

UVA LAW | Cornell West Meador Lecture

PRESENTER: Welcome, everyone. It is wonderful to see you all here and to see such a great turnout, not that I am surprised at all. Welcome to the 2022 Meador Lecture. This lecture was inaugurated in 1997 upon the retirement of Professor Daniel J. Meador who was a longtime member of the University of Virginia Law School faculty.

Professor Meador was born in 1926 in Selma, Alabama. He graduated from the University of Alabama Law School in 1951. After serving in the US Army during the Korean War in both artillery and the JAG Corps, he studied at Harvard Law School, earning an LLM in 1954.

He clerked for Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, practiced briefly in Alabama, and then joined the law school faculty in 1957. He stayed at the University of Virginia for most of his long and distinguished career as a teacher and scholar with a few breaks in service to serve as a Fulbright scholar to lead the University of Alabama as Dean of its law school from 1966 to 1970 and to work in the Department of Justice.

I have encountered Professor Meador not only as a fellow dean and former member of this faculty but also as a historical actor in my own research on vagrancy laws, when he was the dean of the University of Alabama Law School.

He hired several young faculty members who turned out to provoke some controversy. They started the Tuscaloosa chapter of the ACLU. And they challenged the Alabama vagrancy law. And he was asked by one of the plaintiffs whether he knew what he was doing when he hired those faculty members.

And he said, yeah, I knew they were going to stir things up. That's why we have tenure. And the plaintiff said, but they were junior faculty. They didn't have tenure. And he said, oh, that doesn't matter. Folks think they do. So I think that's a wonderful story about Professor Meador.

He retired in 1994. And this lecture was endowed by alumni and friends to celebrate his many contributions to the law school.

And we are thrilled to have members of the Meador family here with us today and to honor him with this lecture, which is designed to promote the interdisciplinary study of law and religion and to explore the influence of religion on the development of law and the interplay of religion and law in the evolution of Western civilization.

And I want to thank the members of our lectureships committee, as well as Rebecca Klaff, and all of the people who made this event possible today.

Our speaker this afternoon has spent his career studying the nexus of philosophy, religion, contemporary American culture, critical thought, cultural theory, and so much more. I am so delighted to introduce our Meador lecturer, Dr. Cornel West.

[APPLAUSE]

A polymath and a public intellectual, Dr. West's reputation is such that he actually needs no introduction. But if you've ever been at an event that I welcome, you will know I'm going to introduce him anyway and take great pleasure in it. Dr. West is the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Professor of Philosophy and Christian Practice at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

He is also professor emeritus at Princeton University, where over the years, he had appointments in the religion department as director of the program in African-American studies and as the first faculty member to have a full-time appointment in the Center for African-American Studies.

Dr. West has also taught at Yale, at Harvard, and at the University of Paris. He is a magna cum laude graduate of Harvard College, and he obtained his master's and PhD in philosophy from Princeton. Dr. West is the author of 20 books and the editor of 13.

He is probably best known for his classic works *Race Matters* and *Democracy Matters*, the former of which was recently rereleased in a 25th anniversary edition, and for his memoir, *Brother West, Living and Loving Out Loud*.

We were talking last night about Dr. West's need to write new introductions to the new editions of many of his books. And I said, we should all be so lucky that we are required to write new introductions decade after decade of what we write.

Dr. West's most recent book, *Black Prophetic Fire*, provides a fresh perspective on six revolutionary Black American leaders, Frederick Douglass, WEB Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr, Ella Baker, Malcolm X, and Ida B. Wells.

As one reviewer put it, the book, quote, "serves as a catalog of and potential catalyst for African-American activist achievement, recalling the strategies, strengths, and limitations of some of the most fearless voices that ever spoke truth to power in America."

In 2024, Dr. West will give the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, called, quote, "The highest honor in a philosopher's career." The Gifford Lecture series has, since 1888, highlighted the work of preeminent thinkers in what was described in the original gift bequest as the field of, quote, "natural theology in the widest sense of the term, in other words, the knowledge of God."

None of this does justice to Dr. West, to his breadth and depth as a scholar, to the importance of his voice for our time, and to who he is most fundamentally as a human being, which is why we are so lucky that he is here and that you all and I will get to hear from him directly in this conversation that he is about to have with his good friend and former student, Mark Jefferson, our own assistant dean for diversity, equity, and belonging.

Mark Jefferson is a graduate of Morehouse College and the University of Michigan Law School. He completed his coursework in theology at the Boston University School of Theology. He has previously served as assistant dean of community engagement and equity-- a similar role to the one he has here-- at Harvard Law School, and served as assistant director of admissions at Michigan Law School.

Before transitioning to higher education, Dean Jefferson worked as a transactional attorney at Phelan LLP. Prior to law school, he worked as a middle school teacher, a chaplain at Boston University, and for the Public Defender Service of the District of Columbia.

It is my pleasure to turn the floor over to Dr. West and Dean Jefferson for a conversation entitled "Death, Dogma, and the Rule of Law-- A Prophetic Perspective." Please join me in welcoming them both.

[APPLAUSE]

CORNEL WEST: Blessed, indeed. Ooh, what a blessing to be here. This is consecrated space, University of Virginia Law School. Mm-mm-mm. And when I heard that my dear brother Mark Jefferson was even thinking about leaving Harvard to come to Charlottesville, I said, let's have a prayer, my brother.

