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A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 33

AGING: ENDING THE WAR AGAINST TIME

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[00:01] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:06] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: Aging is sometimes called 'the great humbler'. Some embrace it, some dread it, but most of us vacillate between loving the good parts – and there're lots of them – and resisting the reality that our bodies and our brains have a limited shelf life. What does that mean for our quality of life? Aging is an involuntary invitation to see how we are attached to who we want to be, and where we are afraid to let go.

[00:36] GANGAJI: No matter what happens, we still age (chuckles) and, and lose. So to finally be able to turn and face that aging, or that losing, without running from it, to face the monster of what we think it will mean, is, has always great, good news.

[00:56] HILLARY LARSON: Is there a place where the reality of our physical aging can peacefully coexist with the wisdom that comes from simply having lived life? And finally, is there a way that the veils that we call age, if we really look at it, seem a little less concrete than we thought? I'm Hillary Larson, and this is *A Conversation With Gangaji*.

[01:24] HILLARY: I wanted to talk about the upside of aging.

[01:27] GANGAJI: Mmm...good! The upside, that's good.

[01:28] HILLARY: 'Cause we, we, we know there is one!

[01:31] GANGAJI: Yes.

[01:32] HILLARY: But first I wanted to talk to you about the downside.

[01:34] GANGAJI: Oh (laughs) - okay.

[01:38] HILLARY: (laughs) And the reason for that is, is that I think that we run the risk of spiritualizing aging. In fact I remember when my...I was in my early forties, and I'm fifty-three now, and I was just starting to have to wear glasses when I went to the movies. And I remember thinking, this aging thing is not bad (laughs). You know what I mean? It's, this is not that bad. And I thought I was just gonna handle it better than the average person.

[02:12] GANGAJI: (laughs) That's so funny, isn't it?

[02:14] HILLARY: It is!

[02:15] GANGAJI: It's a set-up for being humbled. The whole thing.

[02:19] HILLARY: And around that time I was in this women's group, and most of the women were younger, younger than me, and, and we would talk about aging and the wisdom that comes with aging and, and when I got to be about forty-nine I came up with this, I don't know if it's a saying, but I started saying 'aging is theoretical until it's experiential'.

[02:39] GANGAJI: (laughs) Yeah. Yeah, it's – what can be said, you know, so much *has* been said about it. It's an, it's a force, and it won't be denied. And there are better ways to age, of course, and they're, and a lot of that is luck. Certain things happen to people that are unlucky, and it's horrible, there's a lot of suffering with age. And a lot of that, of course, is caused by particular lifestyles, but I'm not even talking about those choices. I'm talking about just things that happen to people that are, are really grim, and can make the last third of one's life or the last fifth of one's life or the last months of one's life really gruesome. So I, it's intelligent to at least be aware of, before we have experienced that, that that, that can happen. And the sooner we are willing to meet the possibility of that, without being morbid or negative but just opening to, to what we see all around us. I mean this was one of the Buddha's main teachings, aging and disease and death. That's, that's what comes with life form.

[03:58] HILLARY: I wrote some fears down that I have about aging and, I think you, you know, kind of, kind of got to the root of it. But one of my fears was that I won't be able to do what I, I'm able to do now. I'm, I'm an active woman. And the other one, the other ones... well I'll just list 'em, is that: I will see myself differently, and other people will see me differently, and that includes intimate relationships; the idea that I'm running out of time; that I will at some point be disabled, that that would be a possibility; and then I'll just toss in the fear of death, just, just for kicks.

[04:36] GANGAJI: Yeah because really that's the fear of suffering, which is a little different from the fear of death. But both the fear of suffering and the fear of death are about loss. And that's what you were speaking of – losing what you have. Losing what you could have (chuckles). And that, that is lost, that's true. And that's the reality. But we (chuckles), we attach that loss to suffering and it's not necessarily suffering at all. I mean there are enough people who have lost so much before they were chronologically old. And have, have lived to inform us all that it's not necessarily a, a sentence of suffering, that it can be, and it *is*, a possibility for great opening and surrender. And in that, the bad news is actually the good news.

