

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Episode 08: Van Jones: A Video Can Change A Nation
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Abby Disney: I'm Abby Disney and you're listening to All Ears. When we started this podcast in April, we were focusing on economic inequality, but inequality is not always just about economics. We all watched a public lynching and it seemed important to focus directly on race and racial injustice. So as the nation streets have filled with protests, we decided to switch gears a bit. For the remainder of the season, I'm using my platform to talk with some amazing thinkers and movement leaders about how we got here and how we should move forward.

My guest today is a long-time activist, commentator and peace builder. He's been fighting police violence and systemic racism since before many of today's protesters were born. He has contributed to advance the green economy, to address criminal justice reform, and has been working since long before the 2016 election to heal the wounds polarizing the country.

I count Van Jones as a friend, I am proud to say. He's helped me navigate some morally complex issues. I think I trust him because he has a very rare capacity to sit with discomfort. The discomfort that conflict brings, and is willing to see past political tribalism, which is a real strength. Many people know him as a CNN contributor and host, but he's also a New York Times bestselling author and the CEO of Reform Alliance, a criminal justice reform advocacy organization. So welcome Van Jones.

Van Jones: Well, it's good to be here. And we are friends. I think you have the same qualities that you are praising in me. And I think that's why we get along so well.

Abby Disney: Yeah, I do. I do count you as a fellow traveler. So, you said something sort of famous on the night of the election in 2016, when you call the result of the election white lash, but now amazingly 60% of white Americans support Black Lives Matter. How do you explain the speed of this transformation?

Van Jones: Well, it's been building up for a long time. It's like a dam that breaks. People are sitting around at home, they couldn't avoid social media and they're trapped because of COVID and the shutdown, and then you show a lynching, this was a lynching. It was a white man strangling a black man to death in plain view with no remorse with the support of law enforcement and the community appalled and screaming, you're killing him, you're killing him. It was eight minutes and 46 seconds. You had to watch the whole thing. We've been lynched in this country for 400 years. There's a memorial to lynching, cause so many of us have been lynched. That's not new. And it's been filmed before, but I think the difference was the length of this video.

The fact that he was not fighting back in any way that he was--even dying was being polite, just saying I can't breathe. And, and he was still murdered in that way, I think shocked people. And it's very similar to Emmett Till, the picture of Emmett Till that the young boy who was lynched in the fifties or the pictures of the dogs being sicced on children in Birmingham, Alabama. You know images and video can move a nation and it did.

Abby Disney: So, I wanted to take some time to kind of like, just walk people through your biography, because I think people who see you on CNN don't really understand the enormity and the length of time you've been working on all just the very issues where we're focused on right now. Maybe what we should do is just start with, how did you find out about Rodney King? And how did you come into relationship with the whole case involving Rodney King?

Van Jones: I was a student at Yale Law School. I don't remember when I first saw the video. It must've been in one of the dorms. But I'll never forget where I was when I found out that the four white LAPD officers, Los Angeles Police Department officers, who had beaten him so mercilessly on video had been acquitted. That was, I guess, April 29th, 1992. I was working as an intern in San Francisco at The Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights. And it was a shock to me and to others because at that time, a videotape itself was a rarity. It wasn't like now where everybody's got them.

If somebody had a video camera that was kind of weird, you know, maybe break it out for your family barbecues or something. So, the fact that somebody had a private video camera and had taken it out to film police doing stuff they had up until that point been able to do pretty much away from public scrutiny, we thought was going to change everything. And not only did it not change everything, a jury gave it a stamp of approval.

So that, that changed my life. I went from being a civil rights-oriented law student, certainly very progressive, but inside the four corners of mainstream politics to the left side of Pluto. I went as far left as you can possibly go. And would've gone farther if I could have figured out how to, in terms of just being anti-capitalism, anti the system. Because I felt that I had been lied to like, frankly, a lot of these young people out here on the streets today who are going to tell you the same thing 10 years from now that, you know, you're told that there's liberty and justice for all here, and then you suddenly see a counterexample and it, put me on a, on a long, long pathway left politics that probably lasted for 15 years after that.

Abby Disney: Did you ever grow up thinking or talking about race?

Van Jones: Yeah, listen, I mean, if you're African American, you're talking about and thinking about race all the time because you live in a society that's mostly white -- I'm a ninth generation American. I'm the first person in my family who was born with all my rights recognized by this government. And I want people to think about that. Like, what would that mean if you lived in a country for nine generations and between slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, beatings, lynching, sharecropping, and everything in between, you were the first person in your family that was born with at least on paper, your rights being recognized.

