

Title: Tony McAleer, *The Cure for Hate: A Former White Supremacist's Journey from Violent Extremism to Radical Compassion*

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Transcript

Chris Martin: Tony McAleer is my guest on today's episode. He is the author of the new book, *The Cure for Hate: A Former White Supremacist's Journey from Violent Extremism to Radical Compassion*. He is the co-founder of Life After Hate, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to help people leave hate groups and to counter hate on social media without censorship. He is based out of Vancouver, British Columbia.

Hi, Tony! Thanks for joining us on the show.

Tony McAleer: Thank you for having me.

Chris Martin: So your book comes out this month. We are recording this in November 2019. Tell me about why you chose to write this book now?

Tony McAleer: That's a great question because I'm an incredible procrastinator sometimes and I've been meaning to write the book since about 2007 when I started doing the counseling work and started doing the healing work to understand how and why I got in and to understand the process of returning to humanity and connecting with my own humanity. I thought I was in a place to write that in 2007, 2008. But I'm glad I didn't because the story was really just beginning.

And so, I continued to do that counseling work and I co-founded Life After Hate in 2011 which opened a whole other avenue that I wouldn't have been able to write about had I written it earlier. And that avenue takes me to the work of helping other people who are where I once was, leave these movements behind, and to learn academically the theories around it.

And most importantly, it gave me a platform and an opportunity to go back to the communities I had once harmed in a restorative way to create healing for those communities and for myself. That's the by-product.

But I've done a lot of that. I've gone back to the Jewish community. I did a trip to Auschwitz in the last two years to confront myself and who I used to be in terms of my Holocaust denial. And so, I feel that this cycle of the journey is complete and I think the world really needs something hopeful to read. So I'm really glad that I waited until now. I think now is the perfect time. Now is when it's needed most and now is when the story is the most complete. If I had written it in 2007, it would be a lot like other books written by former—here's what I did in the movement. I kind of get out of it near the end.

When I leave the movement in the book, it's the middle of the book, and the whole backend of the book is exploring forgiveness, compassion, radical compassion, atonement, making amends, and giving back to the communities I once harmed.

Chris Martin: And you joined the white supremacist group in your teen years and a big chunk of the book and you talk about this in interviews too is what it is that attracts young man, young white man to these group and how they retained. So describe what your ideas are there.

Tony McAleer: Well, not so much the ideology itself but what comes with the ideology. And that's acceptance, community, brotherhood, a sense of purpose, a sense of joining a great cause greater than yourself and you go from zero to hero and go from, not to be overly generalizing, sitting in your mom's basement playing video games to being at the vanguard of this great war who struggled to save the white race from genocide.

And you see similar things when you look at the histories of people who joined ISIS and that same zero to hero piece. And also comes with it is notoriety and it becomes an outlet for unresolved anger. I got power when I felt powerless. And it really – it was all about me and my narcissism and my ego. And that whole movement is full of narcissism and ego and I was right at home there.

Chris Martin: And you talk about one of the reasons you felt powerless was in the Catholic school you went to, the administrators were extremely strict and it was corporal punishment which made you feel powerless. Do you feel like actually having healthy religious institutions in places where children aren't treated that way is a way to build communities where young men don't feel like they need to join some alternative white supremacist group?

Tony McAleer: I'm not opposed to religious schools at all and I'm glad corporal punishment is a thing of the past. There are many ways to get to that place of being a healthy young man. Religion is part of that. That's fine with me. I'm not very religious. I'm more spiritual than religious.

Chris Martin: Yeah. It's a common description nowadays.

Tony McAleer: Yeah, yeah. Well, I think my school beat the Catholicism out of me so ... [Laughs]

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Tony McAleer: But there are a variety of ways to get them. I say I could have got all of that attention, acceptance, approval, feel of power and confidence, all of that from being capital of a football but I was in a jar. And sometimes there's often a bit of serendipity involved and that you just meet the wrong person at the wrong time or you are exposed to the wrong thing at the wrong time and it just feels so right. But if you got exposed to something else that's maybe

healthier, that feels so right, you could have taken in a different direction. So there's an element of sort of chance encounter that's involved.

