Becoming Wise
An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living

Krista Tippett

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An Inquiry into the Mystery
and Art of Living

KRISTA TIPPETT

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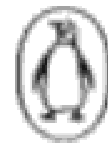

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CONTENTS

Author's Note • ix

ONE

INTRODUCTION: *The Age of Us* • 1

TWO

WORDS: *The Poetry of Creatures* • 15

THREE

FLESH: *The Body's Grace* • 57

FOUR

LOVE: *A Few Things I've Learned* • 103

FIVE

FAITH: *The Evolution* • 161

SIX

HOPE: *Reimagined* • 233

Conversation Partners, 2003–2015 • 269

Index • 275

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BECOMING WISE

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ONE

INTRODUCTION
The Age of Us

I'm a person who listens for a living. I listen for wisdom, and beauty, and for voices not shouting to be heard. This book chronicles some of what I've learned in what has become a conversation across time and generations, across disciplines and denominations.

This adventure began as the century turned and has grown and evolved along with it. My interest in these pages is on qualities of the art of living that have taken me by surprise, uprooting my assumptions. I've tried, in what follows, to show how my ideas have emerged conversationally, through a back and forth with graceful minds and lives. I've come to understand the cumulative dialogue of my work as a kind of cartography of wisdom about our emerging world. This book is a map in words to important territory we all are on now together. It's a collection of pointers that treat the margins as seriously as the noisy center. For change has always happened in the margins, across human history, and it's happening there now. Seismic shifts in common life, as in geophysical reality, begin in spaces and cracks.

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This daunting and wondrous century is throwing open basic questions the twentieth century thought it had answered. Our questions are intimate and civilizational all at once—definitions of when life begins and when death happens; of the meaning of marriage and family and identity; of our relationship to the natural world; of our relationship to technology and our relationships *through* technology. The Internet in its infancy is upending the nature of making and leading and learning and belonging. It's sending us into a new Reformation, but this time of all of our institutions at once—political, educational, economic, and religious. The interesting and challenging thing about this moment is that we know the old forms aren't working. But we can't yet see what the new forms will be. We are making them up in "real time"; we're even reimagining time.

Humanity first looked inside with global sweep in what is sometimes called the Axial Age—a handful of centuries midmillennium before the Common Era. In utterly disconnected cultures in another world of upheaval, Confucius was born in China, the Buddha sought enlightenment, Plato and Aristotle examined life and mind and soul, and the Hebrew prophets began to pen a people of God into being. The cultivation of inner life arose in interplay with the startling proposition that the well-being of others beyond kin and tribe—the stranger, the orphan, the outcast—was linked to one's own. Humanity gave voice to the questions that have animated religion and philosophy ever since: What does it mean to be human? What matters in a life? What matters in a death? How to be of service to each other and the world?

These questions are being reborn, reframed, in our age of interdependence with far-flung strangers. The question of what it means to be human is now inextricable from the question of who we are to each other. We have riches of knowledge and insight, of tools both tangible and spiritual, to rise to this calling. We watch our technologies becoming more intelligent, and speculate imaginatively about their potential to

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become conscious. All the while, we have it in us to become wise. Wisdom leavens intelligence, and ennobles consciousness, and advances evolution itself.

Religious and spiritual traditions have borne wisdom across time, though in charged cultural spaces they can become parodies of themselves. When I speak of these things, I'm speaking of places where we pay essential humanity an attention unmatched in our other disciplines—our capacities to love and take joy, our capacities to damage and deceive, the inevitability of failure and finitude, the longing to be of service. I love the deep savvy about hope that religion tends, its reverence for the undervalued virtue of beauty, its seriousness about the common human experience of mystery. Our spiritual lives are where we reckon head-on with the mystery of ourselves, and the mystery of each other.

We tried to retire mystery in the West in the last few hundred years and enshrined reality's sharp edges instead—solutions and plans and ideologies; communism and fascism and imperialism, with capitalism shape shifting among them. In our somewhat chastened age, we're circling back to the underlying reality that was there all along: the human condition, in all its mess and glory, remains the ground on which all of our ambitions flourish or crash. The adage that "he who does not know history is doomed to repeat it" doesn't go far enough. History always repeats itself until we honestly and searchingly know ourselves. Now the chaos of global economies points at human agency. So, increasingly, does the chaos of the weather. Terrorism, the only "ism" left swaggering in the post–cold war world, hinges on raw human despair all around.

I think a great deal about a moral equation Einstein made that is as radical in its way as his mathematical equations, if far less famous. He began his life with a profound faith in the social good of the scientific enterprise—a community of cosmic endeavor that should transcend tribal rivalries and national boundaries. Then he watched German sci-

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ence hand itself over to fascism. He watched chemists and physicists become creators of weapons of mass destruction. He said that science in his generation had become like a razor blade in the hands of a three-year-old. He began to see figures such as Gandhi and Moses, Jesus and Buddha and St. Francis of Assisi, as "geniuses in the art of living." He proposed that their qualities of "spiritual genius" were more necessary to the future of human dignity, security, and joy than objective knowledge.

