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A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 36

PRINCE EA: THE COLOR OF YOUR SKIN

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[00:11] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: He is African American, a hip-hop artist, and a voice that provides clarity and optimism in a world that can seem not so sane sometimes. She is a white woman, a spiritual teacher who grew up in the South. She was raised in the heart of Mississippi, surrounded by discrimination. For over twenty-five years, she has pointed us towards freedom by asking us to look deeper than our thoughts. So, what happens when these two people with very different backgrounds come together to talk about skin color? Well, we are about to find out. This is a conversation about racism - where it comes from, why we believe it, and just maybe, how to transcend it.

[00:56] PRINCE EA: We didn't have a choice for what skin color we came out with, you know? It's not our fault. So I think we have to see this, we have to recognize this and look deeper. And once we look deeper we see that reality is what we make it and there's no other way to make it other than out of love.

[01:15] HILLARY: This month, Gangaji Radio welcomes Prince EA for a conversation about what it means to be black, what it means to be white, and what it means to give up those definitions altogether. I'm Hillary Larson, and this is a special edition of *A Conversation with Gangaji*.

[01:37] HILLARY: I just wanted to give everybody a little bit of background about this particular topic that we're going to cover today. And, you know, a few months ago, I just thought this would be such a great topic to cover because it just seems like this whole subject of racism is reaching this fever pitch in this country and I - I mean, I think it's definitely related to the election of President Obama - but when I looked at it I thought, this conversation between me and Gangaji would be a great conversation, because I think there's a lot to be said for what two liberal white women think about racism. And then Gangaji, with this perception that she has of always seeing deeper - and what's deeper than the color of your skin - but what are the layers before that? And then we were graced by, by you, by your gracious acceptance of our invitation to join us in this conversation. So I just, first of all, just wanted to say, "Thank you," for flying all the way from St. Louis to be with us here in Ashland.

[02:39] PRINCE EA: My pleasure. My pleasure.

[02:41] HILLARY: So, what I'm really interested about is, when it comes to racism, it's like, what's not being said? Because there are overt acts of racism happening all the time and they are on the news, and it's easy for those of us that disagree with that to stand up and say, "I disagree with that, it's not fair." But I also think there's a different conversation that lurks underneath that, for even those of us that disagree with racism. Like, what is underneath that still, that's not being spoken, that keeps that system intact?

[03:20] GANGAJI: You're looking at me, so I'll start.

[03:21] HILLARY: I'm looking at you.

[03:22] GANGAJI: Okay! Well, I'm really happy to bring my background to this conversation because I grew up in Mississippi and in a racist atmosphere. That was the way I was conditioned and I accepted it because I didn't know to question it. We had maids who were African American and there was a section of town that was African American. I had no idea that the music that was being played there at that time. Turns out that the town I grew up in, Clarksdale, Mississippi was like an epicenter of blues - Muddy Waters and Robert Johnson had played there. But, of course, we didn't know that because we saw the whole culture as somehow inferior. I didn't have a cruel family, but the superiority of the "white-skinned ones" (laughter) was unquestioned until I went to college and had a professor who happened to be from Harvard. But he was at Ole Miss, where I was in college (it is this very racist college), and he questioned me on it in a way that "waked" me up. At least got me investigating, "Well, where did this come from? How do I justify this?" And I am indebted to him forever because, in the belly of the beast, there's no place worse to be, for a person of black skin, then Mississippi at that time.

