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YouSpeak Radio Episode 1 – “Your Transness Is Your Fuel” with Rev. Valerie Spencer

Audio Transcript

YouSpeak Introduction:

This is Youspeak Radio with generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund. A project by ONE Archives Foundation on Tongva Land.

[MUSIC]

Grae Modhorst (0:14):

My name is Grae Mordhorst, and I use they/them pronouns. I am an incoming freshman at the University of California, Davis, passionate about environmental and queer activism. Today, I had the amazing opportunity to speak with Reverend Valerie Spencer. Her storytelling of what life was like growing up as a black trans woman in the eighties to her experience in HIV advocacy was incredible.

Reverend Valerie Spencer (0:34):

I went to him and I said, “I hear you every Sunday talk about ‘homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, gay.’ Do you not like us transsexuals?”

Archbishop Carl Bean, then Reverend Bean said to me, “We’ve had a few girls come through here. But none of them stayed long enough to make us change. God sent you here to make us change.” And that makes Sunday ‘homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, gay, transsexual.’ And he said it with thrust!

Grae (1:06):

Her story was truly inspiring and made me, as a queer youth, feel so grateful for 1 those who have blazed the path before me.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

Grae (1:19):

This episode contains mentions of verbal and physical abuse and derogatory terms against queer and trans people. Please take care while listening.

Grae (1:28):

My birth name is Grace, so I just took the C out, so it's Grae.

Rev. Spencer (1:32):

|| love that. How creative is that, right? I personally am fascinated with the names of my genderqueer, gender non-conforming family. I love the name Grae. I love how you spell it. I love all of the names. I find it to be such an immediate receipt of how badass my people are.

My people are that shit. Baby, I’m sorry, my people are the shit.

Rev. Spencer (1:58):

I'm Reverend Valerie Spencer. You can call me Valerie, and today also happens to be my mother's 85th birthday, so happy birthday to my girl.

Grae (2:08):

Happy birthday to your mom. I'm super excited to be here talking with you today. Tell me about your childhood. What was it like growing up as a black trans woman in Los Angeles in the 70s and 80s?

Rev. Spencer (2:23):

So I grew up, and I instantly knew, like, as a child, that something wasn't all the way right. I knew that I was different and I knew that I was different because people responded to me in interesting ways that let me know that, you know, I was not like the other people. The older I got at about, let's say, eight, nine, ten, I had an idea what it was.

My father, a military man, career navy man, career insurance salesman. He's where I get all my bouginess from. But, my father always looked at me with instantaneous disgust.

But I always knew that what my father wanted and what I was was two different things. Right. And the older I got, the picture got clear, right? That my father wanted this womanizing pimp daddy dressed to the nines. And I just was not that, right. I was a very soft child. I'd like to sit with my legs crossed. I do to this day. Even as a child, I liked a little manicure feeling, a little child's manicure. I've always been a girl. And my father looked at me like, "Why do you have to sit like that? Why do you have to hold your mouth like that? Why ya skin look like that? Why ya lips look like that?" My father wanted a son. He wanted a replica of himself. Right? Tall, dark-skinned, buffed. My father was fine. Tall, but he was evil as hell. Right? And he rebelled instantly against the fact that what he got from the store during the delivery was not what he ordered. Right? I was not his son.

And my father was very physically violent, very verbally abusive, very psychologically abusive. But, his, his love language was that physical abuse. The hitting, the pulling guns on me, all of those things. Let me say this, why I forgive him to this day: because there was no Trevor Project, there was no PFLAG, there was nothing for Black people or even Black men to, like Gabrielle Union and Dwayne Wade, where they could navigate their child's transition and have a bit of like, that culture did not exist, right. All my father knew was that he wanted a butch son, and I was just not that right.

The last time I saw my father, I was 16. I saw him while I was walking to a bus stop. He was on the pay phone.

