

Leaning into Hope for Ourselves and Society

Is there more to life than money? Have we built ourselves provisional personalities? What does it mean to be a whole person in society and what are the obligations we face? Elaine Herdman Barker, Co-founder of Global Leadership Associates, speaks with Valerie Brown, Co-Director of Georgetown's Institute for Transformational Leadership, to address these questions. Together, they discuss her book, *Hope Leans Forward*, and how we might build upon our innate sense of belonging and connection, think for future generations, and "leverage the strength of BIPOC people".



Today's guest, Valerie Brown, is co-director of Georgetown's Institute for Transformational Leadership. She's a leadership coach, a Quaker and a Buddhist Dharma teacher. She's also an award-winning author. Her latest book is *Hope Leans Forward...* This draws on Quaker wisdom, mindfulness, and real-life BIPOC experiences of transformation. People outside America might not be as familiar with the term BIPOC... It stands for Black Indigenous People of Colour. Valerie's identity as a Black woman here is salient because we'll be discussing how communities bring their authentic selves to work... And I'd like to say how grateful I am to Aman Gohal and Bill Pullen for putting us in touch. You may like to hear, Valerie, the reason why Aman put us together... She said it was because of your depth of care for people, communities and our environment. I thought they were wonderful words to really treasure. So welcome, Valerie...

Thank you so much for that beautiful introduction, Elaine. And both Aman and Bill are treasures! They've been very trusted and wonderful colleagues at Georgetown.

That's lovely to hear! Now, if I understand your work, it's about taking an inward path... An inward path towards self-awareness to become – in your words – more robust, authentic versions of ourselves. Your own path has taken you from being an attorney to your current life. So let's start with your journey... In particular, your path to “waking up” as I've heard you refer to it. So: what's led you to where you are now?

Thank you for that really wonderful question, Elaine. Like many things, it begins with a story. Like lots of people, I grew up with a lot of poverty and a lot of violence. When I was 18, I felt I could no longer stay in the household in which I was living... Because of the violence, because of the poverty, because of all the dysfunction. So I made a decision to leave. I distinctly remember the day I packed a few things, put them in the back of my boyfriend's vehicle... And we drove away from the house. I never came back. I got a job at Burger King and I went to school at night.

So I was very much on the run – running from this violence, running from this poverty. But I made my way. First, I won an academic scholarship to graduate school... Then another to law school, then onto the big and important job as a lobbyist and a lawyer. The only problem was that the job was killing part of my spirit; my soul. I felt compelled, as I did that day I left the house, to do something else – to change something. So I set out to try to find that, asking myself, 'Is this why I was born? To make money? To be a lawyer? To get things accomplished for other people? Is there not more to my life?' And these very soul-searching questions – obviously – take people on a winding path.

Thank you, Valerie. Your story and words are particularly striking to me... The image of being on the run, not just once, running away and towards something. You spoke about the vanishing of the self in different environments. I wonder if you could describe a little about the more recent environment you left. What was it about law and lobbying that galvanized you to be active?

The galvanization really started when I went to Howard University School of Law. I was lucky enough to attend at the time of the great civil-rights leaders in the United States. There, the students had a huge honour! A number of these great leaders came to talk about what it means to give back...

Give back?

Yes, and what it means to be a whole person in society. What are our (or is it what are the) obligations as educated, thinking people? And particularly as people of colour. I remember, in particular, Justice Thurgood Marshall spoke to us. Marshall had been one of the chief advocates for the seminal case *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. That was the case that brought desegregation in the public schools of the US. Hugely important! And as a law student, we studied this case; we knew it cold – and we revered Justice Marshall. He was almost like our grandfather. And one of the galvanizing questions Marshall asked us was: what's the quality of your intention?

Not, “What is your intention?”

Exactly, right. Not “What is your intention?” but what’s the quality behind it? Pointing to something much deeper than what it is you’re here to do, but what is, maybe, our legacy? How do we support others? How do we live and lead from within? And what does that mean? So I’d say the galvanization process started with these civil-rights luminaries. They planted the seed of looking beyond... Beyond my title, income and material nature to something deeper and more profound.

And was that, Valerie, an easy turn for you to make? Because the inward turn, moving more and more beneath the problem... That’s quite something! People seem troubled by questions of principle of action or quality of intention.

That’s a great question, Elaine. For me, it was terrifying. I’d spent my life building ‘a provisional personality’. That’s what the Jungian analyst James Hollis calls it. But my whole personality was based on being a lawyer and a lobbyist; being a person with an answer. So I get how those faced with losing something like that could feel discomfort. But then there’s another side to it.

