

Podcast Name: M Leona Godin Interview for There Plant Eyes Book

[00:00:00]

Produced Introduction with music bed:

Narrator: Expression is one of the most powerful tools we have. A voice, a pen, a keyboard. The real change which must give to people throughout the world their human rights must come about in the hearts of people. We must want our fellow human beings to have rights and freedoms which give them dignity. Article 19 is the voice in the room.

[00:00:25]

Kristen:

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Article 19. I'm Kristen Witucki, content creator and accessibility specialist at Tamman, and I'm also the host of our conversation. This interview was a huge honor for me. I spent some time with the brilliant Dr. M Leona Godin, author of "There Plant Eyes," a personal and cultural history of blindness. "There Plant Eyes" was the subject of one of the book talks we host internally at Tamman and post on the show. This book delves into scientific, historical, religious, and cultural phenomena that have led to the ocularcentrism of our world, a term Leona coined to mean a visual perception and way of thinking whose impact people who are blind or low vision still feel today. So grab this book in whatever format you choose. If you use Audible, Dr. Godin reads the book. Article 19 is a call for others to join us in a bigger conversation around the ADA, digital accessibility, and access to information. At Tamman, we're working to build the inclusive web every day, but to do that, we need all of us, and all of you, working together and learning. Thanks so much for listening to Article 19, and let's get the conversation started. I'd like to formally bring in our guest, Dr. Leona Godin. Welcome to the show.

Leona:

Awww Thanks so much, Kristen. It's great to be here.

[00:01:48]

Kristen:

Before we get into our questions, we'll just give a quick physical description of ourselves so you can place us. I am a blind, Caucasian woman. I have light brown hair, pulled back in a ponytail. I'm taking full advantage of my remote work from home status and I'm wearing a very casual outfit at the moment. And Leona, if you could also describe yourself?

Leona:

Absolutely. I am a white woman with long brown hair. Today I'm wearing my groovy seventies rose-colored sunglasses, which I cannot benefit from, but I still appreciate the idea nonetheless, and I am also wearing a pretty casual outfit. I'm actually wearing my disability pride T-shirt today.

[00:02:30]

Kristen:

That's really appropriate. Can you describe the T-shirt?

Leona:

Yeah, so the flag—now, I have to remember the colors. It's been a while since I used the image description, but if I remember correctly, it's sort of a zigzagged band of colors, so kind of a broken band of colors that—I think there's five colors. Light blue, red—all right, I'm gonna read my image description from when I shared this T-shirt, because actually, my partner created a version of a T-shirt. So disability pride flag is a charcoal gray, almost black, crossed diagonally from left to right with a lightning bolt divided into parallel stripes of five colors—light blue, yellow, white, red, and green, with narrow bands of black between. And this was created by Anne Magill, I think is her last name. M-A-G-I-L-L. Magill, perhaps. So there you go, that's the disability pride.

[00:03:35]

Kristen:

I just wanna start with the word that made me feel like this book was totally familiar, even though I hadn't yet read it, and it comes up right in the introduction. "To see or not to see," which is a very personal beginning to a larger cultural critique of our vision-centered culture and sort of the contradictions that that brings up for blindness as metaphor and literal blindness, and that is "ocularcentrism." So I read this word and I did a double take and I had read it again, and I was like, "I

know what that means, I live that every single day.” But for those who are not aware, how would you describe ocularcentrism?

Leona:

Well, I think that’s the great thing about this word is that even if you’ve never heard it before, I feel like it resonates immediately. It’s an oftentimes unconscious bias that privilege sight and, by extension, sighted people above the rest. And I think it’s a really important distinction to say it doesn’t mean that every sighted person is ocularcentric, right? This is an unconscious bias. But it also means that not every blind person is not ocularcentric. Right? We’re all in danger of privileging sight, and I’ll give you an example. Many of us have sighted friends or partners, and sometimes we might find ourselves deferring to their view of the world, right? That somehow, their seeing something—a person, a place, a thing—is more important than our feel of it, or our smell of it. So I think we all can fall into these traps, but of course, what’s most dangerous I think for us, sort of moving around the world as blind and low vision people, is that that ocularcentric tendency says that we’re not just living in a different perceptual universe, but a lesser one. So that there are things like pity that we’re constantly having to mitigate or defer or deflect, and sort of all these states of—oh, how do you say it? Like low expectations, things like that, that I think come out of this larger philosophical, sociological bias of ocularcentrism.

