

Transcript For Maria Popova - Cartographer Of Meaning In A Digital Age by Krista Tippett

Photo by Anna Wolf for Dumbo Feather

KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: Maria Popova has called Brain Pickings, her invention and labor of love, a “human-powered discovery engine for interestingness.” What she really delivers to hundreds of thousands of people each day is wisdom of the old-fashioned sort, presented in new-fashioned digital ways. She doesn’t merely curate, she cross-pollinates — between philosophy and design, physics and poetry, the scholarly and the experiential. We meet Maria Popova at 30, and explore her gleanings, thus far, on what it means to lead a good life — intellectually, creatively, and spiritually.

MARIA POPOVA: You know, we never see the world exactly as it is. We see it as we hope it will be or we fear it might be. And we spend our lives going through a sort of modified stages of grief about that realization. And we deny it, and then we argue with it, and we despair over it. But eventually — and this is my belief — that we come to see it, not as despairing, but as vitalizing.

We never see the world exactly as it is because we are how the world is.

MS. TIPPETT: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being.

MS. TIPPETT: From a weekly email to seven friends in 2006, Brain Pickings became a website, a Twitter feed, a weekly digest, and much more, and has been included in the Library of Congress permanent web archive since 2012. Maria Popova was born in Communist Bulgaria, and she came to the United States to study at the University of Pennsylvania. She started Brain Pickings as an internal office experiment while she was working one of multiple jobs to pay for her studies.

MS. TIPPETT: Okay, so I want to say that when I really understood that you grew up in Bulgaria, I understood you in a new way, what you do. I feel like you have this passionate

intellect and, really, this faith in the power of ideas. I mean, you lived through the world changing. You were born in communist Bulgaria. That was a very kind of aggressively atheist world. Was there a spiritual background to your childhood in a way that you would have defined it as spiritual?

MS. POPOVA: What's interesting is actually that, yes, communism sort of took it upon itself to eradicate any trace of religion. And Bulgaria does have a national faith, I guess, which is Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MS. POPOVA: But half a century of communism did deliberately steer things toward, what you called, a hard atheism. Except it worked with varying degrees of efficiency. Meaning the closer people were, both geographically and in terms of affiliation to the party and to its governing bodies, the more unreligious they were. But people in the rural countryside away from the sort of watchful eye of the government maintained a pretty strong religious tradition. So my family was very interesting because my father's side came from a lineage of intellectuals.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: And they lived in the city. And my grandfather was a military general meaning very much aligned with the government. But my mother's family came from a lineage of, I guess, peasants. My maternal grandparents were both elementary school teachers and lived in the countryside. And I was raised primarily by my grandparents.

MS. TIPPETT: OK.

MS. POPOVA: So I had these two grandmothers. One was the hard, atheist intellectual and the other who still to this day says prayers for me every night. [laughs]

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] Right.

MS. POPOVA: But by and large, my father's side prevailed. So I grew up with an attitude toward religion that can best be described as a cautious curiosity as a child. And then befitting the teenager's typical distaste for nuance, it evolved into contemptuous curiosity.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm. But what I also think was true of that time and those cultures is that intellectual life and literature and poetry, reading and writing, not were not taken for granted and that there was a sense in which intellectual life was a form of spiritual survival.

MS. POPOVA: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. And it's interesting. I was recently visiting my family. And my grandmother, my father's mother who's the atheist intellectual, showed me for the very first time all of these books that her father, my great grandfather who died six days before I was born, whom I never met — and he was an astronomer and mathematician and he taught himself English and German by hacking the radio to tune into the B.B.C. and Deutsche Welle.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: And then he taught my dad and my uncle both German and English. But he had these books which she showed me that he had smuggled from England somehow. And there were first edition Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. And he had — his marginalia were extraordinary. And I felt this strange kinship with him through the years, through the cultures and the eras and these different media. Because what I do when I read is essentially what he did, which is he wrote in the margins all these notes on things that he didn't understand and wanted to understand. He underlined passages that he noted were beautiful language. And words that he didn't know that he would look up in the dictionary, he would circle them and then write the translation. But it was this sort of intellectual dance with another mind that you could see in the margins of his books. And I was just very moved by it.

