

Transcription Episode 5 -Valarie Amos

00:00:02:22 - 00:00:46:16

Reeta

I'm Reeta Roy, and this is Transcending Boundaries Podcasts that features deep conversations with exceptional leaders. Each episode dives into the lives of women and men who have changed their communities, their countries, and the world for the better. Join me to discover the relationships, experiences and insights that have shaped their remarkable journeys. I'm very honoured to host an extraordinary leader whose career has been marked by a commitment to public service and dedication to humanitarian efforts, and a passion for education.

00:00:46:18 - 00:01:19:04

Reeta

From her early years in Guyana and moving to the UK as a child and then making significant strides in government, diplomacy and global humanitarian work, she has consistently broken barriers and championed equality. She's the first black woman to be a member of the House of Lords in the UK. She's the first black woman to be a member of the British cabinet.

00:01:19:06 - 00:01:53:22

Reeta

She is the first black woman to head an Oxford college. She has led numerous humanitarian efforts, including the response to the massive flooding in Pakistan in 2010 and the response to the Somalia famine of 2010 to 2012. She's led the reform and coordination of humanitarian responses to improve the speed and delivery of aid, as well as to secure aid for millions of those affected by crisis in Syria, Yemen, the Philippines.

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Reeta

She was involved in the international response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. She advocated for increased support to all of the affected countries. She emphasised the importance of a coordinated global response. She has received numerous honours, numerous recognitions, fellowships and honorary degrees. Her legacy is one of perseverance and excellence, and she does it with style. She was listed as one of the 50 best dressed over 50 by The Guardian in 2013.

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Reeta

I am thrilled to host a true champion of global humanitarian efforts and an exceptional leader. The Right Honourable Baroness Valerie Amos, the Master of University College, Oxford. Welcome to Transcending Boundaries. Valerie, thank you for joining this podcast, welcome.

00:02:57:21 - 00:03:00:14

Valerie

thank you.

00:03:00:17 - 00:03:19:06

Reeta

I'm thrilled to have you. We're going to just enjoy this conversation. And I wanted to start by asking you about your childhood and growing up in Guyana, with your brother and sister, with your parents, who were both teachers talk about that time in life before you came to the UK.

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Valerie

Well, you know, every time I look back, it feels like such a magical time. I think that there is something when you're an adult, when you look back on your childhood and it feels as if it were a very special, a very protected time. And of course, there were lots of challenges and difficulties, in it. But, the things that I really remember, are all that sense of being brought up by a community, so a wider family, a wider community that care about you.

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Valerie

Everybody knew who we were. I mean, there was no way that you could get away with doing anything naughty anywhere, because somebody would tell you off and then report

you to your parents. But in a very kind of loving, holding, way. I grew up in a tiny island in the mouth of the Essequibo River in Guyana.

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Valerie

So I'm very much a country girl. My friends laugh about that now because I seem so urban. But, you know, spending my, summers, all day running around, with friends, no shoes on, no nothing, and just enjoying nature. But it was also a childhood which had a lot of, discipline in it with parents who were both, teachers.

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Valerie

We were expected, to do well. We studied hard. At one stage, my mother was my teacher, which meant that I couldn't get away with anything. Nothing at all. But, Guyana and Guyanese, children, the young people really wanted to do well, we kind of had a competitive streak, around, education. We wanted to be the top of the class, and, that was me.

00:05:06:27 - 00:05:12:22

Valerie

But I was also pretty quiet. Again, nobody who knows me now believes that. But.

00:05:13:21 - 00:05:19:02

Valerie

I'm a great watcher, and listener, and that goes all the way back to my childhood.

00:05:19:03 - 00:05:44:21

Reeta

Amazing. Now, your parents immigrated, and obviously the whole family came to the UK, and it must have been a whole new world, a whole different adventure. And how did you assimilate? Because you launched yourself right to school and became deputy head girl, as you said, your competitive streak wanting to do well. But you must have been, also a child experiencing a lot of new sensations, new surroundings.

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Reeta

How did that form you?

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Valerie

Well, of course, it's really odd, when you move from one place to another, it's exciting. And for us, because my father had moved two years before. And so there was all the excitement of reconnecting with him that I remember, I remember it in sort of light and shade. So Guyana, very bright, wonderful colours, amazing sunshine.

