

Transcription Episode 2 -Honorable Louise Arbour

00;00;03;23 - 00;00;45;24

Reeta

I'm Reeta Roy, and this is Transcending Boundaries Podcast 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. My next guest has a personal and professional journey that is a testament to the power of resilience, intellect, and our collective humanity.

00;00;45;26 - 00;01;21;07

Reeta

She is an unwavering commitment to human dignity and justice. She is an internationally recognised champion of human rights who has made multiple contributions to international law and human rights advocacy. Our guest is a woman whose legacy continues to inspire and guide the next generation of advocates, dedicated to the principles of justice and equality. The Honourable Louise Arbour.

00;01;21;10 - 00;01;48;19

Reeta

Louise, thank you so much for joining us. You have had an extraordinary life and extraordinary career. I just want to learn a lot about you and how you have busted through all manner of boundaries. Maybe the best place to start is childhood and growing up. Can you tell us about your family life? And where you were raised and what made you, in a way, who you are?

00;01;48;22 - 00;02;19;20

Louise Arbour

I grew up in what was then called French Canada. Now we call just ourselves Quebecers. So in and of itself, I think that gives some insight into what maybe subsequently will become part of my politics. So in a sense, I grew up in a minority environment, but in many respect, this was completely obscured by the fact that I was fully educated in French.

00;02;19;22 - 00;02;47;29

Louise Arbour

And so I had no interface with the majority of the country, the majority of the environment in which I lived. And it's the same as also about being a woman, because I was educated

exclusively by women. My in a very unorthodox way at that time in Canada and in Quebec in particular. My parents were separated when I was very young, about ten.

00;02;48;01 - 00;03;12;03

Louise Arbour

I have one younger brother, and so essentially my mother left, so she moved out with me. My brother and our dog took a little apartment and decided to- and she had not worked outside family life at that point, so she opened a little women's clothing store and raised us.

00;03;12;05 - 00;03;13;01

Reeta

Through that storm.

00;03;13;01 - 00;03;26;15

Louise Arbour

Through that. What's really interesting when I think of it in retrospect is, in order to do that- and you know, in the Mastercard Foundation, how much we talk about access to credit. She obviously she didn't have anything.

00;03;26;18 - 00;03;27;21

Reeta

So how did she start?

00;03;27;24 - 00;03;52;00

Louise Arbour

Well, in order to get a bank loan in those days in Quebec, you had to have your husband's signature. My father was nowhere to be seen. So as a then how old would she have been? Late 30s. Early 40s? Late 30s, maybe. She had to go to her father to get him to sign and to support her.

00;03;52;03 - 00;04;25;24

Louise Arbour

She came from a family of merchants, like small commerce and so on. And so my grandfather, nobody was very wealthy. This was kind of straight, middle class, you know, professional commerce people. But in retrospect, I think, seriously, you had to go to your

dad, with your two kids and your dog just to get him to sign off and get you to start a little modest little business, which did well enough to support us until we were grown up.

00;04;25;26 - 00;04;39;10

Louise Arbour

But also because of all the turmoil in my parents relationship. I was put in boarding school in Quebec. Obviously in an all girls Catholic boarding school.

00;04;39;12 - 00;04;40;22

Reeta

Those are very strict.

00;04;40;22 - 00;05;05;20

Louise Arbour

Run by nuns. It was very strict, very. And the education was, you know, I learned Latin and Greek, but no English, which, come to think of it, the practical aspect of education had obviously escaped them. But I grew and I wasn't that I was a boarder for 3 or 4 years, maybe, and then my mother didn't have enough money to keep me boarding.

00;05;05;20 - 00;05;14;16

Louise Arbour

So I became a day student, but I stayed in the same school, if you could believe it, from grade six until I was 20 years old.

00;05;14;17 - 00;05;17;10

Reeta

Wow! You must have lifelong friends.

00;05;17;13 - 00;05;37;13

Louise Arbour

of course and they're still my friends. But what it means is, So I got a B.A.. You know, it was a classical education. So I was in the same school for ten years. Now I'm one of their stars. It didn't look like that at the time, but, so when I went to law school-

00;05;37;15 - 00;05;39;19

Reeta

And what drew you to law school?

00;05;39;22 - 00;06;04;21

Louise Arbour

I went to law school as many things I've done a bit by default. I was not particularly interested or good in science. And in those days, most women young girls went into nursing. Or at the end of the B.A., some would do a Masters, like in History or Anthropology to teach, or they do a year of kind of teacher's college.

00;06;04;24 - 00;06;29;05

Louise Arbour

So in my graduating class, which was maybe 45 of us, 50 max, maybe less, I think I'm the only one who went to law school, and two went to medical school and others went teaching. But when I showed up on the university campus in a classroom, more than 300 of which was not catastrophic, it was about 10% women.

00;06;29;05 - 00;06;42;17

Louise Arbour

So 30 is not nothing but 30 and three hundred's not a lot. But I had never been not in a uniform. Took me hours every day to decide what to wear.

00;06;42;20 - 00;06;45;09

Reeta

And boutique stores didn't pay off there.

00;06;45;11 - 00;07;13;16

Louise Arbour

Ah no, because this was for more grown up when not. Not exactly. You could appreciate the kind of stuff I would wear. And then competition with men. I just, I assumed that, you know, they had gone to all these great renown colleges. I thought, oh my God, I'm going to get creamed. And then when their grades came out at Christmas- I have to say I worked, because my last year of college, I wasn't exactly shining.

00;07;13;16 - 00;07;34;29

Louise Arbour

I was preoccupied with, again, lots of student's politics, and but when I got to law school, I thought, oh my God, this is the test. And I remember the grades were posted, so you had to go and it was aborted to take a ruler to find. Thankfully with 'A' I was somewhere that you had to look at your grades, so it looked okay.

