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## Liberal Arts Education: What's The Point? | Dr. Robert George and Dr. Cornel West

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### The Veritas Forum

Dr. Cornel West, Harvard Divinity School and Dr. Robert George, Princeton University, discuss the value of a liberal arts education at The Washington University in St. Louis. • • Please like, share, subscribe to and review this podcast. Thank you!

### Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast, a place where ideas and beliefs converge. What I'm really going to be watching is, which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with? How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this in God.

Today we hear from philosopher Cornel West. He's a professor of arts and science at the University of Washington University in St. Louis. In a conversation titled Liberal Arts Education, what's the point? Now, you, Robbie, come from the Roman Catholic tradition.

I think we can call you a Roman Catholic tradition list and a conservative. You call yourself that. While you, Cornel, come from the progressive Protestant Christian tradition, and I think you'd accept the descriptor "progressive" in certain meanings of that term, at least, and even democratic socialist, which you called yourself.

So many people, I think, would be surprised that you two are such close friends and colleagues. So I just wanted us to start, maybe by asking each of you to say briefly how you got to be friends and such close colleagues and what that friendship has meant to you over the years. Well, that is a question, Marie, that we've been asked before.

But we've never had quite as special an opportunity to answer it as we have tonight. And I'll explain that cryptic sentence just in a minute. But before doing that, I want to thank you and your wonderful team and the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics and the

Veritas Forum for the opportunity to be at this very distinguished university.

It's a real joy. I know I speak not only for myself, but for Cornel to say what joy it is to be here with all of you. We greatly admire what you are doing in the center.

And Provost, we greatly admire what you're doing in the university, especially to hold up the cause, the much battered and maligned cause of liberal arts, education. So we're here because we want to support that. That's the fundamental reason.

We're very grateful for the opportunity to be here. Now, if I say things that are even wilder than what I usually say tonight, it's because I had dental surgery yesterday and I'm on these very powerful painkillers. Tonight, I'm the guy in the matrix.

[LAUGHTER] But Cornel will correct anything. He always does. He'll correct anything that I say that's wrong.

Now, why do I say it's such a special evening to answer the question of how our friendship, our fraternal bond was created? Well, we had known each other at Princeton slightly in the 1990s. We'd been in faculty seminars together, discussion groups over at the Center for Human Values at Princeton University. I always admired Brother Cornel.

When we'd be in these seminars, even when he was getting the wrong answers, he was asking exactly the right questions and getting right to the bottom of things. And pushing aside the ephemera and the trivia and the superficial to get at the heart of the matter. And I admired that from the start.

You can't be around this guy for very long without realizing you're in the presence of a very deep thinker. And anyone who's committed to the life of the mind recognizes a soulmate in that. And so we fell in love.

That's long and short of it. Now, although we had known each other slightly, it was a particular day around about 2006. When during my office hours, Marie, I got a knock on my door.

And I answered the door and there was a student, a wonderful student, one of my best students, a young man named Andrew Perlmutter. He was a religion major. I'd had him in my courses.

Turns out Cornel had had him in his courses. I said, Andrew, what can I do for you? And he said, well, Professor George, I'm involved in a new project here at Princeton. A student project, we're going to create a new magazine on campus, a magazine of culture and politics and the arts called the Green Light.

And in every issue, we want to feature an interview of one professor by another professor. And I said, well, Andrew, that all sounds wonderful. Congratulations on the

new magazine.

Have you raised the money for it? He said, oh, yes. This is Princeton. We've raised the money.

So I said, well, that's fine. Wonderful. How can I help? And he said, well, we've reached out to Professor Cornell West to ask him to do the first interview, to be the interviewer for the first issue.

And we invited him to suggest someone that he would like to interview, and he said he'd like to interview you. No, I said, well, Andrew, I'm very honored. But let me get this right.

I want to make sure I understand correctly. You asked Professor West who we want to interview. You can interview any member of this distinguished faculty.

And he said he wanted to interview me. And Andrew said, that's right. And I said, well, I want you to send a message back to Professor West.

I want you to tell Professor West that Professor George said, but it is I who should be seeking baptism from you. To which Andrew responded, Andrew is a religion major, but he wasn't and a wonderful student. I mean, an A plus plus student.

He wasn't quite up on the scripture side of things. He responded by saying, huh? And I said, well, you just tell him. Tell Professor West that's what Professor George said.

And he said, okay, I will, but will you do it? And I said, well, I would absolutely be honored to do it. So the appointed day came, and here came to my office over in Corwin Hall for the Cornell and Andrew and a photographer. And man, that photographer earned his pay.

He must have taken 2,000, he was snapping. We were yakking and he was snapping. And I tell you, we hit every issue.

We talked about everything. It wasn't an interview. I don't know what you got.

Texas deathmatch of some sort. We were really rocking and rolling over all the deep issues, contemporary political issues, music, you name it. We were getting into everything.

Now, the interview was, he had one of these old-fashioned cassette tape records. The interview was supposed to last for as long as we had the tape, which I think was an hour or maybe two hours or something like that. Well, anyway, we went on for four hours, even after the tape had run out.

The photographer still snapping, the tape had run out. At which point I looked at my watch and I said, well, Brother Cornell, this has been so wonderful. You know, we really

need to get together more often than chat.

You know, we need to make this a regular thing. He said, oh, Brother Robbie, that'd be wonderful. We really need to do that.

And I said, well, why don't you walk me down to my car. I'm just parked down here on Prospect Avenue. He said, well, yeah.

So we walked down together and got to my car and I stood there with my hand on the door handle for about a half hour while we went on back and forth. And then, just providentially, I think the Holy Spirit was involved in this, perhaps, system. We got a note.

The senior members of the faculty got a note from Nancy Malkiel, who was the dean of the college in those days, responsible for our undergraduate curriculum. And she said to the senior faculty, you know, we need more of you to teach freshmen seminars. Freshman seminar is a very important part of our program.

