

## **The Laura Flanders Show**

### **V (formerly Eve Ensler): Reckoning with Our Past, Transforming the Future**

**LAURA FLANDERS:** The title of the book we're talking about today is "Reckoning." Not "The Reckoning," like "The Shining," or "The Bible." It's not describing an event or laying out a set of rules. No, reckoning is an act of doing. And it's what, V, the author, activist, and playwright, formally known as Eve Ensler, started doing during the quiet times of COVID. Reckoning with her own past, her abusers, the planet's exploiters, the patriarchy, white supremacy, killers, and her own inner demons. "Reckoning," she writes, "isn't easy. It requires remembering, accounting, and looking deeply at what collectively and individually we'd rather not see." "It's not easy, but it's critical," she says, "especially right now." She calls it the antidote to fascism, and it's ultimately not something we can each of us do alone. We need to do it together. V, formerly Eve Ensler, is a Tony and Obie award-winning phenomenon. Her play, "The Vagina Monologues," has been performed in more than 140 countries and sparked a movement to stop violence, V-Day, which turns 25 this year. Her latest book, "Reckoning," is a collection of poetry, prose, polemic, and play excerpts dating back to the 1980s and it hit the bestseller lists within a week of its release on "Bloomsbury," on February 1st. V can stand for many, many exciting things, but right now it stands for very, very, very excited and happy to have my good friend, V, back with us on "The Laura Flanders Show." Thanks for joining me again, V.

**V:** I'm so happy to be here.

**LF:** We're talking with so much to reckon with at this very moment. And I want to just sort of plant us where we sit with what's on our minds right now. Catastrophic earthquake hitting Syria after 12 years of war and brutal sanctions in Turkey. Ongoing assaults on women in Iran, Afghanistan. Ongoing war in Congo and of course the war in Europe. What's on your mind first and foremost right now as we begin this conversation? What or who?

**V:** I mean, you just began to cover the basis and didn't even mention the pushback against educating people in this country about our African American history and the notions that people need to be familiar with in order to reckon with the story of this country, so we don't keep repeating the misery, and white supremacy, and ongoing suffering of African Americans. I mean, there's so many things we need to be reckoning with and so many directions where the lack of reckoning is ensuring the repetition of those terrible things that have occurred in the past.

**LF:** Did your reckoning in this case, this chapter of it, begin with your taking on of the new name, V?

**V:** I think it began with writing "The Apology." For so many years I believed my father would reckon with his abuse of me and what he had done to me and I thought there would come that point late in his life, you know, those moments where you, kind of before death, where you wake up and you see the light, and you realize you have apologies you have to reckon with? And he was a patriarch to the end. You know, he upheld the principles of non-apology to the end. So I wrote his apology in "The Apology," and I wrote all the things I needed him to say to me. And when that book was done, like, several weeks later, I knew I had no more anger, I had no more bitterness. I had no more rage, I had no more anything. And I knew I couldn't have his name. He wasn't a person who lived for my good wellbeing. He was somebody who had undermined me and I didn't want the name he had given me and I didn't want his name. And I think it was really changing my name. And I've loved, obviously, V, is anything better than V? I mean like openings, invitations, every good word in my life has become a V. Even the anti-violence is part of it, right? I think it was changing that name that really then entered me, plus COVID, into this time of deeper reckoning. Because I think that COVID really pushed a lot of us who were privileged enough not to be on the front lines working in hospitals, or working in bodegas, or working in places where people were generously serving us. We were kind of locked in with our thoughts, with our memories, with our ghosts, with our demons, and just wrestling with how I could have done that better and did I really do that? Oh my God. And at the same time the world was at our fingertips, right? We were reckoning with so much in this country whether it was climate change and the fires in the west, right? Or those diabolical public nine minutes of George Floyd with a knee on his neck. I just began to think, like, there is so much we haven't reckoned with. And if we even look at Afghanistan, everything we did in Afghanistan was not about reckoning. So of course the Taliban was going to come back. And we look across the board, we have never reckoned with history. And so all of the things that have been done in the past keep repeating and repeating. And we're seeing this in Congo. Has there ever been any kind of justice for the thousands of women who were raped and the millions killed? No, the M23 is back and the war is raging again. And I think we can look to any place in the world where these conflagrations are starting to happen again or continue to happen. It's lack of dealing, looking at, reflecting, owning, and transforming our histories.

