

Julia Winston ([00:00](#)):

Take a look around. You'll notice them everywhere. Facilitators people who guide other people create connection and make tough things easier. This is facilitator forum, where we meet a magical mix of people who offer us insights and inspiration through the stories of their work in the world. I'm your host. Julia Winston. Welcome. Let me just start by saying that. When I started this podcast, I put together a list of my dream guests, the people who I would be so stoked to interview. And one of the very first people on that list was Ashanti branch.

Julia Winston ([00:43](#)):

Ashanti is an educator facilitator, an entrepreneur based in Oakland, California. And I was so excited to have him on the show. So this is a real treat. Mr. Branch is on a mission to change the way that students interact with their education and the way schools interact with students. In 2004, when Ashan, he was a first year teacher teaching math. He started the ever forward club to provide a support group for African American and Latino males who were not achieving to the level of their potential. The main focus of the ever forward club was to help these young men deal with their emotions in a healthy way. Since then the ever forward club has become a super impactful non-profit it grown to serve both young men and women and has helped 100% of its members graduate high school, 100% and 93% of them have gone on to attend college. These numbers are astounding, and it's not just about the numbers. It's about who Mr. Branch is and the way that he goes about his work. He has a tremendous influence on youth and on parents and teachers. And the ripple effect is powerful. I personally feel super honored that I got to have this conversation with Mr. Branch. And I hope you walk away with as much goodness and learning as I did

Julia Winston ([02:01](#)):

Ashanti branch, there are a lot of, of things that I could say about you. A lot of things I could say about you, but I'd rather let you introduce yourself. Oh, so what would you like us to know about you?

Ashanti Branch ([02:12](#)):

Oh, wow. So my name is Ashanti branch. I'm from OK. Oakland, California. I am an educator. I'm an engineer, I'm an entrepreneur. And I sometimes wanna be you all at the same time, but I am run a nonprofit called ever forward. We support schools around building healthy relationships. Our primary work started in 2004 as a first year teacher creating a club called ever forward club for young men who were incredible young men, but who, if you looked at the way schools measure people, they were not doing all very well. And our work just began to grow. And not only to support young men through the clubs, but through our million mask movement, other all people, adults, young people, parents, students, regardless of how people identify. We have been supporting people around, being their more authentic sales by helping to navigate this metaphorical mask where we say everything is fine and when it's not, and it's great when it is finding places where people can go when they're not doing fine and making sure that they know that they're not alone. So really hoping to eliminate a sense of loneliness and of, of isolation in the world, which we find is creating lots of other health and wellbeing challenges in our community. So that's a wide, big overview. And yeah, and I'm an uncle of two amazing nephews and a niece. And well, I have three nephews, but my two little ones, other one he's old. So, but he's and I, and I try and stay in touch with him as much as possible.

Julia Winston ([03:44](#)):

I bet you're the best uncle ever. I mean, just like watching some of the clips that I've seen of you working with young men, I can just imagine you being such a fun, sweet uncle. That's like the safest place to go when they wanna talk about anything. Am I right?

Ashanti Branch ([03:58](#)):

Oh, we get to talk. I, I, I do my best. I do my best. I think my uncle, because my father wasn't around growing up. I mean, they have a father in their life, which is beautiful. Right. And I just do my part as the uncle to, to infuse my own flavor of life and of light of play and what it looks like to, to be caring and loving right. And supportive. Right. So yeah, I do my best. I do my best. I'm I'm I probably can work on some things, but I'm actually, you know, it's a, it's a, it's a fun, it's a fun job, you know, I can always send them back home. Are you going home now?

Julia Winston ([04:31](#)):

That's the joy, right? Of not being the parent who were some of the influential figures in your life when you were growing up, that you feel almost you into the type of work that you do today?

Ashanti Branch ([04:44](#)):

Probably my grandfather, you know, my, so my mom's father, he was here in California. So my mom came to California to live with him in a time where Arkansas was didn't work. If you were a black woman with a, with a opinion, right. Arkansas was dangerous for her. And so she, she, they were like, girl, you gotta go to California. Cause you go and get us all killed. You know? And my mom came to California to, you know, relive her life, go to college, you know, figure it out. And, and I was born here, but my grandfather, my mom's father, he was he worked for the city. I don't think he ever missed a day at work. Like he was like one of those men from, I think he was veteran, I think from Vietnam. And he was a, he was a pastor of my church.

Ashanti Branch ([05:27](#)):

He was a preacher. So he had, I, I get living and learned a moral kind of compass from him. I think he also taught me how to pour my first concrete driveway. I built my first fence, like some emergency, once I got old enough, he would gimme a job to do work, can make money. And that was such a beautiful thing. So I was excited about that. And my grandfather was like, we didn't talk about feelings or emotions. Like he talked about God and he talked about the one time I was probably in middle school. I was trying to get some advice from him about this bully. Right. I wanted him to teach me how to fight. I wanted him to, I was, he thought he was gonna be like, cause he's so strong. Like he could like, you know, he would just pick up stuff with like one hand and that I couldn't even move. And I'm like, what the heck? So I wanted him to gimme some tips. Right. And I remember him saying, I was using that proverbial bullied for somebody else. Right. And he was like, Aw, son, you just gotta forgive people like that. You got, and I'm like, no, that's the wrong answer. That's that's not the answer that I, that I want to hear. And I, you

Julia Winston ([06:28](#)):

Wanted him to tell you to fight.

Ashanti Branch ([06:29](#)):

I want him to tell me here's how you, here's how you win. Right. Here's how you take 'em down. Here's how you use, here's how you build more or strength. Right. I was waiting for those kind of lessons, I think. And that's not where it came. And, and I remember it and I was like, I, I was not telling him it was me. So maybe if I had told him it was me, he was maybe said something different. I don't know. But what he said to me in that example for my friend, who I was trying to help was just pray for him. And I'm like, that's not, that's not what I'm looking for. I look back and I'm, I'm thankful. Right? I'm thankful that here my life, weren't saying an I for an eye, a two, four tooth. Right. I think it was protect yourself.

