DAILYGOOD
News that Inspires

Krista Tippett on the Virtue of Hope

by Tami Simon

Krista Tippett is an award-winning broadcaster and New York Times bestselling author whose works focus on faith, ethics, and moral wisdom. She is the host of the radio program and podcast On Being. In this episode of Insights at the Edge, Tami Simon and Krista discuss how journalism can be an art that drives healing, as well as the difference between being driven by a mission and being driven by an agenda. They speak on the virtue of hope and how it contrasts with optimism. Finally, Krista and Tami talk about the impetus for societal change, how that change happens in the margins, and the responsibility we have to see it shepherded to its fruition.

Tami Simon: You&#39;re listening to Insights at the Edge. Today my guest is Krista Tippett. Krista Tippett is a Peabody Award-winning broadcaster and New York Times bestselling author. In 2014, she received the National Humanities Medal at the White House for thoughtfully delving into the mysteries of human existence. On the air and in print, Krista Tippett avoids easy answers, embracing complexity and inviting people of every background to join her conversation about faith, ethics, and moral wisdom. She is the host of the award-winning public radio conversation and podcast, On Being, which opens up the animating questions at the center of human life. She is also the author of the recent book, Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living.

In this episode of Insights at the Edge, Krista and I spoke about journalism as a healing art, and the difference between being mission-driven and driven by an agenda. We talked about how change happens at the margins, and how those whose identities are not on the line have a responsibility to accompany that change. We talked about the magnetic call of virtue, and how hope is a virtue that is not to be confused with optimism, and how Krista engages the muscular quality of hope on a daily basis. We talked about Krista&#39;s discovery of yoga at an important time in her life, and finally, how science and spirituality come together for her as faith in the unfolding mystery. Here&#39;s my conversation with someone who is so gifted herself at the art of conversation, Krista Tippett:

Krista, I&#39;d love to start by speaking a little bit, interviewer to interviewer, if that&#39;s OK.

Krista Tippett: [Laughs.] Yes.

TS: To begin with, I know you teach a class and it has to do with the art of conversation. You talk about asking better questions. So, I thought this would be a good place for us to start, and it might improve the questions that are to come. What does it mean to ask a better question—to ask what you call "generous questions?"

KT: Yes. So, that class is something that +Acumen put together. I don&#39;t think of myself as a teacher in that kind of traditional way, but I actually realize it is kind of what I do, in a sense. That&#39;s something I&#39;ve learned. I think that I feel like asking good questions and listening—these are kind of basic social arts, basic tools for both private—individual—and communal life. A lot of the things we have actually learned, even in our formal spaces where we get taught, dictate against us being good listeners and formulating that better question. So what I mean by that—and I do want to be positive about it, but I think it&#39;s important first to point at all the—what I would call "bad questioning" that we do see around us.

First of all, I grew up experiencing listening as being quiet while the other person said what they had to say. There wasn&#39;t really any curiosity in that moment. So, one absolutely fundamental quality of a good question is the intentionality behind it—that it has true curiosity behind it; that you want to know, you want to understand, and you&#39;re willing to be surprised. If we can create spaces—trustworthy spaces and trustworthy encounters—where that is really what we are telegraphing not just in the words we speak and the questions we formulate, but how we are present, I think we will surprise each other much more than what we think is possible.

So, that&#39;s how I&#39;d start to talk about it. A better question can be very simple; it can be just the simple question of what someone means when they use that word. For example, it can be a really loaded word that culturally, when somebody uses that word, we think we know what they are all about. So, we&#39;re ready to have the debate, which is the mode we go into rather than seeking understanding.

TS: Now, you mentioned how listening is more than being quiet and waiting for your turn to speak. So, what&#39;s happening for you when you&#39;re listening—if you were to track what&#39;s going on inside of you, how do you listen?

KT: Well, I think that good listening starts even before words begin to be spoken, even before we speak the question. It starts with the invitation we create, the way we create the invitation, the space we create. If it&#39;s not trustworthy, if people think they&#39;ve been brought in to be set up or to be—if people feel like they&#39;re on the defensive or they have to explain themselves, then no matter how good my questions are, I haven&#39;t established a space in which I can be a good listener or really draw them out in a meaningful way.

So, it starts with the invitation; it starts with the setting. Then, I am aware that I&#39;m not just there listening with—engaging with my words, with my questions, but I&#39;m present with myself as a human being—as a complicated human being. Just an awareness of that, an attention to that, a mindfulness about that. It still means I&#39;m in there with all of my—whatever preconceived notions I might have unconsciously, however much think I may be in control of them. But as you know, mindfulness doesn&#39;t necessarily erase those things, but it allows us to—we put them in their proper place or we&#39;re aware that they&#39;re in the room. So, that&#39;s one thing. I&#39;m trying to be there as a full human being, and I&#39;m trying to be there with my curiosity.

Again, I think this intention that is really so countercultural—especially now in our culture—to be willing to be surprised, even by somebody who I know from the outset of the conversation that we are profoundly different from each other. But, can I—with everything I can muster—try to bring all myself to the best of my humanity? And can I expect and desire and create a space where the other person can bring the best of their humanity, and can we try to meet each other there?

