

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

FROM PAIN TO POETRY: POET LAUREATE JOY HARJO'S "GIRL WARRIOR" GUIDE

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LAURA FLANDERS: We are in what today's guest calls a dark night of our national soul. Violence is targeting our women and girls and all those who identify as female. We're witnessing an epidemic of those who never make it home and are never heard from again. The Arctic ice is melting and record numbers of our young people are losing their dreams to the doom scroll of the internet. So how do we find our courage? If every generation has a story to tell, what's this one? In her newest book, our guest today reminds us that unusual things can happen at the intersection of time, form, place, and passion. And it is just possible that our story is unfolding exactly as it should. Those lines come from "Girl Warrior: On Coming of Age", the latest book from the celebrated writer, Joy Harjo. Written as a guide for young people, especially young Indigenous girls, there is a message in "Girl Warrior" for anyone looking for help finding their way. And that, it seems to me, is all of us right now, certainly me, which makes me very happy to welcome Joy Harjo to our program. Harjo is the author of countless books, including two American Book Award winners, "In Mad Love and War" and "Crazy Brave", and she was the executive editor of the groundbreaking, "When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry". Harjo's a saxophone player and performer, a visual artist, a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation, and served three terms as the 23rd Poet Laureate of the United States from 2019 to 2022. It's my incredible honor and pleasure to welcome Joy Harjo to "Laura Flanders & Friends". Welcome, friend.

JOY HARJO: Well, I'm glad to be back. It's been years.

LAURA FLANDERS: Way too long.

JOY HARJO: Many years.

LAURA FLANDERS: And thank you for this book. I took the liberty of lifting from your words to describe the nation, the moment that we're in as I'm feeling it. How would you describe it? If you were to do it afresh today, how would you describe this moment that we're in?

JOY HARJO: You know, we're here to grow spiritual muscle, and this is quite the time, we were given quite the opportunity to come in at this time. This is what I tell younger generations, too, that they came in with exactly what we needed to get through and to learn. I mean, we are here to

learn and the learning continues no matter how young or how old you are. You know, it's important that you keep open.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, this book, as you say, what started out as a guide for young people, but it feels as if it became much more.

JOY HARJO: This book came about because I travel about quite a bit speaking, especially in universities. That's my major touchdown places, and Native communities. And I speak to young people, and so I wrote this thinking about who they are, what they're going through during this time to maybe give assistance because of things that I've been through. I can't, nor do I want to tell anyone what to do, but when you get to my age, you know, you've got some kind of wisdom. You've had teachers, I've had many, many teachers and mentors along the way. And so I just wanted to pass this along. And as I wrote, I did start to realize that, well, this is a coming-of-age moment, you know, for democracy. It's a coming-of-age moment for humanity. Are we going to choose kindness over cruelty? In a way, this book has turned out to address this age that we're all in together, coming of age just isn't becoming an adult, but it's all of the kinds of becomings as we move toward self knowledge, which is also community knowledge.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, you write in the book in variety of ways how challenging transformation can be, sometimes physically painful, often, spiritually so. Our young people, well, our people are seeing, all of us are seeing tremendous rates of despair. Suicide rates have gone up something like 36% in two decades, especially among young people and kids of color, Indigenous kids, most of all. How did you find those young people and how did you connect with them?

JOY HARJO: Well, one of the stories, I think it's the third one in called "Mystery", was in the 80s I was called up to the Wind River Reservation because the suicide was epidemic and so much that it even was in the national news. And Natives rarely get into the national news. And so the community people called me in because they know the power of language and they knew that poetry could be helpful to the young people. And so that story is about going up there and engaging with the young people and thinking about, too, what they were going through. And it's interesting, I love what happens when you're in the middle of creation, whatever it is, and things come and I always say, "Thank you. Where did that come from?" I started thinking about how adolescence or even a period like we're going through now in this country and the whole Earth is, you know, you're a caterpillar in your knowledge base, sort of, in your awareness, and you're eating and taking in information and stories. And then the next thing you know, you're wrapped up in them and it all starts to mesh and deteriorate. And there's chaos. Like right now, there's chaos. You don't know from one moment to the next what kind of insanity is going to erupt from the house where there is supposed to be a leader in residence. So that's that chaotic soup. But then in the stories, you know, what emerges from that is the butterfly. I equate in that story going

