Best of Pioneers and Pathfinders: Denise Robinson

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Steve Poor
Hi, this is Steve Poor, and you're listening to Pioneers and Pathfinders.

As summer winds down, we're taking a moment to revisit one of our favorite conversations—this one with Denise Robinson, founding principal of The Still Center. Denise is a belonging & well-being consultant who helps lawyers and legal organizations cultivate personal resilience, build deeper connections, and create more inclusive workplaces. In this thoughtful and inspiring episode, Denise shares highlights from her unique career path and offers practical insights on how the legal profession can better support holistic well-being. We thought it was a timely reminder of the importance of taking care of ourselves and each other. I hope you enjoy listening in. Thank you.

Happy New Year, and welcome back to another year of Pioneers and Pathfinders. We return from our holiday break to be joined by Denise Robinson. Denise is founding principal and belonging & well-being consultant at the Still Center. In turn, the Still Center is a consultancy that facilitates personal well-being, interpersonal connection, and organizational inclusion through mindfulness-based diversity and inclusion methods. Denise started her career as an employment litigator focusing on discrimination claims and other employment disputes. She later changed career paths and became a global diversity and inclusion professional, serving as a law school and college admissions officer for Georgetown University, Director of Diversity and Inclusion at El Melvin and Myers, and Diversity Officer at the International Monetary Fund. In her current role at the Still Center, Denise teaches contemplative practice techniques to lawyers and other professionals to promote self awareness and authenticity, interrupt bias, and advance cultural humility.

In our conversation, Denise spoke with us about how studying philosophy led her toward a legal career, what she learned as an L&E lawyer, the connection between DEI and well-being and the challenges of managing global diversity initiatives. Thanks very much for joining, and welcome to a new year of Pioneers and Pathfinders.

Denise, great to have you on the podcast. Thanks for making the time.

Denise Robinson
Thanks so much for having me.

Steve Poor
I look forward to our chat. Your current focus is in belonging and well-being at the Still Center, which you were the founding principal of. Let's talk a little bit about your journey that got you there before we

talk about your work and your passion for attorney well-being. You're a graduate of U of C law school, Chicago. And what took you to law school? Why the law?

Denise Robinson
Why the law? It's a question I continue to ask myself, even after all of these years. It's been a quarter of a century, as I like to say, since I started law school. It's a long story. I'll try to tell the shorter version of it. It really starts with in earnest. It started with my becoming a philosophy major in college. That is not how college started for me. In terms of my major selection, I started out as a what was called in my university, Ohio, university, biological sciences, pre Physical Therapy Focus. So that's, that's what I started out in.

Steve Poor
And you moved to philosophy?

Denise Robinson
And I moved to philosophy.

Steve Poor
That's not a straight line.

Denise Robinson
It is not a straight line. As my parents definitely pointed out to me, as open minded as they my father is now deceased, but my mother is still with us. And, you know, they've always been very open minded individuals, but that one threw them for a little bit of a loop. And so how I got to philosophy from, you know, biological sciences, is I had a great biology teacher in in high school, and I was in the International Baccalaureate program. And so we had very, very small classes. I went to public schools, first grade through 12th grade. And unlike most people's experience in public schools and the in urban environments, I had these really small classes, we were able to do very interesting experiments that would not typically just there just isn't the resources or the bandwidth for teachers to typically be able to kind of invest in the students the way that my teachers were able to invest in the very small cohort of us. We were the first class of the International Baccalaureate program at my high school, and so this biology teacher really just saw a lot of promise, and not just me, but the others in the cohort, and really tried to push us in the direction of STEM and really biology, the kind of health sciences, was the only area within STEM that interested me at all, notwithstanding the fact that my mother, I think, always wanted me to be a doctor, I was really not interested in that,

Steve Poor
Don't they all? Must've been very difficult emotionally for you.

Denise Robinson
Don't they all? She was, you know, pretty satisfied with the JD, ultimately, but, but I think she wanted me to be a doctor. I, however, was very interested in the work that we were doing in that class and in those classes, those biology classes, but wasn't really sure what I would do with that. But this teacher, Mr. Lee, had enough of an influence on me that it really did help me select my major in college, the