And by then, I was dressed in rather androgynous like. I would say using the language of today, I journey through a process of gender non-conformity. And so I was wearing what I called a skirt and a pair of boots and a cute shirt. So, you know, I was lovely. I was dressing in my own way. And my father said to me, "Well, I see it's finally took in." And his last words to me were "just don't catch AIDS and die."

The older I got, I soon discovered that the world had that expectation of me as well.

They ridiculed me because whatever I was supposed to be, I was not.

I did not know what that was. I had a feeling, but around about my 12, 13, ah, the language came in. The word 'faggot' showed up, and for the majority of my young adult years, that was really like a nickname. Not a term of endearment, but I knew that before I would ever hear my own name, I would hear the word 'faggot.' I heard it shouted out across the street. Bus drivers, school teachers, "Faggot, faggot, faggot, faggot." Fortunately, as I got older, I grew to discover other faggots, and we were lovely faggots together.

[MUSIC]

Rev. Spencer (6:44):

At the same time, I had the love of my mother, Luella Gilmore, who coincidentally turns 85 today. I always knew that I was safe at home with my mother. Mm, it makes me emotional. My mother was the Black LGBTQ center in the hood before they had such a thing. My mother was doing case management before they had such a thing. My mother was doing food distribution before they had such a thing. And my house was the house where all the faggots came, all the little baby dykes, all the little baby queers came to my house and we could do whatever.

She would make sandwiches and whatever, and we would just hang out and be, right? Because she loved it. And when somebody would get put out of their house, my mother would would say, "What's your mother's name? It's Barbara. Give me Barbara's number," and every single time, she would go in her room, close the door. "Hey, Barbara. Hey, my name is Lou," and at the end of that, when that door opened, "Your mama said you can come back home, but don't be bringing in them boys in the house like you did." You know, my mother would get you put back in. I love that old girl for that.

Around about 17, I begin to have feelings that 'faggot' wasn't the home. There was something else happening. Now, at the same time, I had had boyfriends that said, "You know, baby, you're a girl." And I was like, "What are you kidding?"

Well I dated a mobster for a while who brought me dresses all the time, and I was like, "Why are you buying me these cocktail girl dresses?" They say it's a derogatory term, but in my day, it was an extreme compliment to be called fish. If you were fish, it meant that you were the epitome of femininity and female-ness, that you were unclockable. And so my friends would say to me all the time, "Miss thing, you know, you fish girl, you are fish."

My close friends would say, "You should just go on and be fish. LuLu ain't going to mind." I said, "No, I'm gonna lose my mama over this."

At the same time, I went to my doctor. This is when I'm about 17, I had an ear infection. And the doctor kept calling me. My birth last name is my mother's last name, Gilmore. And so the doctor kept calling me Miss Gilmore. And the evil nurse

said, "Doctor, look at the chart. Look at the chart!" and he looked, and he said, "Are you a boy?" and I said, "Well, yeah!" and he said, "Come in here and close the door," and that was the first sign of humanistic contact regarding my transness that I had ever had. He talked to me, and this was an ear doctor, he said, "Are you having any kind of feelings? How long have you thought you were girl?" "I'm not a girl. I don't think I'm a girl." He said, "Are you sure?" and so he referred me to a support group at what then, was the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center, which was not the conglomerate that you know today, it was a little apartment building on Highland.

[MUSIC]

Rev. Spencer (9:57):

My mother living in Los Angeles was increasingly unsafe for me. First of all, I was a queer child. My mother's neighbors, our neighbors all said, "You know, you need to put that faggot and all of them faggots out!" Right, because at that point we always had the house full and the neighbors just hated it, right? And they were starting to sell crack more and more in our neighborhood and then on our block. And then there was the shootout right in front of our house. And that very same day, my mother said, "I don't know what I got, but I'm taking whatever I got and I'm gonna get us a house." And she left one day on a Saturday and went driving forever and came back and said, "I bought us a house," and here we are in Pomona. And when we got ready to pack up, my mother said, "You all can stay here and live out the rest of the month and I'm going to get everything together at the new house."