00;07;34;29 - 00;07;37;17

Louise Arbour

And then I looked at the rest. It looked really good.

00;07;37;19 - 00;07;43;23

Reeta

And so not only were you at the top of the list because your last name started with 'A', but you really were at the top of the list.

00;07;43;24 - 00;07;54;12

Louise Arbour

Yes. And when I saw that, I thought, oh my God, if this is the competition, bring it on.

00;07;54;15 - 00;08;12;08

Reeta

Listen, I want to go back for a moment when you said that you were raised by women. So clearly it was mom and her hard work and her courage. Must have been many friendships at that school. Strict as it was. Perhaps the teachers, the nuns who were there. Talk a little bit about that experience. And,

00;08;12;11 - 00;08;19;29

Reeta

Well, I know you say you're not introspective, but just talk about what you observed about that and their leadership.

00;08;20;02 - 00;08;43;05

Louise Arbour

Well, in the case of my mother, with whom I stayed very close all my life, in fact, she died five years ago. She was 97. I remember she told me at some point when she turned, whatever, 94 or something. She said to me, you know, objectively, I know 94 years old is old. But she said, I don't feel that old.

00;08;43;05 - 00;08;48;14

Louise Arbour

But having a 70 year old daughter, that kills me.

00;08;49;08 - 00;09;18;21

Louise Arbour

As I get older, I get her. For me to have a 47-year-old daughter, I think, where did that come from? So my mother was, she was strong in a very unassuming way. Not ambitious, but very alert to the necessities of, She would say to me all the time, the only important thing is get yourself into a position where you never, ever have to depend on anybody.

00;09;18;24 - 00;09;50;08

Louise Arbour

You have to look after yourself and your children. That's it. She was also, if there's anything critical. But she was very concerned about appearances. So in a sense where one maybe because her fit in her world was awkward, you know, not to have a husband at 37, 40 years old. In those days also, if you could believe it, she could not obtain a divorce except by an Act of Parliament.

00;09;50;10 - 00;10;16;25

Louise Arbour

Yes. Until 1968 in Canada, divorce is federal jurisdiction, and there was no procedure. So you had to get it was called a private bill. So the law changed immediately when it became more accessible, she obtained a divorce, but so she- it's not that she was an outcast, but she didn't fit in the social construct of her era and that preoccupied her.

00;10;16;25 - 00;10;41;19

Louise Arbour

So she was, in my opinion, always overly preoccupied with appearances. What will people think? And maybe in reaction to that, I have zero interest in what people think about me. I care about people's opinions and engage. But at that kind of social level. So yeah.

00;10;41;25 - 00;10;50;19

Reeta

So in a way, you took mom's advice to heart, not only just be independent in terms of independent, financial independence, but just be truly independent.

00;10;50;19 - 00;11;24;19

Louise Arbour

And more intellectual, intellectually independent as opposed than socially, which was not necessarily her message. And, you know, in those days, women didn't talk about being feminist. But these nuns, at one level, you might think they've surrendered all their life to a very strict, sheltered order. But at the same time, first of all, they were better educated than the majority of women of their generation, and they were entirely self-administered.

00;11;24;20 - 00;11;47;11

Louise Arbour

They became very wealthy as an order, well, mind you, because they didn't have to pay tax anyway. There's other reasons for that. They held fantastic real estate and but they were very competent women. So in a sense, until I was 20 years old, all I saw was a universe of extremely competent.

00;11;47;14 - 00;11;49;04

Reeta

Strong women.

00;11;49;06 - 00;11;53;15

Louise Arbour

Yet strong and free in their own terms. Let's put it this way.

00;11;53;18 - 00;12;04;28

Reeta

Yes. Yeah. I understand you began your career actually in academia. Talk about that and then the transition to the judiciary.

00;12;05;00 - 00;12;28;26

Louise Arbour

Virtually everything I've done professionally, I've done by accident. I've never had a career plan. And maybe again, it's a question of temperament, but that gave me all kinds of opportunities. So when I graduated from law school, I went to clerk at the Supreme Court of Canada. Now in the legal profession, especially when we look at the US model, it's very well known.

00;12;28;26 - 00;12;55;22

Louise Arbour

You know, it's the thing to do, the cream of that. But in our days, it was only, I think, the third year that judges of the Supreme Court of Canada took in law clerks, and I even forgot, I think I saw an ad for it or something. But this was a huge step for me because that meant working in Ottawa, which is in English Canada.

00;12;55;24 - 00;13;20;00

Louise Arbour

And this is another it's really interesting what gives you a sense of self or how you're perceived by the world? So when I came to apply for that job, I spoke some English because I had worked at Expo 67 as a telephone operator. So I mastered a couple of the vocabulary. And in law school, obviously a lot of the materials were in English, so.

00;13;20;04 - 00;13;46;28

Louise Arbour

But I was far from fluent. So when I went, I applied for the job. This judge interviewed me very intimidating. I thought, I have zero chance because he's going to find out that I just don't speak English well enough for that. He was from Quebec. The whole interview was in French, and towards the end of the interview he said to me slowly, how is your English?

00;13;47;00 - 00;14;16;11

Louise Arbour

And I said, good. So that was the end of that part of the test. And then he offered me the job on the spot and to his astonishment, I said, oh, well, I'll have to think about that just a minute. Not moving to Ottawa, to the other side, you know, the English. This was like a big deal. And he said, you thought you never had a chance at this job.

