All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 1 Episode 06: Rajasvini Bhansali
The Time to Challenge the Insidious Calculus of White Supremacy Is Now
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Abigail Disney: Alright, everybody, you ready? I'm Abby Disney and you're listening to All Ears. At this point, I'd normally go on to say that this is a podcast about inequality. But actually, this is a podcast that is switching gears a bit. After all, I care about inequality because I care about justice. And years of injustice and inequity have come to a head in this moment we now face. It's a crisis and a call to action. It's not just a call to action for people of color, for young people, or any group in particular. It's a call to all Americans. I plan to use the platform that I have and share it with some of the extremely brilliant and brave movement leaders who are looking to change the structures and systems both public and personal that have plagued this country from day one.

I want to listen and learn from them about what they're doing and why, and I hope to have all you learn from them, so that you can figure out what your role in this historic moment should be. Remember, you can't stand still on a moving train. And not to have a role, is a role in itself.

Rajasvini Bhansali: Hello, hello, how's the day. How many espressos have I had? A lot. Many espressos, in fact. Let's begin.

Abigail Disney: I think coffee's really counterproductive in a time like this. I have enough adrenaline to last me a lifetime.

Rajasvini Bhansali: Can I borrow some of it?

Abigail Disney: So, shall we begin?

Rajasvini Bhansali: Let's begin.

I have lived my life as part of many different communities. One of which is the community of philanthropy, which is right now a little bit part of the problem and a little bit part of the solution. So, my guest today is Vini Bhansali, Executive Director of Solidaire, which is a great network of donors who are looking to empower movements for social change. Vini has herself spent many years in the world of social change, and I am so honored to have her with me right now on a day when she probably has a million better things to do. So welcome Vinni.

Rajasvini Bhansali: Abby, thank you for having me.

Abigail Disney: So Vini, I'm intrigued that you wrote a love letter to movement leaders. It's really quite beautiful, I wonder if you could read a little bit for us.

Rajasvini Bhansali: I'd love to. Dear grassroots organizers: In at least 140 cities in the U.S. and around the world we're witnessing an uprising for freedom. An uprising against deeply rooted anti-blackness and for black liberation. An uprising that calls for justice and

accountability in the murders for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and countless other victims of police brutality and state violence.

Across the country courageous movement leaders like you are tirelessly organizing for racial, economic, and social justice in the face of an unprecedented pandemic, the global rise of white supremacy and authoritarianism and the continued and destructive impact of systemic racism.

As a community of donors and donor organizers we are writing today to say, we see you, we thank you. We love you. And we are with you.

Abigail Disney: It's a beautiful letter and, and, you know, you use a phrase in it that I find very intriguing. I've been, you know, using this podcast to talk about inequality, which you can't talk about without a racial frame. It's just, you can't. It's not-- nothing is neutral. And so I'm wondering if you could tell me what you mean by the words racial capitalism.

Rajasvini Bhansali: Yeah. I mean, you said it, uh, it's essentially an understanding that this capitalism that we function in derives value from the racial identity of others, that everything that benefits capitalism is deeply racialized.

It is built on the free exploited labor of black bodies and indigenous bodies. And that capitalism cannot function without this kind of deep inequality and inequity.

Abigail Disney: So, I wonder if you can just tell me what is it exactly that Solidaire is doing to show up in this moment?

Rajasvini Bhansali: Yeah. So Solidaire first and foremost organizes people with wealth. We move resources to movement building to innovative campaigns, to things that traditional philanthropy would not necessarily take a risk on. So, we're often early funders of work that is really critical for social and racial justice, but not yet big enough robust enough to be able to access, uh, institutional philanthropy.

And then we have a commitment, a long-term commitment to The Movement for Black Lives and other Black led organizing in the U.S. with multi-year general operating support.

Abigail Disney: So why don't you try and sort out for me - what's the difference between a charity, a program, a foundation, and a movement? What's different about a movement?

Rajasvini Bhansali: Great question. So, charity can be for anything like immediate needs to support somebody who's livelihood, uh, to help a family and, you know, we often say that in a charity framework, the giver has almost more power than the recipient, um, it's not a lateral power relationship. Um, there's, there's somebody in need and there's somebody who is able to help them.

Nothing wrong with charity. It's just simply insufficient. Um, so from the very beginning, Solidare's history has been asking what's the role of financial resources and supporting social movements that are fighting for deep systemic change. And we came out of a time when movements were shaking the globe in 2011, when there was the Arab Spring, the entire austerity protests, Occupy Wall Street.

