

## Gangaji Radio

A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 43

WHEN IT COMES TO FAMILY

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[00:05] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:09] HILLARY LARSEN, HOST: There's a Ram Dass saying that goes something like, "If you think you're enlightened, then spend the weekend with your family." For sure, family relationships can evoke the most explosive of emotions. A certain kind of remark or a tone from somebody else can mean nothing, but with family, in an instant we feel like we're 10 years old again. How humbling. To overlook the hurt doesn't seem to make sense, but neither does overlooking the love that surely is deeper than that. The bonds that begin in our earliest memories of childhood have the power to influence how we relate to life in general – who we marry, what we do for a living, where we live. The question is can we all just get along and do we even need to?

[00:57] GANGAJI: Right now, regardless if you're making peace with your family or not making peace with your family or your family irritating you or soothing you, who are you? What is the truth of who you are?

[01:12] HILLARY: What Gangaji has to say about enlightenment, being with family, making up with family, that took me by surprise, but that's nothing new. Maybe it'll surprise you too. I'm Hillary Larson, and this is *A Conversation With Gangaji*.

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[01:26] HILLARY: I think is one of those episodes where I think we could have ten different conversations on the subject of family. It's such a huge topic, and I don't know, I actually wanted to look at the subject of family as being a vehicle to understanding life in a deeper way rather than something that we're trying to cure or fix, and...

[01:55] GANGAJI: So we're talking about family as our, what we identify as who we come from or who we grew up with or who raised us?

[02:04] HILLARY: Yeah, actually I think I wanted to start with talking about that, but I also think some people can consider their friends their family.

[02:13] GANGAJI: Absolutely, yeah. I think the word family has many definitions. So I think it's useful if we just point out that I mean family can be opened and be whoever we feel in relationship with. There's some family, normally we think of family when we say the word family. Normally it means those people we have had the most difficulty with in our lives who try to form us in a particular way who we had to rebel against in a particular way and who we loved and hated in some degree, but that we were bound to. And when we think of family in the expansive way, it's more, has more to do with choice I think and affinity and support, and of course they

overlap, both those definitions. But maybe the more interesting subject is really who we grew up with.

[03:13] HILLARY: It is more interesting because I was riding in the car with somebody one day and I was just getting to know him and he was talking about how great his family was that they had no problems when they were kids and he loved his, I can't remember what his siblings were, brother or sister, and he loved his parents, and I actually believed him but I'd never spoken to anybody like that before. So, and he seemed so well adjusted and, you know, not the kind of person that was going to have to work through or he hadn't needed to work through family issues. And I've heard, you know, different viewpoints on that. I've heard people say, "Well as a being, you choose your family because there's certain issues you need to transcend in a lifetime and they're your vehicle of doing that," and you're rolling your eyes.

[04:04] GANGAJI: That's what we choose is to try to make sense of this chaos that is called my family. Yeah. God love him, I'm happy he had a balanced and I know that they do exist. They would have to exist, and maybe traditionally that was the norm, but in times of change and times where – like I'm almost 74 now, so when I was growing up it was very different from how it was than in the midst of my growing up. The whole world changed, the 50s and 60s and then 70s, and so the family was no longer how it was defined for 100 years before that. So it could be that, and maybe also where you grow up. You know, people who grow up in the Midwest of the United States or who grew up in the small town in Switzerland may have a very different understanding and direct experience of family. So finally it's left to you and me Hill to simply talk about what our experience is and hope that that serves in some way, and if your family is pure blessing that's wonderful. There's no, no need. And if it's pure hell, then it is fertile ground. I don't subscribe to, you know – I chose it for this or that. I'm more, you know, this is what happened, it's more like the roll of the dice. How many millions of sperm had to die so that one made it in, and this one made it in with this egg that dropped at that time, and that gave rise to this form in this family with the same thing having happened innumerable times in the past. So it's still a mystery. It's still a beautiful mystery, and for most people it has its horrendous side.