And when that rent was finished, I went to San Francisco for three weeks to live just to be, right? When I got off the plane, people were calling me "ma'am" and "miss." And I thought, "Is this really possible? Could I really be myself?" Like these people, like, they don't even know me. Right? I him," and that is what happened. I came home, we had a house in Pomona now. That very day, my mother pulled out an old green-lined suitcase. And what we could consider boy clothes, we packed those up and gave them to the halfway house down the street. And so, we for months would see these strange people walk around the neighborhood with all of my sissy frocks and faggot wear and scarves, and my mother, my mother would stop off at a thrift shop after she got off work. "Look, look, look, look, look." She bought me a dress. Mind you, I had did drag before, and my mother bought my first pair of shoes, and mother got my nails done, my feet done. She gave me money to buy fabric to make my dress. She gave me money to go to Mendel's and buy my first pair of shoes. My God, today this takes back memories, and so living here in Pomona, no one knew me at all, and suddenly my name was not faggot anymore.

Grae (12:25):

Your mother sounds so wonderful.

Rev. Spencer (12:28):

My mother said, "You know, I've been talking to these neighbors and they don't know about you," and she thought, like, "What's wrong with these people? They don't know about?" And I said, "Well Lulu, just let that go. Let it be, girl, so I can, you know, move around. Just pipe down, girl, and let it be."

Eventually I went to school, I went to hair school and I started working temp jobs and all that kind of thing, and I made friends, straight friends who would come to the house, and my mother would say, "Hey, your, your girlfriend Barbara that you work with, you know, she don't know about you."

And I say, "I'm really not ever thinking about it, Lulu. I'm not thinking about it"

By then I had fully transitioned, right? I didn't have any boobs or anything. And footnote, we didn't have services where girls could go get hormones at St John's. We didn't have that. We had in the back of Plummer Park lived an old white guy named Bob, and you would knock on Bob's door and slide \$60 through the mail chute, and he would slide you a paper bag with a rubber band around it, and he would slide it like, take that, goddammit, it would shoot out, and you would open it up, and there were vials and needles and some pills and my mother gave me my first shot.

Hormones eventually was not the path for me after all these years. I'll admit it, I've never been on hormones. I had a shot or two, and my mother said, "That shit is driving you crazy, make you eat me out of house and home. You got to stop that shit." And so I did, and I never did it again.

I met friends. I had boyfriends, many of which did not know that I was a trans woman. The men that knew that we were trans, we used them for money. That were dates. But the pieces, most of them did not now. And then finally, I met a really nice Puerto Rican guy who had a really powerful yen for me, and he did know that I was a trans woman, and he pursued me with all his might, and eventually he asked me to marry him. And like a fool, I said, "Yes," but, but that engagement did not work out.

[MUSIC]

Rev. Spencer (14:35):

I was rejected and ostracized in school by the teachers, not just the students. Right? I remember my English teacher in high school, of which I did not graduate, every day she would call me a "Black faggot," and every day I would call her an "ugly white pig." That was that was the bulk of our relationship. That's all she ever taught me. I never learned anything. I went to Fairfax High School where a boy tried to kill me. He tried to push me in front of a bus, and coincidentally, the principal just happened to be walking by and snatched me before that bus hit me. I didn't get beaten a lot, but I, I, I knew I was never, ever, ever safe, never, never, never safe that there was nowhere, unless I was with a group of other queer people.

And there was one street, 10th Avenue. You would walk down Hyde Park and sometimes you would hear bullets flying. They would be shooting at us for target practice. Mind you, we were having all of those boys, all the gang banger boys, all the professional basketball players. We were having all of them.

So that's how it was growing up for me.

Grae (15:49):

You're a really incredible storyteller. Speaking about, like, a world that did not, like, readily embrace queer identities. How did it feel to find community through the Unity Fellowship Church when the world did not readily embrace queer people?

