

EPISODE 1331

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FT: So Money is brought to you by CNET, the site that shows how to navigate change all around us. So Money episode 1331, how narrative intelligence can transform your money story, with my guest, Christina Blacken, Founder of The New Quo.

[INTRO]

***CB:** Money is like a hammer. The hammer in and of itself is bad, but you can use the hammer to murder someone. Or you can use the hammer to build a birdhouse. So money is the same way. You can use money to do specific things to restructure a system. Or you can use it to pretty much perpetuate the status quo, and it's up to us to really think through what are the dominant narratives around infinite worth, which is not sustainable or consuming just to consume, and how can we change those stories to a different message, and use money in a different way?"*

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FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. We're talking about money stories today, the stories that we may have grown up with, the stories we continue to tell ourselves today, the stories the world tells us about money and how it makes us feel, how it makes us engage, the impact it has on our bottom lines. Are these stories healthy? How can we begin to rewrite them?

My guest today is the expert on all of this. Christina Blacken is a public speaker, performer, and Founder of The New Quo, which is a leadership development and inclusion consultancy. She helps leaders create inclusive and organizational change through what she calls narrative intelligence, and she has helped 1,500 leaders at Fortune 500 companies and VC-backed startups leverage the psychological power of story to transform behavior, build inclusive culture, and communicate new ideas with deeper connection and influence. How can we apply this to our personal lives? That's where our conversation begins.

A little bit more about Christina, her story begins with her family being part of the great migration from the south and landing in Utah, where she lived through her teenage years. She speaks openly on the podcast about being an outsider religiously, politically, racially, and what it taught her about how powerful story can be for influencing how we treat one another. Excited to – Here we go. Here's Christina Blacken.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Christina Blacken, welcome to So Money. How are you?

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CB: I'm doing good.

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FT: It's what I like to hear. I like when people are doing good. I just want to begin by saying that I am so appreciative of the work that you are putting out in the world. I just want to make that clean statement at the tippity top because not a lot of people do what you do, and it's really foundational, and it's really important, and we're going to get into it. We're talking about your work specifically around narrative intelligence. Narrative intelligence. Can you first share with us what you mean by that? We'll talk about the connections of narrative intelligence and the stories we tell ourselves around a lot of things. But in particular because it's this podcast, we're going to talk about money. But tell us about your understanding of narrative intelligence and why it is so important to you and to everybody.

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CB: So I'll start off with how I discovered the term because I didn't even know the term existed until a couple of years ago. I was doing the strategy session with a friend where I was describing my work to him because I wanted some advice on how to just structure it differently and talk about it differently. So I was like, "Well, I teach people how narratives affect their beliefs and behaviors." Then I give them strategies to change how they're thinking, change what they're

doing, change how they communicate. As we described it, he's like, "You know, you're doing something called narrative intelligence. Have you heard of that?" I was like, "Do tell. What is that term? It sounds sexy. It sounds interesting."

As we got into it, I realized it was a term that was coined I think in like the 1950s by AI researchers. Essentially, they were trying to figure out how do we get algorithms and machines to organize information in narrative form because the only thing on this planet that does that regularly are humans. Ultimately, we all have inbuilt narrative intelligence, which really is the ability to use story to influence behavior. Most people understand that in a marketing sense or in a sales sense. But when it comes to beliefs or bias, most people don't realize that a lot of them are conditioned from cultural, social, and familial dominant narratives essentially.

In my work, I teach how to disrupt some narratives that are in the way of their full potential and maybe full of bias, and also teaching them ways to use narrative to have better connection and understanding.

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FT: It is sexy. I love it. Narrative intelligence, we think of emotional intelligence. We think of academic intelligence. We don't often give credence to the stories we tell and the intelligence around that. This is something we all need room for improvement. We all can improve upon this. I don't think unlike maybe like academic intelligence, which some people maybe are born, would you agree? Like just having more math skills than – This is something that we can all improve upon.

