

Gillian Kirk Pt. 1 | Discover Stories Episode 91

Tanya Griffiths 0:31

Hello and thank you for tuning in to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio. My name is Tanya, your host and a student intern with VAMS while completing my social justice practicum today, I have the gift of talking with an amazing woman who I gratefully also get to call my classmate and friend, Gillian Kirk. Gillian is a registered massage therapist who has been practicing and studying yoga and meditation for more than two decades, she has a comprehensive education in anatomy, physiology, neuroscience, pathology and management of illnesses and injuries. She also has advanced training in Reiki, Ayurvedic healing, yoga nidra and breath work, all of which inform her holistic approach to healing. She graduated from West Coast College of Massage Therapy in 1996 and she has a bachelor's degree in English with a minor in kinesiology from Simon Fraser University. She is currently in grad school, working on her Master's in Counseling Psychology at Adler University. Welcome Gillian.

Gillian Kirk 1:40

Thanks, Tanya, thanks for having me.

Tanya Griffiths 1:43

Yeah. How are you?

Gillian Kirk 1:45

I'm good. I'm good. I'm enjoying the summer. And I've never actually been on a podcast before, so I've listened to a lot of them. This is kind of exciting for me.

Tanya Griffiths 1:53

Oh yes, no, I'm so excited because we've had lots of different conversations about healing and just like breath work, and also just how, how the body manifests pain. And, yeah, I'm super stoked for this conversation today.

Gillian Kirk 2:14

Yeah, me too. That's great.

Tanya Griffiths 2:16

I guess we can begin with the question, what initially drew you into the field of massage therapy?

Gillian Kirk 2:27

So quite a while ago, obviously, I finished my schooling in 1996 so I started it in 1994 and I had been an athlete before that. I was a basketball player, as you know, because we have classes together. I'm quite tall. I'm over six feet tall. So I had been playing basketball on a scholarship at SFU, and I got in a car accident and, just a rear-ender, but I hurt my back quite badly, and I went to all kinds of different doctors, and nothing really seemed to help. I went to a chiropractor. He really helped. He referred me to a massage therapist. And it was the first time I ever really thought about that as a career. I wanted to go into medicine. I always wanted to be a doctor, but I got scared of stats and organic chemistry back in the day, I didn't have a lot of faith in myself, so I got my minor in kinesiology, but I yeah, that massage therapy just felt like it was, it was a good fit for me. I'd always been good at using my hands. I was always good at giving massages. I loved the anatomy and physiology of of my schooling and, yeah, it was just a good fit for me.

Tanya Griffiths 3:39

Oh, that's awesome. Yeah, it's, it's really cool that sometimes you get these like doorways into our passions because of, like, the situations that we're in, and we're like, oh, actually, this is, like, being in their position, with a chiropractor, like, oh, being in their position seems like something fulfilling and meaningful. Yeah.

Gillian Kirk 3:58

Absolutely. And, I love people. And I think anytime you're in any kind of a helping profession, whether you're, you know, a doctor or an accountant or anything, it's about people. And especially with massage therapy, you know you are, you do get to know, I get to know my clients really, really well. I get to have really strong relationships with some of them, where I see and I'm, you know, listening as they talk about all the different stages of their lives, getting married, having kids, kids going off to college, retiring, all of that, you know, deaths in the family and divorces. It's just, I feel like I really have a strong relationship and I really care about my clients. So, yeah.

Tanya Griffiths 4:40

Yeah, absolutely. And that's definitely something that I've gotten to see in you too, and with all the stories, with all the stories that you've shared, which is something that we'll definitely go into as this conversation progresses, but as I was sharing in your bio, like you have all the extensive trainings and all these different like modalities. And you know, there's definitely a lot of like, the intersection of where they meet, and that is definitely in how it informs your approach to healing in a very holistic manner. So I'm just wondering, like, how do you integrate these principles of yoga, meditation and healing into your massage therapy sessions?