We don't have enough senior faculty teaching. We promise our newly admitted students or the students we're trying to attract to Princeton, trying to get them to not go to Washington. You've come to Princeton.

We attract them by saying, oh, you come and you're immediately even freshman year. You'll be working with the most senior distinguished members of our faculty. And the trouble is that's not really happening that much.

So we'd appreciate some of you senior people being willing to teach freshmen seminars. Well, the light bulb went off over my head. And I thought, wouldn't it be wonderful if Brother Cornell and I could get together every week for a freshman seminar and teach 16 or 18 of these wonderful bright men and women.

And so I got in touch with Cornell and said, I don't know if you've looked at your mail. Cornell sometimes misses those things. He's busy.

He's busy. And the boot sees on the phone. We got all kinds of stuff.

So, I said, you know, we really ought to do a freshman seminar together. And he said, oh, Brother Robbie, that's a great idea. Let's do that.

What should it be about? So I had the idea. Well, let's do a kind of great books approach. We have 12 week semesters at Princeton.

Let's do a book a week. You pick six of them and I'll pick six of them. And let's make them books that were important in our own intellectual and spiritual odysseys and no secondary sources.

We're not going to teach philology classes. We're not going to -- we want the students to actually engage the authors in as direct a manner as possible. So we ended up teaching Sophocles, Antigone, Plato, Zgorgias, I think.

It was Gorgias that semester. St. Augustine's Confessions and all the way at Marx and Hayek and John Dewey, a Democratic faith CS, Lewis, the abolition of man. And it was just a wonderful experience.

And for that experience, we had -- and then we just went on to do it. And then we were taking our show on the road. And then we started writing together.

And it's just been a beautiful, wonderful thing. Something far beyond a friendship, I have to say. I'm going on for which I'm so grateful.

[ Applause ] And for all that, we have Andrew Perlmutter to thank. And if anything we have done is of any value to anybody in this room, I would ask you to join me in thanking the parents of Andrew Perlmutter. For Andrew Perlmutter, they are here.

Mr. and Mrs. Perlmutter. [ Applause ] He's off getting rich in a Silicon Valley. Tell him to remember Princeton.

Brother Cornell? Brother Andrew, he's very special. Brother, very much so. But I want to begin first by saluting you, my dear sister Marie.

What a magisterial scholar you are. What a visionary administrator you are. Of course, you're a magnificent colleague.

And with you and Brother Lee, I can't imagine a more high quality duo committed to the life of the mine in the Academy than Marie and Lee. Let's give it up for both of these two. Both of these.

That's so true. I'm telling the truth. I'm telling the truth.

I want to salute my dear brother, Holden, he's from John Coltrane country, North Carolina. The Elonius Monk country. We were talking about those two giants, but his leadership as well, his beloved wife Patty is the fanist, new faculty member here.

I see my dear sister Valerie, distinguished theorist that she is, sister Debra, sister Sandy, all of you all who were facilitated are coming. We have a good time wherever we go. [ Laughter ] We could be off.

He'd have a little coffee, I'd have a little cognac. [ Laughter ] I talk for hours. Our families are so very close.

They're melted together in that way. That's why he's not really just a friendship. He's really my brother.

I love this brother. And I think all of us have to recognize the ways in which love and respect are not reducible to politics. That you can revel in somebody's humanity even when he's wrong sometimes.

[ Laughter ] Oh, indeed, and you can learn from somebody you have agreement with. But most importantly, that my dear brother hasn't rich in my life in a magnificent way. Not just intellectually, but morally spiritually.

My beloved daughter, Zaytun, is in many ways a niece and he's an uncle. And I could go on and on and on. But I think given where we are now in the culture, it's really going to be more and more a question of will we muster the courage to think for ourselves, the hope for ourselves, and to love for ourselves.

You see, we should never ask anybody for permission. That's who you love. Or ask people permission as to what you think.

Or ask people permission. But what you're home for. You see, I come from a people, hated for 400 years and talked to the world so much about love.

And you can't love unless you're free. You can't be free unless you're willing to be courageous and take a risk and be vulnerable. But go to the edge of life's abyss and then decide who you are, which is the same.

What we try to do, find our voices. That's why I start with jazz. Can't be a jazz woman.

Like we just lost one of the Nancy Wilson. Unless you find your voice. But we live in a culture of too many echo chambers.

Copy this, conform to this, adjust to this, accommodate to that. Where are the originals? Not the copies, but the real things. Who think for themselves, love for themselves.

And hope for themselves. Now we know you can't do that without tradition. Traditions are inescapable and unavoidable.

But traditions are something that you both must recover and you must recover from. We can just let that sit for a while. Oh yeah.

Oh no, we are Washington University. That spirit of T.S. Eliot and his grandfather up here. Yeah, William Greenleaf.

Eliot, that's for real. But most importantly, it's about trying to come together at the deepest human level. That Latin, humando, which means burial, where beings on the weight of burial do will we have the courage to think, to love, to laugh, to connect the way in which we decide to do it.

Based on integrity, honesty, decency, and generosity. It's one of the greatest

achievements in life. Is to be a person of integrity.

And I come from the prophetic legacy of Jerusalem. So I'm not that impressed by Alexander the Great. My conception of greatness is he or she who is willing to serve, sacrifice, try to empower and enable others to begin full and end up empty because you've emptied yourself with your cultivated gifts to make others and the world better than what you found it.

That sounds so simplistic, but it is profoundly subversive in our historical moment. And it never, ever, ever goes out of fashion. Truth, beauty, goodness, love, justice, integrity, no matter what the fads of fashion, those never go out of fashion.

