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A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 42

SAYING GOODBYE: A DISCOURSE ON GRIEF

Released on March 16, 2016

[00:02] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:09] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: We will all lose someone we love, probably many people in the course of a lifetime. There will be that moment when we face the stark reality that we will never be able to touch, or hear, or be with that person ever again. It is in those moments when grief surges to the surface, using all its force to gain our attention. If we fully meet this grief, we may discover that the capacity of our heart is bigger than we could have ever imagined.

[00:42] GANGAJI: Because it is the pain itself that really is the truth. There're so many unexperienced griefs in the closed heart, but the broken heart, they are set free.

[01:00] HILLARY LARSON: Some might ask, what happens to someone after they die? Are they actually gone? Are they really separate from us? It's something that perhaps we will only know when we are faced with truly having to say goodbye. I'm Hillary Larson, and this is *A Conversation With Gangaji*.

[01:25] HILLARY: I wanted to give a little background about this particular conversation before we get going. Last November I did something that I'd never done before, and that was that I gave you a full schedule of topics for two thousand sixteen, and I sent them to you, and it, and that's also something I don't typically do. And I looked at the schedule, and I looked at the different topics, and some of them I could see that I could kind of move around a little bit, but there were a couple that I was very certain that they needed to be in that month. And for the month of March, one of those was the subject that I called 'Saying Goodbye'. And then, a few weeks ago, my dad, who was super active, he ended up going to the E-R, 'cause he had some weakness. And two hours later we found out he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and, and he just passed away (chuckles sadly). So (chuckles sadly) so I'm sitting here saying goodbye in a way I wasn't expecting, and I did think about, for a split second I thought about writing you and saying maybe we could postpone this when this was a little less raw, but then I thought, well, this is satsang, this is life, and we might as well say yes to this too.

[02:46] GANGAJI: Yes, then it's clearly not abstract. We're not just talking about a subject. This is what's alive.

[02:56] HILLARY: I'll just share my, my experience, since it's the, it's on the surface right now, is that, first of all, I have been so grateful for what I have gotten in my years with you because the, the one thing I did over and over again is, was just to say yes. And in that, I'd have to say, in these weeks I have not suffered; that's not to say I haven't been in pain, and I haven't been afraid, but the, the moment I got the news that he had terminal cancer – and it was an absolute shock, it was a shock for all of us – and I, I ran back to their place, my parent's place to pick up a razor and a hairbrush and so on to take to the hospital. And I

walked straight in, and I sat in his chair, and I just sobbed. And I sobbed like I don't know if I've ever sobbed like that before. And, there was something so beautiful in the sobbing because the love was so clear.

[03:58] GANGAJI: Mm... yes.

[04:05] HILLARY: So in the process of my, my dad's dying, I think that... one of the things that helped me say yes is that he said yes. And he didn't, he didn't fight for a moment. And it wasn't a, an apathy or despondency, it was just, yes, like, yes, like this is, this is here too. And we all just followed his lead. For somebody who's never sat in satsang, so to speak, he certainly was a teacher for all of us. But in the midst of it, in the midst of saying yes to the grief and in the midst of saying yes to the fear... there are these moments that feel like, it feels so incredibly shocking to me that he's gone. I can't wrap my wits around it really.

[05:08] GANGAJI: Is he gone? We know his body's gone, you took care of that. You saw him leave, you saw the body afterwards. But this that you love...

[05:30] HILLARY: Well I was so close to him. And in the process of my grieving, that no, he doesn't seem like he's gone, and then the reality of life, he does feel very, very gone. And the different times I feel like something comes up, a— I had to go to their accountant's office to sort out paperwork and, and I got kind of rocked by this moment of reality of that he will never ever be able to pick up the phone again.

[06:01] GANGAJI: So his form is gone.

[06:02] HILLARY: Yeah.

[06:03] GANGAJI: Completely and absolutely.

[06:04] HILLARY: Yeah.

[06:05] GANGAJI: And undeniably. And we are attached to form. And I don't mean that in any negative way, even that you should fix that attachment, that's just part of loving, being attached to form. But it's also really important to be able to tell the truth in a moment like this, where the loss of form is, is absolute, it's not abstract, but it's absolute, of what's gone and what's here. Is he gone? His form is gone. And then you can actually inquire, is he gone? Is, can he go from you? Has he ever been separate from you, really?

[06:50] HILLARY: I don't wanna answer that question and just give you the right answer, so...

[06:54] GANGAJI: No, it's an inquiry.

[06:55] HILLARY: ...yeah, it's....

[06:56] GANGAJI: Truly. There is no right answer in inquiry.

