YouSpeak Radio 2024
Audio Transcript

Episode 6: “The Dreams of My Generation” with Marcus Arana

Youspeak Introduction:

Jasper: This is Youspeak radio. With generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, an intergenerational project by one institute and the outwards archive on Tongva land.

[MUSIC]

Episode Introduction:

Ameer: Hi, my name is Ameer. I go by he/him pronouns. I am currently studying biochemistry to have a career in forensic pathology, and in today's podcast, I got to have the privilege to talk to Marcus Arana. We managed to talk about the LGBTQ community and our experiences and how it has impacted us personally, spiritually and physically. Above all, I got to know more about him and about his own identity. It was a pleasure talking to him, because it also helped me open up a bigger point of view in my own life.

[MUSIC]

Marcus: Things change. They change over time. I remember a time when I didn't know how to love myself, and now I do. I learned to do it through the eyes of my friends. I looked at every friend I had and I said, "God, if they love me, then there must be something lovable here." It started with that. You have hope, and you have desire to see the greater future that's available in your life. Things are not always going to be hard, and they're not always going to feel daunting. You will find your place. You're going to feel comfortable in your own skin one day.

Ameer: Before I graduated, I had friends who were freshmen, sophomores and juniors, and some of them were queer. Some of them are non-binary. Some were trans men. Some were trans women. Because I was leaving and because I was the only trans person to come out in my grade in my senior year, a lot of people, looked up to me in a way to be like, "Oh okay, if Ameer can do this, I can do it." I try my best to, like, motivate them.

Marcus: You're already being a role model. That's a beautiful thing that you could inspire people to feel confident in themselves, and they can look at you and go, "Damn, if he can do it, I can do it." When you choose to be a trans activist. That's kind of what you do. You give up your anonymity, but you present visibility. You are the dreams of my generation.

[MUSIC]

Interview Begins:

Ameer: Hi. My name is Ameer, and my favorite animal is a hyena.

Marcus: I am Marcus Arana. I'm also called Tio. I'm also called Holy Old Man Bull, and I'm a transmasculine, Two Spirit elder living in Sonoma County on unceded Pomo, Lapo and coastal Miwok land,

Marcus: and I'm grateful to be an invited guest here. Hyenas are interesting because the females are actually dominant, and they take on secondary sexual characteristics that look very masculine, so it's an interesting choice of animals. I'm 67. How old are you?

Ameer: I'll be turning 18 in a few days.

Marcus: Birthdays were always strange for me, but I sort of reclaimed them as I got older, because every day is a gift. Life seems so hard when you're first starting out. In a lot of ways, it is because you're building yourself up and you'll build many versions of yourself over time. There's nothing like childhood trauma to influence the rest of your life. Trust me, I'm one of those. I was raised by wolves by the time I was ten years old. My mother didn't do much of anything for us.

Ameer: I'm a Catholic. I once, at some point left the church because of religion trauma, because of the rules of how gender is based. I came back to the church, and I realized that just because people have different perceptions of how God treats its children doesn't mean that it should affect my view because I know that, at the end of the day, God doesn't make mistakes. I know that me being trans is not a mistake. My mental health has gotten a little better because of it, because I know that. Or not that I know, I feel like I have hope within myself. God is like a person who accepts diversity.

Marcus: For me, I'm Native American. I'm Blackfeet, and I'm Ohlone, a California tribe from the Bay area. Our worldview essentially is that the Creator is too big to put a name on. The great mystery of all of this creation, and life is way too large to comprehend, and we're a little bit pitiful in terms of even trying. So, many of our languages, it translates to “the great mystery,” or “we don't have a name for this.” Most often we call this, “Creator.” Creator comes by many names. Some people call him God, some people call it they, some people call it a goddess name. We call it Creator. I'm somebody who was traumatized by Catholicism and left the church when I was ten, never to return except at the obligatory funeral, but there's great truth and beauty and in all belief systems, and the overriding message that I think too often gets lost about Christianity is about love, love, love, love, and not about self. You don't think about yourself, you're thinking about others, and that's the great sacrifice. Creator loves everything that Creator made and made you for the reason, just as you are.

[MUSIC]

Ameer: What was your first encounter that triggered your path of being trans?

