

[Gangaji Radio](#)
Epiphany Series
Host Hillary Larson
Episode 5
SAVED BY A POEM
Released on September 20, 2017

[00:02] KIM ROSEN: I remember riding my horse, Miss Jessie, galloping her across fields and just speaking these words over and over and feeling my whole being, my whole body, come into alignment.

[00:17] MUSIC

[00:24] KIM: D.H. Lawrence has the most beautiful lines, he says, 'If only most lovely of all, I yield myself and am borrowed by the fine, fine wind that takes its course through the chaos of the world.' You know, I felt like I was borrowed by some wind.

[00:41] MUSIC

[00:48] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: Kim Rosen travels the world teaching people how to live and speak from the undefended heart. Speaking the words of great poets, she helps others discover the vastness of who they truly are. Maybe you've heard Kim recite Kabir, or Rumi, at one of Gangaji's retreats. Seeing her onstage with her bright eyes and radiant smile, she possesses a distinct senses of certainty. So you may be surprised to learn that she is a natural introvert, whose shyness was once a deeply painful and confining force in her life. Her prayer to be released from its confines would be answered two different times, and both of those times that grace came in the form of a poem.

[01:37] MUSIC

[01:46] KIM: I grew up in a very privileged environment, but my mother was very harsh and had a lot of trouble controlling her violent emotions. And my father was, you know, a wonderful, stable influence, but not home a lot – that was what was happening in the fifties and the sixties. And I think there was a lot of time where I so deeply was frozen or didn't know what to do, didn't know how to relate, and so I was frightened of moving out into the world.

[02:19] HILLARY: Yet even in the midst of this frozenness, Kim still knew and experienced a deeper longing, and the undeniable intimacy that was always there.

[02:30] KIM: I remember there was, oh nightmare of nightmares, a dance with a boys' school, God help me. And I remember having my arms around this guy, and just kind of, like, everybody else has their eyes closed, and they're resting their little cheeks on his shoulder, whatever 'him' happened to be theirs at the moment. And I'm just like, looking around like a news reporter, kind of like, what is the, what is it that people see in this? I don't get it. You know, so that was more how I knew I didn't fit in, I didn't want what they wanted. I wanted connection. I wanted intimacy. You know I wanted people who I could share my deepest secrets with, like you can with animals, you know, I wanted that quality of presence. Now I realize I wanted to be able to look into my best friend's eyes the way I could look into my horse's eyes, or my cat's eyes. I wanted that immediacy. I didn't have a language for it.

[03:40] HILLARY: That's where poetry comes into this story. Poetry was Kim's way of putting words into her experience of being human. Growing up, Kim recited poetry as she galloped through the fields riding her horse Jessie. She reveled in exchanging poetry with her small, sacred circle of friends. In poetry, she had found salvation. At sixteen she was off to college, where Kim's passion for poetry lost its energy, and in its place, came a sense of disillusionment.

[04:16] KIM: I thought I was gonna be a great poet. Now here comes the death of identity, whenever you think that about anything. I thought I was gonna be a great poet. And I went to college and got into my first poetry-writing seminar. And I wasn't good. I, I wasn't the best in the class. And I couldn't stand it, 'cause my identity was so coagulated around it. And, I quit poetry.

[04:45] HILLARY: For the next twenty-three years Kim pursued a life of many things, not the least of which was her own healing. She became a therapist, a spiritual teacher; she started a theater company. She took people swimming with dolphins as a part of their own self-discovery. In that time, she gained the admiration of both students and clients. There was happiness for sure, but it proved to be unreliable. It was there, and then it wasn't.

[05:16] KIM: I once wrote a really short two-lined poem, and it goes like this: 'The words that once unlocked my cage / Have become the bars of the next. The words that once unlocked my cage / Have become the bars of the next'. And I am so deeply grateful to the therapies and the spiritual teachings that I had prior to nineteen-ninety-four. I don't know that I would still be alive, and if I was alive, I would be 'numb' alive, if it weren't for having found those practices that I still use and integrate and work with. But there was an inexorable depression that came rising to the surface.

[06:10] MUSIC

[06:19] KIM: At the same time I was realizing how absolutely dependent I was on the positive reflections I was getting from the people around me, you know, the people in my workshops, and my retreats, and my clients. And how when I didn't have kind of a steady intravenous feed line of those positive reflections, I was in a shattered glass state of despair.