[07:03] HILLARY: ...I mean of course that question came up for me, and this dear friend of mine, Mary from Santa Rosa, I was a student of yours. She, she wrote me two or three days after he had died. And she had seen a, a piece that was written by Thich Nhat Hanh about

death, and he was talking about the year of suffering that he experienced after his mother died. And then he had a dream one night that she was there with him and young and beautiful and vibrant and in that moment, he realized that she wasn't gone. And then the next day he went for a walk and he was just feeling that no separation, and, and I, there were a few sentences in there that really helped me. And it was, he's talking about his walk, and he says, 'each time my feet touched the earth, I knew my mother was there with me. I knew this body was not mine, but a living continuation of my mother, and my father, and my grandparents, and great-grandparents, all of my ancestors. Those feet that I saw as my feet were actually our feet. Together my mother and I were leaving footprints in the damp soil. And I was like, 'oh, I can feel that.'

[08:21] GANGAJI: Well, that's beautiful. And, and true, for, we can see for our forbearers. But we also often lose people and have to say goodbye to people that we aren't related to physically, that we can't trace our genetic makeup to physically. And the same inquiry is just as strong and just as truth-revealing, of what goes, what is not here, clearly not here, and then we're not just speaking of death, we're speaking of the goodbye that happens at the end of relationships, the goodbye that happens just out of circumstances and, and not, not seeing another. And then, our very idea of relationship is broadened beyond relations. It's, it's really then not about your father, as father, it's about this presence as being, and this presence as you that is not limited to his daughter, but as being inquiring into another being. Is there separation, not physically, as daughter, father, but in truth, no bounds.

[09:35] HILLARY: Hm, that puts it in a different realm, doesn't it? Because I was thinking of, the familial line of that feels so strong to me.

[09:44] GANGAJI: That's wonderful. And we, we do feel so strong that way. But we can also (chuckles), we can even feel stronger about other relationships if we don't happen to have that strong familial connection, and I don't believe that your connection with your father – even though you would never have met him if he hadn't been your father – was just based on the fact that he was the man who raised you, and you grew up in his house. There's something more mysterious and more exquisite, actually.

[10:18] HILLARY: (sighs) The, the truth is, having said all of that, that when you asked me the question, 'are you really separate from your father?' I noticed myself actually move from a conversation, an intimate conversation, into interviewer mode, and I, I felt like I wanted to start bringing in questions from other people – 'cause people had really great questions, and I, I wanted to like, move on to them. So I guess the answer to that was, no. Like I don't know. And I was afraid to say that.

[10:58] GANGAJI: Not knowing is, is where real inquiry can happen. If we're so certain that we are separate, or we're so certain we aren't separate, we don't really get to inquire into this unknown space. This discovery, space of discovery, and it's, in a moment, it's not what you know, based on what you knew from inquiring it one time. It's right now, opening to, is this that I loved in this man called my father still here? Is it in any way separate from who I am?

[11:44] HILLARY: As I rifle through the spiritual teachings I've memorized over the, these years, let me tell you what I do know from inquiry. And that is that I was afraid to be with his dead body. And as soon as we started talking about hospice, I was, my mind went to that, of like 'oh, at some point I'm gonna have to be with his dead body'. And I've only been with two

dead bodies before, and in the moment I was sitting with his dead body and his eyes were kind of cock-eyed and his mouth was open and, and I just was sitting there with this body telling him how much I loved him, and that I promised him I would take good care of my mom. It was so clear that I was talking to a body.

[12:33] GANGAJI: (laughs)

[12:34] HILLARY: And that, I felt this, this just enormous love for him, and, I don't know if I was making this up to make myself feel better, but I'd heard of near-death experiences and I'd had my own brief one, and I just imagined that he actually was there and present somehow and his death seemed like, or he seemed like, I mean in my innocence it felt like.... I actually can't tell you what it felt like because the, the thought that his life wasn't in his body anymore was more, it was a surprise to me. I didn't, I couldn't have planned how I was gonna experience his death so it was like, wow, it's not there, like, he's not there. So maybe I answered my question.

[13:37] GANGAJI: So that's the beauty of the grace of death, as unwanted as it may be and as painful as it may be. It's, for at least a split second, in a moment like that of being clearly in the presence of a dead body, and also clearly the presence of love that is your father in, in form in your mind. But your father is not the dead body (chuckles). He never was, he never was the body. And we hear these, this phrase, 'it's all in your mind', and we make that be a diminishing phrase, but actually in a moment like that we get to directly experience how utterly expansive, 'it's all in my own mind'. Then you, your father, me, every event that's ever happened to you is all only in your own mind. That's where the form of it is. And in particular forms, there's a huge transmission and evocation of love. So what, and maybe because it's so painful, this goodbye, that we have to (chuckles) we are wrenched into seeing, and how perfect that you, you are willing to see the dead body. Because in, as you know, in the West, we often flee from seeing the dead body. But to see it, then in that instant there's something that's, whether it can ever be articulated or not, that's very clear. The difference in form and truth. Hmm.