Marcus: If I were to look at the very first encounter, it was at age four when I saw the movie “Pinocchio.” In the end of the movie, the Blue Fairy came down and turned Pinocchio into a real boy. I got so excited, and I came home and I told my mother, "I needed the Blue Fairy." She said, "Why?" and I said, "So I could be a real boy." I was excited and a little bit angry that nobody had told me about the Blue Fairy. She looked at me and said, "No, you can't be a real boy." I had to wait another 33 years until I was 37. What about you?

Ameer: I don't know which one to pick, but I'll mention both of them. When Mulan dressed as a boy and passed as a boy, or when, one time, somebody accidentally called me son in Spanish, "mijo" instead of "mija." They were like, "Oh, mijo," and I was like, "Why does that? Why does it ring with me? Why does it feel comfortable? Why do I like being called a boy?" And I was like 8 or 7 at the time, and I don't know what it was. I just like being a boy. I just like doing boy things. At first, I had really bad dysphoria, during, like fourth or third period because that's when my body started developing. It got to the point where I got really dysphoric, and I'm like, “I wish I can be a boy.” I didn't know what trans was. I just knew I was

Ameer: different, but in a good way. I was closeted during middle school because there was a really bad anti-LGBTQ, to the point where community members would get literally harassed, sometimes even dragged, and then like I was just so scared to come out. But I remember finding out the word trans, I think, when I was in eighth grade I remember I saw a book and they said, of the word transgender, “one that is assigned one sex at birth but identifies as the other,” and I was like, "Yeah, that's me. I'm trans."

Marcus: I didn't have the word transgender when I was that young, and I learned that word “transsexual” around age ten, but it only talked about people who went from being male to being female. There were no images until I was 20 years old, and a guy named Steve Dain was on national news because he transitioned from “Teacher of the Year” *Doris* Dain to *Steve* Dain, who was fired a year after his transition. I'm not sure how you go from “Teacher of the Year” to getting fired, but there you have it. That was the seventies. I didn't hear the word transgender until I was in my mid-thirties.

[MUSIC]

Ameer: Did you come out, and what was the reaction? How was the aftermath?

Marcus: I came out in high school in 1973 when it was still against the law to be gay in California. It got changed the following year by the Consenting Adults Act. Nobody was surprised when I came out because I was always a masculine kid and very much of a tomboy, so it was no shock at all when I became a lesbian, and when I transitioned, it was no surprise to anyone at all. I knew a lot of people, and there was no way that I could disappear from an entire community. The first thing I did was the first people I contacted was all my former significant others. The relationships I had had. I felt that that was a courteous thing, that they rather they hear from me than from somebody else. The first person I had to come out here was my partner Nancy because we had met as lesbians, and we were a year and a half into a lesbian relationship. When I finally found this word and the resources that could make me be able to become who I am. She was so wonderful and so accepting and said, “You do what you have to do, and I support you along the way.” She stayed with me, so I didn't lose my friends. I didn't lose my exes. I lost my family. My father disowned me for many years because it was just too much for him, and he was mad at me for changing my last name from his last name, and my nieces never got to meet me because their parents kept them away from me. Sometimes, family can be the hardest hurdle and, arguably, relationships are also the hardest hurdle. When I came out as trans, my more conservative straight friends actually understood it easiest. I remember one friend saying, "Well, that kind of makes sense to me because I always thought of you as the guy in your relationship with all these women." It was heteronormative, but she had a context that she could handle it. I'm living proof that relationships don't have to die with transition, and my father did come around and my brother did come around, and my nieces know who I am, and they're very proud of their Uncle Marcus for the work that he's done. They think I'm kind of awesome, actually, in my own way. If you wait long enough, sometimes things right themselves. If you step away, and you stop being angry about it and just move on, they'll come to you. My father and I were very close for the last four years of his life, and I'm, I'm grateful for that. He called me his son. And Every time I meet a new person who's not trans. I have to decide, “Is this going to be a friendship that's going to go somewhere?” and “At what point do I disclose who I am?” I can't keep that significant part of myself. It's not like I walk up to people and go, "Hi, I'm Marcus, I'm transmasculine," but, rather, if I'm going to become somebody's friend, they need to know that I'm an activist There are tens of thousands of people who know that I'm transgender, but my next door neighbor doesn't. Go figure. Now I look completely male, so I'm invisible to other men like myself. We can pass by each other on the street and not be able to go, "Hey, I know you, and I know your journey.” I'm cis-passing. I get heteronormative privilege, which is really ironic since my wife is a lesbian and I'm a gay man. There's a certain amount of invisibility with things cis-passing. There can be a loneliness, but cisgender-passing privilege for me has