[00:05:45]

Kristen:

For sure. I think just some of my ways [audio cuts out] for instance, knowing the way different things sound, sort of come out as unimportant or irrelevant sometimes. Like I’ll you know mention something and people will be like, “Oh, I didn’t know that.” You know and I think sometimes, on the individual level, it can be very revealing for someone to step back and think about it, something from a sound perspective, for instance, but you know, when you think about the larger society, will probably not take things in quite that way. And I feel like you’re also doing a great work around, you know, using *Aromatica Poetica*.

Leona:

Yeah.

Kristen:

Starting that journal, and just bringing our attention to the olfactory experiences.

Leona:
Yeah.

[00:06:28]

Kristen:
Can you talk a little bit about that journal?

Leona:
Yeah. I'm so glad you mentioned that. *Aromatica Poetica* was exactly meant to do that, right? Be a space where it's not about or for blind people in particular, but that it's welcoming to blind people and deafblind people because it's drawing attention to smell and taste. And I was kind of late to the enjoyment of smell, I gotta admit, that it really has been kind of a gift as I've come to the end of my vision. I have lived on, as I say in the book, sort of every notch of the sight blindness continuum. I started out life with you know normal vision and then had a very, very slow vision loss through several decades. So I've only been a totally blind person for like five to 10 years. It's kind of hard, because once there's so little vision, it's like you're still not totally, totally blind, but it's—you know, you're not using vision at all, basically. So in these last few years, I kind of discovered the beauty of olfaction. And I'll tell you what, for my magazine *Aromatica Poetica*, I did an early interview with a perceptual psychologist named Lawrence Rosenblum, and he wrote a book called "See What I'm Saying," and in that book, he talks about how he's another way that ocularcentrism presents itself. He doesn't use that word, but in his introduction, he basically says, you know, he's a perceptual psychologist—no, this was actually not in his book. This was in our interview, because I was so fascinated by all the stuff that he talks about in terms of smell and taste and how there's all this cross-modal plasticity in the brain, and how we basically hardly ever take in information through just a single sense. We're almost always like super-sensing beings, it's just you know what have we trained, what have we paid attention to and stuff. In our interview, he said, "I didn't know about any of this taste and smell and touch stuff, either." He focuses on the audio realms of perceptual psychology, and he said, you know, most of the times when we're teaching, historically, it was the case that we would—when we wrote our textbooks, we would spend a lot of time on sight and a little bit on sound, and then the rest of the senses, the full professors would just throw it to their teaching assistants to like, slap something together for the textbooks. And so it's been kind of recent that there's some really exciting research going on in like neurosciences and in perceptual psychology and sort of the experimental fields, of sort of how do we perceive and how do our brains work—that really reveal that there's so much going on, but that the research itself, right? You

think that science is unbiased? Heck no. Right? Science is as biased as anything else. I mean, talk to women scientists you know 50 years ago. Same thing with disabled scientists now. You know there's so much discrimination. But also the scientific interests lead research. Right? And if you're not interested in smell, if you don't think it's important as a human being, you're certainly not going to research it as a scientist. Right? So, that's how ocular-centrism kinda plays into what we know in a very deep sense of that.

[00:09:24]

Kristen:

In a way, we don't even really know all of our ways of perceiving, or all of our senses. I mean, there may be—.

Leona:

Yeah.

Kristen:

Other ways of perceiving that we don't even really name or understand.