TS: You mentioned, Krista, that you don&#39;t think of yourself as a teacher—that this course was put together by a group called +Acumen and their people. I&#39;m wondering: do you relate to the term "journalist?" Are you a journalist? And the reason I&#39;m asking that is, as you&#39;re talking about making it safe for somebody else to speak and bringing out the best in the person you&#39;re talking to, those aren&#39;t what I necessarily associate with at least some journalists who are detached—they&#39;re not bringing their full, complicated humanity; they&#39;re stepping back, they&#39;re trying to portray a 360-degree view of the situation. So, how do you connect to that term, and if you are a journalist, is this a new kind of journalism or a different kind of journalism?

KT: Yes, I do connect to the word "journalism." I kind of stubbornly insist on connecting what I do to the work of journalism. My project is now as much a podcast as it is a radio show, but my foundation is public radio. My beginning was as a print journalist—very standard, traditional, breaking-news journalism. And that training was so important—that training in asking the fierce questions and attending to what&#39;s happening, and double-checking what I thought I was seeing. I&#39;ve actually thought about this a lot, Tami, and I&#39;ve looked at the definition, and I think of journalism as the work of telling the story of our time. I actually think that one of the things our time desperately needs is for us to—I don&#39;t want to say "create a new narrative," but to tell the stories about ourselves and about our potential; about the quiet, redemptive, healing places that are among us as much as the destruction and violence is among us. To tell a fuller story of our time, which includes our capacity for goodness, and for change, and for growth.

So, that&#39;s what I think I&#39;m doing; I&#39;m not telling another story. I&#39;m trying to inhabit the fullness of our story. I mean, talking about goodness and redemption and change also means asking fierce questions, and it means questioning ourselves. And it means asking challenging questions, and reflecting in a challenging way.

But to your point, there&#39;s a very narrow definition in traditional journalism that we see all around us about what a challenging question is. It tends to be a question that inflames or embarrasses or puts somebody on the defensive. To me, a challenging question is driving to the heart of the matter. A challenging question is getting somebody who is helping shape this narrative of who we really are and who we can be to go that much—to be that much deeper and more revealing and more searching about the questions they hold as well as the answers they&#39;ve arrived at.

I once had a conversation years ago that&#39;s been really formative for me, with another journalist about, "Could journalism be a healing art?" I think, in fact, that is an approach that a lot of people have when they go into this profession, and it&#39;s certainly in the larger motivation I&#39;ve always had. It almost sounds nonsensical in our journalistic culture now, but I kind of want to insist on holding that and thinking that could be possible because journalism needs to be good for us, and right now there&#39;s so much about it that is just paralyzing and demoralizing us.

TS: In reading your book, Krista—a beautifully written and crafted book, Becoming Wise—what I felt was, "Oh my gosh,"—and I don&#39;t think I really knew this just from listening to some of your interviews—"Krista Tippett really cares with her whole heart about making the world a better place, about human growth and evolution." And that&#39;s the core, I think, of why—this is my own view here—about why you&#39;re so good at what you do and why you&#39;ve captured the hearts and minds and attention of so many listeners. But I think that kind of deep caring isn&#39;t necessarily associated with the profession of journalism. What I hear you saying is that separating those two things is anathema to you, and that you want to redeem journalism as a profession of caring. So, I think that is incredibly interesting.

KT: Yes. And you know, it is probably true that, as I said before, the foundational platform of this project was public radio. So, there is a sense in which I have a journalistic persona as the host of On Being on public radio. And I think that&#39;s right and appropriate, or at least it&#39;s fitting. But, you&#39;re also right that I am—one thing about journalism is that you can&#39;t—I don&#39;t feel like I have an agenda, and that&#39;s where people go critically or skeptically if they hear about a journalist who cares—that you have an agenda that is coloring your work. But I am mission-driven, and I think that having a media platform to put conversations and ideas and to elevate voices out there in the world is a huge responsibility and it creates huge possibility. There&#39;s power in that.

So yes, I do care, and somehow I create a boundary there between that and having an agenda. I haven&#39;t thought about this, but I actually appreciate the question.

TS: Yes. I&#39;m still trying to understand—so this is genuine curiosity—but what&#39;s the difference between a mission and an agenda?

KT: So, one thing I think that is actually very compatible with the whole world of mindfulness and all the intelligence that this is bringing to us collectively is, to me, it&#39;s about the intentionality behind what I do rather than about controlling the outcomes. I do think that—and there&#39;s a lot of this in the world. I think journalists and media platforms that are about aiming towards an outcome—that&#39;s dangerous territory. That gets into the realm of what is manipulative. But if I say that my intention is to shine a light, to create a space where voices of grace and goodness and wisdom can be heard and internalized and used by other people, I think that&#39;s more in the realm of me using a platform responsibly, but also understanding that it is a gift. It&#39;s a gift, but I&#39;m not in charge of what people do with that. But I do think that deserves to be heard.

TS: OK. I want to ask you a question about something that you write at the very beginning of Becoming Wise.I&#39;ll read the quote and then we can talk about it. You write, "The book is a collection of pointers that treat the margins as seriously as the noisy center, for change has always happened in the margins across human history, and it&#39;s happening there now. Seismic shifts in common life as a geographic reality begin in the spaces and cracks."

