



Conversation with Kumi Naidoo

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself and tell us about yourself?

Kumi Naidoo: Hi, I am Kumi Naidoo, and I am currently a visiting lecturer at Stanford University. I'm working on what is called energizing activism, which is trying to harness the power of arts and culture for social change and to address the communications deficit that change agents are facing, whether around climate, the well-being economy and so on.

Ashley Hopkinson: Okay, wonderful. Thank you. That sounds like really powerful work. What would you say is the role well-being plays in the current work you do? How do you define well-being?

Kumi Naidoo: So it's very interesting because, like many things, there is a Global North and a Global South take on what these things mean. So firstly, well-being, wellness, that whole language does not have the same currency in the Global South as it does in the North. In fact, I think that there are even some people who believe that wellbeing has become a bit of an industry in itself, in terms of the different wellbeing offerings that you have, especially in the Global North.

So therefore, it's important in trying to figure the answer to this question that we don't homogenize our approaches, thinking that this is how it plays out largely, similarly in different spaces in the world. Having said that, wellbeing is about people finding the balance of being able to meet the professionals, or activists, or change imperatives on the one hand, and being able to do all of that and to do it in a way that energizes them, keeps them balanced.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you say more about balance as it relates to activism?

Kumi Naidoo: One of the frequent things that I say is, in the moment of history that we find ourselves in, pessimism is a luxury we simply cannot afford. And the pessimism that emerges from our analysis, our observations and our lived realities can best be overcome by the creativity of our thought, our action, and the extent of our moral courage, right? Today we must recognize that, especially for people who are pushing for changes that are necessary to address the climate crisis and the intersecting crises that emerge from it, are finding that we are dealing with what some call eco-anxiety.

So when I think about wellbeing in that kind of global context that we find ourselves in, one of the things that I feel very, very strongly is that participation in addressing the issues that humanity faces, however small or however big that participation might be, is actually the best antidote to the rising anxiety levels. When people have pathways to participation, they break out of their loneliness, they discover that there are other people who are also dealing with it, they build community around it. So I strongly, strongly hold that view, and that's a view I've actually held as a 15-year-old.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is the work of organizations when it comes to a well-being economy. Is there anything worth duplicating that you have seen?

Kumi Naidoo: Organizations are doing better on diversity than they were doing in the past, which I would agree with at one level, in the sense that they have been trying to improve on Global North-Global South balance. They've been trying to look at other diversities, whether it's gender, sexual orientation and so on, to address it. And so I want to acknowledge there has been effort and it's moving in the right direction, but it's very, very hard for people to join an organization which is advancing on paper, the big human rights or justice issues of our time, and then what you find within these institutions is a replication, of that very behavior or elements of that behavior. And the truth is, the sad thing is, organizations in the NGO space use the same consultants, often, that the big companies, including the fossil fuel companies and companies that are doing actions that take us closer towards humanity's survival being threatened.

Ashley Hopkinson: Does anything else stand out?

Kumi Naidoo: Yes, a few things stand out. One is, I think in the North, the approach to wellbeing is very individualistic rather than collective and communal. Is that clear what I mean by that?

Ashley Hopkinson: Yes—That the approach comes from the idea of this is what one person is doing. That the focus is very much on one person within an organization and what they've been able to do, as opposed to how multiple people and multiple things have worked together for that to actually be successful?

Kumi Naidoo: Absolutely, and then secondly, especially when we talk about a wellbeing economy, the realities, say for folks living in the UK where the headquarters of Amnesty International is or the folks living in Amsterdam where the headquarters of Greenpeace International is, for example. There are certain things they can take for granted, medical aid, pensions, state pensions, certain social security benefits, if they lose jobs and so on. These are, for most people in the Global South, things that don't exist, or if they exist, they are at a very basic level and don't give you that peace of mind that you've got a social safety net that you can fall back on. So to try to have one conversation about this, in a homogenous way, strikes me as being very difficult because the starting points, economically speaking, culturally speaking, political space speaking, the amount of civic and democratic space you have, in many parts of the Global South is quite distinctively different compared to what people enjoying in [other parts of the world].

In terms of healing strategies, wellbeing strategies, one of the terrible things that colonialism did was it sought to decimate Indigenous knowledge systems, including healing systems, right? And one of the things that you're seeing now, throughout the world, is with the support of Indigenous peoples, notwithstanding all of that effort to crush, it still exists. It survived because of its validity, its durability. So for example, you're seeing increasingly the use of plant-based medicine. Coming from Indigenous communities, especially as plant-based medicines were used to address mental health, right? So whether it is ibogaine from Central Africa, from Gabon and so on, or whether it's Ayahuasca from the Amazon, and its equivalence in other parts of the world. We're seeing things done in ceremony. So the important thing about all of those healing journeys, which are more based on Indigenous wisdom rather than on Western psychology, are to a large extent, a very different starting point, right? And then maybe the final thing I would say is that there is more of a sense that our wellbeing is enhanced when we see wellbeing as a community project rather than solely as an individual project, right?