[04:54] GANGAJI CONT'D: This was this light, this force of light, and so I questioned it. And then the civil rights movement came and I was a part of that, marching. And then I also was teaching school in Memphis, Tennessee - after I graduated from college, obviously - and I had a group of very bright english students - I was teaching English - and they were primarily African American. And I just went out on a limb and I brought in two James Baldwin books - *The Fire Next Time* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Somehow, my principal let me order enough for all these kids and we studied those books. And then I got to see how shocking that was for some of the black students. It was too much for them because they also ... they knew their bubble and they didn't like it, it wasn't right. But to threaten it at that time - that was 1964 - was too much. But we did anyway. And so I have always said that's truly one of the proudest moments of my life. That I loved the marches and felt that, and I wept with the horror of it, but to meet with young people and to say, you know, as a white - and now, as an *old* white lady (laughter) from Mississippi - to meet with this young man. And to know that we are meeting with - it's not even "equals" because it's not in the realm of measurement, we are meeting consciousness to consciousness. And in that, then, we can see how is it possible that these distinctions arise. But, you know, I have my theories, but I'll let Prince EA talk some.

[06:57] PRINCE EA: That was beautiful. My background in dealing with race - I'm from St. Louis, Missouri, and St. Louis is very segregated. But even growing up, my personal ... I saw race, but I didn't ... it wasn't a rigid idea for me that I held on to. I always saw people as people. I knew it was, you know, good people with one skin color; bad people with another skin color. You know, the diversity, it's so...you can't really go just by skin color alone to judge someone. I always knew that. And then I ended up getting my...studying anthropology which...that's what they taught. It was the "sameness" of human culture, not the differences. They emphasized the likeness, uniqueness, things like the Human Genome Project that showed us that we're so similar, that skin color is only about six genes and we've got tens of thousands of genes and skin color is nothing more than our ancestors relationship to the sun and its adaptation. Pigment

is an adaptation to, "Can you absorb vitamin D?" If you're lighter skinned, you're in places where it's less sunlight, less UV. If you're darker skinned, then you're in more intense UV rays, it's closer to the Equator (Africa). So this knowledge, it just...the little understanding and, I guess, belief that I had about race; it totally dissolved. At that point it was nothing more than a cultural construct that we as a society continue to perpetuate. And it's not living in truth. And so that's my standpoint, that's become my standpoint on it.

[08:58] HILLARY: I'm sitting here resisting not making a remark about your remark about being an old white woman. Because there's plenty of people that are listening to this that are laughing about that because it's so the opposite. I wanted to...actually, many of the conversations that I have with Gangaji, we come back always to this idea of just telling the truth. So I'd like to do that with the two of you because this is where I think dismantling the underpinnings of this system happens and it's by conversations like this. So, I would have to say that I grew up in an all-white town. There was a black family that moved in when I was in high school and it was like, "Whoa, like, there's a black family moving in." And I came from a family that was very liberal. I worked in the African American community in Portland for really severely under-served people. For ten years, I dedicated my life to it. I have really strong opinions about racism. I don't like it and I don't think it's right. At the same time, I was in an elevator the other day and a black man got on the elevator and I was by myself...and I held onto my purse. And I just watched myself. That biological, genealogical, societal, cultural momentum is still in my system. And I feel like if we're not willing to tell the truth about those things that are just kind of sitting there within us - that we're like, "Oh, I don't really want anybody to know that about me" - how are we ever going to be free?"

[10:36] GANGAJI: It's very important to tell the truth, the relative truth, and then to look deeper. I never was afraid of African Americans because I didn't...I grew up, in a sense, that they weren't threatening me. I suspect my ancestors were afraid and then built this cocoon and separation. But I found that once my racism was exposed, it was not "patronizing" exactly, but like, "Oooh, look how beautiful!" (laughter) "Look how different!" Which felt great and I don't think it's harmful, but it's still not - something's missing in that. And I couldn't even really articulate what it is, but it's some - I'm very aware of difference in skin color. You know, if I walk into a room and there's one black person, one Chinese person, one white person, I know that when I walk out of the room. And I think that that's possibly hardwired into us. Just to be really aware - maybe from past threats or just a tribal identity - but it's really where that awareness goes that counts. I don't think we have to see each other as the same color, but we can - as you were just saying - see how thin the veneer of color is. And then we appreciate the color. I mean, really, what is more beautiful than dark skin? (laughter) I know that as a white skinned person! I know how many days I've sat in the sun trying to get a little darker! (laughter) So when we tell truth about that, it's like, "Oh, what appreciation is seen." Unless there's some patronizing going on with that too, and that's where we have to, I think, find the edge.