physical therapy piece of it came out of I was an athlete growing up. I was a dancer first, and then ran track and field and cross country and all these things. Worked with a few physical therapists over the years because of some minor injuries, and just thought that might be a way for me to marry this--at least what was--achievement and biology, if not interest in it with something that I thought I might be interested in. Well, I had an internship the summer before I went off to college in a rehab unit in a hospital and where there were physical therapists, physical therapy assistants, occupational therapists, et cetera. But in a hospital, you're dealing with a really, you know, people who just had knee replacements or hip replacements or other issues, and it can be very tough for individuals coming right out of surgery to gain mobility again. And I just found that, oh, this is not what I thought, right? That physical therapy would be about. Very difficult emotionally. And of course, I was doing like the grunt work right as a as an intern. But I'm very observant. Always have been. And so I got enough data, if you will, out of that experience to figure out that, like, Oh, I'm not sure about this physical therapy thing. So you know, fast forward to starting that fall in college. I'm pretty relentless, and so I didn't change my major right away, because I thought, well, you know, I'll stick with it for now, at least until I find something else. And took some all those hard science classes as it was basically pre med curriculum as part of that, though, you had to take a humanities course, and here's how we get to philosophy. So I decided to take the intro level of philosophy, whatever it was called 101 or 103 and fell in love with it to the point of I was going to the professor. His name is Dr Zucker. I was going to Dr Zucker office hours on a very regular basis. And he told me at one point, you know, you're about the only student that I've ever had come to me, particularly out of this course, right out of this intro course, come to office hours as regularly as you do. It's usually a problem that people are that's the reason that people are coming to me, not because they're just so in love with this subject. Took another philosophy class, different professor, equally as enthralled by this subject matter and Dr Zucker seeing that I was a little bit of a unicorn in terms of my interest in philosophy amongst you know, 18 and 19 year olds starting college asked me about my standardized test scores. I had done okay on the SAT, but much better on the AC T. He's like, Hmm, okay, so he took me down to the Honors College. It's called the honors tutorial college in my undergrad, and it's a very small college. The dean, at the time, Dean Berman, just had an open door. Dr Zucker, was the what they called Director of Studies for the students in the Honors College for philosophy as philosophy majors. So he literally just took me to meet Dean Berman, just advocated for me to become a part of the honors tutorial college with a focus on philosophy. And then it was just a matter of convincing my parents, who I said, you know, are pretty open minded folks, but we're concerned about, well, what are you going to do with a philosophy major?

Steve Poor
That sounds like a parent question. I'm sitting there, my parent hand is on, and I'm thinking, okay, what do you do with a Philosophy major?

Denise Robinson
How do you make a living doing that?

Steve Poor
You go to law school, I guess.

Denise Robinson

Right, there you go. So I somehow came up with this idea that, well, I could go to law school with this. And everybody's like, yes, yes, of course, you can absolutely go to law school. We have, you know, people that have done this in the past, and we think that's a logical next step for you. And so I largely went to law school because that was really all I could think. I mean, it's not a great answer, but I'm just going to be honest with you, that was all I could think of at that point in terms of practical things I could do as a philosophy major. I would have loved to have pursued a PhD in philosophy. I still think about it from time to time, but it did not seem like coming from Dayton, Ohio, which is where I was born and raised, which is a very blue collar place, my parents were both educators. They were K through 12 educators and a coach and my dad, and it's just the kind of place where people are not, by and large, going to get PhDs in philosophy or any other humanities topics, or any PhDs, really, you know? I mean, some people are, but it's not, it's not that common. And so I just thought, well, you know, law school, I don't know any lawyers. I didn't know any lawyers at the time, really, but that sounded like something that I could do. And so that is the path I pursued. Took the LSAT, did you know okay on that and then...

Steve Poor
Well, you must have done better than okay on that to get a University of Chicago. Stop it.

Denise Robinson
I did what I thought was okay and got into some great schools, and University of Chicago was among them. My mother is originally from Gary, Indiana, and I still have not as many family members there anymore, but at the time, still had a lot of family in that area. And so, you know, I was familiar with Chicago, and felt like among the options, University of Chicago was pretty much the best law school, at least ranking wise, that I got into. And felt like I can navigate the city. I can always go and hang out with my aunt if I really struggle here, which I did a couple of times, and the rest is history.

Steve Poor
Rest is history. When you got out of law school, you went to work as a labor and employment law I did associate for three or four years. What did you learn from that experience that you apply in your day to day practice?