Marcus: always ended at the emergency room door when I've had to deal with doctors, and I have a different looking body than other men, and they have to deal with that. You're sort of at the mercy of their good-heartedness. Most often it's been good. Sometimes it's been really horrible. It's not like the path ever really ends once you look like every other guy. When you make your friends, you have to decide, “Am I going to come out to them or not?” You can transition. You can learn different ways. You can be heteronormative, but if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time, it doesn't matter. I give a lot of public speeches and give a lot of public appearances. I'm openly transsexual. If you Google my name, you're going to find it everywhere, so there's no stealth for me. Even though my neighbors don't know, I'm in books and videos and soon to be in a feature length documentary that's coming out. Every time I get up on stage in a public place, I have to reconcile to myself that somebody might decide to do harm to me because they know that's where I'm going to be and when. So this sense of fear, no matter how heteronormative I might look, never has gone away from me. It doesn't mean it's my overriding thing, but it's sort of a thing I had to make peace with. When I came out in 1994, it was starting to stray away from the complete heteronormative paradigm. In other words, we weren't expected to be straight men. There was this understanding that some of us are bisexual. I remain bisexual– started out bisexual, stayed bisexual. Both men and women are appealing to me. I'm married to a woman, but this notion that they were actually gay FTMs, gay transmasculine people, was pretty new at the time. The last thirty years, non-binary has come out, gender-bending is more of a thing, and we are looking at what toxic masculinity is, which I think is a healthy exercise. Given that I came from this old world place of "men are men, and women are women." I still feel this sense of being able to carry both. I still carry who I was, but I also carry who I am. That's the joy of being Two Spirit. How do you feel about your own sense of masculinity?

Ameer: I feel my best when I see my short hair, when I wake up with my short hair. That gives me a sense of, "I'm a man." I feel euphoric wearing men's clothes or like when I buy clothes from the men's section. It makes me feel great when people use the right terms. The right pronouns. It makes me feel that people are respecting me and makes me feel like a human. Not just a man, but a human. Whenever I have my Pride flags with me, it gives me a sense of like, "I know who I am. I'm not going to let people's opinion get to me. People are going to say whatever they want because at the end of the day, we live in a judgmental society." I feel like a man whenever I think about my top surgery because it's going to help me be more comfortable in my skin and be able to be with my gender more closer than I am now. Oh, and my facial hair.

Marcus: You know, one of the most gender-affirming experiences I ever had was going to a men's barbershop. Back when I was a kid, my father would take all the kids to the barber shop, and I just happened to be the sole girl and in the middle of two boys, so I came anyway. I got to see what it was like with men getting their haircuts and their beards and the conversations they would have. For a lot of Latino and a lot of African American folks, the barbershop is very much a cultural center, like where we go to meet our friends, where we go to say "Hello," where we go to learn from each other about what masculinity is.

Ameer: What advice would you give for someone who is preparing for top surgery?

Marcus: The first thing I would say, if they're smoking cigarettes, stop, because smoking will harm your healing. Get really good sleep, and eat really good food ahead of time so that your body's in the best shape. Depending on the surgery, if it's a full mastectomy– a very large procedure– you may have to have a blood transfusion, and they'll ask you to donate blood ahead of time, so you've got to make sure that your red blood cell count is good, that your labs look good. Now, there are other procedures for smaller chested people that are less invasive, but I think all of those principles apply because surgery is surgery, whether it's a mastectomy or a keyhole surgery where they do liposuction. I really felt an immense sense of

Marcus: relief the minute I woke up after surgery and my hands went up to my chest, and I felt nothing but flat. I just felt like, "Ohh, this burden had been relieved of me." I think that's a part of the dysphoria, and dysphoria is a strange thing because I think that it makes it seem like we have to have a mental health disorder, and I don't think that's true. I think that society is more dysphoric about us being different, as opposed to just stepping aside and letting us access what we need. I always say that it wasn't so much that I was dysphoric, but I really felt like I wanted to see the person in the mirror reflecting who I felt inside. To me, that wasn't a sense of dysphoria, but more like metamorphosis— like the butterfly coming out of the chrysalis after having been a caterpillar for so long.