00:06:13:19 - 00:06:14:28

Valerie

It also rains every day.

00:06:14:29 - 00:06:15:03

Reeta

Yes.

00:06:15:04 - 00:06:36:21

Valerie

So, Britain didn't feel so different in that respect apart from the heat. Britain at that time felt very great. You know, as we were driving from the airport, to the house where, we were going to, live, I just looking out of the car window and thinking, you know, where's the sun?

00:06:36:21 - 00:07:02:12

Valerie

And the people were wearing draped clothes. It just felt very, very different. But there's also the excitement of being in a new place. And, I remember we had very broad Guyanese

accents. My sister, myself, my brother was still, very, young. And we lost them so quickly because as a child, you don't want to stand out and you don't want to be different.

00:07:02:14 - 00:07:35:29

Valerie

But we were the first, black family in the neighbourhood. The neighbourhood where we settled. So we stuck out, stuck out like a sore thumb. And, you know, on the whole, people were very warm and welcoming, but not everybody. And, and my parents were so important in terms of just helping us to adjust, helping us to understand where we had come from, understanding the importance, of our history, our culture, our relationship to Britain.

00:07:36:05 - 00:07:56:12

Valerie

Why we, were there, I mean, that helped a tremendous amount. And of course, we had wider family and friends, in London. We were just into, Kent. So we would go and see them at weekends. They would come and see us. So they really recreated that sense of family and community forecasts sound.

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Reeta

Sounded like they also grounded you on who you were.

00:07:58:24 - 00:08:04:14

Valerie

Oh, very, very, very much. And that has stayed with me throughout my life.

00:08:04:16 - 00:08:21:00

Reeta

When did this notion of public service or politics or global affairs enter your worldview. Was that something in school or something you talked about at home? How did you come to that idea of a career in international affairs?

00:08:21:02 - 00:08:47:18

Valerie

It's really difficult, I think, to put a finger on it. I don't think there was a particular moment or time. I think that my life evolved and I come from a family where everyone, pretty much everyone, was passionate about politics, about power, about the world, you know, it was a time when many countries on the African continent were becoming independent.

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Valerie

And, and we talked about these things at home all the time. And as, children, we were listening. We weren't necessarily a part of the conversation. I mean, this was a time when, children were seen, but not heard. But it was very much there. I was curious. I read, a lot, and I just had this strong sense, which I think came from, my parents and my wider family about the world not being fair, about the world not being just.

00:09:21:21 - 00:09:34:24

Valerie

And I wanted it to be fairer. I wanted it to be a more just. And I do remember one thing. I mean, when I was about 16, I just had this very strong feeling. But if I ran the world, it would be so much better.

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Reeta

Oh, of course, no doubt it would be.

00:09:37:29 - 00:10:07:29

Valerie

So, as an adult, when I was engaged and continued to be engaged on global issues, international affairs, how hard it is. But there is that thing you have, when you're young, I think, which is that excitement about I want to do attitude and that has always stayed with

me. I know the constraints now, but I'm somebody who is always seeking to find solutions to difficult problems.

00:10:08:02 - 00:10:20:17

Valerie

Don't give me something easy to do. I always say to people, give me the most difficult things, because it's the thing that really motivates me. So I think it just grew organically with me over time.

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Reeta

That's incredible. And we talk about having, give me a tough solution, give me something you can sink your teeth in. And you certainly had your share of very, very challenging, situations, events, world history, which you became a part of. And now and we're going to get into that just before we get there, I want to talk about entering, the British, civil service, entering public diplomacy.

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Reeta

You were the first black woman to be named a member of Cabinet as the national secretary for development. What was that journey like? As and as you came into that role, how did you know that you wanted to occupy it? And what did you want to be your mark on that role?

00:11:10:17 - 00:11:36:04

Valerie

So you've asked me so many different questions. Didn't seem very recent. Let me try and, remember them all. And I'll start with your point by occupying the hill. I'm someone who. I have not planned my career. I've always been someone who has been interested in what's being offered and what the opportunities are, in terms of the difference that I could make.

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Valerie

So, politics has always been a part of my life. And, you know, I've been a member of the Labour Party. I care about fairness and justice. And that's a kind of central core thing, for me. So when I was asked, to go into the House of Lords, Tony Blair had become, Prime Minister.

