A Conversation with DAVID BROOKS and ANNE SNYDER
Revival or Decline? American Faith and Philanthropy Face the Future

Part One: Anne Snyder
Thomas H. Lake Lecture

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The world feels a bit like it’s on fire these days, no?

Ukraine is being destroyed, and there is threat of a larger war, even world-ending nuclear war. COVID still lurks in the background. Many of us are stressed by a verbal and ultimately political minefield of signaling faux pas when trying to dig into deep-seated pain points in our common life. Violent rhetoric is blowing from the fringe to the mainstream. Anxiety is at record highs. Racist acts are on the rebound. Friendships continue to erode due to lack of attention and the long tail of social distancing. The calamitous effects of climate change are careening our way and those actors who might help our world address it can’t seem to unify sufficient political consensus. Moreover, just about everyone I know is confessing a severe depletion in emotional and mental bandwidth: we just can’t do or feel or serve any more than is already being put upon us. We are, whether stay-at-home mother or college president or nurse or pastor or flight attendant or Will Smith, apparently, spent.

And we are spent, in part, because there is no longer any buffer between our day-to-day duties and the forces rumbling our world. The zeitgeist of troubled times has snuck into our homes and our relationships, our work and our sleep. What was private is now public, and what is public knows no peace.

“You talk to older people and they’re like, ‘Dude we sell tomato sauce, we don’t sell politics,’” said the co-founder of Plant People, a Certified B Corporation, to New York Times reporter Emma Goldberg earlier this year in an article that went viral, titled

*The 37-Year-Olds Are Afraid of the 23-Year-Olds Who Work for Them.* The entrepreneur continued, “Then you have younger people being like, ‘These are political tomatoes. This is political tomato sauce.’” It’s not just young people who are blurring the lines of what should be expressed where. College faculty increasingly understand their vocational roles to be advocates of a particular cause rather than as seekers of understanding. Debates around critical theory have spilled into the public domain when the tools for using it productively, helpfully, are known only by a trained few. When people ask, “what church do you attend?”, it seems more often loaded with political suspicion than spiritual care. This last month—and here I am torn—we’ve seen not just governments sanction Russia. We’ve seen private companies and cultural platforms do so, all while bobbing along to the ebbs and tides of public opinion.

It seems clear that we are all chafing against a poverty of choice when it comes to those vehicles that can channel our noblest moral longings. Worshipping beings invariably pivot if we are left hungry at the altar, especially in a country pervaded by a market logic of competitive options. Today, the fact that those spheres that have historically helped organize if not catalyze a propulsive moral witness – you think about the church’s role in the American civil rights movement, government’s role in expanding the vote to women and to people of color, journalism’s role in exposing Watergate and other leadership and political scandals that would compromise our democratic process, the role of science in discovering vaccines and medicines that can save lives and allow us to labor and commune one more day, the fact that these traditional spheres
of expertise, of honed craft, and in the most existential of cases, of the blessing of covenant binding people
to a place and a community and a creed, are now all perceived as impotent, or gauche, or, perhaps most
damaging, suspect in their allegiance within our ongoing culture wars around race or rights or sexual
and reproductive ethics or individual liberties .... the reality of this widespread distrust is as much an
indictment on their institutional embrace of a utilitarian ethic over and above a full-throated clarity around
the common good they exist to serve, as this distrust is a reflection of our own fecklessness as human
beings tricked into thinking we are only consumers and critics.

For our institutions reflect us, and we, too, are shallow creatures. We get frustrated by the slow arc
of justice, impatient for results and eager for scapegoats to explain away our pain. And so, we choose
the lowest hanging fruit, the platform that makes us feel righteous, the popular slogan, the quick
condemnation.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the summer of 2020. With relational, covenantal means of
reckoning, lament, acknowledgement of the particulars to the particulars, confession in the particulars to
the particular and forgiveness therein all robbed by the pandemic (after years of simmering discontent),
many of us took to the streets in the wake of George Floyd’s death. And for a joyous moment that May,
there was a sense of unity between blacks and whites, believers in the sacred and defenders of the secular,
even progressives and conservatives – a unity that felt like it was building on the human solidarity that the
disease had been building.

