

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

LOOKING AT THE UNBEARABLE WITH DR. GABOR MATÉ & V (FORMERLY EVE ENSLER)

LAURA FLANDERS: We are living in profoundly grim times. Images and stories of death and destruction are all over the news. And if we use smartphones, they literally pop up in the palm of our hands. It feels impossible to look away as others suffer and equally impossible to effectively respond. Fear, uncertainty, grief, existential dread, turning away is one way to react to all those feelings. But what happens to us when we do? And what could we do instead? Experts in illness and healing are clear, the only way to come to grips with current pain is to look at the root of things, the context, the beginning of the story. And yet the US is in the grip of a battle over exactly that. Witness the efforts to ban books, censor news, cancel truth-tellers, and hide history. Today's guests have experienced personal trauma and turned it into effective fuel for making social change. They have courage and they also have tools to share. V, formerly known as Eve Ensler, is the co-founder of One Billion Rising and V-Day, the global movement to end violence against women and girls. She's also the author of among other books, "The Apology" and "Reckoning," which is coming out in paperback as we speak. Dr. Gabor Maté, himself a Holocaust survivor, is not only a clinician, but also the author of several groundbreaking books on healing, personal and societal pain. His latest, written with the help of his son Daniel is "The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture." So what are the things making people feel desperate, broken, and afraid. And what can we do to help one another look at what feels unbearable with a view to claiming our power to effectively make change? For that conversation, I am happy to welcome back to the program, Dr. Gabor Maté and V. And I'm going to start with you, Gabor. The question we often begin with is, well, what are you holding uppermost in your heart and your head as we begin to speak?

DR. GABOR MATÉ: First of all, thanks for having me, and especially with my friend V. As an infant survivor of the Holocaust, and I've just celebrated my 80th birthday, I've seen a lot, I've lived through many wars, seen much depredation, injustice. But on a subjective level, what's going on right now strikes me as the heaviest time I've ever lived through. And I can't justify that objectively in terms of the numbers dead, but there's something about the daily vision of children being killed and knowledge that children in Gaza, are having their limbs amputated without anesthetics, and one could go on and on. There's just something about it. As the world watches and as the Western media, for the most part, if it doesn't quite cheer it on, it certainly justifies it. And as you said, without the context. So all I can say is this pain that we're experiencing now, we have to learn the context, otherwise you just seem so hopeless and senseless.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah.

LAURA FLANDERS: V, what about you? What is on your heart as we begin?

V: You know where I am this morning because I was just on this really wonderful webinar with Palestinian women who are trying to figure out how to support Palestinian women in the midst of this. And I just think the story of that young 6-year-old girl Hind who was in a car with her family who were trying to escape and they got caught in gunfire and everybody in her family was murdered, and she was left in that car with her dead family for three hours, and now she's been disappeared. I've just all morning been sitting in Hind's body. I've been just trying to imagine what it's like in there, what it is like to be a 6-year-old girl in the midst of the corpses of your family, knowing you could die at any moment.

LAURA FLANDERS: Not that the story begins there, but certainly ever since October 7th there's been the retelling of the stories of what happened to Israelis at that moment. And ever since, this explosion of images, of stories, of now getting on for 27,000 dead in Gaza.

DR. GABOR MATÉ: The big difference for me is that the Israeli suffering, which was genuine on October 7th, it's humanized, individual stories are told. We are over and over again informed about the subjective experience of Israelis. And that's fair enough, you might say, but we don't get that on the Palestinian side. The Palestinians are not humanized. Their daily deprecation, suffering, oppression, humiliation that's been going on for decades, that has not presented to us on a human level. At the best, we get numbers, if we get even that. It's a lack of human engagement with the subjective experience of the other side that makes this so asymmetrical and so upsetting for me.

