

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 2 Episode 11: Leymah Gbowee
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LEYMAH GBOWEE: Nicole, can you let me use your room to do the podcast for Abby? And she can hear you if you complain. I promise not to snoop in your stuff.

ABIGAIL DISNEY Don't you dare--it'll distract you too much. but that's good. That's better, that's way better.

I'm Abigail Disney, welcome to All Ears, my Podcast, where I get to go deep with some super smart people. This season I'm talking to good trouble makers. Artists, activists, politicians and others who aren't afraid to shake up the status quo. We'll talk about their work, how they came to do what they do, and why it's so important in hard times to think big. You can't think about solutions without being a little optimistic, and man oh man I think we need some optimism right now.

We're only a few days into 2021 and what a week we're having! We had about 20 minutes to be happy about Georgia--and I was very happy about Georgia-- before we were glued to our televisions as all hell actually truly literally broke out in the Capitol.

It was like a dam breaking. And of course there had been cracks for decades. For so long Americans have felt secure in our democracy, believing that coups and election violence were things that happened in other countries, not here. (of course, people of color have known what this country is capable of for a long time.)

When it comes to civil strife, no one understands it better than my dear friend Leymah Gbowee.

Leymah Gbowee in PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL (SOUND UP):
Liberia had been at war for so long that my children had been hungry and afraid their entire lives.

ABIGAIL DISNEY THAT'S LEYMAH IN PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL ...

PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL (SOUND UP): *Some say the war was about the gap between the rich and the poor.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: A film I co-made about the civil war in Liberia...

PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL (SOUND UP): *Some also say that their war was about the hatred between the different ethnic groups.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: In it, the women of Liberia who confront the men who had kept the war raging for over a decade...

PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL (SOUND UP): *Power, money, ethnicity, greed, but there's nothing in my mind. That should make people do what it did to the children of Liberia*

ABIGAIL DISNEY Because of Leymah and the other women, the war in Liberia finally ended. She went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. I don't know really anybody who's as wise as Lima. And I certainly don't know many people who've watched their capitol get ransacked. There's no one I wanted to talk to more to help me make sense of this day than Leymah.

So Wednesday night, I called her up. Leymah welcome and thank you so much for joining me on such short notice.

LEYMAH GBOWEE Thank you Abby for having me.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I think the best place to start here is that image of a white guy sitting in House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's chair with his feet up on her desk. Hey may as well be peeing on a fire hydrant. His arrogance speaks volumes about white male privilege. So talk to me about the white piece - how race played into this moment.

LEYMAH GBOWEE Those of us who live outside of the US have seen how racist remarks, racist action, horrible politics and democracy has taken over this country and through it all very few people, the good people, they didn't speak loud enough. And it sends a message out that we condone this. I know it's just one part of a huge problem that this country has, but I think it's time for people to speak up and speak the truth about this nation.

ABIGAIL DISNEY Leymah, so good to talk to you.-You know, there's an image right now making the rounds of this white guy sitting in Nancy Pelosi's speaker chair with his feet up on her desk. These people were not afraid. So talk to me a little bit about where race plays into this.

LEYMAH GBOWEE Well, first thing first Abby, as an outsider, and I'll keep saying an outsider because I'm an African, I'm a Liberian, proud one at that, but we've been following this and we followed--I followed the protests after George Floyd. And the way the national guards came out swiftly, but

today people were able to march and break through. And no one has called it terrorism.

And that's the reason why white privilege has prevailed in this country, because when it's one race it's terrorism, is something else. And when is it another reason is that thing. So these people came knowing that there's absolutely no way the police would shoot at us. We are the privileged race. The guy in Nancy Pelosi's office--two things--beyond white privilege, why didn't he go to some man's office? So it's not just about race it's about this woman with power and I want to go into that space and prove to her that a man will always be able to take over her space. It's about who the hell does she think she is? A woman trying to control us. So going in there was that act of let's try to subdue her.

ABIGAIL DISNEY Yeah, I'm sure that's definitely true and the specter of Kamala Harris, who combines those things, being the tie breaking vote in the Senate I'm sure didn't help matters in terms of their behavior. I'm sure that they're dreading what's headed their way because it's everything that they've been afraid of.

LEYMAH GBOWEE They're going to use that privilege against their own. Nancy Pelosi is part of the white privilege.

ABIGAIL DISNEY Yeah.

LEYMAH GBOWEE But because she speaks a different language than a lot of these people, that's why they are coming at her.

ABIGAIL DISNEY So, but I keep thinking about some of the footage that I watched with these men, you know, just yelling and just seem so unreachable. They don't seem any different to me then the footage coming out of Liberia, they don't seem any different at all.

Did you see that kind of impenetrability and how do you handle that?