Ashanti Branch ([07:08](#)):

Maybe like, don't let anybody take, take over you or whatever. I think when I got to a certain age, but for the most part, it was like, we gotta, we gotta find more love. And I think that as I think about how I I've lived my life and the things I've done and tried to choose to do in the ways I've responded to certain situations, or sometimes I was like, I would never let somebody talk to me like that. And then when somebody's talking to me like that, I'm like standing there taking it. I'm like, what is wrong with you? That's not, no, but I think deep rooted in me is a place of, of love. Right. And, and, and, and yeah, if, when you need to turn on the other part of yourself, I, I know how, but that's not where I default to. I don't default to like revenge. Right? Well maybe, maybe I do. Maybe I do. Maybe, maybe I, maybe my brain, maybe my brain does sometime like, oh, all that person got me wrong. You know, and then I I'm like, yeah, just let it go

Julia Winston ([08:05](#)):

Just, well, so this is super interesting, cuz we're talking about how you deal with your own emotions, right? Yeah. When things are in moments of maybe where you would want revenge, I mean, what you do at ever forward is you teach young men to deal with their emotions in healthy ways. So how do you deal with your own emotions in healthy ways?

Ashanti Branch ([08:25](#)):

Yeah. When I'm being really healthy about it, I name it. I acknowledge it. Something happens. I'm like, oh, I need to do something about that feeling that just came up. I think sometimes in the moment I may not be in a place to deal with it. Like sometime in the moment, I'm just like, well, I'm at work. Something has happened. I need to address it, but I don't have time to address it. Now when I'm doing a good job, I'm like, okay, we'll come back to that around 6:00 PM after everyone goes home or we'll come back to that later tonight in our, in our workout time. And we'll come back to that later in our gym time, like whatever, I need to come back to it as opposed to stuffing it. Because when it comes up again, it's gonna feel almost twice as activating. And then I'm like, oh, I didn't do with the last one.

Ashanti Branch ([09:11](#)):

So I didn't even process it. So now it's coming back. And, and how many, how many times do I process do I, do I squash things as opposed to dealing with them? So when I'm dealing with them really good, I name it. I'm like, oh, I don't have time to deal with that right now. Or when I'm dealing with it really good. I just like, okay, this time right now to deal with this, okay. This is a thing that made me uncomfortable. It makes me upset. It makes me whatever or how wanna process this. Right? Cause we, we use in our work, we tell'em people, it emotions or energy, emotion, right. And emotions and energy is not gonna be destroyed. Right. It's it may not even be created. It's gonna come. We get, we pull it from other stuff. Something happens. We pull a feeling from it.

Ashanti Branch ([09:50](#)):

Oh, that thing is making me angry. Whatever that was that now has made me angry. I, I, I transfer some energy from that to me now I've named it and put it in some place and now I need to do something with it. And if I don't find a way to get it out of me, meaning draw right script, make a video like Yale run, scream, like whatever that is, go sweat. Right. My bike. Like if I don't get that energy out in some way, it's gonna store inside of me until I deal with it. And it will. I think some people have, I mean, we've see it over and over and young people and adults tell people, oh, I just couldn't take it anymore. What couldn't take anymore? That thing that was happening. Right? And so sometimes it's that the thing gets stored up so much that we don't deal with it when it's in small doses.

Ashanti Branch ([10:31](#)):

And then it comes out in, in a waterfall of emotion. It's kinda like it's an analogy. I was doing some, a prison. And one of the, the facilitators described this to the inmates was like, you know, if you are feeling an emotion, it's a wave emotions, come in waves. Most emotions will go away in about two minutes. If you just let, let it just let it through. Pass through two or three minutes. You're not gonna feel it forever. But if you stuff it in that moment, you don't deal with it. Now you have to wait for it when you ready to deal. But if you happen to navigate it while it's at the top and you don't respond in a healthy way, any surfer will tell you. And I'm not a surfer. Obviously if you see the side, I maybe they're surfer is my size, but I am not a surfer at the top of the wave is not the time to try and jump on the wave. When the emotions at this high is, is not the time to try and pro deal with the emotion you need to like, oh, I need to catch it before it starts coming. Like, oh, this feeling is coming. Yes. Oh, okay. Or if I already see it at the height, I need to duck under it and be like, okay, not right now. We, we, we, we about to make a bad move,

Julia Winston ([11:32](#)):

Right. God. But you know, like we have the that's so true. And we learn as we get older, how to sort of nip it before it becomes a wave or how to deal with it after it's become a wave. But for young kids, like the people that you work with, they haven't worked that muscle memory before. That's right. How do you teach that? Can you teach that to kids?

Ashanti Branch ([11:52](#)):

Oh yeah. I think you can, you can absolutely teach it. I mean, I think most people know the things that make them happy and the things that make them sad, things that make them frustrated, things that make them angry and we can get young people start naming it. Most people can only name maybe, maybe 10 emotions. You know, there's dozens. Like, like if you can only name a few, like some young people can only happy, sad, mad joy. I mean, they may even be stuck in how can you, what emotions can you name? And if you don't have a, a more traditional vocabulary, then every time something comes up, even if it's embarrassment, like when I was young, if, if a girl didn't give you her phone number or whatever, like, this is what I learned from the, I mean, this is me being a 10 year old learning from 14 year olds.