Rev. Spencer (16:04):

I had been put out of a church, right. They wrote me a formal letter saying, "Don't come back," because I wrote a boy a note that said, "Are you t- question mark." In our day, that was was a way of saying, "Are you gay?" And he took that note and got up and showed it to the leadership, and they put me out and told me, "Never come back."

When they put me out of that church, I said, "God, you can kiss my ass. You have seen me trying all these years to be different. You ain't made me different. I'm walkin' around, donatin' money, givin' to, speaking into all this stuff. You're a chicken shit God."

But then my friend Anita told me, she said, "Girl, I love my church." And I was like, "Mhm, mhm, mhm." "I go to a gay church." I said, "A what?" She said, "My pastor is gay as gay can be." I said, "What?" She said, "Yes, girl. He let you know every Sunday that he's a sissy with pink suede pumps and pearl teardrop earrings." And I said, "They should silence him. What is the leadership doing at this church?" She said, "Girl, all the leadership is gay, girl, we all gay up in there, girl, and we loving God." And I thought, "That's morose, disgusting and gross."

And so she talked me into one Sunday morning going. And the moment I hit the door, you could feel the love. You could just feel the love. It was all these people that I hadn't seen in years because I moved all the way out here to the Inland Empire. And after transitioning, I really didn't do much gay nightclubbing or anything. I went to straight clubs, and it's the most boring thing you've ever seen in your life. Don't go to the straight clubs, girl. And so I hadn't seen any of my friends or people that I knew, except for some people that were really close to.

And then, the lights went down. And you heard this man say, "Homosexual, heterosexual, lesbian, gay, whoever you are, God has no respect to person, you are very special." And then, "Walk in the light." And so eventually I was a permanent fixture of Unity Fellowship Church. I loved it.

Because, going to church as a Black person, as a black queer person, if you go to church, you know, any minute now, okay, here it comes, boom: "Y'all going to hell. You ain't nothing but an abomination. You're going to hell." It was awful, was traumatic, but here was this place of love. And this man would walk us through the scriptures and offer us a new interpretation. Of the Good Samaritan story. Right? "There was a drag queen laying on the side of the road who needed help because she had been beaten," and he had redefined those things.

And I went to him and I said "I hear you every Sunday talk about 'homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, gay.' Do you not like us transsexuals?" We weren't transgender people back then, you all. Not yet. We were transsexuals and transvestites. And so, I said, "What is your position on us? Do you think we're going to hell or something?"

And he said to me, "We've had a few girls come through here. But none of them stayed long enough to make us change. God sent you here to make us change." And that next Sunday 'homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, gay, transsexual day,' and he said it with thrust, mind you.

Our gay brothers did not fully embrace us. I'm not sure if they still do, to be very honest, but they did not embrace us. They loved me because I was Miss Val, but the trans stuff. Like, you know, "Why is she here? Why is she trying to be a part of member's ministry and all of that?" And then I became a minister at Unity, and that was very difficult because there were those who just did not accept. But to your point, what was it like finding community at Unity? It was like stepping into a Jacuzzi that is fragranced with cucumber and lemongrass that is the perfect temperature and all you can say is, "Ahh uhh." It was that.

We learned about ourselves. We learned about scripture. Many of us are in spiritual leadership to this day, but it was wonderful to see black faces, and a wonderful thing about Unity, you never knew who you were sitting next to. You could be sitting next to somebody who was white and filthy rich, but they loved coming on that corner of Jefferson and Sycamore because we heard, oh, and of course, you know the music, you know, of course, right, the black worship experience

I sang in the choir, I'm a soprano. I started singing in the choir, singing in truth. There's nothing like it. There's nothing like having a relationship with your God and knowing that your God made you perfect, that you are not an abomination or a filthy wreck, that you were designed to be the trans woman that you were. My self-esteem was affected by way of Unity. My worldview was affected by way of Unity. I found my calling by way, I owe Unity. There's nothing I won't give because it was everything for me. It was everything for me.

Grae (21:42):

Do you think those experiences, Unity, are reflected in how you, practice with the Holistic Empowerment Institute today?

