

**All Ears with Abigail Disney**  
**Season 1 Episode 11: Heather McGhee**  
**The Hierarchy of Human Value**  
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**Abigail Disney:** I'm Abby Disney and you're listening to All Ears. When we started this podcast in April, we were focusing on economic inequality, but inequality is not always just about economics. We all watched a public lynching and it seemed important to focus directly on race and racial injustice. For the remainder of the season. I'm using my platform to talk with some amazing thinkers and movement leaders about how we got here and how we should move forward.

My guest today is a brilliant thought leader in the fight for racial justice, but she doesn't just talk about racial justice, she talks about it as it is interconnected with economic justice. She promotes solutions, she doesn't just write about things and for nearly two decades she helped build the progressive think tank Demos. And currently she's the Board Chair of Color of Change, it's a great organization that has been around a long, long, time. Heather also gave a very powerful Ted Talk that you should go and find on the cost of racism for all of us. And she's also got a book coming out very, very soon called *The Sum of Us*. So Heather, welcome. Thanks for joining me.

**Heather McGhee:** I am so glad to be here. Thanks for having me.

**Abigail Disney:** Well, I wanted to just start with Garry because I think when you and I met and talked for a long, long time, we kind of started with Garry because Garry is so interesting. So, can you tell me a little version of the Garry story?

**Heather McGhee:** Sure. Um, so as you said in the introduction, Abby, I worked for the greater part of two decades at a progressive think tank that was dedicated to addressing inequality in our economy and our democracy. And, you know, I really came to my work as a public policy wonk and advocate from an economic perspective.

I grew up in Chicago at, in an era of deindustrialization and a gutting of the public sector. When you know, the neighborhood that I grew up in on the South Side of Chicago was having these massive economic shifts, and I wanted to know why and how we could do better, um, and make The American Dream more possible for more people.

And so, at this time it was 2016 in August, I was on a show on CSPAN called Washington Journal, which is basically like a radio call-in show, but on TV. It's very low budget. You just sort of, you know, answer the caller's questions live. It's just a picture of your face, basically sitting at a desk.

You definitely need to come ready. Particularly in the Obama era, it had become sort of like the racist caller on CSPAN, who was just, you know, waiting on the line to say his or her piece about what was happening. Washington was very much a trope. So, I was on and I was talking about taxes and jobs and, um, all the other sort of economic issues that I normally talk about.

And someone called in and identified himself as Garry from North Carolina. And the first words he spoke were "I'm a white male and I'm prejudiced." And then he went on to talk about his prejudice and why he was, you know, afraid of black men and drugs and gangs and crime. This is live television.

So, I'm sitting there, you know, kind of nodding and, you know, modulating my breath. And then he says, but I want to change, and I want to know what your guest, he says to the host me, can tell me to do, to become a better American. And I responded to particularly that line, that last part, you know, this sort of leyton idea in his mind that he needed to become a better American and in, so doing, he had to deal with his prejudice. And so I responded off the top of my head and really from my heart. And I said, thank you for admitting your prejudice, because so often we don't. And then I told him completely, you know, this is not my work, but I just said, you know, these are some things you could do to sort of unlearn some of the racial stereotypes and integrate your life.

And that clip between us went viral. It's been seen at last count over 20 million times. And in the end, I ended up getting to know Garry. We found each other on Twitter, and I had a business trip that took me to North Carolina and I went and visited with him. And we've been in touch over these past now almost four years.

**Abigail Disney:** And talking to him, kind of led you into what is now your book and what your Ted talk is about, right?

**Heather McGhee:** Yeah. I mean, it's been a confluence of things, you can never sort of pull out exactly what the thread was that got you to a place. But I had, as I said, started my career really wanting to solve big economic problems. And so often whether it was in my work to try to prevent the financial crash of 2008, or it was my work trying to raise wages for underpaid workers, or it was my work on housing affordability or on the student debt crisis, I kept running up against just the fundamental belief in our politics of a hierarchy of human value.

