



Valerie Weyland

Transcript

Podcraft Productions

Varnya (intro):

Finding and forming authentic connections is often challenging - but when you throw immigration and prejudice into the mix, it can seem almost impossible. That's why Valerie Weyland's story is so inspiring.

In her 20's, Valerie moved from the United States to Australia, where she knew no-one. In doing so she embarked on a remarkable personal journey - a journey that was at times isolating and lonely but ultimately, really rewarding. From the States, to regional Australia to Bali and then back to Perth. Valerie's experience culminates in her creation of Brown Girl Bloom - a space for women of colour to thrive.

I began by asking Valerie why she had decided to move to Australia in the first place.

Valerie:

...it started at a point where I was miserable in a corporate job. At that point, I was just fulfilling my parents' dream. When you have immigrant parents and they give up everything to create a new life, importantly for their children, you feel a lot of pressure to make them proud.

That's all I wanted. I would excel academically, I ended up playing basketball in what you guys call uni, and then I got the corporate job. I was like, "OK. I'm living the American dream, move up the corporate ladder, surely I will find happiness in this space." I never felt it.

I just remember sitting in a cubicle, office cubicle. I don't want this to be my life. I don't want to be 70 and feel like this is what I've done with my life. I haven't felt an ounce of joy in it. I decided to explore, and I reached out to someone who could potentially be a mentor.

I was managing a semi pro-men's basketball team in San Francisco. This happened to be an umpire that was coming for the basketball game. I was introducing him, telling him where the change room was.

As we were talking, I decided to share my story. I just it's like, "Yeah, this is my story. I'm not really happy [laughs] with where I'm at in my life." He's like, "Of course, I'd be more than

happy to help you." He asked me, "Where do you want to go?" I'm like, "Anywhere outside of America."

[laughter]

Varnya:

Something new please.

Valerie:

Something new, like a new exciting experience. He had contacts here in Western Australia. I ended up getting signed to play basketball here. I believe that moving away often gives you that space to discover yourself.

Varnya:

You landed in Perth, and then what? You go straight down to Bunbury?

Valerie:

Yes, literally. [laughs]

Varnya:

You must have thought, gee, this is quite small. [laughs]

Valerie:

Yeah. So different from Los Angeles.

Varnya:

Oh my God. [laughs]

Valerie:

He picked us up, and then we drove straight to Bunbury. It's hard because you're not looking from like an airplane view. I couldn't get a real idea of how small the community was, until I actually began to interact with the locals.

Varnya:

How did you find that?

Valerie:

I found it interesting because it is so vastly different from where I came from. This hustling bustling city to this really quiet, sort of not really sleepy town, but definitely much quieter than where I came from.

There were a lot of things I loved about it, but there were a lot of things that maybe didn't really resonate with me. What I loved was the community spirit. There was a real focus on human connection and having a relationship and bonding with your neighbor, and I really liked that because everyone was friendly.

At the same time, I felt like there was no space to be alone. Everyone has already created stories around you, and I felt people already had decided who I was before I even got to share who I am.

Varnya:

So preconceived ideas? What do you think those preconceived ideas were?

Valerie:

[laughs] Well, I'm a tall 6'1" African American. You can only imagine, right, what people were thinking when they first saw me.

Varnya:

Do you think they were intimidated?

Valerie:

Yes, being a woman of colour, I think, because I was this minority, and there weren't many of me. People were apprehensive. People fear what they don't know so they tend to just make assumptions because it's more comfortable to just make those assumptions rather

than to be vulnerable and say, "I don't know that much about your culture. Can you tell me about it?"

Comfort can be very dangerous, [laughs] because it keeps us in a bubble. Discomfort is actually quite helpful for us to grow and connect. We have to open ourselves up to hear other people's story, and that's being vulnerable. Opening yourself up without having this need to give our feedback, but simply to listen.

I felt like that didn't happen with anyone except for the Aboriginal community.

Varnya:

Was that because you felt very self conscious and conspicuous within the white community, and you didn't have that same feeling within the Aboriginal community?

Valerie:

Yeah, the truth is that when people are staring at you and you feel like they are not smiling, it's more of a stare. You begin to develop these different feelings that you never had before. For me, I ended up having immense anxiety. I would pick and choose which stores I would go to. Literally think about these things before I went out.

