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A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 28

BEING VULNERABLE

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[00:02] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:09] HILLARY LARSEN, HOST: This month on *A Conversation with Gangaji*, we're taking a look at the subject of vulnerability and, for the sake of simplicity, we've broken it down into two kinds. There's the voluntary kind, where we choose to expose ourselves by telling the truth about some aspect of ourselves that feels...well...vulnerable. Then there's the involuntary kind, when something happens, we're caught off guard, and we're left to choose either to protect ourselves or to open to all of the emotions we work so hard to avoid - feelings like shame, hurt, jealousy, unworthiness, and just full on pain. When it comes to our relationships with other people, it may seem easier sometimes to go into protection mode rather than telling the truth about how we really feel.

(clip)

[00:56] GANGAJI: *I'm jealous. I hurt. I'm fearful. I love. Now what am I going to do? Withdraw? Hate? Close off? Or just hurt and love? I recommend hurting and loving.*

(end clip)

[01:12] HILLARY: One of the many great things about vulnerability is that it makes it possible for all of us to dare to be human, to discover the experience of being truly intimate, and to open to the reality that no matter how we appear on the outside, all of us could use a little help sometimes, and it starts with the willingness to just be. I'm Hillary Larson, and this is *A Conversation with Gangaji*.

[01:43] HILLARY: I wanted to start our conversation today just by talking about the last show. In the last show Alanis Morissette sat in for me and that was such a pleasure for me to be sitting off in the other room, honestly, and monitoring the recording but listening to your exchange with her. And also, from my end as a producer, I just really wanted to acknowledge the people behind the scenes on her end that helped us make that possible. They were just so gracious and I felt like they really reflected her.

[02:15] GANGAJI: Yes.

[02:16] HILLARY: So, anyway, there's a lot that happens sometimes to make this show happen and I'd just really like to acknowledge the people that you don't hear, you know, that it's not just you and me.

[02:24] HILLARY: And then as I move into this subject for this month - it's the subject of vulnerability - what I've done here, as I looked at it - because it is such a huge subject - I was looking at it as two separate categories, really. And one was this voluntary vulnerability and then involuntary vulnerability. And, you know, the subject of vulnerability is so popular now, and I think in the greatest way. But what I've seen in myself is that I do have this capacity to be vulnerable. In fact, when we receive letters, if it's directed towards me at all, it's always, "Thank you for being so vulnerable." And there are certainly ways that I protect myself, but that for me started, you know, over twenty-eight years ago when I was fighting some very horrible addictions. And part of that was - my recovery- was the need to save my own life, was to be vulnerable and to stand up and say, "I have these battles within myself and I need help." And so, and within that, I found just extraordinary connections with human beings that were willing to stand up and say the same thing. So this voluntary vulnerability is, it's beautiful and it's huge, but it's not the whole picture, I think.

[03:39] GANGAJI: Well, it's so beautiful, I mean when you speak of that, 'cause you do have this great capacity to be vulnerable and that's what makes this radio program alive for people. And to me when we say, 'vulnerability,' we have to realize the other words, other aspects of that, which is an exposure, and undefended, unprotected. And, naturally, we spend our years learning how to be protected, how to be covered, because that's the way we survive. And then we get to modern culture, where people are surviving in their bubbles of defense, and while it may appear to be, even, community action, social interaction; it's going by formula. And when you're *really* vulnerable, voluntarily vulnerable, there's no formula. You are stripped, in a way, you are really naked, in that moment, *and* you are intelligent enough to realize that you're naked and not pretend that you aren't. And, in that, to ask for help. So this getting to 'help,' it's so big, because we are conditioned - genetically and culturally and socially and spiritually - to do it on our own. And when we realize we've failed on our own *and* we want to live, we want another chance, we want to be; then we can pray or ask for help. And you did! So I really want to acknowledge you. You did that and that's huge. You actually have to already have come back from some kind of depth of suffering to even recognize that. To not just be in denial of that or just going for the next high to be able to cover that. So, it is what makes this show alive.

