

All Ears With Abigail Disney
Season 2 Episode 4: Anand Giridharadas
Air Date: November 5, 2020

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Hello? It's Anand here.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Hi how are you, good to hear from you.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Yes, likewise. Do you want me to record the audio locally?

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Okay. So that's rolling also.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Good. It's high quality?

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: It's high quality.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Okay. Nothing but high quality will do for us.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Certainly higher quality than our democracy.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I hear that!

I'm Abigail Disney. Welcome to All Ears, my podcast where I get to go deep with some super smart people. This season I'm talking to "good troublemakers:" artists, activists, politicians, and others, who aren't afraid to shake up the status quo. We'll talk about their work, how they came to do what they do, and why it's so important in hard times to think big. You can't think about solutions without being a little optimistic and, man oh man, I think we need some optimism right now. So join me every Thursday for some good troublemaking.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Welcome to a special hot take edition of All Ears. We are recording on November 4th at 10:00 AM, which is a crazy day and a crazy time to try to do a show.

Commonly held opinions and pollsters and pundits and neoliberal thought bubbles have failed us once again. No matter what the ultimate result of the count is to be, we know that. And that's why I'm so happy to be talking this morning to Anand Giridharadas -- author, speaker, pundit, commentator, and all around troublemaker of the highest order. Anand eats commonly held opinions, pollsters, pundits, and neoliberal thought bubbles for breakfast. Years back as I was making the global elite rounds at the Ted conferences and the Clinton global events, I built up a well of resentment and anger at what looked like a hell of a lot of hypocrisy in global philanthropy that no one else seemed comfortable talking about.

And I just love a guy who can come out and write a whole book, a really, really hard to refute book about just such hypocrisy. A book called *Winners Take All: the Elite Charade of Changing the World* and his newsletter, The Ink just keeps the trenchant analysis coming. No matter where all this lands, not one of us should need any more convincing that this country is in some deep trouble.

A whole lot of people watched this poisonous man for four years. And last night they told us that they would like some more. So as we wait for final results, and no matter what those results turn out to be, it might be a good moment to talk about culture, power structures, hypocrisy, and greed. Anand. Welcome.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Thank you so much for having me. I mean, this is the I should be sleeping, you know, healing my body after the sazerac, the wine, but, you know, but here we are.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I don't know if the Sazerac was a good plan. Um--

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: It's always the right move. It's just a question of timing and I sazeracked too early.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Okay. Well, I can see that. That would be a mistake.

So Anand, let's just get right down to it. I want to talk about how we're all feeling this morning when we still have the uncertainty and we didn't get what we wanted last night, which was a national repudiation.

Um, no matter where we land with this election, we are terribly disappointed this morning. So just like, first of all, from 30,000 feet, what just happened?

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Well, we don't know what happened in terms of the final outcome, obviously at this, at this moment. But there's a lot that's already been revealed by last night. I think the first and most obvious fact is whether it turns out to be, you know, this state goes this way or this state goes that way. Essentially, fascism, autocracy, white supremacy and various other things were on the ballot and close to a majority of Americans, not quite a majority but close enough to be terrifying is down with those things. Prefers those things to the alternative.

So we now know who we share the country with. We share the country with, uh, with a group of people who saw Donald Trump, not as a theoretical possibility, not as a real estate developer from New York city who promised to make their lives better as was the case four years ago, but as someone who has now been in office for four years, has sewn division, has degraded the institutions of this country every single day, who has threatened to be the first president in American history to, you know, steal an election. Millions and millions and millions of people saw this, knew about it and said, I want more.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Uh, so, where, where do we go from here? Let's game out option one, Joe Biden wins, um, and Trump continues to contest the legitimacy of his win.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Well, I think the most important role in that scenario is for the media. The media has, you know, and I will say, I mean, I worked with the New York times for 11 years. I understand why the traditional media is the way it is. Part of the sobriety and restraint and care with language and not overclaiming and you know, just extreme caution that is the way of a lot of our traditional media institutions is about keeping those

institutions around for the long haul. And I'm very grateful that those institutions are around.