I felt like I had to smile more, just so people didn't think I was going to be aggressive or loud. A lot of people watch American TV, and there's a lot of negative stereotypes attached to African Americans - that is not the whole story. That might be some people's story, because the reality is there. Those big spectrum of different personalities in every culture. That's just one minute part of the whole story, and that's what they based who I am off of.

I had people say that they were surprised that I was so intelligent, or do I speak English. [laughs] When I begin to challenge this perception of Aboriginal people, like, "Why we're not learning about the history of Australia?" "Why do people treat my friends differently?"

Then I began to be also ostracized because no one wants to have those uncomfortable conversations. It's too confronting. The only reason why I understood the story of Aboriginal people is because Noongar women were the first ones to open their arms to me to say, "Come on, sis." They started calling me sis from day one.

I felt so lonely, and they were the ones to say, "Come hang out with us. What are you doing? Come have a yarn." That really welcoming nature, that makes a huge difference.

I have to acknowledge the fact that I came as a professional athlete. People were like, "Oh, you're cool because you're a basketball player." I felt like, "Yeah, but that's just one part of



me." I'm not just here to just shoot a basketball in a hoop. There's so much depth to my truth. I just felt like no one really wanted to hear that part.

They just wanted me to be the person who dribbles a ball and shoots it, laughs, tells the jokes. They don't want to hear your journey.

Varnya:

Yeah. They've already put you in the athlete box. Stay there. Fine.

[crosstalk]

Valerie:

Yeah. When people...

Varnya:

It's a nice box. [laughs]

Valerie:

Yeah, and you know what? It was fun. That part was fun but what happens when the lights turn off and no one's applauding? It's very lonely, right? No one's there to be like, "Who are you?"

That's where my sense of loneliness really started because in America, I always had my family to lean on, my cousins, and all these things. I never really was lonely. Also, there's a lot of Nigerian Americans, that's what we like to call ourselves, [laughs] because our parents are Nigerian. There were a lot of us there so we could connect with each other and share. Whereas here, I just didn't have that.

Varnya:

Did it make you rethink the decision? Did you doubt the decision?

Valerie:

No. I think when you have a true sense of knowing, you lean on that in your darkest times. I knew that I was supposed to be here, but I didn't know why.



Varnya:

OK.

Valerie:

I also knew that I am a radiant being just like everyone else. Just because people can't see that doesn't change who I am or my reality. It just means that this might be a very lonely journey for awhile. That was a hard pill to swallow.

When we share our stories, we think that, "Oh, this happened overnight." No, this was a real journey of a lot of tears in my room by myself. Just feeling absolutely depressed and miserable when no one else was around.

Varnya:

Is that hard? You spoke before really beautifully about being really conscious of where you go shopping and where should you go, so you don't feel quite so conspicuous. I can imagine that if you're in that anxious, depressed place, it's hard enough to go out without even factoring in, "Oh, which shop should I go to even? If I could even get the energy to actually go out."

Valerie:

Oh, even now, sometimes it happens. Even though I have those connections. It doesn't mean that it goes away. You become self-aware of how you're feeling. Sometimes if I feel unsure or I don't want to be stared at... [laughs]

Varnya:

Yeah, sure.

Valerie:

I know that sounds like something that's really light for other people who haven't experienced it. If you're one of those people where you feel like people stare at you for

whatever reason. Whether it's the color of your skin or your religion or your ability, people are staring at you.

Then I guess what I realized by kind of analyzing, "Why do I feel anxious when everyone's staring at me?" The anxiety was just a mirror of my own insecurities. It didn't really have anything to do with the person staring. They could be staring for whatever reason.

It might be something really nice. For me, it was really just this mirror and I realized that I just had all these insecurities that I hadn't dealt with where I'm like, "Am I worthy? Am I worthy of love? Am I worthy of compassion? Am I valued?"

The question is, do I love myself then? Do I believe I am worthy? Those were the questions that really changed the way that I experienced these things. The reality is if you look different in any way, people are going to stare. It doesn't matter what country you live in. [laughs]

I got stares in the US because I'm so tall or whatever. People are just going to stare.