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Valerie

You know, I was very surprised. I did not want to go into the House of Commons. I'd never had a passion to be an elected, politician, but I thought this is a different kind of opportunity to, make, a difference. So, I occupied that. So, I was a member of parliament.

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Valerie

I was a member of the House of Lords, and I was asked if I would come into, government, be a part of government as a junior minister, which I did, and getting the role of a Secretary Of State, getting into the cabinet was completely unexpected. It was not something I had planned for. It was not something I had thought about.

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Valerie

Not least because, you know, as someone who has studied history and politics, I knew very well. But, you know, in the way that the British political system has developed, the House of Commons was where the majority of cabinet ministers sat, not in the House of Lords. I mean, the leader of the House of Lords and the, the then, Chief whip sat in cabinet, but no other major secretaries of state.

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Valerie

So, when Clare Short resigned, and I was asked to be, the Secretary of State that came completely out of the blue, I got a phone call to go and see the Prime Minister. I had no idea

what he wanted to see me about. And in fact, because I was his, special envoy on Africa, I thought that there was an issue about that, that he wanted to talk to me.

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Valerie

And it was that and I sat and I just gazed at him. I don't think I ever said yes.

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Reeta

You just looked at him.

00:13:39:01 - 00:14:08:03

Valerie

I think he offered me the role talk through what, the priorities were for him. And I think I kind of got out of his office and there were various, you know, down the corridor in, Downing Street, there were various people who were sort of smiling at me. And I left there just in a kind of complete whirl, going immediately from one job, to another, and you just have to get on with it.

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Valerie

You, you go straight from one office to another, a different set of people, looking after you. And I was told I need to do a press conference that afternoon.

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Reeta

What did you do? And how did you prepare?

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Valerie

Well, you know, you panic. Panic on a small scale. Thinking, oh, what am I going to talk about? You know, I've just got this job. Of course I did know about the development. I've been the spokesperson for development in the House of Lords. I was a Foreign Office minister. It was a huge, passionate interest of mine.

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Valerie

But getting my head round the government's priorities, you know, making sure that in that press conference, I was absolutely clear about direction of travel. But the other thing that I had not really anticipated it is that the press didn't really know much about me. I was in government, but I was one of those ministers that just went off and did her thing.

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Valerie

I didn't call, the press. I didn't have any particular interest in that. So, this was also something that they, wanted to talk to.

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Reeta

They were curious about you.

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Valerie

They were curious about me. But the big issue on the agenda, both for foreign policy and also for development at that stage, was Iraq. The war had happened. We were now in the next phase. I mean, it was a huge controversial issue. Both, domestically and internationally. And the development piece of that, which is the how was Britain actually going to contribute to ensuring that the people of, Iraq actually got the benefits, their leadership now having gone was one of the big, things.

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Valerie

So that's what was in my in-tray. Much of what the press conference was about was about that. And luckily for me, I'm somebody who always appears pretty calm, even if my feet under the water are down a little bluuuuurr.... So I got through, that. And then, of course, it's straight into, all the briefings through different parts of, the department.

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Valerie

And at that time, international development was a relatively small department in terms of numbers of ministers. But we had a huge budget. And so thinking through how we continued with the priorities that we had established, how we continued to have the support of the British people to spend money on international development was a key part of what I needed to do as well.

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Valerie

Of course, as you know, working with colleagues to make sure that, the overall British agenda in terms of foreign policy and development was being delivered.

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Reeta

That's incredible.

You know, here you are obviously very savvy, thrust into this role and as we know, in government and there's multiple departments, multiple interests, security interest economic interests, development interests and in part is keeping that holistic view but also influencing. What did you learn about yourself in this process as you had to navigate, multiple stakeholders in government, the public.

What did you learn?

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Valerie

So I think one of the things that is important is that it felt like a continuation, because in many roles that I had done before working with others, influencing growing alliances was all very much a part of that. You can't do things, by yourself. And when you in a role like international development, which touches on so many things, across government, I mean, finance being a big part of it, foreign policy being a big part of it, we would work in countries

where we were seeking to, to improve what they were doing in terms of areas like health and education.

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Valerie

Were there any examples from what we were doing, or indeed others were doing that might be helpful, making sure that you continued to get the resources, because one of the things that always happens is that you don't want development to become a political football. You don't want people in the country to think, well, why is it that my pension is not going up, but we are spending money on, an education system in that country or building a health system in that country when our own health, system itself needs help.