And the way that our economy is so cruel and has so little faith in people who are suffering. Right. It's so punitive. It's so exploitative. Um, there's just sort of a fundamental lack of a sense of we're all in this together. And if someone's down on their luck, they're actually down on their luck. They're not bad people, right? There's this sort of sense that it's like, they're the rich people that are good people. They're middle-class people that are on their way to being good people. And there are people who are struggling and there's just something wrong with them. And they probably actually can't be changed.

**Abigail Disney:** Yeah.

**Heather McGhee:** As I kept seeing that trope in our politics and kept trying to compare our solutions to economic changes like globalization and technological change with other countries that have a less diverse population have, uh, you know, their population is more reflected in their decision makers and don't have our history of segregation, slavery, and genocide. It just kept coming back to racism. In these economic issues that were supposed to be race neutral. That were supposed to be about taxes, right? Um, and so Garry for me

was a helpful "aha" moment because as I got to know him, it became very clear that he, as a white working class, Navy veteran was suffering from his own racism and prejudice.

And I thought, well, maybe it's possible that not only is racism a sort of an attributed actor in all of these economic problems that white people are also suffering from low wages, lack of healthcare, you know, student debt, all of these things. But maybe just fundamentally, we have not been honest with ourselves about how pervasively racism has so warped our society's policy, our interactions as human beings, where we live, everything.

And so, we have not taken a true tally of the cost of racism to us all, not just to this group over here or that group over here, but that it distorts our policy making and it impoverishes everything right, we hold in common from our air to our roads and bridges to our sense of what's possible as a country.

And I think right now, Abby, obviously we are just living in the consequences, this feeling like the coronavirus pandemic and the Trump presidency have exposed. I mean, if you look at the polling, everyone of all political stripes just disgusted, shocked that we can't rise to this occasion, that we have been unable to get masks to nurses. And, you know, it's just like I thought we were supposed to be the greatest country on earth, and we are fundamentally dysfunctional. The journey that I went on for three years to write this book has really revealed how racism is at the core of so many of the dysfunctions that affect us all.

**Abigail Disney:** You know, I, I come from a family that's descended from slave owning people in the South. And I have a theory that the damage done to them in their racism actually carries forward. I think evil, it sort of gets in and becomes a kind of a marker going forward because there's a way that the backward gaze in your family with that kind of a history is perpetually on defense so that you get this kind of narrowed consciousness, that is damaging to your ability to function and see the world as it is. I'm so interested. Cause I heard you on Chris Hayes and you use this formulation that I guess sociologists write about called the social dominance orientation. Can you talk about that a little bit? Cause I think I was raised partly because of where my mother's side of the family came from with a social dominance orientation, or the idea that it was natural for me to live and exist above everyone else.

**Heather McGhee:** Well, what you described that, epigenetic, sort of carry over from generation to generation of the markings of the distortion, or not it distorts you as the person who has to invert all logic, all reason, all morality and human emotion in order to perpetuate slavery and racism, or the person who, you know, is scarred by the traumas of racism. It's, it's there and even if you don't take it to the science, it's also about the stories that we learn, right? You, you were raised with these stories from your mother and her side of the family. That just sort of said, you know what, in explicit and implicit ways, this basic sorting of our population is about right. And the justifications of a position of great authority, freedom, power.

I think that is a core part of the American story. It's a core part of what I call in my book, the white story, which has at its core, a zero sum and the zero-sum is a big part of the social

dominance theory that you just referenced. It's the idea that there's sort of only so much good life to go around.

And so, your prosperity must come at the expense of others. And if there are others beneath you in the social hierarchy, who might possibly gain in any large numbers, then it's a threat to you and your position and not just to your position, but to some core sense of self. And that's absolutely what we're experiencing right now in our dominant social narrative.

