

Q&A: Poet Cleo Wade on Self-Love, Community and Promoting Progress Through Art

Written by Kiley Warren

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Cleo Wade is certainly an artistic force to be reckoned with. Wade, who is a poet, activist, avid lover of people and yes, was once dubbed, “The Millennial Oprah,” by *New York Magazine*, has found fame through her absorbable poetry and engaging spirit. Her Instagram-famous mantras encourage everything from self-care to policy changes, with each one being built around the core values of love and community. Wade is currently on her nationwide, *Courageous Love Tour*, which serves as a space to not only connect more deeply with yourself, but also with the people around you. We had the chance to sit down with Wade during a recent visit to the Valley, where she gushed about Maya Angelou, creativity and how cultivating change starts by working within our own communities.

Arizona Foothills Magazine: I know from your poetry that you’re someone who really values community and sort of embracing, as you call it, your “tribe.” With that, what has the *Courageous Love Tour* and the opportunity to go across the country and connect with your fans meant to you?

Cleo Wade: We created this tour for really one reason, and that was to bring people together in a room to connect in real life. I’ve found that there’s been a lot of emphasis on connecting online only, and I really feel that while the online space is an amazing place to connect, I think that some of the most fulfilling ways that we can be in community together, is to actually get in communities with each other. So, this entire tour is truly a labor of love. And I feel so lucky that I get to connect with everyone, but my goal beyond that is really to bring people together wherever we go so that they can connect with each other. What I’ve found is that people are having a harder time finding people that they feel like they share the same values with, or who are aligned with their same principles and lifestyles and spiritual journeys, and so people are feeling really isolated and they’re feeling lonely. I think loneliness is like the next smoking—it’s the next sort of, ‘big epidemic.’ We just really wanted to create these spaces so that you could look around and know that this person came here because they want to be your friend. They want to meet somebody new and maybe they’re working on themselves. They’re into the journey of constantly growing, changing and evolving. I think having comrades in that journey is so critical. So, I feel really blessed that I get to be with all of the people who have been a part of my life and who follow my work, but apart from that, I’m so excited to actually bring them together.

AFM: And why do you think that foundation of community is so important now, maybe more now than ever before?

CW: I think that there’s a place for everything in our world and I definitely am not going to be someone to diss the online space, since I’m able to be in community with so many people because of it. And I’m so proud of the beautiful family that I get to open my phone up to and go to in the online space, and through social media. I just think that we need to have a balance of all things. And so, I think that if we depend too much on finding things online, we’re still kind of alone in that space, and it’s more voyeuristic than it is when you’re in contact and in community with other people, where you’re able to offer someone empathy or hold their hand or look at them in the eyes or sense that something is wrong with them, even if someone says that everything is fine. I still think that we need to go out of our way to be in real-life space with each other and connect with each other on a human level.

AFM: Tell me a little bit about how your partnership with Graduate Hotels came about? How much has their support on this tour meant to you?

CW: So, when we were on my book tour earlier in the year, they reached out to us to see if we just wanted to stop by one of their hotels for a book signing. During the summer, I did this booth called the ‘Are You Okay?’ booth, and it’s basically where I sit in a public park, and I ask people if they’re OK. It’s really just about having a loving conversation. When I kept hearing that people were having this hard time finding friends and finding places to be in community with people, I went home that night to my business partner and was like, ‘I want to travel around the U.S. and build community spaces, and I want them to be free. I want people to have the opportunity to meet other people.’ People are going less and less to organized religious spaces where there’s the church, the mosque, the temple, etc. But, we need those traditions of being together and of rooting for our communities together. She [my business partner] was just like ‘Yeah, I think you should do that someday.’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, I was thinking later this year.’ My business partner is amazing, and she remembered that they [Graduate Hotels] reached out

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to us like a month or two before. We then reached out to them, and they told us how many locations they had, and we just said that we would go to all of them. I'm about half way through the tour, but they have really been amazing partners. We sort of just told them exactly what we wanted and that we wanted it to be free. So many other businesses would have been like, 'OK, how do we charge that? How do we get a return on this?' and they never once asked that. Never hesitated once. So, it's been an amazing partnership for the Courageous Love project, and I'm just so, so grateful.

AFM: You're one of the true creative voices of your generation, and you've spoken so much inspiration into the lives of others. But who inspires you?

CW: Gosh. You know, I'm really inspired by my girlfriends. I feel so lucky to have an amazing support system. And, I'm also really inspired by my audience. People tend to look at a social media platform as a way to reach other people. But it's also a way that other people reach us. There are just so many stories—and every single night on the tour, I learn so much about people and what they're doing, what they're feeling, what they've gone through and how they've gone through it. I'm so inspired by their strength and resilience and their desire to not only grow for the better, but also to help other people do the same. It's truly such an inspirational community, so I think that I'm most inspired by the people I get to meet on my tour, or wherever I am. And on top of that, when I'm not in the public space, I feel pretty grateful for all of the group chats I have with my girlfriends on my phone.

AFM: Fashion has always seemed to be a really important part of your life. I understand that in the beginning of your career, you were involved in the fashion industry a little bit. And currently, you're collaborating with Gucci, Tiffany & Co. and Aerie. So, how special has it been for you to be able to sort of combine your passions of fashion and poetry?