MS. TIPPETT: It's kind of — I mean — in a sense, what you do in a different medium is marginalia. I mean, you can actually hyperlink something and actually look up that word that you don't know.

MS. POPOVA: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: I mean, I wonder — someplace you said, "Literature is the original Internet." And I wonder if that image of your grandfather is precisely what you're describing.

MS. POPOVA: Oh, yeah. Yeah, definitely. And I mean, in this — I guess, seeing these books of his added a different layer of understanding to this thing which I've been saying for a while. And originally, I meant it in the sense of — you know, you look at a book and then, in it, every footnote and allusion and reference is essentially a hyperlink to another work. Except it only works backwards. It only goes back in time, you know? And marginalia or this sort of — it goes back and forth because it is the present mind conversing with a past mind. So it's a different kind of hypertext, I guess.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. That's so interesting. You are often referred to, as one of the many descriptors of what you do, as a blogger. But you don't really reside online in the way I think that word might suggest. I mean, you do many things. You do many kinds of writing. But it seems to me, that one of the things you do is you use technology, you use the Internet to circulate thinking about old-fashioned reading and writing.

MS. POPOVA: Hmm. I guess so. It was not always the case. I mean, my site is really a record of my becoming who I am. And I started so early in my 20s.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: I didn't know who I was. I wasn't doing that much reading then. And it eventually became that. And right now, I rarely read the Internet at all. And I spend most of my days sort of buried in book piles and letters and diaries and old philosophy books and what not. But there's this term that we hear in kind of new-agey circles: spiritual reparenting. Which is a bit too new-agey even for my taste, and I can be quite the hippie sometimes.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] Spiritual repair? Is that what you said?

MS. POPOVA: Reparenting.

MS. TIPPETT: Oh, reparenting.

MS. POPOVA: Sort of doing the work that your parents then do for your spirit or for your character.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes, yes, yes.

MS. POPOVA: But there's an aspect of it that I like. And it led me to think about what I do as a kind of two-way generational reparenting. Sort of, on the one hand, caring for these bygone thinkers while at the same time imbuing the present generation with their hand-me-down wisdom and their most enduring ideas. And it's interesting because I was recently talking to my friend Andrew Sullivan who's a beautiful soul and a journalist of more integrity than probably anybody else I know. And he was lamenting that — here we are with our fetishism of disruption, especially when it comes to media and journalism.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MS. POPOVA: And then he said, "You know, culture needs stewardship, not disruption."

MS. TIPPETT: Mm. That's lovely.

MS. POPOVA: And I was like, "Yes." But I actually think, yes, we have forsaken stewardship to a large degree, but we need both, always, to move forward.

MS. TIPPETT: I love that language of stewardship. And I — there's also something about your work that is — and the — I think the magnetism of your work, the appeal of it for people — that it's aspirational. Right? I mean, which is another contrast to disruptive. We have all these assumptions we kind of walk around with and lay them especially over the new generations that there's no place for depth, that we can only take things in bite-sized pieces, that everything has to be entertaining. And yet, you present this discovery to people that we wanted to know more about big ideas, that we want our brains to be stretched.

MS. POPOVA: As a culture — you're right. We seem somehow bored with thinking. We want to instantly know.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] Right, right.

MS. POPOVA: And there's this epidemic of listicles. Why think about what constitutes a great work of art when you can skim the "20 Most Expensive Paintings in History?"

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MS. POPOVA: And I'm very guided by this desire to counter that in myself because I am, like everybody else, a product of my time and my culture. And I remember, there's a really beautiful commencement address that Adrienne Rich gave in 1977 in which she said that an education is not something that you get but something that you claim. And I think that's very much true of knowledge itself. The reason we're so increasingly intolerant of long articles and why we skim them, why we skip forward even in a short video that reduces a 300-page book into a three-minute animation — even in that we skip forward — is that we've been infected with this kind of pathological impatience that makes us want to have the knowledge but not do the work of claiming it. I mean, the true material of knowledge is meaning. And the meaningful is the opposite of the trivial. And the only thing that we should have gleaned by skimming and skipping

forward is really trivia. And the only way to glean knowledge is contemplation. And the road to that is time. There's nothing else. It's just time.

