

# CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

## Kumi Naidoo on Human Rights and the Impact of Climate Change

Ethics Matter, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

**Kumi Naidoo, Randall Pinkston**

### Transcript

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** I'm Randall Pinkston at Carnegie Council. Welcome to Ethics Matter.

For the first time, we are pleased to present Dr. Kumi Naidoo, a person with decades of dedication and experience as an activist for human rights and environmental justice. He is a director of [Africans Rising](#), a former honorary president of [CIVICUS](#), and the past president and first person from the Global South to lead [Greenpeace](#).

His earliest activism in his homeland, inspired by [Stephen Biko](#) and [Nelson Mandela](#), among others, was during the fight against [apartheid](#). He worked to build South Africa's electoral machinery, worked with nongovernment organizations, served as secretary general of the [Global Call to Action against Poverty](#); and, along the way, he became a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and earned a doctorate in political sociology.

Dr. Naidoo, you have dedicated your life to a long list of causes and the need for civic engagement and collaboration. But in recent years you've been focusing on climate change. Now, why do you describe that as "the most important human rights issue"?

**KUMI NAIDOO:** The head of the global trade union movement, [Sharan Burrow](#), says, "We as trade unionists have to fight climate change because there are no jobs on a dead planet." So if there are no jobs on a dead planet, there are no human rights on a dead planet because there are no human beings on a dead planet.

So the climate change reality, I always say, is one that people need to be calm about at one level, tongue-in-cheek, because it's not about saving the planet—the planet does not need saving—because if we continue on the suicidal trajectory that we are, with our dependency on oil, coal, and gas, for example, which drives climate catastrophe, the end result will be that we will be done as a species; the planet will still be here. And the truth is, once human beings become extinct, then the forest will recover, the oceans will replenish, and so on.

So let's be very clear. The struggle to avert catastrophic climate change is fundamentally about whether humanity can fashion a way to coexist in a mutually interdependent relationship with nature for centuries and centuries to come. Put differently, the struggle to avert catastrophic climate change is fundamentally about protecting our children and their children and their children's futures, and in that sense it is fundamentally a human rights issue for me. I have maintained since day one that the struggle to avert catastrophic climate change and the struggle to address human rights, poverty, economic justice, and so on must, can, and should be seen as two sides of the same coin.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** So is it fair to say that you were led to this position because of your activism in the anti-apartheid movement, or did it come much later? Was it an evolutionary discovery for you?

**KUMI NAIDOO:** That's a very good question actually, because growing up as a young activist in South Africa, the image that most of us had about environmental activism was it was what rich people and white people did. The truth is many white people in South Africa treated their animals and pets and so on much better than they treated the majority of our people. So one had growing up a somewhat negative sort of disposition towards environmental activism.

But two things had a major impact. As an anti-poverty activist, I was seeing so many good efforts to address poverty being rolled back by climate impacts. So if you look at the coastline of Bangladesh, for example, where over the decades many good investments were made in trying to lift people out of poverty, today we are seeing sea level rise already beginning to push people inland because we are seeing that the water table is becoming salty and people cannot grow food as they used to do in the past.

And I can give you other examples from around the world without saying that actually it's crazy to think you can address poverty without addressing the impacts of climate change that are actually making people more poor. The impacts of climate change that we are experiencing in Africa right now are water scarcity, land scarcity as a result of climate-induced desertification. Therefore, that gives you the toxic reality of food scarcity, because that mix of land scarcity and water scarcity means that you cannot grow food. So that was one factor.

The other factor, I must be honest—and some people, my colleagues at Greenpeace, were not entirely happy for me giving this reason—is when people ask me, "Why did you join Greenpeace and the environmental struggle?" I said, "Actually, my daughter told me to."

Greenpeace approached me when I was in the middle of a hunger strike, trying to put pressure on my government in South Africa not to continue to support the [Robert Mugabe](#) regime in Zimbabwe when human rights violations were just kind of mounting up.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** And continue to.