There’s something bigger than the discomfort and fear. And that’s living a life that’s authentic and examined and real. If I go back to when I was 18, I didn’t want to leave the house. I didn’t want to work at Burger King! But there was something bigger than the fear... And that was knowing that – if I stayed – I would be living the life that I currently had. I actually thought of it as a death – so that was bigger. And I think asking oneself what’s bigger than the fear is a really important turn. But I don’t want to minimize that. I mean, I had a pension and health care and a mortgage to pay and all these things. So it’s quite real.

You mention in your book that you were holding onto the financial securities of life... Maybe the status, the self-definition of being a success had been a priority. And it sounds like you were changing how you dealt with the realities of the world?

Yes. On one level, it was difficult to let go of the structure that surrounded that to become something else. So it was quite a gradual process of re-examination, unlearning and letting go. Obviously this isn't something a person can do alone. And I really want to thank many people who helped me in that process. They helped me look at the questions of life purpose, life direction, and life meaning.

People like whom?

People like Thich Nhat Hanh. I started studying with him very early on in this process; around 1994. For many years, as a Buddhist, I was engaged in asking questions about how to be a good citizen... How to live my life with a sense of my purpose and value. And to the earlier point, what are my intentions? And not just the material aspect of my life. I also started to study with a Quaker by the name of Parker Palmer. He also has written books about the inner life of leaders. These two individuals, and their communities, were a tremendous influence in my life.

Thank you, Valerie. I'm hearing that taking an inward turn is not a turn of isolation, is it?

It's a turn of being in greater and different communities and recognising their importance? Whether they're spiritual, academic or whatever... We don't do it alone.

We can't! And there's a lot of talk about the movement to be more self-authoring. Little did I know! I certainly didn't have any of that language when I left the house at 18. It simply wasn't part of my vocabulary! But if I look back on it now, that was a path to become

more self-authored... to determine the right path for me. And that's a question we need to continue asking ourselves. It's part of the beingness of being a human being, and the development of a growth mindset.

And I'd love to just stay with that comment about self-authoring. Because that can be a move that is potentially an overlean to the "I" that loses the "we"... A move that loses the individuation, then loses the social care. But I didn't get any sense of that. In your book you also speak about how the work of the external world depends on how we're working internally. So there's always an interconnection. Could say a little more about that?

Yes! This movement toward a life that's more self-authoring begins with individual examination. For me, that necessarily involves the complexity of my own identity. I can't do this alone. So to understand – as I become more of who I'm meant to be – there's a

broader reach to that. So it was through my contact with various communities that I began to see and develop this kind of social awareness... A social awareness of not just how I am and what I'm doing in the world, but the impact on others.

I'm just thinking on what you're saying about complexity and how it develops. I often see us as chameleons. Our eyes work independently looking inside and out. As we look deeper in both directions, we enhance our social awareness. You extend this, in your book, by talking about the Seventh Generation Principle... How decisions we make today need to be sustainable for the next seven generations. And I find that a powerful invitation for staying alert to our actions today. It is powerful isn't it?

Yes, absolutely. So Thich Nhat Hanh has referred to a term he coined – 'interbeing'... This means that what I do has an impact on you, and what you do has an impact on me. I might plant a tree today, say, not just for the fruit it will bear for me, but also for my children and their children. And again, this goes back to a sense of responsibility...

I'm responsible for creating my life... Not in a narcissistic way. Rather, to say I have an obligation for myself because we're interconnected and can't be separated. We're deeply interconnected. The important thing is that, because of this interconnection, there's an obligation. How do I want to live? Knowing that what I do is going to impact not only another person but this very planet. And we're living with the consequence of that today with climate change. All this is very real.

It's also a reality that we don't want to look at the big troublesome aspects of our lives such as our impact on the planet, our tendency as human beings to separate from each other and live in a racially polarized world. And I've thought, Valerie, about the place of trust in all of this. How can we be genuine? How can we act openly if there is an increasing lack of trust in society? The British Social Attitude Survey is a good example of there being a lack of trust. It says, amongst other things, 45 % of people in the UK would almost never trust any type of government to put the national interest before their party. A [Gallup](#)², 2024 update, states that Americans' confidence, generally in US institutions, remains historically low at 28%.¹ These are only two surveys admittedly. But, in that context, where trust seems to be going down in our society, how do we find the wherewithal to be active? To think of future generations; be positive and authentic?

I think that's such a beautiful question. I would point to several things. First, that many systems and social structures that supported people have disintegrated. And I think that's been catalysed by the use of cell phones and virtual presence and so on.

