpose and you don't have to see that immediate return. But we're in such a like immediacy culture of like, if we're not going to win in the midterms, then right? Which is like in 18 months, and also electoral politics is only one small part of how we change the world. I love that.

So I know you, you have studied and practiced and taught embodiment. We haven't really talked about that yet. So I'd love to kind of connect to that, especially because my listeners, God love them, like me, tend to like to be a brain in a jar. And we feel like, you know, I bring people in with the cognitive first, and then I'm like, just kidding, you also have a body and you have to actually listen to it. Your brain is actually in a body. It's all connected. It's there. So I'd love to hear, you talk about what was that like moment or experience that really first made you realize your body had something important to say and you wanted to listen to it and connect to it more.

Prentis: Yeah, I was kind of tricked into doing this work in a way. I really was not the kind of person that I mean, if I could scroll back 20 years and tell myself, you're going to be talking about the body and healing and any of this, I would never, ever, ever have believed you. It was not my thing. And so I got brought into a somatic training, which I'll talk about what that is, years ago. And I was like, I don't want to be here. Like I was with my



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coworkers too. It was like a, we were doing a practice together with my coworkers. I was like, please don't make me feel anything in front of these people. I just want to go home, you know?

And they were leading us through this practice and they were like, you know, feel the edges of your skin. Pay attention to your breath. Fill out, like fill out your body. And had us like listen to our bodies along these dimensions. They were like, okay, lengthen and feel dignity, widen and feel connection, depth and feel history, lineage, and future. And so it was really evocative in this way, you know, doing this practice. I was like, oh, woah, I'm feeling these things and I'm feeling how I don't want to feel these things.

And I got this image of myself in that moment as like, actually really tiny and tucked very far back in my chest. I just had this image like, oh, I'm small, I'm tucked really far back in, and I'm doing everything I can to protect that tiny version of me. But I'm not living on the edge of my skin. I'm not really here. I'm not really available for connection. And it rocked me to my core to see myself in that way and to kind of understand the difference, the gap between how I think I'm showing up and how I'm actually showing up. Like, I'm thinking, oh yeah, I can connect with people. I can make friends. I can whatever. But I realized, oh, my body is actually signaling that I'm unavailable for real connection with people.

And I did not know. I was not aware of that gap, you know? And that's just what I've been so, I don't want to say fixated on, but like it drives me to understand that we can have total like perceptions of ourselves, things that we're projecting out in the world, a self that we're preserving, a self that we want people to think that we are. And we spend very little time with the reality of who we are, the authentic person here that knows things and doesn't know things, that fears things and is confident about things. That real person. So it set me on this path of exploration, of study, of practice, of like, how do I fill out more into myself? How do I become myself and be as



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real as I can about who I am? And how do I support other people to do that? And really it's through the body. Like you said, a lot of us think about our body secondarily or we think about them as inconveniences or we get trained to think that there's something to make cute or to fit into this or you know, it's like everything is kind of external pressures on the body and then our relationship ends up being, we're frustrated with our bodies that won't conform.

And that's a primary way a lot of people relate to their bodies is through control. And I think that comes from a worldview that's like, we dominate our bodies, and we dominate the bodies of other people. We dominate the bodies of women and fems, we dominate the bodies of children. We dominate the land, we dominate black and brown people, we dominate the indigenous. To me, it's all the same logic. And it's all about imposing something on the unruly body. And I'm really curious about like, what if we actually become our bodies and therefore treat our bodies with respect and curiosity and wonder?

If we make enough room for the different expressions of bodies, if we get more real about who we are so that we can actually grow and grow up, so we can learn, so we can be accountable. If you can't actually tolerate being in you and being real about who you are, then it's hard to grow up. It's actually hard to change in a deep way. So there's a lot more to it, but that's sort of the core of my work. It's like, let's get real. Let's be ourselves. Let's be bodies because that's what we are.

Kara: I love that. The thing you started with, which is that, I'm trying to put this together. That gap between our perception and how we're showing up and the way that the body is a mirror of that, except we ignore it. So I think about this a lot with like, when I coach people who are like people pleasing or lying about how they feel, and they think they're doing a great job at that and no one can tell. Right? Like, no, for sure people can tell. Like you are

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not actually doing a good job pretending not to be mad. Everyone knows you're mad, right?

Prentis: Exactly. Oh yeah.