00;14;16;13 - 00;14;51;20

Louise Arbour

I said, yeah, he said, because you're a woman? No because I don't speak English. But so this is really interesting, the idea that- see this had not occurred to me honestly, until then. Gender disparities, gender discrimination was obscured, in a sense, in my life by, in Canada that the very blatant discrimination against French Canadians and the lack of opportunities because you were French speaking in a in an environment where the majority were French.

00;14;51;20 - 00;15;12;27

Louise Arbour

But if you tried to get a summer job in a department store, you couldn't because you didn't speak English. So the self-perception of who people view you as a person and who you think you are, you know, in the same way, just this small story: Just before I started school, when I was five years old, I had an accident and I had a very big, big scar.

00;15;12;29 - 00;15;27;01

Louise Arbour

A window fell, anyway, a huge scar on my face. And until late in life it was not. If I went swimming, it turned blue. It was very was very obvious.

00;15;27;03 - 00;15;59;18

Louise Arbour

Because of that, every time when I started school or I met new kids, invariably they would say to me, what happened? What happened to your face? And as a result of that, I had no consciousness, that I was very short. Nobody said to me, how come you're so little? They always said, what happened to your face? It's a metaphor to me for your perception of self and a projection of who you are and how the two often don't match.

00;15;59;21 - 00;16;12;27

Reeta

Yeah. Oh my gosh, what a journey. What a journey. So here he is. He's offering you this job on the spot. And obviously you took a moment but you took it. Yeah you took it. What have happened then.

00;16;12;27 - 00;16;42;05

Louise Arbour

So this is really amazing. I mean you enter the hearts and lungs of the legal profession. You know, the Supreme Court of Canada is where it all gets shaped. And so this was great. In those days, the nine judges only had one clerk each. And that's where I met the man who subsequently was my life partner for almost 30 years, 27 years.

00;16;42;08 - 00;17;02;12

Louise Arbour

So he was from Ontario. And when we decided that maybe we had a future together, then the question was, where are we going to work? I was then a member of the Quebec Bar, so I had passed all the bar exams, but now I was in Ontario. It's a different province. I wasn't called to the bar.

00;17;02;15 - 00;17;42;12

Louise Arbour

In any event, it was simpler to stay in Ontario. So because I had clerk at the Supreme Court, we were targeted by law deans. They were always looking for the law clerks as potential law professors, a career I had never contemplated to the extent that I had a career plan, which I didn't, but what I would have liked to do criminal defence work, if I'd gone back home, which meant small, firm, there was already not a lot of women in the profession, but criminal defence was seen as the bottom of the barrel.

00;17;42;14 - 00;17;57;25

Louise Arbour

That's not where the kids who are at the head of the class went. For the most part, it was still seen as C,D maybe. And that's what I like. I like, I like marginal people. I like the underdog.

00;17;57;27 - 00;18;01;25

Reeta

Speaking up for someone who may not have a voice.

00;18;01;28 - 00;18;23;19

Louise Arbour

Yeah, but I didn't think of it. I don't think of myself as a saviour or a...I'm not the voice of anybody else. At best, I could be their megaphone, I could scream, but they have their own voice. And maybe it just intrigues me. And, I entered the academic world. Not only didn't I have a doctorate, I didn't even have a Master's degree.

00;18;23;19 - 00;18;51;25

Louise Arbour

I just had a basic law degree and called to the bar in another province. But this was a really good time. I really, I liked the classroom part of teaching more than the research, which in those days had moved into highly theoretical work, which didn't have terrific appeal to me. But the political side of the law, the social justice and change instruments.

00;18;51;25 - 00;18;58;23

Louise Arbour

I really liked. So that's what I did. For 12 years, I had three kids.

00;18;58;25 - 00;19;03;20

Reeta

How did you manage that? Going between family and work and being committed to yourself?

00;19;03;22 - 00;19;22;17

Louise Arbour

Well...teaching is in fact, is that idea. When I look at the young women in my law firm now and the hours they have to put in, I don't know how they manage to not only raise children, I don't know how they manage to have the time to make them, but that's another. It's true. It's crazy. They work insane hours.

00;19;22;17 - 00;19;46;04

Louise Arbour

As a law teacher, you know, I could manage my days. I could- the reality is I worked all the time. My son actually reminds me that every day I would ask him to carry my briefcase up because my room was on the third floor. And he said, I still see you sitting in bed with lots of pillows and tons of papers in front of you.

00;19;46;06 - 00;20;07;25

Louise Arbour

So I did work a lot, but it didn't feel that way. It was a really good life. Good life balance, very busy, you know, three kids, a cat, a dog, a whatever. It was busy. And then I got the magic phone call that many lawyers crave. But that had not entered my consciousness, offering me a judicial appointment.

00;20;07;27 - 00;20;28;09

Louise Arbour

Wow. So I became a judge. And the irony of it is, when I finished my college education. So until the age of 20, I wore a uniform every day of my life. And when I went to law school, I swore I will never, ever again wear a uniform. And then I became a judge.

00;20;28;12 - 00;20;29;19

Reeta

And you wore a uniform.

00;20;29;21 - 00;20;31;01

Louise Arbour

A uniform again.

00;20;31;04 - 00;20;41;08

Reeta

What's it like being a judge? What does it take to be a judge? A good judge?

00;20;41;10 - 00;21;03;23

Louise Arbour

First of all, it depends at what level. I was appointed at the trial level, where obviously you have a lot of interactions with people, which is very different than the subsequent work I did as an appellate court judge, where you have a lot of interaction with your colleagues. So it's a very different chemistry. And as a trial judge, obviously you're alone.