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CB: Yes, because we all have the – I think around the age of three, we start to organize our world in narrative. So those stories may not make sense. We might be like, "The little ball is on the cliff and the alien." You're like, "That's cute, Tommy. But what are you talking about?" But our brains are trying to recognize information, attach meaning to things that's happening to us to remember experiences. So we have those skills innately.

I think 65% of all of our daily communication is in story, but we're not taught how to use story to achieve a specific outcome. So once we're taught that, it can be a tool that's used for good and

for changing how we structure things, changing how we interact. Or it can be used for bad, as we've seen in a lot of ways even in the last few years. So narrative intelligence is a tool, and how you use that tool can have different impacts.

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FT: I can think of some journalists who could benefit from this. But narrative intelligence for you, Christina, has been a tool that is core to your work as the Founder and Chief Story Strategist at The New Quo, where you're creating social change activism. Can you share a little bit of the behind the scenes of the work that you're doing and the change that you're seeing because of this tool?

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CB: Absolutely. So with my work, I'm focusing on leadership development and equity. My real goal is to teach people how can you realize the dominant and cultural narratives that are affecting how you lead. So what are the stereotypes that you may have? What are the assumptions that might get in the way of how you think, how you make decisions? Then how can you construct new narratives to have a better trust, a better connection and understanding with your colleagues and actually achieve the goals that you want to achieve? That's ranged for from me helping a large tech company with their moderation practices and teaching people how to recognize micro aggressions in conversations, and respond to those conversations more appropriately.

Or it's helping a marketing company with their language and if they're being inclusive, and really giving a good impression of people publicly. I've helped individuals with their DEI goals in every area of their business. So it's really interesting that this tool can be applied to so many equity problems. At this stage, I've trained around leaders across nine industries, and at the core of it is sort of this three As of change that I teach, which is awareness accountability, and action because these concepts of bias and equity are – They feel complex and esoteric, like people are like, “Well, how do we even do it?” But if we have simple pragmatic strategies, we can change habits that ultimately can just be something that someone accesses every single day.

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FT: I would love if we could have you lead us through a workshop right now on how to apply this tool to our financial lives. There's the response – There's a way to change the narrative in the public sphere, right? The way that money is discussed and the discourse that we're having around money, which cannot be inclusive, which can feel alienating to many people, depending on who you are and where you're coming from. But even like the stories we tell ourselves. I just got off of a conference event where I was asked, “Why is money your love language, Farnoosh?” Because I guess I said that at one point, and they made me attest to it.

I said, “Well, it's because of my story. My narrative is that I grew up with immigrant parents, and we talked about money, the good and the bad.” Not to say that I had a very wonderful foray into the world of money. My parents fought about it. But even that I think informed my intelligence around money. That like witnessing that, I learned the importance of being financially independent as a woman to never enter a relationship, feeling dependent, and all of those things. I tell myself these stories, and this is part of the why of why I go about becoming so vigilant about my money and then also sharing that wisdom with others.

I mean, this was my interpretation. Can you talk a little bit about that? We interpret things that maybe we're not interpreting correctly or healthily. So help us. We all come from somewhere. We all have our own money stories rooted in some place in time, and that often dictates so much of how we see the world, the financial lens through which we see the world. Can you help us hone that, and maybe there's some mindset shifts? What is the routine? What is the practice?

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CB: So one tool I talk about a lot is called narrative inquiry, which is just a series of self-reflective questions so that you can get clear on what your dominant narratives even are. I think it's important to also think through what are the narratives that I was raised with. Like you were saying, we all have narratives around money that we were raised with that affect how we relate to and experience money. Then also, the stories that you've heard in the media about money.

I think it's important for people to understand that money is just a tool. It's a tool that can be used for really bad things or good things. Once we see it as a tool and not a self-reflection of

worth, we can then think about money as an expression of values. If you're clearing your values and getting clear on those stories, then you can make better choices.