First of all, I think our listeners can get a sense of what a beautiful writer you are from that quote. But also, I&#39;d love to know this idea that change happens from the margins. Tell me what gives you confidence that that&#39;s actually how change happens.

KT: You know, one thing that I appreciate about the spiritual and religious perspective is that it takes a long view of time. I have to say—and across the years I&#39;ve also interviewed many elders, many people who are wise and who have had a long life in this world. This theme of change happening in the margins by people who had seen it over a span of time—and also people who studied history and who had a large understanding of humanity and where it&#39;s been and how social change happens—I have heard this refrain over and over again from people I trust, from people who know: change happens in the margins. It starts in the margins. What starts in the headlines is not what changes us.

The irony is that in this journalism that you and I have been talking about—the journalism that is everywhere, that is so noisy, the dominant journalism—what gets all the attention is this very tiny sliver of often the most destructive of what we are capable. The irony is that people who are just going about changing, enriching, softening the world that they can see and touch in ways that [are] rippling through lives and communities are quiet. They always have some quality of humility, so they are the last people who are throwing themselves in front of cameras or microphones and the last people to be sought out by cameras and microphones.

What I&#39;m interested in is that long view and the human change that makes social change possible. If you talk to people about how moral change happens, how change that all of us—well, all of us [laughs]. That&#39;s such fraught language. But, change that I think we eventually societally see is good, whether it&#39;s about—and in our time, that has a lot to do with embracing different kinds of difference. And difference that in fact, only a generation ago was not only seen to be strange but morally wrong and reprehensible. Right? I mean, we can talk about race, we can talk about gender and sexual orientation. And what I&#39;ve learned from people who study this and who incite it is that the moment comes when the laws are overturned, when the structures change, but that is seeded by generations of quiet change—of people who change their lives, of people who change their loves, of people who risk everything but who find their way and who are seen in wider circles of unlikely relationship.

So, that&#39;s what I&#39;m interested in. It&#39;s very hard to pay attention to that, or even imagine it being possible when we&#39;re captive to the news cycle, but I do believe in this and I&#39;m attending to that. But, it does not have instant gratification attached to it. Although, actually it does, because whenever any of us becomes attentive to beauty and goodness in the world, even in the midst of the chaos and turmoil of right now—in those moments, we are changed. We are uplifted. And that matters.

We talk about the data points, right? We need to take those moments of momentary transformation as data points and treat them as real—as real as the moments when we despair about the future of humanity.

TS: Now, let&#39;s say somebody is listening, Krista, and they feel, "You know, I&#39;m at the margins, and I feel marginalized. I don&#39;t feel humble and like focusing on beauty; I feel marginalized and angry. Change happens from the margins—you know, I&#39;m not sure I believe it. I&#39;m not sure I believe that. I just feel mad about not being part of the conversation."

KT: Yes. Yes. So—and anger is a moral response, and that&#39;s also how it happens. For me, one of the implications of change happening at the margins is that those of us whose identities are not on the line, those of us who don&#39;t quite inhabit that margin but see something real and important happening there have a responsibility to accompany that change, to put our identities and sometimes our bodies between those whose very identity is threatened and assaulted.

I kind of think this is something you see happening now very slowly and fitfully with the racial discussion—I don&#39;t know about "discussion;" I don&#39;t think we even have a conversation about race. We kind of have a longing—we kind of have an understanding that we don&#39;t even know how to do it, which is in itself a step forward. So more and more people joining what is gathering at the margins, which is real, which needs protecting, which needs nourishing.

TS: OK. I&#39;m going to ask a follow-up here, which is also a quote from you that I think will get at really what I&#39;m trying to get at. So, here&#39;s the quote; this is in an interview with you where you said, "We have to take back ownership of our public life, and we have to start having the conversations we want to be hearing and not expecting the ‘media&#39; to deliver it, and not expect the politicians to necessarily be the grownups in the room." So, what I&#39;m getting at is: how do people take back ownership of our public life, especially if somehow we feel disempowered, marginalized? How do we take back ownership of our public life?

KT: I don&#39;t want to diminish how hard this is, and that in places it feels impossible and in places it may be, in the moment, impossible. I don&#39;t want to diminish that.

But, I feel that we are so captive; we are so riveted by the narrative and the loudest voices that the loud and privileged—and the media voices in the media are privileged in all kinds of different ways, but they are privileged. We sometimes are letting ourselves understand reality to be defined by those loud and often hateful voices, like we think they do define our world and we can stand in that place of despair while not acknowledging the reality of people and communities right around us in our vicinity who are taking a different stance, who are wanting to live a different way, who are creating a different reality. We sometimes undervalue the more transformative realities that are possible right around us.

Part of this, I&#39;m saying, is a shift in attention and in what we take in as powerful. There&#39;s a line in there from John Powell, who is somebody who I really had a great conversation with about reframing the question of race to the question of belonging—how would that change how we approach this? And he has this great line; he says, "We think hate is powerful and anger is powerful, and we wield those things in public life because in fact they do get results. But we think love is wimpy, and that is an illusion." But for it to become more powerful and more practical—starting with myself and you and people who are listening and people in communities, wherever they are—have to claim that power and delve into that power and figure out how to manifest that in a different way to the rest of the world.