But that hope crumbled, through lack of inspired leadership, into excess and still deeper division. Forced
into physical isolation for too long, we all seemed to careen into magnified shadow. Years of intensifying
political idolatry ruptured into in-group splintering and betrayal. Distrust of vested authority festered
into conspiracy and new, totalist explanations as to what was really motivating what. The media sprinted
to keep up with events and articulate their meaning, but most interpretations were weighted by partisan
conviction and zero-sum moral narratives. We all started to hate one another just a few shades more. We
all started to feel like we were going crazy.

And as all this happened, as a local pharmacy down the street from David and me in DC began to burn
and as I watched perverse and foreboding new divisions curl around even our sense of social safety and
freedom by race and by ideological denomination, I wrote some desperate words at the top of a blank page:

CHURCH, WHERE ARE YOU?

This question felt like part accusation, part anguish and lament, part exasperation, part plea, and also part
soul-searching of my own commitment as I found myself as a Christian, implicated in the invisibility, or
worse, perversion, of this grace-giving organ that should be resounding with truth and love.
If the summer of 2020 and all that’s happened since is yet one more sign, we shouldn’t have needed of a society that is not yet clear on what it is to be fully human, and seems daily to fail in sowing the conditions for people to see one another as fully human, a society that remains unhealed from a founding error in recognition, then where is the moral ecology that should be spiritually and philosophically equipped to embody a correction here?

I am a part of several secular communities these days, including some catalyzed by philanthropy, that are trying to do the anthropological work required to put to bed once and for all this country’s false hierarchy of human value as it has manifested in key documents throughout our history and continues in practice and culture through this day. Maybe David will follow me and persuade that the sciences provide an answer to what is a person, that what we’re learning about the brain provides an answer to what is a person, but years of experiencing secular troubleshooting of what is fundamentally a sin problem have made me dubious that secular categories and secular philosophies are large enough, and frankly pointed enough, to hold the glory of our human longings that make us truly equal in God’s sight and in our relations with one another.

The only anthropology I’ve found that can satisfy the question, what is a person and who is the human? is one with a transcendent frame of reference. More specifically, and I guess I’ll go on the record here as saying this, a Christian anthropology that says we’re a people that belong to each other because we belong to God. An anthropology that acknowledges that we are creatures and therefore finite, receivers, dependent vertically and interdependent horizontally, and that in this we are gloriously endowed with an imprint of the divine, making us agents generated by grace when we choose to say yes to it, directed to design worlds within this given world on the map of we have or haven’t experienced love.

So, I’ve just been asking these last few years, Church, where are you in leading our flailing democracy in this vital, urgent re-humanizing task? Where are the people of peace?

I spend the bulk of my days now searching out an answer to this question, not in overwrought accusation, nor ecclesial navel-gazing or fix-it technique, nor, frankly, in the polarization of our pews, but out on the street. In incarnate witness. Almost always local. Quite often on the periphery. Looking for those who are unafraid yet graceful. Looking for people with a clear lens on reality’s scars, yet who point that lens perseveringly toward hope.

And I find the answer in an African American nun in rural Mississippi who has the clarity to say, “We live in a time when the loud and the powerful try to make us less open to one another’s gifts.”

I find the answer in places like The Other Side Academy, a life training school in Salt Lake City where reformed rascals once chained to their crimes and addictions find in a community of peer-to-peer, radical accountability a reason to be free and a process that transforms their moral compass.
I find the church I’m looking for in Shreveport, Louisiana, which, once riven by race and socioeconomic difference, is now a living reincarnation Jane Addams’ settlement house movement through the catalytic presence of Community Renewal International, an organization as much as a neighborly logic that is cultivating a contagion of care that knows no damper on its creative breather, and whose founder, 74-year old former pastor Mack McCarter reflects back on this healing tapestry with tears pooling in his eyes, saying, “I’m just so grateful I didn’t miss the Kingdom of God. I could have so easily missed it.”

I find the answer in Justin Giboney and the AND Campaign, which is daily surprising the prevailing political categories suffocating us all and empowering effective advocacy for justice and mercy to marry in very real challenges of police brutality and affordable housing, discriminatory zoning laws and exclusionary politics.

