

The Danforth Dialogues: Envisioning The Future Of Religion And Politics In America

The first of two themed conversations, Religion and Conceptions of the Common Good features Eboo Patel, Founder and President of Interfaith Youth Core; and Natasha Trethewey, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and former Poet Laureate of the United States.

Date: October 8, 2016

Location: Graham Chapel on the Danforth Campus of Washington University

Chancellor Mark Wrighton:

Good afternoon. My name is Mark Wrighton, Chancellor of Washington University. It's a great pleasure to have you here for the Danforth Dialogues. This special program is timed to coincide with the presidential debate that we're hosting tomorrow night. As many of you know, this is the fifth time that Washington University has hosted a presidential or vice presidential debate. It's the sixth time we've been selected. In 1996 we were selected, but then President Clinton felt no need for three debates, and ours being first he said, "We can pass." But we've had great experiences each and every time. This year, as in past years, we've been encouraging our students to become involved, we've encouraged our students to register to vote, and to vote. And we've been very successful in building voter registration here in our community. I'm very pleased that we have a very distinguished group of panelists to participate in the Danforth Dialogues. This program is sponsored by the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. This is the nation's premier institute devoted to the study of the important intersections between religion and politics, and these have shaped our nation's history and continue to influence our current moment. It is difficult to think of any issue central to our political debates that does not have something to do with religion, and we're fortunate to have the Center's own experts as well as the speakers they host to shed light on religion's varied impact on how we talk about issues from immigration to civil rights to the economy and much more. Several of this afternoon's panel participants have made significant contributions to the Center, as members of the Center's National Advisory Board and close advisors, and we're grateful to them for the good work that they have been doing with us since the founding of this important Center. The Center is named in honor of St. Louis's and Missouri's Senator John C. Danforth. We're delighted to have Jack and Sally and several members of their family with us today, including their daughter Mary Stillman who is now a member of the Washington University Board of Trustees. Would you all please join me in thanking Jack and Sally for their great leadership establishing the Center? (Applause.) I do have a few obligations myself a little later this evening so I'm going to slip out in a while. For me personally, I've already had a big highlight by being hosted on Anheuser Busch's beer truck (laughter), drawn by the eight Clydesdales was a thrill, and I did receive a ceremonial but real case of beer. So, later we will be enjoying that. But this is a great opportunity for both Washington University and

St. Louis. The eyes of the world are upon us. Earlier today, I had the opportunity to speak to the United Kingdom through BBC News Radio, and I also had the opportunity to talk with citizens in Russia, as Moscow's television station was here interviewing me as well. American democracy is strong, and we're looking forward to a great debate tomorrow. This special program is one that we hope to continue as future presidential debate seasons unfold. The John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics is now led by Professor Marie Griffith, who holds the John C. Danforth Center John C. Danforth Center's Distinguished Professorship in the Humanities. She's been a great leader for us, drawn us together for many important programs, and this is one of the most important. Please join me in welcoming Professor Marie Griffith. (Applause.)

Dr. Marie Griffith:

Thank you so much, and welcome to all of you who are here in Graham Chapel and welcome to those of you who are watching live stream either here on the Wash. U. campus or elsewhere in St. Louis, and even around the country. Today's event is a kind of collaboration between the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics and On Being, the award-winning radio program that is hosted by Krista Tippett. Our program is being taped for future use by both of our enterprises, so the very first thing I want to do is remind our guests here in Graham Chapel to please silence your cell phones and other electronic devices. Thank you. Today's exciting event has been long in the making, and I want to first thank all of our distinguished panel participants in the Danforth dialogues, our planning committee of Center scholars Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Liz McCloskey, and Mark Valeri, our National Advisory Board members, Mike McCurry, who's here with us today along with many of his students, and we welcome all of you here today too, and countless others whom one or more of us has consulted over the past few years about this event. And above all, I want to thank the many staff members who have made today possible, those who work with each of our participants and members of the outstanding team at the Center, Debra Kennard, Sheri Pena, and Leslie Davis, you guys rock. Thank you so much for all of your work. (Applause.) And all of us remain grateful, again, to the Danforth Foundation and the Danforth family, including Jack and Sally, William Danforth, and their children and extended kin. As Mark said, their generosity has made today, and every day at the Center, possible. Thank you. Part of the Center's charge, from its founding in 2010, has been to plan a major event in connection with the U.S. presidential election occurring every four years. This year's ambitious program showcases the Center's core commitment to fostering a vibrant intellectual community that promotes rigorous scholarship, models civil dialogue, and educates students and the public about the intersections of American religion and politics. All of us at the Center are dedicated to modeling respectful debate among divergent viewpoints, and spurring discussions that might identify new trajectories for religion and politics in American life. The Danforth Dialogues are designed to explore the place of religion in our current politics and public life. And we do look forward to hosting many more Danforth Dialogues in future. The first of today's dialogues is on religion and conceptions of the common good, with Eboo Patel, the founder and President of Interfaith Youth Core, and Natasha Trethewey, and

Pulitzer Prize winning poet, and former poet-laureate of the United States. The second is on religion and national politics, with David Brooks and E.J. Dionne, two of the nation's most eminent newspaper columnists and political commentators, writers of our time. Each of these dialogues will run about an hour. There will be a short break in between, during which we invite you to stretch, use the restrooms downstairs, or chat with your neighbors, while staying close within these walls for the second dialogue. That one's going to begin around 6:45 p.m. After the conclusion of the dialogues, we welcome our ticketed guests to the reception venue listed on your ticket. There will be staff to guide you. The host of both dialogues is Krista Tippett, a Peabody Award winning broadcaster and New York Times bestselling author. In 2014 she received the National Humanities Medal at the White House for thoughtfully delving into the mysteries of human existence. The citation continues, "on the air and in print, Ms. Tippett avoids easy answers, embracing complexity, and inviting people of every background to join her conversation about faith, ethics, and moral wisdom. Krista grew up in Oklahoma, granddaughter of a Southern Baptist preacher. She studied history at Brown University and went to Bonn, West Germany in 1983 on a Fulbright Scholarship to study politics in Cold War Europe. In her twenties, she ended up in divided Berlin for most of the 1980s, first as a New York Times stringer and a freelance correspondent for News Week, The International Herald Tribune, the BBC, and *Die Zeit*. She later became a special assistant to the U.S. Ambassador to West Germany. Krista left Berlin in 1988, the year before the wall fell. She lived in Spain, England, and Scotland for a time, and then she pursued an M.Div. from Yale University. When she graduated in 1994, she saw, she says, "a black hole where intelligent coverage of religion should be." As she conducted a far flung oral history project for the Benedictines of St. John's Abbey, in Collegeville Minnesota, she began to imagine radio conversations about the spiritual and intellectual content of faith that could open imaginations and enrich public life. In 2007, Krista published her first book, *Speaking of Faith*. It is a memoir of religion in our time, including her move from geopolitical engagement to theology, and the cumulative wisdom of her interviews these past years. In 2010, she published *Einstein's God*, drawn from her interviews at the intersection of science, medicine, and spiritual inquiry. And now, Krista's New York Times bestseller, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*, opens into the questions and challenges of this century. Krista will introduce our dialogue partners in turn. Please join me now in welcoming to the stage Natasha Trethewey and Eboo Patel and Krista Tippett. (Applause.)

