

Welcome to Kosmos Live. Our host today is Tamara Smiley Hamilton, a global speaker and conflict resolution coach, who facilitates conversations on race and differences. Her guest is Valerie Brown. Valerie travels around the world, leading retreats and pilgrimages, speaking, and writing on mindfulness and leadership

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This is Kosmos Live.

Tamara: Today I'd like to welcome Valerie Brown to our podcast. Valerie is a very special person in my life because I have followed her, her writings as well as her coaching journey, and we're very pleased to have Valerie today because we're talking about unlearning together. Valerie, welcome today.

Valerie Brown: Thank you, Tamara. This is a delight to be here with you and with the Kosmos audience.

Tamara: We're in a very different world right now where people are feeling very burdened, very heavy by not only their personal lives, but just the global community that we're all a part of, and when you hear that term of unlearning in the context of the world that we're living in today, what is evoked in you?

Valerie Brown: I guess I'd begin with the premise that despite what is happening in the world today where there seems like... there's just disruption. We turn on the TV and there's yet another incident of gun violence. There's sexual misconduct, Mother Earth is suffering, we ourselves are suffering, and so this seems to be a constant bad news whenever we turn, wherever we turn.

But I also want to say that there's obviously a lot of good news and that they coexist together, and so I begin with the premise, and this is deeply embedded inside of me, I think from the time I was a small child, that we are, as human beings, whole, resourceful, and creative people, and that we're born that way and we have what we need to live in this world that contains so much suffering and so much beauty.

Tamara: I like that positive note that we have what we need and that we're whole, and when we keep that in our hearts, Valerie, what are some tactics, how do we cope with finding that wholeness within us? Because there are some people who do feel broken, who do feel nervous and anxious, how do we help them to find that resiliency that all of us have?

Valerie Brown: Obviously within the United States there's a great sense of dividedness, us against them, and I believe that an important step toward a sense of internal healing and wholeness has to begin with ourselves. That can be a long journey that is both a psychological journey. I want to lift up the words of John Welwood and spiritual bypass. The idea here is that we need to do psychological work as well as the spiritual journey.

Tamara: I agree. I have had my deepest inward journeys when there was loss or there was grieving, so I can relate to what you're saying there. When we think about the journey—and all of us are on our own individual and collective journeys—your journey has been amazing to me as someone who graduated from Howard School of Law and passed the bar exam in 1983, but then made a change, took a different path than that of the lawyer, the lawyer who would usually make lots of money and focus on a career.

Valerie Brown: Well, first of all, I want to say this is the beauty of the long view and being able to take the long view of life, so there were many twists and turns along the way, but the short end of the journey is to say that I was very lucky to go to law school and to go to Howard University, which is a historically black university, and I went to law school at the time that the great civil rights leaders within the United States were still alive. These figures, these people came regularly to the law school to talk with us about our responsibility as black people, as citizens of the United States. And so people like Justice Marshall, Thurgood Marshall. Of course we read *Brown v. Board of Education*. We knew his case; we knew the case cold. But what Justice Marshall was able to do was to impact us with his presence. He was like a grandfather. James Baldwin was another figure; Rosa Parks, Andrew Young. These were people who regularly came to the school, and they changed my way of thinking and helped me change my values.

I went to law school to get out of Brooklyn and to make money, and so I spent a lot of time running—running from myself, running after so-called success, until I came to sort of, I guess you would call, a watershed moment. I remember it very clearly. I was very stressed at work. I was a high-powered lobbyist representing about 20,000 lawyers, going back and forth from New Jersey to Washington. It was a very stressful moment. I decided to take myself on a hiking vacation to New Mexico. I climbed the top of a big hill, and took off my backpack and then looked up at the sky, and I think for the very first time in my life I realized that clouds move. They move in the sky. You might say, "Well, duh. Of course. Clouds move," but for me, I was so much on the run, I was so alienated from the natural world and from my own body, myself, that I had forgotten to look up, and that was the turning point for me in life.

Tamara: What kind of connection did that make for you in terms of reaching the top of that mountain and seeing the sky so differently? What did you think about your life and what you needed to do?

