

[Gangaji Radio](#)
Epiphany Series
Host Hillary Larson
A GAP IN THE ROAD
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[00:02] MUSIC

[00:12] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: It was the dead of winter. Harriett Watson was driving down a snow-covered road, alone, in the dark of night, barely able to see what was in front of her. Suddenly, she was startled by a thud. In the moments that followed, her life as she knew it, would be forever changed.

[00:32] HARRIET WATSON: I looked back, in my mind, and nothing that had been there before was there anymore. All of the things that I had believed my whole life, all of these structures that are in place, and the teachings that I had worked with, and the teachings that I had grown up with, just crumbled and they were gone. And I, I knew it was over, it was just over.

[00:52] HILLARY: What was over for Harriet was a rigid world where discipline and rigorous spiritual practice were the only way to self-realization. From the day she was born, her family was part of a spiritual community where the emphasis was on practice and the study of ancient texts. It was a life that in some way aligned with her deep desire for the truth. When she was as young as four or five years old, Harriet and her younger sister would get up early in the morning to study the Upanishads in Sanskrit. The obedience and discipline that oriented her life were the route to freedom. At least, that's what she'd been told.

[01:34] HARRIET: The leader of the spiritual community was a kind of misogynistic larger-than-life Scotsman who was basically in control of everybody's life, and so everything you did, including everything all of the teachers did, was all being examined. So they were terrified, everyone was afraid, because they had to succeed to get his approval. And that, it would pay on down the line to, to the kids.

[01:57] HILLARY: Isn't that so interesting, that here the goal is spiritual freedom –

[02:01] HARRIET: Yeah.

[02:02] HILLARY: – let's call it that, and the head of the community is actually the opposite, it's the contraction of it?

[02:10] HARRIET: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Very much so, yeah.

[02:12] HILLARY: How hard is it to live in that paradox?

[02:15] HARRIET: Yeah it was, it was very strange. I don't think the, the concept of freedom was one that I actually knew about, I, I don't, don't know that I would ever have used that word. It was more like I was going to live a certain way, I was going to obey the rules, and, and then I would get enlightenment from that.

[02:34] HILLARY: I was thinking that, to me when I hear, you know, of a lifestyle growing up like that, I can see the upside, just that wow, what a gift it would be for a child to, you know, know what meditation and what the experience of stillness is so, so young. So I'm wondering what the upside of that life was, and what the downside was?

[02:58] HARRIET: Well the upside that I was aware of really from a very early age, I'd say around the age of five, was just having had an experience of complete peace, I mean just expansive hugeness (*music begins to play in the background*). I, I remember going out for a walk with my dad, I must have been about five, and it was in the dawn, and we were walking near our house and I was holding his hand and I was just in a, a kind of expansive, universal feeling of peace, and that very specific memory sort of stayed with me my whole life.

[03:34] MUSIC CONTINUES

[03:46] HARRIET: (*music continues to play in the background for a few seconds*) The downside of that life was that it came with a lot of prescriptive rules, because the spiritual community that I was part of wanted us to live a certain way. They wanted us to be somewhat of a closed community with certain values and certain rules around lifestyle that were very cumbersome. And, as a young person growing up in that, as one of the sort of, you know, it was a bit of a hothouse situation, we were being, we were being watched for our every step. So we were sort of the hope of the future, and I think everybody believed that we would just sail through life with no problems because we had the start in life that we had. And of course as soon as we hit puberty everybody hit the usual kinds of problems (chuckles). And it was a big shock for everyone, and a horrible, horrible (laughs) sort of awakening, rude awakening, that we were just ordinary kids with ordinary teenage problems, pimples and all.

[04:54] HILLARY: Is there a moment in time, maybe when you were a teenager, where you sat there and went, hmm, I'm going down the wrong road. I'm wanting something pure, but this might not be taking me where I wanna go.

[05:06] HARRIET: Yeah I feel like I was always questioning everything. I was being asked to live a certain way, I was going through the motions but I was also kicking against it. Just, you know, just especially as I went off to university and started to go about in the world a lot more than I, that I got to see that, you know, there were just, there were just other things out there. But I, I don't think I ever really believed that there was a different spiritual path for me. I think I was, I was told that this was really the only one. But, but yes I, I knew there were, I knew there were problems, I mean I *always* knew there were problems. I remember very clearly as a teenager just, having a moment. I was standing over a milk churn, we used to have the milk delivered in churns. And I was putting milk into jugs with a ladle to be laid out on the table – milk was part of the diet. And, and I just, I just noticed that something had changed in me, that I had turned away in a certain way from myself, that I had, had stopped being that child who was just trusting and open and free and in it, and I turned into somebody else. And I knew it was gonna be a lot of years before I found that again. And that's absolutely true I mean you know it's just like a... so then, so then once you, once you have that feeling of separation from yourself, as that pure and innocent free being, then you look all over the place to, to find that.