Ashley Hopkinson: **Is there a wellbeing strategy that can work to bridge gaps and to bridge divides and to bring communities together? Because as we're talking about intersectional work, I wonder if there is anything that you've witnessed or observed that tends to take some of the firepower out of the room, take some of the tension out of the room, particularly in a polarized situation?**

Kumi Naidoo: So I come from South Africa, as you know. I saw this in practice and Mandela probably was the quintessential healer and the quintessential wellbeing promoter, right, in the sense that what he did, and not without challenge and not without contradiction, but what I saw was him getting people to focus on why people hold different views. And always recognizing that actually people have come to all their views partly because of the ideological state apparatus, by which I mean, the

framework for education, religion, funding of arts and culture, and particularly communications media, is so controlled by powerful, commercial business interests in most society or state interests, state media, that people think they hold independent views, but they have been fed. The 30% plus people in the United States that believe that Donald Trump still won the election three years ago, right? And I would just conclude by saying that you cannot do wellbeing work in the world today, or be committed to fostering wellbeing pathways, without honestly, and boldly, and courageously, addressing the very powerful attempts that are ongoing in a fascist, or if you want to be kind, neo-fascist, mode of being, which is this constant attempt at othering—the us vs them.

Ashley Hopkinson: I'm in an area that is often hit by hurricanes and I've noticed at a point of crisis something changes in the ecosystem specifically around how people interact. I wonder if you could speak to crisis shifting, sometimes, how people think about wellbeing? Does the pressure cooker of urgency shift wellbeing?

Kumi Naidoo: Yeah, absolutely. Extreme crises can force people together where they are, as we're seeing with the extreme weather events that are accelerating all the time as a result of our failure to address the climate crisis. [However], I'm not wanting to romanticize it.

If you take COVID as an example, COVID brought out the best and the worst, right, in humanity. On the worst side, you saw people at the top of society try to make as fast a buck as they could through exploiting the system, what some have called disaster capitalism, right? And then on the other hand, we saw probably the highest levels of social solidarity that we've seen in a long time, where people who had slightly more were willing to share that with people who had much less, right? And in South Africa, for example, we saw new organizations emerge, where people of privilege and people whose economic well-being was better taken care of, suddenly realize, my God, the government is saying to people they can't leave their homes and millions of people rely on a day wage to survive. They go and sell the fruits at the corner or whatever, and if they can't do that, their families are starving. And so in the way people mobilized food, water, and other support, it was on a scale that I've never seen before.

So let me say that crises can be moments where humanity puts its best foot forward, but that is always dependent on whether there are sufficient people of decency, righteousness, and caring who actually step forward. Otherwise, you will have powerful self-serving interests. So, it's not a given that crises will generate a better approach to wellbeing. It does have a huge capability to do that, provided there's a vigilance for those that will, in the spirit of disaster capitalism, step in to make a quick buck and advance their own economic interests from the disaster, the crisis that people are facing.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think it will take to demonstrate the value of wellbeing work, whether that's climate, health, democracy etc? What will it take to persuade others that this needs to be something that people pay attention to in order for us to move forward?

Kumi Naidoo: The problem is, far too many of our people, globally, are living on the edge of survival on a daily basis and thinking about wellbeing sounds like a very, very far away thing from them. I would say, a more serious answer would be, it's about making people comfortable with the idea that the world is facing a massive mental health crisis. It repeats itself in country after country in slightly different ways, whether it's gun violence in the U.S. or it's violent armed robberies in South Africa. It is a reflection of a serious mental health crisis. And acknowledgement that what is needed is there has to be thoughtful, collective investments, changing of narratives, changing of our approaches and so on, is critically important.

I think part of what will advance this work is convincing a lot of people who have public profiles to step forward and say, "Hey, I have mental health challenges." I've just brought out a book called Letters to My Mother: The Making of a Troublemaker, a year ago. And I spoke very vulnerably about the impact, my mother's suicide, my son's suicide, my sister's passing, all of that had on me, right. "It's okay to say that you need help. It's okay to seek out help, and it's okay to go for therapy if you need it."

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there anything else that you would like to add about wellbeing?

Kumi Naidoo: If we look at the rhythms of healing, right, and the rhythms of wellbeing, we should not forget the basic power of rhythms, and music, and arts, culture. And I would say that, if there's one thing we need to do much, much more of is draw on the power of arts and culture in its fullest to help with all the challenges that humanity faces, including the communications deficit we have, in terms of reaching the people that we need to and moving them into action. But specifically, I think the power of arts and culture, whether it's music, whether it's dance, whether it's art, whether it's street theater, whether it's hip hop, whether it's writing, poetry, movies, documentaries, all of these cultural expressions, in all its diversities, needs to be harnessed to its fullest.

I don't think we are harnessing the power of arts and culture to support well-being specifically, but to support all the struggles that humanity faces. And that is why this moment of history calls for energizing activism, bringing arts, culture and activism together on a scale never seen before. It's happening and it's always happening at some place or the other, but it needs to be harnessed in a much more powerful way than before.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*