

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

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**I: Memories of the University of Chicago (0:15 – 16:34)**

KRISTOL: Hi, welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol. It's a great pleasure to be joined today by Leon and Amy Kass. Welcome.

AMY: Thank you.

KRISTOL: Let's begin at the beginning, you both went to the University of Chicago and you both showed up there in the 50s, and you both talked about how this was an important formative experience for you. So I'm curious – as someone who didn't go to the University of Chicago – and has been, of course, wounded and damaged ever since.

AMY: How did it leave its mark?

KRISTOL: You ended up going back there and teaching there for as very distinguished professors there for many decades, so talk a little bit about the University of Chicago.

LEON: I'm a native of Chicago. I went to the college of the University of Chicago as an early entrant after two years of high school, age 15. Not to be recommend necessarily.

KRISTOL: Wasn't great for your social life?

LEON: No, in some respects – because there were a lot of us. There was a program – early entrance, left over from the Hutchins College. I majored in the sciences. I was probably too young to really be moved by the books that I now love and teach until my last year in the college.

But it was formative partly because Chicago was still – the Hutchins – Robert Hutchins had left, the climate of learning through great books and through discussion, search, and inquiry was very much the way of the place.

And the professors didn't lecture. We would sit and read very often short excerpts rather than whole

books, but the questions were searching questions, we were forced to defend our opinions, we were forced to look into fundamental assumptions.

And both Amy and I got caught up in the ideology of the Hutchins College, the liberal arts, and the great books.

KRISTOL: So, even as a science major in order to graduate you had to take a full kind of liberal arts, great-books regimen?

LEON: There were 14 – before I got, there were 14 yearlong, what would now be called, common core courses, which everybody took and you got a B.A. in the liberal arts from the college. And if you wanted to specialize, you did it afterwards.

When I got there, it was all sort of half-and-half. Half your time was on a major, and I was in biology, but half the time was full-year courses in humanities, full-year courses in social science, history of western civ., a course on the organization and methods of the sciences and the principles of knowledge, a kind of big philosophical integration –

KRISTOL: And these were required courses for everybody?

LEON: For everybody.

KRISTOL: So, there wasn't like a "core" where you choose among the ten courses?

LEON: No, everybody took the same things, and you could – anybody you'd bump into had already – was doing these things, had done these things, or would do them. Also, Amy and I were members of an organization called the Student Orientation Board, which was a self-perpetuating group of students who were responsible for orienting the new students every fall and who met during the year to have discussions on the aims of liberal education with invited faculty members.

And we regarded ourselves as the defenders of the faith against the barbarians who had taken over and who wanted to turn the University of Chicago into a place that would be a home for brawn and beauty as well as brains, as one of the deans then put it.

So we were little Hutchins ideologues and – I mean, the idea was, in part, was learning for its own sake, great books for their own sake, but also that this was indispensable for citizenship, and that something like a rich philosophical education in all realms of human knowledge was indispensable for citizenship in a country where the people were sovereign.

KRISTOL: I want to ask Amy about that and to get the truer view of what really – what it was really like at the University of Chicago?

LEON: I gave it the orthodox view.

KRISTOL: Was there any one professor – I'm just curious – as an undergraduate who I don't know guided you or, really, you became close to?

LEON: My last year of the college – I mean, I had done very well in my science classes, rather mediocre in the humanities, and I couldn't write to save my neck. It was terrible.

But my last year in the college, a fellow named Joe Schwab, who had also trained as a geneticist and was a brilliant graduate student, starting teaching in college, got very much interested in why it was – he got interested in sort of the transference and counter-transference problems of the classroom and why some people learned under some circumstances and others not.

Became a psychoanalyst, wound up teaching every course in the college except foreign language and Western Civ. All the social sciences, all the humanities, the philosophical integration course, math,

everything.

And he was a bit of a bully but a real Socratic. And he showed me – the first day of my senior year – that there were questions to which the answers that I was carrying around in my head were inadequate.

It was a class – the first reading was the discussion of “the Cave” from Book 7 of *The Republic*, and the question was, “Why did the philosophers return to the cave?” And goody two-shoes over here said, “Well, of course, to improve the lot of all the other people. It’s their duty.”