**KUMI NAIDOO:** So I was for 19 days on water only when I got a call from Greenpeace asking me if I would consider becoming a candidate for the position. I said, "Thanks very much, but I'm not in a position to make such a decision given the fact that I have been already 19 days on a hunger strike."

That same day my daughter called me, having seen me on television and having lost a lot of weight—she was about 16-1/2 then—and said, "Dad, why are you still doing interviews and so on?"

I said, "No. The only people I spoke to today are you and the folks from Greenpeace."

She said, "What did you tell them?"

I said, "I told them that I was very grateful but the timing was bad."

Then she said to me, "Dad, I won't talk to you if you don't seriously consider this job, because for somebody who considers oneself educated like you do, it's pathetic how little you understand about how in fact my generation's future is so threatened by the realities of climate change."

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** This is your 16-year-old daughter?

**KUMI NAIDOO:** Yes.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** Where did she get her knowledge and concern about the environment?

**KUMI NAIDOO:** Well, she has been exposed to quite a lot of activism and so on. And it's not as if I

was not engaged around environmental stuff. But I was treating climate change like any other issue. But climate change is not any other issue, because—let's say with gender equality: it's pathetic that after so many decades of activism by the women's movement and so on, we still have so much gender inequality in the world. However, with gender inequality we still have time. We can continue to struggle and we can win over time.

But for climate we have a clock that's ticking. We are five minutes to midnight in terms of that moment when we have catastrophic, runaway climate change, when it will be irreversible.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** What do you mean by "catastrophic, irreversible climate change?" Spell it out for us.

**KUMI NAIDOO:** That's a language that comes out of the scientific world. They talk about "catastrophic climate change" and "runaway irreversible."

Right now there are two thresholds, one we have passed and one we are close to passing. You might have heard of a movement called [350.org](#) that was set up by [Bill McKibben](#). It's called 350.org because the safe concentration of carbon in the atmosphere is 350 parts per million. Do you know where we are now? [*For more from McKibben, check out his 2012 Carnegie Council [interview](#).*]

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** No.

**KUMI NAIDOO:** Three years ago, we overshot 400 parts per million. In fact, we are about 440 now. Now, the last time the planet had 400 parts per million, the Arctic was completely ice-free, the sea level was about 15-to-20 meters higher, and Africa was covered in savanna forest, a long, long, long time ago. We have passed that threshold and our political leaders are in absolute denial and are suffering from a terrible case of cognitive dissonance, where they just cannot engage with the science.

The other threshold—now, you know, many people when they read about climate issues in the media, will give out this figure of 1.5 degrees or 2 degrees. Just to explain that in a simple way, what it says basically is from the time humanity started burning oil, coal, and gas, the start of the industrial period, from that moment to now the science says we cannot accommodate more than a 1.5 or 2 degree temperature rise.

Now, developing countries, and especially small island states, like in the Pacific, least-developed countries are saying, "We have to cap it at 1.5 because if it goes beyond 1.5, certain small island states will be engulfed by rising seas." There is a big debate and fight in these climate negotiations between should it be 1.5 or 2. But guess where we are now? We have already passed 1 degree, and already at 1 degree we are seeing such massive climate disruption. We are seeing water supplies being impacted. We are seeing climate-induced desertification.

To give you a graphic example of climate catastrophe, think [Syria](#).

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** Syria?

**KUMI NAIDOO:** Yes.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** Our focus on Syria right now has nothing to do with—

**KUMI NAIDOO:** Well, it doesn't serve a corporatized media that is in the pockets of fossil fuel companies or have disproportionate influence over fossil fuel companies to actually say this. It's a well-known facts in terms of studies and reports and so on, but it is not in the media. To be fair, [Bernie Sanders](#) was the one political figure in the United States who did say quite explicitly that one of the key—not the only, but one of the key—drivers of the conflict there was in fact climate-induced

desertification. In the 10 years prior to the uprising starting, there was a massive movement from rural to urban areas because almost 40 percent of the most fertile land of Syria disappeared as a result of climate-induced drought and desertification.