LEYMAH GBOWEE Well, I know that no situation is irredeemable Abby, you know, but sometimes in the sad part of what we're seeing in America is that people have seen this audacity and the violence that Trump has perpetuated during the four years of his presidency as a joke thing. And, until some of these people get to that place where they take out that anger, that rage, that's the only time there will be space for conversation. But right now it is very toxic.

Right now everyone is holding on to this ground that we are right. What we're seeing in this country is the difficulty of finding a group of people who

can help to neutralize the situation. It is ordinary people using their voice, using their energies to step out there to say enough is enough. Because for every young man that was on that Capitol steps today there is a mother sitting somewhere. All of those who care about peace and love and justice in America should be reaching out to those women and saying to them, it's time for you to tell your people to stop this.

It is only when those conversations start in homes that it can now transcend into communities and then at the national level. Every American must be very careful about the language they use because for a nation that has never seen anything like this, all you see is rage. But rage is not going to create the kind of calm that America needs in this moment.

And the adults in the room will be those people who will be calling the collective humanity of every American. That's what this moment is calling to.

ABIGAIL DISNEY Before I go any further, I feel like we need to explain a little bit about Liberia. It is a remarkably resilient country of 5 Million on the west coast of Africa, and and it has this tie to the United States because it was founded by freed and free-born Black Americans in 1821. By the start of the American Civil War in 1861, more than 15,000 freed and free-born people of color had relocated there from the United States. They wrote a Liberian Constitution that was even modeled after ours, and their flag actually, is our flag, but with one star. There were people there when they got there, and that led to ethnic tension. There was political conflict and instability in the '70s and '80s which led to military rule and tons of corruption. Then two civil wars, which killed a quarter of a million Liberians and displaced almost half the people. The leader who emerged from all this chaos, and was fomenting, was a former rebel leader named Charles Taylor. He was democratically elected in 1997, with 75% of the vote. He was very charismatic. He had an incredibly rabid, faithful following, who, who believed every word out of his mouth. He was completely unscrupulous and narcissistic. He lied. He cheated, and he used the public airwaves to promote whatever he needed to promote.

ABIGAIL DISNEY Can you just explain to me what happened in Liberia and who Charles Taylor was?

LEYMAH GBOWEE Well, he won the elections in Liberia in 1997. And he was very divisive and it took us back to different kinds of civil war, different levels of wars until in 2003, all hell broke loose.

ABIGAIL DISNEY And then what did the women do?

LEYMAH GBOWEE Um, so in 2003, the women decided that they had had enough of the war of the rape and all of the different things that were happening to our children, so we came together, formed ourselves into a group of Christian and Muslim women called The Librarian Women Mass Action for Peace.

And it was the mass action that started to protest. And we protested for many months, calling for three things: disarmament, the deployment of a peacekeeping mission, and a dialogue between the warring parties. And we got all three and we got peace. And from 2003, till today, Liberia has not heard this sound of a gun. Yes, we have issues, but we haven't gone back to war.

ABIGAIL DISNEY I think that's a mistaken idea about peace, right. That when you get to peace, everything is perfect.

LEYMAH GBOWEE Well, I formed the perfect definition of peace in my opinion. Peace is not just the absence of war but peace is the presence of every condition that dignifies everyone. So anything that takes away your dignity leaves you in conflict and you're not in peace. Any society that fails to dignify her people will never see true peace.

ABIGAIL DISNEY Maybe some people will consider me nuts to see parallels with countries in civil war. Do you think I'm nuts?

LEYMAH GBOWEE No, I don't think you're nuts. And I definitely don't think that our conversation in as much of a bringing Liberia in is saying that we're comparing Liberia with America. I think when we compare some of the things that we did, yes, we had a war, but what led us to the war was some of the issues that you all are struggling with today.

Are you going to war? I don't think so, but do you have peace? Definitely not. And so it is that quest for peace, that brings the comparison between these countries. It is that quest for justice and truth. That brings the comparison during this conversation. Because when people say these are two different places, yes. They're definitely two different places. Well, what we cannot take away is that what affects any group of people in any space affects all of us in some ways, because we're tied together. Whether we like you or not.

ABIGAIL DISNEY Ok, right, so let's get back to what is happening here, because this is where we as Americans need, first of all, to understand what it means to have your capitol sacked, and therefore words like "peace" and "reconciliation," and what they actually mean.

I can hear already on Twitter people saying, oh, all the evil people will be talking about reconciliation. No one thinks there's reconciliation in the offing anywhere right now. But any talk of peace, it tends to get dismissed lately in this country as weakness. So, I need you to explain to America why peace is where strength is not weakness. Peace is not weakness.

LEYMAH GBOWEE Well Abby we haven't gotten to peace yet. What America needs right now is truth.

ABIGAIL DISNEY Yeah.

LEYMAH GBOWEE There is a festering sore, and it stinks, and it's smelly. And they had the scent of that sore called intolerance racism.