[LAUGHTER]

Let's pray. What's going on down here? Because I love this brother. I respect this brother. He's high quality. He's not just the critical thinker. But many of you might know, he's a masterful literary artist with novellas and short stories.

And so after the prayer, he said, no, something really is happening at the law school of University of Virginia. My dear sister, Dean Reese is on the move. All the buff on the move, you see.

And then I had a little talk with Brother Ryan, James Ryan, who happened to be dean at Harvard in the education school. He was making a transition I said, I think that this is a historic moment. Your timing is right. He's always been a jazz man.

The timing is just right to come and see what's happening, how one can be a force for good, because when you think of the Elaine Joneses-- you see, I take a bullet for Elaine. We work very closely. And she said she was the first Black sister to graduate from here in 1970, entering in 1967, and came out in her right mind.

[LAUGHTER]

I mean, you got the first Black woman in 1967, you know something deeply wrong, right? That's some evil is going on. You got thick white supremacy and male supremacy going on. But she came out what? In the same tradition that produced Brother Mark and I.

In the face of all that is hatred, she's a loved warrior. In the face of all this trauma, she's a wounded healer. In the face of all of that is terror, she's a freedom fighter. No self-righteousness, no arrogance, she's on the ground.

Now, she comes from Jim Crow Norfolk, Virginia, so she got a jump start in life because there's a whole-- that's where Samuel Proctor comes from, one of the great pastors of Abyssinian Baptist church. You see, the spiritual, moral formation, it's not just a function of skin pigmentation.

She's been shaped as a human being, integrity, honesty, decency, vision. And she comes to this place, and she's unleashed to the world. Gregory Swanson, the same way, 1950, right?

And they get to have Thurgood Marshall on the case that open the door in this place for somebody like Gregory or for somebody like Elaine. That's [INAUDIBLE]. And vanilla brothers and sisters, who had the courage, integrity, honesty, decency, we're in solidarity with you, Thurgood.

We're not your ally at the moment. We're in solidarity with you. How come? We want to be decent human beings. We want some morality and spirituality, not in the sense of do-gooder, virtue signaling, no. These are kind of human beings we want to be.

That's what we're talking about in terms of the best of this place. The worst of this place, well, you could write a number of dissertations--

[LAUGHTER]

--that go on and on. But every institution-- oh, Sister Mimi, it's so good to see you. I didn't see you over there. We had a wonderful dinner last night. And Brother Daniel and Mary Louise, Lord, have mercy, to have met his family and the legacy.

He's part of that vanilla freedom fighters, the Frank Johnson and others. At the highest level of the law, we believe in justice. Treat these Black people with dignity and as full citizens not because they deserve any kind of special treatment.

They're human beings like anybody else, but they need some special attention because they've been enslaved for 244 years. They've been victims of lynching. They've been Jim Crowed and Jane Crowed for another 100 years. They need special attention. But they're human beings. And they're first and foremost, human beings.

That's what the best of this place is about. So after we said our prayer and dialogue, he said, Brother Mark, I think it might be a good idea. He said, I've already decided. So don't you worry.

[LAUGHTER]

Because he's always ahead of me, always ahead of me. But Brother, it's just-- and today is his birthday. Today is his birthday.

[APPLAUSE]

Today is his birthday. (SINGING) Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, Brother Mark. Happy--

[LAUGHTER]

No. But I'm just being honest, though. I'm blessed to be here. This is a beautiful thing.

MARK C. JEFFERSON: Well, Doc, I think it's almost 30 years since we met. And everyone here can see what I've been blessed with in my life since I've come to know you.

And it's a great honor to be with you here today, to be with you in public, and to be able to say to you in public how deeply I admire you and love you. And I still can't believe that you've ever given me the time of day. But I'm so deeply grateful for you.

CORNEL WEST: Now look, Brother, I salute you. I salute you. Salute you. This brother, he has a book club. We meet every two weeks, just with Morehouse brothers and me. And I feel highly privileged.

MARK C. JEFFERSON: [LAUGHS]

CORNEL WEST: Because your Morehouse man-- what did you say about a Morehouse man?

MARK C. JEFFERSON: I was telling--

CORNEL WEST: You can always tell a Morehouse man, but you can't tell him much.

[LAUGHTER]

Morehouse man, Martin Luther King, Morehouse man. We can go on and on and on. But the readings from Thomas Hardy to Gwendolyn Brooks, to Toni Morris, and to Samuel Beckett, one of his favorites to my favorite, Chekhov. And was with Eddie Glaude, he's a Morehouse man, and Paul Taylor, a Morehouse man, and Chuck and Pete, Morehouse men. And we get a chance to revel in each other's humanity week after week. And it's a beautiful thing because it's a bonding that's not just intellectual. It's spiritual. It's social. It's existential. It's psychic, with a lot of humor.

MARK C. A lot of humor.

JEFFERSON:

CORNEL WEST: Laughing at each other.

MARK C. That's right.

JEFFERSON:

CORNEL WEST: Not at anybody else outside of the little Morehouse man and me group. Absolutely. So that's nice to, really, start our conversation spilling over, in a way, as it relates to rule of law.

MARK C. I think so. So "Death, Dogma, and the Rule of Law, Prophetic Perspective" is such a rich topic you always come up with. And I guess my initial thoughts kept coming back to dogma when you shared with me what you wanted to talk about.