[12:35] PRINCE EA: It's funny you mention how beautiful dark skin is when it's also a phenomena of the skin whitening, the skin lightening, across the world where - I think mostly in Brazil - where they put toxic chemicals on their skin to lighten their skin. So this standard of beauty, for me, as a student of anthropology, is really arbitrary. I think all skin color is, like you were saying, is really beautiful. And we can appreciate all the shades and recognize that - that each one has its evolutionary history - and it's really beautiful. But, again, it is just the costume

that we wear, there's something deeper within us, and that's - when you find what's deep, then you can find the truth, not necessarily just believing what your culture has thrown on you - "the conditioning" I guess you would say. When you do the research, you find out that race, as an idea, doesn't go back further than the 1500s. It was invented to separate, to divide us. Even the concept of "whiteness" was created, because back then you had indentured servants and you had the slaves, and the black slaves and the indentured servants were starting to come together. So the hierarchy, the people on the - the controllers, the slave masters, whatever you want to say - created this idea of "whiteness" so that they could divide those two from taking over. This is exactly what happened and so it was "united we stand, divided we fall," and anytime you divide people you're going to fight and they can't come together in order to overthrow the regime that was there. So, that's the history of it. And it's unfortunate that we don't investigate, you know? We don't look into it, we kinda just accept. For me, I think, the best thing somebody can do is to unlearn everything and find out for themselves. To experience, to do the research, and to question, to doubt. In order to really be a - to live life fully you have to doubt things that you've been told, I think, in order to find out for yourself and live your truest version of yourself.

[15:11] GANGAJI: Absolutely. And, it seems to me that the only time you discover that capacity to question, to inquire, to doubt the assumptions that you've assumed, is when you aren't threatened by what you see. Or, at least, you don't believe the threat to the degree that you go to war with what's in front of you. Because it's still what's happening, of course. This history you're talking about, it's amazing. I didn't know that about the 15th century. And it's still, of course, and then we talk about class warfare, and we talk about the power structure and the superior structure, and it turns out that the white people who were setting "lower" white people against the slaves - who were the "lowest" of the hierarchy - and that's still what we see. And even though it defeats everybody, except the ones who are on the top. And they're defeated too, of course, because their lives are built on maintaining a status quo that's about cruelty and falsity. So it's really for everyone the possibility of recognizing - as you were saying Hillary - in this time of intensity, because it's once again been flushed up to the top of our conversation. Of really, what does it mean, skin color, and how do I participate in that? And how can I contribute to seeing deeper? And that's really the way I see all of our conversations. But this one is very, I mean, urgent. It's been urgent since the 15th century, really, then. But we put it out of sight.

[17:00] HILLARY: You know, I'm probably asking the wrong people this question but with you two sitting in front of me, is that, I wonder, in your daily lives are there moments where something old comes up, some old prejudice for you Prince EA? Maybe it's about white people. And Gangaji, maybe it's about black people. Do you ever have moments where it's like, "Whoa, where did that come from?" And what do you do with that?

[17:25] PRINCE EA: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. It's the residue, the lingering. You know I have prejudice that is on that subconscious level about black people, about white people, about everybody. It comes out and I just watch it. I just observe it and then it dissolves because it's untrue. (laughter) It's a thought, some idea that isn't founded in anything that's true. So I just like to observe it. I'm ok. I'm not trying to, "I shouldn't have these thoughts. I shouldn't." I just ... it's ok.

