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A Conversation With Gangaji Series
Host Hillary Larson
Episode 45
THE SECRET LIFE OF SHAME
Released on June 2, 2016

[00:05] BEGINNING MUSIC

[00:13] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: This month, the subject is shame. Yeah, the bad word (chuckles). It could very well be one of the most avoided words in the English language, and no wonder: it seems dark, and sticky, and secretive by its very nature, and leaves us with the lurking notion that if all the things we're embarrassed about were exposed, we would surely be rejected. Whether the source of this self-hatred is from abuse, the subject of sex, things that we've done that we feel weird about, or just being in a human body, shame can wind its way into the story of our lives.

[00:50] GANGAJI: Because the shame, the feeling – 'cause you feel it physically, you feel it emotionally – it's linked to the story, but it's what embodies the story. So then to me that – you see it has no substance. That's the liberation, it's not like you get liberated from it, it's actually liberated from you.

[01:13] HILLARY: Who wants to talk about shame for thirty minutes? Well, it looks like we do, and we hope you'll join us. We're gonna look this monster called shame right in the eye. I'm Hillary Larson and this is *A Conversation With Gangaji*.

[01:30] GANGAJI: Well, I'm curious what the topic is.

[01:33] HILLARY: (laughter) I was just gonna say, I usually don't start the recorder. You'll sit down and ask me, but this time I started the recorder 'cause, like, truly you don't know what the topic is. So, so the title of this topic is called 'The Secret Life of Shame'.

[01:48] GANGAJI: Oh, shame, yeah. Well it would have to be secret (chuckles). But it leaks.

[01:55] HILLARY: Ah, God, you know just when you think you're over shame, then the topic of shame comes up. So, this was actually pretty interesting to me because, we've got topics – secret topics – lined up for the future, and next month we are doing *The Courage to Give Up Hope* and that, was really excited about then, and been really looking at that topic and I was really ignoring this next show, the one we are doing actually even before that. And I realized that once again, I, I actually do not like the word shame. These days I don't feel shame that much, but there's something that just is so, it's like the, the horrible stepchild of all emotions to me.

[02:42] GANGAJI: Yeah, it's a, it's a form of control. And it's been used to control us in different ways, and we've internalized it as, as slaves do to their, their masters of control. And, you know, in one sense we have a lot to be ashamed of (chuckles) as a, a species, and as individuals. We've all done things that were less than noble – at the very best – and, and so in that sense, the regret – if we can make a distinction between really recognizing the regret – and how ignorant we were at certain times, maybe especially when we thought we knew exactly what was going on, and, and the harm we've caused, the hurt we've caused. Then I think shame isn't a tool for control. It, it really becomes an honest regret. And it's a, a

way of deepening, and humbling. And that's the idea behind shame is, is to humble. But there's, there's such a yoke to it, that it's real punishment. And then it also becomes a habit.

[03:54] HILLARY: When I look at shame from a, a positive point of view, I think that it's kind of like this innate early warning system that we have within ourselves, that it's like 'oh, something's wrong, something's off here'. But I think what happens is there's a situation, it brings up the feeling of shame, and then there's a decision made about what we're experiencing in this moment. And the decision could be 'I'm a bad person' because this is happening.

[04:23] GANGAJI: But does shame have to do with the moment, or is it something, it's about something in the past?

[04:30] HILLARY: Well that's a good, I mean that's a good point.

[04:31] GANGAJI: I don't think it's something that is happening, you may be bringing some feeling from the past that's triggered by something in the moment. But shame like guilt is, is made up, it's, it has to have a story that goes with it. And in the moment, there is no story.

[04:55] HILLARY: When I think of particular kinds of shame, like shame that happens within the context of sexual abuse, or physical abuse, there's a certain amount of humiliation that goes with that kind of abuse.

[05:10] GANGAJI: From the abuser, or the one abused... or both?

[05:14] HILLARY: I think it can be both.

