

[Gangaji Radio](#)
Epiphany Series
Host Hillary Larson
THE FIERCE FIRE OF GRACE
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[00:02] MUSIC

[00:09] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: When Stevie Leppard was in his teens, he dreamt of going to conservatory and becoming a concert pianist. But that wasn't meant to be, at least not the way he'd envisioned. In fact, his life ended up going down a long and painful road. It was grace that would eventually save him – but it was a fierce grace, fierce, like the flames of a fire.

[00:34] STEVIE LEPPARD: I'm actually crouched in a ball, completely surrounded by fire, and my mind is completely overwhelmed, and there's this roaring sound, and then in the middle of it, everything just stops.

[00:49] HILLARY: The choreography of how that moment showed up for Stevie is important, so first, a bit of backstory: Stevie grew up in Australia, the youngest of three children. His father was a bank manager, and his mother looked after the kids. There was most definitely passion and joy, but there was a seed of discontentment brewing within Stevie. It was in the form of self-hatred. Who knows all the different ways self-hatred gets its footing, but it was there, and despite Stevie's passionate nature, it was something he just couldn't outrun.

[01:25] STEVIE: I totally believe it's a, it's a universal human experience that on some level we all feel that we are different or damaged or don't belong. But my particular flavor of that, it was, it was just, I was worthless and no good and just purely unlovable. It was just, like an empty black hole of unlovability. And, and you know, that was so painful that I would, got busy on top of it not to feel it.

[01:55] HILLARY (*music begins to play in the background*): I'm wondering how, how did that show up on the outside, meaning, did you have trouble in school, did you have a hard time making friends? What did it look like?

[02:05] STEVIE: It looked really bright and shiny and pretty and cute and bubbly and fun and really successful. And nobody saw, nobody was allowed to see the self-hatred and the shame, that was hidden in my case. You know in other people's cases maybe, I don't know, but it was completely hidden.

[02:22] MUSIC (and then continues to play in the background)

[02:28] HILLARY: Can you describe to me a day in high school or grade school where something magnificent or tremendous or great was happening on the outside and then, what was actually happening on the inside?

[02:44] STEVIE: (laughs) Whoo, Hillary, that's a really good question. So the end of high school, I had been the head boy for the final year of school. I'd received the award for being the top student academically in the school, as well as in the music program, and I was the head of like the athletics – of tennis and hockey teams – so I had the sports covered. And

we were musos in a school of other music students, a small group, in, in a school of otherwise just a regular high school. So we were kind of considered elite, and were bullied by the rough guys in the school. So after I got the award for being the top student a gang of six guys raided the lawn where we were, the musos were having lunch. They grabbed me, picked me up, spread my legs, rammed me into a tree, ran round and round the tree, then ran into the toilets, put my head in the toilet, and flushed it.

[03:47] HILLARY: Wow.

[03:49] STEVIE: Yeah so... that was just pure humiliation and having all of, everything shown to all of my friends, and all of my peers and (chuckles), yeah, it just, you know, confirmed the deep sense of worthlessness that was present.

[04:08] MUSIC (and then continues to play in the background)

[04:20] HILLARY: You have that horrible bullying incident. What did that motivate you to do? Or not do?

[04:27] STEVIE: (laughs... deep sigh) It motivated me to succeed and to prove to the bullies that I was lovable. And so yeah, I became a doctor, I became a surgeon, I became an eye surgeon. And I made a lot of money, and I had sports cars, and, and yeah, it was... I never felt like I needed to get revenge, but it was, it was just this drive to be better.

[05:04] HILLARY: So on the outside, if I were, were to look at you at that time, I would think wow, that guy's got it all!

[05:11] STEVIE: Absolutely. And yet, even with all that, I was still looking outside and going, I wish I had what they had. Just pure envy was the passion running, because this was always damaged and so if this is immutably damage – never any possibility of not being damaged – there's nothing can fill that. So even with all that, still looking out going, wow, I wish I had that.

[05:37] HILLARY: In the midst of that, was there a, like a deeper consciousness that you knew something was bigger, or is that something you discovered down the road?

[05:48] STEVIE: You know it's kind of weird because I know a lot of people that I meet on this path of awakening that always have a connection to know that there was something deeper. For me, it was, it really felt absent, it, I felt completely disconnected from any depth, from love, from joy, from, yeah. I know at some level that that consciousness was there, but it wasn't in my, I wasn't consciously aware of it.

[06:16] HILLARY: Could you give me an example of the extreme that you went to...?

[06:19] STEVIE: (laughs) Aw, Hillary! (laughs)

[06:21] HILLARY: I know! I know! I'll tell you mine, too.

[06:24] STEVIE: Okay! Okay (laughs). Oh my goodness. So it's, for me it's mostly around sex (dance music begins to play in the background). So, sexual partners and just, you know, extreme. The gay community in the nineties with drug taking and ecstasy and partying and

orgies and just, losing yourself, and along with that, the sense of shame, to be fully immersed in the moment in sex. That was my nineties. Yeah.