[18:05] GANGAJI: That's beautiful, so beautiful. Then you don't have to keep them hidden because it seems like that's when they're the most dangerous, when they become subconscious. And then they're just "reality." This is just "right." These people are "bad" or these people are "threatening me." Yeah, it's wonderful. You know, I think that I would agree that it's really what ... the thoughts about everybody. This person is different, or this person is going to hurt me, or this person doesn't get me, or whatever it may be. We have these mechanisms that just spin, based on conditioning or the past. But they can be interrupted, and they are interrupted when you don't follow them. The power drains out. 'Cause they only have the power because of centuries of being fed as "correct" and "real" and "necessary." It's very interesting to listen to a white supremacist speak - and a black supremacist too I would assume - but a white supremacist because that has been the power structure for so long and they are true believers. And I had to realize, when I looked back at my upbringing in the South (and my forefathers, who did own slaves) and my father - who was really a really good man - really believed that he was protecting Southern womanhood. Because, let's face it, black men are more attractive than white men. (laughter) So of course they were threatened. Just kidding.

(laughter)

[19:43] GANGAJI CONT'D: But, you know, I mean...in the South, based on slavery, there had been a breeding program. I mean that's who the top slaves were, the biggest and the strongest. And so there was this underclass of very strong people. They had to be. They worked in the fields all day, they had to be really strong. And there was great fear in the white structure about that, fear of revolts, fear of rebellions (and they did happen, occasionally). And that fear, I would say, was still alive in my father in the - you know, he was born in the 1920's. And 'til he died he was still afraid. But I don't know that he would have said he was afraid. I'm certain he wouldn't have. It would have been, by then, by the time it got to his conscious mind, it was that, "No." He's just, "These people could cause harm," and this idea of purity of the races. I remember saying to him once, "Daddy, we all come from Africa." At that time I was planning to go to Africa. I said, "I'm going to the motherland!" You know! (laughter) And he was, his eyes just got really big because by then he knew not to get into those conversations with me. But we are all of each other already and it's "Can we love the totality of ourselves?" Can we accept the totality of ourselves: the scary parts, the threatening parts, the strong parts, the stupid parts, the ignorant parts, the threatened parts?

[21:22] PRINCE EA: Yeah. To be courageous to face these things, to face what we fear. For me, it's an old saying that life is the constant practice of falling. It's the art of falling, right. The falling is mandatory but the hurting is optional. Things happen and it's all dependent on us, how we choose to interpret what's happening is what affects us. This is what I think I learned a long time ago, that my mind was the world. Everything that appears, it happens in my mind. It's like, another saying, "The only difference between a flower and a weed is a judgement." You know if you're a gardener that wants to plant dandelions, then that's a "flower." It's really all about how we want to look at things, how we want to interpret things. Questioning our thoughts, that's the...that's what I... You're friends with Byron Katie, I think. A good friend of mine as well. "Is that thought true?" You know, we have to sit down and question all of our thoughts. Is it true? All of these thoughts that we've had forced on us, thoughts that we've had just assimilated into us, unconsciously, subliminally. Is it true? And that's freedom when we can actually do that and step back.

[22:57] GANGAJI: That's right, that's questioning the authority. Whether that's in our own mind or the collective mind, it's always part of each. Questioning that authority. We know to question other authority but to question the authority of our own mind, that's the... Yes. (laughter)

[23:17] PRINCE EA: (laughter) Yes.

[23:18] GANGAJI: Now we're laughing.

[22:22] HILLARY: There's this, I would call it the depth of compassion, when you peel away these layers and to be able to walk a mile in somebody else's shoes, even a few steps in somebody else's shoes. And I have these moments in time in my life that are kind of frozen in time in my mind. And I dated an African American man off and on for years. And Portland is very segregated. As liberal as it is, it's very segregated. And this was twenty years ago, so it was much different than it is now, but it's still segregated. And so, he and I were riding in a car together in the black part of town and I glanced over and there were these black women sitting in the car next to us and they looked at me like...

[24:11] PRINCE EA: Mmm hmmm.