And if we can't recover those, then we slide down a slippery slope to chaos. All the polarization, all the balcony, all the hatred and contempt and envy and resentment and so forth and so on. How do we push it back? Brother Robbie and I just out of both love and friendship decided, let's take us on a road.

We've been the chocolate sides of Dallas. Erica Badu's kids. And Husco, you see.

We've been on vanilla sides of town, sometimes in very high places with big money. Same challenge, integrity, honesty, decency, what kind of human being you're going to be before the worms get your body. Well, I think you're already talking about the values that we really want to get into.

And I want us to get into this question of liberal arts education because I know both of you have a lot to say. And you've got a room here filled with students and faculty and people who care deeply about education. So I guess I would ask you all, since you did teach a course together, maybe you want to talk a little bit about that.

But really more broadly, what you do see as the point and purpose of a liberal arts education? Well, we've talked together on a number of occasions. It wasn't just a one-off thing. Once Andrew brought us together, we kept it rolling.

What's the point of liberal arts education? It's not to make you rich. That probably doesn't surprise you. It's not to make you impressive at cocktail parties with your knowledge of Shakespeare and ability to quote Sophocles.

It's not to give you high status or standing. Now, there's nothing wrong with any of those things. I like entertaining cocktail party conversation.

I want you to get a great job and make a lot of money. Remember, wash you. Did I get that right? Yeah, I think I got that right.

And in itself, there's nothing wrong with seeking to elevate yourself, seeking to be respected, to have high standing, to be a person who has influence, use it for the good.

But those are not the fundamental purposes of a liberal arts education. Now, I'm going to put it to you in the polite way.

Cornell's not going to be so polite. Here's the polite answer. The purpose of a liberal arts education is to enable the learner, enable you and me, to lead an examined life.

The purpose of a liberal arts education is to unsettle us, to cause us to question our beliefs and to form our beliefs based on reflection, deliberation, reason, judgment. Which means that we always have to be open to the possibility that we are what? Wrong. Absolutely.

Which means we have to recognize that the hardest part of all are own fallibility. Now, if I ask and I won't do it, I don't want to put anybody on the spot. If I ask, is there anybody in this room who is certain that he or she is not wrong about anything you believe? No answer would go up.

You all recognize your fallibility. We up here recognize our fellow. I know right now I am wrong about some things.

Cornell keeps telling me that. But here's the problem. I don't know which ones they are.

There's a little paradox here. If you take me through all my beliefs, each one I hold under the description of being true. That's why I believe it.

I didn't believe it was true. I wouldn't believe it at all. And yet I know they can't all be right.

I know I have to be wrong about some things. So how do I deal with that? Well, if I value truth above opinion, if I value truth in the way Socrates values truth and teaches us to value truth as being something so precious that we're willing to give up the complacency of being settled, the ease of being settled to get at the truth, then what I need is an interlocutor. He may be a living human being.

Maybe somebody I'm reading in a book. I need someone who will challenge me, who will unsettle me. And not just in the trivial beliefs, not just in the secondarily important beliefs, but in my deepest, most cherished, even identity forming beliefs.

Now that's hard. That's hard to open yourself up to that kind of examination and self-examination. And that's because we are naturally complacent and comfortable with our opinions.

We build our sense of self out of those opinions. We build communities with other people who are like-minded and share opinions. And we value those relationships and we don't want to put them at risk.

We want to be known as a team player, as a right-thinking person. Whether that is



actually a left-thinking person or a right-thinking person. We want to be a person who thinks the correct things for our group.

And we certainly have difficulty imagining what it would even be like to be the kind of person who disagrees with us. Because we kind of don't like those kinds of people. We think there's something wrong with those kinds of people.

So that recognition of fallibility is critical to one of the virtues that we need to lead the examined life, which is what liberal arts education is all about. And that is the virtue of humility, intellectual humility. The recognition, not just notionally-yeah, I must be wrong about something.

But the deep existential conviction that I could very well be wrong-I am certainly wrong about some things-I could very well be wrong about some important things. The kinds of things that are so important that we wrap our emotions tightly around them. Notice that about us human beings.

All of us, we wrap our emotions very tightly around our convictions. Now in itself again, that's not a bad thing. If we didn't have some emotional commitment to our convictions, we wouldn't do anything.

We wouldn't get the baby fed, get the children off to school. We wouldn't pursue our vocation, our calling in life. We wouldn't work for causes that we believe in.

So there's nothing wrong in principle with having our emotions wrapped around our convictions even fairly tightly. But if we wrap them too tightly, we become dogmatists. We become tribal.

We tend to think anybody who disagrees with me or my group or my tribe or my clan is either a fool or a fraud. In any event, it's a bad person. And we demonize.

Now there's something else we need. We're talking about this earlier today. There's something else we need if we are to have that virtue of courage, which we need if we're to lead the examined life.

Another virtue that's got to be imparted by a true liberal arts education. And that's the virtue of courage. Not the courage to face somebody else.

The courage to confront yourself. The courage to be your own best critic. The courage to render yourself vulnerable to changes even in deep conviction.

And this means you actually have to buy into an old adage that is profoundly true but very difficult for us really to believe. And that is the adage that's better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. That means we're not after happiness.

The point of a liberal arts education is not to make you happy. At least in the modern

contemporary sense of happiness which connotes a pleasant state of mind of a smile on your face that might be induced by the stuff I'm taking right now. Or get it on Bob Noeser's Experience Machine.

Remember that corner? The Experience Machine gives you all the pleasant experiences. But you don't actually do anything. No.

That's not the goal. Now if we take the richer, older conception of happiness, what Aristotle called *Eudaimonia*, the flourishing of the human being. The all-round integral fulfillment of the human being.

Now we're getting closer to it. But that means we're willing to lead a life in which we don't rest complacently. Where we're challenging and being challenged.

Where we're challenging ourselves and being our own best critic. And we don't have the satisfaction of having a dogma. Now this is not against religion.