[07:02] MUSIC CONTINUES

[07:09] STEVIE: I became HIV-positive in nineteen-ninety-two, which again was the next kind of reinforcement of my shame and unlovability. And I've never been sick with it, but it's, it was, at the time it was a death sentence, and so there was a, a real movement to just live a life, as much as I could, which is what led into the drug-taking and sex in the nineties, and then...

[07:36] HILLARY: And then in the midst of this, you're a doctor, or you – yeah.

[07:38] STEVIE: Yeah, can you believe that? (laughs)

[07:40] HILLARY: No. Did, did that worry you, like, 'cause there was a long period of time when people didn't know how you could spread AIDS to somebody else entirely.

[07:49] STEVIE: Yeah. It was tricky in the beginning. It was really a difficult period, but the work, I love the work, but it triggered my fixation every day, because I could never be perfect. And, so I was really good at it, and I helped a lot of people, and they love me for it, and then those I couldn't help as much as they wanted, the, the negative feedback that came from that just triggered self-hatred, and so it was a very painful but rewarding period. Its kind of... it's complicated.

[08:25] HILLARY: Yeah.

[08:27] STEVIE: Yeah. You know it's just the, the suffering got so intense that there was no way out. There was no more, I couldn't get anything more on the outside. And I didn't know there was inside yet, and so the suffering was so intense that it felt like suicide was the only way out.

[08:44] MUSIC

[08:55] HILLARY: By the time Stevie was forty-two, his life was pretty much unbearable. Like he said, he had everything on the outside, but was very much empty on the inside. His doctor diagnosed him with depression; he started taking medication, and began seeing a therapist. One day, in the depths of his despair, he went on an early morning trek to Mount Warning, which is in New South Wales. Mount Warning is a sacred volcanic mountain known to many Australians. Thousands have climbed to the top, just for the experience, and others have gone seeking clarity. For Stevie, on that particular day, he was there for the latter.

[09:40] STEVIE: Traditionally you do it at, for sunrise; and the top of Mount Warning is a spiritual place, it's the first part of Australia that gets sunlight every day, as the sun rises, and it's a volcanic peak, so a core of volcano. So I get up, it's dark, I walk up the mountain without a flashlight, by myself, and I get to the top for sunrise. And I'm sitting, and I'm suffering. And in sitting and suffering the mind says, 'There's nothing, there's no way out'. And so it gives up. And in giving up, for me in that moment, there was just this arising of this message. So, there, that wasn't a profound moment. That, that felt very ordinary.

[10:26] HILLARY: And what was the message?

[10:28] STEVIE: You're going the wrong way.

[10:30] HILLARY: And that was it?

[10:31] STEVIE: Yeah. And when I heard that, I, my attention turned itself around and looked inside for the first time. And I started to examine the inside experience of this body/mind, and you know, into the body and feeling, and that process that's continued to discover the truth inside myself, instead of in the outside world.

[10:52] HILLARY: It's interesting to me listening to you because you say that was a small experience, but it sounds like it was a life-changing experience.

[11:01] STEVIE: Well it *was*, in that it started my search for the truth.

[11:05] MUSIC

[11:15] STEVIE: I got back from climbing Mount Warning, and on my bedside table was a book that was written by a man with HIV who'd cured himself through Buddhism. It was, it was just this coincidence. So that was the first spiritual book that I looked at. And then from there the search into other spiritual traditions started, and the desperate needing to know what the truth was.

[11:39] MUSIC

[11:48] HILLARY: You had mentioned somebody who had written a book about healing themselves of HIV through Buddhism. Was that a big motivation, did you want to heal yourself, or did you just want to heal your life?

[12:00] STEVIE: I, I think it was just this coincidence of the two colliding that created the spark of the search in some ways, but it didn't come into my consciousness that that was what I was doing. It was, it was realizing perhaps that there was a way out of this pain that didn't involve going forward anymore.

[12:25] HILLARY: That's a big statement.

Following that moment on Mount Warning, Stevie switched from drugs, alcohol and sex, to focusing on a spiritual search. Better than addiction? Yeah, in some ways. But even that didn't seem to alleviate his suffering. His constant companions, despair and unworthiness, were apparently meant to be the permanent framework of his inner life. But then something happened. On a very ordinary day in August, almost three years after that moment on Mount Warning, grace came to find Stevie Leppard.

[13:03] STEVIE: So I'm in our kitchen, in the evening, having dinner, and a neighbor knocks on the front door. I open the front door, he says there's smoke coming from the windows upstairs. I run upstairs, and the whole of my upstairs bedroom is full of smoke, and there's a little clear section along the floor where there's about, you know, there's this roiling heat haze. And so I crouch down in the stairwell, look along the floor of the room, and my mind is just, you know, overwhelmed with thoughts of how it started and what am I gonna do, and,

and, and as I'm squatting down, crouched down in the stairwell that's full of skylights in the ceiling, and the one at the end of the room bursts, blows out, and the end of the room catches fire. And the second one bursts and this fireball comes closer and gets bigger and then the third one, and the full skylights above my head. The flame comes around me and down the stairwell. So I'm actually crouched in a ball completely surrounded by fire. And my mind is completely overwhelmed and there's this roaring sound. And then in the middle of it, everything just stops. And there's no thoughts, and there's no world, and there's no me, there's just light, this radiant light, and I feel this deep sense of peace. Then it's silence and still. And this experience is out of time, in the, I don't know how long it lasted anyway, but there's just this knowing that that's who I am. And I am that peace and that radiant light of consciousness.