**LF:** Our histories, yours and mine, include a lot of work against militarism and for nuclear disarmament and some of it together. As I read some of the essays that you collected into "Reckoning," the new book, I was reminded of those times and the sense that we had then, I think, that mass action was going to deescalate nuclear escalation. In fact, we saw arms treaties and agreements come out of it. We never saw perfect peace but we did see what I think we'd have to say is progress. Looking to that story today, V, as you know, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is fueling military budgets around the world. How do we reckon with, I guess, our tactics, our efforts, what's worked, what hasn't worked, and what we need to do now?

**V:** I think we knew then exactly what we know now. That the escalation of war and war apparatus and building and creating more weapons of war will be the destruction of the human race. And it's really where we are. It's like we've destroyed the earth in the pursuit of these bombs. We've destroyed people's ability to be fed, to be nurtured, to be housed, to have education, to have healthcare. And all we are doing now is building our armaments and building our ability to hurt and destroy.

**LF:** You have a beautiful part of the book about place. About finding your place, not in the city but in the country, and the home that we're speaking to you at now. And you have a line in there that just sticks with me where you say, "People mistake nationalism for love of place." And how many people long to belong to some kind of place and find that place in groups? Whether it's groups of men, or groups of right wingers, or groups of left wingers, or groups of, I don't know, you name it. A question that I have for you is about how do we find that sense of belonging to one another? Why is it so hard for us to belong to one another?

**V:** It's so true. And I think one of the things I've been thinking so much about on our 25th anniversary is the role of solidarity and how solidarity is a home, is a place, when you feel connected to other people's struggles. Because we all know we are connected across borders through our understanding that violence against women, trans people, and non-binary people is going to kill us, will kill us, will destroy us. And I think it's the same with the earth. I feel I am known here and I know what happens here. And I think one of the problems of nationalism is it's really not about place. It's about ideology, and it's about being better than, and it's about asserting. No place is competitive. Your connection to your place connects you to all places. It's once you feel deeply rooted somewhere you know there are no borders because you were rooted into that earth, which goes in every direction.

**LF:** You didn't always think about the earth this way. And in "Reckoning," you include a beautiful essay. Kind of an apology to the earth, Mother Earth. This wonderful actress, Noma Dumezweni, performed from that piece at the book celebration on February 1st at the 92nd Street Y. We're going to play a clip from that performance.

- I refused your invitation, scorned your generosity, held suspicion of your love. I ignored all the ways we used and abused you. I pretended to believe the stories of the fathers who said you had to be tamed and controlled. That you were out to get us. I press my bruised body down on your grassy belly, breathing me in and out. I have missed you, mother. I have been away so long. I am sorry. I am so sorry. I am made of dirt, and grit, and stars, and river, skin, bone, leaf, whiskers and claws.

**LF:** In this book, V, you do some scary and brave things and one of them is talk about your own abortion. You describe it not as the tragic event that abortions are often described as but rather as

a liberatory act. In fact you say it was the first truly autonomous decision you made about your own body. Can you talk about your decision to write about that and include it in this book in this time?

**V:** I'm really glad you're asking me about that. You know, it's funny it took me so long to write that story. I did it for this beautiful theater piece that they did at the Arena Stage recently where they asked a few playwrights to write about abortion. And I was going to write a, you know, political piece. Then I just said, everything in the end really moves people if you talk about your own experience. And the truth of the matter is, you know, having grown up in a very violent family where my body was never mine, you know, it was invaded early on by my father sexually and then beaten and thrown around. And then I left my body and never felt like I had any rights to say no or to choose anything that happened to me because that choice had been robbed so early on. When I got pregnant I realized I didn't want a baby. I couldn't possibly support a baby. I was a drug addict, I was an alcoholic, I was lost. I was living in a halfway house. There was no way I could bring up a child and that child would've been destroyed. And I realized that I could make a decision not to have that child. And that was literally the first time in my life that I went and I made a choice about my own body and said, "I do not want this." And that choice changed my life. Not only in that if I had a child I don't think I could have ever done what I ended up doing with my life. I think it would've destroyed me and it would've overwhelmed me. And that child would've been a total mess. But it taught me that I had a right, I had bodily autonomy. A woman has a right to her own body. To determine what happens to her body. Whatever the case is, it's a human right, it's a basic right. And I want to remind us that it is not the majority. 85% of the people in this country support abortion rights. It is a fringe minority who has gotten hold of the microphone and gotten hold of the power and the courts. But it is not all of us, and it is not the majority of us. And all of that majority needs to understand how much power we have in turning this back around.