[05:17] GANGAJI: Yeah, so then, if you're speaking of that, of course that's huge. And often people who are abused actually feel shame, feel somehow responsible that they brought it on or, or whatever. So if there's something that triggers that: a sexual encounter, or whatever, then it, that can be reactivated. But I still don't get how it's – has anything to do with what's actually happening. Shame... or regret. Because it's, it, they're both about looking back, and then being so humiliated, or so... horrified, at what one allowed to happen. Because that's usually, the part of the victim is thinking somehow I allowed this or invited this. And society can support that too, of course. So it can get very complicated. But I think it's best if we try to simplify the complication so that we can see what is it really about? What's under the shame, what is the shame a reflection of?

[06:37] HILLARY: Remember when we did the show, I think it was called – it was a couple years ago – we did a show called *Sex, Truth and Desire*, and in that I was telling you that in my family, we didn't talk about sex or body as much so, there was a way that I got this idea that sex was bad. And it was probably, you know, like a lineage thing, right? And so in a way I kind of like tried to skirt shame by having a lot of sex. And so it, it would make me feel like I was in control of the shame, see, like shame's not an issue for me, and it, that was my own very private war, frankly, that nobody could see. And then when I was in my forties actually, actually it happened right after I read *Diamond in Your Pocket*, is I was so sick of that shame ruling my relationships that I finally – 'cause there were lots of evaluations made on my reaction, whether it was, you know, other things in my past that was causing it, or whatever – but, but when it came down to it, it was just the feeling of shame. And when I let myself feel

the shame, it was so amazing because I, it, it just blew right through me, and it changed my whole, perspective and experience on intimate relationships. Changed in a moment.

[08:07] GANGAJI: Yes, it was in, in the bed with you. Yeah, it's, so when you're saying that I mean I hear shame is a version of self-hatred. Some kind of proof that the hatred is deserved and, and yet dangerous if, if we see how bad you really are, how wrong you really are. You know, you, you could be killed, you could be ostracized, you could be left behind, 'cause it always, if you're willing to trace it back, to deconstruct it, it always gets back to some form of survival. That's, that's the badness of being wrong. Or the badness of—and then we rebel against that, as you did with your family's culture of 'sex is wrong' but the rebellion is still actually in, the shame is in play, the wrongness is in play, and no rebellion is necessary unless you've already taken the bait.

[09:13] HILLARY: And the thing about shame too, is that if shame comes up and we don't like that feeling – 'cause I think it's so vis- visceral, it shows up in my body in a very distinct way – then, in order to distract myself from it I, there's a break in intimacy, I have to have within myself in order to ignore it, and then, that moves to the outside because I'm hiding my secret from you.

[09:42] GANGAJI: It's interesting, I, I think probably people have different strategies for dealing with it. My experience with shame would be to sort of wallow in it, indulge in it, as, as, and then kind of wake up from that. But like a masochistic punishing myself. Not in those words because the story is hidden under the feeling, the visceral, emotional feeling. So that's interesting I, I think different people would relate to it differently, although I think most human beings can relate to the issue of shame.

[10:21] HILLARY: Yeah and actually, I can totally relate to wallowing, 'cause I did my fair share of wallowing in that there was – you talk about entertainment – when I look back on it there was some source of entertainment in that for me, of like 'oh...

[10:37] GANGAJI: Oh, how sick are you....

[10:39] HILLARY: (chuckles) Yeah, I'm that sick!

[10:42] GANGAJI: (laughter) There, what a beautiful response.

[10:45] HILLARY: Sick like nobody else could possibly be.

[10:47] GANGAJI: (laughter)

[10:49] HILLARY: That's my secret.

[10:50] GANGAJI: Yeah, well, I, you know it's, it's interesting. 'Cause I grew up in a household where my parents were sexual and we could feel that in the house. And they made noises in the bedroom and, and we could hear 'em. So it's not like sex was ever made to be wrong. Or I ever heard that it was wrong. But still, I, I was in a bigger culture. I went to a Catholic school for a couple of years and, and so when I had my first sexual feelings as a young child, just something, you know, stimulating me, I was horrified. I had just assumed nobody in the world had ever had anything like that happen, and I must be the devil.

[11:31] HILLARY: Yeah.

[11:32] GANGAJI: Or the worst. So, it's got to be some part of our society's control, and, then it's even beyond what was going on in your household because it's the bigger society, usually the household reflects that to a big degree, but we grew up in really different kinds of a household and yet we both know shame. Very intimately I'm sure.