There's a place for dogmas. But it means that even your religious beliefs have to be open to question. We can't shut down the person who wants to challenge them.

Even on the basis that my most fundamental identity is formed by my religion. We need to be open because even about things like that we could be wrong. Now some people here, Cornell and I say, what I'm saying, and they say that's elitist.

That kind of education, that kind of pursuit of the examined life. Trying to give students more than information and skills that will prepare them for a career. But something more, what Cornell calls "pidea".

Deep education that immerse them in the great existential questions of meaning and value. That's elitist because after all, who but the top sliver can afford that. Yeah, the kids who go to Washington, you or Princeton or Harvard or Stanford or Yale or Williams or Swarthmore.

They can. But what about the great massive people? Even those who go to colleges. What about the people at community colleges? Well, I want everybody to lead the examined life.

Now I know not everybody can have an education, can afford an education, can afford the time or the money to go for a true liberal arts education of the sort that's offered here. But there's no reason even at our community college, even in our high schools, that we cannot impart to our young people more than vocational skills, more than information and skills. Those are important, those are valuable, getting a job is important, I want that to happen to you, I want you to have good jobs, I want you to have high status, all that stuff.

But there can be more for everybody. But it takes a commitment on the part of the intellectual class and on the part of the leadership class in any society to say, we're going to make that available. Even if in limited ways in most cases, we're going to make that available in all of our colleges and universities.

Even in community colleges, a student who may be doing a vocational course in something like nursing, which is a wonderful profession. Still has distribution requirements in things like humanities and social sciences. Every single one of those courses should contribute to making that individual a lover of wisdom, a philosopher in the literal sense, a lover of wisdom of philosophia, a lover of wisdom, and a lifelong learner, and a critical thinker.

And his or her own best critic. Now, what are we experiencing now in higher education? Well, the economics of it, the overall economic system, the pressures that we are experiencing from those who support higher education, God bless them, we love them, what we do without them. The pressure of parents, the pressure kids sometimes bring on themselves, is to instrumentalize, professionalize, move in the direction of vocational education.

I notice sometimes, even when you have people who are defending the humanities, they will defend them by instrumentalizing them. They'll say, "Well, you should be a philosophy major, an English literature major, a history major. Those are good, even though they're not tied directly to vocations, because they will teach you to be a critical thinker, and that's what the investment banks and the hedge funds are looking for." Now, again, if you want to work for a merchant bank or an investment bank or a hedge fund, that's fine.

I'm not here to criticize that. But that's, again, not fundamentally what liberal arts education, humanistic education is all about, and that's not fundamentally its purpose. The purpose truly is the examined life.

And the examined life is not just a life for guys with PhDs who teach courses and run around the country preaching. It's for plumbers and carpenters and nurses and insurance salesman and corporate executives and hedge fund managers and everybody. And by the way, as hard as it is not to instrumentalize our liberal arts education, we shouldn't instrumentalize it, even to things that we think are essential.

It's the things that we think are especially noble. Say, "Well, if I'm a philosophy major, that'll teach me to be a critical thinker, and then I'll be a better social justice activist." Fine, be a social justice activist. That's great, but don't instrumentalize your education.

You need to be wrestling and be being challenged by Plato and by Shakespeare and by Jane Austen. It's not instrumentalized to anything. Americans have a lot of trouble with this.

And a lot of our success has been because we tend to be very practical people. We have a kind of utilitarian approach to life, and it's paid off big time economically, and we shouldn't look down on that or say that's a bad thing or deprecate it. But we need to keep it in perspective.

We need to sharpen up our ability to think about what the ends should be and not just think about means, not just think about instruments. We're great at instrumental reasoning, and that's wonderful. But how do we think about the things that are not instrumental, the things that are intrinsic in their value, like truth and love of truth, like friendship, like the critical appreciation of art and music, like the development of profound skills, whether in ballet or chess or football or a range of other sorts of things.

What about faith, religious faith, faith in God? What about those things that are not reducible to means to other things, but are the ends to which other things are means? It's hard for us to give that up, but a liberal arts education, well done, will help us to do it. It'll give us information, it'll give us intellectual skills, but it will also impart to us an inculcate in us, virtues like humility, virtues like courage, that will enable us to take on the tough, but ultimately most rewarding task of all of living the examined life. Absolutely, absolutely no problem.

Yeah, liberal arts education is fundamentally about learning how to die. I said I'd put it politely. True, I mean, because it raises a question, what is a good life? It raises a question, what does it mean to be human, what kind of person will I choose to be in my short time in time and space? And no one gets out of time and space alive.

That's one death sentence. And learning how to die, and we talk about this all the time in our classes, learning how to die is mustering the courage to examine yourself, criticize yourself, mustering the courage to examine your society, and criticize your society and world. And there is no growth, no development, there is no maturity without that kind of examination.

And when you let a certain assumption go, a certain prejudice go, that's the form of death. Let the bells ring for a little bit. I appreciate that timing.

Because rebirth, renewal, regeneration, intellectual and more awakening, that's what liberal arts education is about. We live in the culture that has reduced wisdom to smartness. Everybody won't be so smart.

It's true. You can hardly watch television, watch the number of times, folk on television, use the word obviously, obviously, obviously, obviously, obviously. That is a signifier that they're part of the smart set.

But most of us are not obvious at all. We're looking for an argument. Let the phones be smart.

We got to be wise. Philo Sofia, love of wisdom. The greatest of all early modern European philosophers, Montaigne said, to philosophize is to learn how to die.

To learn how to die, unlearn slavery. How do we be free? Well part of the challenge here is James Baldwin's letter to his nephew. The most powerful sentence for me in that letter is don't comma be afraid.

That's what he tells his young person. It reminds me of Mary Ellen Pleasant, the first black woman millionaire before Madam J Walker. She gave John Brown almost a million dollars to live on for ten years.

She used to start every lecture. I'd rather be a corpse than a cow where. A Martin Luther King, Jr. I'd rather be dead than afraid.

She used to be a woman, a culture of not just escalating greed and hatred, but fear and the manipulation of those fears. Usually the scapegoat, the most vulnerable, like our brothers and sisters on the border, poor people, working people, a brown, a black, a red, or gay, or lesbians or trans. Any vulnerable people are so easy to do that because it doesn't take any courage to do that.

The courage has to come in a so-craic way, raising the questions such that you willing to give up certain assumptions in order to learn how to live. Now I come out of the prophetic legacy of Jerusalem. Well Paul says Christians must die daily.

That was the eulogy of Dorothy Day for Martin Luther King, Jr. April 5th, 1968, Catholic worker. The Romans King, Jr. learned how to die daily. What was it about that brother? He wasn't a god.

He wasn't a deity. But he questioned himself. He grew.

He matured. And he loved enough to learn how to empty himself, to donate himself, to give himself. When he was in the coffin, the doctor said this is the body of a 69 year old and he was only 39 years old.

It was like the end of an all green concert. But a brother can't walk or breathe because he's giving it all. We just lost brother Nipsey.

He learned how to die before he died because he gave so much. He grew. He read.

He learned how to laugh and love and sacrifice. That reality is getting weaker and weaker. That's why to talk about liberal arts education is not some abstract academic conversation for the chattering classes who want to feel as if they're so smart on the way to being rich.

Liberal arts education means whether in fact we are going to be able to sustain the best of our traditions and keep alive a fragile experiment in democracy against the backdrop

of our empire, the backdrop of our predatory capitalism, the backdrop of our white supremacy and so forth. That's what that state. That's what that state.

And when you think about piety and piety is not on critical deference to dog, but it's not blind obedience to doctrine. Going back to Plato's Euthofro. On the John Dewey, on the George Saniama.

It's keeping track of the sources of good in our lives and what we fall back on our dependence on those rich, deep, courageous voices of the dead. And they die twice if we don't keep it alive because their after lives are no longer operating in us. It's like standing in front of your mother's coffin.

You got to ask yourself the question. Now, who am I really all that love she put in me? How will the best of her afterlife be operative in my life? Well, I love the truth and beauty and goodness at the level that she did. And if I didn't, that's all right.

I failed. Beckett is right. Try again.

Fail again. Fail better. That's the lapse.

Protestant. Irish brother. Samuel Beckett.

He understood what it is to learn how to die in order to learn how to live better. And the only way we do it is by means of example, we can't just pontificate and transmit propositions to people. It's like the conclusion of a practical Aristotelian syllogism.

It's not a proposition. It's a life lived. It's a way of being in the world.

It's actions, deeds, practices, always fallible and finite, but still trying to make available this courage that Brother Robbie is talking about. And we can't do it alone. I mean, we got these myths in America about being self-made.

I said, "Yeah, I guess you gave birth to yourself too." Well, you just don't know. I've been independent for a long time. Okay.

Okay. All right. You picked up your language too on your own.

So, childishly American, fetishizing this autonomous individualism. Individuality back to jazz. Voice crucial.

Different from childish individualism. Individuality always comes from a woman's womb. A lover family and community and moss and synagogue and church and music and sports and so forth.

And teachers and professors and brothers falling back to be accountable and answerable. You know that this issue of liberal arts is probably one of the most

fundamental of our time, but it's true for every generation. Because every generation consists of human beings.

And this is where Brother Robbie and I have deep philosophical debates about this because I'm very Kierkegaardian and Mr. St. Kierkegaardians. With Chekhovian. Very, um, Wallace Thermonian.

Which is about how wretched we really are. What it means to be the kind of primates with language obsessed with power and status and honor and territory. Of course, as a Christian, we just call it sin and keep moving.

It's called it sin and just keep moving and keep moving. But there's also a dignity and a sanctity because we're all made in the image and likeness of a God. Which means we have potentiality.

Which means no moment of our wretchedness fundamentally defines fully who we are. And it provides us with the possibility of brothers and sisters of different colors and genders and nations and sexual orientations. Because they made the same image and likeness.

No matter how stuck they are at a particular moment. Liberal arts education. How do you learn how to live? And if we end up like Hamlet.

One of the smartest of all literary protagonists in the history of the modern world. But never learns how to love. Meaning what? Can't share.

No vulnerability. Can't take a risk. No joy.

Just pleasure. And so much of culture is a joyless quest for insatiable pleasure. Oh, that's so much of American culture these days.

Manipulation, titillation, stimulation, superficial, spectacle. And our young people, unfortunately, are bombarded with it every day. And that's one of the differences between Brother Robin.

Even when I think he's much younger than we are. But you write on the age in terms of the generation. Need a younger generation.

Good God. I just don't know sometimes how young brothers and sisters of all colors really make it in this market driven culture. Obsessed with spectacle and image and money, money, money and status.

And not really able to sustain those long, deep connections that produce joy rather than pleasure. The enduring realities of what it is to be human. Even in the music you can see it.

I got if I was looking for a soundtrack for black freedom and worker freedom and women's freedom, poor people's freedom. Where would I go? Give me Curtis Mayfield. Give me Luther Vandross.

Give me the dramatics and the Delphonics. Because there's a sweetness and the tenderness that's integral to learning how to die in order to learn how to live. And that sweetness and tenderness is more and more being lost.

It's all about control, conquest, subordination. I always read and try a little tenderness. That's not saying my name, say my name, say my name.

Very different orientation of the world in terms of how you live your life. Liberal arts education is inseparable from wrestling with those questions. And every human being has to come to terms with how many STEM courses you take.

I don't give you on the block in the alley. A living high in some gated community. You have to come to terms with deaths in various forms.

Disease, disappointment, disillusionment, despair, despondency. Catastrophe is on its way to your house. And you're going to have to come to terms with forms of catastrophe.

Then you discover who you really are. No matter how much money you have, no matter how much status you have, how much education in the narrow formal sense you have. And so thank God that you all are wrestling with.

Washington University has a very rich history of raising these kinds of questions. But Washington University itself needs to be Socrates too. It needs to be questions too.

It needs to be critically interrogated too. It needs to be force, force, force. In a public sphere where we can agree to disagree.

Intensely. And yet still end up recognizing the human beings who would disagree. See, it's not deities on the top and demons on below.

It's human beings who would disagree. And you also discover that you have a number of things you do agree about. Well, thank you both for these answers.

I want to ask you one more question before we open it up. And it really follows. Yes, yes, yes.

And I think it's on a lot of people's minds which is campus protests. And the various campus protests that there have been. We talked about this a little earlier today.

But I wanted you to have a chance to talk about it with our audience. That in 2017, one of the big campus protests was when Charles Murray was shouted down at Middlebury College. I'm sure a lot of folks remember that.



And the two of you issued a joint statement after that which really supported free speech on campus. And that's been a very strong position you both take and even despite your disagreements. And there have been a lot of different types of campus protests.

You had a protest of sorts that played out in the student newspaper over conservatives. And are they welcome on campus? A lot of the protests have to do with racism, I think. And folks who really don't want racist speakers coming.

I just wanted to give you all a chance to talk briefly about campus protests. You know, what's behind some of those and how can we move beyond this impasse that we seem to be at in those? So we can wait for the bells again on that. No, no, no, no.

We got eight times to go. You may have figured out when I'd go to briefly. Oh, Lord, Lord, Lord, this is true.

I want to say that I agree with an awful lot of what Cornell said, especially the true part. So I just thought that was great. [laughter] I'd problematized some things, but the idea, which, you know, I tried to put in the polite sense of leading the examined life and Cornell brought home with learning to die, being the point of liberal arts education.

When you get hold of that deep truth, you're there. You're there. And that point forward, it's just the socratic enterprise of carrying it out.

Now, at Middlebury, not only were two speakers, Charles Murray and the progressive professor, Alison Stanger, who was his interlocutor for the evening, not only were two speakers shouted down, not only were they not permitted to express their views and make their arguments, not only was the audience denied an opportunity to hear these competing points of view. Alison Stanger was assaulted and suffered a concussion and other injuries, from which she has been recovering for two years. I was just happened to be with her at a dinner in Washington, D.C., last week, and she has now fully recovered.

But that's two years, and she only recovered recently. She was very severely injured. And we, eggheads, we professors, in electrical, rather like our heads, so brain injuries are really bad from our point of view.

And it was a terrible thing that happened. Now, Cornell and I put out the statement, I believe it was March of 2017, and it was about campus, free speech and protests, but it was also about civic life. The statement was called "Democracy, Truth Seeking, and Freedom of Thought and Expression." We think that democratic norms, as well as the norms of truth seeking that Governing University, require that there be robust free speech.

Not because people have some abstract autonomy-based right to say whatever they want. This is not some dogmatic, doctrinaire libertarian argument. No.

We believe in the importance of free speech, both for the conduct of republican democracy and for the truth seeking enterprise in the university, for the simple reason that without freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of discussion, you cannot seek the truth and you cannot run a democracy. You can run other kinds of public orders. You can have a despotism.

Maybe it'll be lucky. It'll be a benign despotism. What you cannot have is a democracy.

What you cannot have is what our founding fathers preferred to use the term "republic" or "republic." Now, why is that the case? Well, it's the case because both democracy, republican government, and truth seeking, require the dialectical engagement of truth seekers and of citizens. They both require that we seek the truth, that we seek justice together, knowing that in the nature of things, these are difficult issues on which reasonable people disagree and there's no hope at getting to the truth the matters, if the interlocutors are dogmatists. If they're not open to challenge, open to correction, open to changing the minds.

If they're not exhibiting those virtues that I indicated earlier and that Cornell indicated are at the heart of liberal arts education, both what we're trying to practice and what we're trying to teach our students to practice as lifelong learners. It just won't work. Now, does that mean we're against protests? No, we say in the letter that the right to protest is sacrosanct.

Because that's free speech too. Now, that doesn't mean the right to shout down somebody so that that person can't be heard. That doesn't mean the right to hold signs up so that the speakers visage is blocked and you can't see them.

No, that's not free speech. But the right peacefully to protest, that is sacrosanct. Where would we be without that? Think of King's protests in Albany and in Birmingham and places like that.

But we also say this in the letter and let me commend it to you for reflection this evening. No matter, I might not agree with it, but I ask you to think about it. If you're protesting, if that's your focus, if you're out there chanting and going around with signs and so forth, what you can't be doing at the same time is listening.

So if there's somebody with something worth saying, you're going to miss that something. And it will be especially a bad loss for you if what you miss is something that would have challenged your fundamental beliefs on this issue or that or in that domain or this. That's what you need.

That speaker who is challenging you, that speaker's not your enemy. That's your best friend if you value truth above opinion. If you would rather get to the truth, even if that means abandon an opinion that you're complacent with that makes you somebody in

your group that is part of the agreed upon principles of this friendship or something like that.

But if you really are socratic, if you're a truth seeker, that's your friend. You regard that person as your friend who's challenging you. John Stuart Mill, whom Cornell and I have both admired and taught, points out that there are really three possibilities when people disagree.

One is that I'm wrong and let's say Cornell's right. I like that. I'll leave for the moment.

Well in that case, if I'm listening to his argument, I moved from error to truth or near to the truth. He's given me the greatest benefit anybody could have. If truth has the value that Socrates and that I and that Brother Cornell think it has, what a gift that is.

Now there's no possibility. I'm partially right and partially wrong and he's partially right and partially wrong. Well in that case, I still want to listen, not protest.

I still want to listen. I still want to not just tolerate and hear. I want to actually listen and engage so that I can move the part that I'm in error in over into the truth column.

But then there's the third possibility. I'm right and he's wrong. Now why should I tolerate his speech? More than tolerate, why should I listen to, why should I engage him? If I'm confident that I'm right about this, Mill has a very important point here and it's so often made.

And it's so often missed. Even if I am right, I will benefit from deepening my appreciation of why I am right. By listening to the arguments advanced by an intelligent, well informed, well disposed person who doesn't see it the same way I do.

You might be able to move me from merely knowing that something is the case to knowing or knowing more deeply why it is the case. How it is the case? What the larger, deeper, maybe even lasting significance of it being the case is. I'm benefited even if we're in a conversation where he doesn't move me at all.

I remain confident that I'm right. He still deepened my understanding. This dialectical, dialogical engagement has deepened me understand, my understanding.

So there's absolutely nothing to lose. So then the question becomes, well aren't there limits though? Aren't there limits to free speech? Well there are some limits obviously. Incitement is one of them.

Incitement to violence is a limit. And are there borderline cases? Absolutely, we all know that there are borderline cases. In our jurisprudential tradition and in the jurisprudential traditions of other nations that we regard as basically free nations where political freedom is respected, the tendency is to err on the side of freedom.

But there are limits. But incitement means something pretty immediate. That is immediate, which created by this speaker that the mob is going to go out and attack the corn farmers.

That was the classic case of the corn farmers have the corn. The mob is hungry. I get up and I incite the mob to attack the corn farmers and they go out and they kill a couple of corn farmers.

That's incitement. That's what our law understands is incitement. That's what our philosophical tradition ordinarily means by incitement.

So yes, there are limits. But there's another limit that's important but more subtle. You want high quality interlock in tours.

Exactly. There is no value in listening to a demagogue. There is no value in listening to a rant or a shout or whether that person is on the right or on the left.

So in our statement, Cornell and I pointed out that we should be prepared to engage and to engage respectfully. Anybody who is prepared to do business in the proper currency of intellectual discourse, a currency consisting of evidence, reasons and arguments. If a person is prepared to do business in that currency, we should be willing to engage.

Even on issues where we're absolutely sure we're right, even on issues that we think are terribly, terribly, terribly important, even on issues where we think fundamental justice is at stake, even where issues we think life and death is at stake. I need to listen to my colleague, Cornell's former colleague, Professor Rivet's former colleague at Princeton, Peter Singer, even when he defends a position on the morality of killing newborn infants in Fantasan. Not just abortion in Fantasan.

I need to listen to him and defend his right to advocate his view on our campus, which I have done when the disability rights people have come to Princeton and chained themselves to the gates and demanded that Professor Singer have his tenure revoked and be terminated at the university because Professor Singer is not a demagogue. He's not a shout or a hater. I think he is profoundly wrong on the permissibility of killing newborn infants or severely cognitively disabled people or what have you.

And yet, I have learned more from engaging with Peter, listening to his arguments which are serious, trying to figure out where the defect, if there is a defect in those arguments, where that defect is, trying to formulate my own responses to his very probing questions. I've learned more than I have from people on my own side than just talking with people on my own side. His challenges have educated me as they educate our students.

Now, do I hope everyone will adopt his view? No, I adopt my view. Don't kill babies. But do I think he has a right and not just again an abstract right? I think he contributes

something to the intellectual enterprise.

Do I want him to be protested? No, I want him to be listened to. Here's the problem. We tend to assume that people who disagree with us about fundamental matters, about life and death matters, about what matters of existential importance matters, of fundamental justice, human rights, they disagree with us, they must be bad people.

They're not just wrong, they're demonic. We demonize. And that means we close our minds.

And we lose. And the educational process loses. I hope here at Washington University you are confronted you students, whether those of you who are progressives and those of you who are conservatives and those of you who are in the middle and those of you who don't fit anywhere on the spectrum, I hope you are confronted on a regular basis, not just by visiting speakers, but by members of your faculty representing a wide spectrum of views.

If you are progressives, I hope there are conservatives here who will confront you. If you are conservatives, I'm guessing there are some progressives who will confront you. But if you're not being confronted and being challenged even in your fundamental beliefs or if you're being allowed to be complacent, the provost is sitting right up here.

You might want to ask him for your parents money back. Because you're not being educated, not in the liberal arts ideal sense of education that Washington, you and Princeton and Harvard and these other places profess to be committed to. The truth of the matter is, and here's the profound, difficult thing for all of us to believe because we're so invested in our own convictions.

We have wrapped our emotions so tightly around our convictions. The fact of the matter is on all the interesting issues certainly today, reasonable people of goodwill can and do disagree. There are arguments to be made on the competing sides.

And if we just define a hater or bigot or bad guy or fool or ignoramus or elitist so broadly, whether on the right or the left, we define those things so broadly that we exclude anybody who doesn't basically agree with us. We have fallen into conformism groupthink. We've given up on the Socratic enterprise.

We're wasting our time. We're going through the motions of a liberal arts education. Absolutely.

We've noted and we'll open it up for voices because we won't call in response. But I think Brother Robbie's point about quality is very important. Very important indeed that the Washington University, for example, only got a set number of weeks each and every semester.

You have a semester system rather than quarter, each and every semester. So the last thing somebody says, well, we want to bring in a right-winged brother or sister. Fine.

Bring in the most sophisticated right-wing thinker who has arguments that's going to push people. You don't have three years to have quality, mediocrity, and then just downright dumbness. You don't have time for that.

