

Meditations On by ISPA

Muriel Miguel Episode Transcription

Ilter Ibrahimof

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I'm your host Ilter Ibrahimoff.

Muriel Miguel

I was thinking about how much we don't listen. And that it's so important to listen to each other. I remember once a young woman was interviewing me, and she called me up after an interview and said, "Do you have something important to say that you would like to be put in the interview?" And I said, "Yes: listen, listen, listen, listen." And she said, "Well, I meant something important." And I was like, "Oh, wow." It was an example of not listening.

Ilter Ibrahimof

You just heard Muriel Miguel of the Kuniyala and Rappahannock nations; founder and Artistic Director of Spiderwoman Theatre, the longest running Indigenous feminist theater in the Americas. She facilitates Storyweaving Workshops - a signature Indigenous performance methodology that she pioneered - in universities and communities across the US, Canada and Europe.

A multi-talented actor, choreographer, playwright and visionary, Muriel's remarkable journey and her landmark contributions to the contemporary feminist and Indigenous theatre serves as an inspiration to all generations of artists and arts leaders.

Before she welcomes us to ISPA's 2022 New York Congress, Muriel and I spoke virtually in December 2021 about the importance of story, what it means to really listen to one another, and what inclusion does and doesn't look like.

Muriel Miguel

I find that we don't really listen to each other, we listen to the point of what to say back, not really thinking about what that other person is saying. And at that point, you left the room, you know, you just leave it you go, when you don't, you don't come back until they're finished. And how important it is to stay in the circle. If you don't agree, you talk about it without attacking. You talked about it, in a way that people understand what you're saying to them. It's so important to me, it's really important to me that people listen, that you listen.

And one of the things that upsets me, a lot of the times when you're having discussions is that feeling like they're talking to you, but they're not talking to you. And you have no idea what they said to you. You know, it's just like a barrage of words. And I find that really difficult. I think with Native people, the history is so deep and so long that I think sometimes we get confused, because the anger is still there, the disappointment is still there. And I think it's the listening to, to acknowledge that all these things happen to us.

I realized about a year ago or so that my father was part of that scoop up. He never talked about it. We never talked, the family never talked about it. I always wondered the things that happened to him. And he was sent to I think it was Trinidad or someplace like that. He was you know, he was a kid. And they cut his hair, they changed his name. They sent him to school, they put shoes on him. And he kept on running away until they sent him back. But he had a different name.

I think things like that we're very leery of why we're someplace. Or why do you want me now? One of the thoughts I have is that they really don't think that you're going to do something. You're there. You know that kind of wanting you but not wanting you. Of wanting you but making sure that you can't do anything. That's why I ask why a lot of times when people ask me to do things like, you know, why me? And how did you hear about me? I found out if anyone calls you genius, you run. That's what I found out. That you say, "Well, why did you call me or why do you want me in that piece? Or why do you want me to direct?" And they say, "Well, you're a genius." And you go "Oh, I'm a genius". You get very puffed up, you know, it's like "I'm a genius" and you do it. And then you're in the middle of it and you say I shouldn't be here. They are bringing you into the white circle.

This one experience was that I remember sitting in the circle, and they're saying we can't smudge and, but, we did talk to the Union. And that was the first time that native people talked to the Union. And we were supposed to be proud about that. And I remember saying out loud. "If it's such a step forward, why do I feel so bad?" And that was the question I put into the circle. I don't feel good that they listened to us if they weren't going to do anything. Inclusion does not mean that they want to understand you. You're going to be brought into their atmosphere, their environment. And so you'll be a citizen of the USA or Canada or wherever.

We talk about Native people here, but you know, across the world, Maori and Aboriginal people, and it's like, this is how you become a white person. I think it's more the feeling of, do you see me? Do you see me as a person? A person with different background? A person that thinks in another way? Do you see me as that? Or do you need me to come into your circle, so we have you there and it's called inclusive.