[05:29] HILLARY: I was listening to an interview the other day, and they were talking about aging, and what I found fascinating was, I really hadn't looked at it this way before. It was that, they were putting it in the context of winning and losing. That there's some feeling that as we're aging somehow we're failing in some way 'cause we're losing so many things.

[05:50] GANGAJI: Yeah and it becomes – people congratulate you (chuckles), you know – if you reach a certain age, you're congratulated. And I think that that's, just points to this whole imperative to survive, as a person but as a species, as the collective, and the longer we survive the more we do our part. But I really wanna get back to just this experience of losing and – so I'm twenty years older than you are, and I've lost a lot of my capacity as a physical being, my stamina, my, my image of myself, others' image of me, and it's really good news. I wouldn't mind having the stamina back (chuckles) – but the surrender that is possible with, with losing is worth not having what was so treasured. When I was at my peak as a young woman, I would say in my thirties probably – really strong, really active, tireless, I could stay

up all night if I wanted to – I was miserable. I liked those things, I had pleasure from those things, but I had no serenity in my life. I had no, I had no reality of loss. And it's really when the – of course I had lost things, by thirty we have all lost quite a lot – but it wasn't a reality for me because it was a strong time for me, and so I didn't appreciate the preciousness of what can't be lost or what hasn't been lost yet in this very moment, you know, that we're breathing, that we are upright, that we can move our hands, that we can blink our eyes. This is a great blessing. And we know that, theoretically, but we can't know it experientially until we recognize what's been lost. So you at fifty-three, you've already lost a lot. Surely you can look back twenty years and, and see the good news of that too. You lose your idealism. You lose your, your impatience with the way the world works. It doesn't mean you don't get angry at certain times, or sad, or even feel despondent. But, but you lose your arrogance about, or I lost my arrogance about that I know how the world should be, how it should function. What space opens up! And really I'm here to say from this vantage point and I'm, I'm healthy, I'm, so I don't have great encumbrances, but I can say that it's better! Aging is better than being young. Overall. Although this, I don't wanna ever deny that there are aspects of youth that I certainly would love to have. Great stamina, I would love to have, be more athletic. But not at the price I would have to pay to get it back, which would be the, that that immaturity. Maturity is not a, is not what we think it is. It's, it's incredible, it's better. It's much better than immaturity.

[09:10] HILLARY: Well it's funny (chuckles), 'cause I, I had a little bit of a projection on you, that's been resolved actually through these conversations. And, this was a few years ago, I was taking you to the airport, and I had never driven in a car with you before (chuckles), and the, on the way to the airport, we talked about aging and – and we were actually talking about the downside of aging, all the body, the things that kind of start falling apart – and, and I remember thinking, oh, like I was shocked, like oh if you're afraid of, if you're not afraid of death, like you, you have transcended that in your awakening, then you wouldn't be worried about aging. And so I put that picture on top of you, what I thought of an enlightened being, and then over the years and through these conversations, I mean I've, I've been humbled more times that I can count at what that projection actually meant.

[10:12] GANGAJI: Yeah, it's meaningless really. So, you know we're all made kind of differently. And I'm certain that there are many people my age who don't worry about losing certain capabilities but, I was made a hypochondriac. That's just the way I was made, that's like having the color of eyes I have, or having the shape nose I have. I was made a hypochondriac so to me, if I lose the function of my little finger, that's a signal that it's probably a stroke, or if I have a cold...

[10:44] HILLARY: (laughs)

[10:45] GANGAJI: ... that means death is imminent. It's just the way I'm made. And, and the truth is I don't have a problem with it, and I don't take it as seriously as I did when it wasn't as close as it is. (chuckles) I mean, it could be a stroke, I could die with the next cold, but since it's real now, it's not as fearsome as it was when it was just theoretical.

[11:11] HILLARY: Wow, that's interesting.

[11:12] GANGAJI: But it doesn't mean it's more comfortable. You know, I mean, my digestion is a drag because it's, you know, each year it's, it's more finicky. But so what, you know, so what?