My work has shown me that spiritual geniuses of the everyday are everywhere. They are in the margins and do not have publicists. They are below the radar, which is broken. The discourse of our common life inclines towards despair. In my field of journalism, where we presume to write the first draft of history, we summon our deepest critical capacities for investigating what is inadequate, corrupt, catastrophic, and failing. The "news" is defined as the extraordinary events of the day, but it is most often translated as the extraordinarily terrible events of the day. And in an immersive 24/7 news cycle, we internalize the deluge of bad news as the norm—the real truth of who we are and what we're up against as a species.

But our world is abundant with beauty and courage and grace. I'm aware of a growing aspiration to attend, with all the tools we have at hand, to the human change that makes social change possible. The digital world, though a new Wild West in many ways, is on some basic level simply another screen on which we project the excesses and possibilities of life in flesh and blood. Spiritual life is evolving, and its sources of nourishment are becoming more broadly accessible. Science is yielding knowledge of our bodies and brains that is an everyday form of power for softening the gap between who we are and who we want to be, as individuals and as a species. Across social and medical disciplines, we are gathering a radical new understanding of the nature of human vitality and wholeness.

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We create transformative, resilient new realities by becoming transformed, resilient people. This is about the lover as well as the beloved, the citizen as well as the politician, the social entrepreneur as well as the person in need. It means me, and it means you.

Listening is about being present, not just about being quiet. I meet others with the life I've lived, not just with my questions. I've learned along the way to be grateful for the unlikely trajectory my life has taken, the perspective it's granted. It's given me intimate familiarity with some margins that are in fact the heartbeat of a society and access to places where power is exercised—the power of idea, and the power of action. I have been afforded a sense of long arcs of history that infuse what we perceive to be crises of the moment—where we came from, and how we got here from there.

I was born in the wee hours of the night as the 1960 election returns came in and John F. Kennedy was elected president. I grew up in Shawnee, Oklahoma, a small town in a young state in the middle of the middle of America, where people had come to forget the past and leave their ancestral demons behind. My mother's ancestors drove their covered wagons into the former Indian Territory to create their lives from scratch in the unforgiving Oklahoma dust. My father had been adopted by the people I knew as my grandparents at the age of three. History was one thin, tenuous layer deep—him, and now us.

I grew up full of longing but unsure of its object, and without much sense of the world beyond Oklahoma and Texas. The backdrop of social life was the Southern Baptist church, in which my maternal grandfather was a preacher. The only serious reading I had to work with was the Bible, and I was prone to late night wrestling with the large questions it raised as well as those it seemed willfully not to resolve. Then I spent the summer of my junior year in high school at a debate camp in Chicago

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and made friends who opened my sense of the secular possible. The most wonderful of these wanted nothing more than to go to Brown University, about which I had never heard, and so I applied there too. Going to Brown, for me, was like moving to Mars. I arrived to find the son of the long-ago-slain president living upstairs in my freshman dorm. Life on other planets, parallel universes, scenarios I always adored in science fiction and which physicists now take seriously—so much about the leap between Shawnee and Providence felt tantamount to that for me.

Great leaps, however exhilarating, are hard on mortal creatures. At the bottom of a dark place I now recognize as my first depression, early in my second year at college, I was overwhelmed by all the books I hadn't read, the places I hadn't traveled. I felt I would never catch up with my peers in that rarefied world. But I would throw myself into the chances that were now coming my way. I learned German, backpacked around Europe, and went to Mars again: I spent a semester in an improbable exchange program in the Communist East German city of Rostock on the Baltic Sea.

In Rostock, I was captured—intellectually and emotionally—by the division of Germany in particular and the world in general into communism and capitalism, geopolitical Good and geopolitical Evil. I internalized the message of the mid-twentieth century that politics was where all the important questions resided and all of the valid solutions too. I stopped thinking about God and threw myself into saving the world respectably, by way of journalism and politics.

After college I studied in the sleepy West German capital of Bonn and then went on to divided Berlin as a *New York Times* stringer. I had no promise of a living wage or a byline. But those were busy years in central Europe and I filed stories by teletype from East Germany and through the brave new modem technology from the West. After eighteen months, I was offered a job with the State Department, which was essentially an arm of government in the four-power postwar arrange-

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ment that applied until the Wall came down. I had my finger on a pulse of relationships growing across the Berlin Wall, and I was hired to keep it there. There were human bonds proliferating across the "inner-German border" throughout the eighties: environmental activists waking up together to the effect of human interaction with the natural world they shared; art and church and politics meshing in fantastic, subversive ways; young people coming of age in a world that imbibed Communist propaganda by day and Western television at night, culturally schizophrenic and restless beyond measure.

I had thrilling jobs in the West, eventually as chief aide to the young American ambassador, a nuclear arms expert. This career I was building was my calling card. I learned so much in Berlin that flows directly into the very different career I have made now. I scarcely had any conversations in those years about religion or spirit or meaning beyond politics. But geopolitical drama, in that time and place, was existential. Coming from my childhood, I was captivated by this intensity. German history was so many layers deep, so consuming for the most ordinary person, with terrible, unshakable heft. Its demons were in every room, named and confronted incessantly.