JEFFERSON:

And so how are you defining dogma here? Are you referring to dogma as a body of doctrines authoritatively proclaimed by a religious institution, secular institution or civil society? Or are you referring to a posture we take towards our beliefs regardless of the content, or both?

CORNEL WEST: Mm-mm. Yes. Yes. And I forgot about Brother Sully, professor of law school at Harvard.

No, for me, I begin on the ground concrete experience and the inescapable and unavoidable realities that we have as human beings, as organisms with language on the way to the culinary delight of terrestrial worms and its forms of death, forms of dogma, and forms of domination.

We don't have a moment in the history of the species where human beings have not had to come to terms with our own fears and insecurities and anxieties of the forms of death. It could be physical but also psychic, lack of self-confidence.

It could be spiritual, hating oneself. It could be social death or slavery, for example, or civic death like Black folk during Jim Crow part of the body of the society but civically, dead in terms of not having rights that anybody need respect. So these are all inescapable forms no matter who we are.

And dogma plays an important role, especially at a law school because, see, in the face of death, we all have desires for protection, association, and recognition. There has to be mechanisms in place that can protect us, mechanisms in place to give us a sense of belonging, of association, and mechanisms in place of being recognized, like that moment in *Waiting for Godot*.

Is Godot coming back? No. But just tell him that you saw us. We want to be seen, not even solely for our externality but who we really are, like falling in love. Really see me, baby. You sure? Are you really sure? Yes. See the real me. Oh, Lord, have mercy.

[LAUGHTER]

All the good and the bad, the false, the foibles, and the virtues. But that's a human thing. These human desires in the face of death were dogma in its various forms. It can be imperial dogma. Thinking that you're a member of the Roman Empire, the American empire, your babies have more values than babies in Somalia or Ethiopia or Bolivia and so forth.

It could be white supremacy, deep dogma. Male supremacy, deep dogma. Homophobic dogmas. Somehow, Tennessee Williams is not as sophisticated because he's a gay brother. I'm looking for a straight playwright. OK. Don't hold your breath too loud.

[LAUGHTER]

Here comes Stephen Sondheim. He's gay. Can you deal with his genius? Here comes James Baldwin. Here come Audre Lorde. Can you deal with their genius? No. You're blinded. You're blinded.

Now, what's fascinating about dogma in relation to school of law and the rule of law is that in the face of dogma is dialogue. So the unleashing of Socratic energies, of questioning, and scrutinizing and interrogating, beginning with oneself.

Socrates, "The unexamined life is not worth living." The examined life, Malcolm X says what? Painful, very painful. Malcolm X says, I'm for truth, no matter who says it. I'm for justice, no matter who promotes it. I'm for freedom, no matter who's willing to live and die for it because I'm a human being first, then I'm a Black man, and I'm a Muslim.

That's Socratic energy within the Islamic tradition. That's what makes him a prophetic Islamic figure. The way Martin is a prophetic Christian tradition, the way Rabbi Heschel is a prophetic Judaic figure, the way bell hooks-- God bless his soul-- prophetic Buddha's sister. Gandhi, prophetic Hindu.

Ambedkar, our Dalit brother, even goes beyond Gandhi, prophetic Hindu for a while and then converts to Buddhism. But what's prophetic about it is the unleashing of Socratic energies, the courage to criticize, examine one's self. So it is not an abstract thing.

Brother Mark knows that-- because he was kind enough to take my class, Modernity, The Problem of Evil. What year was that, though, Brother? About 19--

MARK C. '94.

JEFFERSON:

CORNEL WEST: '94. Lord, have mercy.

MARK C. [LAUGHING]

JEFFERSON:

CORNEL WEST: Sue looks back and wonders how we got old. Was 30 years ago. But I tell all my students in my class, you come here to learn how to die, not just to get a grade and get a diploma.

You're learning how to die because any time you must have the courage to criticize yourself and let go certain kinds of dogma, prejudices, presuppositions. That's the form of death.

[PHONE RINGS]

Exactly.

[LAUGHTER]

Let that life come through the technology.

[LAUGHTER]

And what emerges is learning how to live better, learning how to die in order to learn how to live better, to love wisdom as Montaigne says, to philosophize to learn how to die. To love wisdom is to muster the courage to examine yourself.

And we all have dogmas. And the irony is that in the end, we'll all have certain kinds of dogmas because you can never do away with all of them. Never. There's no such thing as a wholesale skepticism. Retail skepticism, yes. That's called mature criticism.

But wholesale skepticism, no such thing. Everybody needs certain background conditions, stories, narratives, orientations that they bring into the Socratic dialogue. And when they leave, you're going to end up with certain kind of dogma that you have reexamined and said, I'm going for this.

Like my own Christian faith, I can read Hume, dated all the most sophisticated skeptics in the world. And I can hear my grandmama telling me, honey, be skeptical about that skepticism--

[LAUGHTER]

--because in the end, you might not be able to live it. And the end in life is not being sophisticated and smart and showing everybody that you're the only one who's right. The end is to live a life of compassion and courage and wisdom that allows you to pass on the best of tradition that's been bequeathed to you so maybe you can be of service or something bigger than you. That's the benchmark of spiritual maturity, benchmark of the best of the human spirit.