This term "cognitive dissonance" is a psychological term which is very powerful, because basically it is saying that all the facts are there, but for political leaders, because of short-term political expediency or the fact that they have been bought off by certain corporate interests and so on, they cannot cognitively accept that in fact the trajectory that we are on is one that we have to change drastically.

Just to make one point about something we can take from [Martin Luther King](#) which is helpful for the moment that we are in, Martin Luther King, speaking in the late 1960s, coming to the end of his speech, said: "My friends, as I come to the end of my speech, I want to note the dominance of the term 'maladjusted' in modern child psychology. Now, all of us," he said, "want to live a well-adjusted life and don't want to suffer from schizophrenia or other mental illnesses. But, my friends, I say to you that there are certain things in our world that are so objectionable, that are so unjust, and so unacceptable we should refuse to be well-adjusted."

Then he went on to say: "I never intend to adjust myself to religious bigotry or racial discrimination." And importantly, he said, "I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few when millions of God's children are trapped in an airtight cage of poverty in an affluent society."

Now, he was talking about the United States, but that reality plays out throughout the world. The consumption patterns that we have, and so on, all have to be addressed. I would say today one of the biggest diseases we have in the world is not influenza, but it is in fact "affluenza," where people have been led to believe that human happiness comes from more and more consumption of material things. It is that desire for meaningless consumption that dries up the level of resources we need to take from the planet to actually be able to keep the economy, that is not working for the majority of people, working.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** How do you get a critical mass of people as energized and as passionate about this concern that you have just spelled out, which obviously has a bearing on human survival—how do you get people to become engaged in the way that we were for the anti-apartheid movement, which was an international movement before Mandela was finally released and South Africa began its path to where it is today?

**KUMI NAIDOO:** The short answer is with extreme difficulty. The reason for that is—you know, let's say with a human rights violation, if I get arrested and tortured and there are scars from my torture, I come out of prison, the media can come there, take a photograph, you can see the scars, and everybody knows that injustice has happened. With poverty, if somebody is homeless or somebody is starving, you can take a photograph, you can see the person is homeless, the person is starving, and people can understand that there is something wrong here that we need to address.

The challenge with climate change is that the detractors will always say, let's say with [Hurricane Sandy](#), "Ah, but we always have hurricanes," negating the fact that the intensity, the height of the waves, the velocity and ferociousness of how it hit, was out of this. So it's very difficult.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** I'm sorry to interrupt you because I know that someone is going to watch this and they are going to comment, "Well, it wasn't a hurricane, it was a storm." But with that said, it did as much damage or more than a lot of hurricanes that have passed through here.

But go ahead. I'm sorry.

**KUMI NAIDOO:** And you see actually that's a good—I'm glad you did that, because that's what detractors will do. They will find technical arguments here and there.

However, I think the way we move forward is we start allowing young people to lead. I believe that the current generation of adult leaders in all sectors of society have run out of fresh ideas. They keep trotting out stale solutions that have not worked in the past. We need to create the space and we need to go against the idea that says "Oh, young people are the leaders of tomorrow," which adults love to say. In very real ways, young people are the leaders today. When I look throughout the world where I have had the honor and privilege of being able to go and I think about, when I listen to the voices of people, who are the ones who are actually with the program, in the sense that they understand the seriousness and they want to actually make whatever changes that are needed, however big those changes are, I would say that appetite is coming from young people.

So one of the things is we need to create more spaces for young people's ideas and looking at the world through fresh lenses. And let's be clear, young people are going to be the ones who are going to pay the price for the absence of leadership now.