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Valerie

So really getting the messages right, ensuring that people understand that as a wealthy country, we have a shared responsibility and a shared history, across the world. But doing that in a light touch way takes a lot of thinking and a lot of, working on. So that was very much a key part of the agenda, as well as the policy work that we were doing, because Britain, was at that time in a leadership position in relation to a lot of these development, issues.

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Valerie

We were seen as leading the way on a lot of policy, development, a lot of brilliant people were working in, development, really pushing the boundaries on what we could do internationally if we work together, if we pooled our resources. You know, the difference that you could make in terms of supporting a government with their priorities rather than just rolling in and say, oh, actually, you need a well, where will you need that?

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Valerie

But actually, taking a much more strategic long-term approach that would actually help the countries in longer term development. So always balancing the needs of the people and the priorities of government and the strategic direction of a country.

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Reeta

You spoke earlier about being a good listener and a good observer. And here you've mentioned brilliant people that you've met who have obviously been very committed public servants. Connect those dots. Talk a bit about the people you met who were, both influential in terms of your own thinking, but also inspiring in terms of just seeing that kind of dedication to wanting to do good in the world.

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Reeta

And this must have also spoken so deeply to your sense of justice and equality.

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Valerie

So I always start with so many of the people I met on the ground, and both when I was doing work in, such a state for international, development, but also while I was at the UN, but also, with some of the foundations that, I've been, involved in. Those people on the ground are always my inspiration.

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Valerie

For a number of different reasons. I mean, I recall so vividly when I was at the United Nations, so I would go to visit refugee camps, and this is like, you know, Turkey or the Democrats above the Congo or, Sudan. It could be anywhere in the world. And the concerns were always pretty much the same. The women worried for their families, worried for their children, particularly in some places, worried for their girls children because of the sexual violence they might, have to, face, you know, many women making a very difficult choice to marry their daughters off early because they would be somebody they hoped, who would protect them.

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Valerie

Always a plea as to why the world had forgotten them. And there was no answer to that. I saw this repeated time and time and time again. But the thing that always sticks in my mind is the kindness of the people. People who had lost everything, but always thinking about how can I help someone else who may be worse off than me.

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Valerie

I was once in South Sudan that there was a woman who when people were just leaving the areas because the armed groups, were, in major, conflict, with government, militia and others and they were just leaving their communities in their thousands, not sure where they were going. And we went to a particular, part of South Sudan where some people had just settled for a few days, and there was a woman who was preparing for the next wave of people arriving because she knew they would come.

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Valerie

She had barely settled herself the way the women when they were given, some support, or, resources or a food pack. They would talk to each other about who wanted what and they would swap plates. I mean, tiny little things that made a difference in their lives. So, they were always my inspiration to keep going. Because if they could do it, we could.

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Valerie

Then the humanitarian workers, I've worked with so many people who put their lives in danger so that they could help others and always you would feel, when you knew that they were going into a conflict situation or something else, there was always that feeling that you might lose someone, you know, I remember being in New York in the middle of the Syria crisis, and we had negotiated that, a group of humanitarian workers could cross, one of these lines, to take humanitarian aid, to the other side of, the line.

00:24:27:04 - 00:24:56:29

Valerie

And we talked to everybody, so that they would not be shot at. And I'm in New York in my apartment on a Saturday, and I got a phone call from the head of that group saying to me, we're being shot at. Is there anything that you could do? I mean, essentially what he was asking me was, you know, were there any of the allies of, the Syrians or any other groups operating in Syria that I might be able to contact who might be able to stop it?

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Valerie

But we didn't know who it was, who was shooting, and I felt completely useless. I mean, we worked on phones. In the end, they were safe. But there is nothing that you can do in that kind or very little that you can do in that kind of situation, because you are not there. Then you just have to support from a distance.

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Valerie

And of course, I've met some extraordinary, leaders, our own board member, at the Mastercard Foundation president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. The situation that she inherited in Liberia and the work that she was able to do to try to make a difference in her country, I had the privilege of meeting Nelson Mandela more, than once.

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Valerie

And I remember the first time I met him, I was, a minister. I was not a member of the cabinet. And we were we were talking about, Iraq and various other things. We didn't agree. But at, a particular point he said to me, you are such a good advocate, you should be in the cabinet. This was March.

