

**All Ears with Abigail Disney**  
**Season 4 Episode 5: Erica Smiley**  
**Visibilizing Labor with Erica Smiley**  
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**ERICA SMILEY:**

My room was full of clowns as a child. I still feel like I have residual trauma.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

You should've said 'Send out the clowns!'

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Yeah, well I was just like, 'I don't like clowns. Please stop decorating my room with clowns.'

We don't want to go too far down this rabbit hole. And is my sound better now?

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Have we already discussed breakfast? Because that's usually how we find these things out.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

I'm eating my breakfast as we speak - a bean burrito. I'm feeling pretty good about myself - that I'm actually eating before we talk.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Hi all, I'm Abigail Disney and welcome to All Ears. In recent months, I've been on the road with my new documentary, *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*. In the film, I tell the stories of some Disney workers to show how the American Dream has become a nightmare for so many. Of course, the problem is not just with Disney. Today, nearly half of all American workers are struggling to make ends meet. That's why in this season of All Ears, I'll be taking a deep dive into some of the big questions raised in the film with folks who are doing the most Disney thing possible, using their imaginations, in this case to rethink modern American capitalism, because if we don't reimagine how it all works, and fix it, we're going to be in big trouble.

How's that bean burrito going down?

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Oh my God, it's fantastic. Let me put the last bit in my mouth here.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

There you go. Chew it up, then we're ready to go.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

I'm ready to go.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

All right.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Okay. Ready.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

If you've seen *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales* you know I like to spend time examining the past as a way to understand how working people in this country lost so much economic and political clout over the last half century.

My guest today, the wonderful labor organizer Erica Smiley, does something similar in this great book she wrote with Sarita Gupta. It's called *The Future We Need: Organizing for a Better Democracy in the Twenty-First Century*. The book focuses on where the labor movement has been, while also imagining a future in which working people are fighting to regain power, influence and dignity in the workplace and beyond.

Smiley is currently the Executive Director of Jobs with Justice, which has been organizing and advising working people across the country for decades. All this she does while fighting to change the metanarrative about who the economy is for and what it should look like.

Her take on the importance of collective bargaining, not only in the workplace, but across our democracy is radically important, and I'm so excited to parse it with her today. Welcome, Smiley.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Hey, glad to be here, Abby.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

So, we're living through a moment of incredible labor ferment.

Public opinion is suddenly overwhelmingly positive about unions. Millions of folks are negotiating new employment terms as we speak, and we've got this thing happening that some people call "the great resignation", other people call "the great awakening", where workers are signaling that they are just not gonna take it anymore.

All of that labor success is due to a little thing called collective bargaining. So let's start there.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Yeah, no, I'm so glad we're starting here first, because to your average person who hasn't been a part of unions, you know, it sounds just kind of like a really good sale at the Dollar Tree, but actually it's so much more than that.

I mean, in many ways it's a wonky term to describe democracy in the workplace, and so in collective bargaining, the group of people come together, a group of employees come together to negotiate the standards and conditions of the place where most of us spend a good chunk of our time, maybe the majority, for some of us, the majority of our time.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

You know, we have a lot of employers, who sort of are like, "But we'll take care of you. You don't need to collectively bargain. We love you."

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Bless their hearts.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Bless, bless their little hearts. So why isn't that enough?

**ERICA SMILEY:**

First of all, the only people who know what's best for themselves are ourselves. Each of us knows what we need and what we want, and it's very rarely enough to have some external patron or kind of savior telling us what's best for us. Because they're often wrong.

Even from a childhood experience, the people who are supposed to be paternalistic to us, you know, our parents, right? They often get it wrong.

This is why we all spend so much money on therapy in our adulthood. Anyway, it's great when people feel like they want to be good employers and that's, you know, I don't want to down that.

But, at the same time, when we think about democracy, we don't just want to count on somebody else to vote for us and hope for the best. We don't want to just count on someone else to make decisions for us in our economic lives. We actually need to have a say.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

So, tell me about Jobs with Justice.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Yeah. Jobs With Justice is a national network of community labor coalitions, founded in 1987 with the goal of expanding organizing and collective bargaining rights.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

How did it get founded?

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Oh, that's such a great question. Oh my God, I don't even know if we have the time.