People always say, well, why don't you guys just quit talking about race? And that was a thousand years ago. I'm sorry. My mother, my father were born under the terror of Jim Crow segregation and I call it terror because it wasn't just, oh, you can't sit in the back of the bus, it's you could be killed at any moment for any reason or no reason at all. You know, terrorism didn't come to America with 9/11. I mean, terrorism has been here for a long time. So yes, I did grow up thinking about and talking a lot about civil rights, all that stuff. But

maybe being born in 1968 when Bobby Kennedy and Dr. King were killed, I decided in my own heart, I want to do something about it.

Abby Disney: Can, can you be more specific about what you mean about going left of Pluto?

Van Jones: Oh, well, I moved to the Bay Area. I lived in Bizerkley, California. Every kind of ideology you know, socialism, anarchism, feminism, every kind of ism, you can find is there. And I tried them all. Some people experiment with drugs. I experimented with radical ideologies. I eventually, when I became a father in my thirties, I began to kind of synthesize a little bit more of all the things that I had come to know. And I began to see as disillusioned as I had been with the establishment, I was becoming disillusioned with the counter establishment, and the kind of the negative energy, the addiction to outrage that comes along with that. And I had to look for a different way.

Abby Disney: Where did you kind of start to find yourself landing?

Van Jones: Well, you know, it's hard to say. I started an organization to take on police abuse to take on youth violence to take on juvenile justice. It's called the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in California. Started that in 1996 when I was just a couple of years out of law school. That organization still exists in Oakland, California; it's a very successful justice organization there locally. And, we closed five abusive youth prisons in the early 2000s. We helped to reform the San Francisco Police Department. We stopped them from building the super jail for youth.

This is in the early 2000s and 1990s when both political parties, Democrat and Republican were pro mass incarceration. I think people forget Democrats, you know, Bill Clinton, and Willie Brown, Jerry Brown, all of the people that we love and respect were a part of the consensus that being a liberal in the 1990s meant you were progressive on every issue from the environment on down, except you are going to be tough on crime, except you're going to be pro a hundred thousand more cops as Bill Clinton, you know, talked about. That, that you purchased the right to be progressive as a Democrat by being regressive on criminal justice issues for 20 years. And so, I came up at a time where you had to be outside of the Democratic party and the Republican party to be sticking up for people behind bars.

And so, to win at police accountability and fight prisons meant I was outside of the consensus.

Abby Disney: Right, right. Well, and they were tough on welfare too. That's the other thing that held together what they called the left in those days. And there's one issue that links those two elements together and that's race. So, the "Super Predator" narrative emerged.

Van Jones: Sure. I mean, the crazy thing is that, when I went to Yale, I saw all kinds of behavior from drug abuse to rule breaking and it was all called people are experimenting with drugs, they're being mischievous, they're testing their boundaries, et cetera, et cetera. A few blocks away in the housing projects--and you've been in New Haven. You know how close the housing projects are to Yale's campus. Kids doing the same behavior. They weren't experimenting with drugs. They were called drug dealers. They weren't called mischievous. They were called gang members.

The cops never went to the frat houses to say, listen, you guys are a criminal drug gang. You're all going to prison. But a few blocks away, kids doing the exact same behavior were called criminal drug gangs. And they would do 10, 20, 30 years.

Sometimes for doing fewer drugs than the kids within eyesight. And so, you never get over that. I think that where I began to come back to a position that's more familiar to a CNN viewer is when I became a dad. And when I became a dad, I went from, you know, F the system to fix the system because suddenly I realized, you know, if you burn it all down, what's gonna happen to my kid? At the time I was living in Oakland.

How can I make sure that Oakland is a great place for my kid? And I suddenly got a lot more pragmatic, and I also began to realize for myself, you know, in looking for funding for my not-for-profit organization, I started coming across wealthy white business owners who were just as passionate about justice, as most of the people in the communities that I was working.

And that threw my whole theory off because it's kind of like the masses versus like the white capitalists, and I'm meeting white capitalists who are putting more money and effort and expertise towards solving some of these problems, especially environmental problems and other problems than the average person I went to high school with, there's something wrong with my theory. And so, I started realizing that I felt much more comfortable and I felt much more honest saying I was fighting against the worst in terms of corporate America, but I could align myself with the best.