[05:43] HILLARY: There was something that somebody said - actually, there was a couple comments I just wanted to toss out here. Somebody said that, "I think vulnerability is the root of all addictive impulses." And, I think, when I look at that, I mean, I look at the addiction of appearing to be perfect, like I've got my act together, and then in vulnerability we have to give that all up and then it goes deeper from there.

[06:05] GANGAJI: So the addiction is really the defense of vulnerability, not the vulnerability. The vulnerability is the willingness to experience, to have the pain, to have the sense of worthlessness, sense of meaninglessness of one's life, and to burn in that and to pray or ask for help. But when we defend against that, our help comes in addictive ways and it's no help at all, of course, it's the cover, it's deeper protection. So, in that sense, it's the opposite of vulnerability...defended.

[06:43] HILLARY: Yeah, but I was looking at what is so hard - or seemingly so hard - about vulnerability and I was thinking that it's so closely linked to the feeling of shame. Like I failed. I got it wrong. I'm imperfect. There's something, I don't know, embarrassing about me or

something. And it seems like you speak of vulnerability itself is beautiful. But to me, I was thinking, maybe it's the story attached to vulnerability that creates the feeling of shame.

[07:18] GANGAJI: Exactly. Because, and it's, the shame is horrible, of course, it's a terrible feeling. But there's something under shame, it's fear of death, finally; a fear of loss which is fear of death. And we don't think of it as 'death' because we are so caught up, often, in the emotionality of the shame and the worthlessness, the meaninglessness. But if we're willing to open to that, to actually experience it, we're not vulnerable in that moment, we're just suffering and we're telling the truth about the suffering. The vulnerability is really *under* that, when we actually open to it all, and it *is* beautiful. It's the resistance to the vulnerability, where there's either - when it's working - a denial or disassociation; or a story about power and not needing vulnerability, not needing anything. When that stops working, and when the defenses crumble, we get afraid and there's stories that are generated. And that's suffering and it's not pretty, it's not beautiful. But under that is the true beauty of the *reality*, as human beings, as creatures, we are vulnerable every moment. And as emotional beings, we are vulnerable to being not liked, or hated, or betrayed, or left, abandoned. So physically, emotionally, mentally, we are vulnerable because we can't know it all, we can't understand it all, and we can be stupid at times. So, it's the identity with the physical, or the mental, or the emotional experiences of life-form that then creates the desire to escape that vulnerability. And the willingness to realize the escape from that is suffering itself in some form, even if it's a form of great success. If you just go deeply into - or just prick the surface of - someone who is powerful and great success, there's a maintenance to that that is relentless. And it is so focused on maintaining the success, the defenses in that sense, or in the sense we are speaking of today, that the inner life is empty and it's not available. It's not being lived.

[09:50] HILLARY: That kind of constant maintenance, that reminds me of this story I wanted to share with you. This was - I don't know how many years ago it was - let's say seven or eight years ago. And I had read *Diamond in Your Pocket* and I, that was my first exposure to you. It was such a huge revelation, it was like I felt like I had read the truth for the first time in my whole life, that I had been waiting for that. And then not long after it - I don't want to say this was like an absolute, direct connection, but - it hit me so deeply, just this willingness to, "Oh, just to Be. Just to Be." And I was on a trip with my partner and we were at the Portland airport on a Monday morning and it was jammed, it was totally jammed, and he and I were at the ticket counter. And while I was talking to the lady at the ticket counter, he had moved our bags and I didn't see that he had moved our bags; and I stepped back and I completely splatted (laughter) on my bag. I was laying on top of this golf bag and it was - it wasn't just that there were some people in line - it was like, it just felt like a stadium full of people. And there was this moment - and it seems like, oh, well that's...Why would I remember that story after all these years? But it impacted me so greatly because there was this moment where I just was like, I just wanted to, like, protect myself from that kind of humiliation. And I remember this decision I made just to like, "Just lay here and experience this shame and humiliation as much as you possibly can in this moment." And I have to say - I don't know how many people can relate to that but - I had such freedom the rest of the trip because, honestly, that could have been a game changer for me. And it was, I felt like it was...when I look back on it it wasn't like, "Oh, I fell on top of a golf bag in front of hundreds of people and I thought about Gangaji and she says to..." It was just so ingrained after I read that book that it just happened.