I find the answer in Nyack College, a university in Battery Park, New York City draws its students from the hundreds of storefront churches that line the boroughs beyond Manhattan. A school whose scholastic body is made up of 24% black, 24% Asian, 24% Latino, 16% international, 11% white and 1% indigenous students choose not to express fear that a romanticized Christian heritage is losing ground, but rather live into their stories of exile with humility, faith and hospitality, radiating the demands of a beloved community outward to one of the most powerful cities on earth.

I find a sustained expression of it at Regent College, an educational institution that is finding and forming future Eugene Petersons and Walter Brueggemann’s, whose prophetic sight becomes a kind of glue and shared framework for the bridge-builders, peacemakers, place-makers and justice-shakers to work in appreciative tandem.

I find it in the Living Hope Wheelchair Association, a Houston-based community organization of immigrants paralyzed by spinal cord injuries who model the way of accompaniment through suffering, drafting the textbook for what our future of responding to disasters justly will require.

I find it in the Bruderhof, an Anabaptist community whose members share all their possessions in common, taking the Beatitudes as literally as they can, a model of an alternative way of we, less I, for the world.

I find it in the Center for Public Justice, which is bridging intractable political divides in Congress and gracefully weaving together different demographic and temperamental expressions of the sacred sector in local civic variations all over the U.S.

I find it in the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, which is protecting and nurturing hundreds of universities that seek to develop global citizens who are 1 Peter resident aliens before they are Americans, alien reconcilers before self-appointed pundits.
I find the answer in *Leadership Foundations*, a global irrigation system of faith-based organizations pumping with an Ignatian discernment that is working to reweave the social fabric of cities with deep listening to the currents that are already flowing, starting on the margins and rowing their way toward the center.

I find it in *BitterSweet Monthly*, a multimedia storytelling shop in DC that is building a community of people who are reading our times with compassion, helping the organizations doing the most rugged work to dignify those whose humanity has been demeaned to narrate what they do and how they do it.

I find it in Detroit, in the cross-racial friendship Dwan Dandridge and Chris Lambert, a black man and a white man who are laboring arm in arm to break down barriers and build bridges in a city scarred by decades of racially charged neglect, government control and whiplash, and a whole heck of a lot of earned mistrust towards perceived power.

I find it in the *Oaks Academy* right here in Indianapolis, a school serving one of the more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse student bodies in the state with a commitment to relationships and beauty as the foundation for all learning & character formation.

I find it in *Jacob’s Ladder in Atlanta*, a pioneering school for kids with severe intellectual disabilities whose compromised neural pathways are being rewired by an all-in marriage of science and love.

I find the church wafting its fragrance outward in the San Antonio police department, where the model of two hug-a-thugs named Ernie Stevens and Joe Smarro – two cops, is shifting a national policing conversation and foregoing norms around how we deal with crises of mental illness and police brutality.

I find it in *Together Chicago*, a longstanding initiative of collective impact weaving together business leaders, faith leaders, and community, non-profit, civic and government leaders effectively pursuing a more holistic, place-based approach to the intersecting needs of economic development, education, violence reduction, and faith community mobilization.

I find it in *Sea Dog Theater*, whose understanding of feasting, welcome, and the dance between the theater and the curiosity required to play a character is disarming the bundling and quick judgment we Americans do so much of today, charting out a path from the stage to the table, from alienation to reconciliation.

I find it in the institution that blesses and supports the intellectual, narrative and institutional weaving work that I am so privileged to do, *Cardus*, whose intentional ecumenism internally and robust commitment to and humility before the common good externally takes one’s breath away with its moral coherence and dynamism.
I find the church in Chico, California, where a long-term recovery group propped up after the Camp Fire of November 2018 devastated the next door town of Paradise, is being led by an Episcopalian priest who never knew his calling to be a physician of relationships and a strategist to rebuild would flower so late in his vocation. He never knew that crisis and displacement would invite him to his annunciation moment.

I find it in Makoto and Haejin Fujimura, whose marriage of beauty and justice are healing too-long torn assumptions that the gift logic is opposed to the logic of law and order.