So one example of this for myself when I was reflecting on my stories of money is in college, I was taking this class. I was studying policy analysis and management. The acronym is PAM, which is very cute. That was my major. In that degree, we essentially had to learn about social policy, and all social policies have specific narratives that are used to get them approved or passed or digested by the public.

One of the narratives around money that came up that was a pretty predominant policy for a long time is the welfare queen, so this idea that there are individuals who just are in the system. They're trying to take advantage of it. They're not working. Many times, the picture of this "welfare queen" was a black woman. Now, as we unpack the data and the information, it was a made-up story. It wasn't necessarily true. If you look at any kind of social policy, usually it matches the demographics of the community that it's in. Because the majority of the people in this country are white, a majority of people on welfare at that time were white. There's just more of them, and there just happened to be more people in those policies.

But we had really, really strong debates in class about this concept of who deserves money? Who is trying to take advantage of the system? And who is "skating by"? And there were so many really negative stereotypes that people had around safety nets for when things happened to people out of their control. Or this idea of, "These people don't deserve it because they don't work hard enough." So those kinds of narratives get ingested really deeply. And they affect how people pay their employees later as leaders. They affect who they're supporting in different causes. That's just one tiny example of a dominant cultural narrative. That is not necessarily true. It's a myth. But it deeply affects how people relate to money, and ultimately how they treat others by their assumptions around what they're doing with money.

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FT: I 100% agree with that. Now the question is, how do we step out of that mindset? If you have been raised with a false narrative around money and you inherit it – It's almost like I was just talking to Ruchika Tulshyan on the podcast on Monday who does a lot of work around

imposter syndrome and the myths about that and how it's been almost exclusively fed as a false syndrome to women. And so we grow up thinking, "I'm not good at this. I can't do this. I am less than." What does it take to break through from that? It's almost like you've been gaslit.

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CB: Yeah. That narrative inquiry is really about, well, one, recognizing your narratives. Because people are really unconscious about it. They might be operating in a way they have no idea. So just listing all of the beliefs you have down about money. Like, I believe blank about money. And you could write 10 sentences or 10 examples. And then you can start to try to challenge some of those statements by your experiences in the world and even looking up information about those statements and if they're actually factually true. And you'd be surprised by the amount of things that you can challenge. This idea of, "Well, people who are blank can never have money." So if I'm a woman, I will never have money because of X, Y and Z. There are ways to challenge that.

And I think once you figure out the fears that you have around money, and which ones are based in complete made-up ideas, and which ones do you have some truth to them or barriers, then you can start to make a plan. So the plan could be, "I'm in crippling debt. I don't know if I can ever get out of it." Well, now we have that narrative. Now we can make a plan of, "Actually, you can get out of this debt if we make a few tweaks here and make an actual specific plan." Versus just spinning our wheels on this narrative indefinitely, which changes nothing. So I think it's important to start with recognizing what your stories even are. Writing them down. Challenging them with facts and experiences, and then making plans for the ones that have real genuine barriers in the way. Because sometimes your stories might have some elements of truth.

And I think it's also good to expose yourself to a lot of information and different stories around money outside of yourself so that you can have new stories. If you only talk about money or only think about or research it from a very specific place or a very specific community, you're going to miss out on other stories. So I used to push myself. One of my first financial books I ever read was – I think it was called *I Will Teach You to Be Rich*, Ramit.

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FT: Ramit Sethi. Yeah.

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CB: And I remember being like, "Oh, this is a really kind of fun, cheeky way of looking at money that I never thought of." And it pushed me to expose myself to a new kind of thinking. Even just understanding the structure of the financial system. Because there's a lot of flaws in our systems that I think are destructive and inequitable. But you can't change them if you don't understand them and if you don't even know how they work. It's sort of like trying to fix an airplane and you have no idea how it flies. So it's important to expose yourself to new individuals, and experts, and ideas so that your money stories aren't only coming from your grandma and your uncle in your living room. Because those may be accurate. And they may not be accurate at all.