TS: Now, in Becoming Wise, you write, again, in the beginning of the book that the connective tissue that runs throughout the entire book is the language of a surprising word here, Krista: "virtue." The language of virtue.

KT: Really? That&#39;s surprising?

TS: I felt really surprised by it. It&#39;s a word that I love; I love virtue, and I think a lot about bringing virtue into business, which can seem contradictory to people. But it&#39;s really important to me. But then you said something about virtue—that you believe that this is now a magnetic word, especially for young people. I thought, "Is that true? Is virtue a magnetic word, or is it seen as this old, dusty kind of thing that we have to try to revivify from the religious traditions?"

KT: Yes. What I have found is that people over 50 think of it as a dusty word that they left behind. So, I think people of certain generations—and I say especially Catholics [laughs] are often really allergic to the language of virtue because people who got a lot of the language of virtue when they were growing up and it was—I mean, these were things that people were hitting you over the head with; it was essentially about what you were falling short of.

My experience is that younger people—and I&#39;m sure this is not universally true—but my experience is that [for] younger people, this is a new, fresh word to a lot of younger people who are not growing up—so many people in the emerging generations, they&#39;re not growing up with any kind of traditional religious formation. And you&#39;re right; that&#39;s mostly where this language has been used. But even to the extent that it&#39;s been used in political life, I think that is another era.

So, it&#39;s new language, and it makes sense. It makes a kind of logical sense to people in this generation, who I experience to be very committed to joining inner life with outer presence in the world. Virtues are kind of these tools that help you pin aspiration to action, because they&#39;re practices. They join intention and presence.

TS: Now, we&#39;ve picked up on virtue and virtue as a word, and one of the themes that runs through Becoming Wise is your love of certain words. I notice with the word "virtue," I feel this immediate love for the word; I don&#39;t know, like I want to put it on a piece of paper between my two palms and just sit with it. I&#39;d like to hear a little bit about how loving words feels to Krista Tippett. What&#39;s that feel like?

KT: So, sometimes people say to me, "Oh, you must&#39;ve grown up in a family where people loved words and were great listeners." But I&#39;m the opposite story, right? That&#39;s one way we become the way we are. The other way we become the way we are is we grow up in the absence of something. I&#39;m that person. There was not a love of language or words or reading or listening in the world of my childhood and my family.

So it&#39;s something I discovered in young adulthood, and it was this great discovery—the beauty of language, the power of language, the joy and the power of taking care with our words. I don&#39;t know; I&#39;m not even now somebody who reads a lot of poetry in any kind of formal sense, but I have noticed when we put poets on the air—which we do more and more and more—there&#39;s something that kind of winsome, graceful use of language, careful use of language, that we realize we need—that it makes us richer. It&#39;s not just that it&#39;s beautiful; it helps us think differently, it helps us shift our imagination. It&#39;s shifting words, but it&#39;s shifting imagination.

The backdrop to me starting this show, which originally was called Speaking of Faith—I feel like the show has evolved along with our cultural encounter of this part of life—but the backdrop to that was the 1990s and this toxic religious posturing and language in American life that did a lot of damage—and we&#39;re still living with the consequences of that. Then [came] my discovery through this project I did with some Benedictines of a whole different way of talking about these things and opening them up through language and through stories and through better questions. There was always beauty in the language, and there was always humor in the conversations. [Laughs.] And those are two of my big virtues—the big virtues I see that can redeem us.

So, yes. It&#39;s just been this thing I walked into, and it continues to delight.

TS: I&#39;m still curious to know when you&#39;ve hit a word or phrase that you absolutely love, what that feels like inside you. Meaning, if I said to somebody, "You know, you love listening to music," or "You love your partner. What does that feel like?" they could describe it to me from the inside. That&#39;s what I&#39;m curious about, because I think we don&#39;t necessarily know what it feels like to love words in a broad way in our culture. A lot of people don&#39;t even attend.

KT: I mean, there&#39;s this phrase of the ancient rabbis, "Words make worlds," and I think that that gets at how it feels in me. When a word or a constellation of words [occurs], I experience it to have a power to kind of expand reality. Like, you didn&#39;t necessarily make something true that wasn&#39;t true before, but the words have been able to point at that truth, give it some contours that I can feel. So literally, the world is bigger and there are possibilities that weren&#39;t there before.

TS: In talking about virtues, this theme that runs throughout Becoming Wise, you talk about hope—hope as one of the virtues that you want to explore. The last section of the book is dedicated to hope; you write about hope. It&#39;s a very beautiful section. You write that, "Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a habit that becomes spiritual muscle memory." I thought this was a great sentence. Talk a little bit about hope. You differentiate it from optimism, and I think that could be curious for people.