And then dogma, I mean, then domination, predatory capitalism, money, money, money, power, asymmetric relation to the workplace. Well, Brother West, capitalism has virtues. Of course, it has virtues. Technological innovation, unleashing of highly-planned economies that are crushing people.

Absolutely right. No doubt about that. No doubt about that. Hayek didn't write for nothing his insights in the *Road to Serfdom*. But you say to Brother Hayek, there's more than one road to serfdom.

You let your predatory capitalism get out of control and see what happens, without mechanisms of accountability in which rule of law becomes crucial, in which counter majoritarian institutions, like legal institutions, not subject to just the will of the majority.

To protect those precious rights and liberties that are prerequisite for any kind of democratic experiment, in every democratic experiment is so fragile and precious. And it takes generations to build, and it can dissolve in one generation, one Pied Piper, one neofascist leader who wants to wipe it out.

And we're not just talking about January 1933 in Germany with its Weimar democratic experiments, so weak and feeble. But it could be anywhere. It could be Italy today. It could be Sweden, Hungary, in some ways already, Brazil may be on the way, USA.

My God, we'll get into that. Ooh, what a time for you, young people, to be alive. You've got to deal with these kinds of neofascist perceptions, the triumph of Thrasymachus over Socrates in Plato's *Republic*. Might does determine what's right. Power does determine morality.

I can say anything and do anything and get away with it. I don't have to, in any way, be rendered vis-a-vis mechanisms of accountability and answerability, the shattering of Socratic dialogue. It's all about force, power. That's frightening.

And all the great minds of every civilization-- even though we can zero in on Plato and Socrates-- but all the great minds of every civilization. If we can't come up with alternatives to what the Greeks call Peitho, persuasion.

Socratic energy, rational exchange, arguments given, stories exchanged-- if those alternatives don't work, then it becomes not just survival of the most powerful, survival of the slickest, oftentimes, survival of the richest and the most wealthy.

And you're on your way to not just losing your democracy, but it's 49 BC with the crossing of the Rubicon of Caesar and the end of the experimental republic. And you're on the way to dictatorial rule. You're on the way to imperial rule with no accountability of the leaders at the top.

This can't happen in America. Get off the crack pipe. What makes you think it can't happen anywhere? As long as you have human beings in on it, it's a possibility. All the American exceptionalism, nowhere in our history do we have the possibility of going fascist.

Our democratic institutions are so strong. Read de Tocqueville, the French brother, he'll tell you. It's the 1830s. Read that last chapter, the longest chapter volume, 3 to 3, races that inhabit this democratic experiment and why he thought they'll never be a multiracial democracy.

We appreciate the candor, Alexis de Tocqueville. He's honest because he knew how difficult it was. He knew how difficult it would be. What about the new aristocracy? Aristocracy, what do you mean, de Tocqueville? Yes, the aristocracy of industry, organized greed at the top that begins to reshape the wind must the political system operates.

De Tocqueville already began to see contours of this. This is why intellectual life is not a plaything. It's not a puzzle. It's not a game to play. The fundamental sources and resources of insights to bring to bear, to make sure that the younger generation has access to the best of their traditions with an "s."

All parts and corners of the world, how will each generation attempt to build on the best of earlier generations? Well, we just want what's new and novel. Nothing novel is wholly novel. It's always predicated on tradition and what came before.

And you have to make choices of what came before. There's the worse, there's the best. There's very ugly morally, spiritually, beautiful spiritually and ugly. And that's the question. And I know it got precedent in law, reasoning, and the role of precedent and so forth. It's very important. Very important.

There is a whole lot of wisdom among the dead. If we had to depend on just the quick, we'd be in a world of trouble because most of the most profound, courageous human beings not alive now. I can test for that with mom and dad.

I'm not half the person my mama was. I'm not half the person my daddy was. So people come to me and say, Brother West, looked like you got something going on. I said, no, not really. I know what the standards are.

That's where Elaine Jones, and Brown, and the others come in, those who came before in every tradition, Irish, Italian, Jewish, WASP, Mormon, Baptist, Catholic, Methodist, Muslim.

Right across the board, the best and the worst, every legal system, especially those in the last 100 years or so all around the world talking about rights, talking about liberties. Let's just see how serious they are in terms of substantive execution.

See, that has the crucial role. And that has to do in part with the civic virtue of the citizens. Do they have the courage to raise their voices collectively when they see violation of the dignity of folk, Black folk, Indigenous peoples, whoever they are, whoever they are?

It could be Jews in France. It could be Palestinians on the West Bank. It could right now be those precious sisters in Iran, straightening up their backs and raising their voices in the face of unbelievable repression and oppression in the name of a great religion, Islam.

Just like the Klan, in the name of my Jesus, going to put a cross on Medgar Evers's lawn and Martin's lawn. What kind of Jesus are you talking about, sick white brothers? And they are my brothers. I get in a lot of trouble with that.

When I was in Charlottesville five years ago, I walked through-- I told you the story-- I walked through, and you got the sick white brothers, the neo-Nazis. First, they playing Motown. I said, ooh, very American.

[LAUGHTER]

How the heck are you going to play Stevie Wonder, and you want to kill me--

[LAUGHTER]

--and Black folk look like me? Well, we're going to get to that. See, sometimes, when you're working at the different level of people's humanity and you're shaping how they come to terms with their fears and anxieties, you speak to their soul even when they hate the very folk who produce it.