[24:13] HILLARY: ...it was like the "death stare." I'm sitting there, this white girl sitting in the car, and it was unnerving for me and it felt unfair to me, and then my next thought was like, "Wow, what would it be like to live like that all the time?" When somebody's just looking at you like, "What are you doing here?" And that's what we've been seeing in all these various pockets of America. So that's, to me, where this depth of compassion comes in.

[24:41] GANGAJI: 'Cause that's really the flip of...if my father had seen that he would be staring too, at you both, probably. "How dare you take my woman. How dare you take one of ours." And that's, of course, what you were getting there because men are a premium and women are a premium when we are just looking at it in terms of sexual selection, or "how do we get *ours*". But when we're speaking of something that is bigger than our tribalism - and we see what tribalism does in the world and how horrific it is. We can see that in the Middle East, in Israel. Everywhere this tribalistic understanding that is not even about the color of one's skin but takes it out into where you grew up, or what your religion is, or how extreme your religion is. And to be willing to, as you did, to open to that - initially feel threatened by that, it doesn't feel good to get the death stare, but then to open to that - and to recognize that we all get that in different ways. You have surely gotten that in some way as a woman in your profession. I got it even as a Southerner out of the South. I mean, people made an assumption - I was stupid. I had to just stay with it, and stay with it, and stay with it. And they thought, "Oh, maybe she has something to say." These assumptions are huge. And when you say, "to question the assumption," this is really calling people to a level of intelligence that's been denied. And then compassion comes from that. 'Cause compassion is natural. Empathy is natural.

[26:36] PRINCE EA: It's the only thing you can do when you see it as it is. Hillary, I've actually had an experience like that. I've dated every race, ethnicity, like a lot of race, ethnicity - women. And going different places where it's like an all-white bar or something, you might get looked at, you know. But even then, I don't know, I just, me personally, I just, I don't know, I write it off. It's

just people that might have some issues of their own that they're dealing with. It's like you, it's like when you have these situations you have to put yourself in their shoes. Once you do that, if you have their history, their thoughts and ideas as strong as they do, then you would be them. You would have the same reaction. And only compassion and peace can come from that. You understand. You know?

[27:28] GANGAJI: It's beautiful.

[27:30] HILLARY: I wonder if we could go from there to the, to me, what is the deepest inquiry in this system. And that is, let's say that those that are in power - and so those would be white people - let's just say that there is an even playing ground in the imaginal world. The fear that that evokes, even for somebody who is pro-equal rights, is that, "I'm going to lose something." I'm going to lose some power. I'm going to lose some privilege. I'm going to lose, maybe, the job I want. I'm not going to get it 'cause now it's an even playing field. I just want to, actually, go to the core of the *fear* of changing the system. Because I can talk about it all day long, I can preach about it, but if it became a reality, how are we threatened in this power structure?

[28:26] GANGAJI: Yeah, it's all based on fear. Though, Hillary, everything, every threat is based on fear and every perceived threat is based on fear. If we can recognize there is a difference, and that the threat really has nothing to do with the color of someone's skin - and the perceived threat does - that one is like steps away from reality. And that's huge. But that's, I think, what maybe the species is ready for. Because, as you've said - and I think that's so brilliant and I didn't know that about the 15th century - in the scope of things it's not that old.

[29:08] PRINCE EA: Yeah. It's a very modern construct.

[29:11] GANGAJI: Yeah.

[29:13] PRINCE EA: And it does. The basis of it all is fear...interestingly enough, it's money as well. Racism, race, was created as a socio-economic construct to divide people so that the top elite could maintain their status quo. That's it. It was created out of love of money. It has nothing to do with some genetic inferiority. It evolved into that, but as a way to explain it, explain why I'm discriminating against somebody which is Social Darwinism and things like that. But it started as fear, as an economic way to separate people and to maintain a status quo.

[30:01] GANGAJI: Fear of losing. And that's always what it gets down to, isn't it? And so that's what has to be met.

[30:08] PRINCE EA: Yeah. Yeah.

