



podcast

the  
public  
good <sup>TM</sup>

Nadine Benjamin MBE,  
British soprano

# Finding pride



Jaco Marais: Hello, and welcome to the Good Governance Institute, the Public Good podcast. In this pre-recorded episode, we'll be discussing Gay Pride.

What is it? Where does it come from? And why should it matter to people who are not gay? My name is Jaco Marais. I'm your host, and I think you'll want to listen to this.

Alright, so I'm here with Nadine Benjamin, and she is a soprano, and also a leadership coach with Everybody Can! It's late on Thursday afternoon, and we're here talking Pride.

London Pride is coming up next weekend, and I want to ask you a few questions about finding Pride. Because I think it's a process rather than just bursting out of the closet or becoming an ally overnight. How did you find Pride? What does it mean to you?

Nadine Benjamin: For me, Pride really is all about a celebration of being all of yourself. That's really what I see Pride as, a moment of celebration, a moment to be among others who also celebrate you and you celebrate them.

It's a time of great connection, it's a time of great understanding, it's a time of togetherness, and it's a time of grief, a grief of moments that have been unconnected, and moments that you've had to strive for, and for the first time you're among people that understand you and there's a grief that's released, there's a sadness that's released.

So I think it's got many, many doorways. It's quite a complex symbolisation, I believe.


Jaco Marais: Do you think the grief is connected to shame?

Nadine Benjamin: I think some of the grief is definitely connected to shame, and also to rejection or exclusion. But also recognising that you're no longer alone, and that there are others like you, and it's okay. Some of that grief is meeting all the things that you have been challenged with, and then all of a sudden you find in Pride, at these events, a place to release, and then it's almost like they wash away and you're reborn again. That's where you meet the full celebration. Every year it gets easier and easier to meet, I suppose.

Jaco Marais: I don't know about you but I find these events quite overwhelming sometimes. People act in extraordinary ways. Why do you think people act in such extraordinary ways at Pride festivals?

Nadine Benjamin: Well, I think once you've been suppressed enough, or oppressed enough, and you're holding this suppression, you need to find a way to release. Sometimes I think when one first releases, it can go completely the other way. There's no balance, there's no halfway. It's like oh my God, I can do anything I want. I don't need anybody's permission.

So I think it's understandable especially if you've been living at



home, for maybe 20 years, never been allowed to speak about your sexuality and who you are inside. I mean, that's a long time. For some people it's 40 years - for some it's even longer. And then they finally get this courage - and it is courage - to jump into their life for the first time. Not an agendaed life, not the life that somebody else thinks they should be living. In that one moment, they're jumping into *their* life. So it's almost like it gets sped up, and you want to live every corner of it just in that day.

Jaco Marais: Do you think some of it's playing out things that they weren't allowed to do in childhood, like the gender norms and gender stereotypes and things that have to be conformed to?

Nadine Benjamin: Yeah, I think we're all - I know certainly for myself as a child, we were all made to feel like we had to fit into everything. There are the lucky ones that didn't get that, and I do find that they're lucky. But then sometimes speaking to those people, they say, well, I don't find that that was lucky, because I never had a structure to work within. So everybody has their own sense of - it's like that story, is it good? Maybe it is, maybe it isn't? Who knows?

Jaco Marais: Yeah. I mean, so many things aren't, and everyone, in some way, has experienced some kind of thing that wasn't right in childhood, and many things that were right. I mean, it's a thing.

You mentioned that every year it gets easier to go to Pride. Could you tell me a story about that?

Nadine Benjamin: Well, I mean, for me, like

yourself, I really identify with - sometimes I can find it quite overwhelming because now that I'm at peace with who I am, I feel like part of me doesn't need to demonstrate any more how I'm feeling in that public place. So what I tend to do now is choose the way that I wish to be involved in Pride.

When I first started going to Pride, I was very like, whoa, and big and wild... it was a real liberation. But I think now it's like, oh right, which bits of it do I really wish to show up in? Because it's important that I'm there because we all have to remember that it's there, because we go. If we stop going, we will have - I believe that we will have some kind of responsibility to go to a Pride every three years or something, just to make sure that it keeps going.

Jaco Marais: That supporter role now.

Nadine Benjamin: Yeah, exactly. I think it's important that we also - well, for me, that I remember to keep celebrating. It's really important. Sometimes it can be that I just meet people for breakfast who are just about to go on the march, or I might meet somebody at a park that's having a concert. Like this year, in Brighton, Christina Aguilera is going to be performing on the Saturday night. So it's all those things that you recognise that there's different people - different parts of the Pride that you wish to be a part of, because you know it's going to meet your joy.

So I do think that what we're so lucky about with Pride is that there's something for everyone, and that you don't have to be in an extreme or you don't have to be really quiet, you can just be all of who you are

in the parts that you love the best.