You want to be able to engage the most powerful perspective from the right. Same is true from the Senate. Same is true from the left.

So you have to be able to cultivate capacities for judgment to bring in the voices that will present the kind of arguments that will unsettle others. And one does not in any way have to accept conclusions to learn something from someone in arguments when they disagree with you. And take, for example, the curriculum itself.

We were talking about a debate here about whether conservatives are welcome or not. You said, wait a minute, conservatives are welcome. Are you reading Plato at Washington University? You can't get more right-wing than Plato.

We're not going to ban Plato just because most of us would disagree with his conclusions. It is his free play of mind, the quality of the arguments, the give and take that we engage in. He's not going to end up with democratic conclusions.

He's going to end up with freedom conclusions. The man was right-wing in the most fundamental way. Dostoevsky, my God, one of the finest of the finest of the finest, shot through with anti-Jewish hatred.

Hard to find a Russian writer, except check off who's not shot through with anti-Jewish hatred. Do we stop reading Dostoevsky? We keep track of that evil and also see his free play of mind in Brothers Carol. Brothers Carol Mausoff, crime and punishment.

David Hume, part of the finest English philosopher in the language that we speak, white supremacists deep, used by intellectuals to defend the Confederacy. Does that mean we lose sight of the free play of mind in David Hume because he's deeply white supremacy? I can go on and on and on. Our own declaration of independence, what does it say about our precious indigenous brothers and sisters? Savages, savages, savages, blood, shame on you, Brother Thomas Jefferson, 200 and some years later in retrospect.

Does that mean we can't learn anything from a slaveholder like Thomas Jefferson? Of course we can, but we can stay in contact with the evil of what he said about our indigenous brothers and sisters. Let alone what he said in action with black people and always keep in mind what will they say about us a hundred years from now? Where were they giving in pending ecological catastrophe? Where were they giving in pending nuclear catastrophe? When you moved into the chocolate side of town and saw those decrepit schools and indecent housing and levels of unemployment and

underemployment and on and on and on. Where were they? What I do love about the younger generation at your best is that at least you're on fire.

You're not numb. You're not callous. You're not indifferent.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Hester used to say indifference to evils more insidious than evil itself becomes a whole way of life with all these defense mechanisms that don't allow us to care. The indifference is the one trait that makes the very angels weak. William James used to say at least if folk, the young folk say we're on fire, but then the question will be that fire for protest which we affirm unequivocally.

But affirm in such a way that it doesn't violate other people's not just right, but their voice. I come from a people that says lift every voice. That's James Wellland.

That's Rosamund. James Wellland Johnson, Rosamund Johnson. See, that's the tradition of a people in America.

Insulate Jim Crow, James Crow, terrorized, stigmatized, traumatized, and yet the end is what? Lift your voice. That's for everybody to lift their voice. And like a fingerprint, there's only one voice in one fingerprint each one of us get.

But we must be accountable. We must be answerable. And right now we all need to be accountable and answerable in this dialogue.

Let me add just one thing to what Cornell said there. It's so important. It's important that no one think that in a hundred years people are going to look back and condemn the stuff I or you think should be condemned already.

If you think it's an ecological disaster and so forth and so on, we have to be open to stuff we believe passionately, maybe even believe justice requires. What if in a hundred years it's the failure to defend the child in the womb that they look back on and say how could that barbarity have been permitted? We don't know. The conservative movement has been wrong about some important things.

I'm a conservative. But I need to acknowledge and recognize Barry Goldwater led the conservative movement against the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It wasn't a racist.

Goldwater had integrated his own family department store before anybody else did. But he was badly mistaken reading the Constitution in far too narrow in crab to manner to exclude that kind of legislation to protect basic civil rights. The progressive movement has been wrong too, equally profoundly wrong.

In the 1920s and 30s before Hitler gave eugenics a bad name who embraced it. Hook, line and sinker the progressive movement fell for it. Oh yes.

Progressive movement in its major foundations, in its educational institutions, we start at

Princeton. Princeton was in the thick of it. The mainline churches, denominations all went for it.

They look back now and say how could we have done it? Or they look back now and say it wasn't us. But look at the wonderful books on this subject. Christine Rosen's preaching eugenics about the way that the liberal mainline churches went for eugenics.

Tim Leonard, our colleague at Princeton has a wonderful book on the way the progressive movement in general, went for eugenics. Now that doesn't mean we have to constantly beat our breasts for progressives or for conservatives about the past wrongs. No, you know, acknowledge it.

Don't try to hide it. Don't sweep it under the rug. That's right.

Move forward. But let it be a reminder that we might be wrong about the stuff we deeply believe in and even the stuff we think justice requires. Let's just not be dogged.

And I say a final word to the conservative. There are already conservative students. If I fellow conservatives want to say a word to you.

And that is it's very important even if you feel challenged, even if you're in a minority, even if you feel there are double standards. It's very important that you not think of yourselves as victims. Do not adopt that mentality.

Rather simply assert your right to engage your fellow students and your teachers on fair terms of debate where business is done in that currency that I indicated. Evidence, reasons and arguments. Be willing to defend your position with reason.

Not just your right to hold the position. Be prepared to defend it. Be prepared to answer a challenge.

If a progressive says, but how can you believe this? Well, you should have an answer. If you believe it, you should have an answer to that. And if there is an imbalance, Mr. Provost and other university leaders, it really isn't the conservative students who are getting the short end of the stick.

Because if there is that imbalance, if there is unfairness to conservatives, that's bad and should be fixed. But that's not depriving them of an education because they are being challenged every day. And that's good.

That's how education happens. The people getting the short end of the stick are the progressive students who are being allowed to rest comfortably, complacently in the convictions that we got it all worked out. We're on the right side of history.

We got all this right. But nobody is challenging. If you are not challenging them, you are not educating.



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[MUSIC] [ Silence ]