[06:44] HILLARY: Harriet had always been told that women needed to be dependent upon men for any hope of spiritual realization. When she was in the early twenties she met and

later married a man who was not part of the spiritual community, he was an outsider. In pushing up against the misogynistic beliefs of the group, she may have escaped the rigid structure she had known her whole life only to fall into a trap of another kind. Soon, the couple moved to America for a new start. She had a smart and successful husband, two beautiful children, a nice house complete with a white picket fence, a glass of wine with dinner, and a complete and utter loss of self.

[07:29] HARRIET: And I was living the dream, you know, and I, had moved into the right school district, got my kids into the right elementary school, I would go have coffee with my mom friends and, you know, there was a certain point at which I felt like I was gonna die, that I had come so far away from a sense of who I was, and just bought into some kind of social norm, some kind of normalness (*music begins to play in the background*). It was always, I just always wanted to be normal, because I never felt normal, that I, that I was, I was lost.

[08:04] MUSIC CONTINUES

[08:12] HARRIET: I knew I had, something had to change. And I was still a part of the spiritual community, all of this time. And more and more dissatisfied, more and more desperate, feeling that none of it made any sense any more. And it, it was, it was like the philosophy behind it was that it was lifetimes of work to clean up all of your samskaras and then eventually you would achieve enlightenment, but I was no good because I forgot to meditate every day, because I didn't carry out my spiritual practices, and because I was just enjoying this life of being a, you know, desperate housewife (laughs). And so, there was a big tension there, and there was always this feeling like, with my marriage, that my marriage was somehow holding me in that position, and that, you know, I couldn't really fully attend to myself because I was, I was split, I was split by that.

[09:11] HILLARY: Was there a particular moment of despair, where there was utter disillusionment? Do you remember any particular moment?

[09:22] HARRIET: I remember one time, a particular time, when I had driven up to Rochester and attended my evening group with the spiritual community. And the whole evening had just been really dissatisfying. And we'd been studying some kind of arcane text that made no sense to me and I really got the impression from the person that was leading it that, you know, the only, the only job to be done was to kind of just understand the words, it was, it was all semantics. And, and, and I was feeling very frustrated. And Rochester was about a, a two hour drive from my house, and it was winter, and so I set off back driving. And it was snowing, and you know there's this stretch of road after I got off the highway along the edge of the lake where we lived. And it was dark, obviously, it was moonlit, and it was snowing and I, I think I was driving along in a sort of agitated fury and consternation and just, what am I doing this for, why am I doing this? You know, I, I've left my family for hours and hours and hours, I, I'm driving through the snow, it's dangerous, and I'm (*music begins in the background*), I'm alone on this empty road in the moonlight, in a snowstorm, and I did that for this. You know, I mean it didn't make any sense.

[10:43] MUSIC CONTINUES

[10:49] HARRIET: The snow was coming down pretty hard, and my eye started to follow the snowflakes instead of the road and I just was sort of mesmerized by that, and almost like I

was going into some kind of trance, like I was being hypnotized by this snow in front of me. And I'm driving along, and then all of a sudden there's this thud, like really visceral thud, of hitting it, some small animal. And I, I looked in my rearview mirror and I saw it, just receding away from me, this little rabbit or a possum or something that I hit, and this, this space just opened up like a – I called it the gap in the road – it was like, I looked back, in my mind, and nothing that had been there before was there anymore. Like there was just a door that was opened. That life that, that was given, that I hit the, hit it with the wheels of my car opened this door, and I went through, and there was nothing behind me anymore (music). What I mean by that is that all of the things that I had believed my whole life, all of these structures that are in place, and the teachings that I had worked with, and the teachings that I had grown up with, just crumbled and they were gone. And I, I knew it was over, it was just over. And I was, I was absolutely silent, I was completely shocked, and I was free and alone, just on this bare stretch of road in the snow with the moonlight.

[12:29] MUSIC

[12:36] HARRIET: Over the next few days in reflecting on what had happened and realizing, somehow in the space that had opened up, I had this conviction that I would find the truth, and I would do whatever it took to find the truth. And I knew I had no support from there anymore, but if I had to find it on my own, I would find it on my own. And if, by any chance, there was a teacher, I would find that teacher.

