

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR HUMANS LEARNED FROM MARINE MAMMALS WITH ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS

LAURA FLANDERS: How are you doing? Are you drowning? Yes, me too. It's a phrase I hear a lot these days. Worries about work, and health, and elections abound. At the root, I think, are concerns that go to the heart of us about food, and family, and home, and how to live. Today's guest says we can learn much about all of those questions from marine mammals. They are the experts, after all, in not drowning. Alexis Pauline Gumbs was last on this program for a special she led on revolutionary mothering a few years ago. I am heart happy to have her back. Her most recent book is *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, for which she won the prestigious 2022 Whiting prize for nonfiction. Welcome back, Alexis. Truly, I couldn't be happier to have you with us.

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: I'm so happy to be here. Thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS: From mothering to undrowning, is there a theme here?

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: Oh, definitely. Definitely. I mean, in fact, the first piece of *Undrowned* that I actually shared beyond my own desk was about mothering, and it was the day before Mother's Day. It was about the hooded seal, and how the hooded seal gets what they need from their mother's milk. Within three days, they get enough nutrients to travel all the way around the world. And so the theme of mothering and what marine mammals can teach us about mothering is all through this book.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's a gorgeous volume, and I encourage people to take a look. It is this deep meditative kind of justice guide for people, for groups, for individuals. In it, you talk a lot about listening. And I often start this program by asking people who are they thinking about right now. But I think I'm gonna start by asking you who are you being called by in this moment? Perhaps, which mammal?

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: I'm feeling very called by the seals in this moment. There's something about how they move on land and in water that is calling me. I think that type of adaptability is what I need in my life right now, and maybe what we need collectively for the times we're navigating.

LAURA FLANDERS: I think many of us really are feeling that huge waves are coming at us from all directions, many of which seem super scary and kind of overwhelming. Can you just talk about how you are riding these waves right now? Just to stick with the metaphor.

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: So this actually takes me beyond the seals to the dolphins and porpoises and some of the whales that have dorsal fins. Right? I think about the idea of a dorsal fin as this physical technology that evolved over millions of years, and its basic function is to allow someone to have enough stability in a constantly moving ocean or river, or wherever they are, to be able to decide, to be able to have intentionality about movement in this context where the ocean is huge. The pressure of the water, the movement of the water is something that no individual animal can ever control, and yet this idea of a dorsal fin is like what does it mean to be where I am and decide. Am I going to move this way. Am I going to move this way? And in *Undrowned*, I write about, you know, we don't have dorsal fins physically, but what are our dorsal practices? What are the practices that keep us able to be present to a moment where, exactly as you say, it's like one thing after another is like rushing in. and rushing in, and very destabilizing, triggering, can be re-traumatizing. All of those things. And so what are the practices that allow us to be able to be like, "Okay, but I still decide how I make this moment." And I think that absolutely I wish I had an actual dorsal fin, but you know, until then it comes from the grounding practices. It comes from meditation. It comes from staying connected to people who share the values and have the political bravery that enlivens me. It's intentional.

LAURA FLANDERS: The practices that lead us forward. The sorts of practice that you're talking about, we don't see much in our media. I mean, we do our best on this program to lift some up, but could you take a moment to share some that are close to you?

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: Black feminist breathing is something that I made up for myself, really, that is a grounding practice where I really just repeat mantras that come from the thinkers, the writers, the activists who shaped my practice of Black feminism. And I repeat them as my meditation mantra. So June Jordan says, "Love is life force." I repeat that, and I repeat that, and I repeat that. And it actually has... It's for me to reclaim my breathing and my body, and to have that repetition going in my brain as opposed to the like, "What should we do? Am I doing enough? Am I smart enough? Why is this..." You know like all of that is understandably circulating in my mind, and I'm grounded in 'love is life force'.

LAURA FLANDERS: There's a great line in one of your pieces. I scribbled it down here. "I would breathe at the pace that love requires."

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: Yes, exactly. I was inspired to even think that it's possible to breathe at the pace that love requires because the harbor seal can actually slow their heart down from like 120 beats per minute to three or four beats per minute, which is like what? Like that's so much slower, but that's what allows them to stay underwater for great lengths of time and for the oxygen in their blood to circulate slowly enough to get everywhere before they have to take another breath. When the harbor seal comes out of the water, they need to be able to quickly see

and make sure there's not somebody who wants to eat them that is coming or to navigate differently, but when they're in this deep space, they need to be able to stay. It's this question about what does it take for me to go deep enough into my practice, into my action, into my collaborations with people that I can actually stay there and possibly be changed by what I find there before I come back into this context where I'm gonna have to react and respond in a different way. Right?

LAURA FLANDERS: I wonder whether this would be a great moment for you to read something. The preface might work well to introduce people to this work.