**Abigail Disney:** There was a viral video of a guy yelling at a black lives matter protest about how, you know, my family fought for the Confederacy and it's my culture and they were farmers and, and the guy protestor says to him who was working their fields. And he got the import of the question right away and he immediately retreated into, they were poor, and it was like an assertion of something. Um, and a way to obviate the clear and obvious criticism of what he was saying. I mean, there's something so sneaky about contemporary racism, you know, that the way that it, it can, it can couch itself in so much coded language.

**Heather McGhee:** You're right, Abby, to really point out that because we never had and any kind of, um, I'll put it this way: because reconstruction was stolen from us and I don't just mean from black people. I mean, from America, right? The true refounding of America, because that was within our grasp.

When we really had multiracial coalitions in the South, we really had representative leadership. We really had sort of a new founding in the post reconstruction, the postwar amendments to the constitution. That's you know, that really spoke to equality. That was, that was a new birth of freedom. Right. And it was stolen from us by terror and mob violence.

And because of that, we have not as a country, and I, and I mean the North's complicit in that as well. Right. It wasn't just what happened in the South. It was the North and the West complicity in that as well. We have not had a way everyday Americans of all races to know how to situate themselves both in terms of morality and responsibility, with the facts of the racial structuring of this country that continued in explicit forms until my childhood, right, and certainly in implicit forms today. And so, um, what you find is that there's this strange jujitsu that has to happen in the mind where, as a white person, you attach yourself to one of the fundamental lies of the white story, which is that we are always good. That whiteness does mean innocence, right? That's part of what the cultural valence of the term whiteness and the identity of whiteness was.

That's why it should have been exalted and on high and had all of these privileges that others didn't because. Whiteness was goodness and blackness was criminality and venality and primitiveness.

And so we haven't really rid ourselves of that part of the story. And so, there is a way in which crime has come to stand in for what, what used to be the belief in sort of a biological inferiority about black people, right? It's like no black people aren't necessarily biologically inferior because of course there are black people who are great. But there is this other thing and it's a cultural explanation. Therefore when faced with just plain facts, facts that really

smart and educated white people should know, like the fact that the GI Bill, by the terms of the bill, did not exclude the hundreds of thousands of black GIs who served honorably, but in practice because it was left to the administration of states and localities because higher education itself was so segregated, very few black veterans, were able to use the education portion and even fewer, less than 2% of those who got VA loan owns to have home ownership, which is just, you know, critical for intergenerational wealth and all other economic security coming after went to black homeowners because of racial covenants and redlining.

You know, throughout the country, in the majority of cities, the majority of homes that the suburbs were built with federal largess that asked developers, required them not to sell to black people. These are facts that are so important to how we live that they should be just known. And I saw a tweet from someone who's an award-winning thought leader and creative person in the world.

And she said, I had no idea about this. That kind of forced ignorance. That need to stay ignorant to preserve the innocence is a big part of, I think, the intellectual cost of racism to white people. And I think it's a big part of the need to maintain goodness above all else.

**Abigail Disney:** The sum of the work of white supremacy in the last 200 years has been to make sure that we all don't think about it. Don't look at it. Don't understand it.

**Heather McGhee:** And I think that one of the, the untallied costs is the economic system, it's not often linked, right? Why is it that we have this bizarrely regressive and top-heavy economic system and this tax code that allows the wealthiest to pay, um, an average of 20% of their income in taxes while everyone else plays between 25% and 30%?

What belief does that tax code represent about the relative merit of people who already have a lot of money versus everybody else? And I do believe that if you boil it down, racism is founded on a belief in a hierarchy of human value, and it is instrumental to pursue greed to pursue and to justify economic systems that allow for the suffering of others and the sort of showering and cascading of advantage and benefits on, on other people.

The central metaphor in my book *The Sum of Us* is the drained public pool. I went around the country, finding towns and cities where in the 1930s and forties with public money. Uh, the cities and towns have built these grand resort public pools, which were this kind of unprecedented commitment to the high quality of life and leisure of all of the towns, citizens, you know, working class, middle class and wealthy alike.