Krista Tippett:

Thank you Marie. I have been so honored and excited and it's a source of solace to know that the Danforth Center exists and to have watched it evolve. I'm really honored to be here today. I want to acknowledge that we find ourselves in a strange, tumultuous political moment. (Laughter.) And in the conversations today, we're not going to focus on what happened yesterday or today or what trended in the last twenty minutes, but on the challenge and promise into which we will all be living as citizens with our political culture and our society, whoever wins the election on November 8th. The notion, these are two very different leaders here with me today,

so this going to be interesting and fun, and thinking about religion and the common good, that is the theme of this conversation. As I delved into the two of you, I started thinking that this is more about religion and the art and science of the common good. The science of the interfaith triangle is the kind of language that Eboo Patel uses to describe some of what he works with and the project that he founded and leads, The Interfaith Youth Core, which Robert Putnam has called the most successful interfaith movement in the U.S. And I'm sure that's right. Um, Natasha Trethewey is not a religious figure, but she is one of our foremost poets, a Pulitzer Prize winner, a former poet-laureate of the United States. And she works in a medium, which she has described as corrective to the trivialized, corrosive language of public life in our time. Poetry in her words is the sacred language that allows us to connect across time and space, across all the things in everyday life that separate and would destroy us. Natasha is also a child of two parents of different races. Eboo is a child of immigrants. And so they also each embody an experience and an intelligence about some of our most fraught human places that are haunting and shaping our political life right now. So again I'm excited to bring these two together in this moment, a moment in which I believe we are all called to nothing less than reimagining and reweaving the very meaning of common life for this century. And I want to just ask you both briefly as we start if you would just trace the beginning, the roots in your life, of what the connection between religion and common life might be. And Eboo I wonder if you would start with that.

Eboo Patel:

Sure. So, thank you Krista, thank you Natasha, what a thrill it is to be here. So it's fun to be back at a college campus because so many of my changes happened in college. I say to students all the time, there's a great line by the French writer Marcel Proust that, "the true journey of discovery is not in finding new landscapes, it's in developing new eyes." It's at a college campus that I developed new eyes. And it was eyes of anger around race, identity, diversity issues. I actually recognize a lot of what's happening on campuses today because it reminds me of being a college student in the early 1990s, the time of the Rodney King acquittals, O.J. trial, Cornell West's *Race Matters*, etcetera. And I got caught up in all of that and still think the substantive issues were very important, but for the first couple of years of my involvement, I was an anger-fueled activist and I came very very close to the edge of burnout, until one day somebody said to me, "have you ever heard of Dorothy Day?" And I never had and it was almost like an angel had descended into my life, right? I don't remember who the person was but she said, "you ought to read, you ought to read her work." And I found in Dorothy Day this most luminous, simple, cosmic language of justice, which was basically, if you are a Christian, live the way that Christ lived. And the way he lived was to give up everything he had and live with the poor. Not serve the poor, not help the poor, live with them. And it turned out that there was a House of Hospitality, a Catholic Worker House, in Champaign-Urbana, where I went to school, and I went there one Sunday evening, I'd volunteered all across Champaign-Urbana and I figured I would just spend this Sunday volunteering at St. Jude's House. And it was qualitatively different than any other social service agency I'd ever been to. It wasn't an agency, it was a community. And it was that

involvement with the Catholic Worker movement, with Dorothy Day's work, that kind of gave me my initial instincts towards the notion of what does it look like to work on behalf and with others from a cosmic sense of love and justice. And the thing that struck me most, I think, about Dorothy Day—her work was, she wasn't particularly impressed with herself. She felt like, if this, if you see yourself as a Christian, this is what you do. And of course, I'm not a Christian, right? I'm a Muslim.

Tippett:

Right, and did that encounter with Dorothy Day and her approach to faith, that was also kind of a path for you back into grappling with where that notion of service lies in your Islamic identity?

Patel:

That's, so it was my first on kind of a larger interfaith spiritual journey. I spent the summer after my second year in college doing a tour of Catholic Worker houses up and down the Eastern Seaboard. My parents' comment on that was, "We immigrated from India for this?" You know, "wasn't 'plan A' Yale Law School?" Umm, "what the heck are you doing sleeping, you know, on the floor with homeless people at the Dorothy Day house in Washington D.C.?" I began exploring different religious traditions and kind of the impulses towards a deep sense of compassion in all of them and, of course, the one that I got to last was Islam, because I had an adolescent discrimination against the familiar, right. Anything your parents do can't be cool, right? So that's why I'm bringing my kids to anything I do right now. They might not think I'm cool, but maybe the other people on the stage. So I'll finish the story off by saying I go to India in the summer of 1998, four years after I heard of Dorothy Day, and I'm staying in my grandmother's home, this is the summer before I'm off to graduate school in England, and I wake up one day and there's a woman in my grandmother's home who doesn't look like she's part of the family, extended family, or part of the household help, and I say to my grandmother, you know "mama who is this woman?" And my grandmother says, "well we don't know her real name, her father and uncle are abusing her so we've taken her in. The leader of the local Muslim prayer house has brought her here." I kind of gave my grandmother a stern look and I said, "you can't just bring abused women into your home, this is not safe mama, you know." And my grandmother padded over to cupboard and she brought out a shoebox and she opened it up and there were dozens and dozens of Polaroids of pictures of all of these women over the swath of India, over the course of fifty years that she had brought into her home. And I'm going through these Polaroids and she'd written on the back, you know, "helped this one get her teeth fixed," "helped this one go to beauty school," "helped this one get a marriage," "this one owns a cake shop in Hyderabad." I'm looking through all these and I'm like "mama, why do you, why do you do this?" And she's like, "I'm a Muslim, this is what we do." And it was kind of this same Dorothy Day sense of like, you see the light on the path and you walk the path and you're not especially impressed with yourself. And I still to this day understand that as the heart of the religious ethic.