That said, I think, and I know many people who work in these places were grappling with this. You know, when you have an unprecedented situation of a president who is an aspiring autocrat, a fascist, attempting to steal an election, a lot of the traditional language of political reporting, um, simply in the act of describing what he is doing becomes inherently normalizing of the abnormal. In other words, you know, if you say as many media outlets did in the run up to the vote that Donald Trump's strategy for winning Pennsylvania is stopping the vote count after election day, well, Abby that's a strategy for a coup.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: And if you are a political reporter in America for mostly good reasons, you may never have typed the word coup into your laptop. You may never have typed the word autocrat into your laptop. We are now dealing with a set of facts that is beyond the vocabulary of much political reporting. And in the coming days, it's going to be incredibly important to just be analytically precise in describing coup attempts as coup attempts.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: There is the problem of, um, competing facts and information. And then on top of it, there's just the problem of competing narratives and ideas about how this should work. What is the problem we need to take on narratives or data information?

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Well, I think you're getting something very important, which is, I think there is one level more dire than where we are. Which is if everybody agreed and saw the same facts with regard to Trump, agreed on what those facts were, saw the truth for what it is, and you had these kinds of divided results, that would be an even more terrifying situation than the one we're in. You're right, we're not quite in that situation. We are in a situation where a great fraction of the people who voted for him no longer live in the house of reality.

They live in castles of fantasy abetted by Fox news multiplied by Facebook and other peddlers of disinformation. But to the extent that we have to think about healing the country at some point, bringing people together, creating a different coalition of possibility around a different politics that would, would have decisive mandates to do big things and heal these divisions, there is that possibility if we were to get more people, to dwell in truth.

And my hope is that we can have political movements that come along, political candidates, political parties, that are frankly much more inspiring than what the Democrats have offered this time around whether they win or whether they lose. That are galvanizing, thrilling, expansionary that offers a vision Americans want to get on board with. The good news is there's a lot of headroom here. The good news is there is a, there is a, to my mind, a wide open lane for, um, transformational figures and transformational ideas in the politics of this country.

And it's going to take such thinking and such people to meet this moment.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know, honestly, one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you is because I think there's a repudiation of the Democratic Party going on here. And I was in on some early meetings around Trump's inauguration. It was clear we're not taking what happened as a repudiation of the party.

Um, even after all that happened with Bernie. And, um, I think that the party itself has been um too married, to, you know, what geeks like you and me call the neoliberal consensus. And I love that what your book is about the *Winners Take All*, is really about that kind of the pretzel you have to twist yourself into, to be an active member of the neoliberal elite, but still believe you're a good person. So, so can you, first of all, help us understand what the heck neoliberalism is. And, what role do you think it has played in this wholesale condemnation of the Democratic Party?

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Neoliberalism is the view that traditional liberal priorities like equality and justice and a fair society are best advanced not by activist government, but by unshackling business people to, you know, do whatever they want to do.

It's a fraudulent ideology, but it's the dominant one. One way to think about this neoliberal consensus that I read about in the book is, um, the, the ideology that says that in a way traditional liberal goals, um, not Koch brother goals, liberal goals, equality, justice, a fair society that works for all, those kinds of things that liberals emphasize, are best advanced best protected, not by activist government, uh, which is bloated and ineffectual, but in fact, by unshackling the forces of the market. And so this vision is very seductive. The neoliberal consensus is trying to say, I am totally down with equality and justice for all. I want the MLK stuff. I want the Rosa parks stuff. I want the woke stuff. Black lives matter. Absolutely. I want every child to have a fair shot. Absolutely. I agree with Bernie Sanders on the diagnosis.