One thing that I did intentionally to combat that -- I wouldn't say combat it but to address it -- was to smile more. Not smile like hoping they'd like me but just to say, "Hmm, you know, like hi or..." I find that especially here when I do it, people always smile back.

[laughter]

It just breaks down all these barriers. It's so interesting.

Some of them will just go from just a blank stare to actually smiling at you and, I think it's like I said before, it's just like this unknown, like this fear of the unknown. Maybe the unknown is maybe they want to say something to you, but they don't know if you'd be receptive to it.

Maybe because they haven't seen anyone like you so it's shocking they don't know how to respond which is often when you have a 6'1" [laughs] black woman. It's daunting for a lot of people and I can understand that so the other part was empathizing for their experience.

If I can understand what they might be experiencing by seeing me, then I let go of this, "They might not like me," and all these things, I'm like, "Maybe they haven't really met anyone like me before" so I smile and I say, "Hello," and it just changes everything.

Varnya:

For sure. I think smiling is one of those things where it's like a beautiful feedback loop where not only when you smile are people more likely to smile and engage with you which



makes you feel good. Even just the act of smiling makes you feel good, even if it's not reciprocated. It just changes your outlook.

Valerie:

Yeah, it does. It changes how you feel. That's one thing that I'm very intentional about is just letting go of my insecurities and doing things that make me feel good - smiling is one thing I think that everyone could take onboard.

It's interesting how the simplest things have the greatest impact. Sometimes we think when we're feeling anxious or unhappy or depressed that something complex has to be the solution - when it could be that you just need to just lay down, relax, and breathe. Focus on your breath.

This is why I meditate because it calms me down. It centers me and I become present. What I find is when I become anxious or I feel depressed, it's usually because I'm stuck in the past or I'm in the future worrying about what I should do to get to this and the whole thing. There is so much beauty in being present which is such a simple thing for us all to do.

Sometimes when people hear the word be present they're like, "OK. What does that actually look like?"

[laughter]

One thing that I do in my head is if I find that I'm living in the past or future, I just tell myself what I notice around me. I'll say, "OK. There's a brown table, there goes a green tree. That's a red car." Then now I'm in the present, I can see things. I'm not somewhere else.

Varnya:

So, you're in Bunbury and you're not in a great space. You're feeling quite isolated socially. Where does your journey go next and could you say how long did that phase lasted for? Was it a long time?

Valerie:

A sense of loneliness and isolation? Yeah, definitely. I feel like life is like this cycle anyway. Once you get out of it, often you end up [laughs] going back into it at some point in your life because challenges are inevitable.



The one thing that I did was that when I was feeling very lonely is that I would spend more time writing. I wrote a lot. I still journal a lot to this day because I think sometimes you have all of these thoughts in your head and you just need to spill them out so you could let go of them and start to flow with life.

The beauty is that once we let go, then we attract all the things that we actually deserve because I was like, "I'm so lonely," I just felt even more lonely because that's all I was thinking about. The more that I spent time writing and letting it go and often I would go outside and eat my oatmeal outside and just be with nature.

I noticed that I began to attract real connections that I actually wanted. When I did that, I noticed that my Noongar friends became closer to me and we spent a lot of time yarning. We would just chat and share stories. I learnt a lot from them about the power of storytelling and really talking about our roots and the things that we're connected to and what brings us joy.

From that, I actually ended up moving to Bali. [laughs] Yeah, for a year, I ended up moving to Bali. My boyfriend, who is now my husband, wanted to move because he is a passionate surfer and he's like, "I just want to be in Bali and surf like awesome waves." I was like, "Sure," because I'm kind of a person who I'm not really set in my ways when it comes to where I want to live.

Clearly, as I was living in Australia. [laughs]

Varnya:

You're open. [laughs]

Valerie:

Before that, I had all my friends. I felt good I had these connections. Moved to Bali, back to that real sense of loneliness again. I'm like: "This is a similar feeling that I've had in the past," where I feel immensely isolated.

Sometimes I would just cry for no reason. [laughs] Nothing would prompt it. I was just so sad because my husband often had to come back to Australia to work.

