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How Can You Hate Me and Not Know Me? | Daryl Davis

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The Veritas Forum

PART OF A SPECIAL 6-WEEK SERIES | Daryl Davis didn't study conflict resolution or communications in any formal way in a classroom or lecture hall. But, through his extensive travels — first, as the son of diplomats, and then, as a jazz musician — Daryl has become an expert when it comes to cross-cultural communication. Over the past 40 years, Daryl, a Black man, has used his skills to build surprising friendships with white supremacists. So far, over 200 people have left the KKK and denounced its ideology as a result of their friendship with him. In this episode, Daryl shares about his life, his music, and how he found himself doing what he does now. He says it all ties into this one question: How can you hate me when you don't even know me? Like what you heard? Rate and review us on Apple Podcasts to help more people discover our episodes. And, join the conversation on our Instagram, @veritasforum. You can see our full slate of speakers and learn more about our production team and co-sponsors at beyondtheforum.org

Transcript

"Welcome back, dated download time. There's some good news on our latest NBC News Wall Street Journal poll. Americans agree on at least one thing.

The bad news? They agree on how divided we are. A whopping 80% of respondents think the country is divided." That's Chuck Todd on Meet the Press back in 2018. Three years later, not much has changed.

If anything, things have gotten worse. One recent poll says it's now 91% of Americans. Who feel we're divided.

And figuring out who's to blame could take anywhere from a couple of hours to a couple of generations. But I only have 25 or so minutes with you today. So instead of going big and national with our conversation, let's go local and personal.

Where do you see division in your own life? Are there people you distance from or judge

as inferior because of what they believe or say or look like? What about the people who don't like you? How do you treat them? Are you dismissive, impatient, or unloving? Our guest today is Darryl Davis, a jazz musician who has worked with Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, BB King, and more. He's also a black man who's been trying to answer one question ever since people through rocks and bottles at him when he marched in a cub scout parade at 10 years old. "I formed a question in my mind at that age, which was, 'How can you hate me when you don't even know me?' And I'd been looking for the answer to that question.

And now for what, 53 years?" And he's been looking in a surprising place in white supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. "Who better to ask that question of than someone who would go so far as to join an organization that has over a hundred year history of practicing hating people who don't look like them?" We're building on our last episode with Kurt Thompson. He said that living the good life includes becoming more resilient.

And the way we do that is by leaning toward difficult people, not away from them. So today we're looking at an extreme case study of sorts with Darryl and his life's work. This is Beyond the Forum, a new podcast from the Veritas Forum and PRX that dives into life's biggest questions.

For our first season, we're asking, "What is the good life and how can we live it?" And we're talking with some of our favorite thinkers. I'm your host, Bethany Jenkins, and I run the media and content work at the Veritas Forum, a Christian nonprofit that hosts conversations that matter across different worldviews. We hosted Darryl at a Veritas Forum at NYU in early March 2020.

His talk was called "All Dacious Love," and it was about curiosity and communication. And even though he also talked about racism, he made it clear from the start that deconstructing racism wasn't his main point. This lecture is more about communication and how we communicate with one another better through civil discourse than antagonistic conversation or combat.

And I simply use white supremacy and myself as a black person as two extremes and how we can communicate and how if we do it effectively, the results. Darryl didn't study conflict resolution or communications in any formal way in a classroom or lecture hall. But he is an expert when it comes to cross-cultural communications.

And he gained his expertise by traveling the world, first as the son of diplomats, and then as a jazz musician. I was born in Chicago, Illinois, and I was a child of parents in the U.S. Foreign Service. So starting at the age of three in 1961, I began traveling around the world.

And how it works is, you're stationed in a country with American Embassy for two years.

And at the end of that tour, you come back home here to the States. You might be here for a few months during the summer, or perhaps even a year, and then get reassigned to another country abroad.

And this went on throughout the formative years of my life. Every two years I was in a different country. I went to Howard University and got my degree in music.

And since that time, I've been a professional musician upon graduation in 1980 and touring the world. So when you combine my travels as a child with my travels as an adult, I have been now in a total of 57 countries on six continents, and I've performed in 49 of our 50 states. So all that is to say that I have been exposed to a multitude of colors of skin, ethnicities, religions, cultures, ideologies, persuasions, beliefs, and all of that has helped shape who I've become.

Daryl's experience is not common. In the 1960s, when he began traveling abroad, less than 3% of Americans had passports. Today, that number is about 42%.

But even at our record high of international travel in 2019, only 28% of Americans went abroad that year. And it's his unique experience that helped prepare him for what he does today. One of my very favorite quotes of all time is by Mark Twain.

And it's called the travel quote. And Mark Twain said, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow mindedness. And many of our people need it sorely on these accounts.

Broad wholesome charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime." And that is so true. You know, Bethany, I'll guarantee you, if I had not had all these experiences and been exposed to all these different kinds of people and cultures, I would like to think that I would still be the same person I am today. But would I really, would I be doing all this white supremacist intervention kind of thing? Probably not.

Probably stay as far away from those people as I could. But having been exposed to so many different cultures, I just consider white supremacy another culture. It's not one that I respect or that I want to adhere to or subscribe to.

No. But it is a culture. Daryl told me the story of the first time he met a member of the KKK.

It was just after college and he was gigging with a country music band in Maryland. I like country music. You know, it's no different than the blues.

It's the same three chords. So I was the only black guy in the band and the only black guy usually, you know, wherever we played. We played a place in a town called Frederick, Maryland, which is about an hour and 20 minutes outside of Washington, D.C.

And the name of the joint was the Silver Dollar Lounge.

The Silver Dollar Lounge was known as an all white lounge. Now that does not mean that was written down somewhere, you know, on their door. But, you know, black people did not go there because they did not feel welcome.

And when you go somewhere where you're not welcome and alcohol was being served, it does not make for a good combination. So here he was at the Silver Dollar Lounge with this country band. And after their first set, they took a break.

And I felt somebody come up behind me and put their arm on my shoulder. Now I don't know anybody in here, right? So I'm turning around to see who's touching me. And it was a soft white gentleman, you know, I don't know, maybe 15, 18 years older than me.

Big smile on his face. And he says, man, I sure like your piano plan. And I said, thank you, sir.

I appreciate that. And I shook his hand very friendly. And he says, you know, this is the first time I ever heard a black man play piano like Jerry Lee Lewis.

And, you know, it was not offensive. I was just rather surprised that being as old as he was or older than me, that he did not know the black origin of Jerry Lee Lewis's piano style. And I proceeded to tell him that both Jerry Lee and I were influenced by the same black blues and boogie-woogie piano players, because that's where rock and roll rock ability evolved.

And he was, you know, incredulous. He didn't believe that Jerry Lee invented that and all that. I said, look, man, I know Jerry Lee Lewis personally.

He was a good friend of mine. You know, he's told me himself. He didn't believe that either.

The guy may not have believed Daryl, but he was fascinated by him. He wanted to buy him a drink. Daryl doesn't drink alcohol though, so they toasted to cranberry juice.

And as they raised their glasses, the guy said something that shocked Daryl. He says, you know, this is the first time I ever sat down and had a drink with a black man. Now I'm totally mystified because you understand my background.

I've been all over the world. I've sat down with thousands, literally thousands of white people or anybody else and had a meal, a beverage, a conversation. This guy had never done that.

And I know that there are black people in Frederick because I've seen them. So how did he miss them all? So Daryl asked him how that could be. But the guy looked down at the table and didn't answer him until his buddy elbowed him and said, tell him, tell him.

And he says, I'm a member of the Ku Klux Klan. And I just burst out laughing. Because now I did not believe him.

I know a lot about the Klan. And they don't just come up and hug some black guy and praise their talent and want to hang out and buy him a drink. It doesn't work that way.

So I'm laughing. And he goes inside his pocket, flips through his wallet and handed me his Klan membership card. So I'm looking at this thing.

Whoa. I recognize the Klan emblem, which is a red circle with a white cross and a red blood drop in the center of the cross. This thing was for real.

So I stopped laughing. It wasn't funny anymore, right? But they kept talking. In fact, the guy gave Daryl his number and told him to call whenever he was back at the silver dollar.

And Daryl did many times. And then one day years later, after Daryl had gone back to play in rock and roll, it suddenly dawned on him. That guy from the silver dollar, that guy could be the key to unlocking his lifelong question.

How can you hate me when you don't even know me? Get back in touch with that Klansman, you know, and get him to fix you up with the Klan leader of Maryland, which is known as a grand dragon, state leader, a national leader is an imperial wizard, get him to fix you up with the grand dragon, interview that guy and ask him and then travel around the country interviewing grand dragons and imperial wizards and other members. And that's what Daryl's been doing now for almost 40 years, traveling around the country and interviewing Klansman, trying to understand their motives for joining the KKK, like looking for a place to belong or looking for a family, and also for staying in it, like having lives and jobs that are wound up in it, making it hard to escape. And the result of his work has been astonishing.

Over 200 people have left the KKK and denounced its ideology. I never thought that anybody would change because as a kid, you heard it, I heard it, a leopard does not change his spots. So why would I think that a Klansman would change his Roman hood? Well, I was wrong.

The Klansman or Klans woman is not born with that Roman hood, that ideology. It is learned. So what can be learned can become unlearned.

And when I saw this unlearning happening in front of me, just through the conversations I was having with these people, when it happened one time, I was shocked. I wasn't expecting this guy to quit. And then it happened again and again and again.

I said, you know, I'm onto something. I need to keep doing this. So 37 years later, here I am still doing it, right? So I changed in the regard that I now know that people can

change when I thought they would never change.

Yet he says he's never convinced anyone to change their minds. He says his primary motivation has always been curiosity, not conversion. You cannot force somebody to change their reality.

They will resist you every time because they know what they know and you don't. So if you're trying to attack somebody's reality, you're definitely wasting your time. But what you can do is understanding that one's perception or perspective is one's reality.

What you can do is offer those people a different, a better perception or better perspective. And if they resonate with one of your perspectives, then they will change their own reality. Hi all.

I'm Carly Ashleman, the assistant producer of Beyond the Forum. If you're loving the podcast so far, we want to invite you to continue these important conversations on our Instagram account at Veritas Forum. Follow us throughout our podcast season to access behind the scenes content, exciting giveaways and conversations with other podcast listeners like you.

Thanks for tuning in and enjoy the rest of the show. When I interviewed Daryl over Zoom, there was a clan robe in the background. He has about 60 of these robes and hundreds of other memorabilia and regalia.

T-shirts, swastika flags, clan flags, belt buckles. They've all been given to him by active members who have renounced the ideology. At the forum we hosted with him at NYU, he told the story of the first robe he ever received.

He was talking with a clansman about crime, about black crime. There's one different class that said to me, well you know, they say all black people have a gene in them that makes them violent. I said, what are you talking about? And he said, who's doing all of the drive-bys and carjackings in southeast? You're talking about southeast Washington DC, which is predominantly black, high crime ridden.

There's some whites that live there, but predominantly black. I said, okay, it's black people, but that's what lives there. Who's doing all the crime in Bangor, Maine? White people, because that's what lives there.

I said, you know, you're not considering the demographics. Oh no, no, no, that had nothing to do with it. You all have this gene.

They say, oh, black, oh, that's a gene. I said, look, I'm as black as anybody you've ever seen. I said, I have never done a carjackings or drive-by.

How do you explain that? He didn't even hesitate. He answered me like that. He said,

your gene is latent.

It hasn't come out yet. It almost came out right then. But, you know, I mean, because he was so programmed, you know, from hearing that over and over again, black people, you know, they have this gene.

It just makes them uncontrollable, violent. And so I was speechless, because how do you even bite on that and chew on it? You can't. So I was speechless.

He's sitting there all smother, huh? You see, you're getting the same. So I thought about it. And then I used his body of authority.

I said, well, you know, they say that all white people have a gene in them that makes them a serial killer. He's like, well, how do you figure? I'm like, well, name me three black serial killers. He couldn't do it.

I said, here, I'm going to name one for you. I named one for him. I said, I'm going to give you one.

Just name me two. He couldn't do it. I said, look here.

Charles Manson, John Wayne Gacy, Henry Lee Lucas, Albert DeSable, the Boston Strangler, Ted Bundy, David Berkowitz, son of Sam, on and on. I said, I said, you know, they're all white. I said, son, you are a serial killer.

He said, Darryl, I've never killed anybody. I said, you're a genocetian. Has some time out yet.

And he says, well, that's stupid. I said, well, duh. And I said, yes, it is stupid.

I said, but it's no more stupid for me to say that about you than what you said about me. He didn't concede right then. He got very quiet.

But you can see his wheels are like spinning real fast. And within five months, he left the Klan. His robe was the first robe I ever got.

And I tell you what I did with it. I never had a Klan robe before. I know some of you all are wondering, I put the robe on.

I put the robe on. I'm transparent. I'm a lot.

I put the hood on. And I went and I stood in front of the mirror. I looked at myself.

I looked stupid. So I took it off. Simple as that.

Right now, these items are at Darryl's house in Maryland. And some of them are on loan to an exhibit in Orlando. One day, Darryl hopes to have all of these items housed in a

museum as a testament to the possibility of change and the power of curiosity.

But I had more questions about that conversation with the Klansman. I was struck by how unbothered and patient Darryl seemed to be. So I wanted to ask him about the roles of both anger and urgency in his work.

After all, the morning I interviewed him was the morning all of us were awaiting the verdict in the Derek Chauvin trial. The country was on edge. Is there room for anger or more active protest in the work that's being done? You were so calm.

And I was just curious, where do you see if at all moments of righteous anger, if that is a thing? Absolutely. There's room for anger. I'm angry.

I'm angry about what's going on right now with George Floyd's case. How we channel that anger is what's key. You know, we all have a right to feel anger.

Just like we have a right to feel joy or sadness if something puts us in that direction. But how we channel that is what's important. And we have to learn to navigate our emotions so that we don't cause more damage.

You know, misery loves company. And anger usually begets violence. And that violence can go both ways.

It can, you know, you can go out and get some satisfaction out of punching a Nazi, which was very popular, you know, a couple of years ago. You punch a Nazi was the thing. But I can guarantee you, I don't know anybody who's ever punched the Nazi out of a Nazi.

Daryl, what you're doing takes patience. You have to have the long game to what you're doing because friendship love it takes time. Meanwhile, people are dying on the streets.

People are, you know, we this cause is so urgent. You know what? Cancer has its own timeline. And you got to be patient.

It's not going to leave your body overnight. So it may take those four and six weeks or that's 10 right there in the two weeks in between. That's 12 weeks.

You don't have a choice to where, you know, you build trust and acceptance and these things do take time. And in our society in America, we want things instantly. That's why, you know, we see all these little, what do you call those? Cry on things under the news that gives us, you know, the quick thing.

So we get a sense of what's going on because we don't want to hear what anybody has to say. Just read me the little blurbs. And we've become a culture of instant.

The most important thing that any of us have is our credibility because we only have one opportunity to make a good first impression. The first time I meet them, I'm planting a

seed. But for that seed to bloom, I have to come back and pour some water or nutrients on it, right? Hi again.

This is assistant producer Carly Eshelman. If you've just stumbled upon beyond the forum, we have news for you. There are more episodes.

Be sure to check out the previous two episodes of our first season on The Good Life. Our first episode is an interview with Dr. Lydia Dugdale, a medical doctor who talks about the importance of living and dying well. The second with Kurt Thompson, a psychiatrist and author who shares about how leaning into hard relationships can actually strengthen us.

You can listen to us wherever you listen to podcasts. Just tap the subscribe button to make sure you don't miss another one of our conversations. Now back to the show.

The biggest thing in Darryl's work, the thing he keeps coming back to in all of his stories, is respect. He talked about it at the forum. Respect is paramount.

And I think it is for everybody. Everybody wants to be respected. We don't have to respect what someone says, but we should respect their right to say it.

And that's where we get in trouble when we want to enforce our opinions on somebody else, but yet we don't want to hear theirs. And you know, if you take away somebody's right to express themselves, it won't be long before yours can be taken away to express yours. So that's what I mean by respect.

And he talked about it in our conversation too. He told me that in all of his travels meeting people all over the world, he's discovered that respect is one of the things all of us want. We all are human beings.

And as such, we all want the basic, these five core values in our lives. We all want to be loved. We want to be respected.

We want to be treated fairly. We want to be heard. And we want the same thing for our family as anybody else wants for their family.

I opened our episode today with a news clip about how divided and polarized we are as a nation. But by the time I was done talking with Darryl, I couldn't help but think about how much we all have in common. In Christian theology, this commonality among humans is often called the Imago Dei, the image of God.

This idea isn't about looking like God physically, though Jesus was a human with a body like ours. But about having characteristics like God, we have a self-consciousness, an ability to reason, a capacity for moral choices. We can speak and communicate.

We can work together to create cities and societies and cultures. And according to Christian teaching, we have these unique qualities because God created us to be like

him, all of us, each one. And one of the implications of the Imago Day is that we are to see and treat others with dignity and respect, no matter our differences.

We are all without exception made in God's image. This is a radical teaching because it cuts against any temptation to think or superior to anyone else in any way. Yet it's also a hard teaching because we know we have not lived up to its ideal.

Human history is filled with stories of humans murdering, trafficking, and enslaving other humans. Instead of marveling at our common humanity, we form tribes and cliques to emphasize our differences and achieve a sort of self-centered sense of our own uniqueness. Freud called this a narcissism of minor differences.

And we know the problem isn't just big and global, it's local and personal too. Around 1920, as the story goes, editors at the London Times asked several prominent authors the question, what is wrong with the world? And the English philosopher G.K. Chesterton replied, "Dear sirs, I am. I am what is wrong with the world." In our hearts, you and I know that the temptation to judge and hate other people, people who are different from us, resides within us, and within all human hearts.

But we have a choice. Daryl said in the forum that our choice is between passivity and activity. "Our society can only become one of two things.

It can become number one, that which we sit back and let it become, or it can become number two, that which we stand up and make it become." So what world do you want to live in? How can you embrace the Amago day and others and instead of judging them, take steps toward them, especially when you disagree? At the forum during the Q&A portion, Daryl and NYU professor Jonathan Heit offered five principles for starting a conversation based on Daryl's talk. Heit started the list. One, respect the person and the right to speak.

Rule two, listen, really listen for as long as the person wants to speak. Rule three, the judo move. Don't be offended, be civil as you make your case and as you deepen the relationship.

And Daryl offered a fourth and fifth principle. Rule four, do your homework. Learn as much as you can.

First of all, all even here, we've been talking about race. It doesn't have to be about race. In fact, let's take race off the table.

It could be another hot topic, abortion, nuclear weapons, climate change, the war in the Middle East, the current presidency. These are all hot topics. You're on one side, somebody's on the other side.

Give that person a platform, allow them to air their views. But also, do your homework.

Learn as much as you can about the other person's perspective, where they're coming from, where their ideology is rooted.

They may not like you because you're Jewish or black or whatever, but they will respect you because you have done your homework. And finally, walk across the room. Don't be afraid to walk across the cafeteria.

Oftentimes, in metropolitan cities, such as New York, D.C., Baltimore, Chicago, whatever, you have different people from different backgrounds, ethnicities, religions, all working together in these companies, maybe even working in the same cubicle on the same project. And they get along fine. But what happens at 12 noon? They go downstairs to the cafeteria to eat and blast it with blacks, Hispanics with Hispanics, Asians with Asians.

They self-segregate. Does that mean that they're racist? No, not necessarily. They just feel more comfortable.

Take a chance, walk across the cafeteria and sit with somebody else a couple times a week because you have something to give that person. And that person has something to give you. And it makes you a more well-rounded person.

In the final two episodes of the season, we talk with two people who are a lot like Darryl. First, Dr. Sethian Devados. Like Darryl, Sethian is curious.

But his curiosity has led him in a different direction. And second, Dr. Mira's Lawful. Like Darryl, Mira's Law has had to walk across the room to people who have hated him.

But for next week's episode, we take a slight detour and talk with Dr. Tyler Vanderweel, a Harvard epidemiologist who is trying to quantify human flourishing. He's asking, "If we can measure heart disease to know if our heart is healthy, why can't we measure human flourishing, too?" And his work is on the far end of cutting edge. You won't want to miss it.

Thanks for listening all the way to the end of our episode. This is Carly, the assistant producer. To close, we at Beyond the Forum want to take time to say thanks to all the folks who helped us get this episode together.

Our first thanks goes to our guest, Darryl Davis. We had such a great time interviewing him, and it was so hard figuring out how to cut our 90-minute interview into a 25-minute episode. Thanks, Darryl, for being a great storyteller and communicator.

We also want to thank our amazing production team at PRX. That's Jocelyn Gonzales, Genevieve Sponseler, Morgan Flannery, and Jason Saldana. And thanks to our great colleagues at the Veritas Forum for being our biggest fans and a fantastic team to work with.

And of course, we want to thank the John Tippleton Foundation and all of our donors for their generous support of our conversation. And a final thanks goes out to our launch team and co-sponsors. It's so great to have your support and help as we produce these shows.

That's all for this episode. Thanks for listening to Beyond the Forum.

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