Gillian Kirk 5:26

You know, it's interesting, because I knew you were going to ask me this question, like you'd sent me some of the questions ahead of time. And I was thinking about it, and I was thinking, I don't know if I have a specific answer for that. I think how I approach it is that I do trainings for things that speak to me. I have, like, never stopped going to school. I'm 52 years old. I'm doing my master's degree now. But, you know, I have always done trainings. I've got postgraduate certificates, and I've done at least three yoga teacher trainings and and it's just something that I'm passionate about is always learning. I got into Reiki when I was making some big changes in my life, and I really, I didn't really believe in in Reiki. I didn't really believe in energy healing. I always used to say Reiki is fakie, but one of my friends had had seen this woman who is really, really a powerful hero healer, and I went to see her, and it kind of changed things for me. There was things that she was able to do for me that were really powerful. And so I don't use Reiki so much in my practice right now. I use a lot of, you know, psycho education in terms of stress management, and, you know, yoga exercises for people who need strengthening and balance and a lot of breath work, especially when somebody comes in and they're feeling a lot and they're like, either super, super stressed, or they're going through a lot. And I think how I integrate everything is I learn for myself. I learn because I'm interested in knowing for myself. And then every client has different needs. Every client in every single session will have different needs, and we have different goals in different sessions that we want to meet, and I'm able to use all of the little pieces that I've learned throughout the years to help them. And I think I also, you know, I so many of these things that I've learned have helped me in my own healing. That's why I did them, yeah, and so me being able to kind of be the guinea pig and say, This is how it's worked for me. That's that's kind of my, that's my approach to it.

Tanya Griffiths 7:50

Yeah, yeah. And you, and you just alluded to to this next curiosity that I have about, how do you integrate these teachings into your philosophy on life?

Gillian Kirk 8:04

Yeah, that's a big question too. Yeah, my philosophy on life is interesting. How do I integrate the teachings, teachings into them? I think it's just knowing that nothing is really separate, that everything is connected. That when you're talking about your own energy systems and your own way of being in the world, your mind, your body, your spirit, your personality, all of those things are connected to each other. And in the Western world, we tend to separate them. You go to your doctor for the physical things, you go to a psychologist or a counselor for the mental and emotional things, but you can't tear them apart. And you know, we've known for decades that stress is the biggest factor in so many diseases and illnesses, and stress is a mental thing, but it manifests physically. So yeah, all of those things. And I also believe that just because you don't have necessarily proof or evidence of something doesn't mean it doesn't exist. I'm still quite evidence based when it comes to science and learning about the body, but there is something about people's energies that we don't know about, and I'm open to just learning about and trying things and seeing if they work. Yeah, so how do I incorporate them? How do I incorporate them into my philosophy in life, I think, is just to being really open and receptive to learning new things all the time.

Tanya Griffiths 9:55

Yeah, yeah, no. I think you beautifully put it. And I really appreciate that, like, that image of, you know, where sometimes we see people as parts, or just like, oh, this is the thing that hurts. So this is what we're going to treat, instead of looking at all the like, the entire system, like, you know, that we need to take a step back and look at what else is happening for this person? And, yeah, I think we've definitely had these conversations on how stress manifests in the body, especially after, you know, big periods where there is just like a heightened time of stress, and our nervous system is just constantly dysregulated, and where that can possibly lead us to and and you also have been diagnosed with with MS, so I'm also wondering like, How have how has that experience of dealing with this chronic illness changed your outlook on life and your professional practice?

Gillian Kirk 11:07

Yeah, it's given me a lot, you know, I'm actually, I'm very, very lucky and that I'm still very healthy. My MS diagnosis was in 2002 after a very, you know, actually, during an extremely difficult period in my life of high levels of stress and and I wasn't dealing with the stress very, very well, because I didn't know how, but I have been extremely lucky. So over the 20 plus years, you know, I'm still very strong, I'm still very healthy, but it did change how I think