Those people who were trying to do triple bottom line, you know, positive for the environment, positive for profit, but also positive for people. I could align myself with some of those folks.

And suddenly rather than being a hundred percent against everything, I began to think where can I find common ground and where can I not? And where there's a battleground I'm going to fight hard. But when I can find common ground whether it's a business leader or a political leader, or even someone in law enforcement who wants to do better. Let me figure out a way if I can work with them rather than, you know, throwing everybody in the same bucket.

Abby Disney: You know, the thing about common ground, it's interesting is that if you choose to go stand on it with somebody who might be your enemy or someone you don't get along with, if you just go choose to stand on that common ground by virtue of you standing there, it tends to grow.

I remember when you went out and started doing The Messy Truth before the election in 2016, it was really remarkable to watch you sit there in people's living rooms and talk to them about voting for a person who many people had just written off as a racist. But you went there with love in your heart to help people understand what was happening.

Van Jones: I grew up in the rural South. I really understood white poverty. I saw it in my elementary school. Poor white kids who, you know, had a lot of problems, especially in the elementary school. And I was --because both of my parents were married and by that time,

both my parents were educators, I was better off than they were. And so, when I got to The White House, in addition to all this stuff that, you know, I went there to do, you know, trying to get clean energy jobs into the hood, so called. I also had a project to try to get money into Appalachia. The last time I went to jail, I wasn't marching with Black Lives Matter. The last time I went to jail I was marching with coal miners to try to get them their pension and their healthcare back after the coal companies stole all that stuff from. So, I've always felt in my heart that at least among the folks at the bottom, the folks in the hood, the folks on Native American reservations, the folks in Appalachia that we have a lot more in common than we know.

And then we acknowledge. So, it wasn't weird for me personally, to go into, you know, a red part of Pennsylvania and sit down and talk to people who were going to vote for Donald Trump.

Abby Disney: So, what do you say to the people who say, but you know, why isn't racism, a deal breaker? What do you say to that?

Van Jones: Well, look, it's a big country and people prioritize stuff differently. I think even his strongest supporters will grimace and flinch at some of Trump's rhetoric. I see Trump as more of a racial opportunist than a racist. I think Trump is a Trump supremacist more than he's any other kind of supremacist. I think in some ways, a racial opportunist may be worse than an actual racist, because I think they're just kind of playing with people's emotions for their own benefit. That said, there are people in this country for whom that kind of stuff coming from a leader is discouraging or dispiriting, but not disqualifying because they got other itches to scratch. They've got other problems they're trying to solve. And they look at a Democratic party and they say, look, I see this Democratic party. It seems to me; you guys might be more interested in transgender immigrants than me. I'm a, I'm a white guy of a certain age. I mean, now I'm not the center of everything over there. Maybe I could be the center of everything over here and listen. I think sometimes we forget; we are asking Anglos in the U.S. to do something that is difficult. I'm not saying that we should ease off. I'm not saying that what we're asking for is unjust. I'm saying it's just, but it's just hard because in human history, when have you ever seen a majority ethnic group become a minority ethnic group in their own country, quote, unquote own in their own country and like it.

There's discomfort, there's blow back. There's a lot of crap that goes on and we have to be steadfast and insist that we're going to have a democracy here, and we're going to have equal rights here, but we could sometimes do a better job of just acknowledging that people who are struggling with this might not be monsters. I'm saying that you don't have to agree with something to understand it. And then when you understand it, you've got a better chance of changing it because you aren't coming at people like I'm right and you're wrong. I'm good and you're bad. You suck screw you. You're an immoral bigot. Now vote for me and do what I say. That's not a good sales pitch to change behavior.

Abby Disney: Do we have any chance of like brokering some kind of at least understanding that we need to be at least looking at the problem with the same vocabulary?

Van Jones: Yes, though sometimes you can't solve a problem at that level. There's a 21st century mindset and a 21st century skill set that I think almost all of us are lacking. The old mindset of competition, accomplishment, achievement, victory, and you need some of that to be able to do well in the world. But the complimentary mindset of empathy--you get rewarded in this culture for being able to speak well, being able to talk well, to debate well, to present well. You don't get rewarded for being able to listen well.

Abby Disney: Yes.