More riveting to me in the end than the politics of Berlin was the vast social experiment its division had become. One people, one language and history and culture, were split into two radically opposing worldviews and realities, decades entrenched by the time I arrived. I loved people on both sides of the Wall that wound through the heart of the city. But I found myself drawn again and again, almost for sanity's sake, to the East, where so much more was at stake, and life and mind felt more passionate and vital. This realization unsettled my sense of personal progress and education: it was possible to have freedom and plenty in the West and craft an empty life; it was possible to "have nothing" in the East and create a life of intimacy and dignity and beauty.

Until the Wall actually broke open on November 9, 1989—my

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twenty-ninth birthday—no one imagined that it could fall or the Iron Curtain crumble. We err when we confine our telling of those events to the calculus of diplomacy and missiles, the charisma of Reagan or Gorbachev. Each of them played a pivotal role in that drama, to be sure, as did the diplomats and strategists around them. But they only brought things so far. The Wall finally collapsed with a whimper, not a bang, as fear lifted all at once from an entire nation. I had driven or walked through Checkpoint Charlie hundreds of times, respecting its absurdity as authority. On the night the Wall fell, after a bumbling bureaucrat misspoke at a press conference, the entire city walked joyfully through it. The border guards joined them. It was truly nearly that simple. There are places in human experience that politics cannot analyze or address, and they hold more possibility for change than we can begin to imagine.

My time in Berlin began to point me to the kinds of questions I've asked ever since. How to give voice to those raw, essential, heartbreaking and life-giving places in us, so that we may know them more consciously, live what they teach us, and mine their wisdom for our life together?

Theology, which I began to ponder in my thirties, offered up vocabulary and resources to pose these kinds of questions. As much as theology's public face has been equated across time with abstractions about God, and fights about God, I cherish its robust tradition of wrestling with the maddening complexity of human nature, human action, human being. It has insisted on the cultivation of qualities that would have sounded suspect, laudable but idealistic, to my ambitious younger self: wholeness beyond progress; hope beyond pragmatism; love beyond realpolitik.

I'm accompanied, in the pages that follow, by voices and lives that see such possibility for the change we are living through now. There is a great deal of poetry here, because it is beautiful and necessary and for other, deeper reasons that I will explore. There is a great deal of science

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here too. My life of conversation is enriched with the insights of physicists, neuroscientists, and biologists who are posing questions, and making discoveries, that shed light on the questions of meaning and moral action once reserved for theology and philosophy.

The connective tissue of these pages is the language of virtue—an old-fashioned word, perhaps, but one that I find is magnetic to new generations, who instinctively grasp the need for practical disciplines to translate aspiration into action. Our spiritual traditions have carried virtues across time. They are not the stuff of saints and heroes, but tools for the art of living. They are pieces of intelligence about human behavior that neuroscience is now exploring with new words and images: what we practice, we become. What's true of playing the piano or throwing a ball also holds for our capacity to move through the world mindlessly and destructively or generously and gracefully. I've come to think of virtues and rituals as spiritual technologies for being our best selves in flesh and blood, time and space.

There are superstar virtues that come most readily to mind and can be the work of a day or a lifetime—love, compassion, forgiveness. And there are gentle shifts of mind and habit that make those possible, working patiently through the raw materials of our lives.

I've organized my reflections around five of these raw materials, basic aspects of the human everyday, which I've come to see as breeding grounds for wisdom. My own understanding and experience of these things have been utterly transformed.

The first is words. We have outlived our faith in facts to tell us the whole story or even to tell us the truth about the world and ourselves. So many of us feel excluded and dismayed by what passes for discourse in our common life. But the words we have for virtue are also endangered by overuse and cliché. I explore the real-world power of "words that shimmer," in the language of the poet Elizabeth Alexander. I know it is possible to speak about our deepest passions and convictions in a way

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that opens imaginations rather than shuts them down. I share what I've learned about the virtue of asking better questions. The world right now needs the most vivid, transformative universe of words that you and I can muster. And we can begin immediately to start having the conversations we want to be hearing, and telling the story of our time anew.

The second is the body. The body is where every virtue lives or dies, but this statement has a vastly different meaning for me than it did in the religious world of my childhood. The cutting edge of science is yielding a vision of human healing and restoration that is realizable as never before. Our physical selves, as we're learning, are so much more than merely physical. They carry trauma and joy and memory and our capacity for opening or closing to life and one another. There are deep connections between beauty and pleasure and wisdom, and we are relearning these with practical effect, beginning with the food we eat. I've come to believe that our capacity to reach beyond ourselves—experiencing mystery or being present to others—is dependent on how fully we are planted in our bodies in all their flaws and their grace.