Denise Robinson
So much, so much. I went to law school again, you know, without knowing really any lawyers or anything like that. But I thought I wanted to be a civil rights lawyer to the extent I was familiar with what lawyers did. I was it was sort of Mac at the macro level. I was really interested in the career of Thurgood Marshall, for example, who, you know, of course, at that point, was a, you know, happened, a Supreme Court justice and, you know, knowing about his career and so on. So I thought, Okay, I'll be a civil rights lawyer. Got to law school, you know, I had some like, a partial scholarship, but also had to take out a lot of loans to cover the balance. And became aware of these law firms that apparently paid a real a lot of money, but not very many of them had a practice in civil rights, right, right? At least not, you know, not where the money tends to be, right. There you go. There you go. And so I had to figure out, well, then what is close to civil rights law? That is something that would constitute a practice area in the law firms that are recruiting, you know, students from University of Chicago, and that would help me be able to pay off these loans. So again, really sort of thinking pragmatically, but in a limited way, because I just didn't know what I didn't know. My honors thesis in college was about. It was about

applying a particular theory of ethics called discourse ethics by Jurgen Habermas is the philosopher who developed this theory of ethics. I applied that theory to the what was then, and still is the affirmative action debate. And so as a result of in the course of doing my research for that thesis, of course, I studied about anti discrimination laws and things of that nature. And so I became somewhat familiar with the statutory basis, if you will, for a lot of Labor and Employment Law, especially the employment side of things. And so eventually, I made my way around to Okay, some of these firms have labor and employment practice. I learned that there are, you know, lots of opportunities in the space of labor and employment. And so that's how I got to that practice area, in terms of what I learned from it, and that I still apply today, I would not be doing the work I do in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion or the well-being work, but for the experience I had as a management side labor and employment attorney, I again, as somebody going into law school thinking I wanted to do civil rights law, have, and still do have a very sort of social justice kind of orientation, found it very helpful to understand the defense side of employment litigation, to understand management side of labor, to just expand my thinking, my approaches to these topics, and not just seeing them as kind of a either or either you are social justice oriented or you're the man kind of thing. And so that has helped me. I often describe my work currently as helping people learn to work together, or be in school together, because I work with a lot of law schools as well, learn to work together across difference. And I think of the work I was doing in really labor and employment, but especially on the employment litigation side of things as well, when those workplace relationships break down across at least a protected class of difference, then that's when, you know, you call the lawyers in and what is it that we could do? This is what I, you know, continue to think about, what is it that we can do to help, to help those relationships in the first place, so that there isn't the breakdown at some point? So, I'm always using what I learned in labor and employment practice in the work that I do now.

Steve Poor
I'm curious in your work, do you encounter you had to make a pragmatic decision in terms of your practice because of the financial cost of law firms?

Denise Robinson
That's right.

Steve Poor
It ain't gotten any better. And so you have graduates from law schools making these pragmatic decisions to pay off their student loans, going into practices that wasn't what they thought there was going to be when they went into law school.

Denise Robinson
That's right.

Steve Poor
I assume you encounter that dynamic a lot. Is that part of the source of some of the dissatisfaction lawyers have in the practice?

Denise Robinson

Absolutely, I think so. And it is, at least in part why I got into the well-being work that I do with lawyers and law firms and corporate legal departments and so on. It's an understanding that sort of misalignment, if you will, or at least people coming into the profession with one expectation and then getting into the profession and having to do something different, but sort of continuing to hold on, for better or for worse, to that original expectation. So that's what I mean by the misalignment, not that it's necessarily bad, right? So it's not the judgment part of it, but it's how people, many people, not everyone, kind of see the choice that they are, not even seeing it necessarily as a choice that one has to go for what can help you, the career choice, that choice, it is a choice. But I'm not sure everyone sees it that way. Having to go where you can make the most money to be able to pay this financial obligation, but feeling like you're not being true to your values in some way creates for many people, I think a lot of angst. So I do see that a lot to answer your question, and I would say, I don't know if it's increased. I was going to say increasingly so, but I just think that there have been so many shifts in terms of our society and culture, and then even within the profession, I really think it's more of an issue that people are more vocal about it with the younger generations coming into the profession than, say, my generation, I'm a Gen Xer, and then older generations ahead of me. We just weren't so we may have been feeling that same level of angst, but not articulating it, and then therefore not getting any help with it, either, and perhaps having someone come in, which is what I hope to do to help people have some perspective about Well, you do have options. You actually have more options as a law school graduate, and particularly if you're coming from one of these so called T 14 type of law schools, like I did, you have a lot of options, and it is a matter of so you can, and therefore you have a lot of agency to be able to make some choices for your career that that perhaps you didn't see as options when you were just worried about, how am I going to pay for all of this that could help you with realignment of values, with perhaps the place where you are, or perhaps it needs to be somewhere else. And so that's where I hope, I hope my work is helpful for people, to help provide that perspective, some of it just from my own lived experience, but then also, of course, just from a professional standpoint of what the work that I do on a day to day basis.