Tippett:

Natasha, religion and the common good?

Natasha Tretheway:

Well I suppose that begins for me, because I'm a poet, in language itself. Umm, it took me a long time to realize that, to realize that I was making the connections between our language, the language of poetry, religion, and the common good. It happened when I was working on a book of mine called *Beyond Katrina*, it's a meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast—

Tippett:

2012

Tretheway:

That's right.

Tippett:

Beautiful book.

Tretheway: Thank you. Um, it's of course about the aftermath of the hurricane on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and my family history in connection to it. And as I was writing the book, I've seen this in my poems too but it wasn't until writing that book, that I saw how much of the language that comes to me is the language of religion, the language of religious rites. And that struck me as odd because I'm, though I was raised in the Baptist church, I think of myself as a secular humanist. And so what I discovered is that when a word like the word "liturgy" comes to me, a word that of course connects us to the various ceremonies that would take place in various faiths, that in the original Greek, the word simple meant one's public duty undertaken as a citizen in service to the state. So the idea "in service to the common good" comes from something secular, but it is also deeply connected to something that we do in our faith. And so from there I began to think about all those different words that arise sort of unbidden because of, I suppose, my own training and my own thinking about language. Even my name, Natasha, shares the prefix with words like "natal," "nativity," and "national." They go together.

Tippett:

Yes, I think you have chapters in that book and poems with titles like "Witness," and is "Communion" one of them?, "Prodigal."

Tretheway:

All of those titles, there's "Exegesis," all of those titles are about ways of thinking both the connection to religion, but also that secular part that has a lot to do with what Eboo said. And that is, about justice. It seemed to me that the language of poetry, and what I'm interested in, like the language of religion, is about justice, empathy, bearing witness.

Tippett:

So, you know, a hallmark of our current political moment, and our cultural moment, is the race conversation, that I think we mostly talk about the race conversation when we talk about how we don't know how to talk about it. But we know our need of it. It was interesting to be thinking about the two of you and also to be reflecting on how each of you in your own way also has a stake in that but also embodies the reality that the very meaning of race is evolving so rapidly, even as we seek to grapple with it more fully. So Natasha, you've said that you describe yourself, as you believe President Obama does, as both black and biracial. And when your African American mother married your white father, they were breaking the law, the law of Mississippi where they lived in 1965, and worried that you would be despised in parts of society. And I know you've reflected on that a lot in this era in which we have had a black and biracial president.

Tretheway:

Yes, it is one of those things that, sadly, is ongoing for us as you say. My parents got married in 1965 and had to go to Ohio to do so. And this was two years before the Loving Decision and so it was illegal not only in Mississippi but in twenty other states in the nation.

Tippett:

The Loving Decision was the couple who finally overturned the law—

Tretheway:

That's right, the Lovings of Virginia—

Tippett:

And their name happened to be Loving, which is so amazing.

Tretheway:

Which I love—you can't beat that.

Tippett:

You can't.

Tretheway:

But you know, I've often talked about this—that, you know, sometimes the worst things seem to disappear but really they just get buried. And so, in the late 90s in the state of Alabama, that's the time that they finally put to a vote of the people whether or not the anti-miscegenation statute should be removed from the constitution. And even though it finally was, 42% of the voting population in the state voted that it should remain. So that at least it could be said symbolically that parents like mine shouldn't be able to marry legally or people like me be born legally. That wasn't very long ago.

Tippett:

And it hasn't all been resolved because we had a biracial president.

Tretheway:

No. No, and in many ways, some of the worst things that seem to have gone underground have resurfaced.

Tippett:

Um, Eboo it was interesting for me to read that when you had your children, who are here today, these lovely young gentlemen—

Patel:

Pay attention Zayd.

Tippett:

That, that your mother worried that you hadn't given them American names, which was that code for them having, well having names that sounded foreign, even Muslim?

Patel:

Right. Now Zayd and Khalil are beautiful, Muslim-American names. But this was, Khalil was born in 2010. Three months later we had this absolute circus madness around Cordoba House, otherwise known as the Ground Zero Mosque, and it was the first time in my mother's, I don't know, forty years in America that she's been afraid of praying in Arabic, saying Bismillah at restaurants, having grandsons with Muslim-sounding names.

Tippett:

Umm, you and I had a really interesting, you and I met just when we had dinner a couple months ago, and you shared your reaction to, um, oh the kind of toxic, um, language and sentiment around Muslims that surfaced up in parts of this campaign. What I was struck by is the real compassion that you were bringing to that human pain and fear that express themselves as anger. And I wonder if you'd just talk to us a little about that.

Patel:

So, I guess there's a couple parts of this, right? So number one, part of what this election has done for me is to open the curtain to fifty percent of America that I haven't thought much about. That makes me a bad citizen. That doesn't mean the way that a swath of my fellow citizens is expressing their understanding of their life circumstance is healthy, right, but to recognize that I hadn't thought about huge swaths of this country is, uh, is on me, right? And I think about this a lot actually. So, what if somebody were to come up to me and tap me on the shoulder one day and say, "hey man, all of your facility in language, your ability to strategically plan, give talks, facilitate meetings, that economy is gone. Sorry. But we're going to retrain you to be a middle linebacker. I'd be like, "I'm done, thanks," right? And so what I think about a lot is my particular set of instincts, inclinations, proclivities, skills, I happen to have been born in the right place, at the right time, and come of age in the right

culture, where they happen to be at the center of the culture. I mean, I'm on stage with you, right? We get paid for this. My kids can't believe that. Right? What if you're coming up at a certain time in history and the story is, "look, if you graduate high school, you play football, you don't commit a felony. You got a job right over there. Here are the four steps on the ladder of that job. And if you keep your nose clean and you play well, by your mid-fifties here's the role you'll be in." And then poof, that's gone.