All right. Look, it's like this. There were some leaders or boat rockers or troublemakers within unions and faith institutions and community groups, and they came together and they needed a place where they could come together with people as equals.

And out of that, an organization was born, or I should say a network, because we were pretty ragtag. We're talking volunteer coalitions around the country, which we still have.

The idea that we have staffing today is still somewhat recent in our history, but that, just like you might imagine an Alcoholics Anonymous or whatever group, right? Like, we were a network of mutual aid, but for workers.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Wow. That's so interesting. I mean, I think of AA as the organizing model for the 21st century.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

I think there's something to that.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

AA is the gift of the 20th century for those of us in the 21st.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

It's the true horizontalism, right?

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:** And there's so much wisdom in it.

**ERICA SMILEY:** The starfish and the spider.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:** It's like, without all the wisdom embedded in it, you can't have the wisdom of the structure of it. It's an extraordinary thing.

What got you from North Carolina?

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Yep.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Uh, where unions aren't the most welcome things.

**ERICA SMILEY:** Yeah. We go back and forth with Puerto Rico over lowest union density. Yeah.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:** Yeah, exactly. So what got you into this work?

**ERICA SMILEY:**

In the book, I talk about the Kmart efforts. There were women, mostly women, who were working at Kmart back when, you know, Kmart was still a contender. Is that rude to say?

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

No, it's not.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Um, but you know, before the Targets, right and the Walmarts, there was Kmart. And they - all I knew is that some of them went to my and other churches in the area. I was a teenager and I knew that they had faced discrimination, that they felt they were being discriminated against, that it wasn't fair, and that they were asking all of us to stand with them as they tried to win better wages, better hours, better treatment.

And I saw a lot of different actions. I remember, you know, we didn't go to Kmart. A couple of ministers got arrested at one point. There was big action at a golf course. And, I just saw collective actions win, right? They came together, you know, we disrupted things, and ultimately they won the things that they wanted to accomplish, which were better standards and better treatment.

And, I didn't know at the time that they were organizing with the union, with the ACTWU, with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. I didn't know that. And in some ways I didn't need to know it. I just needed to know that they were regular people who were trying to get things done. And so, in that sense, you know, that was my first exposure to unions without even knowing what it was.

Because I had certainly seen the women at Kmart, it was a civil rights struggle. We were fighting for racial justice. That was what we were doing.

But I also saw the benefits of unions, right? And so I realized that I wanted the people that I grew up around to have access to those same platforms of decision making and standard setting in their daily lives.

And that, you know, yes, we needed to fight to be able to continue to have voting and suffrage, but that there was perhaps a lack in fighting to ensure that we were also fully engaged in this economic struggle for dignity and standards, or at least perhaps a lack of visibility to it.

And so I realized I wanted to visibilize it so that even though there has been harm done by many labor institutions to my community and to black people that, you know, we could acknowledge that harm but still simultaneously see our own history in building it and our own role in building the future of it as workers. So, that felt important to me.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Yeah. So, something that moves me so much about the book is that it conceives of collective bargaining as the essence of democracy.

You know, what you'd call in Greek the deme, the D-E-M-E, the smallest unit of democracy. Democracy is comprised of demes all working together, and creating larger demos and, sort of, this light turned on in my head about exactly what you were getting at. The fact that you started in Memphis, with the worker strike in 1968. Tell me about why you start the book there, because I think this is really important.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

We wanted to show a couple of things.

I think that we wanted to show that the motivating factor for why people got involved in some of these fights, while it might seem pretty straightforward, like in the case of Memphis, where you have a sanitation worker who died. People who were, their lives were being deemed, what's the word I'm looking for?

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Not important.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

They weren't worth anything, I guess. Right? Expendable, disposable. Those are the words. Okay. There we go. I was a math major. English is a second language. Okay. So those things.

And likewise, when you fast forward to today, workers today, even at Starbucks and Apple and Amazon, like, are seeing their struggles in the workplace not simply as something that they need for themselves. They do, to be fair, right? But also as their way of contributing to the effort to save and expand democracy.

That that actually is a reason so many people are in the streets right now, and we are talking about, we see on the news, you know, we're all watching the horrors unfolding in Ukraine. We're seeing the crisis in democracy almost talked about daily, just constantly.