And they became really the beating social heart of these communities. And almost without exception, either by explicit segregation order or informal policing by white people who were at the pools, they were segregated and black families, though taxpayers, were not allowed to swim as well. And in the 1950s and early sixties, black community members began to win either lawsuits or advocacy fights to be allowed to swim and integrate these pools. And in many of these communities, the towns decided to drain their public pools rather than let black families swim too. And in so doing, of course, they robbed themselves

of a public amenity that had been one of the life bloods and one of the, sort of most vivid public goods and public commitments to a high quality of life.

But they were willing to do it, in order to maintain the lie of white supremacy. And in so many ways, it feels like that's what happened to our entire country, that we drained the pool rather than integrate it. Which is just such a marked departure from the first half of the 20th century where white government policy created a white middle class, you had high union density and a high minimum wage. You had high levels of taxation that then invested in American infrastructure and the subsidization of homeownership for people making, you know, poverty and working-class wages by the federal government and all of it was done on racially exclusive terms, all of that. And once the civil rights movement demanded integration in our public policy, it stopped.

**Abigail Disney:** Yeah.

**Heather McGhee:** And you begin to see a shift in all of those policies, our tax policy, our wages, our labor policy, our public investments, a shift away from the public away from trying to guarantee a high quality of life.

And so, I, you know, learned a story as a progressive economic policy person growing up in my career, that was about the golden era of shared prosperity between The New Deal and the late 1960s that, you know, included race as sort of an afterthought. It was like, yes, and there were disparities and yes, when their work exclusions, but nobody linked for me why did it stop? Right. It was always like, well, you know, corporations organized and then there was Reagan and it's like, yeah, sure. But all of those people were the Henry Ford of the previous generation.

You know what I mean? Like what happened to those same white men? Why did they suddenly--why did they suddenly shred the social contract instead of being willing to fund it? And I really do believe it was a sense of that zero-sum that said, wait a second, we would have to share this bounty with people who do not look like us, who have been told, whether they're women, brown and black people, we've been told that those people are fundamentally not worthy. They're fundamentally not on our team. And so, we are actually going to take our toys into run away and that's sort of where we are today.

**Abigail Disney:** Let me, let me ask you about the essential worker for a second because, um, you know, one, one of the reasons that I do not hear from people enough about why this pandemic has hit black and brown people so hard and women, um, is it because they're essential workers. Um, which means they're at the bottom of the totem pole. Now that justification, I hear when I talk about the hourly workers at Disney or anywhere else not getting paid well is, but what value do they bring to the enterprise, they get to be paid in proportion to the value they represent, you know, the monetary value they represent.

It's massive bullshit because if you're, for instance, scrubbing the sidewalks at a place that's famous for being pristine and people come there because it's pristine, obviously you create financial value for the enterprise, but okay.

I think it all got laid bare in this moment. Um, when we saw that all of a sudden there were people we couldn't do without. And they were all the value of any enterprise, which is why we use the word essential for them. And I thought we might have a moment, right. Where there might be a critical shifting in the way we understand people, who do that work. And of course, it's been lost once again and we're fine with them being uninsured and not having paid sick leave and all the rest of it. But, but I mean, what do you think it will take to get the corporate hierarchy to understand the job that they have as one that encompasses the wellbeing of all of society.

**Heather McGhee:** Honestly, I think it's going to take new laws. I agree with you and your analysis of the revelation of the essential worker of the delivery driver of the home health care aid of the daycare instructor of the meat packing plant factory worker, um, of the cleaning staff at all of these places. You know, it's very clear that that lesson that mother nature gave us this lesson about whose work is essential but--there was a bill, you know, authored by Elizabeth Warren and Ro Khanna of the Senate and the House to be an essential worker bill of rights, which was not like, you know, make them millionaires. It was, make sure they have protective equipment, make sure they have paid sick time off and benefits and you know, a living wage and Mitch McConnell and the Republican Senate have been unwilling to take up the bill. And so, I don't think that the financial incentives are going to communicate anything different until there are new laws in place. I just think we need it, you know, it's, I think we need a political answer. That's just what's needed.