Van Jones: So, the underlying skillset of just being able to literally listen to another human being is radically absent. If you don't have a mindset for empathy as opposed to victory, which is separation and domination. Separation and domination is the core problem. And so, then a lot of what goes on between left vs. right is they're just trying to figure out--they agree we're separate, and they try to figure out who's going to dominate. As opposed to empathy which is, you know, we have a lot in common and because we do, I can better understand you whether I agree with you or not.

I think we sometimes forget how unfree white people are. How tight, how closed off, how fundamentally fearful white people are in a system like this. You have all these white people now saying, well, I didn't know, and what can I do? And, Oh my God.

Well, think about what it would mean to live in a country that was a slave state founded on stolen land, that they had to fight a civil war to get to apartheid which Nelson Mandela fought, which is what, another way of talking about segregation, which Dr. King fought and that all that stuff just came to an end within the living memory of everybody listening to this practically. And to not really know that. For that not to really land it with you. How cut off from yourself from, from reality from life, would you have to be to have Anglo Americans who are walking around numb to that, not connected to that. So, the freedom, you know, there's a discomfort of getting connected to, to a little bit more of the truth of your situation, but there's also a freedom that comes and an empowerment that comes, on the other side of this for everybody, not just for people of color.

Abby Disney: Everything you're saying is, is, is totally on mark, except that then, and then you run into Derek Chauvin right. Then you run into an officer, you know, who's just hate. How does what you're saying help us deal with Derek Chauvin?

Van Jones: Well, yeah, you've had hateful, bigots and murderers throughout the history of the time. That's not the biggest problem. The biggest problem are the White Americans who right now are saying, I had no idea this was going on in my country, what can I do about it?

Abby Disney: Don't you want to lose your mind in rage at those people, because like there you were with the videotape with Rodney King. I understand what people are saying and suddenly all sorts of things are becoming clear, but at the same time, do you, do you feel angry at all?

Van Jones: Uh, kind of. Look, yeah, it's frustrating and can I get on my high horse and be exasperated? Yeah, but my only point is that people continue to say, well, how are we going

to get the equivalent of like the Hitlers of the world, like, these horrific people who do horrific things, what are we gonna do about them?

I say, listen, I don't know about that, but I'll tell you what we can do about most people who are not that, and are still strangling the life out of black people every day, by not hiring anybody. Strangling the life out of black people every day by not having any black interns. Strangling the life out of black people every day by not giving loans or investing in companies. You know? So, this idea that, oh my God, what are you going to do about this one guy who was like a horrible asshole? Look, hopefully we put his ass in jail, but what about everybody else? America is structured around strangling the life out of black people and not letting black people rise and then acting like black people are the threat.

That is core computer code for America. Everybody is now appalled because you've now seen it acted out. And, and that, that look on his face --the just I'm not doing anything, and if I'm doing something, I'm justified in doing it, his hands were in his pocket while he's literally lynching someone-- that's America, too.

That's corporate American CEOs, and everybody else. Oh, yes, I feel so sorry for the inner cities and knowing in the back of their mind, they're not going to hire a single black person and they have no intention of doing anything any differently. So that's, that's the real pain point. And the joy point is, I think it's indulgent. And so, I think rather than criticizing white people for being late to the party, we need to also get busy here and be clear about what this party is and what the party really is, is initially an equality of discomfort, which is a strange thing to ask for. But people of color and other subordinated left out, screwed over people are almost always uncomfortable. I gotta be the black guy walking into the room and you know, I'm on TV so some people have heard of me, but in reality, most people haven't. And I walked into the room, nobody's gonna assume that just looking at me, especially if I'm wearing casual clothes, if I'm wearing jeans and a hoodie like most Americans do when they're not at work.

If I walk into a room, nobody's going to assume I've got a Yale law degree, that I've taught at Princeton, I've been a fellow at MIT, I've got three best sellers and four TV shows and worked for the President of the United States. That's not going to be the assumption. And so I'm going to be uncomfortable being talked down to and even people who know some of that stuff, it doesn't seem to--they don't treat me the way they treat a white guy with that resume. I'll tell you that. Even my most well-intentioned liberal friends, they don't treat me the way they treat a white guy with the same resume.

And so, I got to sit there and be talked down to and condescended to, and deal with all this nonsense and I'm uncomfortable, but I got to figure out some way to deal with my discomfort and still be effective and amazing and get things done. Now, the conversation turns to race. Now, white people are uncomfortable. And if you say one thing that they don't like, they can't fucking handle it. You know, white fragility.

Abby Disney: Yeah.

Van Jones: But but what I would say is, and I mean this with all sincerity, a key to moving forward is we have to have an equality now of discomfort.