Steve Poor
Right. We're talking about one stressor, which is sort of the outside cost of law schools. But let's broaden it just a little bit, because the profession is, is a highly stressful profession. It just the nature of it is. And you've been through in your consulting business, the pandemic, the ChatGPT, tidal wave where everybody thought they were going to lose their jobs and now a cultural divide in the country that is stressful to a lot of people. How have you seen these stressors impact lawyers over that continuum?

Denise Robinson
What comes to mind right away is that it impacts different people differently. I see from some folks a kind of, well, I'll say that it's a form of status quo bias, of, well, we've done it this way for as long as we've been doing it, and so we're just going to keep going at it the way that we've always done it, sort of, I'm just going to stick my head in the sand and I'm going to ignore the noise from the external world and just going to plow straight ahead. So that's one thing that I have noticed, I think, particularly from, again, those of us who've been in the profession for a long time. And those who've been in the profession even longer than I have, not everyone, but I tend to see that more of a like, well, you know, whatever ... Change has come along at many points during my career. And so this is just another one of those situations where we just have to just move forward. I've seen a lot of fear just had a very base

level. Am I going to be able to keep my job? Am I going to do I need to change practice areas? Do I need to change my career altogether? Get out of what seems like a sinking ship to some? And I think the more kind of life obligations that people have, you know, you have a mortgage, you have a family, you have people who are depending on you, the deeper that fear is for some folks, where they feel like, you know, I can't just give up this job, particularly if it's someone you know, earning a high income and easily pivot. And then I see, and this kind of, it reminds me of the sort of in the in the change management world, thinking about the, like a bell curve of how people deal with change. And then you have your like, you know, your early adopters who are, like a tail right of the of the bell curve. And then you have people who are like, Okay, well, you know, I'm willing to adapt to the change. And then you have kind of the meaty middle who are just like, I guess I'm just going to get swept along with it. But then you have the one down the other side, those who resist. And then, yes, those who particularly powerfully resist. And so I think I've seen all of that. I'm seeing all of that. I think the area where right now, and it's because I do DEI work, there is, I think fear is the one that I see most, most prominently. And I think for I don't think it's irrational. I do think this is not like times before, at least, at least since, let's say, like the Civil Rights Act of 64 in that time period, you know, 60 years on, I think that we are at a moment where, at a minimum, we are going to have to adapt the way that we approach the work of what we're calling diversity, equity and inclusion, or else. I think those who are against it for one reason or another will sort of kind of win the day if we just kind of get stuck in the way that we've been doing things. But I think there's also I do. I personally see an opportunity. I'm just not sure. I think, I'm not sure how many, there are some other people out there who see it as an opportunity as well, but I don't think that I'm in the majority on that at all. But I just, I tend to think that ultimately, I guess it's because of the reason I do this work. I think, I think it's we are better off if we are working together, and there's, you know, quite a bit of science to support this, that we are better off learning to work across those differences that I talked about before, and not just relying on kind of the base instinct of seeing difference as bad and threatening and all of that. I think all of us ultimately will suffer with that if we just rely on kind of our evolutionarily base selves and so but it's like a matter of time. I think before people will make a choice as to like, do we want to be better and do the work of what it takes to be better if we work together, or do we? Do we just all want to suffer?

Steve Poor
Well, let's hope we all don't want to suffer. Yeah, let me play that out just a little bit more, because you your practice makes an interesting connection between attorney well-being and diversity and inclusion. That's not a connection that's typically made. Talk to us a little bit about that connection and how you came to connect those two disciplines.

Denise Robinson
Yes, so let me first say 20 years ago, or 22 whatever it's been since I graduated from law school years ago. If you'd asked me, What will you be doing right in 20 years from now?, I could not have even started to articulate I'll be working at the intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and well-being, and so it definitely was not intentional in that way, right? I didn't have this, this sort of vision at that point for the work that I'm doing now. It really very much, I think, evolved organically, again, based upon my own lived experiences, those of friends who are in the profession, particularly people from marginalized communities, and then just kind of where, where the market, frankly, also is leading. And so what I see as the connection between the work of diversity, equity and inclusion and well-being is the fact, I start