[14:57] HILLARY: No fear that you're a, a body, a person that could be burning.

[15:02] STEVIE: Yeah. Any, any perception of the body was gone. Any perception of my life, my story, the event, the experience of the fire, it, it didn't exist. All that was present was this. And then the noise started to come back, and the heat started to come back, and the flames started to come back, and my mind started to come back. And because the oxygen had all been used up, the flames sucked back over the top of me and back into the room, and I ran down the stairs and out into the street where there's fire crews, and police, and ambulance, and neighbors, and helicopter and film crews, and just, just madness. But there was also a sense of deep peace that has never left.

[15:55] MUSIC

[16:03] HILLARY: Could you tell me how the impact of that moment changed how you lived your life after that?

[16:11] STEVIE: Yeah, so I, I pretty much, from the moment of the first inside my external world started to fall away, and in the house fire I destroyed – it's like psychic surgery – I destroyed all of my history, all of my clothing, my personal possessions, my computer, my videos, my backup. I had a roof over my head, because the house didn't burn down, but the only personal possessions I had was a pair of yoga pants and a t-shirt. So there was a great cleansing (laughs). But everything else on the outside also fell away, I, you know, sold my cars, and house, and possessions. And I changed my job. I, I set about retiring from my work. I, selling my business to my partners, but, you know, my life became very simple. It was, became about humility and devotion to love.

[17:09] MUSIC

[17:21] STEVIE: After the house fire, I was watching a compilation movie called *Awakening Now*, which an Australian guy had put together with about twenty spiritual teachers, and in the middle was Gangaji. And so her radiant face came onto the screen and I had this, I felt like a, a moth pinned to a corkboard. And she pierced my heart with her gaze and her love, loving presence, and I didn't have any clue what she was saying or what had happened. But, and then the next week she was in Sydney, and so I went to satsang for the first time. And had no clue what anyone was saying, what it was all about, but I knew I was home. And the following year I was at a retreat with Gangaji – in Yosemite National Park – and I went up and I shared my experience. And there was just a way that she just, she just looked at me, and she said 'Yes.' (cries softly). Uh, so grateful.

[18:36] HILLARY: Seems like you were waiting for that yes for a long time.

[18:48] STEVIE: Ah... yeah, so much love for Gangaji and Eli.

[18:50] MUSIC

Begin clip

[18:59] GANGAJI: You're the proof of the teaching...

[19:04] STEVIE: Thank you.

[19:05] GANGAJI: ...proof of what's possible. And that somehow the worst of the situation actually delivers the best.

[19:16] STEVIE: Thank you.

[19:19] GANGAJI Thank you for showing us this. I don't mean when I say the proof of the teaching that the beauty doesn't take you into the depths – it does – but because we are so trained to exclude the, the horror, what a shock to discover in the horror is the beauty, the same beauty, the final beauty that's everywhere that we are graced to discover in exclusive moments. And that we are graced to discover in the worst of moments. So that it's one moment. And that is no moment then. Oneself.

[20:00] MUSIC

End clip

[20:10] HILLARY: When I hear people's stories and the suffering that we all can relate to with each other, maybe with our different stories and different experiences but, the solitude of it is probably the same, that when you look back at what happened to you – tell me if I'm wrong – but there's this, this way that's either, this thing that we can't stand within us, we either wanna fix it or kill it.

[20:41] STEVIE: (laughs) Yeah.

[20:43] HILLARY: And I'm just curious what your perception is of that horribly, flawed part now.

[20:52] STEVIE: (laughs) Oh, so tender, so much love for, yeah, for the beautiful soul and expression of love that, you know, went through all that suffering to, to be free. You know, it's a, it's, yeah, it was perfect. And painful.

[21:19] MUSIC

[21:36] HILLARY: Now a retired ophthalmologist, Stevie devotes his life to supporting others in their self-discovery through his work with Eli Jaxon-Baer and the Leela School. And his

childhood dream of becoming a concert pianist has finally come true, in a bit of a different way. Stevie writes and performs and is currently working on his own musical, one that celebrates the possibility of freedom in all of us. There was one song that he loved every since he was a small child. It's called Clare de Lune. Perhaps you recognize it. This is him playing it right now. Pretty sweet.

[22:15] MUSIC

[22:34] HILLARY: You can find Stevie at stevieleppard.com. There are lots of episodes of *Epiphany* and *A Conversation With Gangaji* on the Gangaji website, gangaji.org. Please feel free to peruse our catalog of podcasts as well as checking out Gangaji's other programs and offerings. I'm Hillary Larson. Thanks for joining us for this episode of *Epiphany*.

[23:00] ENDING MUSIC