[06:55] HILLARY: It was during the depths of Kim's depression that she sought the counsel of a psychic. What she told her was this:

[07:04] KIM: 'You will be washing the dishes one day, and you will look out the window, and something will happen that will show you the reason you're here on earth.' I had a sort of disdain for psychic readings that gave predictions. I said no, don't do this to me. So the next week I'm, I'm cleaning my house, because I clean a lot when I'm depressed, I think it goes one of two ways for people. But for me, I clean, my house gets really clean when I'm depressed. And I was doing, I was cleaning under a radiator, and I found this old cassette tape, this battered cassette tape, with no name on it. And I threw it in the cassette tape recorder, as we did in those days, and I started doing the dishes. And this man's voice, speaking poetry to music, filled my house: 'It is not enough to know / It is not enough to follow / the inward road conversing in silence / It is not enough to stare straight ahead / to gaze at the unborn / thinking the silence belongs to you / It is not enough to hear / even the tiniest edge of rain / You must go to the place / where everything waits / there, when you

finally rest / even one word will do / one word or the palm of your hand / turning up / in a gesture of gift / And now we are truly afraid / to find the great silence / asking so little / One word, one word only.'

[09:09] MUSIC

[09:26] KIM: And it was so profound, I guess one way to say it is that I suddenly understood that, that one could literally speak from and to and open a portal to the truth of being.

[09:51] MUSIC

[10:03] HILLARY: The man's voice who filled her kitchen that cold winter day was David Whyte. The poem was called 'It is Not Enough'. Over the following months, on her monthly drives from New York to Massachusetts to care for her ailing parents, she devoured poetry: the poetry of Mary Oliver, Kabir, and Yeats. In her book Saved By a Poem, she writes, 'I would speak, sing, shout, whisper, and weep the words, taking them deeper and deeper into me, letting them call out voices and feelings and memories that I did not know existed inside me.'

[10:46] KIM: I was unknowingly rerouting the literal neural pathways in my brain by infusing them with poetry. And it was the beginning of this chapter of my life that has led me to places I never ever would have dreamed.

[11:05] MUSIC

[11:15] HILLARY: In two-thousand-seven, it was Kim's friend Eve Ensler who would unknowingly open a door for Kim. Many know Eve Ensler for writing The Vagina Monologues. With its huge popularity, the play also ignited a movement to stop violence against women around the world. Eve's organization, called V-Day, helped build a safe house for Maasai girls who were trying to escape their tribe's practices of female genital mutilation and early childhood marriage. It was in this safe house where Kim would face her fear.

[11:50] MUSIC

[12:02] KIM: A friend of mine, a great poet named Marie Howe, had met some people who were taking a trip to Kenya to go and work in AIDS orphanages, and she said she was going with her seven-year-old daughter. And I screwed my courage up and I said, 'Could I come?' And my plan was, and it did unfold this way, that I would go on this organized trip to go to AIDS orphanages in different parts of Kenya, and then I would go on by myself and I would finally get to visit this place that was the safe house funded by V-Day. And it was a selfish motive in a way because I was doing it to break through this wall of shyness that had confined me.

[12:48] MUSIC

[12:58] HILLARY: Here she was, a white woman, thousands of miles from her familiar surroundings, her only contact a hired car who was supposed to drive her to the safe house.

[13:09] KIM: I will never forget, the moment when it came time to part company with Marie and her daughter and the other people who were in the organized trip, and I was to go off with this driver that I'd never met, whose English I couldn't understand. I was so terrified, it was like, I felt like my veins were gonna burst, my heart was pounding so strongly. And I was kind of, crying and talking on the phone, trying to understand his English about where I was supposed to meet him, and I couldn't understand – it was one of those, it was like one of those nightmares where you're in this place that you can't understand anyone's language.

[13:53] HILLARY: It's just sixty-eight miles from Nairobi to Narok, but it took a good part of the day to get to the safe house. Huge potholes made the road impassable, causing her driver to take excursions into the bush. Along the way, a hundred questions of doubt arose. Was leaving Marie and the rest of the group a huge mistake? What was she thinking? Was the car even headed in the right direction? Fear filled her body. She hung on for dear life. After a harrowing trip, finally, she was there.