However. I just think markets are the best way to get there, letting everybody, you know, create their own business. Having people have choice in their healthcare, blah, blah, blah. And you've seen since the 1970s in this country is on the right, an active, forthright prosecution of market fundamentalism, of capital supremacy. Um, the Koch brother vision, Richard Mellon Scaife, other families on the right. The right was panicked in the 1970s, got organized, got together, wrote memos, founded associations, infiltrated campuses, organized, organized, organized. Hijacked the Republican party, made alliances with evangelicals and other useful groups and commandeered power so that the interests of big corporations would become the dominant, the kind of lodestar. Um, and the less told part of the story that I tried to tell the book is that at the same time that the Democrats, the left half of the country had to figure out how to live in the world, that the right was, was creating, how to be, you know, to kind of behave as passengers, you know, amid this hijacking and what the dominant element of the Democratic Party did in this time was to reject the most extreme version of this ideology, reject the extreme every man to himself -ism of it, reject the total assault on the idea of government, but absorb almost a secondhand smoke. A kind of passive version of the, the essential claim.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: During this period, I am sure you're talking about the Clinton administration.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Yes. So, Bill Clinton saying the era of big government is over. The Democrats were tortured about it, but the statement that the era of big government is over is a remarkable statement for a Democrat president to make. When Barack Obama came to office, not, not a business guy in his own life. A community organizer, liberal from Chicago, comes to power. Creates the first new office in The White House, The Office of Social Innovation, which is about funding community solutions around the country. And it says on its website, top down programs from Washington are not how you make change anymore. Well, that is a remarkable and remarkably false statement.

Barack Obama was only able to vote in the election that he won because of a very remarkable top-down program from Washington called The Voting Rights Act that's since been gutted. Every day, millions of seniors are kept off the streets and out of poverty because of a remarkable top-down program from Washington called social security. And your sidewalks would be littered with old people if that program, that top-down program from Washington were to go away tomorrow.

You know, and so this notion that government is bad, the market is God, business people are inherently brilliant and whatever thoughts they think deserve to swerve into all other lanes and dominate all other aspects of life, that the logic and sensibility and philosophy of business, of capital, should become the religion of our shared national compact. This, this has been the project and I think you're absolutely right to say, when we look at an election result like this, the way in which the Democrats absorbed and pedaled the neoliberal consensus, it's just bankrupt. Either the Democrats will become a party of real change, or they will die.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I completely agree. And, Biden was the Senator from Delaware. And Delaware is a complicated place because as small and tiny and quaint as the shores of the Chesapeake are, it also is home for 68% of all American corporations. That's because the Delaware state legislature has passed a series of very corporate friendly laws, and, um, Joe Biden has spent years in the Senate Defending the interests of American corporations. And while that may not be a piece of information that people across the country literally understood, I think that they sniffed out that he was one of those Democrats and those Democrats are the Democrats that I think that the, you know, serious hardcore Trump people are talking about when they say global elites.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: I think, think if you look at him and you're exactly right to point out the Delaware thing, if you look at him, there's like, Scranton Joe, and there's you know, Delaware Joe, and let's play with that for a second. Scranton Joe is the good values, right? Everybody deserves a fair shot. When you get knocked down, get back up again.

We take care of each other, right? Keep the faith, spread the faith, as he said last night. Those are really good, solid American values. And, and to be very clear, I think Joe Biden is as sincere in his heart about those values as any person in public life. Like I don't think, I don't think he's been taught to say those things by consultants. It's very evident that he feels, he's a deeply feeling person, he feels those things. And let's call that Scranton Joe. And then you got Delaware Joe, which is I'm a Senator, this is my kind of donor base and I got to cater to these folks. And when it comes to showing up on policy, on regulatory policy, on health

insurance, different things, he's always kind of done, not always, but generally done what's good for those folks. And I think what a lot of Americans don't understand is it's either or. You can't be Scranton Joe and be Delaware Joe and be an integrated person, because what is making life hard in Scranton and actually in all the Scranton's across the land is that catering to those corporations in Delaware, right?

The reason people don't have a fair shot, the reason people are not getting paid enough, the reason you know, that the debt becomes unpayable or the wage just doesn't add up to the bills and so on and so forth is because of another set of values that Joe Biden has. And I think the gamble of this candidacy was that if you dial up the performance of the Scranton Joe element, which is a real part of who he is, it can drown out and mask the fact, um, that he is very much not just part of and complicit in, but a believer in a kind of pro-market neoliberal consensus that is responsible for degrading the very people, his heart bleeds for.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. Your first book, *The True American*, I think was kind of about the life and mind of a Trump voter before we even knew there was such a thing as a Trump voter. And, you know, I actually, as I, as I read it, I thought about, um, the role that masculinity was playing. Because when we talk about, um, the angry Trump voter as feeling, debased, humiliated, thwarted. I mean, what do you think about the role of masculinity played in getting us to where we are right now?