Leona:

I have a deaf-blind friend who's an amazing poet and essay writer. It's John Lee Clark. And he has a book of poems called "How to Communicate," which has won a big award, and he has a book of essays coming out, but he talks about how, I think, soon it's gonna be recognized as just a fact that our five senses are a very limited way of thinking about things. You know? You think about temperature and humidity and like, all the different kind of ways in which we sense our world, whether it's touching with the hand is a very different thing than sort of feeling in these other ways, and then of course, taste and smell are so connected. You know, it's like, we just had this idea that it's the five senses and it's a kind of a limited way of thinking about the world, and I think, in the future, you're exactly right, that we're going to realize that, I think, there's a lot more to this sensing. Both that there's more senses and that there's more sort of plasticity and cross-communication within those senses, as well.

[00:10:31]

Kristen:

No, it's true, and now that I've had COVID, I have felt the disconnect between taste and smell, too, which, I mean—.

Leona:

Oh my gosh. Did you get yours back?

00:10:40

Kristen:

I did, but it was really scary. I did lose my sense of smell for a couple days, but my taste was still intact, so that was really interesting to me, and I know that COVID presents in many different ways. One kind of nice thing, was that if my kids had some undesirable smell, that I didn't smell it, but then I also didn't know. There was a whole way of knowing that was just gone and I didn't know whether it was coming back.

Leona:

Yeah.

Kristen:

And that was so weird.

Leona:

Yeah. It was scary. I lost mine for, I think—as well—two days, and I was like, "Oh my God, what am I going to do with *Aromatica Poetica*?" But I tell you what, just last week I published kind of a sad essay, I have to say, from a blind friend who, actually, you would meet in "There Plant Eyes," in my book "There Plant Eyes," Alice Ekes [ph], who is a romance writer and author of many books of fiction, but she did in fact get COVID quite late in the game, but she lost her sense of smell and has not gotten it back, and is pretty devastated, I have to say. She had an amazing teacher when she was quite young who helped her train her nose, and this speaks to something else about sort of ocular-centrism. Right? That we don't train our nose, and so we feel kind of woo-woo about the sense of smell, right? Because everybody's sort of like, "Oh, I don't know what that is." Well, you don't know what it is because you haven't ever trained it. Right? We wouldn't know what colors were if somebody hadn't sat down and been like, "This is red, and this is blue." Right? And so I think, again, it speaks to this need to kind of train our other senses in order to appreciate them, as well.

[00:12:05]

Kristen:

It's true. I mean, smell in many cases plays a relatively minor role in academia or like, no role at all. But it helps us like fall in love and socialize.

Leona:

Yeah.

Kristen:

And stay connected to each other. I'd love to read that essay, and if you could put that in the show notes, that would be wonderful. So the title of your book, "There Plant Eyes," comes from John Milton, and I wondered if you could explain a little bit about the title specifically, and then a little more broadly about how Milton felt about his own blindness and blindness in society, in general.

Leona:

Yes. So "There Plant Eyes" is spelled with the T-H-E-R-E. A lot of people want to give it an I, you know, give it the possessive, "Their Plant Eyes," and make it into something about plants—which is understandable, because I am a little obsessed with plants for *Aromatica Poetica*—but this is not that. This is from John Milton's very, very famous epic poem called "Paradise Lost," and it's really a directional thing. So it's kind of this abstract idea. It's in the middle of this moment that's often called the "invocation to light," and he's saying—it's almost like he's pointing or gesturing to say "There plant eyes," like in your heart or in your mind or in your soul, the idea of being that it's about the inner eye, right, that's important, that we are actually seeing with our inner eye, and that it's not about the outside, sort of superficial world. I think he would probably say something like that. So very much from a Christian standpoint, although he complicates things very quickly. But he's coming, I would say, from a Greek and Christian perspective, in so far as, in the Christian perspective—and I talk quite a bit about this in the book—we have the idea of the outer eye distracting you from the soul or from God, so that blinding is almost a vehicle for transcendence. And likewise, from the Greek tradition, right, we have the famous blind poet Homer, who—by the way, I should just say, nobody really knows if Homer actually existed or not, certainly whether or not he was blind. But tradition has it, right, for three millennia that Homer is the quintessential blind bard. Right? The quintessential blind poet, and the idea being compensation. Right, that the outer vision, again, was taken away from him and the gift of poetry was given to him by the gods. So those are the two traditions that John Milton enters into his life as a blind person. So, he had about four decades behind him before he