Every smartphone beep that we get is some other story about the crisis in democracy in some way or another. And what better place for workers to take up their role in that struggle and that effort to save democracy than through these, their workplace fights, through these demes, or through their tenants fights, or through these efforts to try to negotiate collectively with others who share that economic identity.

And, it's always imperfect. Humans are imperfect. I'm not trying to say there's a perfect model to go on, but there's real value in these, as you call them, demes, in the demos of democracy. That it's not just something that we do once a year, but there's a reason why unions have been called schools of democracy.

Because you're giving people real practice at consulting, conferring and disagreeing. Like, one of the teachers in the book, Allison from West Virginia, she was like, "It's messy, it's hard. There are members and we go, you know, go head-to-toe on a thing and you know, then we make, try to make a decision and move forward in a way that is disciplined and all this stuff."

And she's like, "But that's the thing, like, democracy is messy, but that's good, because that helps us practice and be ready for it, and to engage in a way that we know that we have a say in the process."

### **ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

You know, that Memphis strike, just to contextualize it - it was 1968, Martin Luther King came to help them organize, and after he got there, he was shot. And most white Americans don't put that strike or even think about that strike together with King's assassination.

But, the strike is such a great early illustration of what you are talking about when you talk about organizing those, all those interwoven and intersecting identities because their slogan was, "I am a man," because race was completely inseparable from their pay and the conditions of their work, and, they were, as men, demanding human dignity. And so, King was there because he saw there was no distinction between the workers' economic rights and the entirety of their demand for human rights, as men.

### **ERICA SMILEY:**

As he was murdered, right? He was about to embark on the Poor People's Campaign, which was, likewise, to say you can't distinguish between these things. Or even when we think about the March on Washington. We all know King's 'I Have a Dream' speech. We see a lot of the other speakers.

But, you know, it was the March on Washington for Jobs and Civil Rights, right? So, the Civil Rights Act was an economic policy, when we look at it, what it meant for creating the EEOC and equal employment, right? Like it was an economic question, in addition to being a political, or social question. And so it is true.

And one of the critical things is when you think of the slogan, "I am a man," - or the modern version, right? Just "I am," right, or, "I am a person" or "I'm human." - is the flip.

You have to constantly think of the flip side, right, which is that, "I am not chattel," "I am not a robot." Or, the same thing in our day and age when we think of Black Lives Matter. You say "Black lives matter," but the key thing is to understand that it is in response to the flip, which is that they don't matter, and that life can be taken without punishment in the same way that another life.

And so this is the thing that we wanted to lift up because when we talk about organizing workers as whole people, and starting in Memphis with, "I am a man," as well as thinking about it in the context of our current struggles and fights, is that

when we think about organizing people, when we think about the “so what?” of it all, let me put it like this.

And as an organizer, I get caught up as a strategist, I get caught up in the weeds of the, “what's the power analysis?” and “how are we gonna win?” and “let's define win.” It's like, we won the contract or we win because we change the wage and we win. And those are wins, yes, but, they're means to an end.

Because the “so what?” as my co-author always says, right, is that, the “so what?” was we want people to be able to live with joy and dignity. We want people to be able to work to live and not live to work.

Like, that there's a “so what?” in there that actually is very much connected with our ability to just be humans: to play peewee football, to go to the terrible jazz concert, elementary school jazz concert, you know, where the saxophone doesn't sound anything like a saxophone, you know, to be able to go on vacation to the theme parks, to the Disneys, and feel like we can do that without having to risk losing the money to pay for our prescription medications or to turn on the light.

That's actually the “so what?”

#### **ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Right, right. The American economy has leaned ever further in the direction of being a service economy. And in the service economy, jobs are much more poorly paid.

#### **ERICA SMILEY:**

Mhm. And the question becomes do we just continue to say it's okay for service sector jobs to be low wage jobs, or do we fight to make them good jobs like our predecessors did in other industries?

And the only other thing I want to add here, and this is why we talk about the centrality of race and gender in fighting for democracy and fighting for collective bargaining, is that the reason why service sector jobs have historically been low paid, especially in the U.S. context, is very much anchored in our own history of enslavement.

This idea that when, in that post-reconstruction era, you had people who had previously been paid nothing who were now entering the workforce, there was still a pretty big drive to pay them based on their service and how well they did. To pay them tips and based on their service and not actually a wage based on their labor. People understood that, “yeah, you don't pay a wage.”