[11:56] HILLARY: I think that there's a, when I listen to you talk, having said what I've said, I can still also say your experience is true for me too.

[12:08] GANGAJI: Ah-hah.

[12:09] HILLARY: And I think there's that, who knows how long our cellular memory is of religious rights and wrongs, so...

[12:19] GANGAJI: Well you know, you can look at dogs sometimes and they look like they're ashamed for what they've done.

[12:23] HILLARY: (laughter)

[12:24] GANGAJI: I mean they say that we're projecting that onto them, but they also realize – each decade more – about animals of all kinds. I read today that manta rays, the fish, manta rays, actually are, recognize their own self-reflection in a mirror, and that used to be THE determinant of a conscious being. When, when they saw that apes, monkeys, did that, not relating to it but, but moving, you know, seeing that it is them. So if manta rays have thoughts and feelings, then how far from humans are they? I mean, we are animals, and maybe that's just some kind of universal teaching tool like dogs: 'bad dog!' At, you know the dog knows what that, that phrase means. And you can see the expression. When, even before you've said the phrase, it knows it's coming and so it, and since shame is sort of taking care of the society's job. So if I hate myself enough, society won't have to.

[13:34] HILLARY: Yeah that's it...that's it.

[13:35] GANGAJI: And it will let me stay.

[13:36] (laughter)

[13:38] HILLARY: Yeah, isn't it, so much comes down to everything related to being in a body, you know, whether it's: 'I have a lot of money, I don't have a lot of money'; 'I eat too little food, I eat too much food'. 'I've been abused, I've not been abused'. It just seems like it goes on and on, but it's all about this identification of who I think I am.

[14:01] GANGAJI: And then the issue is, are we preoccupied with that? Because that's natural, to some degree. But given our level of privilege and that we are, we have survived to this moment, in this particular moment we really don't have to be preoccupied with what I'm doing wrong, or what I did wrong. We can actually just be here. And in that we have the invitation to open, to really, what is free already and *always*. Free of that delineation, of that judgement. That's not to say that certain behavior isn't right or wrong, but the consciousness that doesn't need to survive can recognize itself as free of that. But mostly, we just get more and more preoccupied with it, and obsessive and we're living these lives of

privilege and bounty and we just then go back into the past to find something to hate ourselves about or, imagine a future where we aren't doing something the way we think we should be doing. And that's what's the unnecessary suffering that doesn't have anything to do with just the, the conditioning that's necessary to exist in a herd. It's what we add to it that's unnecessary suffering, that we really have to stop if we are gonna evolve as a species. 'Cause it keeps us looping back in, into the lore, realm of our lives as humans and, the invitation is to be fully, fully yourself.

[15:45] HILLARY: Did you have a certain brand of shame that haunted you, and...

[15:53] GANGAJI: Right.

[15:54] HILLARY: ...was there a point when you saw it for what it was?

[15:56] GANGAJI: I saw a, I mean, I had a certain feeling, like you were saying, I knew it, and then there was a moment I can remember very clearly in my early thirties where I recognized that I was torturing myself. That, something had happened, and I was making myself wrong about it. And there was a way I was replaying it, and that's what I was talking about earlier the, the masochistic part. It was, I recognized that there was, as you said, an entertainment, I – it wasn't pleasurable. But there was some way it was, it didn't validate me but it was a *kind* of pleasure, and a *kind* of validation, it was like the deeper I could stick the knife and twist the knife, and then I, I just got it, this is what masochism means is a, a kind of 'getting off' on this torture. And that was a moment of choice. And I, at that moment, recognized that if I stop telling the story, it couldn't continue. And I, I had to ask myself, do I, you know, I mean, you're free to be a masochist, but that's not what I wanted, that's not what, how I wanted to spend my leisure time, or my free time. And that's when my spiritual search really began.

[17:26] HILLARY: Your spiritual search ended with Papaji, so, how did those things shift...

[17:35] GANGAJI: Well...

[17:36] HILLARY: ...after that?