[06:09] HILLARY: I remember when I was a kid, I – well maybe I still do it, where I'm just certain I was adopted.

[06:17] GANGAJI: Oh yes. My brother tried to convince me I was certainly adopted and probably from a communist country because this was in the 50s, you know, and that was the big bugabear. Yes, adopted and, you know, I couldn't be of these people. They're not my real family. They're not the true family.

[06:41] HILLARY: Somebody had sent an article. Sally had sent an article. It was this great article from the New York Times about the story of family and how our families kind of have a story, like there's the successful kind of achievement family and then there's the, I don't know, maybe the alcoholic family. Whatever the family is, and then within the family, then we all have our individual stories of how we fit in the family and then – but at certain points, you know, I think we just naturally rebel from the story of being in the family, but that's not necessarily so easy to do because I think these primitive wounds that we experience when we're children and they get triggered when, say, you're in your 40s, the damage that can be done as a result of the reaction to that whatever is coming from that wound can affect everyone around you. It can affect every

relationship you're in, so it's no small thing. I know we can joke about going back to my childhood and revisiting my childhood, but at the same time I feel like it is so primitive and it does drive so much unconsciously, and, I really think that the turning and facing it can change everything and it could change potentially the relationship with the family, but.

[08:07] GANGAJI: It can even change your memories about what happened in the family. They're pretty fluid and, and not dependable in the first place. It's not to deny the wounding, but the way we have narrated the wounding to ourselves and who's to blame and taking it personally and in different ways is actually why we suffer with it. If we can just meet it purely, then the narration itself changes.

[08:38] HILLARY: I know I spoke of my father so much last time when we had the episode on saying goodbye and actually in the midst of that, I was inspired to do this topic, and the reason why that was was that when I was growing up, I didn't like my father, you know. We suffered from the demon Irish alcoholic gene, and it was a rough go. It was certainly much rougher for other peoples', the other stories I've heard, but for us it was difficult. And, you know, I got older and I didn't, I didn't actually really want to talk to him, and I would call my mom on the phone. I was in my 20s, and I would call her on the phone and he would answer the phone and I would hang up the phone, and it was before Caller ID, so I could get away with it. And one day I got so sick of being a victim of my dad in my own mind that I spent a good amount of time, I spent a couple of years, you know, it's my spiritual practice, I actually sat down and I wrote down all the ways that I actually was not a princess because it's possible that I wasn't. And so – and as I saw it more deeply the ways I had treated him poorly, all of a sudden the ways I thought he had treated me poorly completely changed, and so I started this new relationship with him, a deliberate relationship where I call. He would answer and he would just almost immediately hand the phone to my mom, and I would say, "Wait, how you doing dad?" At first he was like, "What do you want," and I just kept cultivating that relationship, and I'd have to say because I was willing to face the parts of me that I didn't like that were actually what I was perceiving in him, the last 20 years of his life we had the richest most beautiful relationship. So to me, that was the choice we have.

[10:42] GANGAJI: Well you told the truth, you know. You were telling the truth relatively when you were hanging up. You didn't want to speak to him, and I think that's an important phase of individuation. Sometimes it is really important to leave the family, parts of the family or the total family, to divorce the family. And then God willing there's time to actually make peace with family.

[11:11] HILLARY: And there's such understanding in that because, you know, through that I found out that his father died on Skid Row and what he had to go through and that there's a reason why we all do what we do and we kind of bump into each other in the process, but I received an email a couple of years ago, and there's so many emails I don't open, but this one I did, and it was from a teacher, a guru in India and what this guru was saying was that the path to enlightenment has to include coming to peace with your parents and your family. And I believe that.

[11:48] GANGAJI: Well. You know I don't want to get into the path to enlightenment because I don't believe that there's a path. It's right here, right now. Whether you ever make peace or not.