KT: Yes. So, one of the fascinating things about virtues in general is essentially that what we&#39;re learning through neuroscience is validating that what we practice, we become. Even something like being patient or kind or compassionate or hopeful, or attending to beauty—these don&#39;t necessarily have to be things that I was born—"She was born a happy person." We practice these things and we become them, and it goes for virtues as much as it goes for skills.

To me, I do love the word "hope." It&#39;s one of these words I love; it rolls around in me and it makes the world feel bigger, and it makes life feel more possible. The word "optimism," which to me, it&#39;s kind of—what is that Buddhist language of the "near-enemies?" I think optimism is a near-enemy to hope, because to me it&#39;s about wishing. It&#39;s about pinning your hopes in a superficial way on—you&#39;re kind of wishing in that direction and then hopefully it will happen. To me, hope is a choice; it&#39;s a courageous choice. It works with reality. It works with the complexity of reality. To me, hope is reality-based; it sees the darkness, it sees the struggle, and it uses an "and," [not] a "but." It chooses to also see the good that is possible, the fullest picture, the fullest narrative, and to inhabit that and to live that.

TS: Krista, I&#39;m curious: you wake up one day and it&#39;s a day when you don&#39;t feel particularly filled with hope. How do you engage that hope habit, if you will? How do you do that?

KT: Yes. Well, I&#39;ve had quite a few of those days lately, honestly—both on a personal level and just with everything that&#39;s happening in the world right now. You know, I interviewed Brother David Steindl-Rast at the end of last year, and he says this thing about gratitude; he says, "It would be ridiculous, it would be absurd, to say that we should be grateful for everything." By the same token, it would be absurd and unreasonable to say that we should be hopeful about everything. But he said, "You can be grateful in every moment."

I think I feel that way about hope. It&#39;s not—and this is where I think it&#39;s more resilient than optimism—it&#39;s not necessarily a feeling. My overwhelming feeling on waking up in the morning sometimes may be despair, but I choose to take this muscular thing called hope out into the world with me, and continue to work with it. That means that I keep putting that "and" at the end of my despair, rather than a "but," and I decide what it means to live into that. I decide what it means to take as seriously the good as I&#39;m taking in what is absolutely terrible. And there&#39;s a lot of that.

TS: You use this word, "muscular"—that hope has this muscular quality. Tell me more about that.

KT: I guess what I&#39;m trying to do is counteract the idea that&#39;s out there and that in earlier parts of my life, I had—that something like love, something like hope, is kind of—to use John Powell&#39;s word—"wimpy." In order to live something like hope and love in a muscular way communally, I think there&#39;s work that we have to do communally to reframe [and] to put a lot of connotations and experiences around what hope and love can look like in public.

It&#39;s hard to do that now; it&#39;s wimpy because we&#39;ve watered down the word and we haven&#39;t attached it to a lot of—to me, "muscular" is powerful. It pushes things forward. It has an effect. So there&#39;s work to do in demonstrating something called hope that is muscular. I mean, that has an effect you can see, that has a power you can see. I do think that there is an effect and there is power; I think what we&#39;re worse at is pointing at that and calling it "a muscular hope," and calling it "a muscular love."

TS: Now, in this section on hope, you write about how you&#39;ve been influenced by Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit paleontologist. I&#39;m curious if you could talk a little bit about that: how his writings have influenced you and particularly in terms of this muscular hope function.

KT: Yes. Yes. So again, I mentioned a minute ago that having a long view of time is very refreshing and nourishing, and absolutely critical. We have such a—Americans especially, we have this ridiculous view of instantaneous gratification. We leap to action, and we think things should show results right away. We&#39;re always measuring results.

Teilhard de Chardin is a great person to kind of shake you into a whole new way of thinking because his view of time was geological. He was, at the beginning of the last century, looking at human fossil remains that were finally demonstrating to humanity the span of time in which we had evolved. He was looking at how primitive these bodies were—of our ancestors—and imagining that future humanity would look at us spiritually as equally as primitive. He believed that the biosphere would be overlaid with what he called the "noosphere," this realm of human energy and thought, and innovation and invention. In fact, the biosphere is now overlaid with this global brain we call "the Internet," but we have such a long way to go to grow that up, to grow ourselves up. But, he believed that evolution proceeds towards spirit.

I&#39;m very drawn to an idea that we are in the adolescence of our species, and that if you look at what&#39;s happening in the world today, if you look at the globe, it resembles a kind of image we can get now of the teenage brain. Which is to say: this unprecedented capacity for invention and creativity and technological advance and social entrepreneurship—and at the very same time, it cohabits—it coexists and intertwines—with unprecedented capacities for recklessness and destruction.

That&#39;s a hard place to be, but it also to me is taking it out of this short-term thinking. It creates a spaciousness to—there&#39;s something relaxing about acknowledging that we are in the midst of a long-term project. We&#39;re too quick to call something a failure. This is work; this work is growing ourselves up and spiritual evolution is the world of generations. We do our part, right? We won&#39;t solve the problem, but we are seeding the future, and we&#39;re doing the best we can with our particular lives. And that is good, and it&#39;s enough.

TS: You know, I think that idea of seeing change as a long-term project also requires a certain kind of humility, a word that you used previously in our conversation—about working at the margins with humility. That&#39;s not attractive to a lot of people. "This is my time, this is my generation. We&#39;re going to completely overhaul XYZ."