**LF:** So how do we reckon? How do we reckon with the fact that this stealing of bodily autonomy from women continues centuries on and continues right here in 21st century America? How do we reckon with that? And how do we respond?

**V:** Well, first of all, I have to go back to patriarchy, okay? We are living in a patriarchal paradigm and we have been for what, 17,000 years? But it wasn't always here. It wasn't before and there can be a time when it isn't after. And it requires imagination for all of us to say, "Is this the paradigm, this racist, patriarchal paradigm, the paradigm we choose to live in for eternity? Or do we want to live in a different paradigm and are we going to struggle to dismantle it?" Because if we don't dismantle it we will get abortion rights and we will lose abortion rights. And we will get abortion rights and we will stop violence against women, and there'll be endless violence against women. Because we're still living in a framework that perpetuate those things.

**LF:** Our conversation and your book takes this journey from naming all the problems, all the things that are wrong, to putting out some ideas and imagining some alternative. Something we try to do a lot on this program. In our conversation I've heard we need to imagine what it would look like to actually invest as much globally in peace as we do in war. We need to imagine a new relationship to the earth and actually permit ourselves to feel it. And now you're talking about we need to imagine a new relationship amongst people across genders and in celebration of our individuality, but also our collectivity. Let's take another moment to look at part of the performance from the 92nd Street Y where you actually read from one of the pieces in the book "Reckoning." It's a gorgeous piece about the V people and where V comes from.

- I'm going to close with peace. It's a dream vision of my new name. I've taken V as my name. The name I was originally given was connected to the one who attempted to destroy and undo me. V is my freedom name. I come from the V. I didn't always know this. One of the things the extractors took from me, from us, was memory. They buried it and terrorized it out of us. First they made us mock our mothers then they made us forget them, and our language, and our names. They made us forget our very particular ways. Their violence separated us from our bodies because our bodies housed our energy, our knowing, our intuition, our sexuality. We became separated from all that made us who we were. V is the name of my real people, a reminder of my true origins. It was only by releasing the one who had violated me that I was able to begin to remember. He was assigned the role of my father. For almost 60 years even long after he died, he occupied me with terror and made me ignorant and dumb. Now, since the exorcism, much of my memory is returning. Now through the working of plant medicines and the whisperings of trees, my original ancestors begin to speak to me. The V were a vast and humble people. V for vessel, opening, invitation, the upward reaching side of a diamond, inviting the downward side of completion. My people prayed with their arms outstretched in a V. The divine met the V. And in that diamond completion there was luminous fusion. Messages, wisdom were transmitted through the V connector into the people. In the V community there was no such thing as hierarchy. No one above and no one below. Can you imagine it?

**V:** We did this thing in V-Day where we asked everybody to imagine a world without violence and to write pieces about it. And it was really amazing how hard it was for people. And I was in prison working in my writing group and I put this idea out to the women in my group. And one of the women just broke down crying and she said, "I can't, I can't do it. I can't even imagine it. I don't want to imagine it. It's too painful to imagine it. Like, just open my heart and to be so disappointed by it not happening." And I feel like I think sometimes we are spending all our energy resisting patriarchy, fighting it, going up against it in the same way that I was resisting my father and his narrative, but being caught in his narrative. Rather than opening our hearts, and opening our imaginations, and opening our spirits, opening our genius artistic senses to the