I find it embodied at Arrabon, an organization which, with the leadership of David Bailey, is helping all kinds of institutions understand that better than Diversity, Equity and Inclusion mantras and modalities is a much higher, harder and holier aim of working towards embodying the reconciled community, with all the humbling this requires and the mutual transformation these rewards.

I find it in a place like Fuller Seminary, which is testing the possibility of spiritual unity in a divided age by experimenting with gatherings of very different people and theological streams around the sacramental grace of the Eucharist itself. What happens when your arguments circle around that table of body and blood, when sacrifice itself is centered?

I find it in the Block Project in Seattle, which is building environmentally sustainable tiny homes and inviting neighbors one by one to share their backyards with a homeless person to help that person recover dignity and a life, thereby triggering an unprecedented wave of reckoning in communities that would rather be gated, but find themselves surprised by joy instead.

And on and on and on.

These communal and institutional exemplars sustain my hope, a constellation of lily pads that are less likely to be granted status within the institutional scaffolding of yesteryear, but are shining with strength as they follow the gathering and scattering motif that the Hebrew Scriptures and then the New Testament carved out as the Way. THIS is what you might call Christian humanism, resourcing a constructive way forward for a just and generous common life for all. A common life that works itself out through a thick web of formative institutions that in turn enable purposeful dialogue and relationship between friends and strangers. Over lifetimes, and in more and more contexts that begin to overlap.

And what they have in common is telos, a clear, strong reason for being in the world, embraced and pursued by all of its members. Liturgies & rituals, a covenant or creed that is affirmed regularly as a community, in word and deed. Full engagement by all members of the organization, each one aware of the significance and contribution of their roles. A clear conception of the whole person, that we are not just heads on sticks, but yearn to be integrated beings. They tend to put relational health as the foundation for its success, the ultimate end of excellence. They are careful about the latest technological advance,
embracing it insofar as it promotes healthy relationships and individual skill, and setting limits when it makes those objectives more difficult. They foster opportunities to relate to those unlike yourself, and they provide opportunities for growth and a structure of mutual accountability. They empower their people to act, create and initiate, not simply rest as passive consumers or de-humanizing cogs in a machine. They hire people who can be character exemplars to the younger folks in their midst. Most noticeable, these organizations tend to be flooded with joy, transforming lives in their sticky attraction and forming people in such a way that when they leave for another context, they promote similar norms in the next one.

These are institutions that have rejected the performativity of our utilitarian era and chosen to be formative in a pluralistic time that is reticent to define a universal good, a universal love. We just need more of them, because we need the desert of an intermediating landscape to be lit up like an electric grid.

But what this beautiful spray of green shoots answering my anguish of “Church, where are you?” – what this spray lacks is the thick web part of that just and generous common life, a web thickened by a unifying frame and the gift of connective tissue to undergird their archipelago of hope bubbling up in our democratic lava. What’s lacking is a cohesive narrative about the present amid deep knowledge of the past, with surprise pairings of words and ideas that make way for new categories of value, for new imagination, and thought leaders that put their grand theories at the feet of these largely hidden heroes that are charting out a different moral economy in real-time.

This is the challenge of our moment, to build an imaginative, conceptual fireplace that resonates with these heroes and draws their individual sparks upward through one chimney, towards one huge sky. This is the major task I see for philanthropy, that longstanding, exceptional force in the American democracy Tocqueville so admired. Will philanthropy take its privilege of a high, broad perch and seed, creatively, a new set of intermediating institutions and dense, overlapping networks that might allow top-down power to serve bottom-up beauty? Could philanthropists pour some Miracle Grow on all that is already blooming, and just help give it a philosophical fence and some cross-pollinating tools?

That Miracle Grow - perhaps a better metaphor is Miracle Glue - is needed, because we Americans are experiencing simply too many chasms today: between white and black, between right and left, between self and neighbor, between faith-drenched and secular- convinced, between newcomer and old-timer. To accept these chasms and give up trying to bridge them is to die – as souls, as a society.

But death needn’t have the final word. I think David’s way of seeing may open the doorway to a more life-giving trajectory.

See Part Two: David Brooks, in separate pdf.