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: I think it's playing a very dominant role. The reality is a lot of men in this country are in a very bad way. Which doesn't mean, you know, they don't still benefit from patriarchy and those privileges. But I think if we were to be honest with ourselves and if many men are to be honest with ourselves, they're in a bad way. And we know that because of the conversation you and I just had about the economy.

So for some men, that's the big thing in their lives. The desertion of opportunity, which, you know, is an economic fact that quickly becomes a, a cultural and a gender fact because in many communities men were raised with an idea of themselves as a provider, as the stable source of income, this and that. And the world's changed, where they're not the stable provider or the wife earns more money or, not having a college degree no longer provides the kind of life that it did. The, the larger dynamics of the erosion of patriarchy and the ascendancy of women and the, and the growing equality in this country over the last generation is another tremendous, tremendous source of change. What I often think about in my writing and reporting is when people--all my life I've written about change and people trying to make change and people also experiencing change as a wind in their face. And when you're in those moments, when I wrote about how India was changing, when markets came to India and India opened up to the world in the nineties, and the two thousands, totally different from what's going on with men right now.

But it's the same fundamental thing of people who are living their lives. They're raised in a certain way. They have a certain idea of what the good life is, how to be and the concept of themselves. And then suddenly something happens that they didn't do. And if a society fails to show those people, those men, in this case who they can be on the other side of change, right? What is left for them when this mode of being is taken away, rightfully taken away?

If they can't be convinced that there's some other way of being a man of being a human being of having dignity on the other side, then in addition to their own failures that they visit upon others, the ways in which you know, as has been said many times, hurt people, hurt people. In addition to that, it becomes our collective failure because they lash out. And, it is-- Donald Trump, as I've written before is a weak man's idea of a strong man. And in many ways he represents an authoritarianism fueled by emasculation, by feelings of emasculation, weak men who look to him to be the husband that deep down, they fear they can't be to their wives. The father that they fear they can't be to their children their lack of vigor in the economy or otherwise. And if we don't heal men, I think we're gonna have more Trumps, uh, in our future.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: And, and I would just kind of add one little nuance to that. We did have the ascendance of women, but patriarchy still stands and fully formed, which is why, um, the women who voted for Donald Trump still feel they have to live inside of a structure that values dominance and aggression.

So I do think, um, that the patriarchy was left intact.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Um, I mean, I certainly think it's, it's, it's strong. I wouldn't say it's unchanged from a generation ago, you know? I mean if you think about the men we're talking about, chances are their dads had a certain degree more of immunity and privilege than they do in certain respects. Right? A number of their dads could probably come home you know, expect dinner on the table and not expect to have to clean up anything and not have to share any child duties. Some men still operate like that, but a lot of men don't anymore.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know, I would say that, um this is where gender and race come together in a really important way because you can change laws, but you don't change the individual people who are subject to those laws. There is still this stuckness in America around race. How is it that we have not been able to move one inch from where we were 50 years ago as white people. How have we not managed to pull at least this significant chunk of, of people who, who cannot abide racial reconciliation, cannot abide the idea of equal rights cannot allow for the equal humanity of people who look different for them. What is happening in the American conscience?

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: It's interesting. I see it a little bit differently. I don't see where we are proof that we're not moving on race. I think it is proof that we have moved on race and white people have moved dramatically on race and there's a great backlash among those who have not changed. And I think that's really worth because the way we talk about some of this race stuff, that the way we talk about anti-racism sometimes can be off putting to people or feel like it's just, it's too hard, it's too much. And I often say, no, no, no. Like, without offering a pass to anyone or certainly to this country, like there's no world in which The New York Times runs the 1619 series. five years ago. Right? So I can't stand here and say those five years made no difference because they did make a difference.