CW: It's really important for me, I think as someone who has visibility, to exemplify for young women and people everywhere, that you can be interested in more than one thing at once, and one doesn't always have to portray another. I think especially when it comes to fashion or makeup or hair or whatever, as women, we've been told that we can't enjoy these things and be taken seriously. We have movies—one of my personal favorites being "Legally Blonde"—where you see how much a woman has to prove herself just to be able to wear pink and to be able to enjoy the things that you enjoy. I know that that's a highly-glamorized example of that, but it happens everywhere. And I do think that while we live in a world where there's a lot that we can't control, one thing we can control is when we walk into that meeting or that interview, we can feel confident in how we feel about ourselves. Fashion is the one thing that really has the power to contribute to that and to feel confidence. And I think anyone that would tell you different, is either lying or it's just not true for them. And so, for me, it's always been something that can put me in a better mood or helps me with my energy. Sometimes I think of athletes when they get in a huddle and they hype themselves up—I do think that when we go through our routine of getting dressed and putting on our outfit or putting on our mascara, I do think that it's a little bit of our own rally. You're gifting yourself these things before you go into a room. If it's not for you, that's fine. But if it is for you, you should feel entitled to having that be a part of your life, and still be able to take all other aspects of your life seriously.

AFM: Since Aerie is one of the brands you've partnered with more recently, what specifically attracted you to working with them?

CW: Well, I was first introduced to what the brand was doing through my friend Yara, who's worked on some projects with them. What we really just found was that so much of what they believe is important as a brand, aligned with what we believe is important. And, really, creating spaces for girls to explore and expand the idea of what has been so long sold to us as 'beauty,' or as being 'perfect' or 'healthy.' They're really helping the next generation redefine all of these standards that don't even work and aren't accurate. I was so impressed by and so excited that someone was putting together campaigns with real women who didn't have to be thin for a living in order to get the job. So, when they approached us, it was kind of just a dream partnership. What's really exciting is that we'll be able to travel around the U.S. also together to build spaces for girls to talk about body image and self-love and personal growth and friendship.

AFM: What is the process like for you of creating and editing mantras?

CW: Well, I'm definitely the 'edit queen.' You know what's really important for me is that if it's written in 10 words, and I can say it in six, I always try to get to that place. Even if it's just visually or how the word reads, it's so important for there to be space for the reader. I never write something with the intention of, 'I want you to do this.' I write with the intention of, 'Take this and do whatever you need to do with it.' It's not about somebody doing what I want them to do with it. I have no desire to control how the work is translated into the world or into the lives of anyone. But, I do want them to know that there are words and spaces available for them, for their own healing and for their own growth. So, for me, for it to be as minimal as possible, allows for there to be enough space for that to be relatable to someone who may be going through a hard time in eighth grade or who may be going through a hard time in their eighties. And I think that when I'm the happiest about my work, is

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when I see that the same work is translated for different people and different parts of their lives.

AFM: Your work reminds me a lot of Maya Angelou's. I think that both of you encompass the same level of sincerity. And while your words may read gently, they also speak a lot of volumes. So, are there any poets or artists whose work has served as a sort of template for your own?

CW: Even when I first wanted to try to be a poet for a living—I mean, that was not a job that existed. So, I had no idea how it could be possible. I didn't know anyone of my generation that it was possible for because it really hadn't existed yet. Rupi Kaur is a really good girlfriend of mine, and this was even before "Milk and Honey" was changing the literary world. And so now, I think that girls are able to look at poets, and to see and feel that it would be possible to have a career in literature, which is so amazing. But at that time, there was no one in our generation at all. So, if it weren't for the Maya Angelous, the Alice Walkers, the James Baldwins and the Mary Olivers of the world, I mean—I definitely don't think Shakespeare ever made me feel like I could do it for a living. So, if it wasn't for those authors, I don't know that I could have even began to see the dream. And a lot of those people too, when you're a young writer and sort of trying to figure out your own voice, you find that you kind of start by imitating them. You eventually break open and have your own template and put that out into the world. The reason that it's so important for me to tell my story and to put as much of my work out into the world as I can, is because I know that there's a young writer somewhere who has a voice, and just doesn't know how to use that voice yet. So, I know that they're probably starting with my template. Which I then know that they will bust open and create something ten times better than I could ever create. And I just want to be able to make sure that they have a starting place. Because if it weren't for the Mayas of the world, I wouldn't have known my starting place and I couldn't be where I am today.

AFM: My favorite poem from your book, "*Heart Talk*," was the poem 'tired.' The end of the poem reads: "I was tired of looking at the world as one big mess, so I decided to start cleaning it up and when people ask me if I am exhausted, I tell them no. Because more than anything, what I got the most tired of, was being tired." What words of encouragement would you offer to all of the people who may be feeling, as you say, 'tired of being tired'?

CW: There's another page in my book that says, 'Not every ground is a battleground.' In that, it says that the wise soldier recognized that not every ground is a battleground. Their scars do not let them forget that they've had to be a fighter, but their scars also do not let them forget that the human body cannot live its life every day in the trenches. It's not possible to wake up with anger and outrage and fury every single day. You have to allow yourself to rest so that you can be in a place to properly problem solve. We really do need to create solutions from a heart space and we need a healthy emotional head space. So, I think to everyone who is fighting the good fight, it's so important to give yourself space to come back to yourself and rest and replenish, so that when you are out in the world trying to help the world, you are doing it from a healed space. As the old saying goes, 'Healed people heal people and hurt people, hurt people.' We have to have love and peace within ourselves, so that we can do those loving acts for each other.

AFM: Love seems to be the core value of who you are. It's present in writing, it's present in your work as an activist. And it's even more prevalent in the way that you interact with and care for others. So, Cleo, what does love mean to you?

CW: For me, love is really an action word. It is a thing in motion, it is not something we just feel, it is not something we just say, it is really something you do. It is something that requires you to show up. Whether it's how Cornell West defines justice as, 'justice is what love looks like in public.' It's when we show up in public to change for a more loving way of being. It's when we show up for a friend, whether it's on their birthday or just for a casual dinner. Or whether we show up for a stranger just by saying 'hello.' That's what love looks like to me.