Tippett:

And it's gone for your children too.

Patel:

And it's gone for your children. And I had spent zero time thinking about that circumstance until about 18 months ago. You know, I'm a huge Springsteen fan, I think I just saw him on the Rive Tour, "I got Mary pregnant, and man that was all she wrote, and for my 18th birthday I got a union card and a wedding coat." In 1980, that was written as a lament, now it's a dream, right?

Tippett:

It's an unachievable dream for many.

Patel:

It's an unachievable, and I, how can I not feel for that? And how can I not recognize that, although my name is a little weird and, you know, my color attracts double looks in some places, that I'm at the center of the culture? Right, and that I, that's a lot of luck. And to cultivate some sort of empathy for people who were once at the center of the culture and aren't any more, I feel like that's, that's a part of, that's a part of the gift that poetry has given me and that's part of the requirements of American citizenship.

Tippett:

Natasha, I'm curious about how you, you know, how you think about that and, and you said, and I, and maybe I should invite you to draw that out some more, that there's this paradoxical sense, but you know maybe we shouldn't be surprised, maybe it's the way human beings are that on the one hand we achieved this sign of progress, of racial progress, but it's also surfaced, or at least it's been part of surfacing a lot of, you know, a terrible amount of unfinished work. But, so, say some more about how you see that, but also how you think about this dynamic Eboo is describing.

Tretheway:

Well I'm glad you made the point again about poetry, um, because I find that, um, maybe I have spent a great deal of time thinking about the various populations, um, across the country because poetry is a thing that asks us to do that. It asks us always to, um, well to learn something about ourselves through the intimate unique experience of another, the voice speaking to us in a poem. And those voices are

often, um, people who are very different from us. And so it's a way to enter that, and to experience a kind of redress, you know, as Seamus Heaney would call it. To try to make right what is wrong in the language of poetry. What I think about as I think about the people who are frustrated about their opportunities, where their lives are going, what seems to have been lost, is that we're a nation in which, for the longest time, so much of being able to be in a position where you had all those things depended on keeping other people from having them. And that's the sad thing about it, that we can be both empathetic to people who feel like they're losing something, but part of what they are losing is the fact that other people are gaining equal opportunity and equal rights.

Tippett:

And lest it seems that we have strayed from the topic of religion and the common good, I think we're right in the middle of it. I think Senator Danforth in all his career, as he's talked about, you know, what it means to bring your whole self as a person of faith into the political sphere has to do with how you, how we wield the love commandment, however imperfectly. We will always live according to it. And so one way to talk about this is we have not loved others, we have not kept children safe, which is the primary thing that love does.

Tretheway:

I once had someone say to me, and this is very sad, that he found it offensive that I thought that either the goal or the result of art should ever be empathy. Can you believe that? That the idea, um and I'm not obviously someone who thinks like this, but, I mean, we love art and literature and music for pure beauty, pure sound, we can love it for all those things. But it also is so much more than that. And if it can help us know each other better, that's the highest thing I think it can do.

Tippett:

Um, and to that point, Eboo, compassion is absolutely at the heart of every single one of our traditions. But I think, and you didn't, you know one of the things I think you also started to realize as a teenage and a student is that while you and your fellow, your peers, in a Chicago, was it a suburban high school, were very articulate about all the different aspects of your identity—racial, ethnic, gender. These same people had an impoverished vocabulary about their, about religious identity. And an implication of that is, you know, obviously we have that impoverished vocabulary and an impoverished ability to carry it into our lives. That is, that is going to inhibit whether something like compassion can manifest in common life. So, I wonder as you, you know, how have you experienced in this work you've done, of equipping young people with that vocabulary, how does that nuance expand their, the way they are present to these challenges of our time. Of living, of otherness, of doing something other than just tolerating otherness.

Patel:

So, the way I think about it now is for me, the large frame question is what does it mean to nurture a healthy, religiously diverse democracy? And if I think about each

of those terms, right, what's a democracy? It's not just a place where you elect your representatives. A democracy is a place where you can make personal convictions public. You can make them public in politics, you can make them public in civil society, etcetera, right? Diversity is not just the differences you like. Diversity is the differences you don't like.

Tippett:

Right.

Patel:

Diversity is the disagreements, right?

Tippett:

And actually I think, I think that's something, as much as we celebrated diversity and had this verge of tolerance after the sixties, that piece we're just now learning.

Patel:

Oh well, I mean, you know, everywhere in, you know, my kids' elementary school are "multiculturalism is our strength" and "diversity is beautiful" stuff, and I'm like, "oh yeah," right? Well that's the egg rolls and samosas version of diversity, right? That's the, that's the everything tastes good. And look, that's, you ought to get that when you're eight and nine, we didn't have that when I was a kid, right? And the samosas that my mother packed in my lunch I would look at them and I'm like, "mom, first you name me Eboo," you know? "And now you're going to put this, do you know what happens to me at school when you do this?" So, it is a step forward, right, but—

Tippett:

It's a baby step.

Patel:

It's a big step.

Tippett: Yep.

Patel:

So if you add religion to a diverse democracy and if you understand religion per Tillich's Ultimate Concerns, you have, you have a society in which people are invited to make their personal convictions on matters of ultimate concern public, knowing that their neighbor has a different definition of justice than they do. Justice is another term that we assume everybody has the same definition of. My new line to twenty-year-olds who look very chastised when I say this on campuses is, "if everybody in the room that you're in has the same definition of justice that you do, I don't care how many colors, or genders, or sexual preferences, or religions are in that room, it's not a diverse room." Part of the definition of diversity is the

recognition that there are diverse understandings of justice. So in that situation, what does healthy look like? And my quick take on that is healthy is a society in which people who orient around religion differently can disagree on some fundamental things and work together on other fundamental things. And in my mind, the most dangerous trend in our society right now is what Andrew Sullivan calls “the scalping trend,” which is if you disagree with me on one fundamental thing, right, and I want to recognize that these things are fundamental—matters of the Middle East, same-sex marriage, abortion, they are fundamental, right, let’s not say that they are marginal at all—but if you disagree with me on that, I will neutralize our entire relationship and I will take your scalp and hang it on my wall as a trophy to make sure that everybody else knows, who has that opinion knows, that I’m coming for them. And I just, how do you have a society in which people who disagree on where to draw the line in the Middle East will perform heart surgery together? Or serve on the PTA together? Isn’t that what a diverse democracy is? And it feels to me like the central thing that we do is nurture than ethic of a half-full cup of “I will disagree with you on this set of things and continue to work with you on this other set of things.”