Kara: Because like our bodies are perceiving and interpreting, right? The bodies of other people. Like those systems are, your body can't lie that well about it, right? You don't actually control it as well as you think. And so, if I was trying to turn this into a like, a thing that people listening can try. And I'm sure you have your own suggestions, but just coming from the like cognitive coaching angle that I do, it's like, I coach so many women and other people from marginalized communities that think, think that they don't know what they want, right? Or think that they don't know how they feel, but of course that's just on the cognitive level. Somatically, you do know. The feeling is there, right? And like using that, being willing to tune into that is how you figure out everything else, right? It's like how you know how you actually feel or what you actually think or what you actually care about.

Prentis: One of the things we're always practicing in our work is like, you have neurons in the heart and in the gut. There's actually decisions being made, information being processed. And we tend to like focus on thinking and figuring it out here, but the really potent thinking and consideration to me is a full body experience that goes, okay, here's a thought. Let me run it through these other centers of the body so that what emerges is a little bit more honest, it's connected to my body and how I feel. You know, you can feel what I'm saying. Like, I totally relate to that. I'm angry, but let me cover it up. And I just started to practice like, what if I say, when it's appropriate, when it makes sense, I feel frustrated about that. And there's a congruence that's allowed then when I communicate that, it doesn't mean like the world has to stop.

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But if I go, I'm frustrated or, you know, when I work with people sometimes, I'll say or they'll say to me, trust was broken here. And I want to talk about that. If I'm like feeling and honest enough, it actually opens up space for it to be addressed rather than it's something I should feel shameful about or put away, that actually cannot be addressed, that can't be talked about, that can't be worked through. When I communicate with my whole being, there's just a lot more possibility for me, I find.

Kara: Right. We have a joke in my house, between my husband and I that the answer can't be just tell the truth because like so often, I'm from a, you know, like New York Jewish talk about all the feelings family, and he is like a midwestern white dude who never talked about a feeling until he met me. And so, like there'll always be all these whole complicated scenarios where he's like, so this is what I want to try to communicate. So I'm going to do this and this and this. And I'm like, yeah, or what if or you just said like, this is how I feel or this is what I want. And so our joke is always like, oh, yeah, that would be a lot simpler.

So if we try to tie these two things together, which I love to do. I think with the sort of like the despair or overwhelm that a lot of people are feeling about the current situation, especially here in America, but really worldwide. And then that somatic experience because like, right, one of the problems I feel like we're having as a society is that our bodies live in the here and now in our environment, and then our brains live in the 24/7 like media scape. I mean, they're obviously connected is the problem, right? But like, if you are safe in your house and have food, which not all of us are lucky enough to do, but if you do, it's sort of like the danger signal isn't generating from what's happening to your body in the real time, it's generating from your cognition about what could happen in the future, what's out there in the world, what's happening to someone else.

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But obviously the answer isn't just like, well, my body feels fine, so I'll ignore everything in the world. So I'm curious how you find that basically, like how can embodiment and more attention to our body help kind of ground us in this belief we've talked about in terms of being able to look at the long picture, being able to connect to what matters and maintain hope. How do you see embodiment fitting into that?

Prentis: Well, I think it's a great question, and it is a dance. It's a dynamic process. And a lot of us live in our phones, we live in our computers, we live on screens. We do a lot of living there. And you're right, there is something, it's like multiple tracks that are happening. I'm also making lunch for my kid, but at the same time, I'm reading about horrors that are happening in the world. And I'm scrolling on to a puppy video, and then I'm coming back to another horror, and then I'm going, you know, it's like that kind of disjointed, I mean, if we just look at the way we're consuming crisis, we're not actually doing it in a way that allows us to feel what's happening.

I mean, I can quickly scroll on, and you know, you scroll and you have that like tail of feeling of like, I saw something horrific and I'm either going to scroll until I don't feel that cry in my stomach anymore. You know, it's going to come out somewhere because your body is having an emotion. Your body is having an emotion, but we're not honoring actually a lot of what we're seeing. And we think that continuing to consume is being responsible to what's happening.

And I don't think those are the same thing. I think there's things we have to parse apart. Like taking the time to notice how you feel and notice what moves you, to me, actually can compel you into a kind of right action that continuing to consume is not going to be able to do. And then we end up just posting about something, which does something, but we end up in echo chambers. I mean, the algorithm is going to segregate you into, you know, the corner of people who are screaming about a thing. So I'm like,

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how do we actually process what we feel so that we can choose an action that makes sense based on where we are, what we have access to, the community that we are a part of? And I think we've got to like intervene and develop some agency and choicefulness in how we do it. Not to ignore, but so that our action is actually powerful rather than reactive because that is keeping us in a real reactive state.

And we talk about the brain or the physiology of the body, that reactivity, that constant quick action, it gives us a kind of quick satisfaction. I did something. I said something. I wrote a comment. I cussed somebody out. It doesn't build power. It doesn't actually lend itself to a response that will change something in the long run. And I think in order to do that, we actually have to sit with some of the heavy emotions rather than get kind of taken over by the cycle of how we process things. Now, that's going to keep us inactive and, in my opinion, not very powerful.

Kara: Yeah, I think that's so true and we get, there's also this disconnect, I think about a lot in terms of that learned helplessness between like the global and the local, where I feel like, right, like you'd be so much better off if you took your physical body to a soup kitchen to volunteer for an afternoon than scrolling and reposting 16 things about tragedies on the other side of the world that you can't directly impact. Not again, like you said, not that awareness raising isn't important, but like it's like if you go do a thing that helps a person, you sort of are embodied and teaching your body that it can take action and have efficacy, which you need for that long term kind of commitment.

Prentis: Exactly. Join an organization. That's what I tell a lot of people. Like, no matter where you are, I'm sure there is some organization that is paying close attention to what is happening locally, regionally, maybe even nationally, but there's some organization that is trying something new and is longing for people to join. That's a great place to build relationship. It's a

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great place to, like you said, build agency to feel like there's something I can impact. What we're seeing on all the different scales and levels is having local ramifications, was built by some kind of local or regional convergence or building of power. So, you know, we have to engage in those places too. I think it's so, so important to get out of our phones and into the real world that we live in.

Kara: Yeah, that's where real change is going to come from. We're not going to like manifest a top down savior. Like if we like share enough things, somehow somebody will get elected who's not captured by corporate interests and change all of America right away. It's like not what's going to happen.

Prentis: It really gets on my nerves when I see people be like, where is the Democratic party? And I'm like, sure, but like no party, including the Democratic Party. I mean, I have no faith there, but no party is going to move if the people are not organized.

Kara: Right, you are, I want to be like, you are the Democratic party if you are a Democrat. Like that's it. What are you doing?

Prentis: You put pressure on the elected officials. You make it impossible for them not to make a stand on this. But scrolling, commenting, that is not the pressure that is going to move them into any courageous action. So we've got to do something else.

Kara: I love it. So tell people, please, obviously, you have a book out, people can get it now. They can order it presumably wherever books are sold, but where else can people follow you if they want to keep up with your work and learn more?

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Prentis: Yeah, please pick up what it takes to heal. It's a really great kind of summary of the work I've been doing both political and in healing the last 10, 15 years. I have a podcast that is coming back for its fifth season called Becoming the People. I run an organization called The Embodiment Institute where a bunch of regular ass folks come together and practice how to be who they say they are. So we have an online community called The Practice Ground, where really the bar of entry is that you be trying.

Kara: Wait, that's so good. Hold on. Can we pause on that? Because I feel like from the people who follow this for self-development are like, I got to magically become the person I want to be, and then I'll get the actions I want as opposed to like you have to practice being the person you want to be, and then you more and more become that person. It's the same thing we were just talking about on the electoral level. It's like not top down, reach the magic land somehow, and then everything is great. It's like practice being who you say you want to be. That's how you become that person.

Prentis: Because who you are right now is well-practiced. You've been practicing that for a long time and you've gotten really good at it. So if you want to do something different, if you want to feel something different, you got to practice. And so we've created a place called the Practice Ground where that's what we're doing. We're practicing together. We're practicing awkwardly how to build community, how to support each other. And it feels weird, awkward, hard, and we do it anyway. And we encourage each other to do that. So join us there. And yeah, Prentis Hemphill on Instagram is where I sort of unload my thoughts and sometimes practices. So please check me out.

Kara: Awesome. Thanks so much for coming on and sharing your wisdom with us.



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Prentis: Thanks for having me.

If you're loving what you're learning on the podcast, you have got to come check out *The Feminist Self-Help Society*. It's our newly revamped community and classroom where you get individual help to better apply these concepts to your life along with a library of next level blow your mind coaching tools and concepts that I just can't fit in a podcast episode. It's also where you can hang out, get coached and nerd out about all things thought work and feminist mindset with other podcast listeners just like you and me.

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