[MUSIC]

Ameer: From being an activist for trans rights and everybody in the community, how is your experience? How did you start? Was it a good experience?

Marcus: When I transitioned was really a time when transmasculine people started gaining much more visibility, and it became a larger growing community. We actually had a newsletter that went out every three months. It was information and letters to the editor and medical information about transition and community information about where your local support groups were. I was in San Francisco at the time. I was in the Bay area, so I had really good access to social support and then medical support when I chose to transition. Activism of any kind has its ups and downs, and people work well together and do amazing things. They also squabble. Regardless of whether it was the anti-war movement or the feminism movement or the gay movement or the trans movement or the lesbian movement or the disability movement or any movement that I've been a part of, there will be rocky moments. You'll have people fighting you from the outside. You'll have people arguing with you from the inside, but there's one fundamental principle to create change that works: you need to have people on the inside, and you need to have people on the outside, both trying to make the same thing happen. I became a discrimination investigator, and I got to do things like work on gender-affirming care which started for employees as a San Francisco program, it wasn't for everybody, but it moved into everybody. In the 1990s, the LGB community didn't even know who trans were, and they didn't think we were part of it, so my first part of activism was trying to talk our fellow queer people into the fact that we all have the same problems. That moved later on into the 2000s, when I started talking to people who weren't trans, who didn't know what the word transgender meant. We talked to groups from everything from cops to healthcare workers to parking control officers to retail employees. I talked to all sorts of people about trans-ness and trans rights and, and you know, why we have a right to be who we are and self-determined. So much footwork was done over the last 30 years that the general public has a much greater idea of what trans means. What I love about the current transness, the trans celebration, the transphoria, is that there's so many people who are gender-expansive who don't fit into a binary. It's a beautiful thing because it forces everybody, including people like myself, who are clearly in a binary, to have to be careful and expansive in my own thinking. I love my gender-expansive friends, and I'm learning a lot from them.

Ameer: What do you think that the community should do to support Two Spirit people?

Marcus: I want people who are not indigenous to the Americas or the islands to stop using it. Just because you're trans doesn't mean you're Two Spirit. It very much is an indigenous concept, came from an indigenous vision from an Ojibwe and it is about being indigenous. It's not about just being LGBTQ. Two Spirit people are people who don't fit into boxes. We're not, heteronormative. We're gender-transgressive sometimes. At powwows, people who are male-bodied will dress in female regalia and vice-versa. I think of Two Spirit more as a gender identity than a sexual orientation, per se, because it really is about being the embodiment of both masculine and feminine. Being a good ally is not co-opting our culture and

Marcus: getting to learn about us. Do your homework because there's plenty of literature out there. There's plenty of movies out there. There's lots of websites you can go to. If you just Google “Two Spirit,” you're going to find ways to find information about our communities so being respectful, above all. Being Two Spirit-included doesn't have boundaries like the Rio Grande River. If your ancestors are from Mexico or from Central America or South America or the islands that got colonized, you're also a part of that Two Spiritedness and can absolutely claim it. It's not just about the North American Indians. It's a very embracive Indigenous term.

Ameer: My family is from Jalisco, Guadalajara, and to be honest, I am not sure of the Native tribes that resided there once before.

Marcus: The best place to always start is with the oldest people that you know in your family and ask them stories. “What do you know? Do you know what villages we came from before we moved to bigger cities?” If you can trace your way back, you can find your way there. I was fortunate enough that my grandfather always said, "I am half Blackfoot." In the Latino culture, we are taught to not own that. We're taught to call ourselves Latino, where anything “Indio” is a bad word. So many generations got taught to forget who their tribes were, that all we know is that we're Mexicano or we're a Norteno, or Tewahka, but we don't really know who our people are, what that village was, what our history is. I would encourage you to do that work and to delve into finding out who your ancestors are.

[MUSIC]

Ameer: What would you say for the youth that currently struggles as of right now?