Ashanti Branch ([12:34](#)):

So I'm learning from other kids who learn from other kids who are learning all bad behaviors or bad information. I was heard. If a girl doesn't give you her number, then you probably should call her a name or something. That's what people did. Why that's so dumb. You go from being fascinated and, and in love with somebody. And then all of a sudden, now you wanna call them a name or because we never

learned how to deal with embarrassment. We know how to navigate anger. So if somebody tells you no, then you're like, no, well then forget you. Then what just happened there? I transfer sadness and embarrassment into anger because anger is respected in our community for men, sadness and embarrassment is not respected. Being timid and being soft is not respected. So when something happens, that is not what you was trying to conquer.

Ashanti Branch ([13:22](#)):

Then you turn into a monster. That is what a society and community tells you, you should do. And that is unhealthy and it's dangerous, but it, it happens. And if we don't begin to help young people learn, Hey, what do you feel? Oh, I'm, I'm, I'm upset with my girlfriend right now. I'm upset with my relationship. I'm upset with my mom. Why are you upset? I'm upset because of this. Okay. Well what did that make you feel while I was angry? Okay. But gimme some more behind the anger. Why, why are you angry that you couldn't go? Oh, cause I was gonna miss out because I was gonna feel left out because I was gonna feel alone because I was gonna like all the thing, whatever that situation is, is like, what is underneath the anger. And if we can give you language to find what's underneath the anger, I think it just requires more emotional vocabulary earlier.

Ashanti Branch ([14:03](#)):

Why do we wait till people are outta college and expecting, trying to go get a job until we are teaching about emotional intelligence, most people are not gonna read a 300 page book about emotional intelligence. How about we make sure it fits in the day of schooling so we can teach it younger. Hey, what are you feeling right now? Oh, I'm feeling this well then how, how do you wanna navigate that? What, what do you wanna say? Something? Do you wanna like write about like, what are the ways we channel it? And I think if we don't give people ways of channeling in, in healthy ways, they will channel it.

Julia Winston ([14:31](#)):

Yeah.

Ashanti Branch ([14:31](#)):

They will channel it and it may, we channel it in all the wrong ways.

Julia Winston ([14:35](#)):

What are some of the, a healthy ways that you give boys to channel their emotions

Ashanti Branch ([14:40](#)):

Accepting that is real honoring the truth that I felt it. And if I felt it doesn't make me less than a man, it doesn't make me less masculine. It doesn't make me less of whatever. It makes me more human because to feel as human. And I think the way we challenge it is like, look okay, you you're upset about something. What, what, what are you upset about? Like, like a lot of young people right now I work with, they go to substances to numb out. Right? There's a feeling came up. I don't wanna feel there's a, a past thought I don't wanna think about, let me numb out. And that numbing is with these substances that are easily accessible, inexpensive, fairly. And it allows me to pretend like I don't even, nothing matters around me. So what happens if you are a number? What happens if that's what your habit is?

Ashanti Branch ([15:26](#)):

A feeling comes up? Oh, I don't wanna feel this. Let me go drink something, smoke something, let me go do something. And I know that that is causing people to often act in ways that they don't really feel authentically them. But I ultimately, I know that if we don't give them a way to say, oh, I'm trying to stuff, this feeling of sadness, I'm trying to stuff, this feeling of emotion. I'm trying to stuff, this feeling and we don't help them name it. They will think that that's normal. And here's what I kid is. I think it's, it's dangerous. I mean, here's me, I'm a stuffer. I eat, right. I'm a, I'm a eater. I've been a big eye, my whole life. So eating is, doesn't look like I'm doing something necessarily wrong to hurt myself. But I know deep down that I have a unhealthy relationship with Oreos unhealthy.

Julia Winston ([16:10](#)):

Yeah. I, I I, I am, I do know what you're saying. I do too. It's I? Yeah.

Ashanti Branch ([16:15](#)):

It's, it's, it's crazy. Like, yeah. I, I, I wish I had, I wish I could be like, you know, I'll take three of those and, and five or five of those. I don't even know what the serving size is, cuz it's not in my, my, my, my serving size is at least a row. If it's not a row, then we haven't done far enough. And sometimes I'm like at a row before I even notice it. And I'm like, uhoh,

Julia Winston ([16:35](#)):

You know, Ashanti, I'm gonna be real with you. I so like, I, I, I'm not a large woman, but I do have a problem with regulating my sugar. I also, I really like for me, the, the limit is like, how, how much is there? Cuz I'll probably eat most of it. And then I'll feel really bad about myself. Right? Mm.

Ashanti Branch ([16:54](#)):

I know that I do that. And I think I, when I did this fasting, I was telling you about, I realized that I was outta control and I was what I was outta control about because I was not dealing with some emotional stuff that I had stuffed. When I tell people that I want to help them find the way to talk about their emotions in a healthy way. I'm not trying to be a hypocrite about it. I talk about it because I know it's hard.

Julia Winston ([17:13](#)):

Yeah.

Ashanti Branch ([17:13](#)):

I know that it's important and it's not always easy to do. And so how do we make sure we find ways for people to navigate the things that are, that are maybe simple to do. It's simple to, if I feel it to talk about it, find somebody to talk about it with, that's a simple thing it's not easy to do. Right. And so I think sometimes confusing the two

Julia Winston ([17:30](#)):

There's, there's like two things coming up for me right now. One of them is just how important modeling is in what you do. Like you put yourself out there when you're working with these boys, you become, you know, you're just real, you don't wear your mask when you're with them. And that probably takes a lot of practice for you. Self-Management getting comfortable being in your own skin, in front of people.

Yeah. So like there, there there's something I just wanna put out there and if there's something alive for you, I'd love to explore. And then another thing that maybe we haven't touched on yet, but I keep thinking about is like how important is a group environment for this to be processed, right? Because if you just do one on one with a boy, like that's, but then it's easy for him probably to stuff it back when he is in front of his peers. Whereas if you're doing this type of work processing and exploring and naming, what's real with other boys, I imagine that's where the transformation can really happen.