**Abigail Disney:** You know, I, I think that is, um, one of the two very essential, indispensable things that has to happen. And it has to happen like yesterday. But I do believe also that a shift in mindset is also going to have to happen.

**Heather McGhee:** Yeah, I think that's right. You know, I'm a strong believer in narrative change and belief change and consciousness raising. We've gotten so far away from the era of, you know, a CEO making 25 times the average worker.

**Abigail Disney:** Oh my God.

**Heather McGhee:** And it is so tied up with who's doing the work today, right? It's still white men in the C suites overwhelmingly. And it is increasingly immigrants, black and brown people and women in these underpaid poverty wage jobs. And part of the signal that needs to come to shift that consciousness is that other white men who are running our government need to stand up for those workers. Right? It's a, you know, if you got the entire Republican party and much of the Democratic party being fine with this exploitation, then, you know, that's also a signal that keeps a consciousness in a certain direction.

**Abigail Disney:** Right. And I keep reminding people that the CEO of Disney Bob Iger came home with \$66 million and thought that was just fine, also was considering running for president as a Democrat and, he was totally didn't see any inconsistency in being a Democrat and also sending people home hungry who worked full time because you almost have, you have to be Bernie Sanders and leave the party to be able to think differently about the way people are paid.

To me, that just is deeply distressing because then who will stand up for everybody? If the democratic party doesn't, um, so yeah. I'm awfully glad he's not running.

Actually, the way racism has played out in this country has always been this dance between what is rational and what is not rational. Um, because you know, if you follow the money and you follow the power, it feels like somebody sat down and designed a racist system specifically to resource and make powerful only white people. It feels to me like a plan. But then again, if you look at the way we've bankrupt this country in the name of distributing assets so poorly and pushing certain communities down so totally, that feels completely irrational. I mean, is this how racism works everywhere? Cause we're not the only racist country or is this just an American problem?

**Heather McGhee:** Yeah, I've spent my life and career studying these dynamics, uh, in the United States and feel, you know, up to my ears, uh, in, in the American story of this, but it's also true that anywhere where the logic of racism helped further greed, helped further sort of the massive accumulation of wealth, you saw many of these dynamics.

And so, it's very much a part of colonialism. Um, it's very much a part of, of apartheid. Um, it's very much a part of global capitalism but the way in which we are essentially a multiracial democracy that has not yet been willing to commit to multiracial prosperity and to high functioning government and to a fair economy, feels very American.

**Abigail Disney:** So, okay. For me, who has spent most of my adult life calling myself a feminist and fighting for the things that I think are right from a feminist perspective, and yet white feminists have started to get a little bit of a tinge on it lately that worries me. I'm worried, we're looking at a pretty big backlash against feminism. And yet when I hear the word words, social dominance, um, in the context of talking about race, I can't help but also be thinking about the context of gender. I'm just wondering are you at all worried about a backlash against feminism and like, how do we save a space for a conversation around gender in this whole context that we're in?

**Heather McGhee:** That is such an important conversation to have and black feminists with way more sophistication in history in this work have done a much better job than I'm about to do, but when you talk about the hierarchy of human value, it absolutely allows you to see how class race, gender, citizenship status, disability status, and sexuality and gender expression are parts of that hierarchy. Right. And you know, sexism is one of the core forces that structures our economy and our society, and it also has this different escape hatch in it because part of what the patriarchy needs is the attachment and involvement of women. And the logic of racism actually wants either total control or total elimination of the external threat of the other race, right. Whereas the patriarchy doesn't want to totally exterminate the other gender.

**Abigail Disney:** Yeah, no, you're right. You're right. You're right. That's a very important difference. Yeah.

**Heather McGhee:** And so that in that escape hatch, right? There's a way for white women to travel in on the racial route and get higher up on that ladder. And in some ways, why



wouldn't you want to, right? If you, if you have very few rights as a woman and very little respect but your skin color affords you a rung up in a way to get more social esteem and wealth and access, it's natural to want to climb up there and sort of cloak yourself in that racial privilege in order to escape, at least for moments, your sexual subjugation, your gender subjugation. Um, so that's why the Karen exists. Right?