But the analogy I like to use is, have you ever gone to a grocery store when you're feeling really hungry? As you make different choices from the center part of the grocery store, nothing forces you to put the bag of cookies or the box of chips in your cart. We have a choice to do that. But I don't blame anything on my childhood. Everything I did, I chose to do. But I share those things to understand the lens through which I made those choices. I went out in the world emotionally hungry and made horrible choices for myself and other people that provided a fleeting moment of satisfaction or relief from what was going on inside but utterly toxic and poisonous to everyone around me.

Chris Martin: And I brought up the Catholic education part because I wanted to talk a bit about what educators can do. I was actually raised Catholic myself and I'm also not a practicing Catholic anymore. I went to a Jesuit school where actually surprisingly, it was the priests who were OK. It was the other teachers who were a little more into corporal punishment. So I had a better impression of the priests at that school.

But a lot of people who listen to our podcast are educators more at the college level, but if you are an educator, how can you recognize if maybe a student of yours feels a sense of toxic shame about who they are or feels powerless and what can you do to show compassion? I mean often, education is like this mass production process where you could have a hundred students in a class so there's not much you can do about that. But when you do have some control, what do you suggest educators do?

Tony McAleer: Well, I think we have to park our judgment. We can judge an ideology. We can judge an activity. But we got to make sure we don't slip into judging the human being, which assumes to be so rampant in the society. And the way we do that is we stay curious. We have to understand why, how, rather than just you wearing that baseball cap, you're evil and I want nothing to do with you.

Everyone has a story. Everyone has life events which they don't control their destiny but they certainly influence our destiny. And so when I sit down with someone in that situation, it's listening. People – I think we've lost the art of listening. And dialogue isn't just waiting for your turn to talk, it's listening. And when we can listen to someone in a nonjudgmental way, we can judge the ideology, we can judge the activity, but we don't judge the human being.

And when people feel that they can be heard for the first time in a space that's safe, often the walls come down and there's a human being inside there but it's hard to see with all the armor and all the shields and the masks that they're wearing. And I admit, it's really hard to listen to some ideas and thoughts that are abhorrent, that are assault on my values. But if I'm going to be of service to that person, I have to hold my nose and sit through it to get to what's on the

other side. Whatever you think it's about, it's not about immigration or it's not about the wall, it's not about any of that. It's about stuff going on much deeper.

These young people, they often have a very legitimate grievance. It's where they go as the solution to their grievance that's completely bonkers. So we just need to remember that and remember the humanity that exists in everyone no matter how inhumane they behave or talk.

Chris Martin: And you talk about the group that you are now, that you co-founded and that you now are on the Board of Directors of. And one of the things they do is try to systematically get people to leave white supremacist groups. What kind of research are you doing on what's effective and what's not effective?

Tony McAleer: Well, we've got some of the – we've got Pete Simi on our board who is one of the top academics that studied the violent parade and he did participate in research studies. The current study we are working on is in the arm line space but previously, we did an NIJ research grant and we helped with the research to – we give them 48 people to interview, and 16 of them were women. It was the largest sample of female violent and extremist and they went through full 8-hour life inventory interviews to help understand how they as a data set, how they got in and what were the common factors in them leaving.

And study after study after study, the University of Maryland has done a study of – their studies of terrorism and responses to terrorism. The number one correlated factor in the history of someone doing a violent – a violent extremist group is childhood trauma. And that's just physical and sexual trauma. We get into the more – less visible traumas, the emotional traumas, abandonment, neglect, divorce, those kind of things, the numbers are even higher. And when we can track how they left or what was the intervention that happened randomly or on purpose in their lives that changed their trajectory, often compassion is at the core of that.