The third is love. Love is the only aspiration big enough for the immensity of human community and challenge in the twenty-first century. *Love* is another word that is a bit (or a lot) ruined—something we routinely speak of as something to fall into and fall out of. But as a piece of intelligence about what makes us human, and what we are capable of, it is a virtue and way of being we have scarcely begun to mine. People who have turned the world on its axis across history have called humanity to love. It's time to dare this more bravely in our midst, and dare learning together how love can be practical, creative, and sustained as a social good, not merely a private good. Everything is no longer political, as the old saying goes, but nearly everything now holds civic importance. I hear the word *love* surfacing as a longing for our public life everywhere I turn. I share what I'm hearing about what love might look like as we grapple with crises of racial and economic well-being. Our unfolding

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knowledge of the brain is part of this picture too—a fantastic new companion in stepping out of fear and into care, and realizing our natural belonging one to another.

The fourth is faith. I began my life of conversation with the theme of faith, and my questioning has evolved as faith has evolved in the early years of this century. The spiritual wisdom of the ages is openly accessible as never before, and we are free to craft our own spiritual lives. This is leading, counterintuitively, to rediscoveries of the depths of tradition, for the sake of the world. My own musings and questions are richly informed by my conversations with physicists and with the growing sphere of the new nonreligious. Paradoxical connections intrigue me—the way our technologies are reopening a sense that literal reality is not all there is; the robust vocabulary scientists and mathematicians have of beauty and of mystery. I believe that mystery is a common human experience, like being born and falling in love and dying. A new openness to the language of mystery—and the kindred virtue of wondering—across boundaries of belief and nonbelief, science and faith, is helping us inhabit our own truths and gifts exuberantly while honoring the reality of the other. I have no idea what religion will look like a century from now; but the evolution of faith will change us all.

The fifth is hope. My life of conversation leads me to reimagine the very meaning of hope. I define hope as distinct from optimism or idealism. It has nothing to do with wishing. It references reality at every turn and reveres truth. It lives open eyed and wholeheartedly with the darkness that is woven ineluctably into the light of life and sometimes seems to overcome it. Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a habit that becomes spiritual muscle memory. It's a renewable resource for moving through life as it is, not as we wish it to be. I describe some of the luminous faces and voices and stories I see as part of the story of our time, pointing to what we're capable of as much as every narrative of danger and decay.

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The Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is a beacon for this book, and especially in my reflections on hope. In life, he joined intellectual rigor, scientific discovery, and an adventurous, expansive view of the human spirit. "An interpretation of the universe," he wrote, "remains unsatisfying unless it covers the interior as well as the exterior of things; mind as well as matter." While he was excavating the primitive "Peking man" fossil in China, he imagined future humanity excavating the modern human psyche and spirit—and seeing it revealed as primitive. He foresaw that we would overlay the biosphere with the noosphere—the realm of human intelligence, information, and action. He predicted, that is, something like the Internet. He believed that the noosphere would drive the next stage of evolution—an evolution of spirit and consciousness. This is a grand and exciting vision for imagining the long-term stakes of what we might be fermenting now.

But Teilhard thought in slow, deep, geologic time, and so must we. A long view of time can replenish our sense of ourselves and the world. We are in the adolescence of our species, not by any measure in full possession of our powers. The twenty-first-century globe resembles the understanding we now have of the teenage brain: dramatically uneven; immensely powerful and creative at times and in places, reckless and destructive in others.

In America, many features of national public life are also better suited to adolescence than to adulthood. We don't do things adults learn to do, like calm ourselves, and become less narcissistic. Much of politics and media sends us in the opposite, infantilizing direction. We reduce great questions of meaning and morality to "issues" and simplify them to two sides, allowing pundits and partisans to frame them in irreconcilable extremes. But most of us don't see the world this way, and it's not the way the world actually works. I'm not sure there's such a thing as the cultural "center," or that it's very interesting if it exists. But left of center and right of center, in the expansive middle and heart of our life together,

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most of us have some questions left alongside our answers, some curiosity alongside our convictions. This book is for people who want to take up the great questions of our time with imagination and courage, to nurture new realities in the spaces we inhabit, and to do so expectantly and with joy.

I have yet to meet a wise person who doesn't know how to find some joy even in the midst of what is hard, and to smile and laugh easily, including at oneself. A sense of humor is high on my list of virtues, in interplay with humility and compassion and a capacity to change when that is the right thing to do. It's one of those virtues that softens us for all the others. Desmond Tutu, whom I found impossible to doubt, says that God has a sense of humor. There is science helping us to see a sense of humor in the brain as an expression of creativity, making unlikely connections and leaning into them with joy. So I hope and trust that a smile in the voice may sometimes rise from these pages. And I do bring many voices along with me here, snatches of conversation completing and informing my thoughts, as they do all the time in my life and work.

I'm not surprised by the fact that inexplicable and terrible things happen in a cosmos as complicated as ours, with sentient beings like us running the show. But I am emboldened by the fact that surprise is the only constant. We are never really running the show, never really in control, and nothing will go quite as we imagined it. Our highest ambitions will be off, but so will our worst prognostications. I am emboldened by the puzzling, redemptive truth to which each and every one of my conversations has added nuance, that we are made by what would break us. Birth itself is a triumph through a bloody, treacherous process. We only learn to walk when we risk falling down, and this equation holds—with commensurately more complex dynamics—our whole lives long. I have heard endless variations on this theme—the battle with illness that saves the life that follows; the childhood pain that leads to vocation; the disability that opens into wholeness and a presence to the hidden wholeness

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of others. You have your own stories, the dramatic and more ordinary moments where what has gone wrong becomes an opening to more of yourself and part of your gift to the world. This is the beginning of wisdom.