from being a child to an adult is like that, that teenagehood, the coming-of-age period is like that, but it's like that right now within, you know, in our collective community.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, I want to believe that we're shedding all those little legs and growing wings and that it's just painful. So, I can relate to the discomfort perhaps. And I guess that brings me to your question about how you found your story. I think if I remember from your memoirs, you wrote about, I think you put it as escaping to the warmth of Santa Fe to a Native school, not how people normally talk about those Native boarding schools. But for you, yours had a focus on arts, and you were always an artist, a visual artist and a music maker. Describe that for us, if you would, that moment in your life, that period for you.

JOY HARJO: Yes. I mean, the residential or Indian schools could be pretty brutal, you know, with large graveyards attached to them. And there was even some of that. I went to the Institute of American Indian Arts when it was a Bureau of Indian Affairs School, and they were doing something then that had never been done before, which is arts. They brought in some of the finest Native and non-Native artists, and you had to, as a student, it went from eighth grade to 12th and two years postgraduate. You had to apply. I applied with drawings, and I got in and it saved my life, because, I mean, can you imagine being, it's sort of like the Fame school in New York, you know, where suddenly you're around your own kind, you know, you're the weirdo, but so is everybody else, you know, and you guys have, you know, everyone has a similar story, and we came from Native communities all over the country, as far as from Florida to Alaska to make art with people who were making art. That became my home, and that really saved my life. Yet, we weren't allowed to speak Native languages. There were still residue, you know, from the previous Indian school, you know, previous Indian school incarnations, but this one was, you know, this one was, I guess, a kind of bridge.

LAURA FLANDERS: You talk a lot in the book about the challenge of sort of surfing, bad verb, but the internet. And it does seem to me that a lot of people go to the internet for what you found at that school, for community, for people like them, for their own folks. How do you weigh the sort of advantages and disadvantages of everybody in their palm of their hand, or so many people being able to connect to the world?

JOY HARJO: I think that a lot of the young, this is what I've noticed going on the internet, because I go on there too, is that the people aren't often who they say they are, or they remake their image with effects or so on to be somebody who they think they should be. I think that's the main difference. At Indian school, we were just who we were. We weren't dealing with filters, we weren't dealing with trying to fit in with people we didn't even know, you know, in that community.

LAURA FLANDERS: I guess one of the things I have in my mind is how to balance our own story with our ancestor's story, with what we bring into this moment, which can feel heavy, but also helpful, as you say.

JOY HARJO: Or impossible. Impossible. Because you think about it, is there's contradictions. Every one of us is a contradiction. I finally had to realize through the years is you can't make peace with everything. That there is no... There are people in our families we can't talk to because they're not going to listen and are we going to listen to them because they're supporting somebody who, you know, is going down the street and taking the grandfather of friends who has never lived in another country and dragging them off into, you know, dragging them off and sending them to a country they've never been to?

LAURA FLANDERS: Never to come home and never to be heard from again.

JOY HARJO: Yeah. Yeah. So I'm not sure because I am about, I think, everybody has a story and all this, you know, the whole part one is about a dream, you know, where all the stories exist, but it doesn't mean that they're... the stories aren't the same. We need a diversity of stories. I mean, there would be no story at all without challenge. There would be no story without contradictions. The bone and the muscle of being human is stories. That's what we do. I remember going through years ago thinking about what use are human beings to the ecosystem, and I really couldn't find a reason that we were here, except that we make stories and all that. And that it's important we express gratitude and that we're helpful to the other beings, to each other and the other beings who live here.