I remember what really was inspired me is I walked out of our villa and the neighbors were Balinese. They just asked, "Where are you going?" I'm like, "To get coffee."

I was like, "Why do they want to know where I'm going?" Then a friend told me, another Balinese woman, she said, "They just want to make sure you feel welcome and valued and



that you're not alone." These local Balinese people would just open their arms to me again and they often invite me over for ginger tea.

They couldn't speak a lot of English, but I think one thing that we can connect through is love. Sharing love with each other. They just had all this love to give out and it really changed the way I saw life by someone's kindness.

Varnya:

What do you think stops us from doing that, from behaving in those ways?

Valerie:

The most important thing is that we're not present and we're just stuck in routine. We're so caught up in this busy life that's full of noise in the literal sense, in the figurative sense. We always hear the cars honking. Everyone's busy trying to figure out how they can pay their bills and get to work or get their degree.

All these things. It's like we don't even know ourselves. We're so caught up being outside of ourselves that there's no space to understand that love is the most important thing. We need to make sure our cup is full so that whatever spills over is extra.

Your amazing job is this spill over, but the core is love and light. I think that's what keeps us from really sharing love with others. What I found is that when I understood that through these connections, I became more present.

When we become more present, you're able to empathize for other people. Maybe they're having a bad day, they're not really treating you great or they might be staring at you or whatever. You don't take it on as your own. You understand that they're going through an experience. It's not who they are. The greatest thing we can all do in order to have space to welcome more people is to slow down.

Varnya:

It's really interesting. It's running through as a theme, unintentionally, just this idea of too busy and just not being able to cope with almost the external environment, actually, when I think about it, people, noise.

Valerie:

It's just feeling overwhelmed. There's just too much on our plate.

Varnya:

How long were you in Bali for?

Valerie:

I was there for a year. One thing that I did behind the scenes was I set an intention that I wanted to engage with genuine people. Because I think when we don't set intentions, we just walk around aimlessly, and then we just attract whoever. [laughs] Then you begin to feel a real sense of emptiness.

I made an intention. In particular, I wanted to engage with the locals, and as soon as I did that, again, these people came into my life. My closest friends were all from Jakarta. It was beautiful. They taught me so much about community again, and when I moved back to Australia, I took that with me.

Varnya:

When you guys moved back, did you move back to Bunbury or to Perth?

Valerie:

We moved back to Perth, so then again I felt isolated, again because I didn't know anyone in Perth. All my friends were in Bunbury. But this time around, I had a foundation of how to address loneliness if I were to experience it again because we will experience these feelings again. Anything that's come up in our lives will continue to come up at different stages.

No matter how self-aware we are, they're just going to come up. But the most important thing is that we have the tools and the foundation to understand how to address it when it does come up again.

Varnya:

What are the tools that you use now, what are the things in your toolbox?

Valerie:

The first is that I focus on being present and self-aware. That was the first thing because I can't attract what I don't have. If I don't have love for myself, if I don't have patience and



compassion for myself, I'm not going to attract that outside, so that was the first thing that I focused on.

The second is to...because sometimes, no one knows about this gift of creating something other than you, right? You're given that gift to create, so if it comes into your head, your idea -- this idea -- that's because it's meant for you. I believe that because I didn't see many women of color in spaces, I just decided that I wanted to create it.

I started off with a Facebook group, and I called it Brown Girls. First, it was online, which I think there's a purpose for the Internet and social media. You can really learn a lot.

That's where a lot of, especially millennials -- I fall into that -- and younger, we need to understand that there's definitely beauty in social media, but without human connection, we're going to feel a real sense of emptiness and loneliness. What I did, I started hosting dinner parties, picnics...

Varnya:

Cool.

Valerie:

Yeah, girls' chats, all those things.

[crosstalk]

Varnya:

Was it a small group at first?

Valerie:

It fluctuates. One thing that I found interesting that it taught me a lot about myself because when I first started, no one was showing up.

[laughter]

You know what I mean? This is a big learning curve for all of us.

Varnya:

That's hard, right?

Valerie:

You know?

Varnya:

It's a lot of people's worst fears. Try and host something and then no one will come.

Valerie:

It feels horrible. I'm like, "It feels horrible. No matter how many times you do something or experience it, it still feels the same every time."