Valerie Brown: I was disconnected from the natural world, and I realized that in being disconnected from the natural world I was disconnected from myself. I began to realize what else had I not noticed? What was the risk in not noticing? What did that mean in my life? And what were my values? What had I sacrificed? What did I really believe? So everything was up for grabs. It was as though a light switch was turned on in my brain and body, and I started to question.

Tamara: Yes. Yes. That's very powerful, when you talked about not noticing. We both completed the Georgetown Leadership Coaching program, and I remember a quote by R. D. Laing on noticing. "The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there's little we can do to change; until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds." You have just personified that beautiful quote.

And then from there I remember reading that you met the great Buddhist monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh. Talk to us about how meeting him helped you to continue to not only notice, but to decide what you needed to unlearn.

Valerie Brown: Well, I appreciate the question, and I met Thích Nhất Hạnh when I attended a talk that he gave at Riverside Church just down the street from where my family lived in Manhattan. At the time that I attended the talk I was very much engaged in my big lawyer lobbyist job, and I remember it very, very distinctly because I left the talk and Thích Nhất Hạnh was doing his Zen master thing, and talking about peace and understanding. I left and thought to myself, "What's the matter with that guy?" You know? Because everything he said was the opposite of the way that I was living. Actually, a very wise yoga teacher said when we graduated from teacher training school in 2000, he said, "All of our experiences are to our benefit if we have eyes to see them." That can sound very saccharin, very sweet, like looking at the world through rose colored glasses, but it's actually very much what Thích Nhất Hạnh says, that we need the learning. All the things that we have to unlearn, it begins with the learning, that we need sort of the left hand and the right hand. We need the mud and the lotus. We need the good and the bad. They co-create one another, and so I think it's very, very important that we begin with the premise that we ain't broke. We all whole and resourceful, and the unlearning is part of the learning.

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Tamara: You mentioned being aware and being awake, and today many young people use the phrase "Be woke" in terms of being aware, so when you are trying to move through this world, and I notice that you take people along with you because you do the pilgrimages do ... is it Santiago?

Valerie Brown: Yes. We take people on a pilgrimage to El Camino de Santiago in Spain.

Tamara: And you give them an opportunity to experience life in a whole different perspective. Talk to us, because some of us know about the pilgrimages. I know I have never been on one. Can you describe what that is and why that's important to you, to help other people to also experience that great journey?

Valerie Brown: Yeah, so a pilgrimage is really quite a metaphor for this process of learning and unlearning. It's actually a beautiful way of framing to learn and to unlearn, so a pilgrimage is simply travel. It's traveling to a particular destination with one's heart and mind open to receive and to give. It's traveling with a kind of intentionality.

It's an outward expression of one's inward values and one's inward longing, and a pilgrimage has a kind of rhythm to it. It begins with a thirst, with a kind of longing or a calling that then leads to a person often not knowing. Very, very often people say, "I don't know why I want to take this pilgrimage. I don't know, but I feel called to do it." So there's a kind of a mystery to it that's hard to pin down, and there is a point at which the person prepares themselves to leave, so each stage of a pilgrimage is very intentional. The preparation to leave, the arrival. In our culture today we get from here to there. We don't even realize that we're moving. We're not mindful of how we arrive and the environment that we're arriving into, and so that process of arriving, crossing a threshold to be from one place to another place is a very ancient practice, and then being in that place.

Very often a pilgrimage is referred to as a thin place. A thin place, meaning that the distance between the material world and the spiritual world is very narrow, so the Camino de Santiago is the quintessential thin place. When one walks that pilgrimage, you just feel the spirit of a thousand years of people who have also walked that path, and that's a very, very powerful experience. Then the final stage of a pilgrimage is returning back, returning back home, and that we're different. We're changed in some way.

There's a famous poem that says ... I think it's by Joyce Kilmer and it's something like, "The old maps don't serve us any longer. The old maps are not any use to us." There's another poem that invites us to connect with our inner compass rose, our inner compass. What seems clear to me, increasingly, is that we are in a tipping point in our society where the old map no longer really serves us and where there's a need to do more. There's a need to think differently. People talk a lot about self-care and the importance of self-care, and I certainly agree with that, but I think in addition to self-care we need, as activists, as people, to consider what is the next bridge that we have to make from here to there. How do we bridge this gap, this divide that we have in society?