[15:28] HILLARY: I think when – the name of this show is 'Saying Goodbye: A Discourse in Grief' – and when I think of grief, I actually think of all the things that are contained within grief. And, that it's actually a process in that for me part of the grief process was to have the courage to be with his body, because death can be so sterilized in our culture, for sure, and people die in hospitals and you might get a phone call. And I actually made a decision that I wanted to actually, see, see him, I wanted to be there with him. And it made a huge difference in my saying goodbye. Obviously not everybody gets to do that. But for me, I could've decided that that was something I, I couldn't handle. But, I wanted to not know, frankly, I wanted to go in there and not know what it was like to be with somebody I love when their body goes. And it's still, the, the images, you know, when I think of the image of his body it's disturbing, still, because it, he didn't look like my dad anymore.

[16:31] GANGAJI: He was, he was a body, then.

[16:33] HILLARY: Yeah, he was a body then. Quite clearly he was a body, even actually as he was dying, he just more and more became not my dad. So I think that the, when we talk about grief, and I know people will say grief takes a year or there's stages of grief, or you could be grieving five years down the road or ten years down the road, I think that there's a moment, there can be a moment where you experience grief so deeply, so thoroughly, that

when it does come back, that it comes back as, you know, a layer of grief, but not the deepest grief. Like there's a way that I feel like I'll never grieve him again the way I did in that moment. That's done.

[17:30] GANGAJI: Mmm-hmm. And how exquisite, 'cause in that moment you actually discover that there is no grief separate from love, and separate from the truth. We only grieve what we love, we don't mind saying goodbye to what we hate. And when what we hate dies, we're happy. But to have this aspect of love, this pain aspect, reveal actually a deeper love. A love that's always here, the presence of love. And you can even forget what your father looked like, this happens. You know you may have images of your father or, or other loved ones who've died, that, that fade. But the, you, as your father, and as you, are still here. Father and daughter. One self.

[18:35] HILLARY: That's so...I mean broad isn't the word for it.

[18:37] GANGAJI: It's very big.

[18:38] HILLARY: Yeah.

[18:39] GANGAJI: It's huge.

[18:42] HILLARY: In our human forms, in the process that we, we just have to go through, right, when we miss somebody and somebody's gone. I was really looking at the, how easy it is to distract ourselves from, from that grief, and often really not even knowing we're doing it. And, the very first DVD of yours I ever watched was called Facing Death, and it was completely liberating for me. And there was one exchange you had with somebody – and I, I always wish I knew the names of people because it, I don't mean to be invalidating by saying this person or this woman or that man, but I don't know people's names – but having said that, this one particular woman was talking to you about losing her twenty-three-year-old daughter in a car accident. And it was just so heart-wrenching as she sat there with you. But what she was talking about is part of this conversation was, these kind of ways that it just seems like, I wanna say justifiable ways of distracting ourselves from grief. Because she had a lot to do following her daughter's death, of course, like I have a lot to do following my dad's death. But her realizations were really helpful and I wanted to share that with everybody here.

(clip)

[20:02] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: As a result of Rachel's death, I'm now raising my granddaughter who has cerebral palsy and lots of medical problems. And so I've had lots of justification for being busy, things to do.

[20:12] GANGAJI: Mmm... getting on with it, yes.

[20:13] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: (crying) ...lots of things to do. But I kept hearing today, I kept hearing you say today, 'tell the truth'. And I realize that when I tell the truth, I'm busy, in order to avoid being with the fact that Rachel's gone. And, I choose to be with that. She's not here with me right now and I miss her and everything reminds me of her. But I just want to be with that.

[20:47] GANGAJI: *That's the place to be.*

[20:50] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: *And I think partly, one of the things that I've done to avoid being with that, this busyness and everything, has to do with a fear that if I be with that, if I let the emotion be there, that I'll lose control (crying).*

[21:06] GANGAJI: *Yes.*

[21:07] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: *And how can I take care of Eden, how can I do what needs to be done if I lose control (deep sigh)? And I guess I kept thinking, well, I'll be at retreat soon and then I can lose control.*

[21:19] GANGAJI AND UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBERS: *(laughter)*

[21:22] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: *And now I'm here and I realize that all the busyness that I have used my whole entire life to avoid being with, to, isn't control.*

[21:34] GANGAJI: *That's right. That's the imitation of control.*

[21:40] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: *I don't wanna be in control. (crying) Yeah, but I-*