Secondly, we have to talk about climate and finance. Two of the biggest issues that impact on humanity are climate change and the fact that we've got a broken financial system that benefits a handful of people and leaves most people much less. But both of them have something in common, that the way people talk about finance and climate is designed almost to shut 99 percent of people out of the conversation, because once you start talking degrees and temperatures and acronyms and so on, it's very difficult for ordinary people to be part of the conversation. So one of the things we need to do to build that kind of movement—including from the progressives who are in that movement, because they are also afflicted by the same disease of jargon and language that ordinary people cannot engage with—so one of the things is we have to start being able to communicate in accessible ways that open the door to more and more people being able to participate.

For example, when I started in Greenpeace in 2009, I was at the [Copenhagen planet negotiations](#) sort of two weeks after I took on the leadership. Most of the slogans that were prepared were "Save the Climate," "Save the Planet." There was this one big demonstration we did at the [queen's reception](#). The message that we projected on it was "Do Not Betray Our Children and Their Children's Future," rather than "Save the Climate." By just putting that slogan, certainly if you are a parent or you are a grandparent, you think, "Oh, maybe this conversation is about me. It's not about some sort of nerdy climate scientist sitting somewhere crunching out weather patterns." So that's the other thing.

And I have to say, finally, how do we make this movement move forward? If history teaches us anything, whenever humanity has been faced by a terrible injustice or a terrible challenge—whether it was slavery, colonialism, women's right to vote, civil rights in the United States, apartheid in South Africa—those struggles only moved forward when decent women and men stood up and said, "Enough is enough and no more. We are prepared to go to prison if necessary, we are prepared to put our lives on the line if necessary, we are prepared to engage in peaceful civil disobedience."

I want to say that the challenge of climate change in some ways is more bigger than all the other historical challenges combined because this is about whether humanity will survive and whether our children will be able 200 years from now to prosper and live a decent life.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** You just referenced the necessity of people being willing to risk it all, including their lives. You have had that experience in the anti-apartheid movement. I would even argue that you had that experience when you were [climbing that ladder](#) onto that platform in the Arctic Ocean to deliver a petition of 50,000 names. I thought, "You know, you could have just emailed those names to the head of the oil company instead of taking that risk." It's on the [Greenpeace website](#) still.

But I reference that because you have also said to some interviewers in the past that you felt you were living on borrowed time. What did you mean by that? Do you still feel that way?

**KUMI NAIDOO:** Well, for me this is a deeply ethical issue, in the sense that I was a young leader in the anti-apartheid struggle. I became a leader at the age of 15 when there was a national student uprising and I was one of the leaders thrown up by that campaign. True, at 15 you don't know too much. But you have eyes to see and you can see what the government was spending on a white kid and what the government was spending on a black kid in schools. Just when you went by bus from your township to the center of town, you passed white schools along the way, and you could just see—"My god, they've got a playing field that is five times bigger than my entire school," for example.

So anyway, just to give you an example on a lighter note, I was in the front of the march, and the slogan we were chanting was "We want equality." By the time the slogan got to the back of the march, the younger kids were chanting "We want a color TV." [Laughter] I know because kids in white schools had color TVs and kids in black schools had no TVs. To be honest, at that time I wanted both, I wanted equality and a color TV. But both appeared equally unattainable.

One of the things that was clear was the only way we could actually aggregate power was by mobilizing large numbers of people to have the courage to stand up. Now, as Mandela said, courage is not the absence of fear; courage is the ability of humanity to triumph over it. So, for me, I was always, if I was involved in something risky, my heart was coming right out here sometimes, as a 15- or 16-year-old.

In the course I recruited. I played a role in recruiting many, many young people my age—friends, colleagues, people who got involved in the struggle. Sadly, some of them did not survive the struggle, including my best friend, whose name was [Lenny Naidu](#). Lenny was brutally murdered by the apartheid regime. There were so many bullets in his body his parents couldn't even recognize him at the mortuary.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** Was he in a demonstration at the time?

**KUMI NAIDOO:** He had fled with me into exile in 1986. When he was coming back into the country, he and three young women from my home city were ambushed and brutally murdered by the apartheid regime.