And by the time the class was over, it was perfectly clear that the text didn’t support such a philanthropic understanding, and it was the first time it occurred to me that, you know, the pursuit of knowledge might be happiness for the seeker and not simply instrumentally good and useful for the larger community.

And the whole rest of the year – I mean, he really woke me up. I took a full-year course with him, I took –

AMY: This was your last year.

LEON: It was my last year.

KRISTOL: I was thinking, too, what Amy said, that in a way you can have a wonderful curriculum on paper, but if you don’t have the teacher to wake you up –

LEON: Well, I –

KRISTOL: You still learned a lot, I’m sure.

LEON: I blame myself because I really was young.

KRISTOL: You were very young.

LEON: And I went to speak to Schwab, and I said you know – I also took some classes from Richard McKeon, who was a bit of a bully and in retrospect a horrible teacher.

KRISTOL: Famous Aristotle scholar, by the way.

LEON: Yeah, but I went to Schwab and said, “Look, I’ve been accepted to medical school.” I said, “I’m thinking maybe – maybe I’d like to go to graduate school in philosophy.” He said, “Kass, go to medical school.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Look, if you’re really interested in these philosophical things you can always do them later, it’ll come out. But in the meantime, you love something, and you’ll be able to do something in the world.”

KRISTOL: And make a living.

LEON: And make living.

KRISTOL: That’s so terrible.

LEON: But it was good advice.

AMY: You don’t think it was a comment on your philosophical ability?

LEON: Maybe that too.

KRISTOL: That’s harsh. And you, you showed up a couple years after Leon?

AMY: Well, I showed up in 1959 and Leon was already in medical school. And, in fact, I met Leon the first day I was at the University of Chicago.

LEON: That was one of the privileges of being on the orientation board.

AMY: He was on the orientation board, and he was one of those selected to orient me to the college.

KRISTOL: If this happened today, there would be all kinds of legal investigations and –

AMY: Well, it was the resident's head from my floor that introduced us. And she ran – went running up to Leon and said, "At last, we have someone here who went to the University of Chicago for the right reasons."

And he said to me, "Oh, really, why did you come?" And I said, "Of all the places that tried to send me their brochures and propaganda, I liked Chicago most because its booklet didn't have any pictures in it." So, I thought it was a serious place. That's really what attracted me.

KRISTOL: You were a transfer student?

AMY: I was a transfer student there, yeah. But it was my big act of rebellion. I came from New York City, and I was expected to go to school in the East, and I told my parents if they didn't – if – I didn't want to go to school in the East, and I could support myself if I went to Antioch.

So, I went to Antioch the first year and then transferred to – as quickly as I could – there.

KRISTOL: To Chicago?

AMY: To Chicago.

KRISTOL: In terms of your educational experience there –

AMY: Well, there – first of all, I would say, Leon – I quickly, as he said, joined the orientation board, and this teacher that is so touted by Leon – I was also a student of. And I thought he was a big bully. Just as bully – just as much a bully as McKeon.

But the very first course I took at the University of Chicago was a course by a man who subsequently did not get tenure. He was a known socialist and the first reading was the Declaration of Independence. We spent three weeks talking about the Declaration of Independence. And I was blown away.

Stops on the first sentence, "When in the course of human events . . ." He says, "Do human events have courses?," and it was going through that carefully and the conversations that it generated outside of the classroom as well as inside of the classroom that really converted me to a way of thinking, a way of reading, a way of speaking, and so on.

So, I wouldn't say he was the most influential teacher I had, the most influential teacher was a man named Jack Weintraub, who was a legend at the college, and he was in history. But that experience was really formative for me.

KRISTOL: And was it the experience more of sort of reading the text closely and thinking about the philosophic or implicitly philosophic questions, or was it the experience of sort of America and what America stood for so to speak?

AMY: Well, I had a long-standing interest in citizenship. I graduated high school shortly after Sputnik and the National Defense Education Act was passed, and everybody was promoting science education. And I thought that both citizenship and the humanities were getting short shrift. And, so I was really very interested in this and promoting that, and this just fed into that interest.

KRISTOL: And then you graduated from Chicago?

AMY: I graduated from Chicago and – well, I did basically what was left of the old Hutchins College and

more. I didn't – insofar as I had any major at all you would call it "towards history." But I really majored in this man, Jack Weintraub. I took every course he offered and then I did – I got a degree in tutorial studies, which meant I spent my last year writing a long paper basically on historiography.