V: Of course, what happened to people on October 7th was horrendous, but, absolutely, we know those stories and everything is about who is telling the story and whose story matters. And we don't know the stories of what's happening to people in Gaza. Most people aren't even even seeing the images unless they're plugged into a certain network.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's not the only place that images come to our phones from or to our news from. I mean, I've hung out with you, V, in the run up to V-Day, and you're hearing stories from all over the world. It seems like wars are expanding everywhere. And then there's right here at home where the Surgeon General, just a few days ago, said that he felt that Americans were experiencing an epidemic of loneliness comparable to the tobacco epidemic to which the only antidote, he said, was human connection. Gabor, as a doctor, do you think the surgeon general's right?

DR. GABOR MATÉ: In my book, "The Myth of Normal," which you're kind of to mention, I actually quote him. And loneliness is as much of a risk factor for illness as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. And in the Western world, there's been an epidemic of loneliness. I mean, twice as many

Americans 10 years ago described themselves as lonely as 20 years earlier. In Britain, they've had to appoint a Minister for Loneliness. That's how bad it's got. And physiologically, loneliness actually works to undermine your immune system, disturb your hormones. And it's a basis for illness. Now, where the Surgeon General is being aspirational and optimistic is that it's nice to call for human connection. And I agree with him, but what he doesn't and perhaps cannot touch upon is that that loneliness is not an accident, it's not sort of a human moral failure. It's an outcome and a factor in the way this society's organized, run and managed day to day. And it's an outcome of economic and political decisions made at the top over the last several decades. It's a manifestation of what I call a toxic culture. And so it's not enough to call for connection. It's important, but it's not enough. We actually look at the structures and the modalities of the society that create that loneliness.

LAURA FLANDERS: V, anything you'd add?

V: There isn't one doctor, one therapist I talk to that the central theme is not loneliness, aloneness, disconnection, disassociation. And it's not being alone. It's not being in your aloneness. It's loneliness, which is almost like a virus. It's almost it's a sense that you have no connection, that you don't matter, you have no meaning within a culture. And I just want to say, I think Gabor is absolutely right when he says this has been engineered, like capitalism, racism, patriarchy, feed off of, engineer, catalyze, ongoing divisions. That's what it's about. Separating out groups within groups, within groups, within groups, within groups, and people within people. What do drugs do? What do pharmaceuticals do? They give you a personal drug, which then it becomes your problem, your pill that you take by yourself in your room away from everybody else. And I just wanted to say one thing about City of Joy that I just so love about it, which is our sanctuary and our revolutionary center in Congo, where we are serving, and loving, and transforming, and lifting women who have been through some of the worst sexual atrocities. There is no individual therapy because they don't believe in it, because they don't believe anyone gets better outside of the community, outside of the culture, that you can only heal if the community heals.

LAURA FLANDERS: This is a trailer from the film about City of Joy in Congo.

V: I have seen the most remarkable results of women at City of Joy because all of their therapy is in community, all of their teaching, all of their dancing, all of their singing, all of their art, all of their learning. And so what's happening is communities are changing so women are not left alone to fend for themselves or believe their problems are their problems. They understand they are social, political, economic problems that have to be addressed as a whole.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, maybe you put your finger on it there, maybe it's not so much the loneliness, although that's clearly huge as you mentioned, but the being left alone to solve it

alone as if you could. Our society, I think of the academic Lauren Berlant who passed away a few years ago and who talked about the cruel optimism of the American Dream, that you can somehow be all that you should be without any help from society and instead, mostly obstacles. Do you think we're significantly different and in which ways from other countries?

DR. GABOR MATÉ: There's a colleague and a friend of mine, an American psychiatrist and physician called Lewis Mehl-Madrona, and Lewis himself is part Lakota background from the US. And he told me that in the Lakota tradition, when somebody gets sick, the community gathers and says, "Thank you. Your illness manifests some imbalance in our community and so you're the canary in the mine as it were. And so your healing is our healing." And what's so frustrating is that that Indigenous wisdom, which by the way is shared by Indigenous people around the world, has been now validated by modern science, medical science, and psychological science, and physiological science so that it turns out in the words of one American physician, George Engel, in 1977, we are biopsychosocial creatures, which means our biology is inseparable for my psychological states and our social relationships and the culture that we live in, which is my whole point in my book. Now, America of all the world represents this individualistic aggressive, competitive, selfish ethic more than any other culture in the world. And its culture is permeating the world. So America leads the world in individualism, and in the belief that we're separate creatures. 70% of American adults are at least on one medication, and something like 30% are on at least two. And America leads the world in this pill popping to solve problems that originate in social dynamics and have been exacerbated, engineered as V says over the last 40 years.