with the fact that human beings are social animals, and we even those. And I'm a hard introvert, so I get I can I speak all day with people, large groups of people, and do all of that, but in terms of how I recharge, I need time alone, right? And my 12 year old daughter will tell you that that is true about me, but even those of us who are introverts, and there are a lot of us and in the legal profession, still need people, right? We can't, we can't do this work of living by ourselves. As social animals, the more we feel a sense of belonging, feeling like we are actually contributing to whatever the community, that we're a part of a broader society, and so our own families, right? So it can be micro or macro, the field that we're contributing in some way and also being poured into, in a way, being supported and valued, that we are here for a reason, and that reason is recognized by others, and we recognize that others are, you know, here for a bigger reason as well. So with that, the more we feel that have that experience of belonging, the more space, essentially, we have to be able to do the work that we're here to do like I think often, this is kind of the opposite point that she's not an opposite point, but it's Toni Morrison had a quote that says something to the effect that the function of racism is distraction. The very real function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. So I may have butchered that just a little bit, but it's, you know, I think I paraphrased it well enough. And in thinking about this connection between DEI and well-being, I see it as one. I think she's absolutely correct that we do get distracted by the ways in which we are, you know, sort of trying to separate ourselves. And again, thinking of difference as bad. If we do the opposite, if we can lean into each other, we actually have more space, more time, more resources within ourselves, and then sort of within our groups, our communities, our societies, to do the work, whatever the work is, do the work of you know what it means to be a law firm associate or do the work that that You're doing other, you know, complete work that's completely outside of the legal profession, the work of ultimately making leaving this place better than we found it, whatever that means for, you know, each one of us. So I see that we actually cannot be well. So the well-being, we cannot be well, at least not in a meaningful way, in a holistic way, if we're missing the piece of belonging, if we're missing the work of helping people feel included, I think that they are necessary for one another to exist, because we could have inclusion in a homogeneous, you know, homogeneous group, but then we're not actually growing. We're not getting the benefit of running up against something different. That's how we grow. And so if we want to grow, if we want to be better, then, to me, we have to have the work of inclusion, so that people feel like they can contribute something in a meaningful way.

Steve Poor
Absolutely, that's well said. Thank you.

Denise Robinson
Thank you.

Steve Poor
I know we're running out of time, but I got one last question here for you. One of the aspects of your practice is global diversity initiatives. What different challenges does it present to you working across countries, across cultures, across multi multicultural dimensions.

Denise Robinson

Yes, I got a real lesson in this, working for the International Monetary Fund, where there are people from over 150 different countries, working in two headquarters buildings in downtown Washington, DC, working on behalf of over, I think, over 180 or so member countries of the of the IMF and my work, my title was Diversity Officer, but diversity really wasn't the issue. There plenty of diversity. It is, again, the work of inclusion. So how do we work in a way that one doesn't preference either implicitly or explicitly one way of doing things? So in not to, I don't want to go too deep into the IMF specifically, but any institution is going to have is going to reflect in some way that the founders or even the leaders of the organization in terms of how they do things right, and then that can have sort of broader cultural implications. Are we doing it in a sort of, you know, in a US centric way, or in a Western European way, or in ways that reflect dominant cultures or identities within the world? And so, that's, I would say, a big piece of the work that I am doing to help us see, help organizations see when we are essentially asking people to conform to one way of doing things or not, and then asking ourselves the question, are there good reasons? Are there to use, you know, sort of a Labor and Employment Lawyers terminology, are there business legitimate reasons, right? Legitimate business reasons right for doing this? And...

Steve Poor
You're channeling your inner lawyer.

Denise Robinson
See, I learned something all those years ago. I'm telling you. So, are there reasons why we're doing this, and do they make sense? Because it's not to say that, you know, just because we're doing it in a US centric way, it means it's bad by definition. That's not that's not the case. But we do need to interrogate if that's the only way we can get things done well here, or are there? Are there ways in which we really could be drawing from the differences of all these different people working across nations, across different cultures. Are there ways in which, which, by the way, is why we hire, at least why organizations say they hire these individuals, but then are we asking them to kind of leave something on the table about themselves, or at least something at the door, excuse me, about themselves, that, in fact, would again help make this this organization, or help what we're doing on behalf of our clients, make it better. And so, it's a lot of lot of that work, of you know, asking, realizing the ways in which organizations are conforming to particular norms and standards and not even recognizing that, so bringing some awareness to that, and then interrogating, is this really ultimately serving this organization? Is this serving our clients or you know, whoever your constituents are, your you know your customers are, and if not, then what do we need to do from a both interpersonal level and systems level to make some changes that would allow for more voices to be heard? Understanding, though, that that is that's complicated, right? More voices, it's complicated.

Steve Poor
Anytime you work with people, it's complicated.

Denise Robinson
There you go. Exactly right.

Steve Poor

Denise, you're doing some wonderful work. It's been fascinating to hear about it and to talk to you. Thanks so much for making the time.

Denise Robinson
Thank you for having me, Steve. I really appreciate it.

Steve Poor
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