We each brought our own little...

Tippett:

And I’m just, I love to hear you, how you think about, I mean this, this is such an important critique of how, you know, how we interact with each other but also about how we use language. And you must be watching that as well, and I wonder how you watch that with your perspective as a poet?

Natasha Tretheway:

Well you’re going to watch me think through this one.

Krista Tippett:

Good, that’s what we like.

Natasha Tretheway:

I was thinking that what Eboo was saying was exactly right. But for a moment, I longed to be standing in front of my OED with my little magnifying glass, so that I could look up that word “justice” again. Because there is a part of my, I suppose, that wants to believe that there is a kind of justice that could treat everyone right, that could treat everyone equally, the way that they deserve. But the idea that words that I believe so much in, I believe so much in the power of words, that somehow, well, could get twisted, or changed, or applied in all sorts of troubling ways. It’s going to sound like I’m going back to this, but this is the example that I think of when I think about the word “justice.” It goes back to that word “empathy.” And hearing a few years ago many people, after listening to the president call on us as citizens to empathize with other people, there were actually people who said they did not want to empathize. I mean I think that that’s the thing that seems to separate us from the animals, and people didn’t, although my dogs seems to empathize with me, at least I

think she is. But seriously, that we wouldn't want to do that, it just made me think, "Well, that's really horrible. Why wouldn't you want to do that?" It just never occurred to me to think that whatever they think empathizing means is something that they wouldn't want to do, just as we might think of the word justice as a different thing.

Tippett:

I wonder if "want" is the right word, you know? I mean, um, I interviewed, um, a couple of months ago the civil rights leader and veteran Ruby Sales. We talked about what she sees as a spiritual crisis of white America, which kind of comes back to what we were talking about a minute ago. And I think that the empathy she mustered was that people are so afraid, and so beaten down, and this is not just white people, um, and so fearful. That I think, you know, some of the things we're learning on our scientific frontier is that our brains won't go, that we, and this, I think this comes back to our collective client, we have to create conditions for empathy and compassion to feel safe for each other. As much as it, as much as, you're right, it's a, it's a terrible thought that we have to, right, that it's not just natural--

Tretheway:

That it's not a thing that...

Tippett:

And intuitive, but it's not, and I mean I think instinctive, it's not always even biologically instinctive.

Patel:

One of the ways my life changed in college was somebody who I imagine was an old colleague of E.J. Dionne's, William Raspberry who wrote for the Washington Post. So, when I was nineteen or twenty I, and you know I was a fire-breathing dragon at this time, you couldn't, you couldn't come within fifty feet of me without getting long lectures on people of color consciousness and socialism. My dad damn near kicked me out of the house at one point. He was the, said to me, you know, "If you give me one more lecture on being bourgeois, you can find some other bourgeois dad to pay your bourgeois college tuition." Um, so William Raspberry writes a column in which he says, "The smartest people I know secretly believe both sides of the issue." And that was so striking to me, because I was, the way I viewed the world at that point was, "You all are, I'm the smart one, you all are the dumb ones, my job is to figure out how to make you smart, and the definition of smart was—

Tippett:

If you see things my way, which is smart.

Patel:

Yeah, exactly. Right, and this, this notion of William Raspberry, who was a, you know, was generally speaking a progressive columnist, um, was like "look, the

smartest people I know choose the pro-life side and understand that there's something else at stake. The smartest people I know are against the death penalty and understand that people who might be in favor aren't crazy, that there's a set of values, something at stake." It's one of the reasons I think the Jonathan Haidt's book *The Righteous Mind* is such a terrific book, right? It's, it illuminates—

Tippett:

Social psychologist.

Patel:

Right, a moral psychologist. Illuminates the neuroscience and narratives at play in values disagreements. I wanted to say one thing very briefly on this matter of justice, and I actually, my sense is actually justice and empathy, they're in the Venn diagram, there's a shaded area but the more empathy one has, and the more diversity one is in, the more one recognizes different definitions of justice. So here's my moment to this. So, eight or ten years ago I'm speaking on a college campus and I happen to be speaking with a man named Neker vin Barzani, who was introduced to me as an Iraqi leader, and is a good multicultural, against the Bush administration progressive. My first instinct was to apologize to him for quote, "the unjust war in Iraq." And he looks at me and he kind of shakes his head and I think his English isn't great so I repeat what I said, I said, you know, I, this is, this is a great insight into the mind of the Manachaeon, right, like, "you don't understand me because your English isn't great, not because you disagree with me." Um, I said, "I want to apologize on behalf of the American people, all 320 million, for the, for the unjust war in Iraq." And he looked at me and he said, "I'm a Kurd, the only unjust thing about the war in Iraq is you didn't do it twenty years ago." And I thought to myself, how ridiculous that I didn't even imagine that. Right, I mean of course this is over the next several years that I kind of unpacked this in my head, but how narrow a world did I live in that I thought that this was...Now I still believe the Iraq War was unjust. Do I think that Neker vin Barzani's position after having tens, hundreds of thousands of his people killed by Saddam Hussein's chemical warfare, that his position is not a reasonable definition of justice? And what strikes me in reflection is how is how come I didn't imagine that, how come I didn't play with the figure Neker vin Barzani in my mind, in the dialogue? How is it that I had such a black and white vision of justice in the world? And I find that, I think that that's a, I think that that is a problem in the hyper-diverse, 325 million jazz of a nation in which we live.

Tippett:

Yeah. So, what do you learn creating an experience for college students, which is where you really have focused the Interfaith Youth Core's work now, trying to create a meaningful and substantive and nuanced way of living with, being in conversation with diversity?