became a blind person. There were a few years where his vision was worsening, but when he was in his early forties, he finally lost the last of his vision. And here's what's really interesting. I think about having these—even if they're, like, mythological role models. It was enough for him to not be depressed by his vision loss, but instead turn away from like this very volatile political battles that he was involved in, and say "I'm going to write an epic poem." Right? "In the style of Homer but with a kind of a Judaeo-Christian idea," and that's really where "Paradise Lost" came from. So in other words, he had the idea of Homer, the idea of Tiresias. Right? The blind prophet, behind him, and that gave him—well, the hubris, frankly, to lay down every night—and of course, this was pre-braille, right, he had no way of writing things down and—let me just back up for a moment here and say that, even if John Milton is sort of the blind poet extraordinaire, he had many decades of extraordinary reading behind him, which would not have been possible if he had been born a blind person, right? There would have been no education system. This was the before the first schools for the blind. This is in the seventeenth century, so it would be pre-Paris School for the Blind, which was the first one in the world. So he would have had no way to have that kind of education, but with that education behind him, when he became blind, he was able to have, again, that the ego to lay down at night—and this is the way he would compose—he would compose kind of in the silence of night, come up with like 20 to 40 lines of really intricate iambic pentameter verse. And this is one of the funniest quotes that people kind of gravitate to in the story of John Milton, he would say that he would wake up in the morning and he would wait to be "milked."

Kristen:
Right.

Leona:
In other words, he would wait for his Amanuensis to come around and take down those 20 to 40 lines of verse. So he is one of these people that had the benefits, I think, of both things, right? The sighted education and then the kind of—the ideology, the mythology, of the special, the poet-prophet blind person behind him.

[00:16:48]

Kristen:
Yeah, and then I think—I haven't read the sonnet "To His Blindness" in a long time. But I kind of think of it as his convincing himself to be patient with being mortal, and that like the outer and the inner vision would some day coalesce when he was done with being on earth and [laughter], you know, done with his storytelling.

Leona:

Yeah, that's a lovely way of putting it. It's funny, because I could have written so much about John Milton—and I think probably wrote more than a lot of people wanted. It's funny because I don't actually mention that poem, but I think you're right. I think that's a really beautiful way of saying it, right, of realizing that sort of blindness is part of the human condition, and that idea of being patient to kind of figure it all out is a lovely way of putting it.

Kristen:

Yeah. Although now, patience is this thing we chafe against, but.

Leona:

Yeah. It feels—it is too Christian inflected and everybody needs to go, go, go in these days, but yes, I think it's maybe undervalued.

Kristen:

Yeah.

Harper:

Definitely. Leona, can we add just a quick addendum on what iambic pentameter is?

Leona:

So iambic pentameter is a line of verse that goes BA-duh, BA-duh, BA-duh, BA-duh, BA-duh. Right? So the stress is on the second syllable and it has that kind of galloping sound that we so often find in English verse, and so that—it basically means that you have five feet of this "BA-duh" sound. Yeah, so I think that I said that correctly. [laughter]

[00:18:20]

Kristen:

No, I think that was beautiful. Thank you for clarifying that. So—it's so funny to think about Milton and then you continue in the book by, I don't know, our history of kind of turning that Christian ideal of the inner eye versus the outer eye around when science comes along with spectacles and microscopes and telescopes and it

kind of cemented the outer eye as that supreme sense, for sure. Can you talk a little bit about that change?