You know, it could have easily been me rather than Lenny. During that time growing up, words like "the future," "career path," "pension"—all of these words had absolutely no meaning to us because we lived under that repressive regime.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** You thought you were not going to live to get a pension.

**KUMI NAIDOO:** Yes. I mean it was quite a traumatic thing, finding yourself in your late 20s, and Mandela was out and we were preparing for the [first democratic election](#), and you were still alive.

For me, the ethical question here is: What is the responsibility of a leader who mobilizes people to get involved, who then sometimes goes and pays a higher price—like my friend paid a higher price than me because he died at the age of 24—what is my obligation for the rest of my life? How do I honor his memory, the three women he was killed with, and many, many others who I loved, respected, and so on who perished in the struggle?

So, for me, when I say "living on borrowed time," I could have easily—it was an absolute luck of the draw that I was not the person who got killed and my friend Lenny and others got killed.

I feel a terrible sense of betrayal that I see now by the new [leadership](#) in our country, that have

become extremely corrupt, who seem to have completely forgotten the sacrifices that so many people made, so much blood was spilt, and so on.

My friend Lenny, in the last conversation I had with him before we fled into exile in different directions at the age of 22, asked me a question: "Kumi, what is the biggest contribution we can make to the cause of justice?"

I said, "That's an easy question, giving your life." At that time, every other weekend we were at funerals burying friends and comrades that had been killed in the struggle.

He said to me, "Kumi, that's the wrong answer. It's not giving your life, but giving the rest of your life."

My friend Lenny was way ahead of us. He was the first environmentalist I knew. I jokingly say at that time I think he was one of only 5,000 voluntary vegetarians on the entire African continent. So we hugged each other, shed some tears, because we never knew when we would see each other, and we went in different directions.

And so when I got the news while I was a student at Oxford that he had been murdered, I had to think deep and hard about that last conversation. What he was saying is the struggle for economic justice, social justice, gender justice, climate justice, indigenous people's rights justice—whatever issue, those struggles are marathons and they are not sprints. The biggest contribution that any one of us can make is be true to that cause and continue to push, to have the perseverance, until those injustices have been eradicated.

So when I look at some of our political leaders around the world, and in my context as well in Africa, I believe that the liberation movements, which brought out the best in us in terms of sacrificing for the people and so on—but once in power, far too many of our leaders got intoxicated with power and put their own personal interests ahead of the people as a whole.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** You opted not to get involved in government, you deliberately stayed out, even though you could have as an activist, as someone who was on the front lines, been part of an administration or a department.

**KUMI NAIDOO:** Well, I have a very precious letter from [Walter Sisulu](#), who spent 27 years on Robben Island.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** With Mandela.

**KUMI NAIDOO:** He actually recruited Mandela when Mandela moved from Transkei to Johannesburg. The letter was offering me to come and head the [ANC's](#) (African National Congress) media division in the run-up to the first democratic election.

At the same time, I was approached by a woman who I love and respect and is still a mentor, called [Mary Mkhwanazi](#), who is from Durban, where I am from. She was one of the founders of the [South African Domestic Workers Union](#), the most exploited workers in South Africa together with farm workers. I went to see her. I said, "Aunt Mary, Baba Sisulu has asked me to do this, and at the same time I have also been asked to head up the Adult Literacy Movement, which is a non-profit alliance to promote adult education."

Bear in mind that the most chilling statement about apartheid policy was about education. The founder of apartheid, [Hendrik Verwoerd](#), said, and I quote: "Blacks should never be shown the greener pastures of education. They should know that their station in life is to be hewers of wood and drawers of water." So when democracy came, the majority of the people were not even able to read their ballot. As Archbishop [Desmond Tutu](#) said, the education system under apartheid was "a heavy punch to the

solar plexus of the majority of our people."