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: "This is a guide to Undrowning. What is the scale of breathing? You put your hand on your individual chest as it rises and falters all day. But is that the scale of breathing? You share air and chemical exchange with everyone in the room, everyone you pass by today. Is the scale of breathing within one species? All animals participate in this exchange of release for continued life, but not without the plants. The plants in their inverse process release what we need, take what we give without being asked. And the planet wrapped in ocean breathing, breathing into sky. What is the scale of breathing? You are part of it now. You are not alone. And if the scale of breathing is collective beyond species and sentience so is the impact of drowning. The massive drowning, yet unfinished where the distance of the ocean meant that people could become property, that life could be for sale. I'm talking about the Middle Passage and everyone who drowned and everyone who continued breathing, but I'm troubling the distinction between the two. I am saying that those who survived in the underbellies of boats under each other under unbreathable circumstances are the undrowned. And their breathing is not separate from the drowning of their kin and fellow captives. Their breathing is not separate from the breathing of the ocean. Their breathing is not separate from the sharp exhale of hunting whales, their kindred also. Their breathing did not make them individuals. It did not make them individual survivors. It made a context. The context of undrowning. Breathing in unbreathable circumstances is what we do every day. In the choke hold of racial, gendered, ableist capitalism, we are still undrowning. And by we, I don't only mean people like myself whose ancestors specifically survived the Middle Passage because the scale of our breathing is planetary at the very least. Are you still breathing? This is an offering towards evolution. Towards our evolution. Towards the possibility that instead of continuing the trajectory of slavery, entrapment, separation, and domination, and making our atmosphere unbreathable, we might instead practice another way to breathe. I don't know what that will look like. But I do know that our marine mammal kindred are amazing at not drowning. So I call on them as teachers, mentors, guides. And I call on you, as breathing kindred souls, may we evolve."

LAURA FLANDERS: Tell us a bit more about you, Alexis. You and your partner, Sangodare, are creating something with your work, with your practice. can you talk a bit about it, and why,

and what it looks like? This kind of, I don't know, living library Mobile Homecoming catalytic gathering and learning and sharing project you have going on.

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: My partner, Sangodare, and I collaborate to co-create the Mobile Homecoming Trust now. It first was the Mobile Homecoming Project. And it really was just a love quest. It was an idea that we had. We really wanted to listen across generations. And we wanted to listen in particular to LGBTQ feminists who are our elders with the wonder of how. How could you exist? What has kept you alive? What is our responsibility with you as relatives? As people whose Black queerness, whose lesbian feminism has been made possible by these earlier generations. And so it's called Mobile Homecoming Trust 'cause we literally got a mobile home and just drove around to listen to people. We parked in people's in driveways and on their street, in their office at work. All over the place. Just so we could be with them and listen. And I wrote praise poems for everybody. My partner composed drum beats and dances just to really honor that we know that we could not exist in the way that we exist without those who became before, even if we had never met them before. And then of course, there are people who we have met before who lovingly mentored us. And so as we did that, this has been almost 14 years ago that we started this journey. We learned so much from listening. We learned that people wanted to be together, so we started to do retreats. We learned that people really are thinking about how to live differently and live communally. People are thinking about their legacies. And so Mobile Homecoming Trust now, based here in Durham, North Carolina, has a space called Soul Sanctuary where we're incubating that process and what does it actually look like to live intergenerationally. That phase is starting soon. And what does it mean to activate what we call an experiential archive. The archive of our existence. What we learn from actually being together. That's what makes it a living library. So yeah. That's what we do because that's what we need.

LAURA FLANDERS: One of the things I appreciate about Undrowned is there are a lot of animals that go down and then come back, and disappear, and then reemerge. And people think they're lost, but they're really not lost. Where are we? I think I'm torn between believing we're on the cusp of something truly extraordinary and transformational, and it's with that spirit that I dedicate my work because what else would you dedicate it to? But there are certainly days where I think, "Whoa. This old is going down with a big fight."

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: I think that we're in this place where it has become impossible to ignore the urgency of our values. I think that we're in a place where our relationship, our material relationship with the planet is impossible to ignore. It's an exciting place to be because what actions we take, the ways that we collaborate, the inventiveness that comes out of those forms of clarity, even the going in and coming back out of people because of quarantine and all of those things, I do think it makes so many things possible. And it's really hard to be with these urgencies and not to... I mean, it's like our denial is not tenable. I've been surprised by people's

willingness to hold onto the forms of denial when it takes so much to deny any of this right now. And that's clarifying for me. Right? And that means that I can't be like, "Oh, yeah. People will get it. People will come around." Like I have to be very clear about how do I live these values? How do I collaborate in a way that is life giving when we have a major sacrifice, for example, of disabled people happening because of disregard around COVID-19. How do we when the structures that pretend to protect and safeguard and hold completely are not able to do that around ideology? Because of ideology they can't function in those ways. How do we hold each other, find each other, love each other, protect each other? And the thing about marine mammals is that that's all that they do. And that's what they have to do, right? They've been doing it in response to the violence of the same ideas as we have imposed them on the oceans and have made life more dangerous for ourselves, but also for all marine mammals. And so thinking about, "Okay. How do dolphins reorganize their pods when they had this virus that was moving through their community, and what can we learn from that."