Like reading Virginia Woolf, oh, my gosh, she just saying everything about me, and I'm a male. But I'm so patriarchal that I really don't like too many of the women around. But I can't live without Virginia.

[LAUGHTER]

You're very human. That's called living a contradiction and an incongruity. And you're going to have to deal with your hypocrisy. You see. But then when it came up, we had one brother come up to me. Actually, the one on television all the time, calling everybody brother and sister, I can't stand that.

I would say, brother, I come from a great Black people that told me I don't ask for anybody's permission as to who I love. You think I got to ask for your permission whether I love you or not? And you kind of looked at me like, dang, what kind of Socratic dialogue is this going on?

[LAUGHTER]

And he got his mask on and his gun and a loaded gun. And so then I went evangelical on him, honestly. I said, Jesus loves you just like Jesus loves me. I said, you choose to be a gangster. And I was a gangster before I met Jesus. And now, I'm a redeemed sinner with gangster proclivities.

So you're choosing hatred. You're choosing revenge. You're choosing to hate these Catholics and these Jews and these Black folk and these women and these gays and lesbians and these trans. That's your choice. I come up in a culture where I have to deal with struggles against white supremacy, male supremacy.

Every day, I'm trying to learn how to die in order to learn how to live. And I choose love and justice rather than hatred and revenge. But you catch me on a bad day--

[LAUGHTER]

--and my gangster proclivities can take over. Why? Because we're all human beings. None of us is pure or pristine, free of spot or wrinkle. And that's part of the humility that goes along with any kind of spiritual maturity.

And it's very difficult, I think, for young brothers and sisters of all colors to come to terms with this because you've grown up in the most commodified market ties, culture in the history of the world.

Money, money, status, status, image, image, spectacle, spectacle, addicted to success and not enough commitment to moral and spiritual greatness, or what the Greeks would call arete, excellence. For you measure yourself, position, money, status, where you live, and sometimes, even your trophy spouse.

I'm not just talking about Kanye. I got a whole lot of other folk in mind, you see. All of us wrestling with it. And if that's all you got in life, that shows how deep the spiritual decay that resides. Even the new immigrants, thank God they're here as a result of pushing back the white supremacist laws in 1965.

The new immigrants who come here hitting the ground, can't wait to seize this opportunity. I'm in America. Now, of course, I got a critique, but I got to get my money, my status, my spectacle. What kind of human being are you going to be? You know you come into a country that has opportunities but has been predicated on whose land we own right now.

Been predicated on the slavery. Been predicated on the patriarchal households. Been predicated on subordination of workers vis-a-vis capital. Gunfighter nation, frontier, that's the dominant myth, more regeneration through violence.

Vagrant nation, losing sight of the humanity of those folk, homeless on the block, on the corner that system reads as powerful texts. So many things getting in the way and the best we can do as human beings is what? Bear witness. Raise our voices. That's the voice. That's the anthem of Black people

Lift every voice, not lift every echo. It's very important. Much of what we hear in American culture these days are expression of echo chambers. It's just all echoes. Where's your voice? Brother Mark and I, we've always viewed ourselves as bluesmen in the life of the mind and jazz men in the world of ideas.

And you can't be a blues woman unless you find your voice. If you're going to be an imitation, sing in the shower. If you want to touch somebody's soul to help them deal with crisis and catastrophe, you better find your voice. And your voice is just like your fingerprint. It's all yours.

Erykah Badu's voice, so unique out of Dallas, Texas. Billie Holiday's voice, unique out of Baltimore City. Sarah Vaughan's voice, unique at the Mount Zion Baptist church in Newark, New Jersey. I know Brother Rich know what I'm talking about. He's a jazz drummer tied to Buddy Rich and Max Roach.

Now, he don't play as good as Buddy or Max. No, I don't want to take this thing too far, I know. But he got-- he plays some beautiful drums. But you know, he got to find his voice. So it is in law. And Emerson says what? He or she-- he called him a genius finds their voice, is the person most rooted in quotations as the wisdom of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

He's the American Montaigne. There is no Emerson without the voices who came before, you see. And the-- and I know I'm going. That's a long answer.

[LAUGHTER]

That's a long answer. Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord.

MARK C. This is what we get every two weeks at the book club.

JEFFERSON:

CORNEL WEST: [LAUGHS] Yeah, we--

MARK C. Close the book.

JEFFERSON:

CORNEL WEST: And that's before the cognac hit. You know what I mean?

[LAUGHTER]

MARK C. Talked about a range of things. But one of the things you hit on was kind of Socratic sensibilities. But better than your answer reminds me of two other concepts that you talk about a lot. And I wonder if you would speak about revolutionary piety, piety as you understand it.

And at the same time, talk about kenosis as in both of those terms in relationship to dogma, because you've talked about Socratic energy as one of the ways in which we can push back on to be constantly engaged in certain forms of self-critique so that we don't get stuck and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But you also pointed to tradition. You also pointed to compassion. And those, for me, because throughout your work, you've also talked about forms of revolutionary piety and forms of kenosis, so.

CORNEL WEST: Absolutely. Yeah. Piety, I think, is one of the most misunderstood terms, categories, labels that we have because when people think of piety in the last 150 years or so, you think of uncritical deference to dogma or blind obedience to doctrine.