KT: [Laughs.] Right. Yes! We have to hold these things in a creative tension, right? I think that sense of urgency is good. But, we know from previous generations that—you know, there&#39;s a hubris in thinking—not just thinking, "We have to do our part, we&#39;re going to change things," but, "We&#39;re going to solve the problems." I mean, look at the core Buddhist insight—[it&#39;s] that everything is ephemeral, and that includes all of our best solutions! That&#39;s not the same thing as saying that there can&#39;t be genuine growth, there can&#39;t be genuine leaps forward. There can. But we have to work with this kind of strange stuff that we are. And when we don&#39;t—when we get too attached to our grand solutions—ultimately, in the long run, that just leads to disappointment and to cynicism.

TS: You mentioned this teaching from Teilhard de Chardin—evolution proceeds towards spirit. I wasn&#39;t quite sure what that means.

KT: Well, just that the story—certainly in his time—that was being told about [how] evolution was—it&#39;s all a physical story, right? It&#39;s our bodies, it&#39;s that we&#39;ve got big brains and we stood upright and we made tools. His belief was that it&#39;s more than that; that humanity evolving means the evolution of all of our parts, all of our aspects. I think many of us in many different ways believe that their spiritual potentials are the pinnacle of what we&#39;re capable [of]. So, he believed that it would involve all of us, and that we would evolve spiritually as well as physically.

TS: Now, one other thing you said I found curious: that you have the sense that we&#39;re in our adolescence as a human species. As you said that, I thought, "I don&#39;t know. I mean, maybe we&#39;re in kindergarten, maybe we&#39;re in preschool. I don&#39;t really know what time scale . . .

KT: Well, that&#39;s true. [Laughs.] I may have been overly positive about that!

TS: Yes. Hard to know.

KT: But what we&#39;re not is—we&#39;re not all fully formed.

TS: That&#39;s for sure!

KT: But it&#39;s important to say because I actually think that we got to the end of the twentieth century and there were actually people writing articles with titles like "The End of History" that people took seriously. Physicists were sure that there was just one other thing that we had to figure out and that we&#39;d have it cracked, and we thought liberal democracy and capitalism is the recipe for human happiness. And we weren&#39;t anywhere near finished. And now, we&#39;re grappling with the failure of institutions like schools and prisons and hospitals—that don&#39;t make sense the way they were set up to honor the fullness of human experience or dignity—that seemed like the great solution.

So, yes. It&#39;s important that we say we&#39;re not done. We have a long way to go. And those were early efforts, and we can improve on them.

TS: OK, Krista. There&#39;s a couple other things that I really want to talk to you about from your book, Becoming Wise. There&#39;s a section in the book where you talk about the body, flesh, somatic intelligence. And you say, "As much as anything I&#39;ve done as an adult, yoga has saved my life."

KT: [Laughs.] That&#39;s right.

TS: And I thought, "Well, first of all, what was going on in Krista&#39;s life that she needed her life to be saved?"

[Krista laughs.]

TS: "And then secondly, how did yoga do it?"

KT: Yes. Oh my gosh! I was so tired of the thoughts in my head. I was so sick of hearing my own voice. I was very—I write in the book about my sense of how cerebral a lot of Western culture is, including Western religion and including, in a strange way, the very conservative, immersive Christianity I grew up in—"The body is an entry point of danger." It&#39;s all about rules and beliefs and texts. And that was me.

And then I went to Germany. I was involved in geopolitics—it was all very big, grand ideas and exhilarating. Thrilling! Then I started a show which was about conversation and ideas, and I did hit this point where I—I was not complete enough. I actually now—I believe actually that our capacity to even inhabit or apprehend something like mystery is limited if we&#39;re not grounded in our bodies, and fully grounded in our bodies in their beauty and their flaws, the reality of them. And it was yoga that helped me not understand that so much as inhabit it—get out of my head and into my body. That&#39;s a spiritual move; that&#39;s what I think now, that it&#39;s a spiritual move.

TS: What age were you when you discovered yoga?

KT: I was in my early forties, my mid-forties. It was about five years—well, maybe 46, 47. It was about five years into creating this show—seven years—which I think of now as like the childhood—the infancy of the show. And then I kind of moved into, I don&#39;t know where we are now, maybe our adolescence or perhaps late teens. [Laughs.]

TS: And you approached it as a beginner, and discovered—how did it change your—?

KT: Oh, that was also important. Yes.

TS: I&#39;m curious about that, and I&#39;m curious how it changed your view, if you will, of how you know, listen—the sort of intellectualism—how yoga shifted that for you.

KT: Oh. Well, it&#39;s hard to talk about because it is so much at the—it&#39;s not a verbal thing. It&#39;s not something I think through in that way. If I say that listening is about being present, it&#39;s also about being present with my body and in my body. So I couldn&#39;t really take apart for you how I&#39;m different or what I do differently, but I know that my presence is fuller.

Also, when we inhabit our bodies in their fullness, based in the reality of them, we inhabit a vulnerability. We know their softness—that we are soft. I think that a sense [of] knowing one&#39;s vulnerability, if you&#39;re safe, is also a root to compassion. So I am sure that in ways that are palpable, I am more open and vulnerable and compassionate.