[17:37] GANGAJI: ...you know, you get better, you get where you... you get more aware. You recognize them, you, you practice mindfulness. You have a mantra, you, you know, you do all these things but still, I was identified with the person in the story. And so if I didn't practice, or if I did mess up in some way, it was always waiting to, to grab me by the throat. So when Papaji said 'just stop' or 'simply stop', and I heard that as 'stop telling the story', I recognized the story really had nothing to do with the truth of who I am. It was something that had been built, over – when I met Papaji, I was forty-eight years old, so – from the time of my birth or, or maybe in the womb or maybe before that, just genetically. Something that was built around consciousness but really, just like a name. It, it's useful in certain contexts, but it's not the truth.

[18:44] HILLARY: I have done, I would say a sufficient amount of therapy in my day (chuckles) and what strikes me is that I would tell the same traumatic, dramatic stories over and over again. And it would evoke that horrible feeling of shame. And maybe I got braver about telling the stories, but the feeling of shame didn't, it didn't change, it would just be like, 'oh, here you are again', and I think that, that moment of actually meeting it...

[19:22] GANGAJI: Mmm... yes.

[19:23] HILLARY: ...truly was the only source of liberation for me.

[19:27] GANGAJI: That's right, because it is, let's say it's necessary to, to speak it, to be able to see it, because in that you have, you have the opportunity at least the next time it appears to recognize it, but finally it is, opening to – because the shame, the feeling, 'cause you feel it physically, you feel it emotionally, it's linked to the story, but it is, it's what embodies the story. So then to meet that, you see it has no substance. Yeah, that's the liberation. It's not like you get liberated *from* it. *It's* actually liberated from *you*.

[20:10] HILLARY I definitely think there's huge value in telling somebody a story that feels painful and shameful. Because if you're talking to the right person, and they're not reflecting back 'oh, oh my God, like, (chuckles) you're a terrible person'. If they're reflecting back this, just unconditional love, there definitely is healing in that just to see even how that could possibly work. But then to transfer that to the inside...

[20:42] GANGAJI: Yes.

[20:43] HILLARY ...in the form of self-love, is a whole different level of what we would call healing.

[20:47] GANGAJI: Yes, yes, I - I agree.

[20:50] HILLARY And yet, at the same time as I think about these experiences, or, when I think about just even doing this topic with you. This conversation with you is quite different than one would have with a psychotherapist, for example, because this conversation is not about healing shame.

[21:13] GANGAJI: That's right. Yes, that's right. It's not about fixing shame. Or fixing you and your shame. It's about opening to whatever is here, inquiring, directly. That's right.

[21:31] HILLARY You know, we had that show with Geneen Roth, which was great, about eating disorders, and the shame that can come with eating disorders, the shame that comes with addiction, the shame of, of doing someone wrong. When somebody comes to you with the world of that, you're not a therapist, but what do you do with that?

[21:54] GANGAJI: Well you know what I do with that (laughter). I mean it's what you got from reading the book. I really invite you to, to open to the experience rather than to continue to follow loop after loop after loop, endless loops of the story. To stop your unnecessary suffering. And, to be aware, of the grace that is revealed in that moment as always present. Because there are other moments that can, and let's assume they will, skillfully assume that they will appear in the future, where you could be set up by your own actions, to, to generate harm to someone. If you're willing to actually open to the infinite possibilities of what's here, you can actually meet any situation as yourself, as that openness. And in that, take responsibility for every situation – meaning taking responsibility for your own suffering.

[23:03] HILLARY I think... right.

[23:04] GANGAJI: You can grow up, that's, that's what I tell people. Grow up.

[23:10] HILLARY: I posted this topic on the Gangaji radio Facebook team page, and I love to get the feedback from other people because, you know, I have my own take on things and I like to hear other people's take on things, and particularly for this type of conversation. So some of the comments had to do with addiction, and some of them had to do with that, kind of that self-perpetuating, shame, but somebody also made the point that shame actually maybe can't exist without the thought of what I think other people are gonna think of me. Because then who cares, right?

[23:47] GANGAJI: Although we often see ourselves as another person. We, we are just one of the people. You know, who are you if you don't have an image of yourself, and who you should be? And what you're better than. That's what I meant by the internalization. Yes it takes the other people to, to generate the habit, and to learn how to be that (chuckles) that other person. But I think we do learn that.