Whereas piety, historically, has always been much richer and deeper than that. See, piety is the virtual acknowledgment of the sources of good in your life. So what horizontally could go to mom or dad or aunts and uncles or teachers, or it can go to intellectual ancestors.

It can go to artists who helped you preserve your sanity. If you're down and out and feel as if you really can't make it, put on a little Aretha Franklin, Mahalia Jackson, and lo and behold-- Carole King, whoever it is. You say, oh, Lord, I feel like I-- yes, you are dependent in a beautiful way, you see.

And this is not in any American discourse of the opposite of what the self made-- the got self made. Yeah, you gave birth to yourself to you. I tried, but it didn't work out. But you taught yourself language too. Yeah, I actually did. I got my own language. But I'm just using another one just to communicate. Oh, OK, OK. Highly creative.

No, no, no. Modern notions of autonomy are very important, but it's autonomy in relation to context and constraints. Immanuel Kant has a great essay on what is enlightenment, man's relief from self-imposed immaturity.

Then he says, dare to know Horace. Oh, it's nice to invoke Horace. We appreciate that, Kant. You're in relation to a tradition. You're not out there all by yourself. Of course, you're trying to be independent, but it's predicated on a certain kind of dependence, the crucial role of history.

Probably the most powerful essay that I know written on piety was the first essay that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in English. March of 1940, it's called "What is Piety?" And he said, it's remembrance, it's reverence, and it's resistance.

Remembrance. Toni Morrison, "rememory." Well, what would be the right word? The attempt to regather what has been dismembered in your soul and your society. It's not some abstract reminiscing. You see, it's Kierkegaard in his on the ground. It has to do with your lived experience.

You're living in the midst of alienation and estrangement and that which is best has been dispersed. And how do you then come to a law school and say, I want to gather and regather the best?

[LAPEL DROPS]

Exactly. I mean, this thing, technology, sometimes good, sometimes it gets in the way. But that's all right. I'd just put it in my back. But that's what Heschel has in mind. And he's writing, of course, right at the moment when our Jewish brothers and sisters are undergoing indescribable forms of evil.

And he's saying that regathering and remembering is tied to a reverence. So it's something bigger than your ego. It's bigger than your tribe. It's bigger than your group, your race, your gender. It's tied to something grand. Some of us, who are Christians, call it the Kingdom of God.

If the Kingdom of God is within you, then everywhere you go, you ought to leave a little heaven behind in the hellish world. It could be just an ideal of justice. But it's got to be more than justice. Reinhold Niebuhr says any justice has only just as soon degenerates into something less than justice.

If you're in it just for justice cause, people want to know, do you really care for us? Do you really love us? Do you have compassion for us?

Martin Luther King Jr. didn't die for some abstract ideal called justice. He died because he loved Black people. He died because he loved human beings, be there in America and Vietnam or whatever. That's the stuff of justice.

If it's just justice, it's just your career move. Nice little rhetoric that helps you get some position within the empire, within the capitalist hierarchy, so things become more colorful at the top. But the people still suffering on the bottom. Where is your care and concern?

Brother Mark and I talk about that all the time. The wretched of the Earth that the great Frantz Fanon talked about, that's the stuff of justice. That's one of the reasons why even the blind metaphor of justice within the liberal discourse, I've always had a little problem with, I've always had problem with.

You know the wonderful letter that the great Henry James wrote to the less great Robert Louis Stevenson.

[LAUGHTER]

And Stevenson the great writer, but he ain't no Henry James. Let's just be honest. I don't know. That's Kenny G versus Coltrane. But let's be honest here.

[LAUGHTER]

But Henry James writes. He says, no theory is kind to us that cheats us of seeing. No theory is kind to us that cheats us of seeing. So if you have a framework that is so narrow, all you can see is just what you see through your lens. Then it's cheating you as seeing something broader.

And the same would be true in terms of hearing. If you're not hearing the cries of folk in the prisons and hearing the cries of the white brothers and sisters living in Appalachia, hearing the cries of landless peasants in Brazil, or hearing the cries of gypsies, so-called gypsies and Roma folk in Europe, hearing anybody's cry, it's too narrow.

And then feeling genuine compassion and solidarity and then most importantly, acting. Now, we know and one of the reasons why the jazz tradition and the blues is in many ways based on Socrates but goes far beyond Socrates is because you all know that Socrates never wrote a word, so we don't want to promote that at the law school here. You got to write your papers and things.

[LAUGHTER]

But well, Jesus never writes either. And I would hope you'd be more like Jesus. But that's just my evangelical moment. But Socrates, he never sheds a tear. He never cries. And something's wrong with somebody who goes through life and never shed the tears. It means you never loved anybody.

It was like Hamlet, so sophisticated philosophically, but he suffers from an incapacity to love. Even the friendship of Horatio, you wonder how deep it cuts. You know he doesn't love Ophelia. But he's the greatest literary character in the history of modern Europe with the inimitable Shakespeare.

Socrates, did you really ever love somebody? Xanthippe, his wife, has tears when she comes to see Socrates. You all remember that. What does he say? Somebody take her out. Somebody get her out of here. I can't take it. Socrates, she loves you man.

She don't need to ask for your permission. Cries Xanthippe. No. Get her out of here. What's wrong with you, Socrates? Ah, you need a little prophetic legacy of Jerusalem, don't you? You need those cries of affliction of an enslaved people. You need a Jesus who weeps. You need a Mohamed whose calls for mercy with tears flowing inside.