MS. TIPPETT: Right, right.

MS. POPOVA: There is no shortcut for the conquest of meaning. And ultimately, it is meaning that we seek to give to our lives.

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, in conversation with the mind behind Brain Pickings, Maria Popova.

MS. TIPPETT: I wonder if you would just give an example of maybe something you've been reading or writing today or yesterday where some new connection has been there for you — just an example of that that's fresh.

MS. POPOVA: Hmm. So, I use Thoreau's diaries as a kind of a spiritual text that I reread over and over when I need to kind of center, re-center.

MS. TIPPETT: Thoreau's diaries?

MS. POPOVA: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: OK.

MS. POPOVA: His journals, I guess, because — actually, in the history of the written word, for some reason, men's diaries are called journals, and women's diaries are called diaries.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] OK.

MS. POPOVA: In any case, I was reading — there's this beautiful passage where he talks about hard work. And he says, basically, that the person who works hard doesn't exert himself all day but has this leisure around accomplishing the task. And he says that the hen lays just one egg. And the rest of the time, she goes around and she feeds on things that feed the next egg. And this is in 1861, you know? Today, we wear this badge of honor of productivity as this hallmark of purpose. But it's, in many ways, the opposite because Thoreau's point was basically that the more we busy ourselves with just the drudgery of work, the more actual work we accomplish.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. I do feel that there's a real quality in you as a human being which comes through in your work of — and this is how it came to me when I was trying to put it into words — intellectual confidence and generosity.

MS. POPOVA: Oh, that's such a lovely thing to say. Thank you.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, and it's — you know...

MS. POPOVA: I would like for it to be true one day. It's a good thing to aspire to. It's beautiful.

MS. TIPPETT: So if I use that phrase to describe you, and if I ask — do you think there's a philosophy in you about that that, of course, you will refine throughout your life?

MS. POPOVA: Well, I think identity for all of us is this perpetual process. And it's somewhat like constantly clearing out and rearranging an attic. And it's as much about throwing out all the furniture and trinkets that no longer serve us as bringing in new ones. And in that sense, it's just as important to continue defining who we are as to continue eliminating who we are not. And for me, it kind of feeds on itself. And Brain Pickings is both the record of how that inner philosophy has evolved, but it's also been the fuel for it. So it's a bit of a "chicken or egg" question, whatever that philosophy is. It's not — I don't think you can be deliberate about shaping your course forward because you then end up somewhere completely stale and expected. So, I don't know. I think it's constantly evolving.

MS. TIPPETT: You can't be directive, but you can be discerning in terms of — how you say — what the fuel is that you're providing.

MS. POPOVA: Well, there are certain core beliefs, I guess, that — OK. Well, let's go with that.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: I think a lot about this relationship between cynicism and hope. And critical thinking without hope is cynicism. But hope without critical thinking is naïveté. And I try to live in this place between the two to try to build a life there because finding fault and feeling hopeless about improving our situation produces resignation of which cynicism is a symptom and against which it is the sort of futile self-protection mechanism.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: But on the other hand, believing blindly that everything will work out just fine also produces a kind of resignation because we have no motive to apply ourselves toward making things better. And I think in order to survive, both as individuals and as a civilization, but especially in order to thrive, we need to bridge critical thinking with hope.

MS. TIPPETT: I'd say — well, let me just go into it this way. I wanted to talk about how you've talked about Twitter as part of the discovery economy. I love that language and that you actually use Twitter, which again many people, especially people aren't on Twitter, demean. And I did too until I tried it. It's a logical question. What can you accomplish in 140 characters? But it turns out you can accomplish quite a lot with the right intention. And so, some of the things that you discover and — just actually give perspective also that feeds that tension between cynicism and hope. There's just — and this was something you did for Slate in Future Tense. These are, for example, two different pieces that you've posted there.