Ashanti Branch ([18:22](#)):

Yeah. I think it's really powerful in that way too. I think it's powerful. Not only when one young man sees that know young man is willing to open up cuz they may 1st think that that's something something's off around that. I remember I have one circle that I remember really well where we were doing check-ins and I, a young man was saying something and because I know him deeper than what the circle knows him. Like when he said something, my job in the circle is to like, let them speak their own truth. Sometimes might need to probe a little bit. And probing is just asking more questions and digging deeper. And one young man who's felt me. Probing began to project. And he's like, why are you asking him so many questions? I'm like, slow down. I'm talking to him. Why, well, why are you trying to push him to say something?

Ashanti Branch ([19:09](#)):

He doesn't wanna say, I'm like, he can, he can say he doesn't wanna say it. And I remember, and, and this, this turned into a big discussion because this one young man was trying to project like his own difficulty of getting pushed around deep topics. Like I know him well enough to know that when he checks in, I don't really go deeper a young man. I know that I have a little bit of room. I, I have a little social collateral with him that I had, that I could ask him a deeper question, not to shame him, not to embarrass him, but to help him process a little deeper of what he's saying about where he's stuck at, knowing that the stuckness is kind of in his hands. He's stuck behind, behind these behaviors, behind these things. And if he doesn't make a change in how he acts around these things, he's not gonna get unstuck.

Ashanti Branch ([19:54](#)):

And so in a space of circle, I don't tell his business, I just ask questions and he can say, you know, I don't wanna talk about that. Great. But with this other young man who jumped in to try and protect him, I'm like, Hey, why are you getting so worked up about this? Like this is, I'm not even, I'm not even talking to you. Well, you all, you trying to push him to do. I'm like, well you, even if I am pushing him, why are you so worked up about it? And I think what ends up happening is we don't always know. And so for young men to recognize, oh, and I don't use a, that big words with them. I didn't tell him that he's projecting. I didn't tell him that he was I'm like, tell me what you were doing, making you so upset. I'm not even, I wast even asking you any questions. You know what

Julia Winston ([20:30](#)):

I'm saying? And we can learn so much about ourselves by seeing ourself and seeing other people observing other people in group dynamics. That's

Ashanti Branch ([20:37](#)):

Right. That's right. And because he's a young man who often does that with teachers, he goes in defending other people and he has a great, good heart. It wasn't that he came from a bad place. It's

because he doesn't know how to navigate his own feelings in a healthy way. So when somebody is getting challenged or pushed, he wants to go in as a defender when there's no defender needed, because I wasn't coming outta a place of malice or harm or hurt, I was coming outta a place of helping to push it a little further. But I, but I'm also, I've seen it. So my job is to not only what I see often teachers will do when a kid jumps in to protect somebody else and the teacher gets now defensive, then this kid gets, gets kicked out because he's trying to defend. But actually he's coming from a good, hard place, cuz he's trying to, in his mind trying to help, but maybe he's helping in the wrong time, wrong place.

Ashanti Branch ([21:19](#)):

Right. So it's always like a, it's like a dance we take with, with, with our students and the young men. And it's like, well, let's have this conversation. And I think for some kids they're uncomfortable that any arguing is happening at all because of what they've seen around arguing is it always turns into a fight. And so some kids are like, well, why let's stop arguing about this? And I'm like, well, we're not arguing. We're having a discussion. And I'm, you know, everyone should, but when one young man, the one young man who started to defend the other man, when I didn't listen to him, he wanted to like walk out. Right. So it was like a moment of him trying to, like I said, don't leave. Like, how are you? Why are you getting? So like, he, he took the level of, of frustration to another level because he wasn't maybe getting the response that he was thinking he was gonna get.

Ashanti Branch ([21:56](#)):

He wasn't and all the things that happened in our interactions and how we learn to navigate. So it was beautiful. I mean, it took a while. I mean, it was like if I was uncomfortable with, with discussions that were heated, that would've went horribly wrong. I kicked everybody out, everyone get out. And I know sometimes as a teacher I've had kids like me coming from the best intentions kids like begin to attack. And because I'm trying to do a good job and I'm trying to protect, I'm trying to image, protect. I'm trying to, I'm like everybody just be quiet. I don't wanna hear what nobody gotta say. And I've, I've done that as a teacher and in my early days. And I've learned, that's no, like we need to like give everybody time to talk, but, and we to have some order to the talking, but to like shut it down.

Ashanti Branch ([22:36](#)):

Doesn't do anybody any good to, to come to resolution? Cause we don't learn how to navigate challenging conflict in a healthy way. Then we're always gonna learn that, oh, the way to deal with it is just shut it down. As opposed to have healthy dialogue. That's what I think is wrong with our world. Right? Like people have a hard time having a healthy dialogue. And so when they hear something they don't want to hear, they rather just shut it down. It's kinda like the parents around the us who wanna shut down teaching history in our schools, in, in their minds, they're saying to people out loud, I don't want people to make, trying to make my kid feel bad about himself. But also what they're saying is these topics. I don't want them to hear because they're gonna make a meaning about it. What it means about them, as opposed to understanding that, well, if we're gonna learn history about anything, we have to place ourself in that story of the history.

Ashanti Branch ([23:23](#)):

Oh, that happened way back then that happened to people who lived there. That happened again. If I can't locate myself in history around a topic, then what does it mean? I should never like see myself in history. And I think that that's unhealthy behavior, but we also live in the social media world where all I have to listen to is things I really wanna listen to. Right. My algorithm feeds things that I want to be fed.