about my life. It really did. It was kind of a bit of a smack in the face where I thought to myself for a very long time, like I don't know if I'm going to be alive in 10 years, I don't know if I'm going to be in a wheelchair in five years. I don't know if I'm going to be able to any of those things. But I think I just made the decision for myself that, you know, I have a diagnosis of MS. MS is not who I am, but it was my nervous system's way of trying to protect me. So this was around the time when I was in my late 20s, early 30s, I'd finished massage therapy school, so I'd had had a lot of student loans, a lot of debt, and I was finding that massage therapy was physically harder than than I was expecting, and so I wanted to work, you know, more than I was physically able. So I was I ended up being in pain quite a bit. I had really bad eczema all over my hands, which I didn't really have when I was in school, but as soon as I started working full time, so that made it hard to work, and then my parents were going through a really nasty divorce, so those were the main things that were difficult, and what I didn't know at the time was that I was also struggling with undiagnosed and unmedicated anxiety and depression and trauma responses and all these things that I've learned about since. So the way that I see it is that my nervous system saw that I was working that I was on like, high alert all the time that that there was something wrong, and my immune system because MS, what happens in MS is the immune system attached attacks the myelin sheaths of the of the neurons, so the immune system attacks the nervous system in the brain and spinal cord. And so my thinking about it was that the immune system, who is our defense mechanism, said something's wrong. I have to protect Gillian. I have to protect the organism that something wrong is coming from the nervous system, so that's where the attack takes place. Yeah, and I read Gabor Maté's, "When The Body Says No," and that really, changed my way of being. It really changed the way that I thought about the diagnosis. I went from being feeling helpless to feeling like I had some control over managing my stress and and there's a lot of things that I was lucky about. So yeah, I don't know if I answered your question. I can't even remember. Remember what your question is.

Tanya Griffiths 14:27

No, no, no. It was no, it's beautiful. Yeah. I think, that sense of remembering and reclaiming one's narrative is something that I hear so prominent in what you were sharing of also trying to understand our body in ways, in ways that it protects us, because it needs to, you know, keep us alive and also conserve our being and our ability to show up in the world. And it can be very hard, like just thinking about the whole spectrum of stories and disabilities that are out there, it's, it's such a difficult thing to to be able to get to that place.

Gillian Kirk 15:15

If you think about it too, like this is some sometimes what I what I tell my clients, is like your body is trying to keep you alive and it doesn't react well to stress, so you have the fight or flight response, and that's going all the time. Something is going to have to like, you can't run your car with the RPMs at 900 all the time. Like you can't be revving your car at that level all the time, or something's going to break down, yeah, and for me, all of that coming together at that time, I was diagnosed in 2002 and in 2003 I ended up having back surgery. So I had had to have a disk repair in my back, and there was probably about four months of extreme pain. After that, I quit doing massage therapy, and I swore I would never, ever ever never practice again. And when I figured out with myself is that when I swear that much that I'm never, ever ever ever going to do anything again, I usually, I usually do, yeah, and I and in 2004 I moved to Taipei, Taiwan, and that was extremely healing to just be away from all of the things that made me who I was at home. I could take it just was like this incredible experience that I never, ever thought that I had and I never would have gone if I hadn't been diagnosed with MS, because I had in the back of my mind, I don't know what my life is going to look like, so I'm going to live it now. Yeah, and I really think that that's just such an important way to approach life is just you don't ever know, even if you don't have, you know, a chronic illness or a diagnosis or near death experience, or any of those things that tend to shake people up. You don't know what's going to happen in the future. And I feel really lucky that I've been able to do so many of the things that I've been able to do. My life hasn't been traditional. I didn't get married, I didn't have kids, I didn't do all that, but I did all these other things. And so it's, it's very fulfilling to be able to move to Taiwan and teach English for almost three years and then go and then I went to India for six months after that to study yoga. And lots of really exciting adventures I've had.

Tanya Griffiths 17:38

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, wow. Like, yeah, being able to still say that I've had a very, like, rich and fulfilling and meaningful life, even in all the things that that weren't done. Like, I feel like we're always missing out on stuff anyway, you know, like, it's we're never doing all of it at once. And that also goes to talk about how energy is also very finite resource too. And so how we how we use it and how we apply it into our everyday is also, can also be seen as like a reflection of what brings us joy or meaning or allows us to show up for our responsibilities and our roles in our communities.

Gillian Kirk 18:29

Yeah, yeah, it's very you're right about energy being a finite experience. I remember when I was first diagnosed with MS, I still really reeling from the diagnosis and trying to figure out what it all meant for me. And I met a woman at a Christmas party very shortly afterwards,