Rev. Spencer (21:50):

I'm not a member of Unity today. As I tell people, "I don't have to be a member of Unity. I'm an O.G." I always can walk in and have my seat. I preached at Unity a couple of times, um, but I found my calling.

Unity had an AIDS ministry, Minority AIDS Project, and I worked there for a decade. The late Connie Norman, before she passed away, before I worked there even, said to me, "I'm dying, Valerie, and I want you to take over all my shit." And Connie was one of the founding members of Act Up, and I said, "Connie, I'll do all of that, but I'm not laying in the ground playing dead." So I took over her prototype's cross-training and took over all of her community planning seats. I was on the inaugural class of the prevention planning committee from L.A., and then statewide, and the national stuff, that was all as a result of Connie saying, "I'm passing you my work." And so that's how I began to be a national presence, in community planning around HIV, around health, and mental health because of the work that Connie set me forth to do.

Other people disagree with that, but I believe that Connie and Bishop had a conversation. They set me up. Because, we didn't have any advocates in L.A.. Trans advocacy. What are trans people? First of all, what are transgender people? And so myself and Tracy McDaniel from Atlanta, we were, no shade, but we were the first, to run a prevention program for trans people, and then I became the first to do a lot of the community planning work.

And eventually I grew tired of talking about transness because I knew that the problem with HIV and all of our issues had to do with a connection of spirit, had to do with all of that, religious abuse explicitly in black communities, black and brown. And so I went to seminary, and I became an interfaith minister. But my work has always had a spiritual tone to it. And that's because of Archbishop Carl Bean. He gave me my worldview. He gave me my spiritual view.

And then I read a book that changed everything, called *Conversations with God* by Neil Walsh. I fell in love with the teachings of new thought. I took classes. I found myself leaving Unity, which was so, so hard. But I did. But even today, Unity is home. There's not much that comes out of my mouth that is really not something by or inspired by Archbishop Carl Bean.

Thank you, Bishop.

He later confessed. I said to him, "You know, you is one of the chickens. You're one of the girls." And he would: "Shut up, darlin'. Get up out of here talk all this stuff." Well, later. He would call me and my mother, Kelly, my trans mama Kelly, God rest her soul, into his office, and he said, "Okay y'all listen. They used to call me Miss Lottie back in Baltimore," and he would unpack his own trans story. And then later he confessed to the church, "They used to call me Miss Lottie. I'm actually one of the girls, and my daughter spotted it years ago." And there's nothing about me that has not been touched by Archbishop Carl Bean. I miss him dearly.

Grae (25:02):

That's really incredible. Thank you for sharing that story. Can you tell me more about, like being a leader in the minority AIDS project and like what that looked like for you and what kind of work you did?

Rev. Spencer (25:14):

The position that they carved out for me was a well, just because position, they didn't put me in leadership or any of those things. The leadership at Minority AIDS project were not very supportive except for Bishop, but Bishop wasn't there all the time. He was travelling. He was speaking.

However, I did have a calling on my life. And God just begin to expose me to environments that I needed to be at.

The lesbians, God bless my sisters. The lesbians caught me up, and said, "We're taking her with us." So, all the community planning meetings that I didn't know about because the gay boys wouldn't tell me. Minority AIDS Project leadership wouldn't tell me. That's fine. DJ Roselli. Kerry Broaddus, Frankie Lennon. Mary Lucey. Ooh, I'm forgetting, oh my Latina sister, I see you in my mind, but I can't recall your name, all my lesbian sisters.

The women, the HIV-impacted women of HIV, snatched me up. They made me a part of the Women's Caucus. They made me a voting part of the Women's Caucus. They made sure I was at everything. Mind you, nobody knew what trans was.