[11:45] GANGAJI: Such a great example and, as you were speaking of it, I realized that, of course, that's what slapstick comedy is. And for a comedian to really be a good comedian, it has to be total vulnerability. And this willingness is exposing our very human clumsiness or ignorance of what's behind us and then just falling into that. And that's freedom. And, of course, the laughter that we experience when someone shows us that, it comes from this recognition. And recognition of how if we defend against that it's not funny. We meet that, we open, it's free and then it even becomes a great joke, a great laugh.

[12:31] HILLARY: Yeah it is. It's hilarious because, to me, I mean on a teaching level, what it represents to me - for all of us because we all have our variations of this - is that I grew up thinking to myself, "In order for me to survive well, I need to be together and I need to be stoic." And when I was laying on top of the golf bag in front of all those people I kind of lost my chance at that. (laughter)

[12:53] GANGAJI: Well that's, I think, really the essence of what stoicism is, if you go all the way back. It's not this dead dissociation. It's just really this willingness to recognize it's all happening and it's out of our control and then we, in that moment, are not attached to not having fallen into the golf bag. You fell into the golf bag. End of conversation, beginning of investigation.

[13:20] HILLARY: Yeah, it's funny how those moments can be seemingly so small but then, in the scope of a lifetime, such a huge shift in what's possible.

[13:30] GANGAJI: Yes, it was in that sense a test. Not in the way we think of tests as bad things, but naturally life is always affording us the opportunity to surrender. And that's the test; so it's a great story.

[13:48] HILLARY: I want to make sure I get a listener question in here, and this is more along the lines of the voluntary vulnerability category. This person says, "Dear Gangaji. Sometimes I wonder where the edge is between vulnerability and over-sharing. When vulnerability is taken too far, it seems as though it can become a new version of protection. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on that."

[14:12] GANGAJI: Oh, I think that's a great question. I know that I'm not one for giving formulas for how you discover these things, but it is a living discovery when you're, like, using some sense of vulnerability. It's not open and free. It actually has a...it's sticky. There's a sentimentality often, and narcissism probably - speaking about "me" and let me tell you what "I" did - and being "open" as a dramatic representation of vulnerability rather than simple...simple openness. Like when you fell on the golf clubs, you rested there for a moment.

[14:54] HILLARY: I did. (Laughter)

[14:55] GANGAJI: That's, to me, vulnerability. It's a rest, and sometimes getting to rest is the challenge, of course, because of worthlessness and everything you've said. But in the moment of rest, there's nothing happening and it's so sweet.

[15:12] HILLARY: Speaking of a moment of rest. When I was kind of making out my notes for this show over the last few weeks, I was listening to you talk about something - I think it was on

your With Gangaji broadcast that happens every month. I always, like I always seem like I toss that in there because I actually love that program of yours so much. And you were talking about a radio interview you had done and that you suggested to the person who was doing the interview that maybe you spend sixty seconds in silence. And the thought of that to them was, you know, "Well we don't do that on radio."

[15:47] GANGAJI: It was death. (Laughter)

[15:49] HILLARY: Well, it is because I was thinking, actually, when you were talking I actually felt myself getting uptight. Because I'm a radio person and one of the very very first things I learned in radio is to not leave any gaps. And in radio it is called "dead air" and it's like, "please, please, anything but dead air!" And when you and I had our conversation *Embracing the Unthinkable* and you completely spun me around at the end - which was a great example of involuntary vulnerability - part of that was like, "Oh I'm not doing my job because now we have some dead air here."