Patel:

So -

Tippett:

- And does this have anything to do with the science of the interfaith triangle?

Patel:

We want to get to that, right? [laughter] The first thing that we want to do is we want college campuses to take religious diversity issues as seriously as they take other dimensions of diversity. Right. And if you were to just kind of audit what students here in first year orientation or in RA training etc around diversity it's almost entirely race, gender, sexuality. Which I think is extremely important. But to not also ask questions about Buddhists, Secular Humanists, and Orthodox Jews, and Muslims, I just think that you are missing huge parts of your college population and country. And so, what does it look like for a campus to be a laboratory and a launching pad for what we call interfaith leadership. What does it look like for a young person to see him or herself as an interfaith leader, which is to say to cultivate a space for people that orient around religion differently can have civil conversations about deep disagreements and also make common cause and other fundamental things.

Tippett:

And do they learn to do this thing that you're talking about...I mean the raspberry model?

Patel:

Yeah, well I yap about it an awful lot [laughter] so I just wrote a book about it. I hope so, right. I also know that there is something about being 20 and being I think the word now is "woke". We didn't have such cool words when I was a kid. But that, I mean I enjoyed my fire breathing dragon days, you know. But, this notion of how...I ask students a lot on college campuses, let us say that you disagree with that person where to draw the line in the Middle East or whether to draw that line at all. Let us say, that you take great pride in your decision to not have anything to do with that student group. Let us say that you are a heart surgeon and someone from that student group in twenty years is a heart surgeon as well and you are both scheduled for heart surgery on a Tuesday morning and you are the only two people scheduled and it is a two person surgery and it is a life or death situation. Your position on the Middle East has not changed. Do you not perform heart surgery? In my mind, you do not have a diverse democracy, you don't have an America, unless people are able to say "I am able to disagree with you on this set of things and you will see me on the other side of the picket line on those things and I will try to defeat you candidate at the polls and we will find other things to do together."

Tippett:

Natasha, I just want to read something you wrote that's very beautiful, that I think speaks again about the art, this sacred language of poetry in this collective task...

“poetry allows us to reckon with our troubled past and to imagine the better, more just society that we must continue each day to build. It evokes in us the better angels of our nature, eliciting our most humane impulses to engage the humanity of others through the projection of our own emotional knowledge, our empathetic understanding. The best knowledge we have for dealing with each other and deal with each other we must. I have faith in poetry’s ability to do so. To wield its ennobling influence on us and to save us. Perhaps, not as a nation but one life at a time.”

Tretheway:

You know the last two words of what you just read are...that you didn’t read, the last two were “like mine”.

Tippett:

Yeah [laughter]. I know – I didn’t read that. I’m glad you added that.

Tretheway:

Because...

Tippett:

“One life at a time like mine”

Tretheway:

I wrote those words in response to, in many ways, Joseph Auslander, who was our first consultant in poetry to The Library of Congress. He was writing in 1936 about all of the distractions, the gadgets. It sounded like he could have been talking about our own contemporary moment. He too believed in the possibility of poetry to save us. I understand that firsthand because there was a moment in my life that when we think about the different things that we might turn to for a kind of solace I remember listening to a minister at a funeral saying “do not grieve as others grieve.” And the message was about the solace that awaited us in heaven, in the afterlife. And, I was deeply grieving. And, it was almost a message to me that somehow because that wasn't my faith, that's why I was grieving. Because, I wasn't a believer and that there was nothing for me because if that. But I am a believer in something else. I am a believer in the human capacity for justice. The human capacity to do right. The human capacity to address and correct the wrongs of the past. One of the ways that we do it, you know the idea in Auden's poem is that poetry makes nothing happen. But, of course, it makes so much happen. It's a way that we listen to each other when it is hard to listen to each other. As Eboo points out, it's hard to want to listen to diversity if diversity isn't the good stuff, it's the stuff that makes us different. But I think also, it helps us contend with what has been right and what has been wrong. And, I think to go back to this idea of justice, I try to get my head around the idea that there were people, for example, and this is an easy example but I think that you'll know what I mean, who believed that lynching was justice. But that's extralegal – that's outside the law, that's not justice. Not justice to me. Not justice, I imagine, to people sitting in this room too. So, do we say that they lynchers just had a different idea of justice or do we say the lynchers were wrong?

Tippett:

And I think the other question is: how do we come into relationship with the lynchers? Or maybe not the lynchers but the people right around them who haven't quite made that move to violence.

Tretheway:

Well, I think we've seen a lot of that. The Faith In Politics Institute and the pilgrimage that John Lewis takes this diverse group of people on every year.

Tippett:

Right, where we first met a couple of years ago

Tretheway:

Right, what he believes – and a lot of people who share his belief is love. He believes that in loving the lynchers you can bring them to love, you can bring them to justice. I'd also like to bring them to knowledge; I'd like them to be educated about the law, about the constitution. But, I think that the way you get them is to love them. To empathize with them. It doesn't been condoning anything.

Tippett:

Right, and I also don't think it means love as this feeling and it's not romantic. It's a form of love, it's a practical form of love. In fact, it's the agape of the New Testament.

Patel:

Yeah, they should also go to jail.

Tretheway:

That too.

Patel:

But you can do both.

Tretheway:

And, that's justice [laughter]. That's justice.

Tippett:

So, I think we've circled to the big, open question of how to live beyond this election. Right. What is our work now? I'm really much more concerned about November 9th and beyond that than I am about November 8th because whatever happens, whoever wins, all of this turmoil is still going to be with us. And it's really this human drama, a human crisis, that has fueled political events. I'd love to know how each of you takes that question on or how you are working with it, maybe how you see people working with it in your world? You said to me a minute ago that you see poets kind of rising to this occasion.

Tretheway:

That's right, I see the poets. I've been reading poetry constantly this year in an attempt to edit an anthology of recent poems that have come out and so many of them are contending with the things that are most pressing in our contemporary moment. That in the elegant of poetry, in the elegant envelope of form that a poem is, can take language that has been used in uncivil discourse and apply it to a higher, ennobling goal. A way to make us look at ourselves. A way through the language of the poem to see ourselves reflected in a mirror. That is, at once distorted but in the words of Percy Shelley, poetry is the mirror that makes beautiful that which is distorted. So, poets writing about some of the most horrible distortions of our contemporary moment are making something beautiful out of that. And that is generative. That means we are not shutting down.