I mean for some people it may be absolutely appropriate to not make peace, to stay in divorce from their family. So I wouldn't make it a dogma that you need to even work it out for certain people. You don't need to work it out. But if you do need to work it out, if you are being victimized by it, it supports you in telling the truth, and then you see you have choice. You actually chose one way that, that served you and your father and your family, but that's not necessarily the only choice. It may be a choice to never call the family again. That's as legitimate a choice. So I wouldn't – I certainly wouldn't agree with that guru that wrote you the letter that said the path of enlightenment is to make peace with the family. We have a choice, and no one can make that choice for you.

[12:50] HILLARY: I had my mind really set on that.

[12:54] GANGAJI: That's why you invite me on this show.

[12:58] HILLARY: I know. I know.

[13:00] GANGAJI: Otherwise, you could just, you know, you could dictate the path to enlightenment.

[13:05] HILLARY: That would not be good for any of us, trust me. You know, there's that joke, I think it comes from Ram Dass, he says, "You think you're," pardon me for using the word enlightened, but "You think you're enlightened and then go and have Thanksgiving dinner with your family."

[13:21] GANGAJI: It's because you think enlightenment means a certain thing that you don't get upset, that you don't get triggered, that you don't have feelings of negativity. And that's, that's the trance of enlightenment. It's a trance of the word. That's why it's, throw this word out. Let's say real, true, open to yourself, open to your anger, open to your fear, open to the horror. Some people have really horrible families, and it's in their interest and of interest to those who come after them to not make peace with those families, to stay away from them. So families are made to push our buttons unless they are the perfect family like the guy you were driving in the car with and God bless him, how wonderful. But there's no requirement that these buttons be pushed. If you find it fertile and you want to, great. I mean I know this is sort of what I just said, but maybe I'm just saying it in a little different way. I think it's just really essential for us if we're having a true conversation, and if this is really about awakening to your true self, that we recognize how easy it is to bring in certain idealizations about what that awakening will be or look like or feel like, and we aren't there yet. And so we need to do certain things to get there, and that just effectively keeps it some place in the future. But right now, regardless of your making peace with your family or not making peace with your family or if your family irritating you or soothing you, who are you? What is the truth of who you are? Because that's the essential point of our conversations and bringing family to that conversation allows us to see what we resist in our idealization, what we're resisting in ourselves trying to get to an idealization of freedom or enlightenment or happy person.

[15:35] HILLARY: It just kind of tears apart the idea that in some ways our families can be our barometer of like how well we're doing, right? Because how many of us have, you know, spent

time around family and gotten really triggered and maybe not acted the way we wanted to act, and then stepped away going, “Oh shoot, I thought I was farther along than this.”

[16:00] GANGAJI: Yes, I would say most of us have been in that situation. And that in itself is very useful because really to me what it gets down to is that there is love there. Even when you're hanging up on your father, there is love there, but there's also this kind of, I don't what the emotion was for you, hate or disgust or fear or anger, whatever it may be. So there's a complexity to the life experience that really is revealed in family situations, and with your family and with your life, the way you wanted to lead it, you could penetrate that, you can penetrate that. And then you were enriched by that penetration, but you can't really penetrate it if you're penetrating it so that you will get something down the line. It's fake. You had to penetrate it because you simply wanted to meet this in yourself. You had the maturity for whatever work you were doing to recognize that you were victimizing yourself by this man, this father, whatever role he had played, you were continuing that victimization, and that's what you really wanted to stop and that's what you took responsibility. It's beautiful. And that's why I say, responsibility has many faces, and enlightenment has every face.

[17:31] HILLARY: I agree with you that there are people that have done horrible things to their children or vice versa, and that there are family situations that will never be repaired, and maybe they shouldn't be repaired. Maybe not even in the midst of that, but there's this – I think what I'm looking at is the un-inspected projections that happen within families that are probably more potent than any other relationship we have and the willingness to take ownership of those things is the possibility for liberation.