Leona:

Yes, absolutely. So in basically the same century that Milton was writing, we have kind of the beginnings of what we think of as science. Right? And a huge part of this science was about observing, and a huge part of that observing, if not like 100% of that observing, was through the eyes. So in the seventeenth century, we have the invention of the microscope and the telescope, a lot of people theorizing about what this meant, and I think it's a really interesting moment, because it revealed a couple of different things, and one is—well, the limitations of the physical eye, and some philosophers did think about that, in fact, the telescope and the microscope was earth-shattering to a lot of people because suddenly what you saw, right, what you saw in the night sky was not the end of it, and that the ancients only had a very limited view of what the night sky looked like, for example. So it changed the perspective, like the world perspective, of what surface was. In other words, you know, one really good example that freaked people out—can I say that? Very scientifically. Freaked people out was the moon. You know, all of these celestial bodies were all associated with gods, of course, and suddenly, Galileo turns his telescope to the moon and sees that it's just a big rock, right, with mountains and crags and valleys, and people were stunned and horrified to think of the imperfection of the moon. And so I think what is really interesting to me about that period of time is just that changing of surface, that realization that you know our senses are all limited and that technology extends those senses, and I guess what I wanted to kind of re-insert into that story is that humility, right, as opposed to, I don't know, the egotism of science on the one hand, but I also think that, if you're a really good scientist, you realize the humility of how limited your knowledge is. Right? It's always going to be growing and extending as the human race kind of moves into the future. And that's not to be sort of too blithe about ideas of progress and stuff, but it is true, that as our instruments and as our knowledge grows, that we will simply know more than previous generations. Now, what we will do with that knowledge is a whole other can of worms, shall we say. [laughter]

[00:21:16]

Kristen:

When you think about the ideals of Enlightenment, which started around that time, and this idea of forward progress, and even the very beginnings of education for blind people. How did those ideals of Enlightenment help them, and what did they overlook when they were helping them?

Leona:

That is such a good question. It's one of those things that I've been a little bit obsessed with ever since I was a graduate student and I first realized this connection between, for example, the French Enlightenment, which a lot of us will learn something about in school, right, where we have this explosion of philosophers and it's certainly part of that scientific revolution, not to mention it culminates in the overthrow of the crown and the beginnings of Western democracy as we know it, modern democracy. So all of these things happened in the eighteenth century, and one of the many things that also happened is that people started to think about the education of the blind. And this really came from Dennis Diderot, or Denis Diderot, and he talks about educating the blind. And it's a really interesting moment because he is kind of going against the prevailing interest in blind people at the time, which I talk quite a bit about in the book, about kind of giving blind people sight in order for them to say something about the sighted world. In other words, there was this desire and, in fact, in the beginning of the eighteenth century, it was some of the first cataract surgeries happening, so you started having these stories of people who were blind for X number of years suddenly being able to see, and what was wild about it is that it was super confusing, you know, because what we tend to forget is that it's not our eyes seeing exclusively or even in the majority, but it's our brains that process that information. And so Diderot said something really beautiful, which was like, "Well, instead of trying to give sight to blind people all the time"—and he said this right in the middle of the eighteenth century—"Instead of trying to give sight to blind people, why don't we ask an intelligent blind person how they understand the world?" Right? In other words, getting information from the blind perspective in order to kind of, you know, in my modern ideal about this, to diversify our understanding of the world instead of trying to get them to, you know, be sort of stunned by this new sense that their brains had not been trained to understand. And it is one of those ironies that newly —if a blind person gets sight after having never seen, it's a really confusing world and it sometimes is debilitating, as—you know, Oliver Sacks is one of those people that kind of brought me to this attention. So Diderot's call for the education of the blind right in the middle of the eighteenth century kind of bore fruit in a very literal way, where there's a young man, Valentin Haüy. And his name is spelled H-A-U-Y. Sorry, I had to think about that for a second, with an umlaut on the U. And he kinda was part of that Enlightenment sort of ideology, and he saw a bunch of blind people performing in like, a town square, and it was sort of this embarrassing performance. 10 blind people kind of dressed up as dunces and playing broken instruments and stuff. And I think, armed with ideas from Diderot, he said to himself, "I am going to educate the blind." And he actually did, open up the very first school for the blind in the world. Now, that's not to say that there were not educated blind people, but they were kind of few and far between, and they didn't tend to be, they absolutely were people that were from the aristocracy, right, and had all the means and could have a private tutor and things like that

behind them. But this was the first school for the blind that would have been for middle class and lower class blind children, and of course, that is the very school for the blind where Braille will become a student and invent the writing system that we all know and love.