[14:28] KIM: I go into the guest room, which is the one room at the center that has a flush toilet, and I'm frozen. I can hear the girls singing gospel hymns in Swahili all around me as they wash the floors, and there's a group of – I can hear a group over in the kitchen as they make the dinner... and I'm terrified to go out of my room (*singing in the background*). And finally I just took a deep breath, I walked over to the kitchen, I walked in, and all the jovial, giggling, and laughing, and singing, and radio playing, goes quiet. You know, which is what happened with any group of teenage girls when a middle-aged white woman walks in (*laughs*), right? goes completely quiet. This one girl, taller than the rest, comes over, stands in front of me, and she says 'Do you remember my name?' This is my nightmare, I just learned their names, but I learned fifty of them, or so, and I'm not good at names anyway. And I just grabbed the only name that I could remember at the time, I said, 'Salula?' And everyone screams in laughter, and they point at the youngest girl who's off in the corner pretty much, an eight-year-old girl who was just rescued from a forced marriage to a forty-six-year-old man, just a few weeks earlier. And they say, 'That's Salula.' This girl says, 'I am Jacinda. Do you know any songs?' And I felt like she was giving me a chance to make it good to her, right, and so I said, 'Well I do know songs. But what I really love is poetry. Can I recite a poem to you?' And those girls of course understood because no matter how bad the schools are that they go, they have poetry, in the way they do it in Kenya which is they have poetry teams that go all over the country and recite in these great poetry competitions. So they all nodded, and I panicked because most of the poems that I know in the entire rolodex – I'm going click-click-click-click-click through the rolodex – none of them seemed appropriate for these girls who couldn't be more different life experience than me. And then suddenly this poem called 'The Journey' by Mary Oliver pops into my mind. And I didn't even run through it, I hadn't spoken it in awhile, I didn't run through it in my mind. I just started speaking:

'One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice - - -
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.

“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.

You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations - - -
And though their melancholy
was terrible. It was already late
and a wild night,
and the road was full of fallen
branches and stones.

But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice,
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do - - - determined to save
the only life you could save.’

[18:50] MUSIC

[19:03] KIM: There was that moment when I stopped speaking and I said ‘Determined to do the only thing you could do, determined to save the only life you could save’, and I looked up and I saw the tears streaming down the, the cheeks of these girls who grew up in mud and dung houses, with ten children, you know, in one room. And I got at the deepest level that we were one. And a bunch of them rushed over and threw their arms around me, sobbing, and Jacinda said, ‘Who is this woman, Mary Oliver? Is she Maasai?’ and I said, ‘No, she’s mzungu, a white woman, like me.’ And Jacinda said, ‘How did she know? How did she know?’

[20:09] MUSIC

[20:29] KIM: To look at this in myself, that instead of being trapped in the shyness said, ‘Okay, I’m going right into the storm. I’m gonna go be with teenagers in a land where I don’t know anything. And I’m gonna meet my shyness and break out of this prison.’ I think it’s only through this very conversation, in a way, that I can look back – say through the portal of that moment of speaking Mary Oliver’s poem to those girls and feeling that oneness – and then looking back to my own childhood when I was so isolated, and poetry broke me out of that cage and into the oneness. And I can see the steps, you know the finding the therapy that helped me move my energy, my feelings, finding Gangaji, who opened me into what I think

of as longing's destination. You know, all of a sudden, with Gangaji, the whole story fell away and there was this extraordinary, lush intimacy, which was what I had longed for, that wasn't based or even threaded through with the emotions of agony that intimacy had always been threaded through with. And then I go to Kenya and I fall into this absolute in-love-ness with these girls who, even though the circumstances of their lives are unimaginably painful, where they land together is in joy and devotion and love. These are the happiest people I know on the planet (*music in background*), are the people I know in Kenya, these Maasai girls, in the celebration and their devotion. So seeing that thread of my longing for oneness, you know, and how life mysteriously constellated itself -- whoever would have come up with this story?

[22:59] MUSIC

[23:12] KIM: It makes me see that what I thought was a burden as a child, my shyness and my interiority, has actually been my salvation. And what I thought was causing my isolation as a child is exactly what gave me that sacred moment of falling into the arms of these girls through the power of a poem.

[23:40] MUSIC

[23:53] HILLARY: As I listened to Kim's story, I thought about what it means to face fear: meeting it, and doing life anyway. It wasn't about making fear go away so she would be happier or more comfortable. It was just about meeting it. Kim's relationship with the Maasai women continues. In two-thousand-ten, Kim Rosen started a fund to help the young women at the V-Day safe house go to college. It's called The Safe House Education Fund. You can find out more about that by going to shecollegefund.org. In 2009, Kim wrote a book called *Saved by a Poem*. Some of the inspirations for this story were taken from that. Gangaji Radio, which brings you episodes of both *A Conversation With Gangaji* and *Epiphany*, is fully funded by your donations. To contribute there's a donate button on the Gangaji website, gangaji.org. You can also write to gangajiradio@gangaji.org. Special thanks to Matt Dixon for his lovely guitar music, and the exquisite cello that you heard throughout this story was generously donated by the incredibly talented Jami Sieber. She's at jamisieber.com. Thank you everybody for listening. I'm Hillary Larson. This is *Epiphany* on Gangaji Radio.

[25:20] ENDING MUSIC