[18:07] GANGAJI: Well it's really the willingness to stop suffering and then you see where is that suffering. And maybe I should say unnecessary suffering, because as you mentioned, there are families that cause real suffering but the unnecessary suffering, the continual drama that is played out in one's mind and the endless suffering so that your life is wasted. And I don't know what it looks like for any person. I'm hearing what it looked like for you, you know, what you had to do, and I salute that. I just don't want anyone to say, “Ah, that's what then I have to do.” Although I have recommended to people that they call their parents, you know. I remember I've told this story often of calling my mother on Mother's Day once, and at this time thinking she'd been a horrible mother to me, and really thinking it much worse than she was. But calling her and lying to her and saying, “You were a wonderful mother. Happy Mother's Day.” And the moment I got it out of my mouth, it was true. It was like well of course, she was just the right mother for me. And I realized what she was always saying to me was, “Be natural. Stop being so dramatic.” You know, and I just felt victimized by that, and she doesn't see me and she won't stop acting like she's acting and she's just calling it my drama, but she was right. So she was a great teacher for me. But I had to somehow stop trying to change her in that moment, and I thought I was lying, but I was actually telling the truth. So given that, there are certain behaviors that are really supportive for breaching that gap between you and your mother or your father or your brother or your sister, and sometimes the gap doesn't get breached. In which case, fall through the gap. Fall in the middle of it. Finally, we have to give up fixing each other, and fixing ourselves and just be still. And then quite miraculously, family is everywhere. It's in nature. It's in teachers. It's people we know deeply, people we know casually.

[20:38] HILLARY: I have a brother and a sister, and I haven't seen my sister for a long time now. And my brother and I, you know, I wouldn't say that we're close, that we, you know – meaning we don't spend that much time together. And I also can say without a doubt that I completely love them.

[20:58] GANGAJI: That's beautiful, isn't it? Without a doubt is the key phrase in there. Without a doubt. Then whatever else comes up around that the way you wish it were or the way you think it should be, if there is any of that, it doesn't touch the love. That's freedom. That's the truth.

[21:17] HILLARY: There's a certain way I think in the realm of family, I certainly have been torturing myself over the years because I've had this idea of how I think family should be in certain situations. This is what they should do. And one day, I was sitting at my desk and, you know, as I was in my torture session and I was thinking, "Wow, you know, the way I operated within my family is that if I had something great happen to me, I told one of my friends. If I had something terrible happen to me, I called one of my friends." So I've never had that relationship. And then I was thinking, "Well what, so what's wrong with that?" It's been great. That's how I've operated in my life, and that didn't discount....

[22:03] GANGAJI: That's right.

[22:04] HILLARY: ....the love I've had for my family.

[22:06] GANGAJI: That's it. It doesn't have to look a certain way. The love is still there. And that's finally what we get to. Even in the worst of situations, it is the love, whatever we mean by love. It may be just some kind of bonding, maybe for some people it's this ancestral connection, some people it's simply being fed by someone, kept alive. I mean already what we owe our families, however horrible they've been, is pretty extraordinary. We're here. We can talk about it. We can step back and look at it.

[22:44] HILLARY: So when you look at your family story, whatever story your family had, how do you see it now?

[22:53] GANGAJI: Fluid. It's a very fluid story. It's evaporating quickly, you know. I mentioned to you the other day that I still had dreams about my mother. I may have a dream about my father occasionally but it's not as meaningful a dream. And it seems as if my brain is still processing my mother in a way that gets deeper and deeper to her innocence, that the story, my dramatic story of my mother and me, is dissolved more and more and there's this presence of her that had nothing to do with my suffering with me even, before me, that is simply and really who she was as a person. But I miss that in her lifetime, and how beautiful it is when people have the opportunity to reconnect with families, like you did with your father, and spend these 20 years playing golf with him, being with him, laughing with him. That's really beautiful. I can't say I had that, and I don't actively miss it, but I would recommend for whoever is so inclined to make peace in the family. There's that possibility that you could actually find a treasure of companionship.