Tamara: So many times, when we think of a bridge, we think of a bridge we have to cross, but you're turning that on the flip side and saying we need to think about what is the bridge we have to make? That is so profound for me as one who tries to help people have conversations about race. Sometimes there is no bridge because people have gotten so stuck into stories about the other that there's a wall and not a bridge, so what you remind me and the listeners is that we ... you started off saying that we are whole, we are resourceful, we're creative, and we have everything that we need, so we really have what we need to build the bridges that we need to build to each other's hearts.

Valerie Brown: Yeah. Beautiful.

Tamara: I think that's what that unlearning together ... it's coming clear to me as I listen to you and I think about the journey and the pilgrimage. In your article in *Kosmos* you talk so beautifully about learning that the activism was internal and creating space for other people to make that journey, which some people won't take because they think it's too long, it's too hard, "I can't walk that far."

Valerie Brown: My aspiration in offering these pilgrimages is I believe it's part of the new activism. In part it is a key to a kind of destabilization that I think is essential in a process of becoming who we are meant to be, and when a person takes a pilgrimage or goes out walking, we don't know what is ahead. There's a kind of uncertainty, and that uncertainty is very, very important, I think, for building a kind of inner fortitude and also an inner awareness. That place of not knowing is critical. It's critical to new beginnings.

What I tried, what I'm saying and when people accompany me on a pilgrimage, that not knowing is the first step in knowing, so it's the unlearning that becomes the learning and it begins with not knowing what's ahead. That's a good place.

Tamara: Right, right. And in that not knowing, that's why you say that that's where you find your authentic self.

Valerie Brown: It's part of our own individuation. It's part of what creates what is genuine and deeply meaningful for us, and that's a mystery, and so I believe that begins with cultivating a sense of, "I don't know which way to go. I'm not quite sure." I guess what I would say is that allowing ourselves to be comfortable with an unknowing, and that feels kind of fresh, particularly in a Western culture which prides itself on knowing, on being right, on this divisiveness.

Right. I'm trying to figure out when I can join you on the next pilgrimage, so just know that. Oh my goodness.

Tamara: If people would like to connect with you and know more about your view of the world, or to join you on one of your many pilgrimages and retreats around the world, how can they reach you, Valerie?

Valerie Brown: Thank you for that. They can reach me by my website, which is leadsmartcoaching.com. That's leadsmartcoaching.com.

Tamara: I would like for you to mention again, you mentioned about four authors that I could catch but couldn't write them all down, particular authors that would be helpful for our readers to take a look at at the close of this podcast. Of course we know Thích Nhất Hạnh. The other you mentioned, you mentioned John Welwood. Anyone else that you might throw out to the audience that they can go deeper in their exploration of spirituality or this concept of unlearning?

Valerie Brown: Oh, absolutely. There are so many people, but just to throw out just a couple of names, William Bridges has written a classic book called *Transitions*. I think that's a very important book. Obviously the work of Carl Jung and individuation process, the shadow process. Robert Augustus Masters has done a lot of work on shadow. Parker Palmer has work on the inner teacher. Thích Nhất Hạnh, his work on building beloved community and what that means. I would also shout out for Alice Walker for Nelson Mandela's, for just so, so many people, people of color who have done loads on this topic. Just to begin with, Marisela Gomez, a dear friend who's written on the topic of spiritual bypass. She blogs for Huffington Post. Kaira Jewel Lingo is another person that I would highly recommend. So there are many folks.

Tamara: Then finally, Valerie, if there are just three, one, two, or three takeaways that our listeners should hold near and dear to their hearts, what would you share at the end, those three kernels that they can hold on to in this quest for this unlearning together?

Valerie Brown: So number one, I would say internalize the belief within your bones that you are already whole, resourceful, and creative. Second, that we are in this together, that this is both an individual and a collective action is needed, is required within our society. The third thing I would say is that this process of unlearning is continuous, and the goal is not the outcome itself, but the journey of the process of becoming who we already are, and that means trusting our heart and working with our hands to create the beloved community.

Tamara: Wow. Valerie, thank you so much. It has been such an honor to spend this time with you. I know that our listeners have been enriched by your voice and by your wisdom, and I look forward to talking with you again in the very near future. To the audience around the world, our global community, thank you so much for listening, and this is Tamara Smiley Hamilton, your host for today at *Kosmos Live*.