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FT: And how lucky are we that we live now in a world where we do have access to so many more voices in the money space? I'm one of them. But Ramit is another. And you know depending on what you're looking to unlearn or learn for the first time, there's someone out there for you who you will feel invited into their space. And I think that's part of it, too, is like developing this story in an environment where you feel safe. That comes up a lot in my conversations with people where they just don't feel like they have the safety net to change that narrative, to pursue a different narrative. It's scary. It can be scary.

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CB: Yeah. I think I experienced that a lot with – When I first started my business, I was very scared of charging too much or having prices that I couldn't back up. So I was always trying to question, "Well, is this really valuable? And people are going to value it?" And what helped me get rid of some of that was joining a community where people were doing sort of similar work and me getting questions and information about how they structured what they did. So I could have confidence of, "Wait a minute. My labor has value? My labor's been chronically

undervalued and underpaid? A lot of my career?" And if I'm bringing something of value that's going to have a return for the people that I help, it should be priced effectively.

And I learned that solely by being exposed to other people and their stories about money. They're like, "Girl, mm-mm, you are not charging enough. Your labor is definitely valuable. And here's how you can restructure it." And that only happened when I was in a community of people who are doing aspirational work or work that I strive to also achieve. And I learned about their stories and experiences around money when it came to their own work. And that wouldn't have happened if I hadn't joined that community.

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FT: That's such a good point. Yeah, find your people. Find your money peeps, sometimes I say. And I think sometimes you just need to see the evidence that someone else did it and it didn't blow up in their face. And I can do it too. It's so important.

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CB: Absolutely.

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FT: And, also, like what you're also, I think, pointing to is the transparency. Learning through what others are doing, which we didn't always share how much we made, or how much we're charging, or our mistakes. And I think that is changing. And I think that's contributing to why a lot of people are having more success with their own money because they're not doing it in a silo.

I want to learn more about you, Christina. You have such a fascinating background, which I know this isn't the first time someone's asked you about growing up in Utah, in a Mormon community. But would you mind sharing a little bit about your childhood? And specifically, the narratives you grew up with around money and what you learned about money growing up in that part of the world?

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CB: Yeah. So my family is originally from the United States southern region and have a slave ancestry. So they've been here a long time. I don't know much past my great great great grandparents. It's sort of a blur. But I do know that around the 1950s and 60s, they migrated to Utah. And that was during the great migration. So they could find new jobs and settle down.

And being raised there was a really interesting experience, because I called myself an extreme minority. I was outside of a lot of groups. So I was a racial minority. I was a religious minority because I was a Mormon, and a political minority because a majority of the states to this day is Republican. And so my family had a lot of stories around survival, and community, and depending on each other, and a bit of distrust through the communities that we were part of because there was a lot of racism. There was a lot of turmoil that they experienced and I personally experienced.

But because of that, my family was always sort of working poor. So they worked very hard. They had stable jobs, but they weren't wealthy by any means. And because of that, my first narratives were make sure you pay your bills and try to keep your debt as minimal as possible, which are strong and healthy narratives. But it had really nothing to do with understanding the financial system, or understanding how wealth is built, or even understanding how to not live paycheck-to-paycheck. It was a privilege to not live paycheck-to-paycheck. And a majority of people in the United States and, really, globally, still live paycheck-to-paycheck in many ways and don't even have enough for an emergency in terms of savings. So those are dominant narratives that I had.

And I started working at the age of 16. And I had all types of wild jobs. I was a telemarketer. I sold Cutco knives in MLM, which was insane. I worked at an air bag facility in a literal manufacturing facility putting little airbags together. So I was hustling, and it's because I had to. We needed the support. I needed it to be able to do my extracurricular activities and apply to college. So there has not been a year of my entire life since I was 16 that I didn't work.