00;21;03;26 - 00;21;27;20

Louise Arbour

So you are- it's actually very scary for someone like me who when I became a trial judge, I'd never set foot in a courtroom. I was an academic. No, that's not true. I had taken one case in the Court of Appeal as an intervenor for the Canadian Civil Liberties Association as counsel. So I'd argued one case for half an hour.

00;21;27;22 - 00;21;53;03

Louise Arbour

I had no trial experience. Most people who get appointed to the bench have been lawyers in practice for a long time. So it was very pretty scary. Yes. And the features of first of all, all your work is done in public. Courtrooms are public. You're the director, the producer, the main character of something that you don't control totally.

00;21;53;03 - 00;22;14;11

Louise Arbour

You don't know what the witness is going to say. You don't know it's going to be a flare up in the courtroom. You got to be, very alive. And then at the end of the day, you have to decide, and I have to say two things about the exercise of judgement. First of all, depends in what area.

00;22;14;11 - 00;22;47;18

Louise Arbour

But like in family law, for instance, medical malpractice, all kinds of areas. It's a very humbling experience to be charged with making a decision for two grown up people who just can't make it for themselves, which is essentially what it comes to. They've reached a point in their lives- sometimes it's in a commercial relationship, but it has a lot of personal stakes- where they've given up the ability to come to a resolution.

00;22;47;19 - 00;23;12;24

Louise Arbour

They turn to a perfect stranger. They don't know me. It's, I think it is very humbling and it's very sobering. You really have to. You cannot not take that seriously. You know, you sit down and the other thing is you come out of the trial and often these are, these were High Court. So pretty serious matters.

00;23;12;24 - 00;23;33;17

Louise Arbour

You come out, you think you got it. Pretty good idea. And then you sit down and sometimes it doesn't write. When you start to write that, you look at the law, the legal precedents, you do the analysis. It's like your pen is not going where in some cases your heart would want to go or even your mind. You think, yeah, yeah, yeah.

00;23;33;20 - 00;23;57;06

Louise Arbour

And then as you start that more rigorous, breaking it down, all the analysis, you realise that no, this is not going to go. So to me it shows the tension between intuition and rigour. But the pace, and sometimes it's so fast you don't have the luxury of agonising. You just have to call it and move on.

00;23;57;06 - 00;24;03;17

Louise Arbour

And there's the comfort if you're a trial judge, there's an appellate system. So if you really got it wrong, well, somebody will fix it.

00;24;03;17 - 00;24;27;03

Reeta

But still, boy that's, that's a lot of responsibility. Now, Louise, what you're known for and lauded for is your passion for justice, for human rights. I want to talk about that transition, because I know you've presided over some pretty earth shattering decisions at a global level. Talk about that journey.

00;24;27;05 - 00;24;31;14

Louise Arbour

Well, maybe I could describe to you a little bit the how things happen.

00;24;31;21 - 00;24;32;17

Reeta

Mm hmm

00;24;32;19 - 00;24;57;02

Louise Arbour

Certainly, in a professional life like mine that was not self-directed. So again, this is another generation, I hate to put it this way because it seems so self-flattering or pretentious, but in my days, in that environment, I've never applied for a job in my life. The phone rang because that's the way, you know, these were small communities.

00;24;57;02 - 00;25;16;22

Louise Arbour

Everybody knew each other. In the same way that I never thought of having an academic career. And I had one for 12 years, which I liked. I never really thought of having a judicial career, first of all, because when you're straight out of law school, you don't think, oh, I'm going to be a judge. First of all, you don't control that.

00;25;16;22 - 00;25;55;04

Louise Arbour

And then I would have never in my life thought that I would do international work. I was already uprooted from French Canada to English Canada, which I could tell you in retrospect, was the biggest cultural shock of my entire professional life. This cultural shock was more profound than becoming an international civil servant and travelling all over the world, because it's a confrontation, a deep confrontation with the profound roots of your own culture, and lots of things you take for granted because people look like you.

00;25;55;07 - 00;25;56;28

Louise Arbour

They're your fellow Canadians.

00;25;58;07 - 00;26;28;23

Louise Arbour

And the, the fault lines, cultural fault lines are very profound in some cases. So moving from doing domestic judicial work to international work was very, unexpected. I think it's one way to put it. But again, see, at the end, it's rooted in my intuition right at the beginning of my career that what I really liked was criminal law, criminal defence.

00;26;28;23 - 00;27;01;11

Louise Arbour

I ended up being an international prosecutor, but I had no- I was not ambivalent about that. The prosecution at the level that I did for genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, it reaches the same values that I would have had at home defending small criminals for, you know, possession of cannabis or something. There's a level of profound injustice at both levels, you know, defending at that level and prosecuting at the other.

00;27;01;13 - 00;27;31;12

Louise Arbour

So honestly, I have no idea where that interest of mine or that kind of anchor in justice, particularly in criminal justice, in public law, constitutional law, I don't know where it comes from. I think it some of it, again, is more temperament or likes and dislikes. You know, I like underdogs, I like marginal issues more than mainstream.

00;27;31;14 - 00;28;10;27

Louise Arbour

And I, I think the law was a very good fit for me in the sense that it has a high level but comfortable for me, level of complexity. It's not that hard. It's hard enough. There are other disciplines that would have been too hard for me. But that's- but it's complex enough that it's very intellectually challenging, but it's also grounded in social and moral issues, which I like, as opposed to other disciplines or intellectual exercise or little games-I like playing cards.

00;28;10;27 - 00;28;35;29

Louise Arbour

I like all games, I like Wordle, but I don't pretend that it has any socially redeeming virtue. But the law does. Absolutely. So as an instrument for me, it's been a very comfortable and very attractive way of having a professional life. I ended up doing this international work because, I mean, just the way it happened is so bizarre.