[11:27] HILLARY: Well I wanted to go to the – earlier we were talking about the possibility of being disabled – and I recently, in the last month or two, a very close family member of mine was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and it's been hard on my family and, I found out there was a lecture about Alzheimer's at this, there's a nursing home in Portland and, you know, there was a way... it's like I either wanna learn more about it, face it, or like I just want it to go away. And it's like, well, it's not gonna go away. So I went to this lecture, and this, this nursing home was actually, you know, physically pretty nice. But it was the epitome of a nursing home with people kind of sitting in wheelchairs along the hallways and, and the woman that was presenting the lecture was talking about the realities of Alzheimer's. And, you know, I have to say, I've had a lot of experiences with my own brain so it's a fear of mine. And she kept talking about what a horrible illness this is and, and I was sitting there thinking 'there's gotta be a, a better way'. Because I think that my fear of, you know, when I, I used to not pay attention to older people, you know, in walkers at the grocery store, or they couldn't get out of their car, or they can't count their change or something, I didn't pay attention to that. And now I do.

[12:49] GANGAJI: Yes.

[12:50] HILLARY: And I do because it's a projection, I'm like 'oh, please, don't let that happen to me'.

[12:53] GANGAJI: But it is gonna happen to you. In one way or the other. I mean, maybe you'll be a hundred before it happens to you, or maybe there'll be an accident and you'll die next week. But if you live long enough, that does happen, because that's the nature of form: it withers up and dies. And I know that there are people who are living who would rather be dead, because they've lost so much of what they treasure, value more than anything, so I never wanna discount that. But I also know that there are people who are severely restricted who are still in love with life. And they would never have believed that thirty years earlier, that they could still be in love with life, given the restrictions. So there's a, an invitation in the reality of the, the relentless nature of time and age to actually surrender: to be intelligent, to live your life as healthfully as you can; to, to recognize that so much of it is luck. And you could have a, a stroke of bad luck, or, or you could get lucky, but finally there's no luck in that the body is made to wither and die, and lose its function. And we're already invisible, as, as you were saying, those people in wheelchairs and walkers were invisible to you in a certain sense, we are already invisible to people who are just coming of age now. Which is amazing, and it's all happened very quickly. So I don't think there there's any easy, pat answer, or formula about it. But in our willingness to see, like because of this experience with your family member and Alzheimer's you, your consciousness has been expanded. It's, doesn't feel good because you would maybe like it not to be so close, but you can, you can see more than you could see before. And in that there's a possibility of real compassion, not just for other life forms that are suffering but for *your* life form that suffers, that ages, that dies.

[15:06] HILLARY: When you think about it, you know, it's all about, you know, we all have a terminal diagnosis. But for me when something like that feels like it gets closer, the space I receive from it was, is that, because I don't know what will happen to me in my life, but it made me more aware of what I'm doing right now.

[15:30] GANGAJI: Yes.

[15:31] HILLARY: You know I, I've paid attention to, or I pay attention to, like, this work I do with you, or whatever video work I do, or, it's like, wonder if I could only do this for a day, one more day?

[15:42] GANGAJI: Then you discover what else is precious besides this work that you can do. That's the thing, I mean, when we see people who are, who can't do the work they loved, the work that defined their life, what's left? And those who find nothing, of course, suffer deeply, and wish they were dead, or, or killed themselves. But those who can find this, this flame of life, that still loves itself, no matter whether it's producing or not producing or making art or not making art or, that's (chuckles) that expands all of our consciousness.

[16:27] HILLARY: Well, I wanted to make sure I got a couple questions in, because I think a lot of what we're talking about here is different forms of identification that we don't want to lose. And I'm sorry I, I don't, when I don't have somebody's permission to use their name I don't use that, if I haven't checked in with them, so with a couple of these questions I, I wanna make sure these people, their anonymity is protected in case they didn't want their name mentioned. But this woman had something to say about losing her sexual identity, and she says, 'I wouldn't say I'm a highly sexual person. I guess I would fall into the normal range, whatever that is. I've found in the last few years that my sex drive has changed significantly. I never realized how much I identified myself as a sexual being, but I'll have to admit that the thought of losing that aspect of myself is a little terrifying, which is a surprise to me. I tell myself that I'm grateful for the amount of wisdom I have, now that I'm in my late fifties, and that's true. But it also feels like I'm sugar-coating that part of aging, the aging process, so I can make myself feel better.'