[21:42] GANGAJI: *Then you don't need an invitation. This is very good. And I accept this term justifiable distraction, because there's nothing wrong with distracting yourself from belief, from grief. We, we have the choice. It's just that we often don't know we also have the choice in any moment to simply stop and experience the depth of the horror of whatever a loss or a goodbye has generated. So I never wanted to, I don't wanna set it out that you should face the horror, or that's what you need to do is to meet that. It's, it's not a dogma, it's just the recognition that you can. That you have the capacity to meet it all.*

(end clip)

[22:33] HILLARY: *What, what do you say to somebody who has experienced a death that doesn't seem, I don't know, that seems too soon, or seems abrupt? Kristen from Colorado actually had a question for you, and she said, 'What if somebody isn't ready to say goodbye? What if the loss seems too abrupt or unjust?'*

[22:58] GANGAJI: *Well (laughs), it, just... doesn't it? I mean (laughs) I'm laughing because of course, if, when you are deeply attached it's always too abrupt, even if you, the one you're saying goodbye to is in their nineties, or hundreds. I, I hear from people all the time, my ancient mother died, and it, it was, shocked me, it was too soon, I, I know, the writer would say, I know it's not really too soon, but for me it's too soon. It's because we, we don't wanna lose what we love. That's the way we're made. And so I wouldn't, I wouldn't entertain this abrupt or, or too soon – it *always* is. (chuckles) I mean can you qualify what it feels like to lose your father, losing your mother, or losing your sister, and losing what's ever been lost? It's, you know, it, it, perhaps there are different qualities, or flavors, to each loss, but when it's truly a loss, we don't want it. It is too soon.*

[24:12] HILLARY: *I think, though, if my dad was in his fifties, or if I'd lost a child, or if there was a medical mistake, my grief would be different.*

[24:25] GANGAJI: Yes, but how can you know that?

[24:28] HILLARY: (chuckles) I don't know.

[24:30] GANGAJI: That's right. So what you know is, is what you're experiencing. And then, a distraction from that is, is a sentence like 'it's too soon'. Of course it's too soon. It can, let's all agree, it's too soon. And we can use that. I'm not saying, you don't wail: 'It's too soon, it shouldn't have happened'. Those are just natural reactions. I'm not preaching that you don't be willing to experience it's too soon, it shouldn't have happened, whatever it may be. Yes, just say, say what comes up. And recognize that there's more that has nothing to do with time, has nothing to do with his time, or not his time, it's just, it's right here, it's right now.

[25:21] HILLARY: I had an interesting reaction in certain ways, because, out of just, unbelievable, it just seemed like endless kindness coming in my direction, in my family's direction, so many people said to me, 'I'm so sorry for your loss'. And I kind of actually, my reaction to that was surprising to me because I, I wasn't sorry for the loss. I'm sad for the loss, but it didn't feel like a mistake 'cause my dad had lived a really full life, and he had a really good death. He didn't ever want to be an invalid, and he was really clear: 'If I'm ever an invalid, I don't wanna be here'. And he didn't really have that choice anyway at the end. But I was more experiencing the sadness of his loss but the incredible gratitude of his life.

[26:15] GANGAJI: Mmm, how beautiful. That's, that's the opportunity. And I'm certainly not in any way trivializing the loss of a child, you know. People are lost, children are lost in the womb, they're lost when they're too young. I'm just saying that it's never, it's never what you want. You, it's not that you would want him to live and be an invalid, but you would want him to not be an invalid, and live. To not age, and live. To not have disease, and live. And that is what we want for ourselves, and for each other. Especially those we love. It's just not what we get. And that's the horrific grace of, of death, of grieving, of saying goodbye, is that it has nothing to do with what we want, with our timeline, with our control. It has nothing to do with any, any reality of control, or any imitation of control.

[27:21] HILLARY: Like I said at the beginning when I was making my notes for this conversation, two months ago I wasn't thinking that we would have this conversation.

[27:31] GANGAJI: (laughs)

[27:32] HILLARY: So, life happens, and...

[27:37] GANGAJI: And death happens.

[27:38] HILLARY: ...and death happens. And, and love happens (chuckles)

[27:41] GANGAJI: (chuckles) Love is here.

[27:58] HILLARY: I'm gonna keep this short this time around. As we're speaking of saying goodbye, I wanna dedicate this last clip to someone we lost here at the Gangaji Foundation recently. Anita Tamboli was a core member of the group of volunteers who stand by Gangaji's side to help her reach as many people as she does. We will remember Anita for

her bright smile and her generous heart. Steve Capra composed this piece just for Anita. Thank you so much for joining us this month. I'm Hillary Larson. Be well everyone.