LAURA FLANDERS: Pill popping and has to be said, pill making. There's an economics here. And I want to ask you a little bit about politics too. I mean, there are people being attracted to authoritarian regimes and strongman, leaders all around the world. It's not just here. And I don't know the degree to which it's also there fueled by disappointment and failed fantasies of what life would be. But I do think that here, that feeling of a dream we were promised, perhaps the life that our parents had and we are not able to have it, is translating into real sadness, grief. And I'd love you to talk about that too. You've both written, to go back to Israel again, about your kind of relationship to Israel and to Zionism as possibly a solution as a perhaps disappointment. Gabor.

DR. GABOR MATÉ: I used to believe in a dream of Zionism. I used to be a Zionist youth leader. I thought this was the antidote to Jewish suffering and to Jewish fear. But really what happened was that if you look at the history and the context of the Holocaust was then transmuted into a dream of liberation that imposed a nightmare on the Palestinians. So essentially, the fear and rage that Jews incurred in Europe was outsourced to the Palestinians. And we've been imposing it on them ever since. And I don't know about V's personal trajectory, but my own trajectory was, at some point, I had to realize that you cannot ensure the security of one people by making another

people completely unsafe and insecure. The problem is that the fear imposed by historical trauma makes it difficult for people to look at reality in the face.

V: I was never a Zionist, but I was definitely... I had a very hard time criticizing Israel because I obviously am Jewish and felt the complexity of that. I remember the first time I went to Israel and I was shocked at the kind of militarization of the Jewish people. I had never seen so many soldiers and Jewish soldiers. It was just a shocking idea to me. I'd always seen us as a reflective, intellectual, analytical literary. And I think grief is the big thing that gets skipped, loss. The sense of helplessness, the sense that you could not control your destiny and you had to witness the death and the dying and the annihilation of people you love. Where does all that go? Where does that helplessness go? For me, in my understanding, it either goes into aversion, which is you keep it away at all costs, and then it gets sick and it turns into something very poisonous or it goes to rage. It goes to rage. And it becomes aggressive and it becomes something to keep that grief away, to keep the grief of knowing the grief that I feel right now, witnessing what is happening to thousands of children every day and having no ability to intervene on their path. And knowing that my witness is not a rescue, knowing that my witness cannot save. Like where did the grief of the Jewish people go? Where did it go? And where does the grief of the world go? The grief of the disappointment of every American realizing there is no American Dream. If you want to understand America, look at Donald Trump. All of this attraction to that, to him has to do with, I think, rage. I think it has to do with violence that is beginning to find a way and an outlet because we haven't listened and heard and made people feel like they are a part of and welcome and in community,

LAURA FLANDERS: When you talk about the grief of the world, it's whether you're Israeli or American, we are all living on the grief of stolen land, of stolen hopes and dreams, of being the beneficiaries of others' loss. How do we grapple with that is the question. And you have taught and written and said, Dr. Maté, that trauma can be a teacher. In fact, there's a film on exactly that topic, *The Wisdom of Trauma* that's out there and people can see. Here's a bit of the trailer from that film.

DR. GABOR MATÉ: That was just a bit from the trailer, *The Wisdom of Trauma*. And coming to you, Dr. Maté, Gabor, how do we learn? How do we let our grief teach us?