[17:34] GANGAJI: Well I think some people don't lose their sexual identity. That also is, depends on how you're made, I mean there, I, I hear about, or read stories about, people in their, certainly seventies, eighties, nineties, enjoying different ways of sexually relating. For myself, I, I'd say it's hugely liberating to lose that. It's losing of a certain form of pleasurable, extremely pleasurable, bondage, of identity, that's dictated by mostly adolescent hormones. And so... I, there was a time when I recognized I was losing it. Was I afraid? I, well you know, it was really, it was after meeting Papaji, so it was more of a noticing that, that there, that life doesn't need that juice. Certainly the procreation of life needs that juice but, but the fullness of life doesn't need it, so. Again, it's surrender. You either *are* a sexual being, however you define that – average, or extreme, or, or none – or you're not. But it doesn't touch the, the beingness. And the beauty about losing, losing identity is that you discover this, this life force that is alive and doesn't need to be attractive even, doesn't need to attract, doesn't need to find pleasure in ways that great pleasure has been found. Because there's something deeper than pleasure. And I, maybe that's what we're talking about with all these things that can be lost. That, that there is a joy of being that we link up to sexual activity, say, because it can be quite joyful. I, I never would deny that (chuckles). I was I would say above average sexual being. So it's true, I, it was wonderful, but just as from someone on the other side, nothing is lost. Nothing is lost: affection and love aren't, aren't even dented. And that's, that's where the joy is in sexual activity.

[19:54] HILLARY: I think there's a sense of, that, that, like, you know, I don't mean to turn this show into the sex show 'cause we already did a show about sex....

[20:04] GANGAJI: Yes, we've done that (laughs).

[20:05] HILLARY: ...but why not, right? But there's a certain amount of alive-ness, you know, when you're younger and your hormones are raging, there's a certain amount of exhilaration with that. And, and, you know, there can also be an addiction to that, I certainly have gone through that myself.

[20:20] GANGAJI: And that, and a certain amount of misery, too. I mean that's, that's not just alive-ness, exhilaration (laughs), that's, that's some miserable times, because you're, you're thwarted in some way, or you're addicted in some way, or not met in other ways, or, you know, objectified in certain ways and so it's that we, because it's such a powerful force I think we just identify exhilaration for life in that sexual way. And then when we reach a certain age, if it happens, when we don't have that identity we discover that exhilaration and joy is still there. It may not be in the blush in your cheek, it certainly won't be (laughs). Or the spring in your step, or your pheromones, or, or whatever is responsible for that, the juice, but it doesn't mean that, for, in one iota the capacity for intimacy is diminished. And it's the intimacy that really gives us our, our connection. And I think as adolescents, that was, you know, how else could we really find intimacy except being thrust into it by this powerful force that we had no control over. But now it's available every, every moment, it's not dictated by this force of sexual drive.

[21:50] HILLARY: And I think it's also about, you know I think that we probably would agree that this culture that we live in is a, is a very immature culture.

[21:59] GANGAJI: Yes.

[22:00] HILLARY: And to, and the willingness to stand up, really and say 'I am', is a bold statement.

[22:09] GANGAJI: And yet it's so obvious who is not, you know. I, it's, the immaturity is because our culture, the Western culture in general, is fixated on, on the power of adolescence, whether it's a physical power, I mean that's a peak for certain power and strength and the sexuality is a part of that, a peak for procreation. And we, and so there is a, certainly a, maybe a fixation in terms of continuing the species, but our culture has really doubled that fixation where it's, it becomes the benchmark for value. And it's a subtle, sometimes not too subtle, but often subtle, conditioning that we absorb. So, and no matter what happens, we still age (chuckles), and, and lose. So to finally be able to turn and face that aging, or that losing without running from it, to face the monster, or what we think it will mean, is as always great good news.

[23:27] HILLARY: Well I, I wanna say that I used to be, like the first twenty-five or so episodes I was super vigilant about the clock and now I just hope for the best (laughs).

[23:30] GANGAJI: (laughs)

[23:31] HILLARY: So, 'cause what I wanted to talk to you about was actually to go deeper into that, this, as a spiritual seeker is, is age relevant? And somebody who's part of With Gangaji, Juan Carlos, sent me this great clip. He told me to go, go into the oasis, look for this great clip, where Gangaji is having its discourse about aging. And I, I wanted to play this because it's, I think it's a, it's a very relevant conversation about age in relationship to waking up.