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Valerie

I was in the cabinet by May. So, when I saw him in December, I have a wonderful photograph of the two of us alarming together, because I'm saying to him, do you have any other plans for me? And if you do, could you just tell me? What they are? Amazing women, working on, human rights issues, working on issues related to domestic violence and violence against women.

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Valerie

I have met so many people. I've had such a privileged life.

00:26:47:23 - 00:26:58:04

Reeta

That's incredible stories and incredible stories about women and their leadership. Not just their heart and their courage, but their leadership. To demonstrate by example.

00:26:58:06 - 00:27:32:06

Valerie

And if I may say. And in relation to that. Because I think sometimes when you do humanitarian work, we forget that the first responders are the people themselves. There will be people who will have lost people, and still, they are the first responders trying to help their communities to, respond. I mean, I saw this in, the Philippines, when, Tacloban was destroyed.

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Valerie

People were looking for relatives. They were looking for members of their family at the same time, they were trying to build places where people could shelter. They were looking for food. The community. The international community hadn't arrived yet. The natural, resources hadn't arrived yet because they couldn't get there. So, we should always remember that we need to support those first responders because they are at the heart of the response in the first instance.

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Reeta

What does all this teach us about justice, and what does this teach us about what it means to lead a life that has purpose, but largely to create much more equity? Is it about making people who are invisible, visible to others? What does it take to actually create justice?

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Valerie

Well, I think at the heart of it is recognising that people need to have power over their own lives, but they need to have power to make decisions that have an impact on them. And we see over time just how power is taken away. Decisions are taken further and further from, the people who are affected by those decisions this year.

00:29:00:13 - 00:29:31:02

Valerie

And we see the people don't listen to them. I learned of, a really important lesson. We were talking to a group of, women about what did they need? There had been a flood. Everything had, been taken away, and so I was watching. The humanitarian workers were asking them, you know, could we bringing, sea food, you know what?

00:29:31:02 - 00:29:55:02

Valerie

Health and, health supplies, whatever. And the women said, if you would just fix that bridge over there, we would be able to go and get everything that we needed. So, by talking to them their response of what they wanted was very different to what we had assumed they would be. People would want their local economies to be back up and running.

00:29:55:02 - 00:30:29:12

Valerie

They want to take control over their own lives. This is just a tiny, tiny example that will help to contribute to delivering, equity, making sure that women have, of all places, there have been so many conflicts where they're trying to find solutions to those conflicts, but they are

not bringing women around the table. If you don't have all the different sections of your people represented, you're never going to get a peace that is lasting.

00:30:29:17 - 00:31:00:25

Valerie

And this just so there were a whole range of things that I think that we need to do. Of course, at a government level, how you deal with, poverty and disadvantage? There are all of those big things, but I think that there are a lot of smaller things which are about recognising that people need to have a voice, they need to have a say in the world and the work that affects them, which is where I think we need to start.

00:31:00:27 - 00:31:33:02

Reeta

So now it's important to have people to listen, to listen to them and to elevate their voices and let them speak for themselves. When you've confronted injustice and when you've confronted; perhaps racism, perhaps discrimination or just complete disregard for what's right. How do you confront that and at the same time have influence and have an impact?

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Valerie

Do you personally or when you're talking.

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Reeta

Personally, it could be personally, could you in your many leadership roles that you've held, when you've had to be that voice, that advocate for people who were not present, who could not speak for themselves at that moment? How do you how do you go about doing that?

00:31:52:20 - 00:32:12:05

Valerie

Well, on a personal level, I think we all make decisions, as it were, in the moment, because the reality is, you know, if you're a woman, you're a black person, you're a person of colour. You know, we face these kinds of these indignities every single day. And that is not how you want to spend your time.

00:32:12:05 - 00:32:35:24

Valerie

So we make decisions and choices about what we challenge, when and why. Very occasionally. Certainly, in my case, it just gets to the point where you think, I really can't take this anymore, and you react to something which maybe yesterday you might not have reacted to. And that's because you want whatever you do and say to have an impact.

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Valerie

And if we respond to react to everything it dilutes and you lose that ability to have impact and influence. Where it's in an organisational setting, I am very considered about it because it's about I'm very clear about where I want to get to. And then I think about how, how am I going to get there?