The things I start listening to the algorithm says, oh, show them more of that. The things I watch, more of the things they show more of that. And you begin to like now I don't have to listen to any con distancing voice because I only have been hearing from weeks and weeks and weeks, late night, three in the morning, the things I want to hear, the things I wanna see more of. And therefore when I hear different, I've gotten, we, people got really good about shutting it down. Mm. And I think that's a, that's, that's, that's an unhealthy society. We can't handle hearing something we don't agree with and being like, oh

Julia Winston ([24:16](#)):

Yeah. And that's, this brings me back to the modeling thing too. Because if you stand up there and you model that we can tolerate conversations that are challenging that's

Ashanti Branch ([24:27](#)):

Right.

Julia Winston ([24:28](#)):

And people see you modeling that, being with it, just staying with it and doing it with love. The love, like you felt from your uncle. Yeah. Like from the beginning you knew, you know, you have it in you to fight and push back and, and tell them quiet. Everybody be quiet, but you have really worked some other muscle. Yeah. There's some staying power that you have. And when I think about what you're sharing with us from a facilitation perspective, that could be applied in so many different places. How can we, when we're facilitating challenging dialogue, or when we're met with a person who doesn't wanna participate or someone who wants to actually throw a wrench in the rest of the group up, then what do you suggest? Like what, what do you, you you've done so much of this beautiful work. So like, what are some, what are some nuggets of gold that you might have for us about how on earth can we have that staying power?

Ashanti Branch ([25:20](#)):

Oh man, you didn't say that we were having a teacher educator panel webinar and someone on, and they were doing some negative stuff. I'm like feeling, it I'm feeling it I'm feeling it. I'm like

Julia Winston ([25:32](#)):

You're feeling the rage.

Ashanti Branch ([25:33](#)):

Oh, I'm feeling like the, the fire burning. And I'm like, and I'm being accused of like, not replying to emails or not responding to their needs or blah, blah, blah, or making prom, like I'm making accused of a lot of stuff. And people who don't know the first per the person was in the chat originally and I was just gonna ignore it. And then I'm like, well, if I remove them, then it's gonna seem like, because they're, they're, they're just throwing subliminal messages out there. So it's like, I'm trying to hide something, but I'm not trying to hide anything. I'm trying to like facilit his workshop. And if somebody said, can we, can we address you know what this person is saying in the chat? And I'm like, oh, cause I knew it was all nonsense already. I already knew the person and they knew the nonsense. And part of me was like, all right. And then I let the, the darts come. And part of me was like, how long am I willing to listen to this

before I have to stop it? Okay. Let me let the person talk. And I'm like, okay. And I was like, okay. I said, let, let me stop you real quick. I said, you know what?

Ashanti Branch ([26:25](#)):

And I think my breaths, my, my meditation, my, my constant work is before I get ready to speak, sometimes I, I have to learn this when I practice this. Like, okay. And it's more of like, you don't people won't maybe notice me doing it sometimes, but I'm doing it because I'm like, I'm trying to like pro I mean, I only have split seconds to think. I, I don't have like a long time. I'm I'm taking it. I'm trying to like process and think of a healthy response as opposed to react. Cause react, you be like, shut it down. That react right. Or respond is like, thank you, thank you for sharing those things. And what I've, what I've learned is that my work is around. I, I'm not able to process these right now. And just being really honest, like, right. Like, I, I can't give you an answer.

Ashanti Branch ([27:12](#)):

That's gonna make sense or that's gonna feel right now. Good. So I think it's best that would take some time to, to separate between this. Right. And I think it's, it's a journey. Right? Cause a teacher, my students have taught me a lot because I've learned about shutting it down and what that does I've learned about, oh, what is that saying? When I'm not really saying that I'm trying to like get back to the lesson, but the lesson is not, this is the lesson for today. The lesson for today is how you as an adult handle a tough situation when kids are throwing darts and then you have to be like, boom, boom, boom. We like, you know, you know what I'm saying?

Julia Winston ([27:45](#)):

Like starting the darts.

Ashanti Branch ([27:46](#)):

Like, I'm just like, no, we're not, we're not, I'm not taking those in. Yeah. They can throw 'em my way, but I'm not gonna take 'em in. And I'm like, oh, okay. So you all are upset. Okay. Let me name it. And then begin to like play back what I heard. And like, I think those are like critical you know, courageous listening skills. Right. But I think if we think about just people, somebody wants to be heard, somebody's feeling unheard. They have found a platform to now be heard and they're doing it in a really unhealthy way. And I, if I respond with another unhealthy way, it doesn't do anything for anyone. And what I did in that moment, I just said, here's what I need you to do. I need you to reach out to us next week and somebody will get back to you. But ultimately right now, I need to get back to the work dead hand. And if you wanna stay, please do. But if you're not able to stay, like I'm not, I'm not, there's, I'm not gonna make you satisfied in this moment. And if you need to be satisfied with what you're frustrated about, then you probably should not, you know, maybe leave the call or if you can handle it being here and still have some unresolved things. Because I think oftentimes we think we should get our stuff resolved when we want it resolve.

Julia Winston ([28:46](#)):

Right. People don't have a lot of patience. And I'm speaking as a very impatient person. Who's had to do a lot of personal work on becoming more patient. That's a really hard one, especially in this world where we have everything we want at the drop of a hat. Yeah. And with social media, it's constant instant gratification. So wow. To tell people like slow your role. We can't address this right now. It will be

addressed later. Yeah. I imagine that that at least gives people something that they can hold onto. Right?

Ashanti Branch ([29:12](#)):

Yeah. And sometimes they don't want that. Sometimes they, they want to make it resolve right there. And I, and I think those are the moments you have to like say, okay, well here's what we're gonna do. I'm going to respectfully whatever disconnect from this situation. I, I think oftentimes when I think of about the work I do with people alive, like when, when it's virtual, you have the moment you can, you can push a button and eject. Right. That's a little comfort in knowing that if I, if it gets too bad, but when you're in a room with people,

Julia Winston ([29:38](#)):

Yeah.