White people have to learn how to listen, how to be uncomfortable the same way when you go to the gym, you don't go to the gym to be comfortable. You go to the gym to be uncomfortable so that afterwards you can be stronger. So, on the back end, the payoff is you're a lot stronger. You're a lot better able to hear truths that have been hidden from you and partner with people that you've been told subconsciously are really not worth partnering with. And it's on all sides to come up with a way for while people's hearts are open to consolidate on a place where we can have these conversations and then where we can partner together. That's really, what's, what's needed is true partnership to solve and not just to solve black people's problems. We got climate change, we got China and Russia rising, we got robots taking everybody's jobs, I mean, we got real problems. And in order for us to solve them, we are going to have to work together in a different way than we have been doing. And we've got to pass through this valley of, of equality of discomfort to get to a place where we can have equality of partnership.

Abby Disney: So, the folks that are talking about you know, abolition and defunding and all the other words that scare everybody. I'm just wondering if you were in charge, how you would address this like total mistrust now for the police force among, African American people. Help me understand what is the change that needs to be made here.

Van Jones: Well, that's a complex question. I'll, I'll try to answer it simply. The problem with law enforcement, the fundamental problem with law enforcement in the United States is impunity. That there is no effective mechanism to hold people accountable to anything. You can't sue cops individually, because the Supreme Court just recently reaffirmed once again, qualified immunity. You have a very hard time disciplining, demoting or firing a police officer because the unions have bubble wrapped all these bad cops and so many rules and regulations and processes and bureaucratic red tape that even a motivated police chief has a very hard time disciplining demoting or firing a cop.

And of course, you can't put them in jail easily because most prosecutors are very, very reluctant to bring charges against cops. They got to work with cops every day. And so, if you can't discipline, demote, fire jail, or sue somebody it's really hard to get their behavior to be lawful. I don't care if they're the most decent law abiding people in the world, but you got 800,000 cops in the US give them all guns, badges, tasers, fast cars, walkie talkies, and say, go out there and keep the order and you can't be disciplined, demoted, fired, sued, or jailed, some of them are going to act up and they're going to act up where they can get away with it and that's with the poorest, most marginal ethnic groups, black folks, Latinos, Native Americans.

Abby Disney: Well, and beyond that, they're also gonna form into systems of positive reinforcement around certain codes. And, and so a whole system can form around these behaviors pretty quickly.

Van Jones: Yeah. And so, you can predict without having to go through any psychodrama at all exactly what will happen just with that scenario. You can have this many cops with this

much money and this much fire power and this little oversight without having. A lot of problems, especially for disfavored minority ethnic groups. That said, what's the solution?

I'm not a huge fan, and I've never bit my tongue about it, of some of this language around, abolition or defunding. I defend the ideas behind it. And I defend the people who are pushing for it because I understand what it is that they intend. But I personally never use those terms because I just think it causes more smoke than light. First of all, I don't believe in abolishing all prisons. You need some prisons, at least for the Klan and for CEOs that are poisoning the world and refuse to stop and war criminals and all kinds of people. And so, I just --I don't understand why we're so attached to the term abolition. And I would say the same thing about "defund the police."

Nobody who has to count votes in Congress loves that slogan. Nobody who has to count votes in swing States loves that slogan. I think frankly, if you take that label off of it, police would probably endorse a lot of it because cops are being asked to do too many things. Let police do less. You take some of those dollars for the police overtime, put it toward real social workers, you probably have a better outcome. So, I'm not a big fan of some of the rhetoric, but I defend the people who are pushing this stuff forward. Cause I do think we need radically fewer people behind bars, radically, fewer.

And I do think that we need to rebalance the city budgets so that police can do their job and there's still money left over for the rest of society to do its job and not make everything a policing issue.

Abby Disney: Yeah, I think you're absolutely right about that. Well, Van, thank you so much for giving me so much of your time. You've been so generous.

Van Jones: Well. Look, I think that we're at the beginning of a great awakening. Sometimes I feel moved to tears. Sometimes I'm mad sometimes I'm you know, a little bit tired but fundamentally I know that people are going to be studying 2020 20 years from now. Is this a year just like 68? Just like any other year where a lot has changed and a lot has been made possible. And I appreciate being on the show.

Abby Disney: Thanks, so much Van take care of yourself. To learn more about Van Jones' amazing work in criminal justice reform, visit reformaliance.com.

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