MS. POPOVA: Oh, they — yeah. They reposted things that I've written for Brain Pickings.

MS. TIPPETT: The reposted. OK. Yeah. One of them is a visual time — the headline is a visual timeline of the future. It says the world will still exist in the year 802701. And then another one nearby: "An Amazingly Timely Essay on Info Overload, Open-Access Science, and Human Filters — From 1945." [laughs]

MS. POPOVA: So I should say, first of all, that I love what Slate is doing. I think they're doing some of the most ambitious journalism online. But I had no say in titling those essays.

MS. TIPPETT: Oh, you didn't? OK. [laughs]

MS. POPOVA: They republished the substance of what I wrote on Brain Pickings, but they retitled it.

MS. TIPPETT: That's good to know. Alright.

MS. POPOVA: But the one — the second one you referred to is Vannevar Bush, who wrote this beautiful essay in 1945 called "As We May Think." And in it, he basically envisions the Internet. He envisions this personal computer called the "memex" from memory and index. And it's extraordinarily prophetic in what — not just the technology but the relationships that we'll have with knowledge, with information, with each other. And he talks about this — he said there will be a new profession of trailblazers who will make a career out of finding useful trails through what he — through the common record. And I love this notion of the common record.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: And in a way, so much of what I do is an attempt to make sense of humanity's common record.

MS. TIPPETT: You can listen again and share this conversation with Maria Popova through our website, onbeing.org. I'm Krista Tippett. On Being continues in a moment.

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, a conversation about the meaning of life with Brain Pickings creator, Maria Popova. From its beginnings as an internal office experiment while she was still a college student, Brain Pickings has expanded to a website, a weekly digest, and an esteemed Twitter feed — disseminating wisdom of the old-fashioned sort in new-fashioned digital ways. Maria Popova has also written for Wired UK, The Atlantic, The New York Times, and Harvard's Nieman Journalism Lab.

MS. TIPPETT: You've become a role model for a lot of young people looking to navigate life and life with technology, both entrepreneurially and meaningfully. And it's interesting because one of the things that you're very known for — whenever people write about you, they go into great detail about your prodigious workload. Do you know what I mean? [laughs] And they'll say...

MS. POPOVA: I think it was all — all of that was seeded by a somewhat inaccurate...

MS. TIPPETT: ...one thing that someone wrote?

MS. POPOVA: ...one rather inaccurate thing. Yeah. [laughs]

MS. TIPPETT: 450 hours of work — this is just one of them. They all have their variations of this. 450 hours of work each month, hundreds of pieces read a day, 12 to 15 books a week, three to eight hours writing a day, publishes three hours, tweets four times per hour between 8:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m. I mean, is that all true?

MS. POPOVA: Some of it has been true at different times.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: The tweeting has sort of slowed down the hours. I think it's actually a gross underestimate.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] OK.

MS. POPOVA: I read and write from the minute I wake up to the moment I go to sleep at night and everything in between. Even those — I get around on bikes, so I commute. And whatever I listen to, that feeds in. That's part of the reading. And so I would say the hours are probably a lot more. [laughs]

MS. TIPPETT: Right. But...

MS. POPOVA: But the thing — I want to say something important about that. Even if it's factually true, I think the framing is a little bit misleading because it's framed as a sort of as a productivity thing. I mean, look at how much, like, some random person in the world gets done, you know? And for me, it feels very purposeful. And I think what's funny is that I used to marvel for a long time why my best ideas — and I don't mean — by ideas, I don't mean the ideas that sort of — about what to write or all of that, but just sort of insights on the truths of my experience, of the human experience, whatever.

Those ideas, the best of them came to me at the gym or on my bike or in the shower. And I used to have these elaborate theories that maybe there was something about the movement of the body and the water that magically sparked a deeper consciousness. But I've really come to realize the kind of obvious thing which is that these are simply the most unburdened spaces in my life, the moments in which I have the greatest uninterrupted intimacy with my own mind, with my own experience. And there's nothing magical, at least not in the mystical sense, about that. It's just a kind of ordinary magic that's available to each of us just by default if only we made that deliberate choice to make room for it and to invite it in.