We saw a moment emerge where there was more power of collective action. People were taking to the streets in many ways, quite similar to the moment we find ourselves in now.

Abigail Disney: So, so tell me why a movement needs money, because I think most of us have this notion that, uh, Rosa Parks just sat down on a bus one day or, or that a bunch of people sort of make a lot of signs and show up. What is money for in a movement?

Rajasvini Bhansali: I mean, we often don't hear the full story behind Rosa Parks. We don't talk about the years of organizing the decades of hard work that grassroots organizers did to lead up to that pivotal campaign moment, uh, where Rosa parks was able to become a symbol of our struggle for Black liberation for civil rights.

That is true for almost every movement. You know, there's a way in which we all love heroes. And so, there's a singular story that makes it much more digestible, but almost no movement works alone. Um, there's many, many people that make it possible to win, to actually have even small victories.

And so, movements are essentially organized groups of people that are fighting for structural and systemic change. We're really fighting for a world where all people have power to shape their decisions and to flourish. That's what movements are looking to do.

Abigail Disney: You mentioned the Arab Spring earlier, and I think that Tahrir Square's a little bit of a cautionary tale about poorly funded movements, because when they succeeded in removing Mubarak, um, the Muslim brotherhood stepped in and took over the government because they were a movement too. They are a movement too, but they had an infrastructure, and their infrastructure was ready to go when the elections came. And so, the democracy protesters much as they built a beautiful movement, forgot that piece of it.

And I think very often we keep our movements functioning in such perpetual scarcity as funders, um, that we set them up for exactly this kind of disappointment.

Rajasvini Bhansali: Oh yeah. In the last recession while progressive and liberal foundations cut back their giving to movement building the right wing doubled down.

And so that's why we see a very, uh, bolstered and fearless white nationalist movement. It's because it's been well funded with unrestricted general operating support for years. Whereas our movements that have been fighting for racial and social justice seem to be at the whims of the economy.

Abigail Disney: Right, right. Well, the whims of the economy and the whims of the donors as well, who come and go, and they don't seem willing to build strength in institutions and they certainly don't want to build institutions around movements and organizing. Why do you think philanthropists are just so reluctant to really go in on movements?

Rajasvini Bhansali: Hmmm. This is a, this is a daily musing. Um, I have some hunches, none of them are firm answers, but I would say part of it is that, um, we tend to not have our imagination. We haven't seen what is possible when we invest in movements for the long

haul. But also, I would say trustees have to make bold decisions, braver and riskier decisions, and that doesn't always happen.

Abigail Disney: Well, I think there's an entitlement among wealthy people to a feeling that they should decide the things that happen. And so, when they fund year to year, they control whatever organization they're funding, because they can always say no. And I think that there's an enormous fear of movements because they might do something that politically isn't necessarily that pleasing.

Rajasvini Bhansali: Right. I mean, this idea of control that you are bringing up right, is at the heart of this. I mean, in a way, the whole idea of solidarity throws personal control, uh, into the wind. We cannot try to control the outcomes of a movement because we as donors and philanthropists are not the movement, the movement has its own rationale, its own logic and the best social movements in the U.S. are the ones that are truly building a base of power from the ground up.

Their members, the people who lead them are people who've been most impacted and are also the people who are most effective in finding the solutions their communities need.

Abigail Disney: Right. And what these movements that we're watching now on the streets are asking for isn't to borrow our power for 10 minutes, right? And then to hand it back when whatever small thing happens. These are people who are saying that the power structures have to fundamentally shift in this country for there to be any justice.

Rajasvini Bhansali: Indeed. Yeah. We're in such a powerful moment where it's becoming evident how almost all the structures in U.S. society are built on white supremacy and anti-blackness in particular. And this anti-blackness leads to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Tony McDade and so many other victims of state violence.

I'm finding in this moment hope in the fact that so many people that didn't see this as their struggle are now getting involved. They're getting politicized. They're wanting to have their voices be heard in solidarity with all our Black organizers on the ground.

Abigail Disney: But there's also a lot of confusion among white people about how to be an ally, right? And how to be a constructive member of a movement. And I think that there are also a lot of White people who are not off the sidelines because they're frightened by what they're watching and when there's violence, they just assume that the protesters are triggering the violence. They're still very invested in their benevolent understanding of, of police officers. Because as White people were raised from very young to look at a police officer and see a benign person who only wants to help us, that is a really hard thing to shift. And it's a really--it makes you very insecure to give up that notion.