Aunt Mary said to me, "My boy, whether the ANC has a media division or doesn't have a media division they are going to win the election. If you went into the job and you tried to do the job badly, the ANC will still win the election. So if you want to be famous, be on TV, and so on, go do the ANC job. Bear in mind if you say no to the ANC job, there will be about 1,000 other people who will want to take it. But who is going to run the Adult Literacy Campaign where there's no money, no prestige, and so on? If you really want to make a difference, go run the Adult Literacy Campaign." And she said, "We need some good people to stay out of government so that we can hold our new leaders accountable, because we should not take it for granted that they are going to be saints."

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** And she was prophetic too.

**KUMI NAIDOO:** Well, sadly. The joke was during that time—you know, NGO stands for nongovernmental organization. When the change happened, there were so many people who moved from the NGO sector into government, we jokingly used to say, "The term NGO now does not stand for nongovernmental organization but stands for next government official." [Laughter] So it was critically important for some of us to stay out. Those of us who stayed out then advanced a philosophy which we call critical solidarity, meaning that we said, "Of course we are in solidarity with the democratic government, the first democratic government that played a key role in delivering democracy. But the basis of that solidarity has to be critical."

So for example, one of the main reasons the ANC government has given over these years for failure to deliver on poverty eradication, water, sanitation, housing, health, and so on, is they would say, "Oh, we have all this legacy to address. We need more time."

I became then the head of the South African NGO Coalition later on, and as the head of the South African NGO Coalition argued very strongly: "But hang on a minute. Why should we give you time when if we see you are going down a path going in that direction and that's the wrong path? We are going to oppose you and try to shift you back to the right path. So we have the right to contest your policy, to shift your policy, and redirect your policy."

I'm happy to say that on many issues South African civil society over the years has succeeded in pushing government to shift tack on many things which were bad judgments on the part of the government in power today.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** I want to spend a little bit of time, if you agree, to talk about your personal life, and specifically your mom. Two questions: How did your family react to your decision to be an activist at such a young age? I can imagine that they may have had other dreams for you, like educator, doctor, whatever. And then, what was the impact of your mom's suicide on your life decisions?

**KUMI NAIDOO:** I would say massive and transformational. It's hard to quantify with specificity, but suffice it to say that she committed suicide two weeks before the first national student uprising that I would take part in occurred.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** It was before?

**KUMI NAIDOO:** It was before, yes.

But I had already become politicized, and I can tell you she was anxious, as were all—

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** All parents, yes.

**KUMI NAIDOO:** Basically, parents knew if you get involved in the struggle it meant you are either

going to be killed or you're going to end up in prison.

One of the things our parents used to always tell us, if you asked them, "Why can't we swim at that beach?" They would say, "Don't ask questions like that. You'll end up with Nelson Mandela on Robben Island."

Robben Island was the prison where he was held. Now, as a young kid in primary school, I already knew there was a place called Robben Island, and once you got into that prison—

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** You didn't get out.

**KUMI NAIDOO:** —you could never get out.

But my mom, even though she was 38 when she died and I was 15 when she died, I think most of what I do is very informed by the values she shared with us, even though it was not framed in a political sense.

For example, she would always say things like, "It's much better to try and fail than fail to try." That's the life of an activist. Ninety percent of the time you are going to be knocked down, you're going to get beaten up, you're going to get thrown into jail, you're going to lose the fight. But the ability to continue to try is what makes a good activist with a sense of stamina, perseverance, and courage.

The second thing, which for me is really important, because I engage with people who are very different from my values and so on, and I can do so with respect. And I think it's important right now that, in a world that is dividing along so many fault lines, that leadership is not about accentuating those divisions but about creating the possibility of dialogue that leads people to greater understanding and, hopefully, some measure of compromise. But what we don't even have in the world today is the ability to actually talk across different perspectives.

My mom used to say, "Always see God in the eyes of every human being that you meet." She said, "There are many people who profess I'm this religion, that religion, and so on. But if you cannot actually see God in the embodiment of every human being that you meet, and then still go to the church, temple, synagogue and spend hours and hours praying; but if you are disrespecting"—what she called the manifestations of God, which is people—"then there's no point in you going."