MS. TIPPETT: I'd like to talk about your perspective on journalism and news, which is another way, a very important way and consuming way we deal with information. You often talk about one of the things you're looking for in content for Brain Pickings is something that contains both timeliness and timelessness.

MS. POPOVA: I think journalism has all these concentric circles within it.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: We've come to conflate journalism with news. And so much of that culture deals with what is urgent right now and not what is important in the grand scheme of things. And there is this sort of time bias or presentism bias that happens.

MS. TIPPETT: Presentism. I like that.

MS. POPOVA: Which is — right. The — in part, because of the way that the Internet is structured. So when you think of anything from a Twitter feed or a Facebook feed to a news website, the most recent floats to the top always. And it's always in reverse chronology. And I think that's conditioning us to believe rather falsely that the most recent is the most important. And that the older matters less or just exists less to a point where we really have come to believe that things that are not on Google or on the news

never happened, never existed, or don't matter. I would say probably 99 percent of the record of human thought is off the Internet and from the history of humanity.

And so I think — the Internet — its beauty is that it's a self-perfecting organism, right? But as long as it's an ad-supported medium, the motive will be to perfect commercial interest, to perfect the art of the listicle, the endless slideshow, the infinitely paginated oracle, and not to perfect the human spirit of the reader or the writer. And I think that journalism is moving further and further away from — you take something like E.B. White's ideal, which he said that the role of the writer is to lift people up, not to lower them down. And so much of what passes for journalism today lowers.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. But I think that there's been this unfortunate convergence of the Internet and the kind of 24/7 cycle. It used to be possible to do some huge piece of exposé of something shocking and terrible. And that would mobilize people. But when people are bombarded by the shocking, and they start to internalize it as the norm, it actually shuts them down.

MS. POPOVA: Oh, absolutely.

MS. TIPPETT: I mean, you wrote something in The New York Times that I — I just thought this was a very — a great sentence. "A powerful story transcends the shock value to help the reader reconcile the cognitive dissonance of controversy and emerge closer to the truth, if only just a little bit."

MS. POPOVA: Yeah, yeah. I mean, to me, there is so much goodness in the world. And of course, we just kind of have to show up for it and refuse to leave.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] Yeah. Right.

MS. POPOVA: Yes, people sometimes do horrible things. And we can speculate about why they do them until we run out of words and run out of sanity. But evil only prevails when we mistake it for the norm. And yet, the currency of news journalism is making it the norm.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. Unwittingly. You — in the "Literary Jukebox," you quoted Anne Lamott. Talking — she's actually talking about something Emily Dickinson said that, "Hope inspires the good to reveal itself." And I — to me, that speaks to the cultivation of hope as a way to move through the world, which you talked about a little while ago, meeting the information that comes our way with something robust and complicated called hope. What did you say — hope with its critical faculties intact.

MS. POPOVA: [laughs] Yeah. And I think — the thing is, I don't think hope is a baked-in faculty, that you're born either with or without. It's a conditioned response. So we can respond to horrible events that do happen in the world and we do need to actually attend to and try to understand and help. We can respond to those with hope. And we can respond to them with resignation, which brings us back to this notion of the sort of re-parenting. Because I think when we have a foundation of wisdom and of assuredness, I guess, that comes from people who have lived long ago and have gone through horrible things and through beautiful things, that then we somehow are better able to rest in that and know that despite what happens, yes, we should show up and think critically about it, but despite it all, at the base level, there is this hope that is the human experience.

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, a conversation with the mind and life behind Brain Pickings, Maria Popova.

MS. TIPPETT: You know, when you said a minute ago that the Internet is a self-perfecting organism and that — you use some language about — there are values and details built into the way we design that that work against the perfection of the human spirit as a primary drive. But do you have hope and confidence in the Internet, in our technology as a place where — perfection is a big word — but where the human spirit can be cultivated and deepened? That's not language people often use when they're speaking of our lives with technology.

MS. POPOVA: Well, the thing to keep in mind is that this is such a young medium, you know?

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: We have not even had a full generation live and die with it. And I think, like any territory to which bring the pioneer spirit is bound to have both the good and the evil. And we're not going to know how it turns out until much, much, much later. But in the meantime, the decisions we make, the microscopic decisions that we make daily, shape it. And I am not so foolish as to make predictions, but I can tell you my hope which is that I do think that people will come to rebel against the things that just don't work for us spiritually, intellectually, creatively.

And we're seeing this to some degree. And I think the younger generations — and I don't mean this by age, but I mean people who are sort of more recently coming onto the scene of the Internet — are more willing to, for example, pay for ad-free versions of publications or to limit what they engage with and recognize that, actually, it takes time and thought and effort and resources to produce a publication that is nourishing as opposed to a cat listicle, and to make decisions according to how something makes you feel in the end, and what kind of contribution it's making — to use Vannevar Bush's word again — the common record.

I was listening to an interview with Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, and he said that people contribute to Wikipedia for free because they want to do something useful with their time. And yes, I agree. I think people hunger to do something useful with their time in our age of kind of uselessness, time uselessly spent. But also something ennobling with their time — this can't quite be quantified. There's no utilitarian value to it the way that there is with usefulness. But I deeply believe that people want to be good, that more than that, we want to be better, to grow, to ennoble our souls. And I have hope for this medium with that lens.

MS. TIPPETT: I was so intrigued. You sent out, at the end of the year, at the end of 2014, the best Brain Pickings articles of the year, best meaning those most read and shared shared by others as well as those you took the most pleasure in writing. And it's kind of a long list, but I want to read it. We might not have time for it on the whole show. But I think it's really a fascinating list. "An Antidote to the Age of Anxiety," "Alan Watts on Happiness and How to Live with Presence," "How to Criticize with Kindness" — that's philosopher Daniel Dennett. I won't read all of them — I'll skip. "How to Be Alone: An Antidote to One of the Central Anxieties and Greatest Paradox of Our Time." You can hear — I printed all this out, so I've got all the pictures I'm looking at. "The Benjamin Franklin Effect: The Surprising Psychology of How to Handle Haters," "The Shortness of Life: Seneca on Busy-ness and the Art of Living Wide Rather than Living

Long.”

Anyway, there’s definitely a — there’s such a deep theme, a thread that runs through all of that. And if somebody had heard about Brain Pickings but not read it — I mean, you do — there’s a lot of big ideas, but this recurring thread is how we bring big ideas and aspirational ideas and also real kind of spiritual and social technologies to become whole integrated, evolving people. I just — I want to ask you if that — the list from 2014 is different from the list nine years ago. I mean, have those themes deepened? Have you — what have you seen along the way?

MS. POPOVA: Oh, absolutely. They’re radically different. I am radically different.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: I was a spiritual embryo nine years ago.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] You were 21.

MS. POPOVA: Yeah, yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: I would also say, because Brain Pickings is just such a subjective, private sort of one-woman labor of love, it’s so aligned with the events of my own life...

MS. TIPPETT: ...of your own evolution.

MS. POPOVA: ...and the things that I struggled with. Yeah, the evolution, but also the struggle and the aspiration and the questions that I’m constantly trying to answer for myself. That list is really the list of my year. What were the things that I was preoccupied with this past year? And it’s been — I can’t recall off the top of my head what the previous year’s most — what my favorite pieces were, but I would imagine they were pretty different.

MS. TIPPETT: There is a very spiritual aspect to that — the word “spiritual” being expansively understood. And I sense that that’s grown in you as well. I don’t know. Is that right?

MS. POPOVA: Yeah, yeah. And I mean, this goes back to the whole thing about growing up in Bulgaria and the atheism and the extreme resistance, not just to religion, but to spirituality, to not seeing the nuance and what that can mean. I think we never see the world exactly as it is. We see it as we hope it will be or we fear it might be. And we spend our lives going through a sort of modified stages of grief about that realization. And we deny it, and then we argue with it, and we despair over it. But eventually — and this is my belief — that we come to see it, not as despairing, but as vitalizing.