How do we address that? But I figure whoever's listening to his podcast is a demographic of a lot of White people. So how do we help white people figure out how to be in this moment?

Rajasvini Bhansali: You know, I actually think there's never been a more important moment to challenge the insidious calculus of white supremacy and how it lives inside our institutions, inside our communities, inside our families than now.

And actually, if there was ever a time where organized White folks with a role to play, here it is. For better or for worse we live in a society where wealth continues to have power, where folks with money have a platform that so many frontline organizers and community workers and Black lives just don't.

What we actually need is our allies, our people who actually believe in justice who actually believe that White people's own liberation is tied up with the liberation of people of color and of Black people in particular. You know, I'm Indian by birth. And I came to the U.S. as a student and it's also my community.

I speak to my community as well. Uh, where many of us have actually benefited from the racial of capitalism of this country. Um, and we have a role to play, to stand in deep solidarity with our Black and indigenous brethren in the United States who have been fighting this fight a really long time. If there was ever a time for us to take a look at our own privileges and to divest of them in, in the care and in the support and literally putting our lives on the line to support Black folks, now, is it.

Abigail Disney: You know, toward the end of his life, Martin Luther King said that the problem Black people have in this country isn't necessarily the racist, but the liberal. And just the other day, Van Jones said something very similar. He was talking about Amy Cooper in Central Park. Can you help me understand what, why is a White liberal a problem?

Rajasvini Bhansali: Well, I don't entirely agree with that assessment necessarily because I, because of the work I do, I actually believe that each of us is on a journey of transformation. And as long as you're continuing the journey of educating and informing yourself and noticing your own privileges, and over time doing the work that it takes.

It is true that we're in a moment where that process needs to be accelerated and we can't afford to be so self-focused and self-absorbed. If we were paying attention, essentially, the president of this country is moving towards Martial Law. Uh, we are militarizing and arming our police with more and more weaponry.

Abigail Disney: And have been for years.

Rajasvini Bhansali: And have been for years and we're, you know, at the highest levels of elected electoral power, I would say. We're endorsing anti-blackness. And so, I think when, when Black folks are in pain over the actions of an Amy Cooper, it is simply because that kind of disguised racism is something that we get a lot from liberals, right.

That Amy Cooper video for me was how quickly when feeling threatened by nothing except the presence of a Black body, uh, she quickly turned to a very old and historic ruse, which is to criminalize the Black body in front of her without taking the time to know this person without taking the time to understand what they were asking of her, it was an immediate reactiveness.

And that to me, is a person that hasn't done the internal transformative work it takes to really undo the racism that lives in anyone who is raised in American society. And that's what people are calling for when they turn to White liberals and say, you can do better. In

fact, you must do better, and you must accelerate your own process of transformation because we need you to actually organize your family.

Abigail Disney: I think that part of the difficulty is that race is a personal problem, but it's also a social problem. And it is possible to navigate as a White liberal person with some means your entire life living the illusion that you don't have "a racist bone in your body" because you're never made uncomfortable by anything that happens around you. And I think part of what's happening here, what's erupting is, is that the discomfort is coming home for everybody. And, and because it is both a political problem and a public problem, but also an inner psychic one. I mean, I think what happened with Amy Cooper was fear just ran her over. It wasn't a rational fear. It was rooted in racism and she, and she, she let the fear take the reins. Um, and, and that is always when you make your worst, most hateful choices, that's how Donald Trump was elected. That's how he stays in power now. Right? Is he just pumps fear.

So where will we help White people find their way through that first veil of fear that falls in front of everything with, with some, some of their spine intact so that they can get to the other side and start to be able to hear.

Rajasvini Bhansali: In every city in every region and every state of the United States now, uh, if you're a White person who wants to grow your own consciousness and who is committed to understanding deeply, not just what mainstream media feeds you, but what do you, if you really want to understand deeply what these struggles are about. There are so many opportunities to get involved, and I believe that we do our most transformative work in a collective and never alone.

We have to find other people in our community. Other people like us with whom we can be in our journey, whether we're white, whether we're brown, uh, we have to, in this moment find others who are unpacking what it means to be in the deepest form of solidarity. Again, not simply woke words, not just like saying the things that people want to hear us say, but actually deeply investigating and interrogating how these systems live inside of us and what it takes to undo them, understand that it's a process and commit to doing this work with others.