Ashanti Branch ([29:39](#)):

You can't just be like security, security, come get this teacher outta here. You know what I'm saying? You're like, oh, okay. What feeling is being described and what things are being not described. And because I talk about people about masks, what I try and do is try to understand a little bit more about what I'm not understanding. Okay. I understand that you're upset about this, this and this. So here's what I need to do. Maybe we should talk at the break. And maybe it won't be resolved, but also in a moment when I'm, when I'm trying to do is I'm trying to teach a teaching moment. Right. You know what I'm saying? Like how much of it do I let be in my space when it's off the topic or D kind of maybe feel like it's derailing. But my, my work is mostly about building commit connections and community.

Ashanti Branch ([30:25](#)):

And sometimes you have to help people recognize that what they're trying to do is serving them very well, but it's not serving the whole. And because we're in a space where this is a whole, then I need to like, make sure that I'm giving attention to the whole. And I think those are just like, I, how do we have the words to be able to say those things in the moment where people can hear it. And sometimes people can't hear it because they're so upset. And you're like, well, maybe everyone should just take a, maybe just take a moment and just step away and then come back if you're ready. But I think it's just all those places of like, how can I teach? How can this moment, can this be a, a teaching moment? Oh, you can learn something new here. We can all learn something new here.

Ashanti Branch ([31:03](#)):

And when I go into a space, I'm really clear people. I'm not here to make you think a certain way. You don't have to, whatever I say, it may, it may not be for you. Maybe it's for somebody who you are gonna know, and you're gonna share it with them, but maybe you've already decided on how it works for you, how you're emotional mass work. And I think what's been really beautiful when I'm not trying to like, prove, like when I was in engineering and I would be like, oh, they're gonna ask me an engineering question. I better know the answer. Like in this work, I don't have to know the answer. I don't even claim to know the answer. I claim that I'm always in exploration of how do I be more whole, how do I be more of myself? How do I listen better?

Ashanti Branch ([31:44](#)):

Am I hearing this right? When I come with people by text, they may misread what I wrote. Right? When I come with people by voice, I can hear their words. Hmm. What am I hearing when I see you? And I'm talking to you face to face and I'm on zoom, like all the different ways we communicate with people these days. I think of my key is trying to make sure I understand. Do I understand enough? Am I understanding this? Right? Do, did I hear this part? Right. Let me tell you what I think I heard. Right. And I have to be careful when I said you said

Julia Winston ([32:09](#)):

Right. Cause then it can sound blame me.

Ashanti Branch ([32:11](#)):

Oh yeah. And it sounds like, I think I know, but maybe I heard, it's not maybe, maybe you didn't say this, but lemme tell you what I heard. Can I tell you what I heard? And when I can reflect back what I think I heard, then the person could correct me. And then I'm like, oh, I heard it wrong. Or I made it mean something that it didn't mean.

Julia Winston ([32:28](#)):

I mean, the, the, the work that you do and the taking off the mask workshop that you facilitate, that I've participated in is really like, right on the front of the mask, how you show up in the world, like, what are some adjectives to describe that? And then on the back of the mask. Yeah. You have people write what's going on inside. What's going on behind that mask. Yeah. And what I keep seeing as you're talking is like, in the moment that you're facilitating or teaching, whether it's one on one, as a mentor or in a group, there is a mask that's forming for the group of like, what are the ways that we're showing up right now on the outside? And like, what's actually going on behind the scenes here. That's

Ashanti Branch ([33:04](#)):

Right. I was at a group. I was at a school the other day, the week, first week back from the holiday break. A school had a wellness week. I mean, there were so many kids on the phones, no adults were in there put so many kids put, and I was just like, okay, here's what I've learned. Focus on their important things. Don't get, pull don't, don't get sucked into the weeds. Right? Like the weeds are important. Right. But don't, don't start chasing the birds. If you, you gotta throw seeds out, like you start chasing the birds, you're gonna get off track of planting seeds. Right. And I'm like, look at all these phones. Oh my God. Like all these phones. And I really in that moment had to be like, what have I thought about phones? Like, they're not, some of 'em are not paying attention. Some of 'em are not listening. Some of 'em are disconnected. And I had to begin asking questions to myself, like, what does that make me feel like? It means, oh, they don't care what I have to say, oh, is a feeling about me coming up.

Julia Winston ([33:52](#)):

Right. Oh, I know that feeling. Oh my gosh. Yeah. When you're like, oh man, they're not listening to

Ashanti Branch ([33:57](#)):

Me. They're not listening to me. Like, I'm, I'm here. Point out my heart to you all. And now not nobody is listening, not nobody. But, and so, because I get focused on the ones who are not I'm, I'm missing the ones who are, and I've learned that as a teacher focusing on the one, a Parker Palmer, who's a old Quaker educator. He talks about teacher for cur teach, teach

Julia Winston ([34:20](#)):

The cur the courage to teach

Ashanti Branch ([34:21](#)):

Courage, to teach. Thank you. He talks about the student from hell, right? He talks about as a teacher for many years, letting the one kid who's doing who's off task and doing, like, get sucked all of my energy. Cause I want to help everybody. And I left the 29 behind to chase the one. Now there, there are parables that talk about the, you go find the one. Absolutely not that you don't care about the one, but I don't let the one cause me to lose the others. Right. I may focus on the one, but in better service of the others. But not that I'm like now gonna make my lesson horrible now because I've chased this one. Who's not, oh my goodness. And I've done this teacher and I recognize it now as a facilitator, I'm like, oh, I see what I'm I see what I really want to do. And really one, like, I've just learned how to do it more in a fun way. I had one kid, three young men right here. I walk up and they're all three of 'em on their phones. All three of 'em like literally, like, it was almost like, and I'm like, oh, NA Ruto. I know about Naruto. You, you know, he gave me some inspiration right now he's watching a cart. He's watching anime

Julia Winston ([35:28](#)):

During your, during your workshop.