[laughter]

Still feels horrible. I just knew that in order to create the life that I want, I have to be consistent and committed. I would continue to host events, and eventually, more people would come.

Sometimes, people are apprehensive for whatever reason. They're like, "Ugh, I don't want to come," and "I'm the only person there," and all these things.

I just kept creating and eventually, more women would come, and everyone's having an amazing time. That evolved into what I call the group now - Brown Girl Bloom.

Brown Girl Bloom focuses on...It's attached to my personal journey. I have a real deep relationship with meditation and the power of stillness. I believe that it's completely changed my life.

I think that fear of being judged for being maybe potentially different, kept me from wanting to attach that to this networking space. Towards the end of last year, I decided to just jump and see what happened. I changed the group and the focus is around Soul Sister Circles where we meditate outside.

Soul Sister Circles gives space for women of color to heal and thrive. Even more women started to come. If people want to create spaces for connections, attach it to something you're passionate about, because people will be more drawn to what you're passionate about rather than something that you're just hoping people will like.

As soon as I attached my passion for meditation and stillness, so many people started to come and so many girls are just like, "Oh my gosh, Valerie, this is such a good idea. I'm so glad." I had one last month and girls are like, "When are you going to have the next one?"



That never really happened before. It's interesting how when you stand in your power and your purpose, how you just attract the right people. I get really energized. [laughs] You don't need coffee when you're full of joy because you just have this endless energy because you're doing something that really brings you life.

Also for me, being of service to others actually brings us a lot of joy. As well, for me, it brings me so much joy to give to someone else, because when we give to others, we are also giving to ourselves.

Varnya:

With the loneliness thing, you seem to have a very calm approach to it, in that you're not shutting it off. You're not saying, "I've got to get rid of it, I've got to eliminate it so it will never happen again."

You're more in a position of radical acceptance, where it's like, "That's going to happen, and when it happens I have some tools that I can use."

Valerie:

Yeah because you know what? My whole life, until a little bit after I moved to Australia, I was running from the things that brought me pain. You run away from anyone that makes you feel less than, or you feel like they don't like you, or it just brings you this real fear. You just run from it, but the reality is it keeps showing back up in your life.

That's what I know. You can't run from your pain. It's going to catch up with you. Acceptance is the key. As you were saying, the only way to address things is to acknowledge that they exist in our lives, and not to try to fight it. When you're in the ocean, there's only one way to float and that's to let go. You can't grab the water, right?

[laughter]

You're going to drown.

Varnya: Good luck with that.

[laughter]

Valerie:



You can't grab the water, you can't grab the ocean, you just have to flow with it, and flowing with it is to acknowledge those painful experiences as just an experience not your identity. That's the thing, detaching our identity from our experiences.

That's what I've done and that's how I'm able to acknowledge when I'm feeling lonely or low as a moment in time. I don't try to run from it or try to make myself feel better.

What I believe is that there is no cure that's overnight. When I was feeling that anxiety and apprehensiveness to go to certain stores, I would pick places that I would go to be comfortable, I didn't try to just change it, I just tried to acknowledge it.

A lot of times we'll hold our breath and we just have to let go. The simplest thing people can do really, I know I've been talking about this a lot, but just practicing breathing slowly, because we typically take really short breaths.

If we can just take a deep breath and acknowledge how we're feeling, don't try to solve it, don't try to find some solution or someone to figure it out for you or fill that void, just be present with it. It's so interesting that simply being present with it and breathing helps that feeling to dissipate on its own. So that is really what I would suggest to anyone that's experiencing it right now.

The other thing is to understand that we are all interconnected, so that means that we all have had the same feelings. If you're feeling really lonely right now, really depressed, know that I felt it, probably your neighbor has felt it, probably the person that you admire, some celebrity, has definitely felt it. We all feel that at some point in our lives, but the biggest question is how do you respond to it.

Varnya (extro):

Valerie Weyland, chatting with me about her experiences of loneliness, prejudice and ultimately, connection.

You've been listening to the Connected Us podcast. You can find the whole series at the befriend website - that's befriend.org.au or wherever you find your favourite podcasts. I'm Varnya Bromilow - thanks for joining me! See you next time.