The third thing she said: "Always try to see the best in other people and focus on the weaknesses in yourself, because you can do something about the weaknesses in yourself; you can't do too much about the weaknesses in others."

Those three very simple things have really informed the way I engage with people.

When I was at Greenpeace, people used to get shocked because I would have a fairly difficult conversation with the CEOs of the most powerful companies in the world. But when our activists were put in prison in Russia, spending three months, I could pick up a phone, call a CEO of some of the top 100 companies in the world, and say, "I understand you are going to Russia to talk business with the Russian leadership. I need you to actually raise the issue about putting pressure on them to get our people out." They would go, they would have the conversation, they would call me, give me their analysis, say how far they got, and so on.

People would say, "My god, how did you manage to do that?"

I said, "Well, when I am speaking to the CEO of a company who is engaged in economic activity that is driving us to climate destruction, I don't just see him as the enemy; I also see him as a victim. He is a victim of an economic orthodoxy that he or she—mostly it's he—was told that's how economics work,

and he's stuck there. Yes, okay he's stuck, but he's got big bucks and he's benefitting from the current system. But that doesn't mean he's not a victim."

Just as in the South African context, when Nelson Mandela from prison taught us that whites were never our enemy, that white people are as oppressed as well, that white people are ideologically oppressed, they've been sold a lie that white supremacy is something that's real and so on.

The need to see the humanity in the people that you have a difference with I think is a critically needed commodity today.

When I look at the United States' [elections process](#), for example, currently underway, I have to say that it does give you a very deep sense of foreboding about what has happened to the United States as a country, where in fact the sense you have, firstly, is, as is the case today in many countries around the world, when people go to vote, they are not going to vote for the best candidate; they are going to vote for the least worst candidate.

Secondly, where lies, blatant lies, can be told left, right, and center are creating tremendous confusion in the minds of ordinary people because they have heard it five or six times on television. And then of course, now when they see things on social media, even if it is false, people think that's reality.

And so we are in a very challenging moment of world history. What I described in a book I wrote in 2010, called *Boiling Point: Can Citizen Action Save the World?*; and what President Obama's then chief of staff, [Rahm Emanuel](#), said after the [global financial crisis](#), "A good crisis is a terrible thing to waste"—and so people have called it "a perfect storm," or I call it "the boiling point," and so on. The moment we are in is we have seen a convergence of a range of crises—poverty crisis, financial crisis, climate crisis, and so on. How we respond to it now cannot be like how we have responded to things before because, as [Albert Einstein](#) once said, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting to get different results, right?

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** If you want something different to happen, you've got to do something differently.

**KUMI NAIDOO:** So now is the time for us to have the courage to ask some fundamental questions about what kind of economy is fair; what constitutes happiness—because, basically, we have all been fed a lie, that happiness comes from how big your house is, how many cars you have, how much money you have, and that's what makes you happy.

As you see if you look at the gun violence situation in the United States, for example, many of the young people who have been involved in that came from pretty wealthy backgrounds. The [Columbine kids](#), for example, they were not from poverty.

So privilege, economic material privilege, definitely does not guarantee you happiness, and sometimes can be actually the source of your discomfort with what's happening around you.

**RANDALL PINKSTON:** Dr. Kumi Naidoo, unfortunately our time has expired for this session of the Carnegie Council Ethics Matter. I hope, however, that this is just the first of many visits that you will share with our viewers and our audience.

Thank you for your insight, Kumi Naidoo.

**KUMI NAIDOO:** Thank you very much for having me.

## Audio

Kumi Naidoo's activism began at 15 years old, when he risked his life to protest against apartheid in

his native South Africa. The former Greenpeace executive hasn't stopped since. Learn more about this inspiring man and find out why he considers climate change to be the most important human rights issue of our time.

### **Video Clips**

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### **TV Show**

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