possibility of another way of living on the earth. Even if it doesn't happen, even if we might suffer disappointment, to take the risk of saying, "What if we live like this? What if we could live in a world where we weren't hierarchical, where we understood that every single person on this planet possessed their own specific genius that we absolutely need?" These are the things we need to imagine. These are the things we really need to assert in ourselves so that we can create pathways for those things to happen. Because what we cannot see cannot unfold. It's impossible. And I sometimes think we should be really developing this other world over here that's so juicy, and so sexy, and so alive that everyone's like, well I don't want this, I want that. I'm going over there. Because if I look at City of Joy, for example, our amazing sanctuary of healing, and our revolutionary center in the Congo, when you walk into that place the energy is so high, the vibration is so high, you know you are in a holy, magical, beautiful world that you never want to leave. Believing that women can turn their pain to power, can turn their lives in a new direction, we can do that everywhere. We can create City of Joys everywhere we go. If we make a decision to do that and not spend all our time either collapsed and depressed and giving up or reacting with the same energy to the perpetrators, but instead building this other world, building this other reality.

**LF:** That takes me back finally to your meditation on the Biblical Eve and your retelling of that story in which Eve is a fairly brave character and a character standing up for everything that you've just described. And again, I think of the women in Afghanistan and I think of the women in Iran and around the world today. And I wonder if you have anything to send us off with about the state of the reckoning, the state of the rising in our world right now?

**V:** Well, I just want to say that I think the women in Iran, and the women of Afghanistan, women in Congo, women in Palestine, lead me, teach me, inspire me every day to be braver, to be bolder, to not get out of the way and stand for what I believe. And you know, speaking of Eve, you know, I never liked the name Eve. It was a hard, hard burden to give a six year old, you know, the birther of sin, and death, and everything horrible. But you know, I remember when I first saw this image of Adam and Eve, it was 13th century painting and they were wrapped around a mushroom tree. And I suddenly went, oh, oh. The tree of knowledge was a mushroom tree. And the reason God said not to eat of it was that they would be like him because they would realize they were divine like him and had powers like him. And what Eve knew deep in her soul because she had been in another garden before the meme of the patriarchal garden is that there was someplace to get back to. And so when the snake being part of her deep unconscious arrived with the mushrooms she was like, "I'm eating the mushrooms." And she did and went back to that former state, generously offered them to Adam, because that's what we do as women. We always want people to come with us when something wonderful happens. And I think what she knew and what we all know as women, as trans people, as non-binary people, because we're out on the outside and we've been pushed to the margins, we know in our souls that there was another time before this time. There was another way before this time. And there are ways to get

back there. And one way to get back there is to be part of groups where you are actively involved in changing the story. And one way to get back there is to support and love people every day and go beyond your comfort zone and being more generous than you ever thought you could. And the other way is to ingest plant medicines and psychedelics so that you open those portals so you begin to remember what those states of mind and consciousness of ways of being were. You know and at the end of that piece, you know, I feel like that so-called Apple was the greatest offering we had. So we all have to eat the apple. In the end it's all about love. It's all about how do we connect with each other in a way that is caring, and generous, and restorative, and healing, and be for each other in this world.

**LF:** The book is "Reckoning." Our guest is V, formerly Eve Ensler. Thank you so much, V. Always a pleasure to have you on the program.

**V:** Thank you Laura.

**LF:** And keep up the reckoning. Banished people behave in a whole array of ways and some of them have been studied for years. Take a recent report in the "American Political Science Review," which found that even a single police stop made a person less likely to vote in the next election. There's even a political science term for it, strategic retreat, from the society that feels as if it's retreating or rejecting you. We also know that people whose bodies are treated in hateful ways come to hate their bodies. It makes sense. But what about the other side of the story? What about those who when rejected by society, refuse to leave? What about those who when they're disparaged demand to be called by their own name? What about those who when pushed down, rise up? Seems to me we could do with a whole lot more research on them. So if you're a political researcher out there, political scientist, get busy. And when you find some results, let us know. In the meantime if you want to hear my full unedited conversation with the author and activist, V, in which she talks about her feelings on self-care and on the story the future will tell of now, subscribe to our free podcast. Podcast subscribers get the full unedited conversation every week. And you can find all the details about how to subscribe at our website. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. For the Laura Flanders Show, I'm Laura.

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