And there's been really beautiful historical research about just how profound to the creation of the myth of white supremacy was that was the contribution of the idea of the innocent white womanhood. So ultimately, I think there is a massive cost to white women whiteness over solidarity with other women of other races and backgrounds, a massive cost.

You know, we would be the majority as women if the white women in the coalition for progress in an enduring way. And of course, there are very many famous and important white feminists, but the majority of white women are not on the feminist program in terms of the way they vote and, and the fights that they choose to align themselves with. And so, in many ways, you know, the fight for a truly just world is really a fight for the soul of white people to get on board and what we've started to see is that, you know, when we can get enough white people on board with the program for progress, then we can have breakthroughs like the Obama presidency, and like the 2018 midterm election. But when we can't, then we risk everything in our country. Everything,

**Abigail Disney:** So last week a group of social justice organizations did a long analysis of what Facebook's policies were and that was not greeted positively. How aware were you of all that going on to, to participate in that?

**Heather McGhee:** So, I'm the Chair of the Board of Color of Change. Um, I've been so proud that we've had a years long campaign to force Facebook, which is now, you know, the public square is now the most influential communicator and distribution panel for both our news and our politics.

They are woefully under-regulated--unregulated in many ways and they have to be held to a higher standard. And so, Color of Change has had a long-standing campaign that has really reached a fever pitch in the past couple of months. It's called the Stop Hate for Profit campaign and Rashad Robinson who's the Executive Director is the one who was in the meeting and whose brainchild this is, and it's resulted in over a thousand corporations pledging to stop advertising on Facebook in July. And you know, when I last looked, it was an 8% drop in their share price.

I mean, this is really important pressure that's being put on a company that fundamentally doesn't want to be seen as responsible. And what they do is they don't understand how its algorithms really drives people towards these echo chambers of extremism. It is absolutely, you know, people pay a lot of attention to what's going on at Fox news, but it's, it's so much about Facebook and YouTube as well.

**Abigail Disney:** It's Testament to the idea that there's no such thing as color blindness because, you know, I mean, they, I know they write these algorithms thinking they have

everything accounted for and they just don't know what they don't know, which is the problem with color blindness.

**Heather McGhee:** Yeah, I mean, I think there's a, an overall ethos in the tech world that is really been captured by what I think of as sort of a radical libertarianism that has its roots, actually in the intellectual pendings of anti-government anti racial equality, anti-civil rights.

And, you know, I think many of them don't realize that that's where this anti-government, you know, no regulation intellectual history leads them to, but it is. And then you start to see it coming back to roost when it means that tech giants are unwilling to do what's right. And we realized that actually it's all of a piece. The same anti-government anti-regulation ethos, which feels like, oh, just let the brilliant guys do what they want to do also means your own workers have no one to stick up for them.

**Abigail Disney:** Exactly. It's interesting cause the ferocious libertarian tends to be a white male again. And it's so interesting to me that they don't look around and notice all the other white men in the room. Because if you really interrogated that you would begin to understand, and that maybe everyone else doesn't feel comfortable with libertarianism because the things as they are aren't really great for them. And they need a structure in society that isn't supposedly colorblind to protect them from people like them.

Heather, I just--thank you so much for your time today. You took so much time and I know everybody wants a piece of your time these days. So you can find Heather on Twitter @hmcghee, which is H M C G H E E. And, you can go watch. Heather's very good. Uh, Ted talk, which is like, what 2 billion views these days. Um, it's called Racism Has a Cost for Everyone at ted.com and you can preorder her book The Sum of Us online, wherever books are sold. So, um, Heather, thank you. Thank you a million times. Thank you.

**Heather McGhee:** Thank you so much. It was really a pleasure to talk to you, Abby. And thanks for having this platform.