Something about the tears, that's blues. That's the blues, catastrophe lyrically expressed, unleashing questioning. "Strange Fruit," Billie Holiday with the Jewish brother mirepoix right in the lyrics. What is that? That's American terrorism. That's lynching. Does that require tears? It might, but it also requires Socratic reflection.

What kind of person I want to be? How does it connect to what the suffering of these people? It's that fusion of the Socratic legacy and the prophetic legacies of Athens and Jerusalem that make so much of a difference in that way, you see. And that to me is something to be believed in the end.

It's not simply a matter of words, it's like the conclusion of a practical Aristotelian syllogism. Socrates says, what the conclusion is not a proposition. It's not a set of sentences, it's action. It's a life lived. That's the answer. It's like Rilke saying, we live the answers in regard to the question.

That's the moment in the *Raisin in the Sun*, the genius from South Side of Chicago, Lorraine Hansberry, and Joseph Asagai, a great African intellectual from Nigeria in that 1959 play. The daughter asks, Joseph, how are we going to deal with this anti-colonialism? How are we going to deal with empire?

What happens when we push the colonial folk out and the new bourgeoisies come in, African bourgeoisies, Black bourgeoisies, brown bourgeoisies, women included within the bourgeoisies, and reproduce the same greed, the same hatred, the same hierarchy, the same asymmetric power? You have to be committed to something bigger than just your race and gender and your nation. You've got to be committed to something that's concerned about love that is so embracing. Yes, it is *A Love Supreme* that Coltrane is blowing. Yes, it is the love Stevie Wonder talks about when he said, love in need of love.

It's the love of James Baldwin. Love forces us to take off the mask we know we cannot live within but fear we cannot live without. That's deeply Socratic and prophetic at the same time.

Piety simply says that you humble yourself enough to try to make yourself available to the best of the traditions that had gone into the shaping of who you are in light of the new and novel circumstances.

And then try to be forces of good for love and justice and democracy and accountability and integrity and honesty and generosity and compassion, the very things that are being pushed to the margin in the moment right now in the history of the American empire and history of the American democratic experiment.

And one of the reasons why, one of the reasons why Trump is so powerful is he's generating a movement that, in so many ways, is a hatred of all of us, no matter what your politics is. They see the professional managerial classes as arrogant, haughty, condescending, indifferent to their suffering, callous to them.

And they see a neoliberal order that is weaker and weaker. And if they can't provide an alternative, some of us try to provide it with Brother Bernie, we broke our neck foot, brother Bernie, we were winning in Nevada with Brother Bernie.

[LAUGHTER]

And then comes the phone call with neoliberal Barack Obama. Anybody but Bernie, dropout, dropout, dropout. We got the most powerful and charismatic leader of all time, Brother Joe Biden, please.

[LAUGHTER]

Oh, Lord, Lord. And I did vote for him because I'm part of an antifascist coalition. And part of that antifascist coalition includes many Republican brothers and sisters who can't stand Trump's gangster activity. Based on principle, we've got deep disagreements like my dear Brother Robert George, who I love dearly.

He's part of the same coalition. So Biden had to be somebody to-- he's head of the coalition. I said, oh, my God. It's almost like making Mick Jagger head of the James Brown Band.

[LAUGHTER]

Come on, Mick. Move. No. We love Mick. We love Mick. We love Mick. But the point is that piety has the capacity to be a force for good based on the commitment to the weak and vulnerable that comes out of the best of Hebrew scripture.

The spreading of that has it, that steadfast love and loving kindness to the orphan and widow and the fatherless and motherless and persecuted and subjugated, you see. And you can imagine any of that is not a popular word at all, but I'm very much tied to it.

It's the language of Wordsworth in the epigraph to the immortality ode, natural piety. Not just our dependence on nature but the fact that we're always already animals and part of nature. It's not nature over against us, but it's tied to connecting the past and the present and the future.

And one of the problems of America has always been very much like the end of F. Scott Fitzgerald's great novel, *The Great Gatsby*. The green light, the green light, Gatsby goes through hell and high water. He still believes in the next to last paragraph. And the green light-- what's the green light stand for?

Tomorrow, we're going to solve. Tomorrow, we have possibilities. Tomorrow, we have unlimited constraints. Tomorrow, so you're going to fetishize futurity and turn your back and not see and feel and connect with folk suffering in the present.

That's the best way to foreclose the best of your future because you're not connected with the best of your past. And F. Scott Fitzgerald understood it, but his character never got the memo. And he leaves toward what? Distraction. And he's not the only one. It's the wholly, the hollow men of LA. Yet we can go on and on and on.

Toni Morrison probably and Faulkner understand this probably better than any. And I know Brother Mark's crazy about Faulkner and Toni Morrison and Samuel Beckett, the Irish bluesman. Try again, fail again, fail better. That's the Irish blues from a genius named Samuel Beckett.

Try again, fail again, fail better. That's the story of our lives. So how are you going to fail better? By learning how to die. How willing are you, willing to learn how to die in order to learn how to live with courage, to think critically, to act compassionately, to laugh at yourself self critically? And then at the same time, be able to not succumb to the despair, which ought to be our intimate companions. But it should never, ever be the last word.

MARK C. I'm going to ask you one more question before we open it up.