Marcus: I think a thing that changed my life absolutely was getting an education. There is nothing more powerful than a person of color, a BIPOC person who has an education, because we can make things better for our own communities– the Chicano community, the Native American community, the trans community. First and foremost, I'd say if you can't get an education, learn a trade. There are a lot of trades that actually pay good money that are viable. There are trades that aren't necessarily toxic. You can learn auto-mechanics. You can learn carpentry. You can learn all sorts of things. There's never a shortage of jobs for any of those folks, and they pay decent, decent wages. It's not as if you have to necessarily be a white collar worker. I've done both. I was a carpenter for years. I was a cook. I was a radio disc jockey, and I ended my life as a discrimination investigator, but when I was 18, I had no idea that I would end my working life as a discrimination investigator and policy analyst. You never know what opportunities are coming your way. I got that job because I was a radio DJ, and I knew how to talk. Find occupations that might lead to other occupations. Even as you age, you take jobs that you don't necessarily want because they bring money, and you agree that, "I can do this for a year. I can do anything for a year." If you can set your mind to know that, "This isn't permanent. I just need this to pay my rent right now," you can get through whatever tough job you have to get through. Things change. They change over time. I remember a time when I didn't know how to love myself, and now I do. I learned to do it through the eyes of my friends. I looked at every friend I had and I said, "God, if they love me, then there must be something lovable here." It started with that. You have hope, and you have desire to see the greater future that's available in your life. Things are not always going to be hard, and they're not always going to feel daunting. You will find your place. You're going to feel comfortable in your own skin one day.

Ameer: Freshman year of high school, I was the only trans person coming out in my year and people were threatening me. I used to get a lot of hate for just being myself. Senior year was more chill because everybody knew that I wasn't having a phase, and they knew that I was genuine about it. Before I graduated, I had friends who were freshmen, sophomores and juniors, and some of them were queer.

Ameer: Some of them are non-binary. Some were trans men. Some were trans women. Because I was leaving and because I was the only trans person to come out in my grade in my senior year, a lot of people, looked up to me in a way to be like, "Oh okay, if Ameer can do this, I can do it." I try my best to motivate them.

Marcus: You're already being a role model. That's a beautiful thing that you could inspire people to feel confident in themselves, and they can look at you and go, "Damn, if he can do it, I can do it." When you choose to be a trans activist. That's kind of what you do. You give up your anonymity, but you present visibility. I came out to the person who was serving me coffee yesterday because they were non-binary and had a nametag on. It started the conversation, and I eventually said, "Oh, I should know," but I called them "ma'am," and I said, "See, there I went and did it," and they said, "Well, you know, don't worry about it. People make mistakes." I said, "I should know better. I'm a transgender man," and they looked at me like, "Oh, really?" I said, "Yeah." It was pretty amazing. When you're out at school like that and you're visible to your friends and they can see your confidence, they're going to, they're going to learn and grow, too.

Ameer: Because I literally just graduated this year, I tried to tell them, "These teachers are cool. These teachers are semi-cool. This is what you can do to be open with them" because a lot of the teachers that I had during senior are very accepting, so I'm like, "Hey, as time goes by, don't be afraid to open up to them because they're not here to judge you. Just because they're a teacher does not mean they can't also look out for you and care for you." A teacher can be also an ally, you know?

Marcus: Teachers are supposed to look out for you. All of my friends who are teachers, they feel very strongly about watching out for very young people to make sure that they're okay. I want to leave this image with folks that I find really helpful because I'm a gardener, and I grow flowers, and I grow food. You have a bare plot of dirt that looks like nothing, and you stick a seed in the ground, and you give it food, and you give it water, and it looks like nothing for a long time. Then, you get this little tiny thing, and you nurture and nurture and nurture it. Before you know it, you have an entire yard full of wildflowers everywhere. You have to know that the work you do now is like planting that garden, and if you wait around long enough, and you work hard enough, and you nurture those seeds that you plant, you can look out and see these wildflowers. When I look at you, you are one of the flowers in the garden. You are the dreams of my generation. The world, though it seems harsh, sometimes gets better with the work that we do in the gardens that we plant, so create the beauty you want to see in the world. Create the beauty you want to see in the world.

Ameer: My life has changed because of this. Thank you.

Interview Concludes.

[MUSIC]

Youspeak Outro:

Jasper: This is...

Jasper, Milo, Kelly, Madeline, Charlotte, Ameer: Youspeak Radio!

Jasper: We are Jasper Chen,

Milo: Milo Drake,

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Madeline: Madeleine Lee,

Kelly: Kelly Hsu,

Charlotte: Charlotte Ly,

Ameer: Ameer Flores.

Jasper: With generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, an intergenerational project by One Institute and The Outwords Archive on Tongva land.