KRISTOL: So, in both your cases actually that – some individual professors were key, the overall climate presumably helped make it possible, I suppose, for those professors to teach the way they did.

LEON: And I think that's really very important. In retrospect, I think one would say a lot of the teachers weren't so great. The curriculum could have done with reading whole books rather than, you know, short selections.

But what was key was they had a separate college faculty that did not get tenure on the basis of publication, but on the basis of their commitment to this curriculum of liberal education. They believed in the enterprise. They made us believe in the enterprise and its importance, and there was a kind of spirit of Chicago, a fundamental inquiry argument, disputation, and asking really basic questions just about everything, including about the sciences.

And that – and for years, I would – much later in professional life, I would go to a meeting, and there would be conversations in the meeting, and I would find somebody whose way of thinking or habit of thought I really liked, and I was always both pleased and disappointed to discover that they came from Chicago.

Because you'd like to think that what you learned there is not idiosyncratic and just peculiar but is sort of universally an appropriate way. Chicago placed its mark on people.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I was going to ask about that. Because I mean – I guess other people I've spoken with who went to college in the late 50s, early 60s – and I think Sputnik was such a formative moment. I'm a little too young – I remember it vaguely, but, I mean, a little bit young for it to have been formative for me, I think – I was going to say this was true beyond Chicago. Maybe there was a moment here where people, both from the point of view of liberal education and civic education, had a kind of both openness and sense of urgency about it that went away or diminished a lot in later decades. Or maybe it was more just a Chicago tradition or some combination of the two, I suppose?

AMY: I think when I was in the college, that was true. There was more of an urgency about it. But really what was distinctive about Chicago – and I think remained distinctive throughout the 34 years that we ended up teaching there, it was a place that you really didn't have to apologize for being serious.

It's a – it was for us a place as undergraduates, a place where the conversations in the classroom really were taken outside the classroom and continued in the cafeteria and in your dormitory, and so on.

So, Chicago was known as the place where fun comes to die.

KRISTOL: Right.

AMY: Well, I – when the newspapers published that story, I thought they should be proud of it. They thought I was perverse, but that was a different time.

LEON: In 1957, three friends and I got into a car and went Spring Break traveling to the East and visited Harvard, where I had a friend, now a rather infamous of the left and we went to classes with him. We went to a big lecture class with Arthur Schlesinger Jr., as I recall. He was raving about all of this.

And we thought, what a waste. I mean you, know, here were 300-400 people packed into the Sanders Theater, whatever it was; the fellow was probably doing the same thing he's done year in and year out; one can read this, and where was the activity of sort of challenging people and how they thought?

So, I remember we were – we were snobs, at least, about the kind of education we were getting even compared with what was going on in more respectable and elite places.

## II: Towards Liberal Education (16:35 – 35:50)

KRISTOL: Let's stick with the theme of liberal education, you have gone back to Chicago, and were distinguished professors there and also formed various courses and, I think, whole curricula – whole concentrations – maybe you should say a word about that? But also I'd like – I wonder how much you think what you experienced is "experience-able" today in other – in many – at Chicago or at colleges and universities?

It seems to me one could argue on the upside, on the positive side, that in a way there are a enough Chicago graduates and Chicago-influenced types who went to teach in other places that one runs into students who've had very similar experiences to what you've had, I think, at places that were not Chicago.

On the other hand, one has the sense that the whole trend of modern higher education has been sort of against the experience you had. So I'm curious – your judgments from your time at Chicago and also about the current situation since you're still teaching young people, of course, in various programs here in Washington and elsewhere?

AMY: Well, I would say that the current atmosphere at Chicago is very, very different from what it was when we were undergraduates. But I would say immediately – follow that up with – we retired in 2010, spring. And until the last quarter that we were teaching there, there were always – a redeeming handful of students who were recognizable.

And they came to Chicago mostly because of the legacy that was left by Hutchins and a lot of them influenced by Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*.

LEON: There are large cultural differences between the 1950s and the last 20-30 years. Partly the people who come to college are not as well read to begin with. I mean, in my days in Chicago – not me – but – by the way there were a bunch of 15-16 year olds and there were returning veterans, too. So that was – there was a healthy influx of people who had seen the world and were quite mature. And that produced a very interesting mix.