Tippett:

I love that word – generative. That’s what I want us to be doing.

Tretheway:

And that’s what it’s doing, I think. And because they can make something out of the chaos of this moment through the order of a poem, they’re showing us a glimpse into a better future. That’s what the poetry can do. By showing us this moment, it shows us also at once the distortions of the past but also a better way in the future because of the order proposed by the elegance of language.

Tippett:

I’ve been interviewing many poets this year and we didn’t really set out to do it strategically but I realized putting poets on the air is kind of our contribution to being soothing and deepening in this election season. And what I’ve experienced about poetry – because Americans don’t think of themselves as people that read a lot of poetry... but what I’ve experienced about putting poets on the air, it’s hearing your voice in this room tonight, is that we suddenly realized that we needed this like we need food, like we need air. It’s something we forget. And, our religious traditions in Islam very profoundly have poetry at their heart. And so much of what’s in the Bible is poetry that got turned into prose when it got translated. So, we read it in this flat way but...

Patel:

So, I’m going to sound like a super geek here but I’ve been rereading this great, medieval Sufi poem called *The Conference of the Birds* and it reminds me of America and I’ll tell you why. Because, it’s the story of the bird species, this cacophonous, multitude of birds who get very sad one day because they realize they don’t have king. One of the birds steps forward and says “we do have a king, it’s just that he lives far far away and I’ll take you to see him. His name is The Great Simorgh.” And, the story of the poem is how this leader bird, the hoopoe, basically convinces these various birds to go on this journey – all of them make all sorts of excuses along the way about why they don’t want to be a part of it – he leads them through seven valleys of challenge and they finally get to the door, behind which is The Great Simorgh. And of course, in Islam the notion of one God – there’s no God but God – is the central notion. The Muslims reading this were waiting to see how is Farid ud-Din Attar, the poet, going to depict The Simorgh. Opens the door and there’s this shimmering mirror in which these birds see their own reflection. And, the play-on words here is in Persian “simorgh” means “thirty birds” and so the hoopoe has led this civilization of thirty birds on a journey to see their king, right. And, what they see is a reflection of themselves. And, rereading that was like “wow.” A diverse community that has completed a journey is sacred, right. The American project is sacred. What we do here... I’ll never forget to intersect that with something I read in Michael Walzer’s work some years back in a book called *What It Means To Be An American*. Walzer writes: for centuries political philosophers thought the only way you could have diversity was in dictatorships. If you want a democracy it had to be

ethnically, racially, and religiously homogenous. Who would in their right mind allow a representative from a different religious or ethnic group to be elected and rule over them? Was the thinking, right. So Walzer ends that section and begins the next one with the line "Until The United States of America." And, that's a stunning realization. We live in the first nation in human history where our founders, sinful and mistake-ridden though they were, believed that the people coming from the four corners of the earth, praying to God in different languages, including or not at all, could come together to build a country. That, when we look at ourselves in the mirror, we ought to be proud of being a sacred community. And, I think reminding people of the nature of that project and how unique it is is potentially binding.

Tippett:

I also wonder though if another interpretation of that ending is that the king we get is a reflection of ourselves.

Patel:

I think that that's it, right. And it is not always holy. I think that is exactly right. And that is, that is democracy. The country you get is the country that you nurture.

Tippett:

You know, I really think that for all that is hard right now, part of the reason it's so hard right now, we talked about the early days of just being in the room and just being proud of that was a baby step of pluralism. We're now getting into – do we become mature? Do we get out of adolescence to really figure out what this means? Remember, the great civil rights leader Vincent Harding who wrote King's Vietnam speech and helped create the philosophy of non-violence. Said to me, this business of being multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious democratic system...we've only been doing this for 50 years. We are a developing nation at this. Which is not the way we think about describing ourselves but that is what we're describing here.

Patel:

What I loved about Vincent is he would open his speeches by saying "I live in a country that does not yet exist." And you could hear the possibility for cynicism and go ahead and list the sins and mistakes and instead he spends the next 45 minutes willing that promise into existence. I found that so inspiring, right. I think we just celebrated in Chicago the commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr's, the 50th anniversary of his Fair Housing March in Chicago. And it was an ugly moment in Chicago and American history. 700 peaceful marchers, 5000 people from the community, showing up to spit, throw bricks, hurl racial epithets. A brick hits King in the head, he goes down on one knee, blood drips. He gets back up and he keeps marching. My family and I, we went to the 50th anniversary commemoration and I'm rereading Taylor Branch's chapter from that time and Taylor Branch points out this moment that a couple days after King gets hit by the brick they come and do the march again because that's what King did. And King breaks from his security and he goes to one of these ethnic whites on the sidewalk, throwing bottles and spitting,

and he says “you are too smart and good looking to be so full of hate.” That’s so remarkable. So, not everybody is touched by God that King is but the thing that I think about when it comes to greatness like that is King knows that after the Civil Rights Act, after the election of a Black president, after whatever it might be, he still has to look with that kid. You can’t expel that kid from the nation. For every stitch of hate you put in the fabric, you have to unstitch and re-stitch in a different way later. So, King is getting ahead of that. Now, my line is far south of getting hit in the head with a brick but I think that that points to something remarkable. Do people change by getting yelled at or do people change by saying “hey man, I thought you were up here. Now, why don’t you rise to that?”

Tippett:

It’s also an example of the gentle disarming way love can look in public. That idea of living in a country that no longer exists...does not yet exist. I think it gets out this notion of narrative. The narrative, the story we tell, it’s not just what exists, what is real and what it is not. It is what we privilege in this story we tell of our time. Which I think does not call us to be our best selves or make that seem very possible. And I think that, Natasha, that this notion of narrative. You know, in your book *Beyond Katrina*, which you called “a meditation” on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, one that’s full of liturgy. You know you talk about physical landscapes and landscapes of cultural memory and emotional knowledge that gets passed down and inherited and passed through families. All these ways we know who we are. You know, it’s something I’m really aware of now. There’s all this anti-Muslim sentiment that’s just there again. I mean, it’s never gone away since 9/11 but it’s resurfaced. And yet, at the same time since 9/11, all over this country there are Muslims and Christians in relationships that work. No one had thought of doing that before. And that narrative is true as well as the frightening things we read in the newspaper. I don’t what my question is [laughter]. But this notion of narrative, let’s end on this. Talk about your sense of how we can talk to ourselves about ourselves and the importance of that and the content of that moving beyond this election.