In the Life After Hate, we use evidence-based counseling practices. So we know what works in other fields. It's not a unique field. It has some unique elements to it. There needs to be a bit of training like cultural competency around like you would have around when you're in the games where domestic violence or drug and alcohol addiction is specific training. But traditional counseling practices work perfectly fine in this space.

So the hard thing to track is – it's hard to track what doesn't happen. Do the people go back or don't they go back or what did you prevent by helping? That's always much more difficult. But since Charlottesville, we've had over 300 people reached out to us and half of those were individuals and the other half were families worried about a loved one. And we've got a great Executive Director, Sammy Rangel who has Master's in Social Work, 18 years counseling experience and he has his own story that would be a great interview for you, coming from a Latino gang background and he rose quite high up. He was one of Wisconsin's most violent inmates. He spent two years in the basement in the hole, chained to a metal slab and holes down because he couldn't go to the bathroom. He was chained up. He was that bad.

But he has had a remarkable turnaround. And his social work insights and experience had been invaluable. We have incorporated the social work code of ethics. We also hired Robert Orell from Sweden who ran Exit Sweden for 14 years and he is trained in cognitive behavior therapy. And we are now training other practitioners whether it would be law enforcement, social workers, or mental health people to give them that cultural competency to understand the space and then to give them a nuance version of motivational interviewing combined with trauma-informed care to work on top of whatever modality of therapy that they are using to make them so that they can engage with these people with the highest chance of success.

Chris Martin: When you use cognitive behavioral therapy, that's a form of therapy that's built around identifying negative distortions that you are placing on the world. How does that apply here?

Tony McAleer: Well, I'm not a cognitive behavioral therapist but there is very much a distorted negative world view at play. That's the whole ideology is negatively distorted. Then with the ego that's always looking for evidence of what it believes to be true, there's no shortage of evidence to reinforce those world views.

And I think we also have to look at the source. We go back to toxic shame. That's a negative self-view. Toxic shame is the lie we hide from ourselves and the lie we had from the world that reside deep in our subconscious self-identity belief system that we're less than whole. We are not good enough. We are unlovable, not pretty enough, not smart enough. And we live our lives in reaction to that and I think part of it is correcting and healing those lies. And the ego goes through extraordinary lengths to not – to hide that toxic shame from the rest of the world.

The way that I did it, I did by numbing the pain with alcohol but I also projected and adopted an ideology that told me I was greater than what's the opposite of shame. Pride. Proud voice. White pride. I'm proud of my race.

Chris Martin: I suppose one or the other negative distortions might be that nonwhite people are out to get white people and white people need to defend themselves.

Tony McAleer: Yeah. The whole white genocide narrative that there's an existential threat and whites are going to be a minority and it's the end of civilization.

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Tony McAleer: Or Jews or sort of demonic hive mind of people controlling entertainment and finance out to destroy the white race through racial intermarriage, homosexuality, drugs, and – I mean it's nonsense. But it's – but I believe that the level to which we dehumanize other human beings is a mere reflection of our own internal disconnection and dehumanization. When we can repair the internal piece, when we can repair that toxic shame and connect to our

humanity, we can connect to the humanity in other people. So we can often go inside to change that outside distortion and narrative.

Chris Martin: Right. And you do talk about how your interest in Buddhism was sparked around the time you were moving away from the movement too and you bought your mother a book called *Without Buddha I Could Not be a Christian*. And then you went on a meditation retreat as well. Tell me about how that interest was sparked and how that changed you.

Tony McAleer: Well, I had a – it was through a friend, a mutual friend. And he was a leader in the movement as well. His name is George Burdi. He was the founder of Resistance Records and lead singer of the band RaHoWa which is notoriously famous, RaHoWa meaning Racial Holy War.

And he and I sort of talked each other out of the movement over the years. We were both bright, middleclass kids, private school educated, and all of that. So we, compared to the people around us, the typical people around us, we were intellectually quite a few steps above and read more books than everybody else, and so always had these conversations both when we were deeply involved in the movement but also on the way out.