I was thinking about growing up in Brooklyn, and how we learned to dance, we learn to sing, you know, we learned the songs that went with the dances. And we spent a lot of time you know, it was like, every Saturday we went, and we did this. And then in history class, the history teacher, he just pronounced that all Indians are dead. And their culture is dead. And I was like, beyond myself, I don't know how old I must have been like 10 or 11. And I got up and I said, "No, we're not dead". And I talked about being Native in New York City. Got into big trouble... sent to the principal and my parents being notified. And I found out that all of us young people, were getting into trouble. Because we were saying that, that, you know, we are alive and living in our culture is alive. Then what happened was that we were asked as a group to go into the assembly, as they called it. They invited us to come and tell our stories, to show our dances and songs. And I never thought it was important. I thought it was a gig. It's how I was thinking about

it. And years later, I realized how important that was that we were able to talk and there was someone listening. And someone that was brave, because you're going up against the educational system, you know. And that to me, because I always think about it was very, very important.

Among Native people, a lot of times, you know, they say, "Oh, you do that this way. We do it this way." And you talk about that. I remember one time, we were doing a show, and there were Iroquois, and they do round dances, they go the other way, then a lot of us go. And so we were in the dressing room. And we were talking about it amongst ourselves, saying not nice things, you know, because they go the other way. And we had a chief there. He announced, you know, he said, My clan is such and such and I'm Iroquois. And there was a big, big, deep, deep silence in the room. Because this is a man that danced with us and we respected. No one said anything. But I carried that story with me for a very long time. I was an emcee for this man, on his 80th something birthday. And I brought it up. When I was talking, I apologized to him. This was over 40 years later, I apologized. And I said, you know that it doesn't matter which way which way we dance as long as we're all in the circle. And we understand some go this way and some go that way. But we're in the circle. We're there to back each other and support each other not put each other down. That's what's important. That's a roundabout story if I ever heard one.

They ask a native person to do a land acknowledgement and I realized one day that Well, you're asking the wrong people. We shouldn't be doing the land acknowledgement. Other people white people should be doing the land acknowledgement. They have to tell they have to know. We know where we came from. It can't be a land acknowledgement for us. It has to be a welcoming. It has to be that Welcome to Turtle Island. And telling other people other than native people that this is what happened to us. That's really, really important that we talk about that in a way that we go back to listening again, that people should be listening to this. This took centuries, what happened to Native people. So how can we fix it in one meeting around the table, you know? And it means every day, you have to think about it. Every day, you have to know who you are.

It's not only Native people, I think it's it's all over the world. I think that we, we forget who we are. All this stuff comes up but we forget, we really forget how hard it is for young people who have been working on Zoom, and all this other streaming and all of that, how the touch and looking at each other, became so difficult. And they're back to their phones, they're back to not looking. And things happen.

When I was in Toronto, we were I was living in a very fancy place, God help us and I was turning a corner. And I have a cane and I was turning a corner and this young man, came whipping around the other the same corner. And he almost knocked me down. And he just looked up and went back to his phone and walked around me. And I thought, well, that's what we have now. We don't have no connection. And if you don't even say, Oh, I'm sorry, are you okay? or anything like that. You just look around the person like it was their fault. There was a place they brought me in to just talk with young kids. It was in a black neighborhood. And they were really working hard on their young ones. And how, how they look at other people, and I heard it, but I didn't think about it. I heard it. Well, that's nice. I went to open a door. And this little

kid came running down the hall. And he was in front of me. And he went, he opened the door. And then he looked at me. And then he held the door for me and let me go through first. And there you go. They're being successful. They're successful here. If you have kids doing that.

I got into a car the other day in Toronto, and the door was open and I was reaching for the door and a young native kid came by and he tucked me in and closed the door. And it was that kind of a feeling again, that it's being taught somewhere. This is being taught somewhere. And maybe it means simply that we should be talking to other people and listening to other people and what they're doing and how to do it without the daba daba diba daba. We do a lot of our dabba dabba dabba, and we may get grants and get money. But the problem is still there. The dilemma is still there. And that kid that almost knocked me down. Would he be doing that? If things were really talked about?\

That's the interesting part, I think, is that all of us carry stories. Every one of us carries stories. And sometimes the story is baggage. Sometimes it's knowledge. And sometimes it's it's just who we are. And we don't look for that when we're talking to people. And when you come into a circle you're hoping that little by little you'll start to understand it that this one does this way this one does it that way, but you're in the circle. So you can look at each other and see each other and talk about it and I think that's that's so important as a people to do that.

Ilter Ibrahimof

Meditations On is presented by ISPA.

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