Right? The leadership in so many of our institutions just looks completely different than it did 10 years ago. That doesn't mean it's anywhere near where it needs to go. And, in the

hearts and behavior of white people, we have actually, and this is the same point I would make for men, we have successfully psychologically migrated millions, I would say tens of millions of white people to a new and better and fuller understanding of themselves and of white supremacy. And so if you don't start with that, then it can seem very hopeless.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Right. Right.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: I deal with white people all the time who are very clearly on the other side of a line of transformation. Frankly, any white people I grew up with, you know, 30 years ago, and that, and they've changed relative to where they were and relative to where other people still are. So I think when you start with that, then you say, okay, got to get a lot more people over that line.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Right.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: But when I go to campuses and I speak to people, you know, including campuses in red states, I remember the school in Indiana where, you know, a lot of farm kids, a lot of people from conservative, rural backgrounds, but they're there the people who go to this college. They're often the liberal one in their family who want to go to college. What they are learning today, the way in which they understand themselves and, and operate in the world with an awareness of, you know, how whiteness has worked and how to live in a world with others and share power, it's remarkable. These kids are doing it every day. And we just have to figure out --this is the optimistic me--we just got to figure out how to get everybody to go on the journey that we have already successfully gotten many, many people to go on.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I want to believe your optimistic view and I'm right on the edge of it. Except when I think about the power and the, and the frankly, success of the backlash. Why is the backlash this powerful?

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Well, I think to bring the different elements of the conversation together. When we're talking about race, we're talking about gender, we're talking about white people, we're talking about men. Um, the most pressing need any person has, is to have some idea of themselves that is stable. That is, that gives them a sense of dignity, of being whole of understanding how they relate to others and to the world.

And what a lot of these changes that we have been living through, in part, because of the economy that we talked about in part, because of social change, in part, because, mostly white and white dominant country, has inexorably started to become a country that will be shared. Those types of changes often steal from people, the idea that they have of themselves before providing the replacement. And I think while I have very little patience in my heart for a Trump voter or for, you know, a man lashing out at women because of these changes or a white person lashing out at people of color because of these changes.

If what I try to often do as a writer is to say, what in my life puts me closest to this emotion that other people have to this political emotion, not, not to the same political view, political stand, but the political emotion. And I think when you think about it that way, you know, have you ever felt like you suddenly, you used to know how to play the game and then the

rules change and, and you feel kind of wait, where am I? Who am I? You feel, right? You feel-- I mean I think any of us who've ever been to another country know that feeling. But I think there is an important component of education, a civic project of helping people see who they will be on the other side of the mountain, because if you don't, and we have failed to do that for men. We've failed to do that for lots of white people. If you don't, they retreat back to their worlds, and carry out, lash out at others. They go to the ballot every two or four years, the ballot box, and they lash out in politics while lying to pollsters about what they're going to actually do. Um, at some point, the only way to where this country needs to go is through each other. And we're going to have to actually change what is in people's hearts.

And that is a project that I think people just don't talk about enough. People want to work around--people want to just drive up turnout. I don't think it works. If you have a country where an enormous number of people feel shit scared about who they are and how they fit into the world, no matter how wrong they are, they are your problem. The, uh, one of my favorite mantras is that the burden of citizenship is recognizing that what is not your fault, may be your problem. Um, the Trump voter is not our fault. It's certainly not my fault, but it is my problem.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You're exactly right. That's a beautiful place to stop, actually, Anand Thank you so much. You've calmed me down. So thank you for that.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Thank you for, uh, for this morning therapy session.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. Meet me next week.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Yeah. Send me the bill.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah.

Anand's weekly newsletter, The.Ink is a great example of modern journalism that comes straight to your inbox. I highly recommend it. And his book *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* is available at bookstores everywhere. And you can learn more about Anand and his work at Anand.ly. And are you on Twitter too?

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: I am a little bit on Twitter. @Anandwrites.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: So what's your? @Anandwrites. Okay. Okay. So, a million thank yous.

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS: Thank you so much. And I hope we, uh, I hope we all get through this. I have, I have some faith in us.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Good.

All Ears is a production of Fork Films. The show was produced by Alexis Pancrazi and Christine Schomer. Lauren Wimbush is our Associate Producer. Sabrina Yates is our Production Coordinator. Our engineer is Veronica Rodriguez, Bob Golden composed our theme music. The podcast team also includes the VP of production Aideen Kane.

Our executive producer is Kathleen Hughes. Learn more about the podcast on our website. forkfilms.com. And don't forget to subscribe, rate and review All Ears wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening!