A Conversation with
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and
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Revival or Decline? American Faith and Philanthropy Face the Future

Part Two: David Brooks
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This is a transcript of David Brook’s lecture.
Thank you, Anne. We have similar minds; different communication styles, and the way I have described it, Anne is a painter and I’m a pointer. So, after a beautiful elegance you’re about to get journalism. Sorry for the comedown.

So, I also am going to talk about community and connection. Unlike Anne, it’s not natural to me. Anne, like when we leave a party, I’m like “Okay, we’re done here,” and I’m out at the door in the 30 seconds. She has a 45-minute process of saying “Good-bye” to everybody in the room, because she actually cares about other people. [laughter] And so, though I talk about community -- I grew up in a home, if some of you have seen “Fiddler on the Roof” there’s a certain kind of Jewish home that’s filled with emotional ebullience and connection; the people are all huggy. I came from the other kind of Jewish home. So, our phrase was, “Think Yiddish, act British” and so, super stiff upper lip. And then I went to a Grace Church School, because it was in New York, I was a part of the all-Jewish boys’ choir at Grace. We were about 40% Jewish in our church choir, and to square with our religion, we didn’t sing the “Jesus” and so the volume would drop in the church and then it would come back up and we would go on. And then when I was 8, I wanted to become a writer which is not a very socially connected, it’s a bit of a solitary profession. I read a book called “Paddington Bear” and decided I was going to be a writer, and I joked that in high school I wanted to date this woman named Bernice. She wanted to date some other guy, and I remember thinking “What is she thinking? I write way better than that guy.” And so those were what my values.

And then when I was 18, the admission officers at Columbia, Wesleyan, and Brown decided I should go to the University of Chicago. And so that too, if you know Chicago, not a very social place. The famous saying about Chicago, “it’s where fun goes to die.” My favorite saying about Chicago “it’s a Baptist School where atheist professors teach Jewish students St. Thomas Aquinas,” and so, [laughter] but it’s intellectual. It’s not a social place. And so, I think, I had a great education, but not a lot of social life. I had a double major in history and celibacy while I was there [laughter], so there wasn’t a lot of connection. Then I go into journalism and you would think journalism as this social profession, we’re interviewing people all the time, but actually, it’s a kind of profession for somebody who wants to stand in the corner of the room and watch other people. And so, I say to journalism students, if you’re at a football game and everybody’s doing the wave, and you just sit there, you have the right kind of aloof personality style to be a journalist.

And so, all of these are isolating; coupled with that, is this weird emotional nonreactivity that I hope I’m getting over with, but when super exciting things happen, I don’t react. So, if anybody’s a baseball fan here, if you get a ball in the stands that’s like a big deal, you would stand up on the jumbotron, I have never had a ball and I’ve been to thousands of games. But I once sitting in Camden Yards and close to the dugout, and a batter swung and a bat landed in my lap. Now, a bat is a thousand times better than a ball. And what did I do? I just put it on the ground and sat there. It’s like, why can’t I be happy?

And I’m going to start, and the two things I’m going to emphasize in this talk related to Anne’s are—and I talk about community and Weave which we’ll talk about, I really think a lot of talk about community is too
abstract; that what really matters is the actual social act of being with another person, in all its most minute details. So, that’s going to be one of my themes tonight. And the second theme, is going to be on moral formation which Anne finished with lack of moral formation in this country and what’s it’s done to us.

So, let me just start with the details of an encounter. Let me just tell three quick stories. One is from a woman who was recounting a time when she was 13. She went to her first party. She got really drunk, and then got dropped off at home, first time ever having alcohol. She was so drunk she was just on the porch, she couldn’t get in the front door. Her dad, a big, strict disciplinary, comes out on the porch and she thinks he’s going to scream at her; thinking, saying what she already has in her head “I’m bad, I’m bad.” Instead he just lifts her up, puts her on the couch, and says “There’ll be no punishment here. You just had an experience.”

Second story: A friend of mine has a daughter in second grade, she’s struggling. One day the teacher says to her, “You know, you’re really good at thinking before you speak.” And that little comment took this girl’s sense of awkwardness and turned it into a gift.

The third story is not real, but hopefully some of you will know it’s from the movie “Good Will Hunting” with Matt Damon and Robin Williams. Matt Damon plays this math whiz, but who has trouble relating. And Robin Williams is his therapist who was supposed to help him with his emotional problems, but which Will will not face. But he levels Robin Williams of brilliance and his stereotypes and humiliates him. Williams calls him out to a pond, if you remember this scene, and says to him this, “You’re a tough kid. I’d ask you about war you would probably throw Shakespeare at me, right? Once more into the breach. But you’ve never been near one, you’ve never held your best friend’s head in your lap and watched him gasp his last breath. I ask you about love you quote me a sonnet, but you’ve never looked at woman and been totally vulnerable. Known someone who could level you with her eyes. I look at you; I don’t see an intelligent, self-confident man. I see a cocky, scared kid. You’re a genius. No one denies that, but I don’t care about that. But you know what? I can’t learn anything from you that I can’t learn in a book. Unless you want to talk about who you are, then I’m fascinated. I’m in, but you don’t want to do that do you sport? Because you’re terrified of what you might say.”

And so, why have I told you these three stories? The first one about the drunk girl, that’s about seeing with understanding; the dad saw her and understood exactly what she was going through. The story about the teacher; that’s affirming with insight, lifting a talent that somebody has that maybe they don’t even know they have. The third; the Robin Williams’ story, critiquing with care, giving somebody a critique of themselves that they know something to do with and it’s done from a position of love. These are three important skills, and if you can do these skills, you will be a good teacher, a good leader, a good parent, a good friend, and a good citizen in your community. And so, I’ve come to think that morality, sometimes it’s written on commandments and stone, sometimes it’s just social consideration and it’s possessing these skills.
Now, what’s the capacity that underlines these three skills? It’s the ability to see others and understand what they’re going through. And I’ve come to believe there’s one skill at the center of every healthy church, organization, company, or society, it’s the ability to make people feel seen, respected, and understood. And if people feel unseen, they will lash out in humiliation and your plans will fall flat; if they feel seen, they’ll follow you to the ends of the earth. And so, how good are you at seeing? Some people are just phenomenal.

Some of you may know a novelist, E. M. Forster, his biographer wrote of him, “To speak to him was to be seduced by an inverse charisma, a sense of being listened to with such intensity you had to be your best, sharpest, most honest self.” Who wouldn’t want to be that guy? Winston Churchill’s mom when she was a young woman, had dinner one night with William Gladstone, the British Statesman, and she left that dinner thinking, “Gladstone is the most clever person in England.” A couple weeks later she had dinner with Gladstone’s great rival Benjamin Disraeli, she left that dinner thinking she was the most clever person in England. So, it’s good to be Gladstone, it’s better to be Disraeli.

So, how good are you? Well, most of you I don’t know very well, but I know the research and you’re not as good as you think you are. [laughter] The average person is accurately perceiving what the other person is thinking in conversation 22% of the time. With a good friend, a close family member, it rises to 35%. A lot of people are 0%, but think they’re a 100%. And so, we should be humble about how well we think we can know each other just based on our raw abilities. And as a result of our failure at this, we have an epidemic of blindness in our society, and this is what I see in my career as a journalist.

So many people tell me I feel invisible, I feel unseen. When I come to this part of the country, it used to be once a week somebody would tell me, “We’re in flyover country. You don’t really see us.” By 2016, I heard that like 8 times a day in the Midwest. And so, we have this epidemic of people feeling unseen. Blacks feeling their daily experience is not understood by whites. Rural people not feeling seen by coastal elites. Depressed people not feeling seen by anybody. Republicans and Democrats looking at each other in blinding comprehension. Husband and wives in broken marriages who realize the person who should know them best has no clue. And so, this is to me at the core of what’s become a widespread and extremely mysterious social crisis. 54% of Americans say that no one knows them well. There are a number of adults who had romantic partner is up by a third. There’s been a 73% increase in depression since 2007. The percentage of students suffering from anxiety disorders has doubled between 2008 and 2019. Teenage suicide is up by 58%. Just 45% of Gen Z’s says their mental health is good. Twenty-seven percent of Americans are estranged from a member of their immediate family.

These are all seemingly unrelated, but they all have to do with this crisis of connection and I see it in my life. Most of my friends are very fortunate, but they still have this level of anxiety or exhaustion that Anne spoke about. I gave a talk in Oklahoma recently, all the questions came on index cards; I opened the index card, and it says “What do you do if you no longer want to be alive?” I didn’t know what to say. And then
I asked my friends what to say, and it turns out that so many of them had suicide somewhere in their family or depression. And so, that most of us are fine, but there’s this undercurrent of disconnection and sadness, but it’s not the sadness that bothers me or that really worries me. bad as that is, it’s what people do with sadness.

Anton Chekhov, the great Russian short story writer, wrote a story called “Enemies.” It’s about two guys who suffer grievous losses in one day, one guy loses a son; the other loses his wife. You would think they would be bound by suffering, but their social inequality between them, the nobleman who lost his wife, looks down on the doctor who lost his son and this is a toxin that creates hate. And Chekhov’s point is that when people are lonely, they will experience that loneliness as a rejection, as a humiliation, as an injustice. And when they experience rejection, humiliation, and injustice, they lash out and they’re angry.

And so, I gave you a bunch of statistics just now on disconnection, there’s also an equal number of statistics on hostility and lack of empathy. Gun sales have been surging, reckless driving is so bad that even though miles driven is down, highway deaths are up. Disruptive classroom and students are tripling as the School of Philanthropy found that used to be almost two-thirds gave to charity, now it’s fewer than half of Americans give to charity. Recorded scores of empathy dropped among college students by 40% between 2000 and 2010. The person who would score average 20 years ago on empathy would now be in the 76th percentile. And so, we’re just becoming a more hostile, more angry culture. It’s as my colleague Peggy Newman says that, “People are proud of their bitterness now.”

We were just in a restaurant in New York and the owner was chatting with us, he now has to regularly ban people for life for bad behavior. We had lunch with a friend, he runs COVID policy in San Diego; his house got fire bombed in the middle of the night. The death threats are just normal. And so, authoritarians thrive in a social environment like this one. Authoritarians tell stories of betrayal and loss, they feed on those who were humiliated. Dictatorship bases itself on loneliness which is among most radical and desperate experiences of man. For those who feel they have no place in society is through surrendering themselves to ideology and power, that the loneliness rediscover their purpose and self-respect. And so, in this way, a private psychological emotion turns into a social problem.

So, what the hell is going on? What’s causing all of this? Some people say technology stories, social media is driving us crazy. Some people tell an economic story; the economy is more fragile and unequal. Some people tell the demographic story; we’re moving from a mostly white country to a much more diverse country. Some people tell a sociology story; we’re bowling alone, lack of community. I agree with all these stories. I don’t think any of them is the deepest story. Sure, social media has bad effects, but social media is everywhere. Our problems are American. Economic inequality is real, but America endured depressions and economic crises before without this level of emotional breakdown. Demographics are changing, but it’s not just white people who are suffering through with depression it’s everybody. Sociologists are right, they were more isolated, but why? What values cause us to lead lives that make us miserable?
And so, to me the core story is a failure of moral education. A core story to teach, first of all the skills of how to treat people well, how to be considerate, how to be in the words of this institute, “How to be generous.” And it’s a failure of social skill. Basically our social skills are inadequate to the society we now live in. And so, let me tell you a quick historical narrative that explains why I think we got here. There was a 100 years ago, an age of character formation. People were obsessed with character in the 1890s, 1900s. Mary Woolley is a hero of mine, she ran Mount Holyoke College. “Character is the main object of education,” she wrote. College training gives purpose for life. College training teaches self-control. Her job as an educator is to mold the character of her students. This ethos was built on a certain view of human nature which is a Christian view of human nature; that we’re gloriously made but deeply broken. It’s built on a nature awareness of sin; a word that is now mostly used in the context of desserts. And so, the idea was that because we are sinful, you can’t just stay the way you are. You have to improve yourself through formation and you have to surrender to institutes that will teach you how to do this, because otherwise, your life will be inadequate.

And so, if you go back a hundred years, people as I say were obsessed with it. The Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts were obsessed with formation. The read these stories to their kids, “Little Red Riding Hood” is a story about a girl who surrenders to passion and gets devoured by a wolf or about to be devoured by a wolf. That’s a story about moral formation. There was this movement that swept across Europe called “bildungsroman,” the German word for moral formation, and they redid education across Europe and especially in Scandinavia. I went to a college in Chicago which was an offshoot of that. The great books of education that I received was based on the idea that you come in as George Elliot said, “A moral idiot.” But if you read the great books of literature and think about them deeply, you will have the keys to life. It was formative.

Churches; what are churches about? The worship of God and the formation of Christians. And so, these were deeply formative institutions and there were two ideas that were popular in that age which had been largely discarded today. The first idea is that there exists an objective moral order to the universe; that things are truly beautiful, truly right, and truly wrong and that is true for everybody. The second idea was people educate their moral senses by being obedient to that order, deferential to the authorities that uphold disorder whether it’s parents, principals, bosses, clergy, great leaders. And so, we all know the Eugene Peterson book “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction.” There was some hint of obedience and being formed by your institutions whether it was law or medicine, clergy. That all went away, or at least as the mainstream of American life.

Conservatives blame the 60s, but it really didn’t happen in the 60s. It happened in the 40s. Between 1929 and 1945, Americans were in a depression and war; long period of restraint. Forty-five comes, the consumer revolution comes, the suburbs come, people said the heck with that, “we’re done with restraint.” And so, you get that is process of unleashing. Along comes people like Carl Rogers, Dr. Spock, there’s a guy named Joshua Liebman who wrote a book that was number one on the best sell list for an entire year.
There was the power of positive thinking. All these books have one message; all that stuff about human sin, that’s old fashioned, that repressive. People are basically good. It’s the institutions that are corrupt. And so, there’s no need for formation, you’re basically good. All you have to do is detach yourself from institutions and your goodness will flower forth. And if you go to a commencement speech, it’s like find you passion. Look for your true self inside. First we saddle the next generation with a mountain of debt, than we give them crap advice so they’ll never be able to pay it off.

And so, many theologians and philosophers most importantly Charles Taylor and Alastair McNair have written about this, the ethos of autonomy, the ethos of authenticity: “the goodness is in here, I’m just wonderful.” It did not produce what they hoped. It produced the statistics I just read. So, what do they do if you give people freedom and it turns out to be chaos? Well, they escape from freedom. People escape from freedom that feels dangerous. They did this in Germany in the 1930s; they escaped from freedom into Hitler. I covered the Russia in the 1990s, they escaped from freedom into Putin.

We don’t quite have that problem. We have a less serious problem. We escaped from freedom into politics. That we have what Eitan Hersh, political scientist call “political hobbyists.” They don’t canvass. They don’t volunteer. They just get emotional about politics all the time. And in such a society, everything becomes politicized. The corporations become politicized. Churches become politicized. Friendships become politicized. Politics is everywhere. I wrote a piece about the chaos in the Evangelical Church, and what struck me was how many pastors said, you know, “it’s FOX News not the gospel.” I told groups earlier today I had a buddy who put sentences from the Beatitudes into his sermons and the people came up to ask him, after he didn’t say where he got them; they were in the “Sermon on the Mount,” and the congregants would come up and say, “I didn’t like that part.” It was too woke.

And so, but we have politics infecting everywhere. Except this is not politics as normally understood. Normally, politics is about redistribution; where should money go? Where should power go? This is politics about recognition. Do you see me? Do I have status? Do I get to humiliate you? So, political movements are filled by social resentment these days. I want to feel emotionally validated and I want you to feel emotionally shamed. Oppression gets redefined as psychological injury, and when you do that, there’s no solution. If you think of oppression as being slighted, you’ll always find a way to feel slighted. The politics of recognition appears to produce psychic benefits. It appears to be a sense of belonging, but being part of the same political movement is not friendship and volunteering. Politics seems to provide a sense of morality. I’m fighting against evil. But basically it takes the Christian view of human nature, that the line between good and evil runs down every human heart and it externalizes it -- the line between good and evil runs between my group and their group. Finally, politics is just not going to get you the things you really need in your life, which is a sense of tenderness, and care, and support, and love, and friendship. And so, the psychologists have a phrase, “The hardest thing to cure is the patient’s attempt to self-cure.” People have problems. They adopt solutions that make it all worse, like alcohol commonly or drugs. We have adopted politics to make it all worse.
So, let’s return to Anne’s phrase for the podcast, “The whole person.” You have to recast, get out of politics and see people in their full humanity. I’m going to tell you a quick story that I hope will help us do this.

It’s about a guy named Emmanuel Carrere, who on December 26th, 2004 went with his girlfriend and their respective sons to Sri Lanka, stayed in a hilltop hotel. And he had once thought this woman he was with, Helene, would be the love of his life, the one he would marry. But at Christmas, the night before, they talked about separating. And Carrere was thinking “Yeah, I don’t love her. And it’s sad, because she’s worthy of love. But the fact is,” and this is him thinking, “I’ve never loved anyone.” He went back and thought about all his broken relationships in his past, and he realized I’m just incapable of love. And then he self-pityingly thought forward into his future, and said “I’ll probably die alone because I just don’t know how to love anybody.”

So, a mood of bored irritability settled over the little group, and they decided the next morning not to do a scuba diving lesson they had signed up for. And that was consequential, because that was the morning the tsunami hit; remember the tsunami of 2004? Earlier, a couple days earlier, they met another French family, a guy named Jerome, his wife Delphine and their little 4-year-old daughter Juliette. When the tsunami hit Juliette was playing in the waves. Her granddad was on the beach reading a paper; her parents were in town shopping. Her granddad felt himself get swept up by a big wall of black water and had two thoughts; the first is “I’m going to die,” and the second one is “Juliette already has.” He gets swept inland. The water begins to start taking him out to sea. He happens to run into a palm tree at the top. He grabs at a piece of fence, piece of the palm tree, he survives. He comes down bloodied and bruised and decides that he has to go tell her parents.

So, he walks into town, he spots them across the square, realizes they’re experiencing their last moment of pure happiness. And he tells them and as Carrere writes, “Delphine screamed Jerome didn’t. He took Delphine in his arms and hugged her as tightly as he could while she screamed and screamed. And from then on, he had only one objective, I can no longer do anything for my daughter, so I will save my wife.” And so, Carrere spends the next couple of weeks with that family, with Jerome and Delphine and he watches Delphine absorb the blows. He watches as she barely eats anything, but when she brings the fork full of rice to her mouth he can see her hand is shaking. Her husband Jerome is watching her constantly trying to will her to stay with us, stay with us. Helene, meanwhile, has gone out--she’s one of those people in crisis who become super practical and super useful. She’s like arranging insurance, doing practical details, getting food, helping other people who survived, and over meals Jerome is still trying to save his wife. And so, the meals are strangely loud, because he’s wanting to fill the space with upbeat stories with jokes, he’s pouring drinks.

Carrere watches him, Jerome the father. And he says, “I watched him out of the corner of my eye keeping watch over Delphine, and I remember thinking, there it is real love. A man who truly loves his wife. There is nothing more beautiful. But Delphine remained silent, absent, horribly calm.” And so, this is just a profound emotional experience for all of them. But a couple of weeks later Carrere the writer here, realized
that he does love Helene and he must marry her. He writes, “I tell myself that this long life together must happen. If I need to succeed at one thing before I die, it is this.” And Helene remembers those weeks as the time they really came together.

So, why have I told you this story? First it’s about human solidarity, basic human solidarity. The second, it’s about responsibilities defined by your role. Finally, and most importantly for my purposes, it’s about how an entire world viewpoint and the consciousness can be transformed by an event. Usually over the course of our lives our viewpoint in life changes gradually. There’s a famous thing called the Grant Study, where they took a bunch of Harvard guys in the 1940s and followed them through life, and one of the guys was a prick in college, kind of insufferable. Then he loosened up and apparently became a great guy to be around. And the researchers in the Grant Study, when he was about 70, sent him the interview transcripts from when he was 20. And he sent them back and said, “This is the wrong guy. None of this ever happened to me. I never thought any of this. You sent the wrong transcript.” And they said, “No that was you.”

Usually it happens over a lifetime. In this case it happened all at once. And to me it’s a reminder that each of us is viewpoint. We take all the experiences and emotions of our lives and we create a distinct point-of-view. Each person creates their own way of being aware. And if you want to see and know somebody, you have to have some hint about how they are seeing you. I’ll just simply put it, experience is not what happens to you, it’s what you do with what happens to you. And so, this is just a deeply human act that we do every second consciously and unconsciously.

So, I think we’re all amazing artists of the real. We are amazing artists. We are made in the image of God. God is a creator. We are participants in his creation, but we are also creating this viewpoint. How would you want to get to know a creature that amazing? Well, first you don’t want to study them like they’re some object. You want to illuminate them with your love. You want to beam at them the kind of loving attention and considerate care that Rembrandt beamed at people. I’ve been interviewed, lucky enough to be interviewed twice by Oprah. I can tell you when she looks at you, you are illuminated. And so, that concept of “made in the image of God” is the foundation for how you want to look at somebody with reverence, awe, and respect. You want to look at them as a soul.

So, I tell secular people, I don’t care if you believe in God or not, that’s up to somebody else. But I ask you to believe that every person you meet has some piece of them that has no size, weight, color, or shape, but gives them infinite value and dignity and it’s called a soul, and if you treat them as if they have an eternal soul you’ll probably treat them right. And so, you want to illuminate them with that kind of understanding. The Bible was so smart about cognition. To know in the bible is not a cold, rational thing. It can mean everything from study to have sex with and are covenant with. It’s an emotional thing. And the Bible is filled with dramas of recognition, Esau. The disciples don’t recognize there is a Christ. And the parable of the Good Samaritan, a lot of people see the injured guy in the side of the road, but only the Samaritan really sees him. And these failures of unseen are not failures of the mind, they’re failures of the heart. And
so, you want to imitate the kind of love that God uses to see us. So, that’s the first stage.

The second stage is a word Anne used, which Pope Francis loves, “accompaniment.” That’s an other-centered way of just doing life with people. Most of our life is not a deep conversation or spiritual epiphany, it’s going to the carpool, it’s going to the meeting, it’s just normal. But some people have an other-centered way of doing that reminds you of the way a pianist accompanies a singer. They just want to make the other person a little more impressive, and we’ve all known people like that. It’s just a faithful presence, open to what may come. Your movements are not marked by willfulness, but willingness. You’re willing to go wherever the relationship leads and that kind of accompaniment is to me the second thing.

And then the third thing and the most important skill that we teach the least, is conversation. If you think empathy can get you into another person’s mind, you have excessive faith in your mindreading skills. You have to ask them a question. And so, I’ll conclude with this, I’ve collected a lot of conversation skills. I want to emphasize that talking about morality, it comes down to minute skills just the way being a carpenter or a painter or anything else. And so, here are some I’ve read from conversation experts:

*Treat attention as an on/off switch, not a dimmer.* If you’re going to be there, be all the way there or not at all.

*Be a loud listener.* I have a friend who when he listens to you it’s like he’s at some charismatic church, it’s like “Uh–ha? Yeah. Yeah. Preach. Preach.” Love talking like that. He’s a loud listener.

*Make them authors not witnesses.* When people tell stories they don’t put in enough detail. If you ask them, “Where was your boss when he said that?” Then they get right into the scene and they tell you a lot more and you really have a good conversation.

*Do the looping.* When somebody says something, paraphrase what they say and say it back to them. You’ll be shocked at how often you misheard them.

*Keep the gem statement at the center.* If you disagree about something, there’s probably something underneath that you agree about. My brother and I can argue about our dad’s health care, but we both want what’s best for our dad. That’s the gem statement.

*Don’t fear the pause.* When you’re listening to somebody, say they start talking here and they talk to the end of their fingers, at what point have you stopped listening so you can think of what to say next? Probably about here. So, let them finish to their fingers and then pause.

*Find the disagreement under the disagreement.* If you’re having a big argument, there’s probably a deeper philosophical reason you’re having a big argument. Work together to find that thing, it will be fun.
And then finally, the most important things are questions. Good questions are just honoring.

Kids are phenomenal at asking questions. They ask great questions. I have a friend who teaches interviewing skills to 8th grade boys. So, one day in class she said, “Okay, interview me. I’ll ask--I’ll answer any question you ask me.” First question was, “Are you married?” “No.” Second question, “Are you divorced?” “Yes.” Third question, “Do you still love him?” Ooh, [brief laughter]. She paused and thought, well I told them I would answer them honestly, so she said “Yes.” Bad questions, evaluative. “What do you do?” “What college did you go to?” Sometimes “What neighborhood do you live in?” Good questions are open questions. There’s a focus group lady who was asked to study why people go to the supermarket late at night. So, she could have asked the focus group, “Why do you go to the supermarket late at night?” The better question was an open question; “Tell me about the last time you went to the supermarket late.” And there was a lady in the focus group who said, “Well, I just smoked a joint and I needed a ménage a trois with me and Ben and Jerry” [brief laughter]. Good answer. Introductory questions, like “how did you get your name?” “Tell me about the time you thought you belonged.” “Tell me about a favorite childhood memory.” Then as you get to know someone, you can ask wide-angled questions and get them to step back and evaluate their lives. “What crossroads are you at?” Most of us are at a crossroads, but we don’t think about it until somebody asks. “What would you do if you weren’t afraid?” Fear is in our lives somewhere, but how? “What problem did you used to have that you now have licked?” Deeper: “What is the forgiveness you are withholding?”

Peter Block is a great community thinker. He’s got great questions. “What is the know or refusal you keep postponing?” “What have you said yes to that you no longer really believe in?” And so, these are just questions that produce better conversations, and if somebody asks you that question or and you’re in a conversation like that, you walk away thinking: A) That guy’s a pretty good listener. B) You feel great. You feel heard and you feel seen. And so, the big issues of our day ultimately come down to these minor detailed social skills. And when you feel seen and heard, like the lady who got drunk on the porch, you remember it forever.

And I’ll close with the time I wasn’t seen, but I was a seer which is also pretty fantastic. When you actually feel like you know somebody. And this happened about a year ago. I was sitting at our dining room table and I was reading some boring book, and Anne walked in the front door of our house, which you can see from the table, and she stood in the doorway with afternoon light coming in behind her, and she happened to glance at an orchid that we kept on the table by the door. And she absentmindedly looking at the orchid. I look up from the book and I think, “Wow, I really know her. I know her through and through.” And if you would ask me what I knew, it wouldn’t have been the biographical facts or the personality traits; it was just the ebb and flow of her being. It was the way that she responds, the way she sees the world. And then I wasn’t even seeing her in a normal way. I was beholding her. That’s the only word I can think of to describe what it was like, “beholding.” And people tell me they sometimes have that thought when they--someone they really love they just behold them. Like you don’t have to do anything, but you just behold. And it was
almost as if I wasn’t seeing her, I was seeing a little out from her. And perhaps to know someone you have to have a glimmer of how they experience the world, to know someone you have to know how they know you.

And so, I’ve spent my days writing about politics and the grandest schemes. I’m spending my week thinking about Ukraine and globalization, but it comes down to the details of social relationships. The social practices we are either good at or not good at, and when we screw those up on a micro scale, they have gigantic macro effects. And so, to me, our focus—focus of philanthropy as churches—have to be on these two things: The moral formation so people don’t feel existentially and ontologically panicked, and the social skills of an actual relationship. Thanks very much [applause].