after the diagnosis, and was talking to her, I was like, I don't know, "I was just diagnosed with multiple sclerosis." And she says, "Oh, okay." She says, "I was diagnosed with MS about eight years ago." She goes, "I'm fine, I just have to take naps. More naps." I'm like, "What?" She says, "Yeah, I just have to make sure I get lots of sleep. And if I don't get lots of sleep, I have to take naps and just make sure I take care of myself." And she was so nonchalant about it, and she was so like, it's not a big deal, that I thought to myself, "Oh my God, it doesn't have to be a big deal." And I will always put the caveat in that I have been extremely lucky that the course of the disease that I have has been extremely mild. And I don't want anybody who has a chronic illness or an autoimmune disease to think that all you have to do is take naps. And I don't want anybody to think that I'm blaming the victim if somebody else has, like a worse course of disease than me. I know I've been lucky, but I also think that part of the luck has been because I have really prioritized taking care of myself, mentally and physically. Mm. Um, and doing the things that I need to do to keep my stress levels manageable, right? And get just, you know, sleep is just so incredibly important.

Tanya Griffiths 20:13

Yeah, yeah, no, definitely. Sleep is so important for for many reasons, and and also in terms of within Indigenous communities, I was attending an event, and an elder was talking, and she was essentially talking about how Spirit works the most while we're asleep. And I really felt that too, because not, not is it, sorry, it's not just like a form of of rest, or a form of, like our art, you know, like, like physical rest, but it's also a form of processing too. Like we process a lot in our dreams, you know, like lots of healing takes place to when we asleep. So it really is a source of life, really, yeah.

Gillian Kirk 21:08

Exactly, yeah. It's so it's so important. Yeah, source of life is exactly what it is. I love that. What did she say? Spirit?

Tanya Griffiths 21:16

Oh, she says Spirit works the most while we're asleep.

Gillian Kirk 21:20

Yeah. I love that. Yeah, yeah.

Tanya Griffiths 21:23

I know there's just lots of things to learn beyond, like the the Western lens of healing. And also, when you mentioned Gabor Maté earlier, like, I'm such a fan of his work too, because of all the all the things that he's done, also like, just like the Downtown Eastside, and also to talk about him, and also Robert Sapolsky, who's very big on talking about stress, like perceived stress, and how that can also affect just the way we see ourselves essentially, just like talking about the way we talk to ourselves. And, yeah, self talk is very important too, when we talk about stress management, yeah.

Gillian Kirk 22:12

Absolutely it is. I think there's the I mean, I think about in the there's something about that. I think it's been decades since I read it, but in "The Four Agreements," especially the one that I think about when it says to be impeccable with your word. You know, to me, that is like the messages, the way that we use our speech, like with me saying all the time, I was diagnosed with MS, not I have MS. Sometimes I will say that, but generally, I have made it very, very specific to say I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, unless it doesn't make sense to say it like that, there is something powerful about words and how they connect with what we believe and what we believe, you know, dictates how we move through the world, what our actions are.

Tanya Griffiths 23:02

Yeah, yeah. And really finding a way to speak your truth in a way that is most authentic to you.

Gillian Kirk 23:11

It's all connected.

Tanya Griffiths 23:12

Yeah, it is all connected.

Gillian Kirk 23:14

I was actually thinking, and I couldn't remember what it was when we first were, when I was first talking about that, I was like, there is a yoga, a yogic, term for that. And I can't remember what the actual Sanskrit term is, but the idea of, like, duality and non duality, and the lineage of yoga that I was really studying, I haven't done a lot of yoga in the last couple of years for a lot of different reasons. But, you know, there's this idea of non dualism, like there is nothing that is singularly solo in the world. Everything is connected.

Yeah, everything within us is connected. All the levels of our spirit are connected. We are connected to everybody else. We're connected to the earth. We're connected to our ancestors, all of those things.

Tanya Griffiths 24:02

Yeah. And that's also why, when we're in a state of isolation or loneliness, it's so hard to remember that we are also connected and that there is more than the physical being in feeling isolated in the world is, is definitely like, yeah, like, I don't know. I feel like the opposite of isolation is connection. And so how can we feel connected? You know, I just after finishing this the summer term that we've just had, I remember the times in which I was so that I was stressed out and and also after being diagnosed with Graves', which I didn't realize was for life. Yeah, I thought it was in the beginning. I thought it was something that I'm like, "Okay, I got this now. I gotta get better, and then it'll go." But yeah, I realize just within the past year, that it was something that I'd have and something that I'd have to consider in just, essentially just my approach to life and to more importantly, stress, but yeah, all those times in which I felt this heightened level of stress and my nervous system being dysregulated, and I knew this because I'd sit down to to eat and I'd already feel like, like I had to rush because I had other things to do, as if nourishment was not important enough. And and then in those moments, I remembered, I just said, "Okay, I think I just need to go to the forest and just sit there, and I just need to feel held, and I need to look at all the trees and touch the ground and just lie down," and that, in itself, is connecting. For me at least.