Jaco Marais: Okay, well, now I'm curious. What was your biggest moment of Pride? What was your biggest memory?

Nadine Benjamin: Oh, my gosh.

Jaco Marais: It can be about somebody else.

Nadine Benjamin: I'm just trying to think. One of the biggest things that I remember is just being able to sit in Soho and be with my girlfriend and just feel relaxed. That's one of the things that I remember most of all. And then the second part of that is that acceptance and no judgement I felt when I was around people who were at Pride. It's like looking in a looking glass, and it's like being in an alternate universe, and for those hours, no one's judging how you turn up, what you look like, what you say. No one's judging. Everybody just wishes you to enjoy. I think for me, that was very, very moving in showing up at Pride.

I haven't been for - obviously we couldn't go because of COVID. I may go this year, I may not. But I think it's such a privilege that it's there. I'm really happy that it is, especially for people who are making that first journey into their sexuality and what that looks like for them, and knowing that there's other people around that they can talk to and connect to. I think having that meeting place once a year is so important for people to feel identified and liberated, connected, loved and celebrated.

Jaco Marais: Did you not feel relaxed before? And do you feel relaxed now with your girlfriend outside of Pride events?

Nadine Benjamin: Now I have a wife, so I don't have a girlfriend. That's a very different thing altogether.

Jaco Marais: Congratulations.

Nadine Benjamin: Thank you. So that's a very different thing altogether. But now I'm in love with a very beautiful, beautiful person, and it's the inside that I'm connected to their heart. I choose my moments. There are times where I know it's not okay, and it's not safe around wherever I may be, and there's other times where I just don't care.

So I think the most important thing is I'm comfortable with me. I think as long as I'm showing up authentically with me, and being in that space, then I can only notice my levels of comfort on a daily basis, and I just think - yeah, I love that I'm being true to myself. I think there isn't another way. I just don't think there's another way. I'm born this way, this is how it is, and there has been great acceptance for myself, great love for myself.

When I first started, I was severely bullied at secondary school and primary school for exactly the same thing. I feel like I've finally come home to my heart.

I think the most important thing is recognising that I make a difference in the world by being all of myself, and when I do that, I role model the way for others to do exactly the same. There's a thing that we say in recovery, that we don't get sober to be miserable. You don't come through what we've come through in the LGBTQI community and more to not live your life to the fullest. Because we're here to make a difference. So it's really, really important to

show up as authentically as I can.

Dame Kelly Holmes recently has made her mark about it. Emeli Sandé recently made her mark about it. I think it's just to reveal that let's live in that happiness, let's have acceptance of who we are as people who are around us and live in that space of love. There is lots of vulnerability when revealing one's whole self. That's part of who we are as humans. There's loads and loads of vulnerability. But when we can walk into the loving space, really loving ourselves for all of who we are, and loving the other person that's in front of you for all of who they are, the magic, the miracles that happen through those connections is astounding.

If we can just take the time to be with that, listen to that, what has that other person got to teach me, what has that other person got to share with me? What am I supposed to learn with those other people and celebrate the differences. We celebrate those differences and we don't make them a conflict.

Jaco Marais: Can I ask two more questions, because it is the end of the working day and we're here doing our extra work, which I'm very happy to do. Actually somebody asked recently - I'm going to ask you the question. If you could wave a magic wand would you rather not be identifying as lesbian?

Nadine Benjamin: Oh, wow. That's such a huge question. Wow, that's really complex, Jaco. That is such a complex question. And I tend to say gay because it just reminds me of being happy and alive...

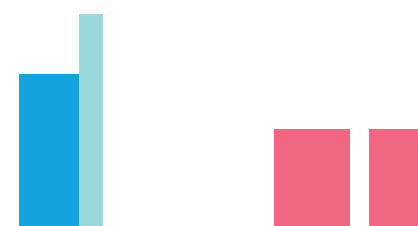
Jaco Marais: Yeah, I like gay too.



Nadine Benjamin: ...and not to in any way put a marker over lesbian in itself; it's just what appeals to me.

I think if you were to ask me that question, maybe even six years ago, I would have said yes because of how my life started because of it, and because of this whole redirection of self, like where do I fit in, and how do I express myself, and how do I show up? And how do I keep myself safe? And how do I keep others safe? And where do I contribute, where don't I contribute? How much should I show off myself? How little should I show off myself?

But today I recognise that it's not about me. How other people choose to see me is actually none of my business. It's not about me. I'm doing the best I can with all I have to make this world a better place on a daily basis, and the first step of that starts with me, and my inner journey, and making sure that I show up fully, and in the fullest of myself. I have to respect that that's how creation decided to send me down, and I'm honouring that with all of my life. I've loved the woman I've become because of it.