But the other thing that you said was important to me too—that I went into yoga, I&#39;m like 47, I was in pretty good shape and all that. But I started doing this kind of athletic—this Core Power Yoga—and it was clear to me from the very first class that I really thought I would never be good at this, but I was going to do it. I was going to do it because I could tell that it felt good and it was good for me. I think it was the first thing that felt important or that it was going to be a big part of my life that I had ever done, gone in saying, "I&#39;m not going to be good at this, and that is not the point, and that&#39;s OK." That was so freeing. This is all about personal neuroses and development, but it&#39;s also a spiritual lesson.

The truth is, at this point—I don&#39;t know, seven, eight years on—I am good at it in a way I couldn&#39;t have thought then because there&#39;s that thing again—you practice and you get better. But even so, there&#39;s something so beautiful about yoga that, no matter how—you&#39;re always, even in the same postures that you do three, four, five times a week, you discover—I make these little shifts or adjustments or do something I didn&#39;t think I could do before, and it&#39;s come through patience and going over the same ground, putting myself through the motions again and again. All of that is—I don&#39;t think that I have an especially spiritual practice of yoga, but it is such a spiritual teacher to me.

TS: In your mid-forties, when you had this call—I&#39;m going to go be a beginner in a yoga class—what were the symptoms, if you will, that something had to change for you? How did you know that?

KT: I think I had just finished writing my first book, and as I say, I was sick of the thoughts in my head. I do know that meditation is not about thinking, but at that point, one thing I thought I would try and did try was to meditate to calm my mind, to still my mind. What happened for me is that it just was another way of being with my mind! [Laughs.] Right? So, yoga actually took that away, because I had to focus—especially in those first—for years and years and years, I had to focus so intensely on what I was supposed to be doing with my hands and my feet. That was just such a relief—to get out of my mind, out of my head.

TS: OK, Krista, as I said, there are several things I still want to talk to you about, and one of them is the section in the book, Becoming Wise, on faith. In that section of the book, you talk both about the leap, if you will, that mystics make into mystery, and also how scientists have come in different ways to their discoveries and their own way into mystery. What I&#39;d love to know is how the spiritual and the scientific come together in you—in you as a person?

KT: So, I grew up in this conservative Christian environment where science was just not—it was not part of the picture, and it was just a threat, essentially. Also, the life of the mind was not invited into spiritual life; it was also a threat. So, I was not at all religious and not at all interested in religion or spiritual life for a good 10 years. Then when I came back to this, I had to know that I could—that the life of the mind could have a really vigorous place in spiritual life.

When I started this show, I had no idea—if you had told me when I started the show that I would be interviewing physicists and neuroscientists and evolutionary biologists on a regular basis, that&#39;s not something I anticipated. Those conversations are so meaningful for me, they&#39;re so meaningful for our listeners. I think that there&#39;s an element in that—when you ask me what it means for me—there&#39;s just a sheer delight and just an exhilaration of being, of finding the creative interplay, the conversation between this place where ideas and inquiry and discovery—material discovery—are so alive.

Often—maybe most of the time these days—when I talk to scientists, they&#39;re not themselves religious people, or they&#39;re not religious or spiritual in any kind of traditional way. But the discoveries they&#39;re making—the insights they&#39;re gaining of what it means to be human, of the cosmos, of our place in it—these things are spiritually evocative, they&#39;re theologically evocative. That is just such an exciting place to sit. There&#39;s so much I get that I just chew on.

So, it is in this realm of big ideas, but these are things I carry around with me. I see the world differently. And that&#39;s one thing I often ask scientists: "How do you walk through the world differently, having seen—being on this hunt for habitable life on other planets?" The answers they give—knowing that other people live this way, that these are my fellow human beings—it just makes the world that much richer.

TS: How would you answer the question, "What is your faith at this point?"

KT: Well, I&#39;m kind of fascinated about how the word "God," I feel, is not just resilient, but making a comeback.

TS: Oh my! Virtue and God are making a comeback! You&#39;re making my morning here!

KT: [Laughs.] But do you know what I mean? The word "God" is making a comeback in all these unexpected ways and places. In fact, I have to say, I interviewed Thich Nhat Hanh early, early on—10 or 12 years ago—actually we&#39;re going to put that show on the air again this week because I just feel like that&#39;s a voice people need to hear. But he talked to me about—one of these things he says is he can&#39;t imagine that the Kingdom of God is a place free of suffering. And I remember just feeling—with him, I felt like—sitting with him physically felt like sitting in the presence of God, and I&#39;m sitting with somebody who&#39;s not a theist, and yet he&#39;s talking to me about God.

So, that&#39;s how I feel—like this strange and fascinating and rich way [about] the language of God. So, I love that, and I also—I think for me, the word itself is just way, way, way too small for whatever we&#39;re talking about. It&#39;s the word we have. I feel like we&#39;re filling it with all these connotations that include the particularities of our search for whatever our search is—for God, as humans have pursued that across the years. I think that is evolving. It&#39;s going to be informed as much by physics and by Zen Buddhist monks as it is by Jesuit theologians.