LAURA FLANDERS: And what did they do, those dolphins?

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: They regathered. They made smaller pods that they then regrew. They worked intergenerationally. They found each other across groups in order to have what they needed to have to be the sustainable units that they knew they needed to be, which goes so far beyond something like a nuclear family, you know, the ways that we're organized in this particular society. They really prioritized life and adapted in the face of loss. And that's why I'm a marine mammal apprentice, and I just invite everyone else so we can all apprentice ourselves to the marine mammals. I want us to be more like that.

LAURA FLANDERS: In the course of your research, you discovered that a lot of the sort of attitudes of racism came out in the language that was used in these scientific guidebooks. And you talk a little bit about both those parallels and some of the sort of social justice movement responses that are inspired for you by what you've learned.

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: I know that there's racist science. I knew that there were all the things with the anthropologists trying to prove that race was a species difference and to use it to justify slavery, you know, like I knew about those histories, but I didn't necessarily think that when I did this simple task of just opening a guidebook about marine mammals, just to try to see what seal is this, what can I learn about this particular seal, that I would find it there. And in some of the exact same language, you know? The hooded seal.

LAURA FLANDERS: Predator.

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: Yeah. Vagrant juveniles. You know? And I'm like, "A vagrant juvenile?" You know, like it was really a light bulb went off when I saw that the same

terminology that's used to criminalize the communities that I'm part of and that I love is being used to classify and explain the behavior of marine mammals. But of course it would be. Right? They're not separate, right? It's the same colonizing logics that I face in my life are absolutely at play, and I'm not saying scientists are more oppressive than other people. I'm just saying that they are created in the same society that I'm created in, and that's the lens. That's the containing lens. But it also means that we have more in common with marine mammals than just the fact that we are hurt by the same things that hurt them.

LAURA FLANDERS: How do you deal with grief in this context? I read about the damage that has been done to our waters, to our seas, the sound pollution that's polluting their abilities even to communicate. I get sad thinking about what we've done to our marine mammals and marine life. And I'm assuming you do too.

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: Honestly, grief is what had me turn to marine mammals to begin with. I felt from the loss of a parent, my father passed away, I felt like I was in this ocean of grief. I felt like I was gonna drown in my own tears. It felt that hyperbolic and big. And what I realized was that I had never made any space to learn from a feeling so big for me, unpredictable, consuming. And it felt like navigating an ocean, and I was like, "Well, who navigates the ocean?" Right? Marine mammals do. And how do they do that? And what I found was that it was that grief that brought me to learn more about marine mammals. Like when I think about the fact that through my grief, I'm actually connected, for example, to my father who's passed away. And the existence of that grief is actually the evidence that that love and that stream of love is not stopped, even by death. It's also the case that my grief around the heating of the ocean, for example, the pollution, all of what is happening on this planet, and how it impacts marine mammals is also a depth of connection. And that connection is actually... It's not the way to escape the grief, but it's actually the way to generate another relation. Another way of relating. Another way of being. Right? And that doesn't mean that it should be the case and it doesn't justify anything about what the circumstance is. But it is a deep and sustainable and ongoing and expansive source for the type of imagining, the type of openness, the type of vulnerability and attentiveness that it requires for us to grieve what has been lost and stay committed to creating what is required in the face of that.

LAURA FLANDERS: Alexis, thank you so much for being with us today. Thank you for everything you bring into the world. Come on in back to the show very soon. And stay in touch with us.

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS: Oh, thank you. Thank you for, as you said, creating this space and this, I see it as a portal for all the possibilities that come through here. It's so important. It's so important. Thank you. Undrowning. I was pretty focused on that as a kid learning to swim, and then later learning to be a lifeguard. I remember in those classes, they taught us that a person

struggling for breath does the most irrational things. Even reaching out and trying to drown the very person who stands a chance of saving their life. I've been thinking about that as we approach the beginning of the school year. A time when many of us feel like we are drowning, whether we're parents, or teachers, or administrators, or maintenance staff, or kids. It's a pretty overwhelming time in the year for many. And it's a time when a lot of people have been wondering how that \$190 billion in COVID pandemic relief that went to the education department over last few years has been spent. Well, it turns out, a lot of it was spent on things like plexiglass walls and monitoring and policing. Things that didn't help so much against the virus. What really helps it turns out is ventilation. New systems for ventilating the air, and keeping it clean and fresh are good not just for public health, but for our thinking and our wellbeing. So how about it? More into breathing, less into policing. Good way to start the season? I think so. Thanks for joining us. You can find my full uncut conversation and another poem from Alexis in our social media feed or by following us at our website through a subscription to our free podcast. Till the next time, stay kind. Stay curious. I'm Laura.

For more on this episode and other forward thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries, and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast. It's all lauraflanders.org.