Gillian Kirk 26:15

And nourishment, yeah, yeah. I love that. Yeah. Nature is very, healing and very important. I think our connection to nature in the way that you know city life is these days, is makes it difficult, but really good that you know that about yourself, that that's somewhere that you can go to basically reboot and recharge.

Tanya Griffiths 26:37

Yeah, yeah, absolutely, um, and yeah, and right now you're pursuing a master's in clinical counseling while working part time as a massage therapist, so you kind of went back to massage therapy. But can you tell me more about that? Like, what brought you to pursue counseling?

Gillian Kirk 27:01

So I told you that I had that really powerful Reiki session. And so what happened in that very first session? First of all, it was extremely powerfully healing. I do think that the woman that I went to is a little bit of a witch in the best possible way. So I think she has some special gifts. But one of the things she said to me at the end of our session was she said, some people are just structured, like just energetically structured to be healers. And she said, I want to plant a seed, and I think it was February, she said, and it's still winter, so that seed might sprout and it might not, but she said, "You are a healer, and you should be doing this kind of healing work with people." And I always know when something and I had been working basically in corporate world, business chamber of commerce, boards of directors, marketing, public relations, community, all that kind of stuff. But I've been doing that for years since I'd gotten home from my travels in India and Mexico and Taiwan. But it just rang through my head for weeks like a gong, and I just started this new job that was supposed to be my great this is going to be the one climb the ladder, start up all that stuff, and it just at that point like I'd been there for not even six months, and I could already see that it wasn't what they had sold me when I took the job. And around that time, my brother, who I've always had sort of a challenging relationship with my brother, but he was really struggling with an addiction to alcohol, and I found myself in the position of being the one that he called for help. All of these things happened around the same time, and I think it was like, was it 2017 or 2018 or something? And it just made me think. And then one day, and then one day, and so it was just ringing, all this stuff was like ringing through my head. Her saying, "I'm planting a seed. You're a healer." And then I got laid off my job, and I just when I left, I was like, I think that was exactly what's supposed to happen. I'm still mad about how they did it, and I don't know exactly what I'm going to do, but I'm not going to do that anymore. And that was when I went to Bali for the first time. Got back. I'm like, What do I miss about my life? What do I miss a lot? And I miss traveling. I missed yoga and meditation, and I miss really feeling like I had, you know, purpose. And so I went to Bali, ended up doing some teacher training stuff, and when I got back, I actually had been asked by the mayor of Port Coquitlam to run for city council, because I was involved with the community quite a bit, and I thought that I was going to do that. But after spending, you know, a month, almost a month, in Bali, I was like, "Nope, that's not the direction," so I had to redo my board exams. Luckily, I didn't have to do the hardest part, but I had to redo those. So I had two weeks to study, and it had been over 20 years since I did since I did them the first time, yeah, and luckily I passed on the first time, and in 2019 I started practicing again. And just, it's just been really I was so burnt out and so fragile and raw and in pain and self-sacrificing when I left that I've just approached this in such a different way, and it's been really, really rewarding, fulfilling. But I'm 52 years old. I know I'm not going to be able to do this for the rest of my life. It does hurt when I work too much, and so

counseling school felt like the right felt like I was always meant to be going in this direction, and I finally stepped into the path to walk the path that I was meant to walk.

Tanya Griffiths 30:53

Yeah, yeah. I feel like that does. I'm always so moved whenever I hear people come to a place of clarity with what brings purpose and meaning. And it's just also such a beautiful experience to have watched you be like do a therapy session, as you know, in one of our in one of our classes, we had to do a demonstration, essentially, of being with a client for 30 minutes in front of everybody, which can be very nerve wracking. But yeah, I think life really propels us towards a specific direction. I want to say. And while people make all that fade, I also think that when we're able to listen to ourselves and listen to what feels right. That's where we get to practice our sense of freedom and our autonomy too.

Gillian Kirk 32:07

Absolutely, yeah, beautifully said.

Announcement 32:09

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