Tretheway:

Well, I was just thinking about two things. One: Eboo you reminded me of this by telling the wonderful story about the poem you were reading. A line from Rumi: “the room is the place where the light enters you.” We are so deeply wounded right now that part of the story that we can begin to tell ourselves is that we are so fully open for light to enter us now because we are so deeply wounded. The stories are always different. The stories that we need to tell ourselves as individuals or as parts of groups often are in contention with each other and yet it has been my belief for a long time that to tell a fuller version of American history, a fuller history of our stories as natives and immigrants of the United States, that all the stories have to be told. That, it’s an aggregate of our narratives and that in the aggregate in knowing more about the stories that are often erased or buried or forgotten we tell a fuller version of American history that’s owned by all of us and I think that can benefit all of us. There’s no benefit for us to not know certain stories or to not tell each other certain stories. There is not a single story but the aggregate of our stories. In that

kind of telling we get toward a larger, shared truth about the differences of our stories but collective.

Tippett:

A more whole story...so Eboo, religion, common good, and the narratives we live by.

Patel:

So, I think that there are surface narratives and there's a lot of this on the surface right now and I think that there are deeper narratives. I'm actually very hopeful about the long-term trajectory of things. I'll just take a Muslim example. So, in June 2016 - 4/5 months ago - Mohammed Ali, maybe the most prominent Muslim figure in American history passes away and he literally gets a state funeral. I mean, it's carried for about two hours on the ESPN and CNN. Former presidents speak, etc. etc. And Mohammed Ali is celebrated for a range of things but in part he is celebrated for an Islamic conviction to not go to war. He refuses to go to the Vietnam War, he goes to the Supreme Court, and he wins his conscientious objector case based on being a Muslim. He's celebrated in part for that. This is not hidden. Two months later, Khizr Khan upends the political race by saying that his son, Humayun Khan dies as a Captain in Iraq who gave his life for his company. Both of these figures are welcomed, if you will, as American Muslim archetypes and it seems that's a deep narrative. I don't think that a lot of people are walking around with that hyper-salient but...

Tippett:

No, it's a whole different way to tell that story that's been told and retold.

Patel:

When a community, when people in a community are allowed to be complex like that you can be celebrated for your courage, your Islamic courage for not going to war, you can be celebrated for your Islamic courage for going to war and it happens two months apart. And it's a lot of the same people celebrating both. It just means that this new community, like Catholics before and Jews before and Mormons before, frankly all of us set up by African-Americans. African-Americans were the original community who said "okay, we exist too." James Baldwin: "I did not enter in chains, I'm one of the first people in this country. I built this country." This notion of you expand the nation to welcome multiple contributors. We see this happening right now, I think, in a deep narrative way with American Muslims. I want to end my little part with something that I was rereading today that reminds me of you, Kris, actually. A great radio host called Norman Corwin, right. Who's kind of the Krista Tippett of his time if you will. He's beautiful, radio productions. He's got this line that I say to a lot of twenty-year olds on campuses: "Post proved that brotherhood is not so wild a dream those who profit by postponing it pretend." That's your job, right. Post your proof. Just do that. It is a religious act, however small it may be, just

post your proof that brotherhood, sisterhood, empathy, solidarity is not so wild a dream that these other people think it might be.

Tippett:

I thought...well...I thought we should end with poetry and Natasha you had that poem with you? Because I had it printed out. I think this is one of you most recent poems you've written.

Tretheway:

That's right.

Tippett:

And it was...well you tell the story.

Tretheway:

It was a poem I was asked to write for the Smithsonian Magazine special issue to coincide with the opening with the new National American, the museum of African-American history and culture on the Mall on Washington. They sent me a photograph of an artefact they wanted me to write about and the artifact was a very small rosette from a stained-glass window from the 16th Street Baptist Church that was found in a parking lot across from the church and donated to the museum.

Tippett:

And that was where the bombing happened...

Tretheway:

September 15th 1962.

Tippett:

Where the little girls were killed...

Tretheway:

Right, the four little girls. So, when they sent it to me, that's a story that's been written many, many times. So of course, the idea of finding another way to enter that story and to tell that story, I decided to look at the history of stained-glass. That's where I started. And, that's the thing that led me into the poem because it was remarkable to me to find out that since Medieval Times, the making of stained-glass window begins with a sketch of what the finished product is going to look like. And, the sketch in latin is called the "vidimus," which translates to "we have seen." So, it already suggests the idea of a kind of bearing witness. So, I'll read the poem. It's called "We Have Seen: View from the window of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, September 15, 1963."

Because they must have wanted the symbol of their gospel visible to all, not only to those inside the sanctuary, and perhaps to show that the savior watches over them both in and out of church, the congregation chose the painting, not on canvas, but stained glass: Christ the Good Shepherd in a window facing east. In the aftermath you could have seen, from a hole in the window, what a photographer captured: a sign on the building across the street, the word "Liberty," its brutal irony in 1963, or the dark windows two stories above the shattered body of a car, the street strewn with debris, the slick helmets of police catching the sun -- how it all seems crowded together, a flat perspective. In the short depth of field, everything is compressed into the ruined tableau. If you could look beyond it -- the palimpsest of wreckage -- you might see what should have been: a street scene in which the parked fire truck is moving through the grainy light, headed elsewhere; the few onlookers, framed in the windows, leaning out as if only to catch a breath of air; the men on the street below them going about the business of the day as if it were any other; and in the middle ground, a man raising a camera to capture something we might have never had reason to see. Instead his lens must find the wounded church, the mangled remains of windows, the twisted armatures -- rosettes dangling from each gnarled grasp. And, as if to remind us of the angels, how they might walk, unknown, among us, as if to remind us of the martyred girls -- like Addie Mae Collins, her face no longer a face her sister could recognize -- Jesus too, the window, his body left nearly intact but faceless, after the blast

Tippett:

Thank you, Eboo Patel and Natasha Tretheway