But everybody read Marx, everybody had read Freud, and this they had read in high school. The kids who come to college don't have – they haven't read any books that have made a profound influence on them with the exception of a small group of people for whom *The Fountainhead* and Ayn Rand is important.

And very interesting, because they believe in excellence, even their view of it is rather – rather narrow. But I think our experience – I think Amy's right, until the very end and somewhat against the attempts of the institution to try to make it look more normal and to build up, you know, extracurricular activities and theater and the swimming pool and take advantage of the city – the students who have come to our classes to the very end were imminently teachable.

And they're people who want to be taken seriously, want to live a meaningful life, and if you teach up to them – in other words if you speak to them as if they are better than they think they are – they don't disappoint you. I mean, they really – they rise to the occasion, and you put good books in front of them and read them slowly and ask them to discuss it.

And I always compare them to the way I was when I was in their place. And they're better than I was. They're better than I was in terms of the willingness to enter in a serious way. I'm not saying all of them were of the same native intelligence. But it's very good to remember what you were like when you were a callow youth and they don't disappoint.

KRISTOL: That's good to hear.

AMY: Let me just underscore one thing that he said. I've never met a young person who didn't take himself or herself seriously. And if you reciprocate that, if you take them as seriously as they do and ask

questions that they can understand and about things are urgent for them, they rise to the occasion. And in many cases, they're better than even they thought they could be.

KRISTOL: You – but let me ask you about that, you were both extremely well-regarded teachers and taught a wide variety of courses and taught what we might call multidisciplinary courses, I suppose – “Human Being and Citizen,” which, I think, read literature and philosophy and politics, maybe even history, I don't know if that was permitted or – as a bow to your youthful studies.

To someone who is off going to teach somewhere – let's say, there's no core curriculum at whatever college he's going to, she's going to, but he wants to try to replicate this experience – particular books that you found most effective to teach about or teach from for freshmen, for sophomores, for undergraduates, or to young people who want some guidance? Any – I mean, there are obviously so many great books, but did you have particular favorites from a sort of pedagogic point of view or educational point of view?

LEON: We should probably each answer about the favorite books. But a favorite strategy, I think, is exportable. When we came to Chicago to teach in the fall of '76, I came allegedly to teach courses in bioethics, that's what people wanted me to do. I wasn't that keen on doing that. It seemed to me the students were ill-served reading the current literature in bioethics, and they'd be much better off reading weightier books that would have a more enduring value. And we had just come from St. John's where we taught for a few years, where we really got I think charged up over the importance of such study and learning.

But the core curriculum available then was organized around the academic disciplines and the questions of interest to academics. So, it was a course that emphasized the differences between politics, philosophy and poetry. Or a course on the different genres within literature.

Whereas we wanted a common core course that would be centered around the urgent questions that a young person faces. What's a good life for a human being? What does it mean to be a human being, and how could you live excellently? What's a good community, and how can you be a decent citizen, and what's the relation between being a good human being and being a good citizen, and are they simply congruous?

So, the choice was not an academic choice, but to choose books that addressed these large questions, challenged our conventional opinions about these large questions, offered alternatives about them and – which we could study for their own sake but also ask the students to judge their truth or falsity and feel their importance for their own lives.

Maybe we can talk about the individual books, but I think the “Human Being and Citizen” course, which we designed with four other colleagues: Ralph Lerner, whom you would know among them; Herman Sinaiko, a distinguished humanities teacher who recently died; a couple of other young people.

This was really explicitly on this theme. And we had half the students' time, their humanities common core, their social science common core. For a year, we – I did the social science part. Amy did the humanities part. We sat in each other classes, we had the kids for six hours a week and –

AMY: Which was two-thirds of their academic time.

LEON: Two-thirds or a half.

KRISTOL: And read a limited number of texts carefully and –

LEON: Yeah, the fall, if I'm not misremembering – the humanities was really, “What is human excellence?”, and the fall was *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Apology* – Achilles, Odysseus, Socrates. In the social science side the theme was “Justice and the Just Society”: the *Oresteia*, Plato's *Republic*, and Thucydides.

And in the winter Genesis, and Exodus, and Matthew, Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*, a Shakespeare play, and Hobbes' *Leviathan*. The spring was American documents, speeches of Lincoln, Tocqueville, the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*.

KRISTOL: The Declaration of Independence, I trust.

LEON: Of course. Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, Kant's *Foundations*, and we finished, if I'm not making this up, with *War and Peace*.

AMY: Well, maybe. It was always a big novel.

LEON: Big novel at the end. So, basically three major texts a term read. We can't do any of them properly in one term, but much more closely than a book a day or a book a week as is fashionable in some more prestigious universities not to be mentioned.

KRISTOL: Or just a part of a book. Why read the whole thing, you know?

AMY: That was also a difference between what we tried to do and what we were taught when we were undergraduates. In the Hutchins College, it was great snippets. It was not great books.

LEON: It was problem-oriented rather than text-oriented.

AMY: Exactly. Exactly.

KRISTOL: Which is distorting.

AMY: And I should add about the "Human Being and Citizen" course, we went back to Chicago in 1976, and we started in 1977. And it lasted as this double core humanities/social science course just for six years when the college rebelled.

The dean of the college thought we were not doing proper social science, so –

LEON: No empirical studies.

AMY: It split the course, and it became the humanities course, and then social science went somewhere else.

LEON: But Amy chaired this course until we left, until – and –

KRISTOL: But if someone said to you, "That's very nice, but we're going to take three weeks, one book, two books maybe or three books" – I'm just curious. You began with the Greeks and "Human Being and Citizen." Was that partly chronological, I suppose, but partly, you must have thought that was the best way in or – ?

LEON: What would you say?

AMY: I would say it was mostly chronological. And all the books that we chose really addressed the question, which took its bearings from –

KRISTOL: You could have begun with Shakespeare.

AMY: Sure, but we began with *The Apology* from which the question, "Who is the knower of the excellence of a human being and of a citizen?" is taken. So, we always began with that.

And, so it made sense to do Greeks first, and since Homer is, arguably, the author of all Western literature or the founder of Greece, you can say, we began with *The Iliad* and then followed with *The Odyssey*.



KRISTOL: Your favorite, I mean, to teach.

AMY: Well, that's an interesting question. A lot of people always ask me, "What's your favorite book to teach?" and my standard answer has become whatever book I happen to be teaching. Because I do not think that you could teach a book well if you don't love it. And you don't give it everything that you have.

So, I have personal favorites among the array, but for teaching purposes, whatever I'm teaching I have to believe in.

KRISTOL: No automatic recommendation. If a 25-year-old shows up on your doorstep, on your doorsteps and, "Mrs. Kass, you're such a great teacher what – I'm not sure I like –"

AMY: Read *The Iliad*, read *The Odyssey*, read the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln's speeches, I would say.

KRISTOL: *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, that's a big challenging thing which would be – that would be –

LEON: I mean, and I would say for myself Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Genesis and Exodus, and Tocqueville. Comparable kinds of things. Comparable kinds of things. But look –

KRISTOL: I don't mean to push this too hard. Obviously, there are a million – not a million but there are dozens, at least, of really great books that are suitable to this –

AMY: Any Shakespeare play.

LEON: But the important thing is – the important thing to add is, yeah, there are certain kinds of students for whom the books in a way teach themselves. But the greater the book the less true that is. And we could put together a paper curriculum, which is not exportable, and you could take – you could probably take a good essay written in the *Weekly Standard* and with careful exegesis and good questions, generate a kind of discussion that would be vastly better than what some people would get out of having a class on *The Iliad*.

And I say that not just to flatter, I mean, everything depends –

KRISTOL: On the teacher.

LEON: Everything depends on the spirit of inquiry, the kinds of questions that are asked, what you could follow-up an opening question with so that –

AMY: Do you think any curriculum –

LEON: No – look, I think you're far better off – you're far better off giving people books to read, which even if they get very little out of it the first time, it will be part of their experience.

I read Aristotle's *Ethics* as a sophomore in the college. I hated it. I thought it was boring and, yet, when the time came, when I really later in life woke up to the discovery that what I had been taught ethically was problematic and that I needed to look for something other than this kind of naïve enlightenment view, the *Ethics* was in my background. I said, "Maybe I should read this."