However, there's something even stronger than the polarization you describe! And I don't want to minimize that... But stronger than the polarization

is the imperative, the biological imperative for connection. As human beings, we can't survive without it. We're actually hardwired for this sense of belonging and connection... To be seen, to feel safe, and to feel satisfactory human bonding. And I don't think we'll ever outgrow that. And how do we achieve that? How do we make ourselves into a bridge between that disconnect to the connection?

Excellent question...

One of the ways we do it is through reaching out to other people, even people with whom we feel a sense of polarization. That takes courage. But yes: it's making that connection with other people. Being able to listen to another person, not for rebuttal, but for understanding... Because often when people are in conversation,

they're listening only to get a point across. And that's not a bridge, it's a dead-end street. But sharing stories and being a little vulnerable builds connections and addresses polarization. Many people have said that vulnerability is one of the most beautiful aspects of what it means to be a human being.

I love that, thank you. And you gave a beautiful example from your own life of that listening... As an attorney and lobbyist, you'd actually listen to different people's perspectives. You also mentioned how vulnerability and anxiety can open the chance for change. I'd love to hear more about that because it's often one of the main reasons we don't change. We get a little bit like an octopus. We're anxious. So our tentacles wrap around the problem holding it tighter and tighter in the hope that it'll go away.

Anxiety, loneliness, frustration, disappointment... We could keep going! But many people live with anxiety! And it may be a coping mechanism, or actually justified based on one's own living circumstances. But we live in an anxious society, so I want to

acknowledge that this is real. Climate change, social and racial injustice... Many people – me included – hold a great weight of anxiety. There's a lot to be anxious about! But it doesn't stop there. Many people also talk about mindfulness.

Mindfulness?

Right. It's become quite vogue now to say, "I'm studying mindfulness". But what does that really mean? My understanding of the purpose of practicing mindful awareness is to ease suffering... Anxiety and injustice – these are forms of suffering.

And so rather than turn our back to it, say something's black when it's white deny or placate or whatever the coping mechanism is. As a student of mindfulness, I would do something that's kind of counterintuitive. Move toward whatever that is. So students of mindfulness wouldn't turn away and say something's black when it's white, for example. They wouldn't deny or placate – or whatever the coping mechanism is. Rather, they'd do something counterintuitive. They'd move toward whatever that is. With my own sense of anxiety, the practice is to stop... Look at it, and notice: what's coming up? What's happening in my body? This is a lot of information... Is my heart racing? Are my hands clammy? Am I short of breath?

Thank you, that's a lovely description of working with anxiety. You mentioned social stresses... Could we draw in here the stresses that the BIPOC community bears? And how you support them in that?

This is a really important question. And let me say that I have a book that came out in February of 2024... I wrote it with two friends; both Dharma teachers: Kaira Jewel Lingo and Marisela B. Gomez, MD.

And what's that book called, Valerie?

Healing Our Way Home: Black Buddhist Teachings on Ancestors, Joy, and Liberation. In it, we talk about the condition of many Black, Indigenous and people of colour... Many of us live with many aspects of discrimination. Whether it's discriminatory gaslighting, structural and systemic racism, stereotyping, colourblind race ideology... What many people engage in – particularly those in the workplace – is a lot of code switching. They're one way in the work environment – then in another mode when not at work. And that can lead to a sense of inauthenticity. We know that imposter syndrome is rampant in the workplace, for example. A huge percentage, maybe 70% or 80% of people generally feel like they're an imposter at work.

They feel inadequate, and like a fraud. They worry they're going to be found out. And we know that one antidote to imposter syndrome is deeper self-awareness... To be aware of one's own

gifts and strengths, as well as those things we need to work on. But there's also a huge health implication for people in the BIPOC community. These forms of discrimination actually have a physiological stress on the body... On the cardiovascular, respiratory and digestive systems. Researchers, particularly Dr. Arlene Geronimus, who wrote the book, *Weathering*, call this process 'weathering of the body'.

And weathering means wear and tear on the organs of the body due to having to repeatedly having to adapt to long term discrimination. And researchers quantify this with what is known as allostatic load. This is, again, the load of having the chronic stress on the body. And research shows that even the anticipation of discrimination is harmful. It sets a cascade of problems in motion... Increased heart rate, release of cortisol and adrenaline in the blood. It has a chronic effect on the body.

And your book touches on this as well, doesn't it Valerie? How do you help people to bear and heal this load?

Yes. I work with many BIPOC people... In the book – Healing Our Way Home – we talk about what do we need to do to heal from the longterm effects of this... Physiological, emotional, spiritual, and mental. But there are many things we can do. We need a trusted friend and community. This I've described before; it's very, very

important. We can't do this alone. So it's important to find people that can support us. We need to engage in self-care practices. These include knowing when to shut down social media and take time to rest. That may sound obvious, but actually building it into our schedules and doing it is vital.