In high school, it was 20 hours a week that I was working on top of being a cheerleader and doing all the things and having pretty good grades. So my experience with money was always I have to work extremely hard to have it. And I have to be very careful with what I do with it and

not spend it too opulently or recklessly. And I should just be able to meet my basic needs, and that's it, and not strive for more. And that narrative started to shift when I built my own company and thought of the idea of, "How do I use money as a tool for change? If I am going to be in the system and I don't like how it works, how can I, in the meantime, use it as a leveraging tool for shifting power, for shifting ownership, for shifting impact as much as possible?" And that shift happened to me when I moved to New York City. Went to college here. I'm not in New York City. I went to Cornell, which is upstate. Then I moved to New York City. But that's when that journey started to shift of, "Wait a minute. I could do more than just pay my bills and work way too hard. What else can I do with this income?"

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FT: I think that's a great lesson for everybody, is that wherever you are in your financial journey, whatever belief you have, even if you think you've got it all healthily figured out, I would push you. I would urge you to think a little bigger, a little bit more expansively about maybe not so much even like I want – It's not even about like, "Can I earn more money?" But what is the influence that you can extend with your financial power?

I think, as women, that really speaks to us. We love to feel like we're helping, and we're supporting, and we're nurturing, and we're kicking the ball down the road. And I think like money can be a tool for that. And maybe I'm generalizing. But that for me was very empowering when I was in my 30s. And I am, have always been, and still am the breadwinner in my family. And I felt very proud of the income that I was bringing in and that it was supporting our family unit. And I felt like I had had "enough".

And it wasn't until I spoke to a female financial empowerment coach on this podcast, and she said, "Why don't you want to be a millionaire? Why don't you want to have more money?" And it's not for everybody. But I think she sensed in me that I wanted it, but there was something holding me back. And I was truthful. I said, "Well, I think that I grew up with this idea that like the more you make, the harder your life can almost get." Because as a woman, especially as a mother, to try to go out there and somehow double my income. What was that going to mean in terms of loss? Would I lose time with my kids? Would I be sort of branded like an unavailable – Emotionally unavailable, unavailable mother, wife? And I was worried about that.

She said, "You know what? Let me tell you something. When women make more money, the world becomes a better place. So get rid of those what-ifs and think about what kind of power you can inherit. More power you can inherit. When you make more money, and if there are things that you want to influence, like, if you want to be more charitable, if you want to build a bigger business, if you want to leave a bigger financial legacy, have that motivate you to make more money." And I think it just completely – Like, the room started to swirl around me. I was like, "Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! Wait a minute. Are you telling me, like, this is actually possible now?" What a breakthrough narrative can have. I'm sure you've seen it over and over.

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CB: Yeah. And I think those narratives around what do I want to do with money? Because a lot of people believe acquiring and hoarding money is enough. And if you think about the shoe hoarders, there's nothing else in the world that we encourage hoarding except for money.

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FT: It's my nightmare.

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CB: Yeah. It's like I have five million pairs of shoes in my house. What is wrong with you? Like people would think you're crazy. So this idea of hoarding wealth with no intention and no purpose, and also no – The no consciousness of how you created your wealth is extremely destructive. And I think it's horrible. But at the same time, how can you reframe that to think, "How am I creating income? How am I using this as a tool? And how is that tool an expression of my values?" And in a way that's not based out of fear and scarcity. Or trying to create some empty self-worth through consuming things that maybe don't matter to me.

So, for example, there are things I spend on now that I wouldn't have in the past in terms of having a nice apartment, having a certain amount of space, traveling in a way that I'm not going to have a cramp in my back and my leg is going to be twisted. So I pay a bit more for more leg

room, right? But there are other things that I don't care about and I'm not going to chase, because I don't care about keeping up with any kind of Joneses.

I do care about using my money to expand my message, to invest in other people's labor appropriately, to think about the policies and practices around me and how I can bolster their messages and get more supports and systems in place so people are not working poor or don't have a living wage. Like those things matter to me. And that's how I use the tool.

So I think it's important for people to realize money is like a hammer. The hammer in and of itself isn't bad. But you can use the hammer to murder someone. Or you can use the hammer to build a birdhouse. So Money is the same way. You can use money to do specific things to restructure a system. Or you can use it to pretty much perpetuate the status quo. And it's up to us to really think through what are the dominant narratives around infinite growth, which is not sustainable? Or consuming just to consume? And how can we change those stories to a different message and use money in a different way?