And the same thing can be said for the replacement of white workers with black workers or migrant workers or even undocumented and guest workers, when it comes to defining a low wage industry or keeping an industry low wage.



**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Well, and in an economy where it's a feature, not a bug, to have, always, a group lower than the group you're in.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Right.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

It's always going to be the first go-to move from a management that is not willing to even consider the idea that the workers should be better paid: just go look for the next group lower on the spectrum to undercut the workers you already have.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Right.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Maybe this is a little crazy, but -

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Uh oh. I like crazy.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Good

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Come with it.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Service sector jobs strike me as jobs that, in particular, cause a person to have difficulty drawing bright lines between the workplace and the rest of their lives.

So in the book, you talk about organizing the whole worker because a person's never just a worker. I do feel like moving towards service sector jobs in this country is maybe bringing the issue of the way identities intersect and interweave with each other even more to the surface because he just can't separate out when a woman is a teacher from the fact that she also has to pick her own kids up at school, that she's caring for her mother, that she has, you know, no healthcare and no paid sick leave and so forth.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Yeah. The thing and the example that you just raised, Abby, is really important because one of the things you're describing is unpaid work, unpaid labor. And so particularly in our culture, in our society, patriarchy, gender discrimination is still pretty embedded. A lot of the work that women do is unpaid.

And so essentially you have many women, particularly those in low wage sectors working multiple jobs, including at least one or more unpaid jobs of childcare or

healthcare, family care, you name it. And, I say it like that because there are other places where those types of things are taken care of, or built into the infrastructure of a country.

That infrastructure isn't just seen as building more roads and bridges, like, in Canada, you know, women are actually paid to be on leave, when they give birth and paid longer and don't lose their seniority, right, in the workplace. Or, in parts of Germany where the price that you're paying for your apartment in a building also covers childcare facilities in that building and a cafeteria. That is a real thing.

But your question, I believe, was around this why we're seeing more of a drive towards low wage work in the service sector.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Well, I guess I was more asking, if the fact that we've moved towards more service sector jobs makes that imperative of looking at the whole person more clear.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

So, whole person organizing, this is critical to this framework of democracy and a lot of people in the country haven't identified themselves as workers, or at least not solely, right?

I mean, like, you know, they're also soccer parents or players depending on who they are, or, you know, they have a church or faith tradition that they identify with.

So when we think about organizing workers as whole people, we realize two things.

So in the context of winning, say in our workplace effort to win a contract, we realize that we don't need to go very far to find so-called allies. The workers themselves, all they have to do is name the church they're a part of, and the PTA committee and you know, the soccer team that they're a part of, and all of a sudden you have a complete ally mobilization.

It doesn't have to be so sterile. And most working people know this, right? When they really want to get something done, they know who their allies are. You know, organizing workers and centering working people as whole people allows us to have better strategies and also is the key.

If success were guaranteed and we had this wonderful, full-on democracy, that we all dream about, that we've all aspired to and been promised, and continue to fight for that working people would be able to negotiate and set standards in all aspects of their lives, not just once a year in a vote, and not just in their workplace, but in all aspects of their economic lives.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

You know, it's, - and I'm gonna use an obscure word, but I know, you know it, it's the legacy of Taylorism, right?

**ERICA SMILEY:** Ah Taylorism! Look at you, Abby. Okay, now we're doing it. Okay, hold on. Let me get my seat. Let me get comfortable. Okay, here we go.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:** Well, for anybody who doesn't know Frederick Winslow Taylor was a management consultant who lived about a hundred years ago. He is considered to be the father of something called Scientific Management, which is a bunch of theories and practices for companies to maximize efficiency and boost worker productivity.

Many of the ideas at the heart of Scientific Management were drawn from techniques developed through plantation slavery and they're still in use today, which is why I hate using words like productivity and yields because those words, they make you feel like you're not talking about actual people.

**ERICA SMILEY:**  
About people. That's right.

I was having a conversation with a set of corporate executives who were trying to figure out how to have a set of metrics for worker standards.

And I was like, "Look, it's not gonna be the same thing as what you might do for the metrics of a machine, because you know, humans and whatnot, we're complicated."