[00:24:58]

Kristen:

I think of the center of your book—and it is, in fact, the literal center of your book—is Chapter Nine, you know when you talk much more about braille itself and there's kind of a back and forth between the larger cultural commentary on braille and then your personal experience of braille, and how technology helped you to become more comfortable with the idea of using braille and learning braille as an older person, since you didn't really have the benefit of learning it as a child, and embracing it in that way. And so I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about that and, you know, what you think is going to happen with the relationship with braille and technology?

Leona:

Well, the easy answer is I think that braille and technology is maybe one of the most exciting things that happened to the blind community. I was one of those people that I tried to learn braille, maybe around the age of 20 or so—first of all, it was hard, but the larger issue was that I felt like I wasn't able to get the books that I wanted, and it felt like the books were quite limited. Probably a lot of your listeners will know that braille books are very expensive to produce, and so there was a very limited number of books for a long, long time, and so one of the biggest things that's been an impetus for me to finally work hard, hard, hard at training my brain to read in this new way is the fact that basically every book that is a digital book, I can read it in braille with my braille display. Right? And as a writer, somebody that reads constantly, wants to read you know, both the newest books and the classics, I am so thrilled that I can just download a book that I read about you know in the New York Times Book Review or whatever, and throw it on my phone and be able to read it with my braille display. So that is so exciting. I will say that I am still slow. I still do most of my reading by ear. And that's only because I can go so much faster, so that I might spend an hour reading braille, but I just don't make it as far. And so I go back and forth. That's the other beautiful thing about, you know, say, a program like Voice Dream, right, where you can have—you know I can listen to it for as long as I need to or while I'm eating or washing dishes and then I can go and, you know, sit down with my braille display and continue. So that's kind of been my MO for, I guess, the last few years, since I got my first braille display, is kinda going back and forth so that I'm not taking a year to read a book,

but I'm also constantly kind of working on my braille skills. And the other thing is that, my expert opinion, braille is really cool, and being back in New York again, I'm kinda volunteering. On Saturday mornings, there's a little braille group at the Andrew Heiskell Library for the Blind here in New York.

Kristen:
Yeah.

Leona:
Which I would say is kind of one of the cultural centers of blindness in this city. It's pretty amazing. Lots of stuff going on and, ooh, whenever you visit, we'll have to get some lunch or something [laughter]. But, you know, I mean, Chancey Fleet is just amazing there. She's got you know 3-D computers, 3-D printers, and just so much amazing stuff, but there's a whole braille group.

[00:27:58]

Kristen:
And like—I know my—a friend, Sooganda Gupta is in like a textiles class.

Leona:
Weaving, yes. Oh, see, it is a small blind world after all. Sooganda's awesome, yes, yes for sure. And what's really fascinating is that, because Andrew Heiskell is a public library, is that anybody can come in, right? So it's open to the public. Of course, it caters to blind patrons, but anybody can come in, so we've got—right now, I've been working with a couple of design students from Pratt, which is an art school in Brooklyn, and they are sighted design students who are learning braille and they're so excited about it. I really feel like this is one of those places where it's not about—so often, inclusion is thought of like a one-way street. Right? It's like, "Let us in, let us in, to mainstream."

Kristen:
Yeah.