[16:25] GANGAJI: Well, this is the way most people live their lives, as if they're on radio and they can't have a moment of silence. And that's how we are driven. And then we are exhausted but we keep hoping if we reach some end we can then rest, rather than just taking this moment, on radio, in your life, however it's showing up, and...be vulnerable. Be open. Be free.

[16:54] HILLARY: I love that, how you compare dead air on radio to how we don't allow that in our lives - just these moments, these gaps.

[17:02] GANGAJI: It's fear of death again, of course, it always shows up. That's our human, or animal, or just form-driven imperative "Do not die." And that shows up in so many ways. It's not just on your deathbed or by a disaster but in the many ways in a day that we *lose* something or we *fear* losing something. That's always fear of death, we *fear* of there being *just* space. And to realize just space! It's full.

[17:35] HILLARY: There's actually a comment from somebody else who said, "Dying, dying is profoundly vulnerable." And I think that making friends with our vulnerability makes it more possible for a good death.

[17:47] GANGAJI: It's a, you know, I would say dying is probably, in one sense, the ultimate involuntary vulnerability. We don't want to die. Even most of us who are listening, anyway, really don't want to die. But we will die, whether we like it or not, so it's not a voluntary event. But the possibility of recognizing that there are these involuntary events and volunteering for this inevitable. Then you're not waiting for the moment of your physical death to actually experience the spaciousness of falling - falling, not keeping yourself upright - of opening, of open space. And in that you meet death as we will all have to meet death. And some of us will experience great grace in that moment of meeting death, and some won't; some will still be fighting to get upright as animals do - to get upright means you're not dead yet. But in the surrender, everyone is gifted by this possibility to open to life as we are present in this brief span.

[19:08] HILLARY: When I look at people moving through just the aging process, and if there's a - maybe it's not just the aging process - if there's a fight against vulnerability, it does seem like it

makes the aging process harder because there's...and there is a loss in it too, because there's a loss of connection that could have been had.

[19:31] GANGAJI: Well aging is hard enough, you know, we don't need to make it harder. There are enough involuntary vulnerable moments in periods that we, you know, it's not to say you shouldn't keep yourself in shape or take care of things that can be medicated or fixed. But just to recognize that the vulnerability of being an animal that is born and then dies. And that's the... we can recognize that, as Ramana did, when we're sixteen and we have a full life ahead of us; so it's not necessarily the chronological aging. It's simply the fact of aging and opening to that. You know, usually that doesn't occur to people until you reach your thirties; probably forties, fifties, sixties, and on. But it's possible, whatever your biological age, to open to it now. I mean the Buddha did, he recognized age and disease. And that 'waked him up' to something that he could not discover in his protected, defended, life. He had to choose vulnerability to walk the earth like other beings.

[20:47] HILLARY: I love the idea of, like the vulnerability really starts with just being in a body, you know, because we don't get to choose our bodies. And some of us have had struggles with our bodies - either the way they operate or the way they look or society's, you know, perception of how they should be. And those can be extraordinary moments of opening to the self-hatred that can be within that.

[21:15] GANGAJI: That's right.

[21:16] HILLARY: And it also seems to me within that - now that I'm sitting here just saying it to you - is that sometimes people could see vulnerability as some form of self-abuse or negativity saying, "Oh, I have self-hatred about a certain aspect of myself." But, to me, true vulnerability leaves open this possibility of self-love.

[21:42] GANGAJI: Well, yes, because the inquiry doesn't stop with self-hatred. That's actually where it begins - it's the willingness to tell the truth. That doesn't mean you're to broadcast the truth to people about your process or where you are in your investigation. Because it can all happen within a moment of seconds, minutes at most. In the willingness just to take this moment and tell the truth about *where* you are protected, *where* you are defended, and not to get into an analysis of that or the *whys* and the *when* it happened or *what* you will be like when you are unprotected. Just to open to what is being defended - and generally it's some sense of something missing or not right or even actually wrong - and to open to that. There is a discovery of what's closer than any of it.