And he married an Indian woman. And so as we're both leaving, we both stayed in touch. And I think she introduced him to Eastern mysticism and he introduced it to me and flew out to Vancouver so we could drive two hours to go to – my introduction to meditation was a 10-day Vipassana meditation.

Chris Martin: Right. You described it on the book.

Tony McAleer: People say, "That was your first meditation?" And I was like, "Yeah." I had no idea what I was getting myself into. It was one of the most difficult things I've ever done but one of the most profound things that I had ever done. And that was the first time that I really started this internal inquiry to look inside in me. Everything up until then was what's going on outside of me. And everything external is to blame for what's happening to me. And thus began the journey of self-discovery and internal reflection and eventually the healing work to repair everything inside. And as I did that, my world view changed. I'm a big believer, heal yourself, heal the world.

Chris Martin: Yeah. And you talk about compassion a lot. It's in your website too. It's featured prominently. That's a part of your mission is using compassion. Given the options out there, how do you persuade people the compassionate strategy? In terms of persuasion, how do you persuade people that compassion is the best strategy here?

Tony McAleer: Well, so we look – if we are talking about other people looking at that population, well, I ask them, how is doxing people working? How is calling them out, calling

them names, shaming them, ridiculing, dehumanizing them, how was that working? It's not. It's actually contributing to the problem. It's actually making it worse.

I can point to hundreds of people that we've helped with compassion that have come back and reclaim their humanity and many of them in living productive, engaged lives in their communities, compassionate lives to the benefit of their communities. I've got results. I don't know if anyone can show me results that punching a Nazi – punching Richard Spencer changed Richard Spencer. No, it emboldened him.

So we have to – in our engagement with people on the far-right, we have to ask ourselves a question before we are going to consider an action is, what's our intention? If the intention is to be right and to feel good about yourself, go ahead, scream your throat and do whatever you want. If your intention is to change them, then we have to look at what works and what doesn't. And compassion clearly works but the greatest misunderstanding about compassion is that it's weak or forgiveness that it's weak and it has to be accompanied by healthy boundaries and consequences. Compassion and forgiveness does not give a pass to someone because they've got mommy and daddy issues or something like that.

Compassion is seeing the humanity within that person. And it's important that we do call people out but we also have to remember that we have to call people in as well. So compassion with healthy boundaries is incredibly powerful piece. If you punched me in the face and I forgive you and then you punched me in the face again and I forgive you again, that's not forgiveness. Not that healthy boundaries piece, it's not forgiveness. It is weak.

But in a society, law enforcement is tasked with the healthy boundaries and consequences. And when I think of these people, I think of wounded 4-year-old children inside grown men's bodies having a temper tantrum. But I'm also mindful of the fact that there's nothing more dangerous in this world than a wounded 4-year-old child having a temper tantrum in a grown man's body.

Chris Martin: Right. And you do talk about an interesting strategy you have on Twitter. So describe that strategy to get people to stop retweeting hate speech tweets.

Tony McAleer: Yeah, that's the We Counter Hate Campaign at WeCounterHate.com. And again, it's sort of this out-of-the-box thinking and it was based on there's a group that does – been around much longer than we have called Exit Germany, and what they did is they have – I can't remember what they call it. But basically, there are these followers of Rudolf Hess, the Nazi – one of the Nazi top guys in World War II, he is buried in this town and they have a march every year through this town.

Exit Germany set up a walkathon so that for every kilometer the Nazis marched, they raised money to fight racism. So the Nazis are marching, the townspeople come out and give them water bottles and bananas to encourage them to walk further so that they can raise money to – so that it becomes self-defeating.

Chris Martin: Right.

Tony McAleer: So we teamed up with a creative group out of Seattle called Possible and we gave them the keywords. We work with them on the languaging of it and they provided all the technical expertise. And Twitter is such a toxic place. There are more hateful tweets on Twitter than Game of Thrones than major league baseball, than all of these different categories which are super popular. But the hateful tweets are more.