And what is true for individuals is true for peoples. Our problems are not more harrowing than the ravaging depressions and wars of a century ago. But our economic, demographic, and ecological challenges are in fact existential. I think we sense this in our bones, though it's not a story with commonly agreed-upon contours. Our global crises, the magnitude of the stakes for which we are playing, could signal the end of civilization as we've known it. Or they might be precisely the impetus human beings perversely need to do the real work at hand: to directly and wisely address the human condition and begin to grow it up.

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TWO

WORDS
The Poetry of Creatures

I take it as an elemental truth of life that words matter. This is so plain that we can ignore it a thousand times a day. The words we use shape how we understand ourselves, how we interpret the world, how we treat others. From Genesis to the aboriginal songlines of Australia, human beings have forever perceived that naming brings the essence of things into being. The ancient rabbis understood books, texts, the very letters of certain words as living, breathing entities. Words make worlds.

We chose too small a word in the decade of my birth—*tolerance*—to make the world we want to live in now. We opened to the racial difference that had been there all along, separate but equal, and to a new infusion of religions, ethnicities, and values. But tolerance doesn't welcome. It allows, endures, indulges. In the medical lexicon, it is about the limits of thriving in an unfavorable environment. Tolerance was a baby step to make pluralism possible, and pluralism, like every ism, holds an illusion

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of control. It doesn't ask us to care for the stranger. It doesn't even invite us to know each other, to be curious, to be open to be moved or surprised by each other.

Here are some words I love, words that describe presence rather than means towards an end: *nourishing, edifying, redemptive; courageous, generous, winsome; adventurous, curious, tender.* I began my professional life as a journalist dealing in words the twentieth century favored: *crisis, containment, realpolitik.* Along the way in that era and beyond it, we reserved some of the other words we need the most for sidebars to the news. They fell into disrepair and cliché. *Peace* is strangely divisive. *Justice* is somehow partisan. I'm unmoved when we "celebrate diversity" by putting it up on a pedestal and avoiding its messiness and its depths. I intermingle the language of *common life* with *public life* because in recent generations we've collapsed our imagination about public life to be too narrowly about *political* life. I always rush to add qualifiers when I use the word *civility*—words like *muscular* or *adventurous*—because it can otherwise sound too nice, polite, and tame.

Of course all words are just containers on some level, but that is really the point. The connection between words and meanings resembles the symbiosis between religion and spirituality. Words are crafted by human beings, wielded by human beings. They take on all of our flaws and frailties. They diminish or embolden the truths they arose to carry. We drop and break them sometimes. We renew them, again and again.

> Here's what we crave. We crave truth tellers. We crave real truth. There is so much baloney all the time. You know, the performance of political speech, of speeches you see on the news, doesn't it often feel to you like there should be a thought bubble over it that says, "what I really would say if I could say it is . . ."

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Elizabeth Alexander was the poet of the first Obama inauguration, and she is one of my favorite thinkers about the failure of "official language and discourse." The poem she wrote and read on the Washington Mall in January 2009 was about the mundane, miraculous interwovenness of words with reality. I called her up for a conversation two years later, in the midst of a political season of language grown feral. Then the congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was shot and wounded, and several others killed, at a civic gathering in front of an Arizona grocery store. I worried that a show with a poet in a week of national tragedy might seem beside the point at best, callous at worst. Instead, there was an outpouring of the same wild gratitude I know in myself when poetry intrudes and demands I let it take up space in me.

We are starved, and ready, for fresh language to approach each other; this is what Elizabeth Alexander names.

> I learn so much every day from being a mother. My sons are 11 and 12, and you see the way children know when they're being bamboozled. And they also are drawn towards language that shimmers, individual words with power. They will stop you and ask you to repeat a shimmering word if they're hearing it for the first time. You can see it in their faces.

I have a young son too—can you think of one of those words?

> Well, actually, if they were right here, they would love *hoodwinked* and *bamboozled*. People sometimes ask me when they read poems that have an "I" in them that seems to be autobiographical—people are interested in the details. Oh, did that really happen to you? Is that from you? What I try to explain is, even if I am drawing on personal experience, the truth of a poem is actually much deeper than whether or not something

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really happened. What matters is an undergirding truth that I think is the power of poetry.

As you're talking, I'm thinking of your poem "Ars Poetica #100: I Believe," *especially these lines:*

> Poetry is what you find
> in the dirt in the corner,
>
> overhear on the bus, God
> in the details, the only way
>
> to get from here to there.
> Poetry (and now my voice is rising)
>
> is not all love, love, love,
> and I'm sorry the dog died.
>
> Poetry (here I hear myself loudest)
> is the human voice,
>
> and are we not of interest to each other?