[22:40] HILLARY: We just have about three or four minutes left and I'm hesitant to take this opportunity to say what I am about to say but as we have been doing these shows - over I think, this is show number twenty-seven...twenty-eight, twenty-eight - and at a certain point, after a few months, I kind of became suspicious of myself, because there was a way that the conversation itself felt like a protection or a postponement in some way and that playing clips - I love the clips, I love for people to hear you in all these different ways - and I love for people to hear these exchanges you have with people and these moments of vulnerability with, where you have them stop. And, and there was some way I was thinking, "Gosh, I hope she never does

that with me!" (laughter) Because it's vulnerable for me to have these conversations with you because that silence, that dead air, to me is a tender area.

[23:50] GANGAJI: Yes. Yes it is a tender, tender sweet area. It's here.

[23:56] (Silence)

[24:12] GANGAJI: Just right.

[24:13] HILLARY: Yeah. Just right. Thank you.

[24:31] HILLARY: This actually would be a perfect place to end our conversation this month. But I wanted to take a few minutes now to play one of my favorite exchanges with Gangaji and it has everything to do with the subject of vulnerability. I used a portion of this piece in an episode a couple of years ago. It was about love and intimacy. But I've been actually looking for an excuse to play the whole thing, so here it is. The issue you're about to hear Gangaji walk this lovely woman through, is this: "How do I unprotect myself?" But first, Gangaji's question back to her is, "How do you actually go about protecting yourself in the first place? What are the steps in shutting down?" Seeing the mechanics of this is so helpful. Let's listen to this:

(clip)

[25:13] GANGAJI: So I'm asking you to teach me. How it is you withdraw? Say I want to learn how to withdraw. What are the steps?

[25:24] SPEAKER: OK.

[25:24] GANGAJI: Yes, you see. Now you have to examine, "OK, it seems so natural to me, it just happens." But it doesn't just happen. Because you've seen the lead up to it.

[25:33] SPEAKER: Yeah. I can just say to myself, "I'm going to go blank here."

[25:36] GANGAJI: I'm going to go blank here.

[25:39] SPEAKER: And I'm going to withdraw and move back.

[25:42] GANGAJI: And I'm going to withdraw and move back. And then what has to happen? What do I do internally?

[25:47] SPEAKER: And then I want to run away. But internally?

[25:50] GANGAJI: Yeah internally. So I get all that. That's good. That makes sense. I can do that.

[25:54] SPEAKER: OK, good, good. (laughter) And then you get lots of adrenaline.

[25:59] GANGAJI: Lots of adrenaline?

[26:00] SPEAKER: Yeah.

[26:00] GANGAJI: Where does that come from? How do you generate that?

[26:05] SPEAKER: Ummm, I'm not sure.

[26:06] GANGAJI: Well let's see!

[26:07] SPEAKER: OK!

[26:07] GANGAJI: You're teaching me.

[26:09] SPEAKER: OK. Ummm, you get really angry. (laughter)

[26:12] GANGAJI: Uh huh. Angry at...? Somebody who's causing...

[26:16] SPEAKER: Yeah.

[26:16] GANGAJI: ...me to run away?

[26:17] SPEAKER: Uh huh.

[26:17] GANGAJI: OK. So now I got this story about me and inadequacy, based on some comparison and some feelings of jealousy and worthlessness. But now I have to involve somebody else who caused this story.

[26:29] SPEAKER: Yeah. Because they deserted me.

[26:31] GANGAJI: They deserted me. Now the story, yeah, I can start to feel it, right through there! They deserted **me!!!** (laughter)

[26:39] SPEAKER: (laughter) They did! (laughter)

[26:42] GANGAJI: And then?