Ashanti Branch ([35:30](#)):

Oh my God. And I'm like, and you know, kids chuckled. And I'm like, and I just kept going. Like I was like, and

Julia Winston ([35:35](#)):

So you didn't shame him. Stop him. Tell him to stop.

Ashanti Branch ([35:39](#)):

I mean, I tried to use that as the moment. Like I see you being totally disconnected unfocused, but he's in the room. It he's in the room and guess what? All the other friends were on something else. So I, I pointed out one, cause I recognized that the, the movement and the characters. Right. And then I moved on to the, the, the rest of the, the workshop. But it was Mike and moment of like, and I, in my, in my mind that, I mean, I've had some less things set kids off to be you trying to point me out, blah, blah, blah. Right.

Julia Winston ([36:04](#)):

I've had less. So did, did they react?

Ashanti Branch ([36:06](#)):

I didn't pay attention. I was already, I was like, I kept walking down the aisle

Julia Winston ([36:08](#)):

And then you just kept paying attention to the people who were with you and you let them keep doing their thing. Oh, I

Ashanti Branch ([36:13](#)):

Did. I knew that my job was not to stop and be, I stopped near them for a minute and I saw them on the phones and I was like, thinking that they were gonna automatically just respond by putting them away. They didn't. And I'm like, oh, okay. But I, but I knew that my job was not to like, take my attention off of the hundred plus and be like these three. Right,

Julia Winston ([36:32](#)):

Right.

Ashanti Branch ([36:33](#)):

Lots of, lots of thoughts. I have, I, I leak back, but they didn't have the, to be like, I'm put this away. Like he's standing right next to me. He's like, literally in the aisle I'm sitting, he, I'm not even gonna try and put it away. Wow. Like my brain was like, oh, but I'm also still talking. I'm talking to the audience while I'm processing this thought in the back of my mind, like, what should I do? What can I do? What's the smart thing to do. What's the wrong thing to do. What's all the things that I'm battling. And I'm like, and I just turned. And as I was walking past and I looked back and I saw what he was on and I just named it. And then I, I looked at him, I looked, you know, I looked at him and I think he felt a little something because he felt,

Julia Winston ([37:10](#)):

Oh, he knew, he

Ashanti Branch ([37:11](#)):

Knew, he knew.

Julia Winston ([37:12](#)):

And everyone saw that you knew, paid attention to the kids who were with you. And I

Ashanti Branch ([37:17](#)):

Back I was back. It was, it was not like, you know, in the teacher mode is like, put that away, like looking for, make, you know, make.

Julia Winston ([37:25](#)):

But then like you said earlier, we end up shutting down a bunch of people. When we do that, I just wanna share, like when you shared that story, it reminded me of one of my biggest learning moments as a facilitator. It was one of my first big corporate moments. I was doing this whole workshop about passion and purpose and you know, creating life mission statements. But it was for a company. And so a lot of people were like, I don't wanna do this. This is my job telling me I have to find my purpose. And so there was some pushback and some folks were kind of pushing back on it. And I was paying so much attention to the people in the back who had their arms folded and didn't wanna participate. And the person who was training me, he said, listen, and you have two people out of a room of a hundred that's right. Who have their arms folded. And you give a hundred percent of your attention to 2% of the room. You dim the light for everybody else.

Ashanti Branch ([38:14](#)):

Oh, beautiful.

Julia Winston (38:15):

And it changed my whole perspective. And because it's not about me, it not about you, it's not about us and wanting to be respected. And for people that pay attention to us, right. It's about the rest of the room. It's about the light in the room. That's right. And how are we turning on that light?

Ashanti Branch (38:30):

That's right. That's right. That's exactly right.

Julia Winston (38:32):

So Ashanti, as we, as we start to close our conversation and I wish I could talk to you all day. I really do.

Ashanti Branch (38:38):

Oh, me too. Me too.

Julia Winston (38:40):

This is so good. There's like a thousand other questions I wanna ask you, but

Ashanti Branch (38:44):

Well, we have to do a part two or something.

Julia Winston (38:45):

Oh my God. I would love, I just like got so excited. I started dancing in my chair. I would love that.

Ashanti Branch (38:50):

Let's do it. Let's do it. Let's just do it. I know that we let's do it. Let's make sure that we

Julia Winston (38:55):

Okay. This is part one. Okay, great. All right. My last question for you is back to you. Yeah. So if you could bring anyone on board, the Ashanti train to facilitate something for you in your life, whether that's through your work or in your personal life, something to help make your life easier to guide you, what would you want to be facilitated for you?

Ashanti Branch (39:19):

Yeah, that's great. I think one thing that I'm working hard on trying to process now is get outta my own way of like how to get outta my own way. I think not only do I need to like hire a marketing person to help us market this work that we're trying to do in the world, like how to tell the story and you know, and all the ways that, that, that we're not telling it yet. I think part of me has been, and this weekend has been one of those weekends of that realization that I gotta get outta my own way. And so I think what are the ways that I need to like continue focusing on pushing, I'm not trying to talk to 7 billion people. Like there's an audience that I'm trying to talk to around finding their voice and finding themselves. And whether it's parents, teachers, educators, students, finding yourself, finding the stuff in the middle of all the chaos.