So I think that the truth of that poem is not about true things or things that happened, but rather in the question are we not of interest to each other? Which to me isn't about, I like her shoes or, oh, he has a fascinating job. It's much deeper than that. Are we human beings who are in community, do we call to each other? Do we heed each other? Do we want to know each other? To reach across what can be a huge void between human beings. I look at my children and I think, as deeply as I

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> know you I do not know what's inside your heads. But I crave knowing them that deeply. And so it's most intense with one's beloveds, but I think it's a way to move in the world. And if we don't do that with language that's very, very, very precise—not prissy, but precise—then are we knowing each other truly?

I began to learn an art of conversation about undergirding truths from the Benedictine monks of St. John's Abbey of Collegeville when I moved to Minnesota by way of one of life's odd, unplanned trajectories in the mid-1990s. Religious stridency in American life had reached a fever pitch of toxicity, spurred on by a media appetite for voices that delivered entertainment. I was fresh from my study of theology, and intensely aware that we were working with a very limited vocabulary and skillset to discuss things that matter in public. These Benedictines had founded a quiet but mighty institute for "ecumenical and cultural research" in the 1960s, when the notion of Catholics and Protestants in relationship was a now unimaginably daring move. It became a seedbed of cross-religious ferment for the latter half of the twentieth century.

One of the ecumenical institute's founding visionaries was developing Alzheimer's disease. Others were simply growing old. And so they sent me off to gather an oral history of what had happened, and how, in this place. Far-flung lives had come quietly into relationship here and in turn informed the way their denomination entered into relationship with the religious other. They were Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, Presbyterian and Nazarene Holiness and Pentecostal. Among them were a leading Evangelical seminary president and a Paulist priest, Tom Stransky, who had been Pope John XXIII's liaison with non-Catholic observers at Vatican II and now was running the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, a place of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim encounter on the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

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The friendship between these former religious strangers was in itself remarkable. It was their corollary to my experience in Berlin that there is more change possible in our lifetimes than we can foresee. They all remained as distinct and impassioned on their spectrum of belief as ever. And yet the delight, curiosity, and esteem they had acquired for each other's minds and journeys changed everyone profoundly. It humanized doctrine. It invigorated their sense of their own tradition, and simultaneously imparted them with a grateful sense of mystery about what other traditions bring into the world. They took these new ways of seeing and being back into their lives in their own communities. The great religious historian Martin Marty has said that America's transition from a Protestant majority nation was one of the most graceful handoffs in history. There are many chapters in that story, and what happened in Collegeville is one of them.

Father Kilian McDonnell, the monk of St. John's Abbey who founded the ecumenical institute, had become a globe-trotting theological ambassador after growing up in the backwoods of South Dakota. "It wasn't the end of the world," he liked to say of the little town where he grew up, "but you could see it from there." A decade after I came to know him, when he was in his seventies, he became a fairly successful published poet himself. My favorite of his poems goes like this:

Perfection, Perfection

I have had it with perfection.
I have packed my bags,
I am out of here.
Gone.

As certain as rain
will make you wet,

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perfection will do you
in.

It droppeth not as dew
upon the summer grass
to give liberty and green
joy.

Perfection straineth out
the quality of mercy,
withers rapture at its
birth.

Before the battle is half begun,
cold probity thinks
it can't be won, concedes the
war.

I've handed in my notice,
given back my keys,
signed my severance check, I
quit.

Hints I could have taken:
Even the perfect chiseled form of
Michelangelo's radiant David
squints,

the Venus de Milo
has no arms,
the Liberty Bell is
cracked.

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who started his life as an atheist molecular biologist and whose life was upended by photos he came across of the faces of monks—pictures that revealed an unexpected template for radiant, integrated life.

There are pleasurable, primal, life-giving reasons we are rediscovering the power of personal story everywhere in media and culture. The art of conversation I'm describing here is related, but it is something subtly and directionally different—sharing our stories in the service of probing together who we are and who we want to be. To me, every great story opens into an equally galvanizing exchange we can have together: So what? How does this change the way you see and live? How might it inform the way I see and live? I believe we can push ourselves further, and use words more powerfully and tell and make the story of our time anew.

One of my most beloved examples of this is an early conversation I had with a wise woman and physician, Rachel Naomi Remen. Her words did shift the way I move through the world ever after. She first began to challenge the nature of cancer treatment—and later the content of medical education—with her realization that every illness has a story attached. A person is given a diagnosis of cancer or diabetes or heart disease, but the details of a person's life make every cancer or diabetes or heart disease different and every course of healing unique. In ruminating about the spiritual roots of her life, she told me about her Hasidic rabbi grandfather, and the Birthday of the World—the story behind the evocative, demanding Jewish teaching to "repair the world."

> This was my fourth birthday present, this story. In the beginning there was only the holy darkness, the Ein Sof, the source of life. In the course of history, at a moment in time, this world, the world of a thousand thousand things, emerged from the heart of the holy darkness as a great ray of light. And then, perhaps because this is a Jewish story, there was an accident,

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and the vessels containing the light of the world, the wholeness of the world, broke. The wholeness of the world, the light of the world, was scattered into a thousand thousand fragments of light. And they fell into all events and all people, where they remain deeply hidden until this very day.