[24:27] HILLARY: When we look at this idea of blood family and then other types of family, I was thinking about, I think it was in the summertime, and I got a chance to meet your daughter and

your grandkids, your granddaughters, and they were so lovely, just completely lovely. And I remember at the end, they were getting ready to leave and I said to them, I was actually talking to your daughter, and I said, “We sure love your mom.” And I walked away thinking, “Wow, I wonder if she just thinks that’s weird that all these people say that to you all the time when she’s your daughter.”

[25:10] GANGAJI: I think she thinks it’s a little weird. Still, you know, she’s – it’s not that she doesn’t like it, but it’s not a part of her world that you would even say something like that. But I do want to say that when we speak of blood family, we’re often in that very terminology excluding adoption and people who were raised by other people who aren’t of the same blood, although we are finally all of the same blood. And I just want to make it clear that when I’m talking about immediate family, it’s really who raised you, who you’re with. And that could be, you know, an orphanage. It could be the matron in a school, but it’s whoever as a small child you got your information from, what it means to be who you think you are. And so it’s big. You know, you and I were privileged to have families that were relatively intact, even if they were suffering and we were fed and clothed and educated, and so we’re privileged that way. But family, immediate family has all shapes and forms, and even though there may be – I’ve said this, but I’ll just say it again – there may be a lot of emotions around it, there is finally some light of love that is simply a reflection of being, however imperfectly cared for, being cared for.

[26:55] HILLARY: I think I’ve covered every single thing I wanted to say about family, in a subject that’s so....

[27:04] GANGAJI: So big.

[27:05] HILLARY: ....so big. I think there’s a way though, now that I think about it, that it does follow you because how many times have you heard people say – actually I dated a man who was just shockingly like my mother, and I thought. And then I dated somebody else who was like a little bit more like my father, and as time went on, and this kind of brings me back to one of the first things I was saying is that how that, our relationships follow us.

[27:34] GANGAJI: Reflect that, yes.

[27:35] HILLARY: In that way, and it’s like, at some point, I went, “You know, you’re going to have to come to terms with this, because if you’re going to be, you know, dating this pseudo parent, you’re going to have to work it out.”

[27:45] GANGAJI: I married a man who’s so much like my mother it’s really quite surprising, and it’s worked out very well.

[27:56] HILLARY: Wow, really?

[27:58] GANGAJI: Yeah. I was really in love with my mother too. I mean I’ve talked often about the difficulties but I loved my mother. I just had no control over her, and I really wanted her to function for me and she wasn’t functioning for me. And yeah, so I – they do follow you, those relationships do follow you, but that’s not necessarily bad news. It can be quite good.

[28:23] HILLARY: No, it's not necessarily bad news. And then how great for all of us, right?

[28:28] GANGAJI: Yes. We have each other.

[28:32] HILLARY: I mean I think when all is said and done, we talk about, you know, dysfunctional families and, oh my god, I married my mother or whatever we did, but the truth of it is that I think that what I learned from my dad is the characteristics in him that I most rebelled against are the ones that I ended up actually loving and appreciating the most, and they were the qualities that he also gave me. So whatever way I was pushing against him or pushing away from him was absolutely clearly how I was pushing away from myself. And when we talk about making peace with our families, to me that was such a literal way....

[29:18] GANGAJI: Yes.

[29:19] HILLARY: ....of saying the war is over.

[29:20] GANGAJI: That's right. It's always peace with yourself.

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[29:38] HILLARY: In the next few months Gangaji is going to be addressing the subject of hope. I also thought it would be great to ask her about anger, what is the best use of anger? And we'll also be doing a special episode on impulse, compulsion and longing. In the meantime, if you'd like to join Gangaji's monthly webcast or you're thinking that you'd like to be on retreat with Gangaji, she's in California, different parts of Europe. She'll be in Victoria, B.C., and also Australia in the next few months. All of those retreats are listed on the website, [gangaji.org](http://gangaji.org). If you have a comment or a question for this show, feel free to write [gangajiradio@gangaji.org](mailto:gangajiradio@gangaji.org). Thank you for sharing *A Conversation With Gangaji* with others. I'm Hillary Larson. We'll see you next time.