[24:04] GANGAJI: Great.

[24:05] HILLARY: And this piece is from, actually back in 2000. And you're reading this, this woman's letter. So I'm picking it up where, where you're just starting to read her letter.

(clip)

[24:16] GANGAJI: *'Thank you for coming to San Diego. I'm a beginner and listen to every tape I can get my hands on. In one of the videos of satsang with Papaji, the camera panned a youthful audience. Then Papaji said, "It's good to come to this teaching when one is young. The old ones can get it next time around."' (laughs)*

[24:34] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBERS: *(laughter)*

[24:37] GANGAJI: *This is very good for people to hear, Papaji saying things like this. 'Being one of the old ones, that struck fear into my heart. Is it too late for us to awaken in this lifetime?' Are you an old one? Your body. But you, you, I'm asking you to look deeper than your body. I'm asking you to look inside yourself and discover what is the same age as the first time it was aware of itself when you were either an infant, or a baby, or a toddler, or five years old, or six years old, or ten years old. The first time self-consciousness appeared in this lifetime. No age. No age. So the fear that was struck was simply an indication that you have, to some degree, in the past, mistakenly identified yourself as your body, which does age, which is old and young. But this that is consciousness, it's no age, it's obvious isn't it? That's why old people look in the mirror and say 'That can't be me!' (laughs)*

[25:53] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBERS: *(laughter)*

[25:54] GANGAJI: *'That can't be me!' (laughter) 'It's not!' (laughter)*

[25:59] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBERS: *(laughter)*

[26:01] GANGAJI: *That's the good news! But it takes getting old before you can realize it. Because when you're young and beautiful, it's like 'Hey, that's me!' (laughter)*

(end clip)

[26:16] HILLARY: I can't think of a better clip to start wrapping up this conversation.

[26:19] GANGAJI: That's it, really. Really, we've been speaking about identification and the more you lose of it, the more possibility you have to discover what's true.

[26:33] HILLARY: Well I was speaking with a, a gentleman, his name is Matthew, I'm gonna surprise him here by saying his name. I'm, I met him at the With Gangaji in person weekend recently, and he came up to me and he said that, his remark was to me, 'You've really changed over these, the course of these conversations,' he said, 'Cause I listen to every single one.' And I was surprised by what he said. And then he looked at me and he said, 'And I have changed with you.'

[27:05] GANGAJI: Ah.

[27:06] HILLARY: And that was so deeply touching to me, because I, you know I do my best to stand in for all of us but that's what these conversations are about and this, this opportunity you give us to truly wake up no matter what the topic, is such a, it's, it's such an honor to be here with you.

[27:31] GANGAJI: I feel the same way, yes. An honor to be here with all of you.

(clip)

[27:50] GANGAJI: That's what is meant, 'to wake up; to wake up.' To wake up in the dream, to wake up before the story ends, which each story will end. This physical story will end, this mental story will end, this emotional story will end. To wake up in the story, this, in nighttime dreaming, it's lucid dreaming. So you have the capacity to live a lucid life, a lucid life, a clear life, an authentic life. There may still be a physical story. This body as your body has a physical story based on genetics, and environment, and early nourishment, or lack of nourishment. It has a story. It will play itself out. But you are the lucidity that that story appears in, regardless of the, the direction the body story is going. You are the clear light that it appears in. And if for one instant your attention is withdrawn from the physical story, or the mental story, or the emotional story, or the circumstantial story, you know yourself clearly, as clarity, as spaciousness, as indefinableness.

(end clip)

[29:58] HILLARY: We're running a little over this time, so I'll keep this short. Gangaji has some retreats coming up. She also has her ongoing monthly webcast, With Gangaji, you can check all that out at gangaji.org. And before we go, I wanna say something to all of you who have rated or left a comment on iTunes for *A Conversation With Gangaji*. I know it takes some time to sit down and actually do that. Michael you left a beautiful message. Someone who identifies herself as 'She plays guitar, how could you not love that?' thank you, yours was lovely too. We appreciate all of them. Next month our episode is called "Being Yourself". It should be a brave conversation. We look forward to that. We look forward to being with you. Again, next time. Be well.