And so what – when someone types a hateful tweet in, we have this AI that we were training, it recognizes the tweet, it goes to a human to flag it and it says, “Is this a hateful twee or not?” And it gets a thumbs-up or thumbs-down.

When it’s a hateful tweet, the AI then pose a message to reply to the tweet and says, “If you retweet this tweet, we are going to donate a dollar to Life After Hate.” And what we found immediately is a 65% reduction in retweets, 18% of the time, the original tweet was deleted by the author. And a side effect of it is 30% of the time, Twitter investigated the account.

And so, it was a way of how do we reduce this without censorship? Because we don’t want to – the answer isn’t to censor everything so we nothing bad happens. The idea is to try and change behavior and clean things up. But it was remarkable. And I think there’s the impersonal nature of the internet and that we stand there thinking that we are anonymous when we post stuff and we don’t know the people on the other end. But what this kind of does is tap you on the shoulder and says, “Well, I saw you posted that,” and if you’re going to retweet or we are watching, this AI is watching and that seems to have change behavior.

And I know a professor out in Yale did a similar experiment with chat box where people would write toxic things in a chat box and just say, “Hey, you know that’s a human being on the other side of that comment.” And I think over the course of a month or so of repeatedly doing that to targeted people, reduced their hateful tweets by 50%.

So the answer isn’t to suppress behavior. The answer is to change it.

Chris Martin: Right. That’s a useful strategy. I’ve seen that strategy in a couple of other places. You mentioned the march of Germany and I hadn’t heard of that but I’ve heard of similar approaches. And when it comes to your funding, I know the Obama administration promised your group about \$400,000 and this was a story in the national news. The Trump Department of Homeland Security decided to drop that funding. Do you why it was such dropped and whether you might eventually get it?

Tony McAleer: Well, the official reason why we were told it was dropped is that because we weren’t working with law enforcement. They changed the parameters by which everything was

scored and that kind of thing. And there are lots of speculations because we were working with white supremacists. I don't know that that's the case.

But in a way, it was the best thing that ever happened to us because over 10,000 donors gave us close to \$800,000 in small donations in the three or four months after Charlottesville. And so, thank you for cutting our funding. We got twice as much as we asked for. Funny how the universe works that way.

Chris Martin: It is funny. What do you think, I'll close with this, what do you think about the federal government and the Canadian government's response at the moment? Do you think in general it's a functional response and they are aware of the threat?

Tony McAleer: I don't think in the past they've been healthy but I think where they're going with it now is much more healthy and I think now that they are taking domestic, homegrown domestic violent extremism seriously. Before I think they were overly focused on ISIS and Al Qaeda-inspired threats, ignoring the domestic threat. And I think now they are taking the domestic threat very seriously.

Canada is – they've been really slow to put a proper response in place. But I know what they are doing and they are just being very well-thought and methodical about what they do. So I anticipate when they do stuff it will be done properly and done right and it will be well-researched. So it's I think too often, governments knee-jerk react and try to come out with a popular solution that actually doesn't work or isn't functional. Canada is taking its time a little but I anticipate they will come out with a great response because I know the people that are thinking the call.

Chris Martin: Great. Well, Tony, thank you for joining us on the show. I really appreciate you taking the time to do this.

Tony McAleer: Thank you for having me.

Chris Martin: Tony's book, *The Cure for Hate* was published earlier this month and is available in bookstores everywhere. You can learn more about Life After Hate at LifeAfterHate.org. And you can follow Tony on Twitter @mcaleer, that's spelled M-C-A-L-E-E-R.

As always, if you enjoyed the show, please leave us a review on iTunes because it helps other people find out about the show. You can reach me at Podcast@HeterodoxAcademy.org and you can follow me on Twitter @Chrismartin76. Thanks for listening.

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