00;28;36;01 - 00;28;59;22

Louise Arbour

I was then, I think, on the Ontario Court of Appeal, and I got a call from a fellow judge from another province whom I barely knew, and he said she had accepted to go to a conference in South Africa but couldn't go. And would I go? I'd never been to Africa. And I remember telling him this would have been 1987, 88.

00;28;59;22 - 00;29;23;27

Louise Arbour

I said, don't we have sanctions? We don't go, no, no, no, he said, This is Canadian government supporting that. It's helping the legal profession, judges and lawyers to start envisaging a post-apartheid constitutional system. And they want to talk to us because we've had a new Bill of Rights, entrenched Bill of Rights in 1982. It's very recent.

00;29;23;27 - 00;29;28;10

Louise Arbour

We've just been there. So I found myself in Johannesburg.

00;29;28;13 - 00;29;29;11

Reeta

Aha!

00;29;29;13 - 00;29;56;21

Louise Arbour

First time in Africa all by myself. And I stayed in contact and there I met Richard Goldstone who became the first prosecutor, blah, blah. And I remember we talked a lot about equality issues, non-discrimination, but also they were way ahead of even our thinking. Should they entrench environmental rights? We hadn't done that. Social and economic rights. Anyway.

00;29;56;21 - 00;30;18;25

Louise Arbour

So yeah, I met them. They invited me the second year for a meeting of the Bar Association, and then Richard became the first war crimes prosecutor. At some point he came to Toronto and came to Toronto to talk to me because he had to go back. He was on the Constitutional Court of South Africa and all the big issues were coming up.

00;30;18;25 - 00;30;38;15

Louise Arbour

Death penalty. So he came to Toronto and we had dinner with his wife, it was great, and he said, I have to leave the war crimes prosecution: Yugoslavia and Rwanda. The Secretary General wants names for my replacement, can I give your name? I thought yes, this is so ridiculous.

00;30;38;18 - 00;30;43;08

Reeta

But you said yes.

00;30;43;08 - 00;31;06;05

Louise Arbour

But I said, yeah. I said, yeah, well of course, yeah, that would be. But I said, Richard, this will never work. I don't know anything about war, the laws of war. I don't know the difference between a general and major, a sergeant, armies, rules- I know nothing. But the underpinning is still criminal law. It's just criminal law with a big spin.

00;31;06;08 - 00;31;24;14

Louise Arbour

So that's how I found myself in The Hague. I'd never set foot at UN headquarters. So I was appointed, you know, at the level of an under secretary general of an organisation that I knew nothing about. And there you go.

00;31;24;16 - 00;31;25;08

Reeta

And there you go.

00;31;25;11 - 00;31;42;07

Louise Arbour

That's another sort of little piece of insight. Because, you know, you and I often talk about leadership and, you know, what is very bizarre in my life, when I look back on it, is I've never had a boss, ever.

00;31;42;09 - 00;31;43;01

Reeta

What do you mean?

00;31;43;04 - 00;32;06;02

Louise Arbour

Well, when I worked for my judge, he was sort of my boss. But, you know, my boss. It's him and me. When I was an academic, the dean? Not really your boss, he can't tell me- well, he could ask me what to teach, but he can't force me to teach something. I don't know, it's more like, what's the word?

00;32;06;02 - 00;32;31;29

Louise Arbour

(inaudible)...like the dean is the leader of the pack, but he's not your superior. He's like an intellectual beacon I think externally and a super administrator. But he's not your boss. You have academic freedom. He can't fire you. Then I became a judge. Well, same thing.

00;32;31;29 - 00;32;57;06

Louise Arbour

The Chief Justice is not your boss. He administers the court. He can't tell you how to decide a case. He can't force you, you know, to get off. He can organise the assignments. But anyway, you don't have a boss, really? And in the case of performance evaluation, when I was a law teacher, not my dean who evaluated me.

00;32;57;06 - 00;33;03;24

Louise Arbour

He's never in my classroom. So it was always students evaluations which were public- oh I have a good one on there.

00;33;03;26 - 00;33;05;09

Reeta

We'll come back to that.

00;33;05;11 - 00;33;29;16

Louise Arbour

Yeah. So then I was a judge and I didn't have one. Then when I went to the UN, the hyper hierarchy, I had two jobs in the UN, third one recently, both of which were completely independent. When I was the chief prosecutor for the tribunals for Yugoslavia, Rwanda, first of all, I was appointed by the Security Council upon recommendation of the Secretary-General.

00;33;29;16 - 00;33;53;23

Louise Arbour

But he didn't appoint me so he couldn't fire me. And the statute made it explicit: The prosecutor shall not seek or receive instruction from any source, any member state. And I took the position that that included the secretary general, which came as a bit of a surprise to his legal advisor. But that's another issue. So as the prosecutor, I had no boss.

00;33;53;26 - 00;34;18;26

Louise Arbour

And then as the High Commissioner for Human Rights subsequently, yes, first of all, the appointment is by the General Assembly. So again, Secretary General can't fire you. And of course, you're part of this big executive team. But as the High Commissioner for Human Rights, you are also expected to have a very independent voice in the UN system.

00;34;18;29 - 00;34;38;15

Louise Arbour

So I'm often asked to reflect on leadership, but I've never had a kind of progress through the rank of observing different layers, and maturity of leadership. Not from a personal experience anyway.

