



SEASON 1, EPISODE 1

My name is Ilesha. No, not Alicia. Not Aisha. Not Elissa, not Ilesha. It's Ilesha. E Lay Sha. . . . Oh, forget it. Just call me Coco.

And so it began. My losing of my name and, in part, myself. People always ask me, "where did CoCo come from?" Because it's not even close to Ilesha. Well, today I'm spilling the tea because I realized that I didn't even give you the story of why CoCo Speaks in my intro episode, which, by the way, if you haven't listened to it, go back and check it out. The easiest way to explain it is, CoCo was just easier. It was simpler. It didn't require people to think or actually hear what I was saying. And because I always struggle with believing that my words were worth hearing, becoming CoCo just made sense. It was easier than making people stop and truly listen to the words that were coming out of my mouth. So I traded cocoa for my voice.

And then there was middle school English and my middle school English teacher. Let me set the stage for you. It's the first day of, (have I told you that it was middle school(?) with all the awkwardness that it brings) and we're in our advanced English class. All of us students standing up, lining the walls of the classroom as a teacher calls us one by one, in alphabetical order by last name, from her class roster. And as she called our name, we were supposed to take a seat in the desk, right behind the last person who sat down. After she called "Fredenberger, Clinton", I knew that I would be next, and I waited for it. She frowned. She squinted. She scanned the room. She looked back down at her paper again. Then she called my last name and then slowly sounded out what she thought was the pronunciation for my first name, I Lee Sha. I politely

corrected her and told her, "No, ma'am, it's llesha." And that's when it happened. One of the most embarrassing moments in middle school, and I'd only been there for 30 minutes. Right there in front of the whole entire class, she walks over to me, points her finger, and decisively announces that my mother spelled my name wrong, "Because clearly, if your mother wanted your name to be pronounced llesha, she should have spelled it differently."

Hold up. Wait a minute. You talking about my mama? My top of her high school, Cal Berkeley University educated, Lifetime credential holding, Pupil Personnel Services Certified educator mother didn't know how to spell my name? But back then, I wasn't a sassy as I am now. So I never got the chance to tell her about my name, and its origin, and its meaning, and the great pride that I had in it. So again, I traded CoCo, this time for my heritage. It was just easier that way when navigating an institution that didn't value difference. And there is so much more I could say about bias in schooling. But let's save that for another episode.

Let's fast forward to adulthood and professional living and professional event. By the way, can you explain why at every conference, seminar, training, meet and greet, do we have to wear those dog on name tags? I mean, talk about opening the door for everyone in the room to butcher my name. Ah, but I digress. Back to adulting. Adulting is hard. Stepping out into your purpose and calling even harder. When God first nudged, okay, let me keep it real. When God shoved me into sharing my story, my real, raw, unfiltered "I started from the bottom" story, I wondered what my professional colleagues and community would think of me. What I still be accepted or what people only see me is that poor, homeless, single parent living on government assistance, chick.

So when I emerged into the speaking circuit, I emerged as CoCo. So while CoCo Speaks, llesha hides from her past, for a really long time. You see, I traded CoCo for my truth because, well, it was easier. Or at least that's what I told myself. But the reality is that it wasn't easier for me to live each day as a shadow of my whole self. It wasn't easier for me to shrink, so as not to make other people feel uncomfortable. It wasn't easier to dim my light in order to make other people think they were brighter. It wasn't really easier at all. And while yes, I'm still CoCoSpeaks most places on the interwebs, it's not because I'm hiding. It just really is easier for people to find me now. But you know, it has taken me a really long time to regain, to accept, to embrace and love my name and my heritage, and my history, my story and my truth. Brene Brown wrote, "When we spend a

lifetime trying to distance ourselves from the parts of our lives that don't fit with who we think we're supposed to be, we stand outside of our story and hustle for our worthiness." She's also been quoted as saying, "We can either walk inside of our story and own it, or we can stand outside of our story and hustle for our worthiness." And that's where I was standing, outside of my story for years; trying to distance myself from the pain that it contained and working to please others to not offend, to fit in, to not make waves, to hustle up the corporate ladder, all in an attempt to feel and be seen as worthy. But once I worked through all that, and began to love myself and even began to love every single part of my story and my journey, I realized that therein lied my worthiness. It lied inside of my story. It lied inside of me all along. And maybe you're in the thick of it, my friend ,hustling for your worthiness. But let me tell you, it lies in embracing your story, not abandoning it. So I want to share five steps that will help you show up more powerfully, more authentically and more assured of just how worthy you are. Are you ready?

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Number 1: Change the narrative. You have to write a new story of who you are and how much you matter and that value is unattached to anything that you do or don't do. You have to stop letting the negative voices of your past, hold you up from preventing your best future. I tell my clients, "you can't let the voices in your head speak louder than the One who speaks to your heart." And the One who speaks to your heart has already declared that you are worth more than rubies, that you are more than a conqueror, that you are blessed and highly favored, and you are worth dying for.

Number 2: Bless the mess! Cause we all have some and it can truly be the path to your message and our mission. Embrace your flaws and your quirks and your imperfections - they make you human! And real and true and authentic. Don't let shame be the lens through which you view your mess. We're all a mess. I know I'm a hot mess and we're all navigating through it together.

Number 3: Stop people pleasing. Listen you will be too much for some people and not enough for other people. Those aren't your people. I love to say, "you aren't a jar of Nutella, you can't make everybody happy!" Don't try to squeeze into places where you are just tolerated, go where you are celebrated. And if you find you aren't welcome at the table go build your own.

Number 4: Live your LIFE to the fullest Brene Brown says, "If you aren't in the arena also getting your butt kicked, I'm not interested in your feedback (edited to keep it G rated). When you get focused on living YOUR life, pursuing YOUR purpose, fulfilling YOUR calling, you won't have time to even be worried about what other people are thinking. It will be inconsequential because of the lives that you are impacting! So, get out there and do you, boo!

Number 5: Honor the commitments that you make to yourself. When you hold yourself accountable to the promises you make to yourself, you are saying that you are worthy of the improvements and changes that you are making for yourself. Become trustworthy to yourself. You're worth it.

I know it may be hard to remember all of these points, so I've created a worksheet for you to help reinforce the 5 steps that I've shared here. Just head over to cocospeaks.net (that's dot net) forward slash episode 01.

And join me next time and I'll tell you about the time when I was told that I only got my principal job because I was an affirmative action hire and how THAT changed everything!

I can't wait until we're together again.

You just bring the cup and I'll bring the perfect pour of whatever you need.