

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 56 – Kali Ferguson – Personal Parable

Gifts of Imperfection

And now a personal word,

Kali Ferguson is an empath. Spend any time with her and you feel yourself being absorbed. She is sensitive to moods. She listens carefully. And she expresses the joys and bruises of the world with deep insight and grace.

Here are some traits of empaths noted by Dr. Judith Orloff in *Psychology Today*: empaths filter the world through their intuition. They are highly sensitive. They are wide open and nurturing, attuned to people's feeling, often to the extreme. They take on positivity around them, feeling a rush of peace and love, but also negativity, which can be exhausting for them. As super-responders, empaths need time to be alone to recharge. Empaths can be overwhelmed in intimate relationships. They can be engulfed and lose their identity. The hustle and bustle of everyday life can be too much. Quiet and nature restore them. Empaths are compassionate, drawn to ease the pain of sentient life around them. To carry on, empaths must set boundaries, fiercely manage their time, and attend to self-care.

Combine these empathetic qualities with Kali's talents and interests – her performance skills, her knowledge of folk tales, her poetry and song-writing, her fluency in English and Spanish, her passion for the oral traditions of Latin America and the African diaspora, her own intersectional identity as a Black woman in America, and her family legacy of civil rights and social justice – and you have the makings of a unique and powerful body of work.

Here are just a few of Kali's accomplishments: exploring the connection between Spanish Catholic hymns and the poetry of the Harlem renaissance, organizing coalitions to unite Black and Brown people in North Carolina, leading creativity workshops in elementary schools, publishing essays on the importance of crossing borders and learning to tell our own stories, inviting folks to a festival to sample the food and music of the African diaspora (Mississippi cornbread, Liberian potato greens, and songs by Sade), drawing attention to the plight of the homeless, coaching early education teachers on integrating the performing arts into the curriculum, and designing a story-telling web-based course for immigrant and marginalized populations.

Kali has done all this work by choice, but also because the route of traditional employment has been closed off to her. What Kali did not share in this interview was the cost of her psychiatric illness on her career. In an email exchange I asked her if there was a connection between her diagnosis as manic-depressive and later schizoaffective and being a story-teller. Kali wrote back:

So, if I had not had the trouble I've had keeping jobs as a teacher...I never would have had time and mental air between careers (as a Black-Brown community bridging organizer in Durham and a Masters' student at Florida International University in Africana studies) to understand and pursue telling the stories I was reading anyway. I had to go through a lot of therapy to become ok with not being able to have regular jobs like other people because the stress nearly broke me.

I asked her in that same email exchange if she sees her life as a fractured fairy tale. Kali responded:

Hmm. I would not call it that. I do have a unique situation and some huge blessings I can take no credit for, but at the end of the day, I am very, very human. I want decently normal things like good movies on Netflix and people I can trust who understand my mind and my joys and challenges...I want us all to have something like storytelling or music in our lives, though it requires the best kind of work to maintain a quality relationship with anything or anyone worth keeping. Storytelling, music, loving relationships are well worth keeping so I work at them. If there is magic, it is in the appreciation and humility required to share that. My job is to promote a change in our Modern Mythology that uplifts this kind of appreciation and approach.

Kali Ferguson reminds us of our gifts of imperfection. We are all less than we might hope for and greater than what we might imagine.

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