00;34;38;18 - 00;35;08;00

Reeta

I want to go back to a couple of things, but we're going to come back to your strengths. You said something really interesting that the most profound shift was going from French speaking to an English speaking world, and that they are deep cultural fault lines. And I mentioned that's true the world over between peoples, sometimes even within families, those fault lines,

00;35;08;02 - 00;35;39;04

Reeta

How does one navigate fault lines, particularly in conflict? And the conflict could be at a small 'c', you know, within a family, within a community, or could be with a capital 'C', it is between countries. And where the consequences are devastating. How do you stumble onto fault lines, uncover them, then what do you do? Do we create bridges across them, or do we navigate around them?

00;35;39;07 - 00;36;18;22

Louise Arbour

Well, I think the first thing is, is just to recognise them. You know, that's why I said for me, this shift, it's not just language, it's not just moving from, operating essentially mostly in French to professionally and personally in French, professionally in English. It's not just that. First of all, it's making the assumption that your fellow citizens, especially for me having grown up in such a homogeneous environment: all girls, all French Canadians, all Catholics, we were at a macro level that little clones of each other.

00;36;18;22 - 00;36;52;14

Louise Arbour

Of course, at the personal level, there were immense differences. But the assumption that your fellow citizens are just like you, for me, was shattered when I realised that it's not because, apart from gender, they all look like me. Because in those days Canada was still quite a homogeneous country. So starting even with this superficial homogeneity, there are such profound, very profound assumptions about how you live your life, about your level of religiousness for instance.

00;36;52;14 - 00;37;19;26

Louise Arbour

Of who is in the establishment and, you know, these are not class systems but professional classes. So I came to this environment with a set of the assumptions that I realised quickly were very superficial and unfounded. That idea I carried easily elsewhere. So I don't make assumptions about people.

00;37;19;26 - 00;37;49;24

Louise Arbour

I don't make assumptions about, certainly not about what they're worth. That's another thing when you think I was a judge, it's true, but I, I have never and I never, ever judge

people. That's not what judging. It's not passing a moral judgement. No, it's applying rules. You know, it's not personal. So yeah.

00;37;49;24 - 00;38;29;25

Louise Arbour

So I think in all situations, the capacity first of all, to acknowledge that your point of view is not the universal point of view. It's just one, and one could call that the kind of form of political empathy. The intellectual capacity to distance yourself from your baggage and make an effort to see the world from somebody else's point of view, which actually, I think in negotiations, that's the highest quality, because to only be smart at articulating your positions is not that hard, but to be able to really figure out where is the red line on the other side.

00;38;29;25 - 00;38;47;03

Louise Arbour

How does she- where is she going to be prepared to yield, and where can I meet that? I think pays off much more. But some people seem absolutely incapable of getting outside their own-

00;38;47;05 - 00;38;49;06

Reeta

And standing in the shoes of someone else.

00;38;49;07 - 00;39;21;05

Louise Arbour

And that's why I, I'm very suspicious of conversations that put too quickly on the table things like: these are my values. Because your values are not negotiable. Your interests are negotiable. So the world of values and passion, intuitively I'd like to take a step back from that, instead can we come down to something a little more...

00;39;21;07 - 00;39;26;09

Louise Arbour

pedestrian, like your interests, which I think are more negotiable.

00;39;26;12 - 00;40;04;14

Reeta

But even finding that common space where interests may genuinely be shared takes work, takes observation, takes listening, and also takes in some way standing outside of yourself. Again, when you think about it, I think about the cases you've had to preside over, the level of independence that was just paramount. And yet the level of consultation that must have also taken place listening, consulting the law, but also you work with peers in other jurisdictions.

00;40;04;16 - 00;40;14;24

Reeta

How did you manage that? Because it sounds, on one level, incredibly lonely. And yet at the same time, I know there was a community, that balance.

00;40;14;26 - 00;40;44;13

Louise Arbour

I think our lives are full of paradoxes and like, for instance, a lot of the things I've described to you about parts of my life would suggest that I'm very independent and therefore... like in the judicial world, for instance, a lot of people celebrate dissidents. You know, the great dissenter. No, the courageous, smart one that sees what nobody else can see and will stand for it.

00;40;44;16 - 00;41;22;15

Louise Arbour

I've dissented in some cases, but not by- I've only done that very reluctantly. I like consensus. I like to be part of the one that shapes the consensus. And not everything has to be on my terms. Now, where are the red lines? That's where I will never say oh, values and principles. To me, it's more having made every, every effort to consolidate a consensus.

00;41;22;18 - 00;41;48;00

Louise Arbour

If I feel that it's just too high a price to pay, I will still dissent, but only where I have to. So I will, express myself as a member of the consensus up to that point. And frankly, you know, unless if you have a very big ego, if you dissent like some people say, well, the dissenter is the voice of the future.

00;41;48;04 - 00;42;04;12

Louise Arbour

Well, sometimes. Sometimes not. But if you're in the consensus, that's the order of the day that it works, like, right now. So sometimes it's better to gain less, but to-

00;42;04;12 - 00;42;06;29

Reeta

Move something forward.

00;42;06;29 - 00;42;21;28

Louise Arbour

Than to stand on the moral high ground, largely unoccupied, with no immediate benefit and possibly, sometimes it is the way of the future, but sometimes it's just.

00;42;22;01 - 00;42;22;19

Reeta

Thought in progress.

00;42;22;19 - 00;42;23;18

Louise Arbour

Ego flattering

00;42;23;22 - 00;42;30;14

Reeta

No, no, it's so true. Let's go back to those students. What do they have to say about Professor Arbour?

00;42;30;16 - 00;42;50;03

Louise Arbour

So these students evaluations in my days, the way it was done, it was: on a given day, towards the end of term, you didn't know ahead of time, somebody would walk into your classroom, ask you to leave. They give the students sheets of paper, and some of them were just ticking, you know, in their range of 1 to 10.