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FT: I'm quoting you in my forthcoming book. What you just said is so quotable. That money is a hammer. And yeah, it could kill someone or it could build a home for a new life. So true. I want to shift a little bit of our conversation to the outside world. We spent a lot of good time talking about what we can do as individuals to change the narrative. What are some narratives around money that you see continue to perpetuate in the outside world that doesn't build inclusivity? That doesn't invite people in? That is not creating a more equitable world? What do you want to see end?

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CB: The first is that ownership is more important than labor. The idea that if you own something, you're inherently more valuable than if somebody is laboring on something. So, for example, with people that I work with, I try to pay them as much income as possible. I don't pay them the market lowest price to bring as much profit as I can to myself. And the reason is, without their labor, I could not achieve what I'm achieving. They are inherently as valuable as I am even

though I'm the owner. And I think our narratives around ownership have to shift, and this idea that people are inherently more valuable or less viable because they own something or they don't. And a lot of owners would not be where they were at without hundreds of people's labor essentially. So I think we need to shift that narrative significantly.

The other idea is that working extremely hard is the guarantee for wealth. There are people who work hours a week, and they're chronically underpaid, and it's because their organizations do not value their labor, do not pay them a living wage, or an effective wage for their labor. And so they are stuck in a cycle of poverty.

I think I saw a statistic recently that it takes years of no accidents and no mistakes to get out of poverty. So if you don't have a medical accident, if there isn't some little misstep, maybe you'll get out of that situation. It's not just because of character flaw or a lack of "hard work". And I think that myth about hard work and bootstraps have to stop, because the system that we have in place is not necessarily about that. And I think when people understand that, if you are in a position of power, you can restructure it. You can pay people effectively. You cannot try to be as cheap as possible and as exploitive as possible in the ways that you think about money and capital. And if we don't change those things, essentially, it's just repeating the same issues that we already have. So those dominant cultural narratives.

And even this idea of inherent character worth, if you have money or not. There's a lot of assumptions of if you're wealthy, you're inherently smarter, harder working, more trustworthy. And if you don't have a lot of income, you're lazy, you're not smart, you're degenerate. And that's just factually untrue. We have data to prove that that is not true at all. So I think people need to decouple character from money. They also needed to couple the idea that some people are inherently much more worthy because they have more money.

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FT: Right. And we do tend to connect self-worth with net worth. We also connect money with power. And I just want everyone to know that if you are struggling or if you're not where you want to be financially, that does not mean that your voice should not be heard. That you have any less ability to deserve what you want and to earn it.

Christina Blacken, thank you so much. This has been a very important conversation. I'm so glad that we are having it. And I would love to have you back. And by the way, I am exerting this for the book. The whole chapter on the fear of money and how we say we're afraid of money, but we're not afraid of money. Because money is just sitting there. That's not a thing – Like until we engage, that's when the fears start to surface and then we're going to start looking at like where did that fear come from. And it's sort of a reflective hammer. We see ourselves in it. And sometimes we don't like what we see. But that can also be a false narrative.

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CB: Yeah. I would just love to leave people with the idea that the stories you believe can change your perspective in life. And if there are stories that are in the way of your fullest potential, you have the ability to reframe them or shift them and to believe new stories. And especially around money, that's one tool of power and potentially influence. And there are many other tools that you can leverage. But thinking about money as a tool for expressing your values is a powerful place to begin with the new story.

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FT: Christina, thank you so much.

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CB: Thank you.

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FT: Thanks so much to Christina for joining us. To learn more about her work, check out thenewquo.com.

I'll see you back here on Friday where we are having our next installment of our Women's History Month Series on Fridays. Our topic of conversation is everything women and retirement.

Answering your specific money questions. Looking forward to that. In the meantime, I hope your day is So Money.

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