Jaco Marais: I love how you answered that, because it respects not only yourself but the society that you live in. Well, the way I answered it, it's such a contrast to the way I answered that question, which was, well, at first, absolutely, but now that I've become such a badass, I wouldn't give it up for the world. I think the focus is very much about - it becomes very quickly about how to build yourself and how to relate to others.

I have only one final question. What do we want society to do, to deal with us?

Nadine Benjamin: I don't want to be dealt with. I'm not a problem.

Jaco Marais: Yes, absolutely. But what do we want society who might not feel that they are directly affected by Pride or needing to find Pride?

Nadine Benjamin: I think for me, generally, we can talk about positive and negative. There's positive circumstances of Pride, there's negative circumstances of Pride for each and every person. My thing is, actually, I've moved into there's vulnerable thoughts and there's loving thoughts, rather than this negative and positive. Because when I look at it as vulnerable thoughts, it gives me a space to look at somebody who doesn't understand the woman I am, the colour I am, my diversity, my disability, where I've come from, and it shows me where their vulnerabilities are. Because I can look at them in my own vulnerabilities, and see that there's places that I'm uncomfortable with as well and I feel unsafe with as well.

So what each and every person that teaches me now, whereas before it would have been like a defence, this now for me in this part of my life, it's more about oh, wow, okay, I can see that that person really doesn't have the capacity, and to find a way to meet where they're at. I'm



old enough now to take a space to go okay, can I meet that person, can I connect with that heart where they're at?

And what for me that does is it turns the journey into a loving thought or a loving space. So I then get to understand them as well without feeling that it's about me, because the person doesn't know me. The ones that do know me and still have that uncomfortability still love me.

And what I've realised is, the more comfortable I am with myself, the more comfortable everybody else is with me. So we are mirrors, for people to really live their full lives as well in whatever capacity they are in, and I just wish everybody to keep everyone safe, to be in acceptance of who your neighbour is, regardless of whether you know them or not, to live in connection, to live in love, and to remember that we all have our vulnerable moments. That might show up as fear, it might

show up as anxiousness, it might show up as shutting down, it might show up as freeze, it might show up as fight or flight where you just want to run, and you don't want to talk to the person, or you can't cope with the person anymore. But we all have that level of vulnerability.

So the thing is, can you look at yourself while looking at that other person and say, can I find space in my heart, even though I don't agree with their views, or their views may be different from mine? Can I have the capacity to be in acceptance, to be in connection, and to take the more loving step into harmony and peace? I'm really pro-peace. I'm really, really, really pro-peace.

I am learning more and more every day that an empowered person is someone that can continually step into their peace. Because it takes so much courage to do that.

I remember this quote - I'll just see if I can find it - by Gandhi. And he was asked how he liberated his nation from the most powerful empire at the time, without ever firing a gun to it, he said, 'I empty myself and become an instrument.'

I sing for a living, and I feel that my voice heals, and that's what I'm here to do. So if I just empty myself of what I perceive maybe as a judgement, or other people's opinions of me, then I can do the service that I'm meant to do here. I think that's the what, that's the only way I can answer it really.

Jaco Marais: So if we were to extend this individual, one-on-one experience to people coming across a community of Pride marches





- so we want the wider society to give us some space, to keep it peaceful and to keep us safe.

Nadine Benjamin: Yeah, absolutely, but also to the wider society to open their heart to receiving and accepting and sharing with us a part of their joy. What does their joy look like? What does their celebration look like? And come and join us.

Jaco Marais: So maybe the future of LGBTQ+ activism is to invite other people to be their full selves.

Nadine Benjamin: Yes absolutely, and I feel that's one of the most important things that we do. I really do. I can feel really tearful as I'm saying it because one of the most important things that we do is coming into that space of liberation. I wish everyone to feel that

liberation, everyone to feel that joy, everyone to feel that peace, everyone to feel that love. Because there will be many days when we're challenged, there will be many days where we're sad and we can't see through to the other side. So it's really important that when that is met, that we find a space away to look through that looking glass and share this Pride experience.

Jaco Marais: Let's all feel the Pride.

Nadine Benjamin: Yeah.

Jaco Marais: That's my wish for this, finding Pride this year, 2022. Thank you very much for speaking with me and taking time out of your day.

Nadine Benjamin: It's been great.

Jaco Marais: Thank you for joining me in the Public Good podcast to discuss Pride. I look forward to hearing the comments about today's discussion. But I think the discussion really highlighted how Pride is both deeply personal but also something everyone can share.

My name is Jaco Marais. If you have any questions or comments related to today's discussion on the Public Good podcast, please don't hold back.

We look forward to responding to you on Twitter, @goodgoverninst and by email [advice@good-governance.org.uk](mailto:advice@good-governance.org.uk)