[13:06] MUSIC

[13:10] HILLARY: What happened next was even more meaningful. Because of Harriet's deep connection with her mom, they shared the same misgivings regarding their spiritual group. But they also shared the same desire for the truth.

[13:27] HARRIET: That was probably a month later? My mom sent me a DVD for Christmas of this woman called Gangaji. And I, I was actually pretty skeptical, I was like, oh I don't know, you know, I don't know if I'm gonna watch that. But when February came around, and you know, the tree was down, and everyone was back at school, and I had a quiet morning to myself at home, I, I put it in the DVD player and, I heard her say, 'There is a desire that arises in certain lifetimes.' And that was it, I mean, that was absolutely it. I knew that was the desire that I had, that I'd had my whole life. And it was explained to me, it was laid out to me, cleanly and clearly, with no attachment, with nothing binding, and in absolute pristine integrity. And I fell flat – I mean not literally – but I was, I was done, I was done for.

[13:36] MUSIC

[14:47] HARRIET: The very first time I got to speak with Gangaji, I went to Silver Bay in upstate New York for a retreat and, I just couldn't sit on my hand, I mean I raised my hand in the very first meeting, the very first night. And I'd, I'd actually just flown in from London, I was *completely* jet-lagged, and crazed and, you know, I think it was the first night and she, we'd sat in silence for twenty minutes. And I, I really didn't know what to do, and I'd never had the experience of not being told exactly what to do, of not being guided and, and controlled.

Begin clip

[15:20] HARRIET: Hello.

[15:21] GANGAJI: Hello.

[15:24] HARRIET: Well it was really just a question, because –

[15:26] GANGAJI: Just a question (chuckles)?

[15:27] HARRIET: -- the period before you speak in the meeting, it sends the mind into a kind of panic and turmoil.

[15:37] GANGAJI: That's what sends the mind into a panic and turmoil?

[15:40] HARRIET: What should I be doing? Should I repeat a mantra? Should I be still, stop, be still?

[15:40] GANGAJI: (concurrent with Harriet's words) Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

End clip

[15:48] HARRIET: The conversation progressed a little bit and I said that that made me very afraid, that I was afraid, and she asked me directly, she said, 'Well what's right underneath that fear?'

Continue clip

[16:00] GANGAJI: So when you feel this terror, of 'I don't know the answer, I don't know what to do, I don't know what I *should* do, I don't know what I should *not* do', and you just feel the terror of that, just, just right now as we sit here, are you aware of what's under that, what's deeper than the terror? That as deep as the terror seems and feels, in your falling into the terror you discover something even deeper, even closer.

[16:41] HARRIET: Certainty.

[16:42] GANGAJI: Certainty! How exquisite. Isn't that a surprise?

[16:48] HARRIET: Yeah.

[16:49] GANGAJI: Oh I love it!

[16:50] AUDIENCE: (laughs)

[16:51] MUSIC

End clip

[16:52] HARRIET: And I realized that I, it was that, you know it's like that, going back to that moment of when I was five years old and I had this experience, it's, that was when I felt like finally the gap was closed.

[17:04] MUSIC

[17:14] HILLARY: During our conversation, Harriet said she often thinks of that moment on that dark, snowy road when her life and the life of that small animal mysteriously collided. In hindsight, she sees it as a divine sacrifice of sorts, a testament to the trustworthiness of life itself. However the timing, it was a moment where a lifetime of rules and adherence to those rules gave way to the infinite possibilities of the unknown. In the end, it was about trusting her own love of the truth, the same truth that was there when she was five years old, walking down a pre-dawn London street with her dad.

[17:56] MUSIC

Begin clip

[17:58] GANGAJI: There is a moment where there is a leap back into oneself, and that leap always only happens right now. And it always only happens when you are naked of everything but yourself. When you're innocent of what you have learned about who you are and what you need and who you can become and what you have to do to become that. When you stop, you attend to what has never moved. When you are still, you recognize the silent presence that is always here. When you tell the truth, you recognize that to be yourself.

End clip

[19:00] MUSIC

[19:11] HILLARY: Thank you Harriet for sharing your tender and courageous story with all of us. It has definitely left its mark. You can find over sixty episodes of *A Conversation With Gangaji* and *Epiphany* by going to the Gangaji website, gangaji.org. There are lots of other things there, including Gangaji's event schedule, info about her live monthly webcast, and lots of other ways to connect. I'm Hillary Larson. This has been *Epiphany* on Gangaji Radio.

[19:42] ENDING MUSIC