[26:44] SPEAKER: This is not so hard after all guys! (laughter) Oh dear! Oh right, now where were we? (laughter)

[26:56] GANGAJI: So we're unwinding the story that was wound so tightly that you didn't even know it was there. It just seemed like something that just happened. Now we're unwinding it and we have gotten to the point of where I'm victimized in two ways. By this feeling of jealousy that arises in me and this person that causes that feeling. So I've got to escape. Now what I want to know is how do I make the next step to escape? What happens physiologically? What happens in my body? What happens in my emotions? How do I go blank? How do I withdraw? How do I hide?

[27:38] SPEAKER: *Stop talking.*

[27:41] GANGAJI: *Stop talking?*

[27:42] SPEAKER: *Yeah.*

[27:42] GANGAJI: *Uh huh, OK.*

[27:44] SPEAKER: *Clinch my teeth.*

[27:46] GANGAJI: *Clinch your teeth? OK.*

[27:48] SPEAKER: *Yeah.*

[27:49] GANGAJI: *What happens to the eyes?*

[27:51] SPEAKER: *Blank stone.*

[27:52] GANGAJI: *Mmmm, stone eyes.*

[27:54] SPEAKER: *Mmm hmmm. Yes, very cold. (laugh)*

[27:57] GANGAJI: *And, my body itself? Is there a posture that goes with it?*

[28:02] SPEAKER: *Ummm, I'm not quite sure.*

[28:05] GANGAJI: *Well, put yourself in the situation then...*

[28:06] SPEAKER: *Yeah, slumped. I guess, victim, got to be victim so it's really slumped, round shouldered.*

[28:12] GANGAJI: *So, what I'm telling you...this takes some effort!*

[28:16] SPEAKER: *Yeah. (laughter) And it does! 'Cause I'm very tired and I'm sick of fighting this depression and it's like, ugh.*

[28:22] GANGAJI: *Yes! Yes! This effort is a lot of energy!*

[28:24] SPEAKER: *There is a lot of energy that goes into it.*

[28:27] GANGAJI: *So then what's the solution? You see all of the steps, I'm sure there are many more other steps but those are at least enough to see that at any point along the way - you have seen it now - at any point along the way you can say, "Stop." I'm giving up this power to close down. So you sit up straight. You open your eyes. You say, "Hello, you have hurt me." Or, "I am feeling hurt and I'm blaming you." Or just, "I'm feeling hurt. I hurt." Or, "I love you."*

[29:09] SPEAKER: *Thank you.*

[29:10] GANGAJI: Ah! You see how easy!

[29:12] SPEAKER: (laughter)

[29:13] GANGAJI: Isn't this easier!

[29:14] SPEAKER: It is.

[29:14] GANGAJI: It is! This is the truth that we hate to tell!

[29:18] SPEAKER: (laughter)

[29:18] GANGAJI: Because it is. We have so much invested in these powers that we have developed and we think they are so great and special. And to give them up means I will actually be unprotected, I will actually have to experience this pain. But you see that, in protecting yourself, you still experience the pain. So what a bad joke you have played on yourself. If this protection actually worked it would be another matter, but the protection augments the pain, turns the pain into suffering. Pain is pain. And yes, so let's say there's jealous pain - and we can diagnose jealousy and why it shouldn't be or why it should be. But say it's there, just as part of the human experience. Jealousy! Feel it! I'm jealous! I hurt! I'm fearful! I love! Now what am I going to do? Withdraw? Hate? Close off? Or just hurt and love? I recommend hurting and loving.

(end clip)

[30:42] HILLARY: That clip is from the compilation CD *Open, Unprotected, and Free*. You can find that by going to the website gangaji.org. And if you'd like to support this show, you can do so by going to iTunes and giving *A Conversation with Gangaji* a rating or leaving a comment. It helps more people find the show. And if you are interested in becoming a sponsor, please go to the radio page on the website. You can email us to find out how all that works. Well that's it for us. Thank you again for joining us. This has been *A Conversation With Gangaji*.