But if I hadn't had it and if I hadn't seen it, it would not have been – would not have been available. So, far better to teach better books than lesser books, books in which you have a reason to believe that the author saw and still sees farther than you would ever see left to your own devices.

But the texts alone don't do the job. The number of people who read *The Odyssey* and who never will ask the question of the class, "Why does Odysseus want to go home, and what is home, anyhow?"

AMY: What makes a home a home.

LEON: What makes a home a home. And every kid in the room has an opinion about that and not all of them edifying.

AMY: Or the question of fathers and sons in *The Odyssey*, very few people will get to that if ever.

KRISTOL: And I suppose – of course, what makes that harder is that most people think, “*Odyssey*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, folklore, folk tale, you know, mildly interesting if you want to know what the Greeks – sort of Greek popular religion was like or something like that, but maybe some beautiful lines, if one knows Greek, but nothing serious to teach.”

I suppose – I mean I’ve asked other people this question and they have sometimes said, “Plato is special,” or maybe Plato and Xenophon – although Xenophon is so less well-known – because of the dialogues. I mean, there is a way in which if you want people to question you do see actual questioning – obviously, if one reads Homer or Aristotle carefully, you see questioning, as well – but here – the great thing about Plato is he presents the questioning so it is questioning-in-action, so to speak. And I suppose that is an advantage to Plato.

AMY: It is drama. And, so you can do the same thing with *Hamlet* or with *King Lear*.

KRISTOL: But Plato gives you the advantage of –

AMY: Of asking questions.

KRISTOL: Also having, like, Socrates there to sort of – now, this could be a big trap, of course, to kind of guide. I think what – Shakespeare is fantastic – in my experience, students do like reading Shakespeare, they just don’t – it’s so hard to know what to make of it, you know, what Shakespeare’s judgment might be of Hamlet, you know.

Whereas with Plato, there’s some indication that Socrates somehow is superior to his interlocutors so you’re allowed provisionally, at least, to kind of follow Socrates a little bit. That’s dangerous, of course, too.

LEON: This is why the dialogues as most commonly taught don’t do the job that the three of us would like to see it do. I mean, they pick apart the logic of Socrates’ refutations or they treat all the interlocutors as dummies or yes-men.

Whereas the real power of the dialogue comes from having to say – with whoever says whatever they say – why’s this person answering this, and how could some – on the basis of what other assumptions or opinions could somebody say this? So, that you –

KRISTOL: And sometimes why Socrates is misleading people a little?

LEON: People are saying what they think. And you went away re-vivifying a conversation, such as somebody listening in on a conversation, trying to be sympathetic to all parties would then really be able to recreate for themselves vicariously the kind of inquiry that’s taken place.

So that, I mean, a real Socratic dialogue is not – doesn’t do its work unless it’s become a living conversation for the reader and viewer as it were.

KRISTOL: And even *The Apology*, which is less dialogic – dialogue-like, I suppose, than most of the dialogues.

AMY: The most common mistake is that students identify with Socrates, and none of them, of course, will ever be Socrates. None of us will ever be Socrates.

### **III: Teaching Great Books (35:58 – 43:48)**

LEON: It's a good question, too. I would have begun, I think, earlier in my teaching to do only philosophical texts, Aristotle *Ethics*, Plato's *Symposium*, Rousseau's *Discourses*, Lucretius – that's not just philosophy. But – and it's partly Amy's influence and also some joint teaching with her, *War and Peace* and *Moby Dick* at the end.

I've come to be more and more friendly to the teaching of literature, partly because it seems to me arguments are easier for people to get a hold of, but the forming of the imagination and the education of sentiments is much more needful in the present climate, where people start in such a desiccated and shrunken place in the general culture.

And therefore – yeah, I mean – I would rather – I mean I'm not that good at it, Amy's vastly better at it than I am – but good novels, short stories, poetry, have a much better chance of doing the work that needs doing than eliciting the kind of argument, making the best argument for justice. Would you agree?

AMY: Yeah. I think that you can make the same argument of great literature as you do of short stores and poetry, the education and sentiments. But in fact there's a lot more to be said for reading great big books.

Somebody once asked me and I thought he was bonkers – he said to me, “Do you teach long books like your husband does?” And I thought to myself, “Why in the world are you asking this?” Well, this happened to be a first rate teacher at Georgetown –

LEON: Father Schall.