DR. GABOR MATÉ: What trauma does is it disconnects us from ourselves. And that disconnection is protective. When you're helpless and small and weak and you have pain, suffering, distress, and there's no help, then it's protective on the part of the organism to dissociate, to disconnect. That same disconnection then creates all kinds of problems later on in life, whether in physical health, mental health, social relationships, personal relationships. And that all happened to me. I had to deal with my own depression. I had to deal with the travails and stresses of a marriage that was full of love, but full of mutual pain at the same time. And we

acted out that pain on each other and our children were affected by it because whatever stresses, traumas we haven't worked through, we inevitably and unwittingly pass on to our kids. So I had to look at the sufferings of my children. I had to look at my own addictive tendencies, my workaholicism, trying to get away from a sense of worthlessness imposed by my early trauma. And in working through all that, you learn a lot. You learn what matters. You learn what is true. You learn that these patterns that we act out, they're not representative of our real selves, but of our conditioned, traumatized self. And real liberation doesn't come in trying to escape from your pain and from your trauma, but in actual, embracing it and learning from it. And underneath it, you find out who you really are. And that's a lifelong trajectory.

LAURA FLANDERS: V, how do we look at what's so hard to look at and live with what's so hard to know?

V: My experience has been I am as caught and stuck and sick as the secrets I will not get myself to look at. And liberation only comes through looking at the truth. When I wrote "The Apology," which was writing my father's apology to me, it was a very impossible thing because I had to have empathy for my perpetrator. I had to climb into him, and listen to him, and feel him, and know him, and try to understand the roots of why he did what he did to me. And it was agonizing, but it was the greatest liberation of my life because what I came to realize is it had nothing to do with me. It had to do with my father and his projection. He didn't see me. He saw an idea of me through his own trauma and that was my greatest liberation. And every time I have faced, what I've told myself, "Oh, you will never deal with your brother or you'll never deal with this. It's too much. It's too much." Every time I have that 'too much', I know this is what I must face. And that's on a personal level. So we have to do that on a historical level. If you don't want to look at the history of what happened to the Indigenous people in this country, it is where you must look. If you are afraid to look at what happened to African Americans in the 400 years of slavery and Jim Crow, that is where you must look. And that does not mean it's going to be good and it's going to feel good all the time. It means you're going to go through a process of humanization. You're going to go through a process where you get to be deeply compassionate and deeply human, and deeply open, and deeply more than you've ever been before.

DR. GABOR MATÉ: V's personal story especially as outlined in her wonderful book "In the Body of the World." She's someone who came from deep trauma. And she found that security lay not on the side of fear and denial, but on the side of truth,

LAURA FLANDERS: She found security, but also an enormous amount of joy. V, V-Day is upon us. February 14th. Every year, you and your colleagues around the world rise up to stop violence against women and girls and grapple with all this tough stuff by dancing among other things. What the plan for Rising 2024?

V: I'm very moved that this year, the theme is Rising for Freedom because it's just feeling so apt everywhere. And I'm thrilled that there are already hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of events. Everybody is invited. What is the freedom you are seeking? What is the freedom your body is hungering for? Go and organize your Rising. Is it to free Palestine? Is it to free this country and free this government and free yourself from the government being involved in your body? Whatever it is, come and join us. If we are going to dispel this horrible plague of loneliness, it comes through collectivity.

LAURA FLANDERS: Gabor Maté is the author with Daniel Maté of "The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture" out now. V's book "Reckoning" is also just now in paperback. Thank you both so much for being with me.

V: Thank you, Laura. Thank you, Gabor.

DR. GABOR MATÉ: Thank you, both

LAURA FLANDERS: Feelings are powerful things and we should unleash that power more often. That was the teaching of the late great working class, femme activist and author, Amber Hollibaugh. I've interviewed Amber on this program, and she had a great story to tell about the night after the verdict came down in the case of the killing of Mayor Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk in San Francisco for their support of the gay community. The crowd was furious there in the Castro and several high placed politicians were trying to keep a lid on that anger. Amber, when she got the mic, said, "Let it out. We have a right to be angry and we should feel that anger more often and act on it." Amber talked about feelings, both angry and passionate, about our longings and what it means when we stuff away our feelings and what we long to bring into the world. If you want to see my full conversation with Amber Hollibaugh, who passed away last October at the age of 77, you can in our archives. And if you want to see the full conversation or hear it from today's show, we'll post more on YouTube and we'll send the entire thing out to the subscribers of our podcast. So if you want to subscribe, you can get all the information at our website. Til the next time, stay kind, stay curious, keep feeling. For the Laura Flanders Show. I'm Laura. Thanks for joining me.

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