00:32:57:25 - 00:33:18:27

Valerie

Who do I need to influence, who need to who do I need to have in the tent, and aly? It may be that I have a path that I thought was the one that would get me there, but actually, the path has to change, because we get new information or there's somebody who can help you with something else.

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Valerie

And the big thing for me is I don't have to take the credit. I want the change to happen. I want to work with the people to make it happen. I don't have to take the credit for the change having happened. By the end of the process. But I do think you need to be very, very intentional about it.

00:33:39:06 - 00:34:18:17

Valerie

And you need to be clear about what the barriers are going to be that are going to prevent you from being successful. It's the classic way in which we set objectives and deliver against them and, and, monitor them. But the passion comes through the fact that, you know, this is about our relationships as people and about the fact that we are disadvantaging huge sectors, of our community because of personal prejudice and because of structural discrimination

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Valerie

We need to help people to understand that. And we need sometimes to help people who do demonstrate prejudice, to actually appreciate and understand what they're doing, because sometimes people do it unconsciously, not always, but sometimes they do. And helping people to understand is, in the long run, I think, much better than isolating people because they may have made a mistake.

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Reeta

Because it's huge lesson here for, I guess, future generations of leaders who lead us, who we're mentoring right now just to listen to what you've had to say about looking at the big picture, the goal and recognising the means to get there are just as important as the ends. So, sort of calls on flexibility to some degree, generosity of spirit, that some sense of adaptability.

00:35:15:09 - 00:35:39:21

Reeta

And there's nothing wrong with that in getting there, I think of so many movements right now also in the world, which we care about, where young people are championing change, sometimes with angry voices and perhaps justified and in other, more quiet ways also trying to influence change. So, if you could think of a role, they all have a role to play.

00:35:39:23 - 00:36:03:25

Valerie

I think the angry voices have a role. Much plays as the quiet voices, because one of the things, and you asked me about, you know, lessons that I have learned that one of the things that the Pi know absolutely clearly and I have seen over time is that if you're in an organisation and you want to be a change agent in that organisation, you wanted to be different.

00:36:03:27 - 00:36:55:09

Valerie

You need the voices from outside that are saying, it's too slow. We demand X, we demand Y because you may not get X and Y. Well, you may get much further along the way because of those voices on the outside which are pushing for change. The barriers, and down. So, they may not recognise, that you are wanting them to do that because you can't necessarily say that they may feel impatient that the change is not quick enough, but if you're really smart, you will use, what they have created as a kind of springboard, to make the change even deeper and more.

00:36:55:09 - 00:36:58:13

Valerie

longer lasting than it might have been

00:36:58:13 - 00:37:31:20

Reeta

Absolutely. Valerie, is there a moment or maybe a several moments in your career that you thought were just pivotal in terms of how you either took more risks or, or how you made a different decision? Anything comes to mind? I mean think about all the places where you have been- in Somalia, Central Africa, Republic, just, the Ebola crisis, were they things that just when you look back and say, that was the moment I, I went a different path.

00:37:31:23 - 00:38:02:13

Valerie

Maybe thinking about working on Syria, for example, there were so many countries that had interests in, Syria. And one of the things that, I really sought to do when I was at the UN was

try to find ways of ensuring that we brought those voices in because they were part of the solution.

00:38:02:15 - 00:38:35:24

Valerie

But you know, how do you get the US, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the UK, I mean, France, I mean, so many different, countries to actually be in the same place to talk about some of the challenges, that we were facing and how we might overcome them. And we were able to do that because we were working on humanitarian issues.

00:38:35:27 - 00:39:11:03

Valerie

If we had tried to do that through a political lens, it just would not have been the same. But, you know, I spoke to the Russians when I wanted access. I spoke to the Iranians when I wanted access. I talked to, the US and through the humanitarian lens, we were able to bring those countries together, not always at the level that we wanted them to come together, but we would bring them together to try to help us to resolve some of these really difficult access challenges.

00:39:11:03 - 00:39:48:25

Valerie

And as a result of that work, we would sometimes just shift gear, a little bit, think about some different things that we might do, what we were asking for. It took us, I think, two years to negotiate a cross-border resolution in the Security Council for Syria. We were only able to do that because you had Jordan, Australia and Luxembourg, who at that time were non-permanent members of the Security Council, really doing the heavy lifting on that, resolution.