We never see the world exactly as it is because we are how the world is. Was it — I think it was William James who said, “My experience is what I agree to attend to, and only those things which I notice shaped my mind.” And so in choosing how we are in the world, we shape our experience of that world, our contribution to it. We shape our world, our inner world, our outer world, which is really the only one we’ll ever know. And to me, that’s the substance of the spiritual journey. And that’s not an exasperating idea but an infinitely emboldening one. And it’s taken me many years to come to

that without resistance.

MS. TIPPETT: While I was getting ready to interview you, Seth Godin's blog came across my desk — into my inbox. And I just — I want to read it because it just seems so resonant with...

MS. POPOVA: I love his mind, so please do.

MS. TIPPETT: I do too. "Giving the people what they want isn't nearly as powerful as teaching people what they need. There's always a shortcut available, a way to be a little more ironic, cheaper, more instantly understandable. There's the chance to play into our desire to be entertained and distracted regardless of the cost. Most of all, there's the temptation to encourage people to be selfish, afraid, and angry. Or you can dig in, take your time, and invest in a process that helps people see what they truly need. When we change our culture in this direction, we're doing work that's worth sharing. But it's slow-going. If it were easy, it would have happened already. It's easy to start a riot, difficult to create a story that keeps people from rioting. Don't say, 'I wish people wanted this.' Sure, it's great if the market already wants what you make. Instead, imagine what would happen if you could teach them why they should."

MS. POPOVA: I love that. But that's always been the case.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: We orient ourselves in the darkness of the unknown by grasping kind of blindly for familiar points of reference. And we seek to construct out of them a kind of compass, out of similarities and contrasts relative to our familiar world and our existing knowledge. And I think it's especially true about such nebulous subjects as art or philosophy or really how to think where there is no true north. So we seek tangibles like the market to orient ourselves in this maze of merit and meaning. And it takes something, but I really believe most people, all people have that capacity in them to do what he says, basically — to not orient ourselves to what's been done, what's been thought, to the market, to the familiar, and try ever so gently to expand our private locus of the possible.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. And Maria, you are an old soul, and you are East-Central European by birth. I don't like asking people to speak for their generation, but I do wonder if you feel like your generation and the new generations may be more open and to — and powerful with that possibility, equipped in some way to be present to that possibility.

MS. POPOVA: Again, I can only express my hope and not my prediction, but especially because I feel like I'm profoundly under qualified to speak to that, in part, because most of my friends are dead people. [laughs]

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] Right.

MS. POPOVA: People — the authors and artists and so forth...

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: ...are long gone. But my real-life friends, the majority of them, are significantly older than I am. My partner is significantly older than I am. My youngest

friend is six years older than I am.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] OK.

MS. POPOVA: So I don't feel — I feel like I'm such a profound failure of representing my generation. [laughs]

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] Alright. You are who you are. How — if I ask you how you measure success, like, in any given day, what comes to mind?

MS. POPOVA: Well, once again, I am going to side with Thoreau. And he said something like, if the day and night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers, it's more elastic and more starry and more immortal, that is your success. And for me, that's pretty much it — waking up and being excited and curiously restless to face the day ahead, and being very present with that day, and then going to bed feeling like it actually happened, that the day was lived. I mean, there's nothing more than that, really.

MS. TIPPETT: And in terms of the effect that you can gauge externally, I do hear you that you don't measure success on number. But what feels like success to you when it comes to you from outside?

MS. POPOVA: Well, we are such — and I'm not — I'm far from being on the sort of high moral horse of, I don't — I'm immune to these metrics that we all respond to. I think we're such Pavlovian creatures, and we thrive on constant positive reinforcement. And we live in an era where the tangibles of that have become very readily available. You can see things like Facebook likes and retweets.

MS. TIPPETT: Right, right.