[30:11] GANGAJI: Because we do lose, finally, everything. (laughter) And if we're willing to lose, I mean, this is the nature of inquiry. You have to lose all your preconceptions.

[30:21] PRINCE EA: In order to get everything to be free. That's the greatness of it because it's so oxymoronic.

[30:28] GANGAJI: Yes.

[30:29] PRINCE EA: It's paradoxical. Once we abandon all of these concepts and constructs, we're here, we're happy, we're free to be who we are. I think it's easy to hate a group of people when you don't know them, when you just have an image or a caricature. When you just see that, then it's that, and that's that little box that you put them in. But once you get to know them, know that they have the same issues, the same problems, the same fears and prejudices as you do - that we're all human - then that's where we can dismiss a lot of these divisions that we've created. That's what brings us together, that gives us the tolerance. Not only tolerance, but understanding and love that we can see, that we're all - this is the human experience. Nobody had a ... we didn't have a choice for what skin color we came out with, you know? It's not our fault. So I think we have to see this. We have to recognize this and look deeper. And once we look deeper we see that reality is what we make it and there's no other way to make it other than out of love.

[31:52] GANGAJI: Well, may we meet. May we all meet.

[31:57] HILLARY: I just want to thank you both so much for, to me, the beauty of this conversation with the two of you, really, is that you have inspired people in so many different ways to look deeper and to ask what is *really* true. And so, before I, we, say goodbye, I'm going to play a clip from Gangaji. And she's talking about - this is from 2007 - and she ... obviously, Barack Obama had just been elected - and it doesn't matter what your political affiliation is when you're listening to this - but your point was: What a moment in history when a black man is elected President, what it cuts through in ourselves and what that has to do with freedom in general. So, I'm gonna play that.

[32:44] GANGAJI: And what it evoked. What it has evoked. Which is possibly why it's exploding.

[32:52] HILLARY: Gangaji, I would love it if you could give us a takeaway from this conversation. What do we walk away with? What is our responsibility with any, even the smallest, awareness from this conversation?

[33:07] GANGAJI: It's possible to be free. It's your birth right to be free. And it's time.

(clip)

[33:29] GANGAJI: I know within each of us there is the possibility, and the likelihood, of some division of power, some aspects of ourselves or other that are not allowed into the power circle. Some parts that we call, "the dark," or the "less than," or the "inferior." And when an event like this happens in the material universe and the historical present time, there's the possibility for that to be blown wide apart. To see the fallacy of that, to see that that is the status quo, and to allow that to just dissolve in the possibility that you are free. That freedom is your birth right regardless of what you have been told, regardless of what you believe. Regardless of what your experience has "proved" to you. Regardless of that, you are free, you are whole. And to surrender to that, to vote for that, to say "yes" to that. To say YES to that! Rather than to continue to follow the discussion of, "well maybe if..." No, Now! In this moment, before your imperfections are erased! Now! You are free.

(end clip)

[35:32] HILLARY: If you'd like to find out more about Prince EA and the inspiring work he is doing in the world, the best place to find him is on Facebook and you can also search for him on Youtube. Coming up in October, the subject of our attention in a couple different ways is about intimate relationships. Gangaji's live monthly webcast, With Gangaji, will focus on that subject. That's both on the webcast and over the course of the in-person weekend that's happening in Ashland. That all starts on October 16th and it goes through the 18th. And then here on Gangaji Radio, we will be starting a three-part series on relationships. That kicks off in October and goes through December. You can get information about With Gangaji and Gangaji Radio by going to the website, gangaji.org. This show only happens with your support, so if you'd like to find out how to be a monthly donor or sponsor, just click on the radio tab or write us here at gangajiradio@gangaji.org. Thank you all for joining us for this very special edition of Gangaji Radio. Thank you to you, Prince EA, we so much appreciated this time you so generously spent with us. And to all of you, be well. We'll see you next time.