00:39:48:27 - 00:40:20:16

Valerie

And we were always, working together, thinking about, well, what could we do to bring more people, more people on board. But I remember when I again, in relation to Syria, when, I don't know if you remember President Obama's red line in terms of Crimea, this

weapons and the red lines crossed and the Syrians weren't sure what the next steps were going to be.

00:40:20:19 - 00:40:40:15

Valerie

And I had been trying to get into Syria for some time, and they had refused at the point at which they thought that actually they might be bombed as a result of crossing the red line, I suddenly got a phone call saying, we'd be very happy for you to visit, I think on the basis that they thought if I were visiting there.

00:40:40:15 - 00:40:41:01

Reeta

They wouldn't be bomb.

00:40:41:01 - 00:40:57:12

Valerie

They wouldn't be bombed. I didn't like to say I don't have that kind of that kind of power. But I did say, perhaps we could leave it a couple of weeks, and I'll have to think if it could fit into my schedule that or at a later stage. It wasn't so much about changing tact, but more.

00:40:57:14 - 00:41:01:09

Valerie

Like to say I'm not saying I'm not coming right now. No, now. Not a good time.

00:41:01:12 - 00:41:22:19

Reeta

Wow. Incredible. They incredible Valerie of broken so many barriers. There've been so many firsts in your career. I mean, you think about advice you would give to maybe your younger self. Perhaps another young person who might be following on in your path. What would you advise them?

00:41:22:22 - 00:41:48:12

Valerie

Well, I think the first thing I would say, and I always have a wary of giving advice because it's a whole different world that they are, they live in all facing or that they are living. I think the first thing is that it's the other people who focus on the first, not you. So very often I have been the first person that's been in a particular role, and I've only realised it because I've been told by somebody else.

00:41:48:13 - 00:42:10:24

Valerie

So it's not the thing that you're going to focus on. You're just going to get on with your job. And then all these opportunities are going to open up and things will happen. And because you've done the best that, you don't know everything, but, because I do think that we kind of have a sense that we know everything.

00:42:10:26 - 00:42:43:29

Valerie

Be sponges, be open. You learn. Watch. Listen, there's a huge world out there, and there is so much that we have to learn. And I think, you know, I want to leave this world feeling that I'm still learning, but there is still knowledge out there. But, I don't have. And every day, actually, with what is happening in tech and everything else, I feel I actually there's more that I don't know, more than ever.

00:42:44:02 - 00:43:08:15

Valerie

So, there's that I think it's not it is in no way a failure to ask for help and to look for support. The challenges facing the world, we can't do any of it on our own. You could be a super and as you like. And you couldn't do it on your own. So, look for support.

00:43:08:18 - 00:43:32:05

Valerie

Talk to people who've had the same kind of experiences. Seek mentors. I mean, these are all people who will help and support you. Keep your feet firmly on the ground. That's. I mean, I love my family. I love my friends because that's what keeps you going. I'm, Auntie Valerie or, Sister Valerie or whatever. I am not doing this.

00:43:32:05 - 00:43:59:26

Valerie

so enjoyed it. I think so many of us, when we work hard, we see things that need to be, done. We don't remember to enjoy time with family and friends and actually enjoy the fact that we are in a position where we can make an impact. Very privileged place.

00:44:00:03 - 00:44:01:29

Reeta

Certainly is.

00:44:02:02 - 00:44:23:21

Valerie

So, embrace it. And it's a wonderful world out there. Have passion, have a vision. Think about how you want to live your life. You're not inhabiting somebody else's life. You are inhabiting your own life. It's wonderful.

00:44:23:23 - 00:44:41:04

Reeta

Let's come back to your, mum and dad. I know the passed away within nine days of each other. It's not easy to speak to such incredible love and bond. And you and your sister, thinking your brother have set up, a trust, a bursary. The aim of this bursary is to honour them.

00:44:42:21 - 00:44:47:26

Reeta

What are you hoping.

Is their legacy? And what are you hoping to achieve through the bursary?

00:44:47:29 - 00:45:15:17

Valerie

Well, they have an incredible legacy already. Because they were so open, so generous. So many young people, our friends that just connected with them. I remember when I was at university and if I went home and mother would send all of these, you know, food packages or, supply everything to me for me, but, you know, for various friends, they would come to the UK.