00;42;50;03 - 00;43;14;18

Louise Arbour

Does she speak loud enough? All kinds of stuff. And there was space at the at the bottom of the sheet for personal comments, general comments. And these blocks of evaluations were then put in the library for the students for subsequent years to choose. You know, they were three sections of the same subject, they could choose which profit they wanted so they would go.

00;43;14;18 - 00;43;31;24

Louise Arbour

When I had my first child, I had my three kids when I was teaching, so I was pregnant with Emily due to give birth at the beginning of March. So when I went and told, first of all, nobody had ever been pregnant.

00;43;31;24 - 00;43;32;14

Reeta

And teach.

00;43;32;14 - 00;43;57;19

Louise Arbour

And teach, there were no women. So I go see my dean and I said, I'm pregnant. I could see his administrative mind go into, oh my God, what are we going to do? Says what do you think? I said, well, why don't I talk to my students about options? So either we could condense the course and we'll do the exam before the beginning of March, which would mean an additional hour per week.

00;43;57;19 - 00;44;20;14

Louise Arbour

Or I could hire someone to replace me to finish the course, but I'll mark the exam anyway. I gave them 3 or 4 options. I left the classroom. They debated, I came back, what do you want? They said, we can't add another hour because we all have different schedules, so you'll have to hire somebody to- or I said I could not teach the course at all, but that- what am I going to do for two months anyway?

00;44;20;14 - 00;44;42;26

Louise Arbour

They said hire somebody to finish the course. So I found someone, didn't work out as well as I had hope. Apparently, according to the evaluations. But the way it was put by one, I assume a guy because nobody else would think in those terms/ One of the questions was, how could this course have been improved? He wrote: by the pill.

00;44;42;29 - 00;44;46;11

Reeta

By the pill?

00;44;46;13 - 00;44;50;16

Louise Arbour

I assume this was meant as a compliment.

00;44;50;19 - 00;45;16;10

Reeta

That goes right up there. Now Louise you also talk about three kids coming through. Your partner. Life partner, who I believe was also a lawyer. How did both of you manage and navigate this? Busy careers. Three kids. Any of these kids in the law as well?

00;45;16;12 - 00;45;19;19

Louise Arbour

Only my oldest daughter is a lawyer.

00;45;19;19 - 00;45;21;07

Louise Arbour

Yeah, very similar pattern.

00;45;21;13 - 00;45;22;16

Reeta

Very similar. Okay.

00;45;22;16 - 00;45;26;19

Louise Arbour

She clerked at that the Supreme Court of Canada, you know, yeah.

00;45;26;22 - 00;45;28;12

Reeta

Some patterns repeat.

00;45;28;15 - 00;46;03;11

Louise Arbour

Some, but not all not all, I really believe, I always believe in a lot of freedom to live their lives that they want, as long as they're happy. And I'm there. It's good. It's good. Yeah. We had two professional careers, but that's, the funny thing is, we worked sort of together for a long time. We worked at the Supreme Court of Canada as law clerks together, and then he went to teach at Osgoode Hall Law School, and I joined the law school the subsequent year, first as a lecturer and then...

00;46;03;11 - 00;46;29;13

Louise Arbour

He went into private practice and different things. But yeah, and I see them now today and counsel, in a law firm at BLG in the Montreal office, I look at the young women, I could still hear my mother say to me, how do you do that? How can you do it with, you know, you both have these big jobs and three kids? And I thought, I don't know what she's talking about. You get up in the morning,

00;46;29;13 - 00;47;03;27

Louise Arbour

You just go, go go go go and catch your breath. And now I look at my daughter with three kids and my young colleagues with 2 or 3 kids, and I'm thinking, oh, my God, how did they do it? It's seems inconceivable to me that you, that young women can still manage and accomplish so much professionally in, I think, a work environment that's even more demanding than it was when I was there with constant solicitation by email and texting and the complexity.

00;47;03;27 - 00;47;05;29

Reeta

And the complexity. The pace and the complexity.

00;47;05;29 - 00;47;19;18

Louise Arbour

The volume of stuff you must consult and digest. And we complained in my days that we didn't have enough, you know, we didn't have enough good books of doctrine. There was not enough literature. Now, it's overwhelming.

00;47;19;21 - 00;47;37;14

Reeta

An overwhelming amount. I want us to depart a little bit to talk about how you've just contributed. You told me this, you've mentioned the dog a couple times. The dog when you and your mom up and left and took all of you.

00;47;37;17 - 00;47;38;08

Louise Arbour

And the dog.

00;47;38;08 - 00;48;06;13

Reeta

And the dog, you told me a story about working with a charity on its board, which prepares dogs, and gifts dogs to people who are, who are blind or who have some pet impairment in terms of their vision and who need a dog. Tell me a little bit more about that was, there's something lovely about how your face lights up.

00;48;06;13 - 00;48;19;25

Reeta

I remember when you first told me this story about this wonderful dog, and I think you had one of them, you brought one of those dogs home as a retired dog, or maybe a not as well behaved dog who came home with you. Tell me a little bit about that experience?

00;48;19;27 - 00;48;46;28

Louise Arbour

In fact, I just finished my nine year terms on the board of that foundation. It's called the Mirror Foundation in Quebec. It's an amazing organisation. And so it's at the other extreme of the Mastercard Foundation, because it's a small, very, targeted work type organisation. And for me, it's complete self-indulgence to have worked with them.

00;48;47;00 - 00;49;12;11

Louise Arbour

So it was founded 30 years ago by one guy who used to for some reason, he was he was working training attack dogs like guard dogs, you know, dogs that guard, factories at night, you know, that bite people and bark and he hated it. He felt that the whole world hated him and the dogs and yet he loved dogs.