AMY: Father Schall. And I said, “Why do you ask me that?” He said, “I've just taken to read – to teaching long books, and I realize it's the greatest gift that you can give to your students because they have to spend a long time living in a world that is not their own,” enlarging their views of things, experiencing characters and situations which they would never have, which they – and making decisions that they would never have to make.

They have to think with the character, and that's much easier to do if you have a long stretch of time and a long book. Now, you could do it in a short story, but I think it takes – it's more difficult.

LEON: The dwelling with single books actually was the idea of the fundamentals major that I had spent a little time on. This was –

KRISTOL: Let's talk about that.

LEON: This was Allan Bloom's – originally Allan's idea, that – I mean, his formula would be: “One book read carefully can change a life.” Whereas many books read hastily becomes a blur and leaves you with nothing.

So, this was what 1983 I guess we started the major, and Amy became part of it shortly thereafter – a concentration – a B.A. granting program, “Fundamentals, Issues, and Texts,” in which each student entering the program by application and admission had to articulate a question of intellectual and personal concern that they want to study for two years, two – two and a half years.

That question was to be pursued by the intensive study of half a dozen great texts, individually selected with advice by the student to address that question, supplemented by some supporting courses from the traditional disciplines pertinent to the student's question, study of a foreign language so the student could read one of these books in the original language and not be at the mercy of the translators.

But one book read over and over and over again and the final examination, the B.A. examination, was a three-day examination on questions set by the faculty individually selected on these half a dozen books.

So, a student could be interested in the question of justice and study Thucydides and war or Kant's *Perpetual Peace* –

AMY: Or *The Republic*.

LEON: Or *The Republic*. A student interested in marriage and family could do Jane Austen, or could do –

AMY: *War and Peace*.

LEON: We could do *War and Peace*. We could do *The Odyssey*. And this was a thriving program.

AMY: It still is.

LEON: It still is a thriving program. I was the chairman of it from its beginning until we left to come to Washington. Maybe on the average of ten students graduated a year and –

AMY: More now.

LEON: Probably more.

AMY: The Fundamentals program continues to thrive, but so does “Human Being and Citizen.” It remains the most popular common core course.

LEON: And I’m not sure that there are that many people in the second year of college who already have a deeply –

KRISTOL: A question.

LEON: A question, so there’s a certain fraudulence in the way in which these are formulated. But for some of them it really, really took hold and the books became – will become for most of them lifetime companions. I mean, they really have these books to carry with them.

And I’m not sure that looking back I can say that I left college with any book – with any book that made a difference. I had some experiences, but I didn’t come away with something saying, wow.

So, I’m not actually persuaded this was the right thing to do. There’s something to be said for teaching the big questions or the big issues and formulate things around problems rather than around texts.

But we did put in, what, 25 years in this program, very labor intensive.

KRISTOL: It must be individualized curricularly.

LEON: And each course was a single book. So, I would teach Genesis for 20 weeks. Amy would teach *The Odyssey*, *Moby Dick* –

KRISTOL: And these were seminar –

LEON: Seminars.

KRISTOL: This is why they call them the great books, right? And they’re really, at the end of the day, great books and great teachers. There’s no substitute for that, I think.

#### **IV: Men, Women, Courtship (43:48 – 1:07:39)**

KRISTOL: I remember, I guess a little over a decade ago getting in the mail your volume you co-edited – *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar: Readings for Courting and Marrying*, it was called.

LEON: Right.

KRISTOL: And I remember you had – I know you had written about this before over the preceding few years, but I remember thinking this is both unusual, an unusual topic in a sense for people, science,

philosophy, bioethics, even literature in this day and age, and certainly, a countercultural topic. So, why the book? I mean, it's a terrific volume, terrific introductions and questions posed by you. Why the focus on that topic and how'd you get into it? What did you learn doing it?

AMY: Well, it started in the 60s. I decided to teach a course called Men and Women –

LEON: In the 80s.

AMY: Oh, 80s, I'm sorry.

LEON: Mid-80s

AMY: The mid-80s. Is that when the course – you're sure – '86 – so it was probably '85.

I taught a course called "Men and Women: Literary Perspectives." And basically we were going to read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Henry James' *The Bostonians*.

