

June Sarpong

The TV presenter and broadcaster has written a book, *Diversify*, that may prove to be our handbook to negotiate these troubled times. Here, she speaks about the inspiration behind her writing, and what really matters to her

INTERVIEW DANIELLE WOODWARD

In the book, I use the word 'other' to talk about those people we fear; 'racism' is too harsh and 'prejudiced' is too broad. The 'other' describes what happens when you meet someone who is different from you and you feel uncomfortable around them. Most of us aren't even aware of it, it comes from conditioning, not malice, so how can we recondition centuries of programming?

We mustn't vilify people; I understand why some people are attracted to UKIP or Trump. Imagine your grandparents living in the same community they've known their whole lives, then in the space of a decade, their area is completely unrecognisable; English is not the dominant language and their neighbours look different to them. Immigrant communities congregate together because it feels safe, but maybe we need to spread the communities across the country, which will take away the fear; once you get used to having the 'other' around you, you're not as frightened of them anymore.

People don't know how to debate without having an argument. We need politicians who are brave enough to have a different conversation around immigration. It's always a negative conversation; what about the things a country can gain? For me, it feels wrong to close our borders, because you want the best of the best coming to your country to create jobs that benefit your economy.

The beauty of inequality is that it shows you what works and what doesn't. There's a lot of research in *Diversify* from Nuffield College at Oxford University and LSE calculating how much it costs to discriminate against various groups of people. I hope the book highlights what it feels like to have the odds stacked against you when you don't have the framework to fulfil your potential.

I genuinely believe we can move towards a fairer society, because we've made progress with each generation; when I look at how different life was for my parents when they came to the UK and how different things are for me, it makes me feel hopeful, but we have to be aware of why we are in the situation we are in now.

I was very honest about myself and my experience in the book. I was no different than the kids I went to school with, but I had aspirational parents, went to a good school that gave me opportunities to access a world I had no direct links to, then I had mentors within that world. People think if you're famous, your life is perfect – please! Far from it. We're all just trying to figure it out.

I have a strong sense of self; I believe in prayer and meditation and having a spiritual life helps me deal with negativity – I'd be a nervous wreck if I took it all to heart. But you can't just listen to the good and not the bad; some people like you and some people don't.

I like spending time by myself or having dinner with a couple of close friends. Celebrity life can be superficial and vacuous; I just want to be around the people I love, which also means you don't have to get dressed up – who's got time to do your make-up for two hours when you've got a life?

Kindness goes a long way; it doesn't hurt to be nice to people. Understanding and empathy are vital, too; if you can imagine what it feels like to be that person, you can get a view as to why they're doing whatever they're doing, good or bad. It's also important to realise how differently people are treated in society and how their experiences shape who they become. If you see a young black boy who seems menacing, it might be because the majority of people who walk past him are scared of him and after a while, it becomes a way of protecting himself.

Injustice makes me angry; the NFL protest was such a quiet, respectful way to say, 'we will not be bullied'. What I hope *Diversify* will do is to wake us all up to injustice, because it can be subtle things – the way someone is treated in the office, when you see an old lady who needs help and nobody gets up for her – it's about standing up and being a voice for good.

'Diversify' by June Sarpong (HQ, £18.99), is out now. Visit diversify.org for ideas and a toolkit for hosting your own Diversify Dinner, with recipe suggestions and conversation starters