This is one of the girls that be at the club that you give the dollar to. That's all they knew. We had 1% of the L.A. County HIV prevention budget, and they were pissed that we had that 1, right. We were fighting for 2%. And there was vehement like

opposition, right. But the lesbians and the women that were impacted by HIV, they are the ones who snatched me up and took me and showed me what I needed to learn taught me everything about community planning and curriculum development

And in those days, trans women themselves, black trans women in particular, trans women period, did not appreciate the work that we did because it wasn't everywhere. It was y'all coming in here in the club, passing out condoms. Michelle Triple X, God rest your soul, Michelle, was the first one who, when Peanuts wouldn't let me bring condoms in, she knew I was sneaking rubbers in, and she would tell me, "Hide them under the bar and, then come get, when the owner leaves, and then come get."

So I wasn't embraced at first. No, not at all. I couldn't be at your show at 2 o'clock in the morning. I had to go to work, right. So I wasn't embraced. And I left the local scene to do more national work. I did that on purpose to develop a vacuum so that local voices could develop. And they did.

[MUSIC]

Grae (27:53):

Thank you so much for sharing. I have one final question for you. What message do you want to give queer and trans youth who are struggling to, find themselves and be their authentic selves?

Rev. Spencer (28:05):

First of all, I want to say to you that your queerness is not your deficit. It is actually your fuel. It is not your deficit. It is actually your fuel. The thing that makes you sickening is the fact that you are queer and you, right, your transness is your fuel, your gender non-conformity is your fuel.

And so although we live in a culture today that does not celebrate, does not fully embrace or understand. That's fine. It's the culture that is at play, not you. You are divinely, uniquely and wonderfully made. Everybody wants to be you. Everybody wishes they had what you had. Everybody wants your insight. Everybody wish they had your taste. Everybody wish they had your ability to create. Everybody wants to be you.

Now, if you are living in an environment that tells you that you need to change, now that's what we need to fix. We need to get you up out that environment because you are loved, you are loving, and there's love that is waiting for you. I feel for my brothers and sisters and my siblings who are struggling with their sexuality and their gender expression. Know that whoever you are, whatever you are, and however you identify, if people keep telling you that you're complicated, you should wear that as a badge of honor, because the human experience is complicated. It's not simple. It's not vanilla and chocolate. It's much more nuanced than that. And so if you are a part of that complicated nuance, wear that with pride, but you are flawless, you are wonderful, you are going to be taking over someday.

My only request is that as I age, that you make sure that I have wonderful gray hair, the best caftan, and please put me in a queer-centered nursing home where I can be at peace for the remainder of my days because I am the one that loves you. I love you young people dearly. I'm fighting for you. I'm praying for you. I'm hoping for you.

And knowing that your leadership is impeccable and knowing that you are everything.

I regret that you live in waters that are toxic for you to swim in. But there's a whole 'nother pool on the other side of that lake that you're in. And it's lovely over here. It's called freedom and liberation. And once you get free, young people, once you know who you are, even if you don't know who you are, once you give yourself full permission to be you, no matter what that is, don't you ever turn back. Don't you ever. You be like a bull dog with your freedom in your teeth. Don't you ever let go of it. Because that's what you're supposed to be. That's what you're supposed to be.

I also lastly want the young people to know take over. Take over. If you know how to plan, plan your ass off and take over. If you are a fashion designer, design the best fashions they've ever seen. If you have political implications, run for president twice. Take over. Let your queerness—it is your fuel, right? Let your queerness take you into every corner of the globe and make money, and live well. Make money, live well and take over because you deserve it.

Grae (31:45):

It's been really inspiring and, amazing to have this conversation with you today. It's been really wonderful. Thank you so much for talking to me and sharing your stories. You're a really incredible storyteller. I really enjoyed listening and learning. I feel inspired.

Rev. Spencer (32:03):

Thank you, Grae. Grae, take over. Take over. Take over the world.

Youspeak Outro (32:10):

This is Youspeak Radio. We are Caleigh Campbell, Diego Gonzalez, Madeline Lee, Grae Mordhorst, Elliot Starr-Schneider, Marbella Zoliz-Maldonado with generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, a project by ONE Archives Foundation on Tongva Land.