Not just for accountability, but also for support. This is hard work. This is fundamentally undoing what we have been raised to believe about ourselves and to undo this work, it's almost never possible to do it alone. You know, we have an example in the anti-apartheid movement. So many White folks were involved.

And when I talk to people who were part of that struggle, they will always reflect back and say, oh, we didn't just wake up one day and became better White folks. No, we were trained on what it means to be a comrade, to be to the black struggle. We were trained to believe that that struggle is just as much about us as it is about Black folks.

Abigail Disney: Right. And I think a lot of white people live in a state of perpetual fear. This is the source of white fragility, right. That if they say the wrong thing, you know, they'll never be accepted in polite society again. I'm going to confess to a ridiculously, horribly stupid

thing. I said about a year and a half ago when my sister got her DNA tests back and said that it turned out she had 1% African American blood, African blood.

And you know, I know my family came from the South. And, you know, that implies everything you imagine it implies. And so, I jokingly said maybe somebody loved somebody along the way. Right. And I said that in front of a group of people, some of whom were African American. And I got a look from this one woman, which of course it dissolved me, and I thought, holy shit, how did I say that thing?

That was. That was like the amount of pain that I just kind of joked away in that little throwaway comment. How do I fix that? How do I fix that? And what I figured out was there was no fixing that. I could not make that go away because all I was trying to do was make myself feel better about what I just said.

So. Like, what do you recommend for a stupid two left foot White person who's going to say an idiotic thing? How do you recommend they handle the fear?

Rajasvini Bhansali: Make more mistakes. Yes, truly. I mean, the vulnerability with which you're telling this story and the discomfort and the shame that you're willing to acknowledge and then to move through it, you know. If we look at this moment, historically, we know we got here because we never truly reconciled with the truth of slavery in this country. We never truly reckoned with the impact it's had on generations of Black folks and indigenous folks. The decolonizing process that each of us must engage in, involves us telling the truth.

I do some leadership training work and we often, uh, invite our multi-racial groups of folks into just being really loving towards people's mistakes, because that's how we learn. We have to be able to actually bump up against our own edges all the time. And I think what you're naming now, um, you know, you could have gotten defensive, you could have tried to justify it.

You could have done what Amy Cooper did and said, look at my funding. It proves I'm not a racist, right? But instead, you simply acknowledged yeah, a mistake got made. I made it. I'm in a learning journey. Let me learn to do better. Sometimes there's no fix, like you acknowledged sometimes actually the biggest fix is the next thing we do.

Can we learn the lessons from our mistakes and apply them?

Abigail Disney: So, let me make right another stupid White lady thing that I'm doing right in this moment, which is to center the conversation around what the White people need. So, I want to turn back to, why would you write a love letter to movement leaders, exactly?

Rajasvini Bhansali: Yeah. Um, because we're appalled that in the midst of this pandemic crisis, in the midst of an uprising for justice all over the country, there are progressive funders amongst us, there are social justice funders amongst us that are deciding to cut their giving to movements, to grassroots organizing to Black and brown led work, and we find it really disheartening. We understand that when there's stock market declines and economies falling into free fall that there's a weariness that happens for people around their giving. But, with much love and respect, we wanted to tell our colleagues in philanthropy that this is not

the moment we hoard and protect our wealth. This is exactly the time for each of us to own the mistakes of the past and step up with more courage and more risk, with more abundance and support what the movements are asking of us.

But we also noticed that while we're doing this work of calling in our colleagues in philanthropy to do better, to be led by what's just and right, we also realized that nobody was actually letting the movement players know that we've got their back and we wanted to expressly acknowledge, um, clearly in no uncertain terms that we see them. We see the real hard work it takes to fight for power.

We see the hard work it takes to meet community needs in this moment where you're threatened, not only by this unprecedented pandemic, but also by incredible vigilante violence and threats every single day. What it takes to actually work at the community level, at the grassroots level, what it takes to build power is incredibly brave work. And we wanted to love it up.

Abigail Disney: Yes. Yes. That's beautiful. That's beautiful. These movements need to have legs and foundations under them. So even as the violence passes, the hard work of establishing institutions and building corridors of power needs to be done more than ever. So Vinni, you're wonderful. I really have enjoyed this conversation.

Rajasvini Bhansali: Thank you so much, Abby.

Abigail Disney: I want to thank you for so much. Um, not just for the conversation, but for the loving voice you brought to it.

And if you want to learn more, you could go find Vinni over at www.solidairenetwork.org. There's lots of ideas for ways you can learn and places you can go and things to be a part of.

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