[24:15] HILLARY: Such a great point, you know that we all have all these people inside us, saying all sorts of things at any given moment. And then, we feel sad or angry or....

[24:29] GANGAJI: (laughter) It's madness, isn't it?

[24:30] HILLARY: It totally is.

[24:32] GANGAJI: Yes, voices in your head (laughter). Great power from these voices. But it's, it's like *The Wizard of Oz*, you know you have to be willing to expose the magic trick, 'cause it's a miraculous magic trick that we can have these images and voices in our head, it's, it's stupendous. But when it generates unnecessary suffering, there, there has to come an end to it and that's simply being still.

[24:59] HILLARY: To finish this I just wanna ask you one question. Is shame even an issue for you in your life now?

[25:10] GANGAJI: No. That's not to say I don't have regrets. But I really make a distinction between regrets. I think from regrets we can actually learn, but I don't believe that we actually learn from the shame. I think shame, because it's so, unnecessary in its suffering. Regret you can go, 'mmm... sorry that happened, sorry I did that'. But shame is 'oh my God, I did that, I'm horrible, I'm no good'. So it's, it's you know I, who knows when I walk out the door but there's a, we all have the capacity to discover what are we telling ourselves? What is this particular voice that bears my face and my name telling me about who I am? And so that's the way our minds work. But we don't have to believe any of it. And we can stop it, that's the main thing. That's what I learned when I was in my thirties in that moment of recognizing that I was perpetuating the torture, and that then, I was, in my own body perpetuating it but that meant I was also perpetuating it in the whole cosmos. And we have the opportunity to, to really ask and answer the question: what do I want?

(clip)

[26:48] GANGAJI: *Like fear, of death or non-existence, self-hatred is, it's a horrific gift. And it seems to come with most humans who were raised by most parents. It just gets inbred in*

there: bad girl, wicked girl, stupid girl, mean girl, selfish girl. And it's like, it's right, you have the proof of all of that. And so the trust, when you trust yourself, is actually willing to penetrate that, to discover what's underneath it, and the by-product of that penetration is the liberation of this wicked, bad, ugly, filthy little girl. Bad seed. Throw-back. However, we formulated it, and at whatever support we've gotten for that formulation. That's what gets liberated. And the, the trust is still opening to what's underneath that, but to get underneath it there has to be a penetration of what the barrier is, the disbelief, the fear, the self-hatred. And with all of our proof of how that is so, so – I, I've shared with you before – finally it, it wasn't, I didn't see myself as an image I just saw dark, murky, energy. And I had already met sort-of the frantic, hysterical, crazy energy – this was under that. That frantic, hysterical energy was an attempt to escape this dark, murky, stuff. And it's like, 'oh my God, not that' but here it was! And, for much of my life I had spent avoiding it, circling it, dramatizing it, fixing it, hating it, and I just opened. As I invite you to open to it, I experienced it. And I, it felt like it moved through my body. Like it was maybe a, a curse. So let's say we've all been cursed, and you could feel this demonic curse moving through. And then it was gone.

(end clip)

[29:37] HILLARY: If you'd like to listen to that entire clip of Gangaji, it's from a YouTube called *Gangaji on Self-Hatred*. The whole thing, it's about eight minutes long. If you google it, it should pop right up. It's a great, great clip. Someone recently asked me, the best way to support Gangaji radio, and there are two ways, well actually there's three. First, if you are listening via *iTunes* and you'd be willing to take a moment and give us a rating or write a comment, that helps people find Gangaji more easily. Also, if you'd like to find out more about supporting *A Conversation With Gangaji* and Gangaji Radio by making a donation, the address to write is gangajiradio@gangaji.org, And finally, if you like this episode, please pass it along to a friend. The title of next month's show is *The Courage to Give Up Hope*. Hope seems like a good thing, so why would anyone ever consider giving it up? Way back during our very first episode on chronic pain, Gangaji said this: 'hope is very beautiful, and then it becomes a poison'. We're gonna talk about what that really means next month. Ok, that's it. I'm Hillary Larson, thank you for being here. See you next time.