MS. POPOVA: And it is so tempting and so easy because they're concrete. They're concrete substitutes for things that are inherently nebulous. It's so easy to sort of hang your sanity and your sense of worth on them. And I have certainly suffered from that earlier on when these metrics first became available. And they're right there. I mean, they are right there. And I think it takes a real discipline just to not hang the stability of your soul on them. And so one thing that I've done for myself, which is probably the most sanity-inducing thing that I've done in the last few years, is to never look at statistics and such sort of externalities. But I do read all of the emails and letters — I also get letters from readers. And to me, that really is the metric of what we mean to one another and how we connect and that aspect of communion. I mean, I heard from a woman yesterday who said that she's been living with stage IV cancer for 26 years.

MS. TIPPETT: Oh, gosh.

MS. POPOVA: And she goes and tells me this remarkably moving — it's not a story, it's her life. And it makes you go, wow, these are the things that matter. And her — she was writing very, very generously to say that she was finding nourishment in all of these thinkers and these ideas. And that, to me, is success, the feeling that somebody more enlightened and living a harder life and, in some ways, a more beautiful life than I am resonates. That's what it is.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. You wrote somewhere, "We are a collage of our interests, our

influences, our inspirations, all the fragmentary impressions we've collected by being alive and awake to the world. Who we are is simply a finely-curated catalogue of those." Which brings the word "curation" — which I understand you're not as fond of anymore — into this — into the answer of what it means to be human, that we curate our lives. How do you think your sense of what it means to be human, that grand question, has evolved? How would you start to talk about that?

MS. POPOVA: Hmm. I think much of it has shifted from an understanding that's based on concreteness to an understanding that's based on relational things. That this notion of not just who we are but who we are in relation to our past selves, the people around us, the culture that we came from, the culture that we live in, all the different lives we've had. And for me, certainly, I feel like I've had all these different lives. I grew up in a country that is pretty much the exact opposite of my life right now. I grew up having nothing, and then I sort of clawed my way up and out. And now I live in New York City.

And I am able to afford my own life and live my own life without worrying about things that I worried about for many, many, many, many years. And it's so strange how we're able to carry forward this mystery of personal identity even when our present selves are so different from our future selves. And I — and from our past selves most of all. And I think a lot about this question of, what is a person? I mean, how — am I the same person as my childhood self? And sure, we share the same body, but even that body is so different. It's unrecognizably different. Our lives are so different. Our ideas and ideals are so different. And to me, this question of what it means to be human is always a question of elasticity of being. It's never an arrival point, you know?

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: But I want to also go back to this — you mentioned the fragments, this notion of the fragments. I mean, consider that — the things that we encourage when we talk about a full life, wholeheartedness and mindfulness. And of course, we are so much more expansive than our hearts and our minds and our perfect abs or whatever fragment we fixate on. [laughs]

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] Right.

MS. POPOVA: But yet, we compartmentalize our experience in that way. We divide it into these fragments to be divided and conquered. And I was reading this morning, actually, for a piece that I'm writing for tomorrow, Virginia Woolf's diary, which is not a journal, but a diary.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] A diary. Yeah.

MS. POPOVA: And she says, "One can't write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes." And she talks about the slipperiness of the soul and the delicacy and complexity of the soul. But I think the fullest people, the people most whole and most alive, are always those unafraid and unashamed of the soul. And the soul is never an assemblage of fragments. And it always is.

MS. TIPPETT: Maria Popova is the creator and presence behind Brainpickings.org. In 2012, Brain Pickings was included in the Library of Congress permanent web archive. You can listen again or share this conversation with her at onbeing.org.

MS. TIPPETT: Like Maria Popova, On Being is also in the business of curation. Each week, our executive editor pulls together the best of what's happening in all of our media spaces into an email newsletter — connecting ideas from inside On Being with the outside world. And did you know that Sharon Salzberg has now joined Parker Palmer, Courtney Martin, and Omid Safi as a weekly columnist on our blog? Sign up and never miss anything by clicking the "newsletter" link at onbeing.org.

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