It's interesting, like I'm not opposed to science, right? One of the things from Taylorism that was interesting is that you could have some intentional efficiencies, you could have some intentional redundancies, like as a way of being the most productive.

The problem comes when, like you said, the humans in that plan are dehumanized into either chattel or robots or whatever we've done in the past as a society. Because, humans don't work that way. It's a miscalculation of the resource, basically, if you think about it.

It's not so much that the system itself is bad. It's the decision making and the profit motive behind it that ultimately harms people, right?

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**  
Right. I know this sounds like a crazy leap, but when I wrote to Bob Iger at Disney, and talked about all the different issues that the workers there were facing, and I talked about housing and the length of their commute and enough money for their food and healthcare costs and so forth, one of the things he said when he wrote back to me was, "Well, that's not in my control."

And what's amazing is he said, "Well, you know, arguably the government is letting these people down."

There are about 65 layers of why that is such an appalling answer, but it goes to this tension between how managers understand what they're doing, which is to create the most efficient workplace and get the most out of every single human body that they can, in the most rational way, without taking into consideration that these are human beings.

So, given that you do have to hire a whole human.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Yes, you do.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

I don't understand, do corporations really think that they can just take the worker into consideration in these negotiations and just segregate that one aspect of who they are out from everything else about them?

**ERICA SMILEY:**

It's crazy, right? It's almost like got a QAnon tint to it. It's like this cognitive dissonance. It's like you're living in an alt reality or something.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Yes, exactly. Because all of those same people go home to their own families and you'll get articles in the lady magazines about how hard it is to get work-life balance when you are a CEO of a company.

You'll hear exactly that analysis, which is: "I'm a whole person. I need to balance these things," from the person who the next day who's gonna go in and argue on behalf of the corporation that there shouldn't be a childcare allowance or,

**ERICA SMILEY:** That's right. It's so true. It's so true.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

It really blows my mind.

One of the things that, you know, I'm scared about for the Walt Disney Company is that they're so unable to think more than four quarters ahead of themselves because of the pressures from Wall Street. And it has been the pressures from Wall Street that have completely altered the way the company is managed and they're only going in the same direction every other corporation in America is going.

This is not anything unusual, but nevertheless, if they were looking more like at five and 10 year increments, then they would say to themselves, "I wonder what the effect in 10 years of this sort of Tayloristic approach to our employees is going to have on our brand," for instance, you know? Because, as they treat people worse, I think people inside the park have a harder time being the positive, wonderful people that they are required by their job to be. So that is going to erode.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Right. It cheapens it.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Right? That is going to erode.

The experience is gonna get less good. The brand will suffer and the parks are the biggest ambassadors for the brand that there is, so everything else across the company is gonna start to suffer. So, if you're looking at it from a 10 year point of view, actually there are incredibly rational reasons why you should not be treating people badly. But, you know, it's impossible to get anyone in this particular financial context that we live in to be understanding it any better than that.

But also I get a little impatient with the idea that if I wanna talk a manager into being a better person and not exploiting their workers, I have to use like a self-interest argument to make that case.

And like, I can't tell you how many times I've been dismissed because it just all comes back to, "because it's the right thing to do." It's amazing to me that that argument is a nonstarter in every quote unquote "serious" room I walk into.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Yeah. Like you're just this pie in the sky idealist or something, right?

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Like a child, you're patted on the head and sent on your way.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Like, that's not how the world works. But it is.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

So let's talk about some of what's happened because you talk in the book about what you call the fissuring of the workplace. I guess I wanna understand, what do you mean when you talk about the fissuring of the workplace?

**ERICA SMILEY:**

It's when companies, you know, put the responsibility of, say, the labor force onto a contractor or subcontractor.

It's the same notion around some of the gig work that we see today from the platform companies where it's the worker's responsibility to do a lot of - to get the insurance, to pay for the car

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

And to bear the risk.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

To bear all the risks, while the ultimate company gets to bear the overwhelming share of the profits.

And that's not necessarily a new technique. I mean, it's certainly on a larger scale given our global economy, but it's something that's consistently happened when employers and large companies see shareholders as the ultimate, prime, like, that's who they're accountable to. Or even, not even shareholders, sometimes it's just themselves and their board, bless 'em.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Exactly.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

But, you know, but like the stakeholders of the community, their workforce, like all the different stakeholders become less of an issue.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Right, right. But the fissuring goes a little deeper than that in the sense that, like, when you walk into a hotel, the people that you encounter are all working at this hotel, but they're not all working necessarily for the same employer. Right?