Now, according to my grandfather, the whole human race is a response to this accident. We are here because we are born with the capacity to find the hidden light in all events and all people, to lift it up and make it visible once again and thereby to restore the innate wholeness of the world. It's a very important story for our times. This task is called *tikkun olam* in Hebrew. It's the restoration of the world.

And this is, of course, a collective task. It involves all people who have ever been born, all people presently alive, all people yet to be born. We are all healers of the world. That story opens a sense of possibility. It's not about healing the world by making a huge difference. It's about healing the world that touches you, that's around you.

The world to which you have proximity.

That's where our power is. Yeah. Many people feel powerless in today's situations.

Right. But when you use a phrase like that just out of nowhere, "heal the world," it sounds like a dream, a nice ideal, completely impossible.

It's a very old story, comes from the 14th century, and it's a different way of looking at our power. I suspect it has a key for us in our present situation, a very important key. I'm not a person who is political in the usual sense of that word, but I

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think that we all feel that we're not enough to make a difference, that we need to be more somehow, wealthier or more educated or otherwise different than the people we are. And according to this story, we are exactly what's needed. And to just wonder about that a little: what if we were exactly what's needed? What then? How would I live if I was exactly what's needed to heal the world?

I told my son, who's seven, this story about the beginning of the universe and about the sparks and the holy flying out. He listened to me so raptly, and he said, "I like that."

I was told this story, let's see, 63 years ago. And my response to it was exactly the same. That's very important about stories. They touch something that is human in us and is probably unchanging. Perhaps this is why the important knowledge is passed through stories. It's what holds a culture together. Culture has a story, and every person in it participates in that story. The world is made up of stories; it's not made up of facts.

Although we tell ourselves facts to piece together the story.

Well, the facts are the bones of the story, if you want to think of it that way. I mean, the facts are, for example, that I have had Crohn's disease for 52 years. I've had eight major surgeries. But that doesn't tell you about my journey and what's happened to me because of that, and what it means to live with an illness like this and discover the power of being a human being. And whenever there's a crisis, like 9/11, do you notice how the whole of the United States turned towards the stories? Where I was, what happened, what happened in those build-

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> ings, what happened to the people who were connected to the people in those buildings. Because that is the only way we can make sense out of life, through the stories. The facts are a certain number of people died there. The stories are about the greatness of being a human being and the vulnerability of being a human being.

I think you make such an interesting contrast also with the fact that we live with all kinds of stories in our culture, forms of entertainment as well as information, but that those stories always have beginnings and endings. And you say that the stories of our lives, stories as they function in life, take time. Real stories take time.

> There's a powerful saying that sometimes we need a story more than food in order to live. They tell us about who we are, what is possible for us, what we might call upon. They also remind us we're not alone with whatever faces us. When I say a story doesn't have an ending, for example, part of my story is you telling your little boy the story of the birthday of the world. That's also part of my grandfather's story, right? And your little boy has never met my grandfather, but perhaps my grandfather will be woven into his life in some way. It may be a very small way or it may not, I don't know, but in that sense no one's story is ever finished.

The thing about the raw materials of the life of the spirit is that they are always changing. What you see in the past is dependent on what you are able to see now. I've done a lot of writing before this in which I would have started my answer to the question of the spiritual background of my life with a story about my Southern Baptist preacher grandfather and his effect on me. There will be much about him in these

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pages. But at this point in my life, I'm as acutely aware of how my father's lost sense of history and family was the spiritual background to his childhood and a great black hole in the middle of mine. It's a good analogy: time and space had collapsed in on themselves. No light could enter or escape. He'd been dropped off for adoption one day without warning, along with an older sister and a baby brother. I don't know what his first years were like before that; I suspect the worst. My father professed to have no curiosity at all about his sister or brother or mother, though I believe he remembered their names. When he was a bit older, his mother briefly tried to kidnap him back. He shared this story matter-of-factly. But he sometimes had terrible screaming nightmares, which lent a perilous air to my nights, that his mother was coming to get him.

By day in my family, we scarcely spoke of these things. Questions flourished in our midst, unaskable. And of course, those unnamed realities, those unasked questions, shaped us all from the inside out in ways it would take me decades to begin to apprehend. Only in the writing of this book have I come to trace the intensity of my insistence on talking about what matters—now in the world writ large—to the beginnings of my own story. This is ironic, and wonderful in its way. Conversation after conversation, year after year, I've coaxed others to trace the intersection of their grandest aspirations and surest wisdom with real life and time and place, past to present, wound to gift. Now, in the act of offering what I've learned to others, I receive it for the first time, fully, for myself.

At risk of stretching my analogy too far, I find myself drawn to black holes in common life—painful, complicated, shameful things we can scarcely talk about at all, alongside the arguments we replay ad nauseam, with the same polar opposites defining, winning, or losing depending on which side you're on, with predictable dead-end results. The art of starting new kinds of conversations, of creating new departure

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who is right and who is wrong and the arguments on every side; not on whether we can agree; but on what is at stake in human terms for us all. There is value in learning to speak together honestly and relate to each other with dignity, without rushing to common ground that would leave all the hard questions hanging.