JEFFERSON:

CORNEL WEST: Definitely.

MARK C. More questions. Check off time. [LAUGHS] Who are some of your paradigmatic prophetic figures that you consistently derive inspiration from in the context of piety and so on and so forth? Where do you draw--

CORNEL WEST: I see. First, I look at myself as a mama's child and daddy's kid. So it begins in my crib in my household. And that's very important because you see, I've never think God been obsessed with the white normative gaze.

You see, the white normative gaze is to look at yourself through the eyes of others, who du Bois said, often view you with pity and contempt. You remember du Bois's conception the double consciousness and souls of Black folk.

Same would be true for women. The women understand themselves solely through the male normative gaze. Then you reacting all your life. You're just a parasite on a host. Even when you're victorious and successful, you're still a parasite.

You've got to fall back on something grander so that your point of reference is not, how does it feel to be a problem, which is du Bois's question. Brother Matthew knows that from the Harvard class that we had together, right?

I say, du Bois, what makes you think you're a problem, brother? Ralph Ellison, I'm invisible. No. Jamal and Latisha looking at you, and they see you. Oh, I'm talking about John McGillicuddy. How come John McGillicuddy's view has a privilege?

Was I ever invisible to my mama? Was I ever invisible to Shiloh Baptist church that produced me? Was I'm Invisible to Curtis Mayfield and John Coltrane and Mary Lou Williams and Marvin Gaye? No. It's the point of reference, you see. It's the point of reference.

And so for me, I start concretely with the folk who loved me. I am who I am because somebody loved me and cared for me. And when you love folk, what does that mean? You're going to get some deep criticism. You're going to protect, respect, and correct, all at the same time.

And I'm sure all you all can testify to that, is that right? There's testimony. So tell me about the love of your mama. Oh, yeah, good God, oh my, well, she-- depends on the day of the week in terms of what was coming at me, but I know she deeply loved me. Yes, that's what it is. That's what love is.

Intellectually, who are the great love warriors? Anton Chekhov, atheist, goes to church every week anyway. Tears coming down his eyes looking at the passion and saying, this Christian story is too beautiful to be true. But I identify with the love and the compassion.

I just can't accept the Christian conclusions and consolation. Absolute condemnation of no one, absolute forgiveness of everyone. Russian Orthodox Church. That's Chekhov. He's a love warrior to the core. 8,000 characters. He's loving all of those characters in his short story.

Eudora Welty understood that. She's the closest we have in the history of this country to Chekhov. And she's out of gut bucket Jim Crow Mississippi. She's a love warrior too.

But American, Chekhov is deeper than any American in a way. Why? Because he's never ever been caught in romantic possibility of unlimited constraints. He's never had to react against it. He's had repressive Soviet, I mean, Russian regimes, all the way through. All the way through.

All Americans, to some degree, have a romantic sensibility, have some American exceptionalism shot through our unconscious. It's difficult. Henry Adams tried to get rid of it. And I wouldn't say he made a fool of himself. But that education was one of the great works. But oh, my God. He is wrestling in a way.

Iceman Cometh, Eugene O'Neill, the greatest play ever written in the history of the American empire, the darkest play. Because his expectations are so high, his disappointments are so overwhelming. Chekhov had no expectations.

I don't expect human beings to sustain democracy. I don't expect human beings to treat people right. I don't expect whatever they're able to muster, I'm pushing it, I'm pushing it I'm, pushing it. And I'm waiting to see three sisters. And that's just one grand example of it.

But it's Toni Morrison, it's Anton Chekhov, it's John Coltrane, it's Mary Lou Williams. But in the end, it really is mom and dad and Reverend Willie P. Cooke and my vacation Bible school teacher, Sarah Ray, because they were love warriors and freedom fighters and wounded healers and joy spreaders, like Louis Armstrong.

Almost like the Baal Shem Tov, just overflowing, just oozing out of love and joy. Dizzy Gillespie was the same way. And you all have examples in your own traditions. But those are the ones who constitute sources of inspiration for me. And it's a beautiful thing. It's a beautiful thing.

That's why BB King can sing the blues "Nobody Loves Me But My Mama," and she might be jiving too.

[LAUGHTER]

And he got a smile on his face, and he's playing "Lucille." And you can hear in the sounds of "Lucille" Robert Johnson, Son House, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday. You can hear that tradition inside of them.

So when you interact with them, like when I interact with Brother Mark, it's not just Mark. It's his magnificent mother and father and church and so forth, all in him. The best of his tradition is manifest inside of him. It gives you a solidity and a spiritual substance.

Not always being right, you can deal with people you disagree with because they're on a human spectrum, because you've been wrong many times. You're not new to being wrong. That's the kind of moral and spiritual substance that we need.

And the sad thing is that we're losing it. We're losing it. I mentioned 49 BC Rome. I'm serious about that, that crossing that Rubicon. And it's a sad thing for the younger generation, which means you just have to fight harder.

You have to have more maturity, more vision, more courage, more willingness to engage with people you disagree with, and stay in contact with their humanity, because we pass it on to you. We'll see what you do with it. We shall see. We shall see.

I think that we've got a wave of young brothers and sisters of different colors who can meet the challenge. But it's still a question as to whether that can be pulled off. And in the meantime, it would be nice to save the planet.

[LAUGHTER]

To have something to work with. But that's a whole another issue.