**ERICA SMILEY:**

That's right. You might even see it at Disney, right?

There's some who might actually get their checks from Disney, but there are others who will get it from some other contractor or subcontractor or consultant or firm.

You see this a lot in landscaping or in janitorial services. Like in the nineties, the Justice for Janitor's campaign was an attack against fissured workplaces where they were going after the companies that were outsourcing their custodial staff.

The difference between, say, the custodian staff and, say, Disney or Marriott or whatever, is that in the latter examples, they're still wearing the brand. It's almost like free advertisement. They might still be wearing the brand of Disney or Hyatt or whoever it is, even though they don't actually directly work for them. Hyatt's not responsible for them in the same way that they would be if they were direct employees.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Right, I mean, Disney's weird. It's got this kind of otherness to its brand, because, you know, people and families and my memories of my childhood and what's good and right in the world, I mean, it has this ineffable quality that other brands don't carry with it. And so, it is a pain in the ass, as a brand, because someone like me can come along and say, "Snow White is sleeping in her car", you know, "and paying \$150 for insulin."

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Right.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Like, that's not ok.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

-w White is sleeping in her car because she can't wake up, because she doesn't have her meds.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Exactly.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

I love you, Abby, this is great.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

So, as long as Disney has that resonance to its brand, it's vulnerable, which is why I'm working so hard at what I'm doing, because it's really difficult to shame McDonald's.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Yeah, no, I see your argument. Like, this idea that, almost like Disney is in the public sphere in that way.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Exactly. It's a public asset in a lot of ways.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Yes, I see it. I see it. The one thing I'll say is that, I mean, Disney is definitely still one of the few shame-able brands based on its public character, and known. But when we actually dig a little deeper and look at the relationship that many of these companies have to society they should all be publicly contested in many different ways.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Yeah, because almost every company is a public resource. It conducts its business in such a way as to become necessary.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

I actually faced that same framework when we were supporting people who were facing eviction during the initial COVID shutdowns, and we were asking all the largest corporate landlords in the country - we're talking thousands upon thousands of buildings and tens upon thousands of units - to put a pause on rent. They had plenty of money, they had backup funds, they had savings, if you will. They could afford it.

And they said, “No, no, no. The government should just help people pay.”

So, instead of, like, people paying out of their wages that they had lost, because many had been laid off, right? They wanted to get their tax dollars to pay them. Meanwhile, they're also getting bailed out. So they're double dipping. But it's the government who's failing them.

Like many of these companies profited during the pandemic.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Every single person inside of every single corporation in America, I guarantee you, was freaking terrified at the beginning of the pandemic and thinking, “Okay, we have to go into pure defense mode here. And what I know is I'm not gonna be bringing any revenues in, so I better not be paying any people.”

And that's just common sense to them, period, end of story. Because they are trained, through the legacy of Taylorism, not to see the world as anything larger than the P and L in front of them, the profit and loss machine.

They were gonna furlough people for as little time as possible and then they were gonna lay as many off as they could. And then they were gonna use those layoffs to build back in a different way to disadvantage the people when they came back.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

To like make up the, to recoup the costs and reorganize. This is the model.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

They would use the idea that they might potentially lose money and therefore that would be bad for America as a justification for all of that.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

As opposed to the people who are already experiencing the bad. And it's true, any disaster, COVID, or climate disaster, is an opportunity to reorganize business to the ends of privatizing the resources while socializing the risk.

Here's the thing: there is an easy solution. It's not even that complicated. As painful and depressing as it is when we hear all the stuff happening, like if we are in fact democracy loving people, then if we center that we'll be fine.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Okay, so I wanna read you some words from your book because first of all, they moved me so much and they do seem to be at the heart of all the promise and potential for democracy that you see in the organizing that you do:

“We, of the race of people whose forced labor built the foundations of capitalism and the modern economy. We, of the people who ran one of the first U.S. industrial labor organizing demands for the abolition of chattel slavery. We, of the people who



organized sharecroppers unions in the most dangerous conditions. We, the washerwomen who threatened to shut down the city to secure a better life for our families. We, who know what it means to organize in the harshest conditions and win. We are not simply the ones we have been waiting for. The stories and efforts of heroic leaders and communities in this book demonstrate that we, in fact, are the ones who have been waiting for everyone else to catch up.”