It has been really unveiled to the world in a way that no one can cover it up again. And if America must heal, the only balm for that festering sore is truth. Truth that yes, white privilege is alive and well in the world. Watch it today. Truth that racism has always been a center of our politics and our daily existence. Truth that the women in this country still are disrespected regardless of the color, their creed. Truth is that if it was black men on the steps of the Capitol today, there would be taking body bags out of DC. Truth. It's time for truth. And the only way to peace is truth.

ABIGAIL DISNEY So, let me ask you another question because, I'm with you on thinking that the women are the answer to this, except for the problem of the women among them in that protest or insurrection or whatever you want to call it. And there were certainly lots of women around Taylor and part of the problem that you were facing. So, help me understand those women. The ones who are for the conflict, the ones who are engaged in the suppression and willing accomplices.

LEYMAH GBOWEE Well, I'll take a step back. I was socialized to believe that good will overcome evil. That we are one people. A lot of things were reinforced into my head when I was growing up.

A lot of these women were socialized like me on different issues, including yourself. So the group of women that you see in that protests, I'm not speaking for them, but I assume they are there because according to them, they're fighting for the values that were enshrined into them. And those values should not be compromised, even if it means dying. So, as far as they're concerned, being on the steps of the Capitol is to save the lives of unborn children. It is about Jesus and bringing him back into schools and churches and all of the different things. So they're fighting for that for the values. But what they don't understand is that a lot of those men are in

there because of their ego. It has nothing to do with the values that these women are fighting for.

ABIGAIL DISNEY Yeah.

LEYMAH GBOWEE Yeah.

ABIGAIL DISNEY Well, I do think there are women in the mix there who really are just in it for their egos, just the same as the men are. We can't forget about that. I mean, they've recognized that women have a special position in a conservative power structure and they are positioning themselves to exploit that weird double bind that they're in to their advantage. And I'm beginning to set aside my notions of women's specialness honestly because they really are causing me to lose--

LEYMAH GBOWEE You should never, you shouldn't ever do that Abby. I am 100% optimistic when it comes to the power that we have to transform things and there should always be room in our minds that it's about our collective humanity.

I'll tell you one thing, my biggest fear watching everything that is happening today is what it is signaling to countries in Africa, oppositions and, and ruling parties. We will begin to see people carry out these same things and they'll say, oh yes if it could happen in the US who are you to stop us from doing this? So this is not just a threat to America's democracy. It is a precedence that is being set for the rest of the world. But there's also a moment where America needs to reframe the language, because everything that has been spoken in this country, or that is being spoken hides the truth. What we see happening is no longer a civil rights issue. Right now in this moment if you start saying oh we must make peace, what people will start to think about is that everything that happened today we should sweep it under the carpet. So right now in this moment, if you start saying, Oh, we must make peace. What people will start to think about is that it means everything that happened today. We should sweep it under the carpet. No, that's not peace.

ABIGAIL DISNEY Leymah, do you think that today was the beginning of something or just a blip?

LEYMAH GBOWEE No, I think today's the beginning of something, but our response, your response. The women's response, the religious community response, every American response to today, will determine me how the rest of the country or the decades later, how it's going to happen.

That is definitely what people should be thinking about. Let's just close our eyes and imagine everything that is happening to this big ball of problems, the problem of racism, sexism, and all of the different things.

If you took a pitchfork and chip off a tiny piece, just a tiny piece, it's not a whole ball of problem again. And if another person take another thing, a chip off its not. And so if each and every person in this community, in this country who believes in peace, justice and human rights, decides that I'm going to do my tiny bit beginning tonight, by tomorrow morning it's no longer a whole ball of issues because some of it would have been chipped out.

Some people's role will be to give hope because there are many young people watching today and saying, there is no hope for this country. And so if you're able to give one person hope, imagine that ripple effect some people's role, we'll be able to say we're standing with the women. Are we standing with the speaker of the house? Are we ensuring that that guy who had his leg on the desk will face the full weight of the law? If some people's role would be let's get all of the religious leaders together, including the one who spoke all of the negativity and led us to this place so that we begin a conversation or reconciliation.

But this is definitely the nation in chaos. And everyone has a role.

ABIGAIL DISNEY Yeah.

LEYMAH GBOWEE You have a group of people that have a purpose. Or they have a determination that I am not going to leave my nation the way it is, what God is calling me home. You can change a tide, you can change something. And that is the kind of determination that we need to put out there.

It may look difficult. But, it's not as hard as it seems. Purpose commitment and faith will get you there.

ABIGAIL DISNEY I think I'm going to leave it there. Leymah, you so much.

ABIGAIL DISNEY 2011 Nobel Peace Laureate Leymah Gbowee--I feel the need to spell her name for you: G-B-O-W-E-E--Leymah Gbowee is a Liberian Peace Activist and women's rights advocate. She is the founder of Gbowee Peace Foundation and currently serves as the Executive Director of the Women & Security Program at Columbia University.

And special thank you goes out to my partner in making the documentary "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," director Gini Reticker!