LAURA FLANDERS: So how are we doing on that front?

JOY HARJO: I think most people really want the same things. They might go about it in a different way, and I don't know how you deal with that with people who demand. And we see a lot of that here with certain religions, especially in the State of Oklahoma, who demand that everyone think like them, and they will enact laws to force that. And I don't know what you do with that, really. I mean, we can stand up, and then there's a point to where you start feeding it because you're giving them all the energy and yet you need to acknowledge it, but continue to make a story weave that includes the children and includes, you know, is about making a place so that everyone has fresh water, so that, you know, everyone has enough food to eat, you know, you're not stealing from the poor to give the money to people who already have too much money. In the Muscogee tradition, if somebody accumulating and lives to accumulate, they're seen as being mentally ill.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, maybe that is the illness we are trying to shake off right this minute.

JOY HARJO: Yes. It seems built into the system. And maybe this is why we're going through this is to all of us to understand, to see it within ourselves, you know, and to change.

LAURA FLANDERS:] Music seems like it's playing a healing role with you, too.

JOY HARJO: Yes. My mother was a songwriter, a singer. We had some of the best country swing band musicians at our house jamming out. Here we go.

LAURA FLANDERS: You didn't always play the sax.

JOY HARJO: I always kind of wanted to, but I didn't pick up a saxophone till I was almost 40. I have a new album coming out from Folkways. They said I'm not supposed to say the name yet, but it'll be out from Folkways in March. And it was produced with Esperanza Spalding.

LAURA FLANDERS: I can't wait for that. You have another book of poems coming out too. Is there anything you want to read from those?

JOY HARJO: Yes. I'll read a poem called "Overwhelm," again, addressing these times. And I wound up in a little hotel room in Gunnison. That's right. Gunnison, Colorado. And I remember noting on the elevator, there was a guy, he was really big with a case of beer, and I thought, "That's trouble." Well, he wound up in the hotel room next to mine. So here's the poem, "Overwhelm". "There was a door between the men arguing and me. In the small-town hotel when I returned late to my room. Then they went quiet, which can be more dangerous. I became stealthy in my mind. Bad spirits find doorways in stupor. I used to seek lift from the overwhelm in drink. I'd ride over the meadow of doubt flowers, to the field of miracles where anything was possible in the blur. I never drank alone. It was the circle that drew me, from the haunting to the waters. We remembered songs we thought we had forgotten. And we were beautiful beyond belief. The profane danced wildly with the sublime. How ridiculous now to think we were happy in the quick shelter we sought from truth. I now understand how a whole country can drink from the waters of illusion and go down. And how easy fury can turn to gunshots, then give way to torpor. I needed a respite from the story, then as in now. I counted the steps from midnight to home, to your arms. The dark skies of eternity were lit with small fires. They showed me the way."

LAURA FLANDERS: That question of how you find your courage or find your way obviously is a big part of your multi-page message to the people reading this book. But if you were to speak to our audience today, and maybe specifically to fellow members of the Muscogee Nation, what's your suggestion for how you find your courage?

JOY HARJO: I find relatives and people who inspire me, and I listen to them. I may not have their words. I have their presences. Some of them are relatives, some of them are plants, some of them are poets, some of them are artists. It's important to feed your spirit by... It's important to feed your spirit in that way to keep going.

LAURA FLANDERS: Who's fed yours?

JOY HARJO: Where do I start? I think about June Jordan's poems, of course, have been coming up quite a bit. I was very lucky to come of age as a poet when I did. Audre Lorde was a mentor, Adrienne Rich, Ishmael Reed. I've had so many mentors. I've had an ongoing correspondence with my first poetry teacher at the University of New Mexico, David Johnson. And then the children, there's a group of, I watch these little girls that have just turned about two and they're incredible. You know, I'm thinking it's going to be okay when I see these little kids, because of what they're bringing in, they're really intelligent. There's a wisdom about them. And they're watching. It's like they're already teenagers, and they're only two years old. And I think, "Okay." And they inspire me. Yeah.