Can you talk to me in particular about that last sentence, which I think-

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Waiting for everyone else to catch up?

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Yes.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

It was a long run-on sentence. I remember writing it. Okay.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Actually, it's a bunch of sentence fragments.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Yeah. It's a weird thing to say because I'm not like a writer by trade, but writing that was life giving, it was one of the favorite things. It was almost like finally being able to articulate my own transformation and place in the movement.

It was the articulation of that by my mom, albeit in a different, through a different lens, that helped me come out of my own fog after the election of 2016 where, you know, we were all like, “What just happened?”

I mean, I'm old enough to have known that it wasn't impossible, but it was still a tough defeat, or a backlash, I should say. And, I remember being really upset and my mom said, you know, “We've been through this before, and we'll get through this, but I gotta call you back because I gotta go to choir practice.” And I was like, “What? What? There's life? There's still life happening?”

And it was a reminder of resilience. The people who have come before us, they managed to keep going and to even find joy in it. It's not like music stopped, even during the worst periods of chattel slavery. In fact, some of the best stuff came outta there. And so, there's a reminder to myself and to others about the resilience of our people, and our ancestors, and not just mine.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

You know, the shadow story in those words is that there are a whole lot of Americans, white Americans in particular, for whom this is not their ancestry. And that the failing of 20th century labor, was not just that it wasn't representative of people of color, or immigrants, or women, or a lot of other things, but that that was

very much to their detriment, because there's a very specific and important value in not just addressing white supremacy and patriarchy, but in listening to the people who have, always, under the worst of circumstances and recognizing in them that they have a special power and access to ancestral knowledge that we have chosen not to hear or learn from or see as maybe the superpower that we've been waiting for.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Well, you know what? I'm gonna push back on one thing there, Abby.

I think you're right that there's a collective look the other way happening. But it's not just from, say, the stories of my ancestry, but even the story of the ancestries of many, many white people: this idea that they, too, could be the Rob Waltons or the Walt Disneys or the Jeff Bezoses or the Elon Musk - that they've been sold a different dream.

And that's kind of like the promise of whiteness, like the whitening of Italians, the whitening of Irish people. And, I say that because actually many white people have their own histories that should and could align with the stories that I have.

I mean, you know, it was just finally acknowledged, the Italian workers who were hung in Louisiana, who were lynched, Or, you know, when I talk about the washerwomen strike, they didn't put it in the newspaper, but a lot of Irish women were also supporting black washerwomen in that strike because they were also getting their asses kicked in very different ways. But that wasn't in the newspaper. That would've been scandal - multiracial organizing, right?

And so, it's actually critical that white people also, not only see their futures alongside black people and people of color, but actually see that they have a lot of histories. And so, all that is to say is that there's certainly a collective turning a blind eye with this kind of strange aspiration to become Elon Musk, which I don't know why anyone -

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Right. And I guess what I'm getting at is that white middle class and working class people who are choosing this narrative about wealth are impoverishing themselves, right?

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Right, as opposed to our collective well-being.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

They're impoverishing themselves because they're cutting themselves off from access to the extraordinary stories and strengths that they could be pulling from if they could only imagine being part of the human race with everybody else.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

And that being good!

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Yes, and that's something that I bring - now, I bring something from my own personal experience, because in sort of doubling down on the advantages of class that I experienced in my growing up, I found myself hungry for human connection.

I found myself starving in a house full of food. What I kept trying to convey to my mother as we fought and fought and fought was, "Mom, I'm not special. And I'm not, you know, above anything."