Leona:
But the only way that inclusion can really mean something, be meaningful, in my opinion, is if it's a two-way street, if it's not just blind people letting into

mainstream culture, but also mainstream culture wanting to come into our world and be really interested in that Diderot kind of way, you know? And I think that this is one of those perfect examples of like, how enthused these young design students are about learning braille, and it's exciting and fun, and even if I'm a little bit slow, I get to feel like a little bit of a braille expert for a couple hours every Saturday, and get excited about that aspect of blind culture.

[00:29:19]

Kristen:

So as we look ahead, past the back cover of this book and into our century and all of the changes which are coming at us so rapidly, how can we build a future that's less ableist, more inclusive, and also intersects with other forms of identity, like race and gender or orientation, and other aspects of humanity that have traditionally been marginalized?

Leona:

Ooooooh! That is a big question.

[00:29:56]

Kristen:

Yes. It is. It's like, "How can you solve the whole world here?"

Leona:

I'm gonna solve the whole world right now, with a single word, and that is diversity. And my particular interest is in sensory diversity, and that's why I put a lot of pressure on not just saying blind people need to be let into the sighted world, but also let's get excited about the blind experience, about the deafblind experience, about these other senses that have for so long been marginalized. This idea of identity, I think, has tended to be very binary. You know? People are either seen as disabled or nondisabled, they're seen as Black or white, or they've been seen as male or female, and I think that this age that we live in is really exciting for exploding those binary structures that have tended to uphold power structures. And I think about the kids that I have taught at NYU and that many of them are not interested in things like male and female. Right? Certainly not in disabled or nondisabled, right, that we sort of recognize that many of us exhibit the traits of the whole spectrum. Certainly if you live a certain number of years, your identity is

going to shift vastly. Right? To become an old person is to have your identity changed, and not to mention, then you will tend to participate in being a disabled person. And so it's in our best interest to fight ableism because if you are lucky enough to live to be an older person, you will benefit from that fight. Right? To not feel bad about yourself because now you can't run or climb stairs the way you used to, or see the way you used to. I mean, I have so many people that have come to me through the years and have said, "My father, my grandfather, my grandmother, my aunt, is blind, can't read anymore, they're so depressed, they feel so alienated from their former life." And I just want to pull my hair out and say, "It doesn't have to be that way, it doesn't have to be that way." And I think that so much of it has to do with the stigmas that trail them into sight loss later in life that they can't even imagine trying to do things differently. And so again, I think that our fight against ableism is gonna benefit a good portion of us at some point in our lives.

[00:32:18]

Kristen:

It's true, and sitting here thinking that fighting against binary structures and our binary way of understanding people, especially people who aren't like us, in some form, can really help to shift the balance of power, and just—hopefully, at some point, destroy another binary, of like, the powerful and the powerless. I don't know. It's just an ideal.

Leona:

Absolutely. Yeah, no, I think it's true. It's something that I kind of always come back to. You know? And so much of my book is about saying that this idea of sightedness and blindness are not strict binaries and that most of us who are "blind," that carry canes, or that have guide dogs, have some sight. And one thing that I have noticed amongst my blind friends is how frustrated we get when people—sighted people, or many sighted people—say to us things like, "You're not actually blind," right? Oh, they catch us out, like we have been tricking them or something. Because we have some sight, and I think that really speaks to this idea of the binary structure. Now, if you notice, in that very thought, I use the term "sighted." And I think that sometimes, you know, people have said, "Oh well you want to explode ideas of the binary and yet you still use terms like sighted and blind." But I think that it's important to call out sighted people just like it's important to call out white people, right? Because it's understood to be the default, and so that then you're always, as the minority, you have to say like, "Oh I'm a Black person" or "I am a blind person," right, that we're the only ones with identity, as if sightedness and whiteness are not also identities. And I think that it's useful, while we're trying to tear down these binaries, to point out that they are culturally constructed situations and not part of reality, you know? And I think it sometimes

catches people up when I say things like “sighted people.” They’re like, “Oh, sighted people,” right? Like, this is a category. This is not you know just the norm or the way things are supposed to be. No, it’s an identity.