00;49;12;11 - 00;49;55;08

Louise Arbour

So he got this idea of starting to train dogs as service dogs originally, really for people who were visually impaired. And then it grew into people with mobility issues. People who are in wheelchairs. And he had a dog with them. And now increasingly, we still we work with children on the autism spectrum and for emotional support to traumatised children in particular, or women when they have to tell their stories either to the police or even in a courtroom, have these emotional support dogs- they sense the tension in the storytelling and they'll...

00;49;55;10 - 00;49;55;25

Reeta

They'll be right there.

00;49;55;25 - 00;50;25;05

Louise Arbour

They're amazing, amazing dogs. It's a huge amount of training. So when they're born, they go to a foster family until they're about one just to be socialised, and then they come back for assessment. And the ones who are interesting, the females who are the best at every level, in intelligence, sensitivity training, ability to they go into reproduction.

00;50;25;08 - 00;50;32;19

Louise Arbour

Which is a nice life. I mean, it's not a puppy mill. But they they're the future.

00;50;32;21 - 00;50;35;04

Reeta

And hopefully they pass on the genes, that emotional intelligence.

00;50;35;11 - 00;51;02;02

Louise Arbour

And it only takes 2 or 3 males but 16, 17 females. Anyway, that's in and of itself the whole genetics and stuff is interesting. And then the foundation gives away, you know, up to 200 dogs a year to people in need as service dogs. So and of course, the one I got, nine years ago,

00;51;02;02 - 00;51;11;06

Louise Arbour

Just died in the fall. All right. So I'm in the line up for another reject, because the ones we get are the ones who are not.

00;51;11;08 - 00;51;11;24

Reeta

Quite, quite.

00;51;11;24 - 00;51;13;10

Louise Arbour

Not quite, not quite.

00;51;13;10 - 00;51;35;25

Reeta

Louise your life, I just think about what you said, you know, raised by a phenomenal mother. Courageous, you know, in many ways, defying of her times, even though she may have been preoccupied with fitting in, you know, maybe not. Or being aware of having not fit in, raised by other women. And, you really have navigated all kinds of fault lines throughout your career.

00;51;35;25 - 00;52;10;26

Reeta

And whether you think it was serendipitous, accidental, unplanned, I see a thread all the way through about using a megaphone to speak to justice, to speak for truly, to speak for the underdog, but mostly for people who have been on the margin, who, right down to this story you've spoken about this charity, and I hope, the work that we do at the Mastercard Foundation, we're so honoured that you are on our board, that you are that voice.

00;52;10;28 - 00;52;47;09

Reeta

You are that voice which always brings us back. I don't know whether it's to consensus, but you bring us back and to pay attention to fault lines. And while I know it's not about always about these airy fairy things and this and perhaps these intangibles, but it is about ensuring that we are here for the interests, the interests of humanity, you know, and about seeing each other, not making assumptions, but really trying to empathise, with the contexts in which people have to live and have to work.

00;52;47;11 - 00;52;48;29

Reeta

So I just want to thank you.

00;52;50;28 - 00;53;31;04

Louise Arbour

You hear it from everyone what a privilege it is to work with an organisation that has, again, the right mix of extraordinary capacity, not only financial, but in terms of the pool of talent that it has attracted and has put in place, so enormous capacity and a willingness to have an impact. But if it has to be the hard way, that to me is very critical that we're not in the low hanging fruit business of self-congratulation for great accomplishments.

00;53;31;05 - 00;53;58;25

Louise Arbour

I think this organisation is, to me, is such a perfect fit for everything I've ever stood for, except this time with capacity at other stages in my life. I didn't have at that level. I think it's, and I have to tell you, in my life, there were times I was very suspicious of philanthropy. I thought, well, why don't we have an adequate fiscal system, tax system?

00;53;58;28 - 00;54;13;16

Louise Arbour

And if you're a real Democrat in the general sense of the word, why is it that this board of 12 people with the fantastic CEO makes all these decisions, where is the rest of the world? But I've changed my mind, as you can see.

00;54;13;17 - 00;54;35;17

Reeta

Okay, I'm glad to hear that. But I hope you can always keep us walking that line to constantly listen, especially now to listen to young people across Africa and indigenous communities in Canada, and to have that empathy you spoke about so that we also centre ourselves on finding that consensus for the greater good.

00;54;35;17 - 00;54;39;07

Louise Arbour

Yeah. And I think if we keep in mind that we are not their voice.

00;54;39;07 - 00;54;39;17

Reeta

We aren't.

00;54;39;17 - 00;54;45;29

Louise Arbour

They have a voice. We are their megaphone. Today it's not called a megaphone, it's probably called some other-

00;54;46;01 - 00;54;46;17

Reeta

Some other-

00;54;46;22 - 00;54;55;25

Louise Arbour

Tech instrument, but I think it's really important that we never think that we speak for them or that they don't have vocal cords.

00;54;56;02 - 00;55;04;26

Reeta

Yes they do. And we hear it and we listen. Thank you. Thank you so much, Louise. Thank you. Wonderful. I've had so much fun doing this. Yes. Thank you.

00;55;04;28 - 00;55;06;06

Louise Arbour

Absolutely.

00;55;06;09 - 00;55;49;01

Reeta

Honourable Louise Arbour's life and career exemplify the profound impact that one individual, one woman, can have on the pursuit of global justice, from student to chief prosecutor, International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, from research officer to justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, from mother and grandmother to advocate for global human rights for all. Louise Arbour is an outstanding example of transcending boundaries.

00;55;49;03 - 00;56;15;19

Reeta

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.

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