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Or even that I'm special because I'm a part of this big thing.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

I wanna be in the water with everybody else. That's where all the fun is.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Right. I wanna be on the team. That's right. I'm so with you.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

That's where all the joy is. That's where all the purpose is.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Well said.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

And that wealth, when pursued for its own sake, no matter how much or how little you succeed in accruing to yourself, will starve you. It's like drinking salt water. You just get yourself thirstier.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Jesus. You just dropped a whole bunch of gems in that one. I'm like, I wish I could be taking notes right now, like starving in a house full of food and it's like drinking salt water. It's like, who knew you were a poet? Oh, Ovid over here.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

I can't help it.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

It's so true, though. That is exactly the situation.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

So tell me, okay, this is my last question. It's the million dollar, billion dollar question. I guess inflation drove it up to billion dollars.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Okay.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

How do we pivot this country from this “Don't tread on me” narrative. This, “I'm on my own, that I need to - leave me alone, keep the government outta my life.”

How do we pivot this country from that to the shared responsibility is the good news narrative.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Mm-hmm. I love it: to bring the good news narrative. Look, there's not a magic bullet here, right?

Like, this is very much about a level of deep, relational organizing: to actually go there with people that we know, because relational organizing requires relationships.

So, no, your comment on Twitter doesn't count, right? But like, you know, actually engaging people in our homes, in our families, right?

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

But I'm so good at commenting.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

I know, but it's so easy. I know. We can just say it, you know, and just leave it out there in the ether.

But no, no, I'm talking about, you know, like my partner, right? Who insisted we move back to her hometown so that she could organize her people after Superstorm Sandy, that's relational work. And the outcome of it 10 years later is that you've got people who would be very caught up in that “Don't tread on me” narrative had that level of person-to-person campaign building not happened, right?

We often say at Jobs with Justice that people are transformed through struggle. And while that doesn't sound attractive to anyone who is perfectly comfortable drinking their tea in front of their Zoom and not struggling at all, it's real.

Like, the idea of when you are in any kind of fight together, whether it's around getting back into your house after a climate disaster, or getting your medical debt forgiven or whatever it is, it transforms people. It transforms your imagination for what is possible.

And to your question, it transforms the idea that we could actually win better together than if I just get mine on my own. And so that's the key.

And there's no, I mean, I know everyone likes to talk about narrative and framing and sure, we need to do that work. I'm not going to deny that we don't need to do that work. But, that has to happen not just over the big loud megaphones, but in every household, at every dinner table, including with that uncle that you really can't stand sitting beside, but you have to engage him on these questions.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

And the only way to engage him is with stories.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

That's right. The only way out is through.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Yes. Yes. I think that's gotta be where we leave it. The route is through.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Oh man. Do we have to leave it? This is so much fun. I feel like we should be talking about all, I mean like we were just beginning to get into the metaphors. Like, I was about to really go there.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

You are a gift to our democracy, my love.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

As are you, Abby. I love it.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

This has been such a pleasure to talk to you.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

I love it.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:** Really. I've enjoyed it so much.

**ERICA SMILEY:**

Let's do it again.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:**

Let's do it again!

**ERICA SMILEY:**

We got a lot to talk about. I mean, you brought up Taylorism. You just dropped that in, like, it was just a side conversation, right? We got a lot to talk about.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:** Because I'm a massive geek.

Learn more about the work being done at Jobs With Justice on their website [jwj.org](http://jwj.org)  
And follow Erica Smiley on Twitter [@smileyjwj](https://twitter.com/smileyjwj).

If you want to see *The American Dream and Other Fairytales*, it's available on Amazon, and iTunes, and vudu. And we're hosting screenings across the country, so

to find out if there's a screening near you, or to host a screening, please visit [americandreamdoc.com](http://americandreamdoc.com). That's [americandreamdoc.com](http://americandreamdoc.com).

Next week, I will be talking with the brilliant economist, Kate Raworth, author of *Donut Economics*:

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:** And I could live in a donut anyway. Just—

**KATE RAWORTH:** This is the only one that's any good for us, of course, because it's conceptual. Because you don't actually have to eat them. The best donuts are conceptual.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:** Yes. I think the best ones are Krispy Kreme, but that's just me.

**ABIGAIL DISNEY:** You've been listening to All Ears with me, Abigail Disney. Our supervising producer is Alexis Pancrazi. Jake Frankenfield is our associate producer. Our engineer is Florence Barrau-Adams. Bob Golden composed our theme song. And our executive producer is Kathleen Hughes.

For Fork Office, the All Ears team is Angie Wang, Dominique Bouchard, Phil Nuxoll, Codey Young, and Cathie Camacho.

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Thanks for listening.