00:45:15:18 - 00:45:38:01

Valerie

They flew all over the world. They would come to the UK. My mother would know before me that one of my friends had landed in the UK. So, an incredible network of people to whom they had given, love and support and, and I think that's a huge part, of their legacy. But of course, it continues through the Amos bursary.

00:45:38:03 - 00:46:01:06

Valerie

They died nine years, nine days apart, as you said. I mean, we always say that was terrible for us, but good for them because that connection that they had was so, so strong. And we saw it through our eyes. It didn't mean that they didn't argue. It didn't mean that they didn't have different perspectives, but it was very strong.

00:46:01:08 - 00:46:29:07

Valerie

So when we were thinking about how could we honour them, that's the way the Amos bursary got formed, because we thought education really important to them. At the time we were thinking about this, young men of African-Caribbean heritage were getting to university, but they weren't staying. They were dropping out at an incredibly high rate. So, we thought, what could we do about this?

00:46:29:07 - 00:47:01:26

Valerie

And that's how the bursary was formed. We thought, there are skills that they need to help them to stay ahead, but they don't have those skills. We started with seven. We now take about 50 scholars every year. Men and women. But in addition to that, we also have what we call associates, program, where we're not able to take all of those young people on the full program.

00:47:01:26 - 00:47:35:04

Valerie

So, we do something, online for a significant, number of young people. It's about 700. Now we have mentorship program, opportunities for, internships, international experiences. But crucially, we support you in your last two years at school, your years at university embed into, work. The program has been incredibly successful. It operates now in, London and, Birmingham.

00:47:35:11 - 00:48:08:03

Valerie

So, this is very much, very much their legacy. These are young people who have aspiration. They have ability, but they don't necessarily have the opportunity. They're clever, but they haven't necessarily come from families or communities that can help them to negotiate. That kind of challenging power, from, school through to university into work. And that's what we help them to do.

00:48:08:08 - 00:48:28:00

Reeta

That's incredible. Your parents' legacy. It's been powerful. But I can just see the love living on. And it goes right back to what you said. This is about our relationship to each other, to different generations, across generations, different parts of the world. But it's about loving people and giving them incredible opportunity

00:48:28:00 - 00:48:28:18

Valerie

And these young people are our future

00:48:28:18 - 00:48:31:03

Reeta

absolutely they are

00:48:31:06 - 00:48:49:07

Valerie

And with us, we are here for a tiny amount of time. Where we are custodians of something. And we're only custodians to enable us to hand it on to someone else. That's what our life's journey is about for me. So, I always want to be giving back.

00:48:49:13 - 00:48:59:09

Reeta

You've walked us through your amazing life-giving back, honouring your parents. What's next for you?

00:48:59:12 - 00:49:29:19

Valerie

Well, this is such a funny question. Reeta, a couple of days ago, I was going into, Boston and the immigration officer looked at my passport, looked at my age, looked at me and said, until we're going to stop. So, the answer to that is no, I'm never going to stop. I don't know exactly what is next, but, you know, I'm excited by our young people, the things that they care about.

00:49:29:21 - 00:49:46:05

Valerie

Our world is going through some really challenging times right now. And if I can help and support those young people in any way as they try to bring about change, that's what I see myself as here for.

00:49:46:07 - 00:49:53:03

Reeta

It's amazing you stand for change. Thank you so much for being part of the show. It's been a real honour.

00:49:53:04 - 00:49:54:04

Valerie

It's been great.

00:49:54:06 - 00:50:31:13

Reeta

Thank you. From waking Guyana to the House of Lords in the UK. From serving in local government to becoming a member of cabinet. From supporting community relations to heading global humanitarian efforts, from a young girl in Guyana to the master of the University College, Oxford, the life journey of Baroness Valerie Amos is a beacon of hope and a series of powerful lessons on transcending boundaries.

00:50:31:15 - 00:51:02:22

Reeta

She continues to inspire and lead with a vision for more equitable and compassionate global society. Thank you for joining us on Transcending Boundaries. I hope this conversation sparked a new idea, or inspired you to reflect on your own leadership journey and the values that guide you. If you enjoyed today's episode, please subscribe, leave us a review and share our show with others.

00:51:02:24 - 00:51:07:02

Reeta

Until next time, keep leading with purpose and with courage.