And what, Valerie, could the architecture of the system in organizations do to ease stress? I mean... When you look back to your time as an attorney, what would have been an assist? A constructive architecture to be within as a black woman and attorney?

There are many things I think organizations can do to leverage the strength of BIPOC people. We need developmental feedback, we need mentoring. We need structures that actually create a mentoring system that support people. We need to address the inadequacy in the pay structure. These are concrete things that I think can be done. I work with many Black lawyers in particular, and many BIPOC lawyers. Maybe the number one concern with people in the corporate world is mentoring... Knowing to whom to go to get help along the way. Many people simply don't have that or don't have it in a robust enough form.

The other thing is developmental feedback. Often, you might find a non-BIPOC supervisor giving feedback to a BIPOC employee. Regrettably, the feedback is often vague and kind of positive. And often that's because the non-BIPOC person doesn't want to appear discriminatory in any way. So they only give vague positive feedback – it's not developmental in nature. That doesn't really help the person get to the next level in their career. They need constructive developmental feedback.

This is so important for the younger generation coming through now. [Claire D'Abreu-Hayling](#) spoke about wanting things to be better for her girls. And my understanding is that the younger generation expects to bring their whole selves to work... I just wonder what your thoughts are on what they're going to bring forward into organisational life? And the changes they will be driving in markets and society?

This is it. I think people who are entering the workplace today are questioning many things. Notions of gender expression are up for grabs. How to address polarization, how to address climate crisis. Having lived through COVID and its aftermath, many of us have questions about how we live. It's had a huge impact on resetting people's values.

What's meaningful? What's important? It's insufficient, I think, to expect people to work without a sense of bringing their whole self to work. And many employers now know that! They're incentivising people to be comfortable bringing their whole self to work.



You know, Valerie, I could stay in this discussion for hours, about I realize we're coming to the end of our time. But there're two things I want discuss. One is a quote in your book by Gregory Orr. He asked, "Has the moon been up there all these nights, and I've never noticed?" I really love that. Could you speak to that?

Yes, that's a beautiful quotation. I found it years after a watershed moment, meaning my life was reset. When I was in that very high-pressure job as a lobbyist and lawyer, I took myself on a very short vacation. I went to one of my favourite places – New Mexico – and climbed to the top of a big hill. I took off my backpack and sat with my back against a log, looking up at the sky. And for the first time, I actually saw the clouds.

Well, Elaine, I know people might say, "Well, clouds are always up there!" But for me, I was so busy... I was so on the run. I was all about becoming somebody, being the big-shot. I totally didn't have time to look up. I was alienated from the natural world – and from myself. And that set me on a path of understanding who am I... What is my life meant to be for? And when I found that beautiful quote – thank you Gregory Orr for that – I could so resonate with it. And I think many people are also in the grind culture. They're so busy becoming somebody, they haven't time to even look up. So I'm not proud of that time, but it was definitely instructive.

That's incredibly moving, Valerie. Thank you for sharing that. And finally, would you please leave us with three active questions each of us could ask ourselves?

There are three questions that I ask myself all the time. One is: What is it that only I can do? And I mean that not in a narcissistic way...But what is my unique voice that I want to bring forward today – this day? And I prioritize around that.

Another vital question is: How do I want to live the life I've been given under the circumstances that exist now? And I think this is really important, regardless of our circumstance. It helps to ask how

you want to live this day. Also, and Aman can speak to this, what are my protective patterns? What are the shadows? What defence mechanisms that were useful in the past may not be useful now? What can I relearn or retire? For me, that's been my own vulnerability and regaining a sense of my openheartedness and tenderness. It was lost for so many years as a lawyer and lobbyist, or just not accessible. And then finally, who am I becoming?

Wonderful. Thank you so much, Valerie, for sharing so generously today. I found it incredibly nourishing. And I'll finish by taking a moment to say this... I found your book, *Hope Leans Forward*, to be touching, personal, and uplifting... So much more so than the word "transformational, which is of course associated with your book, can ever convey. Hope shines through your writing from your periods of personal loss. And I love how you speak about humanity's capacity for bravery and compassion. So thank you for that, too.

Elaine, You're so welcome. It's been such a delight.

Valerie's latest book, *Healing Our Way Home: Black Buddhist Teachings on Ancestors, Joy, and Liberation* by Valerie Brown, Marisela B. Gomez, MD and Kaira Jewel Lingo is now available to purchase [here](#). For details on all Valerie's other books, please [click here](#).

Further information on the Plum Village, France and Thich Nhat Hanh can be found [here](#) and please [click here](#) to find out more about the work of Parker J. Palmer.

References

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