[00:34:18]

Kristen:

No, it’s true. I think it’s why we’re more conscious in our audio descriptions and our photo descriptions of describing white people, because before, it was only “anyone else.” So.

Leona:

Exactly.

[00:34:31]

Kristen:

Before we go, we like to just ask all of our esteemed guests a couple of fun questions. So the first one is, if you had a sign in Times Square—and let’s assume the sign was accessible, that we could also hear it, see it, and maybe experience it in other ways—you had 24 hours for your slogan to be displayed for everyone, what would that slogan be?

Leona:

“Tear down the evil empire of ocularcentrism.” Or, if that’s too long, just “Down with ocularcentrism.” And it would have to like, emit some really beautiful smells. And musical and tactile and all the goodies.

[00:35:07]

Kristen:

Yes, it would. Yeah, it would have to be musical, too [laugh]. And what is something that you have seen or heard lately, like a podcast, a movie, a book, anything, just exciting that you’ve experienced lately that you’d like to recommend to our audience?

Leona:

Oh Boy, there's so much good stuff. One thing, blind author Andrew Leland has got a book coming out called "The Country of the Blind," so keep your fingers and ears out for that one. Not disability related, but I think it's been kind of a big part of my writing life, and of course, we all—here's the identity thing, right, I identify as a writer just as much as I identify as a blind person—and there's this wonderful thing called 1,000 Words of Summer. And it's part of this writing community created by Jami Attenberg, a really wonderful, prolific writer, who's created this community, and has a newsletter, right—anybody who is a writer and wants some inspiration, I highly recommend it—but she does this thing for two weeks out of the summer where writers are challenged to write 1,000 words a day, and then she also kind of introduces you in each newsletter, each day, we get a little day one, day two, day three newsletter and we meet all these other authors and stuff, so I've got a whole kind of list of authors, of guest people, that have contributed to her newsletter and—yeah, I highly recommend it for any authors out there. And we're on day 12 right now, but you can absolutely catch up or do the next one or whatever and it's kind of this exciting thing. And her reasoning was that, basically, she has written all her books—and I think she's published pretty much like one every couple of years over the last, I don't know, eight years or so? Is to write 1,000 words a day for about six months, and then spend another six months editing, and revising, and she's got a book. And so it's amazing, that incremental chipping away at doing something, I think is just a really useful tool, because a lot of times, we feel so daunted by new projects or big projects or learning new ways of doing things. I think about this when I think about my work on mobility and things like that. Right? A little bit of practice every day goes an awfully long way.

[00:37:18]

Kristen:

No, it's true. I'm going to look that up for sure, because I could use some help with getting unstuck, so I appreciate that, personally, for myself. And I hope the audience will appreciate that. Well, thank you, everyone, again, for listening, and again, we were speaking with Dr. M Leona Godin, professor, educator, author, and performer. She performs in a lot of places, too, and you can catch her pretty much anywhere. And we're so happy that you could spend some time with us.

Leona:

Thank you so much. This has been a real pleasure. Thank you, Kristen, and thanks everyone over there.

[00:37: 52]

Kristen:

Our guest is Dr. M Leona Godin, author of "There Plant Eyes: A Personal and Cultural History of Blindness." Markus Goldman and Harper Yatvin produced this episode, and I am our host, Kristen Witucki. If you liked what you heard today and want to explore more about digital accessibility, technology, our company culture, or anything else, just schedule a time to meet with us. You can find the whole Tamman team at Tammaninc.com. That's T-A-M-M-A-N-I-N-C.com. Don't forget to sign up for our newsletter while you're there, so you never miss an event or an insight for us, and be sure to rate our podcast five stars on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever you catch us. It really helps us grow and reach new audiences. Make sure to follow us, hit that bell icon, so you never miss an episode. If social media is more your style, you can also follow us at Tamman Inc on LinkedIn, X, Instagram, or Facebook, and share our podcast on your favorite platform. Until next time, thank you so much for listening and being a part of Article 19. Take care.