Ashanti Branch ([40:11](#)):

And I sometimes hold myself back from trying to support the ones who I'm actually talking to. Cause in my mind, I get worried about the people who are not gonna like what I have to say. And I think I heard David Grogan say something like that. Maybe David groins, how you say his name, the, the ultra runner. He was like, if you gonna do some amazing stuff in the, in your life, there're gonna be people who gonna be hating you. So if you worried about not making people upset and not making people mad, then you gonna be off track of trying to do the things and serve the people who you're supposed to. Everyone's not gonna take listen to your message or want your message or care about your message. That's not who you're doing it for. And I think if, when I get clear on that, and so that's, that's the work that I am constantly the message I'm constantly trying to keep, cuz that's not my normal process. My normal process is worrying and thinking and overthinking and as a being a worrier as opposed to a warrior. And I think that's what I'm trying to every move forward towards like, I'm gonna go forward. I'm gonna give to the world what I think I've been given to give and those who it's four is for, and those who is not let 'em talk, cuz it doesn't matter.

Julia Winston ([41:12](#)):

But that 2% sit in the back of the room with their arms cross. So you can light up the whole freaking world Ashanti because you are, oh, you are such a light. You are such a light.

Ashanti Branch ([41:24](#)):

Thank you so much. I appreciate those words. I appreciate you. Thank you for this conversation. I, I, I, I feel like we have more, we got more to go.

Julia Winston ([41:32](#)):

We got more to go, but this was part one and it, it was like such a joy and a pleasure. I'm dancing in my chair again because I'm so grateful that we had this conversation. Thank you, Ashanti.

Speaker 3 ([41:42](#)):

Thank you so much.

Julia Winston ([41:48](#)):

Dreams do come true. Wow. I really enjoyed that conversation so much. And if you're feeling anything like I am right now, you're just wishing that you could have Ashanti Branch on speed dial. Ashanti offered really enriching perspective and stories about a bunch of tough topics that we navigate quite frequently in the world of facilitation. So I went ahead and put together a little list of my five top takeaways, hoping that this might be helpful for you too, to just synthesize everything that we just heard. So here we go. These are my five top takeaways from this conversation with Ashanti Branch. 1. Don't respond to unhealthy with unhealthy step away if needed or ask others to step away. 2. Pay attention, not only to what feelings are being described, but also try to understand what feelings are not being described. In other words, consider what might be behind the masks in the room.

Julia Winston ([42:42](#)):

3. Every moment has the potential to be a teachable moment. It's okay to use the moment itself to go deeper 4. The answer is that you don't need to answer. The point is to always be in exploration of how you can listen, better, be more whole, be more yourself. 5. Giving your attention to the folks in the room



who are open and engaged, and there for it, versus the folks who are disengaged and even detracting - that's where we can be in highest service. On that note, I kept thinking about this framework. I learned through my coaching certification, which I got from the proactive training Institute, also known as CTI. And this is called the levels of listening this framework. And it breaks down listening into three different levels, listening of course being a key skill in facilitation. So level one, listening is you're kind of listening to your own inner dialogue.

Julia Winston ([43:38](#)):

So an example of that might be, oh, I really need to go to the bathroom right now or, oh my gosh, that guy won't stop talking. How am I gonna make him be quiet? Level one is about our own experience. Level two listening is when we're so focused on one other person. We're so deep in paying attention to what they're saying, that everything else disappears. Imagine that you're at a bar and you're having a conversation with a friend and it's like, the rest of the room is gone. You're just only listening to what they have to say. This is a great skill to have in one-on-one coaching or if you're being a mentor and then level three, listening is about being aware of your own inner dialogue, listening to whoever is speaking and also being conscious of the environment around you of the context that you're in all at the same time.

Julia Winston ([44:23](#)):

And of course that's a very challenging thing to do, but that's facilitation. That's what we're doing. We're actually managing a lot behind the scenes. So an example of level three listening might be that someone is speaking and they're sharing something vulnerable. And you're aware that the session needs to close in five minutes. So you're conscious of your own inner dialogue telling you, Hey, we gotta wrap this up. You're listening deeply. So that's level one, level two. You're listening deeply to what this person is sharing and level three, you're aware the at times running out. So the environment is asking you to shift the energy. Many of the stories that Ashanti shared with us in this interview are shining examples of level three. Listening. Ashanti is clearly a very masterful listener because he's listening all the way around. He's aware of and managing himself. He's deeply to whoever is speaking. And he's also aware of and managing the environment around him. So kudos to Ashanti for being such a wonderful teacher to us when it comes to this levels of listening and how we can be even stronger in our level three.

Julia Winston ([45:29](#)):

Usually I like to leave you with a question the end of each episode, but today I wanna leave you with a challenge. The challenge is to think about an opportunity that you have coming up to be more intentional about your level three, listening. This could be a one on one with a direct report. It could be a family dinner that you've organized, whatever it is. I wanna invite you to really open up your attention, paying attention, not only to your inner dialogue, what it is that you're experiencing or what you wanna say right now, but also listening deeply to the person or people who are around you and being aware of what the environment wants. Right? What wants to happen? What would really help this group of people right now in this moment and how can I shift my energy to make that happen,

Julia Winston ([46:21](#)):

To learn more about Ashanti Branch and his work with Ever Forward, go to [everforwardclub.org](http://everforwardclub.org). You can also go to [facilitatorforum.com](http://facilitatorforum.com) to get the show notes for today's episode. Special. Thanks to Ashanti for joining us today. And I wanna give a big thank you to everyone who helps me or has helped me with this podcast. So big, thanks to Josh Gilbert. Who's now helping me edit, which is such a

This transcript was exported on Mar 16, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

godsend. Thank you to Adam Rosendahl for the original artwork. And thank you to Gasoline Tequila. That's Caleb Spaulding on percussion and Massimo Lusardi on guitar. Most of all, I wanna thank you. Thank you for being here. Thank you for listening. Have a beautiful day and I'll catch you next time.