So, I take delight in that. To be very honest with you, lately I&#39;ve been realizing that I haven&#39;t had a practice of prayer for a long time. I&#39;ve kind of felt like my work is my prayer, and I think it is, but that&#39;s not enough. So, my life of faith, whatever that means—it&#39;s a very fluid thing. It has to do with God, but I do think that more and more, the "with God" expansively understood this sense that there&#39;s some—well, I don&#39;t know how to define it. But more and more, and given the nature of this kind of accumulative conversation that I&#39;m part of, I think the work we do on ourselves, the work we do to get clarity—to be intentional, to care in the most practical ways, the imprint we make on the lives around us fitfully—that that&#39;s the first thing, whatever God is. Attending to that is the work. That is holy work.

I would say, just added, there&#39;s this really reality-based, moment-to-moment understanding of the work of faith that I have. And then, I do have this really—the other thing—the effect of my life of conversation has been to give me this sense I have of mystery. The reality of mystery, the richness of that, the vastness of that. That just grows and grows. So I have less and less a need or desire to pin things down, you know? To sum it up in any kind of word or belief. And yet, words and beliefs have ultimate importance. So I kind of hold all those things in a dance.

TS: You said this very beautiful sentence: "My work is my prayer." What are you praying—or how are you praying—do you think, through your work?

KT: Elie Wiesel died recently, and I went back to this conversation I had with him a long time ago, also. He of course is somebody who had a very fraught experience of prayer, coming out of the Holocaust. Was prayer possible after the Holocaust? He said—I was just revisiting this this week—he said, "What makes words holy?" And I&#39;m paraphrasing, but he said, "What turns words into a prayer? When it brings you closer to the suffering of others, your words become a prayer."

So, I think to the extent that my work is an engagement with the humanity I share with others, with our longings and our questions and our aspirations to be our deepest selves and our highest selves, that somehow that&#39;s a prayerful endeavor.

But as I said, I don&#39;t think it&#39;s enough, and I think I&#39;ve realized that I still need that contemplative time for my own inner anchoring. I actually do have a really, I think, kind of embarrassingly minor meditation practice [laughs] for the last couple of years, which has also been completely transformative. I didn&#39;t even write about it because I feel like it&#39;s so tiny. But I have to do those things, so I&#39;m just saying I&#39;ve realized I can&#39;t fall back on, "Well, I have all these great spiritual interviews, and that&#39;s enough," because it&#39;s not. I still have to be forming myself inside, and I still have to keep getting grounded inside.

TS: Krista, I just have one final question for you. It&#39;s kind of a curious question, but for whatever reason, it&#39;s what I&#39;d really like to ask you. Which is: I&#39;m curious to know what generates a feeling of fulfillment for you? And I think I&#39;m asking that because I see you as such a public servant, if you will. I really do. You give so much to help the collective move forward. I&#39;m curious to know what actually feels fulfilling to you?

KT: Wow. That&#39;s a—I have never quite thought of it that way, so I&#39;m just going to tell you what came to mind. I&#39;m not going to—

TS: You&#39;re going to be vulnerable with me!

KT: [Laughs.] When I&#39;m in a conversation—when I&#39;m in one of my conversations—you know, there&#39;s this thing that happens when you&#39;re writing that you can put words around something you didn&#39;t even know you knew, or you didn&#39;t even know you thought about it that way. I think the same thing happens in a conversation, and then it happens with another person. So, there&#39;s something incredibly fulfilling, and it&#39;s like holy ground, it&#39;s like a privilege.

When I&#39;m with somebody—and because of the back-and-forth of the conversation—they put words around something that they know and something that&#39;s really helpful for other people to hear in a way that they&#39;ve never quite put words around it before. That, to me—I guess that gets at my sense of the power of words and that somehow, that just brings something new. It&#39;s also a gift to them—there&#39;s something transformative for any of us when we do that, and to be present, to help be a catalyst for that, to witness that, and then to have all the people in the room who are eventually going to be in the room when they listen on the radio.

I think the other side of that is when people say to me that because of being in this listening room, that they weren&#39;t just able to hear that conversation, but that they were able to be present and listen differently, and gather some curiosity—and through those things, create some new possibilities in the world close to them. That&#39;s just, again, just this amazingly—I get one story like that and I feel like, "OK, this is the metric I needed for this year to know that we&#39;re doing the right thing, and we should do it another year."

TS: Yes! Keep going!

KT: [Laughs.] This was really—these questions have made me think in a wonderful way. Thank you.

TS: Thank you, Krista Tippett—the host of On Being, and also the author of a new book—a beautiful book—Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living. Krista, it&#39;s been great to talk to you. I feel incredibly inspired by the depth, really, of your commitment to care and to be forward in the way that you care, and to bring that into your work. Even though you may say, "My work is my prayer; that&#39;s not enough," and for you there may be more, I&#39;m grateful that you&#39;ve been praying through your work for all these years. I&#39;m grateful for that, so thank you.

KT: Thank you so much.

TS: SoundsTrue.com: Many voices, one journey. Thanks for listening.