I have experienced that even with the most intractable lightning-rod discussions that have ripped our families and some of our institutions apart, reframing the animating questions can start whole new conversations. We can reject the predictable posturing and the inevitable stalemate. Frances Kissling is best known as a pro-choice advocate, the longtime head of Catholics for Choice. Less famously, when she retired from Catholics for Choice a decade ago, she decided to give herself over to learning what it would mean to be in real relationship with her political opposites. I once engaged her and the Evangelical social ethicist David Gushee in a conversation about abortion. Our framing question was to explore what is at stake in human terms in all the things we approach when we approach abortion and what makes this subject so exquisitely fraught and divisive. We nearly succeeded in avoiding the language of "pro-choice" and "pro-life" altogether. The conversation was big and messy in a whole new way. It was uncomfortable and also thrilling because it opened provocative territory we hadn't charted before we began—whether the sexual revolution was good for us, and how to rehumanize and deepen our relationship to sexuality in public as well as private spheres. There was a realization in a room full of people that we long to ponder these things, but they had been obscured by the predictable, well-worn debates.

Sometimes one wise voice that has been in the world for a while and evolved, lived the same human drama from a few different angles, can provide more nuance than any two-sided debate. Frances Kissling is one of those voices for me. She's steeped in the particular context of reproductive rights, but what she's learned applies to every sphere. She's also

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stopped using some of the comforting words we understandably reflexively leap to as a basis for dialogue, like identifying common ground in the midst of deep differences. She says:

> I think that common ground can be found between people who do not have deep, deep differences. And in politics you can find compromise. Politics is the art of the possible. But to think that you are going to take the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Organization of Women and they are going to find common ground on abortion is not practical, it's not gonna happen. And we could extend that. But I do think that when people who disagree with each other come together with a goal of gaining a better understanding of why the other believes what they do, good things come of that. But the pressure of coming to agreement works against really understanding each other. And we don't understand each other.
>
> The polarization that exists on the abortion issue, in which people have called each other names and demonized each other for decades, definitely speaks against any level of trust that enables people to come to some commonality. So you really have to start with this first idea, that there are some people—not all—who see some benefit in learning why the other thinks the way that they do. Some of it's the simple stuff of humanization—that the person becomes a real person, not an extremist, not evilly motivated; that perhaps for some you can overcome the epithets that we have charged each other with. And that, I'm a very strong believer in.
>
> I have learned—I have changed my views on some aspects of abortion over the last 10 years, based upon having a deeper understanding of the values and concerns of people who disagree with me. As a result, I have an interest in trying to find

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a way that I can honor some of their values without giving up mine. That's, for me, what has happened.

And that is, again, different from this rush that I think we make in this culture, a parallel to finding common ground, to getting on the same page, right? You're not talking about getting on the same page.

No, no. But, you know, Sidney Callahan, who is against legal abortion generally speaking, a long time ago said that the hallmark of a civil debate is when you can acknowledge that which is good in the position of the person you disagree with.

I want to read you something that you wrote. You were listing a couple of qualities that you thought were necessary to bring constructive, forward thinking approaches to a difficult issue. One of them that really struck me was "the courage to be vulnerable in front of those we passionately disagree with."

I think that's the hardest thing to do. It is very hard for all of us in these situations to acknowledge, for example, that we just don't have the answers to this problem. I don't think we have the answers to the problem of abortion in our society, whether it's the problem of abortion itself or the problem of how we're going to mediate our differences about abortion.

And a willingness to admit that is very, very difficult. What is it in your own position that gives you trouble? What is it in the position of the other that you are attracted to? Where do you have doubts? I've said this to somebody recently: I don't understand how you can work on an issue for 35 years as complicated as this and never change your mind at all about any-

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thing. What we've been doing hasn't been working. I think that you become more willing to be vulnerable at a moment when you recognize that what you have done has not gotten you where you want to be. So an element of vulnerability is some modicum of helplessness. And if you don't think you need any help and you think everything is just hunky-dory, well, then, there's absolutely no reason to be vulnerable.

What do you think you've learned about how social change happens? What would progress look like now in these years ahead?

That's a very difficult question. What have I learned? The need to approach others positively and with enthusiasm for difference is absolutely critical to any change. There is no way to change somebody. I'm the toughest of fighters, let's be very clear. My reputation for being devastating in debate is legendary, and I love a good fight and I love to win. But what I have learned is that, you know, the simplistic way of putting it is that you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar. That's a very wise saying.

And I have learned that people in the center are not going to be the big change makers. You've got to put yourself at the margins and be willing to risk in order to make change. More importantly, you have got to approach differences with this notion that there is good in the other. That's it. And that if we can't figure out how to do that, and if there isn't the crack in the middle where there's some people on both sides who absolutely refuse to see the other as evil, this is going to continue. There's a lot of pressure, and it's much easier, to preach to the choir versus listening to people who disagree with you. But the choir is already there; the choir doesn't need us.

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