LAURA FLANDERS: I love that you talk about curiosity, and you end the book talking about curiosity. And we end every episode by saying, you know, stay kind, stay curious. You say give chase, be curious. You want to speak about that? I loved that idea.

JOY HARJO: Yes. You know, my husband turned me onto that, particularly curious because, you know, I can get into, like all of us can get into corners of things, but he said, if you're curious, he reminded me, that, you know, just be curious. And so when I've gone into situations that, before, I would have a tendency to react to, I kind of stop and think, "Okay, what's behind this? What's around it?" Walk around it in my mind and then take myself totally out of it and then come back in. It's sort of like having a drone, you know, a drone that can go through time. You know, not only do you go around the situation with, you know, drone like, but you can go through time with it, and somehow getting that perspective, then you're not so stuck, you know. Perception can come with that, with that curiosity.

LAURA FLANDERS: So how much effort do you think we have to put into understanding, as you put it, the occupant of that house that is supposed to house a leader and some of his followers?

JOY HARJO: Well, we have to know what's going on, for real, but we have to keep in mind a vision. And I think democracy was a kind of collective vision that came out of the Haudenosaunee, but also the Muscogee Nation has been called one of the oldest democracies on the planet. And so if you keep in mind a vision, and then if there's a collective vision, that helps also because a collective vision towards unity or harmony in the end is going to work more, will

work more than something that's breaking it apart in whatever system it is. Our Earth systems work towards harmony and sometimes destruction can be working towards harmony, not us destroying, but there are some things in our system that are no longer useful.

LAURA FLANDERS: You're a time traveler. If you were to look to the future, I don't know, 25, 50, a hundred years, what do you think is the story that future will tell of us now?

JOY HARJO: That's a hard one. But looking at these children and looking at what's possible after seeing the intensity and the ferocity with which this breaking apart has seemed to have suddenly come about is that it will be resolved in a way. It will be resolved in a way that we thought we couldn't quite imagine at this point. I don't like to use the word renaissance because that's so, but a spiritual, that's what is a spiritual renaissance.

JOY HARJO: Listen now as Earth sheds her skin. Listen as the generations move one against the other. We are bringing in a new story. We will be accompanied by ancient and new songs, and we will celebrate together.

LAURA FLANDERS: Joy Harjo, thanks so much for being here with us on "Laura Flanders & Friends". It's been a real delight.

JOY HARJO: Thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS: The scandals keep on coming, and some have never gone away. Long before there was Jeffrey Epstein and his rape ring, there was the horror of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls. That crisis spans decades, arguably centuries, and involves thousands of cases in the U.S. and Canada. As the Epstein story finally generates elite media attention and some one can only hope more federal prosecution, Indigenous women and girls and women-identified people continue to turn up dead or simply to not turn up at all. And no one seems to care except for Native activists, some of whom got themselves elected to Congress not long ago and passed a Not Invisible Act that created a commission that heard thousands of hours of testimony and produced a report that was posted on the government website in November of 2023. As soon as Donald Trump was elected for the second time and inaugurated, that commission report disappeared, along with most of the funding for prosecution and investigation and healing in the Indigenous community. So as we call for the release of the Epstein files, let's call to make the Not Invisible Commission report visible once again, because it's not just about blaming and shaming the powerful right now, it's about the culture shift that we need in this country. And that requires turning our conscience to the colonial cruelty at the heart of so much of it, and cherishing our Indigenous women and girls. You can find my full uncut conversation with Joy Harjo about her book "Girl Warrior" through subscribing to our free podcast. All the

information's at our website. You might want to check out my Substack, too. In the meantime, stay kind, stay curious. For "Laura Flanders & Friends", I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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