And I – there were about 45 people the first day of class. I wanted about 20, and I couldn't believe that there were so many people wanting to spend five weeks discussing *Pride and Prejudice*.

So, the first thing I said was, "Well, I recommend that you go to the bookstore and just read the first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, and if you like it come back. If not, you'll know that you don't want to take this course." I just couldn't believe that there were so many people who wanted to do this.

And then I decided, as I usually do, rather than discuss why I'm interested in a topic or a course, we do some kind of demonstration. So, I asked the class, "What do you think is the most important decision you'll ever have to make in your life?" And we went around the table.

KRISTOL: This just occurred to you on the spot?

AMY: Yeah. We went around the table and the first person started talking about graduate school and what kind of career to have. Second person, career, graduate school. Third person, where I should finally live and do my graduate studies. They were all talking about graduate studies and career.

We come to about the 15th or 16th person in the class, a young man who was a senior at the time, who said, "Who's going to be the wife of my children."

LEON: The mother.

AMY: The mother –

KRISTOL: The wife of your children is another drama.

AMY: So, "Who's going to be the mother of my children," and there was an audible gasp in the room. Why? One person said, "What do you mean mother of *your* children?" Another person said, "What are you talking about? You're going to throw away your four years of undergraduate education just to find the mother of your children?" You want to have a family? I mean, why is that the first thing on your mind?

And I knew after that we had some work cut out for us. He was one of the few young men who came back to the second class.

KRISTOL: I was about to say, how many people did come back to the second class?

AMY: About 28.

KRISTOL: That's good. And, so over the year – so you taught this then for the next –

AMY: No, no, I taught it twice, I think. But I had a wonderful experience teaching *The Bostonians*. There

were hard-core feminists. This was just when feminism was really taking off at the universities. In fact, this was before any gender studies program or anything like that. And when they started the gender studies program, I was the first one they invited to join it and I refused, and they were shocked.

LEON: But in any case, *The Bostonians*, if you remember, is about a young girl who is trying to be recruited to the woman's cause. It's Henry James' American book, and it's about the women's question.

And she falls in love with a dashing young man, Basil Ransom, who keeps – and the war is between the affections of this woman who tries to bring her to the cause because she's a very talented speaker, and so on, and her love for Basil Ransom.

And the book ends when she is about to give her first public speech of any importance at an auditorium of a thousand people. Basil Ransom comes backstage and he lifts her up, takes a big coat, and carries her off.

And I thought, especially the feminists in the class, would just be absolutely hateful of this moment, hate it. And the most outspoken of the students – I said, "So, what do you think of this ending?" The most outspoken of the feminist students said to me, "Three cheers for Basil Ransom." And I nearly fell off my chair.

And I said, "What are you talking about?" And she said, "Well, the problem is there are no manly men. Everyone – every man I know wants to be a feminist. And, so, of course, I'm a feminist, but if you want a good strong man, of course they're few and rare, go with them."

KRISTOL: It's an unusual perception.

AMY: It's very unusual.

LEON: I mean, it points to the fact that the orthodox opinions that are brewing about everywhere may only be skin-deep, really. That – and this showed up years later when we did our courtship class. But – before we come to the book and the courtship class – I think Amy's experience teaching that class and beginning to pay attention to the fact that the sensibilities out there regarding the normality of getting married and having a family couldn't – was no longer what it was when we were students.

AMY: The culture was already vastly changed.

LEON: It was changed, and partly the effects of divorce, partly women's liberation, partly the orthodoxy of feminism, partly the fact that the young women were being counseled, solely to care about their career and that maybe if they wanted private life it would take care of itself somehow, somewhere down the road.

But because of the way we teach with small classes, we get to know a lot of our students pretty well, and many of them stay in touch with us over the years. And really through the 70s, the 80s, and into the 90s, we would hear from former students who were now through their 20's and half way through their 30's – and still looking for someone to make a life with. Mostly the young women.

Very disappointed in one bad relationship after another. Really looking for something permanent and –

AMY: I would say this was not just after they graduated, but we were both people who had office hours, at least two days a week, a couple of hours each afternoon. And young women would come in constantly to office hours and complain about their social life.

LEON: Not to my office.

AMY: Reveal their unhappiness. Unsolicited.

LEON: But we began to realize really was that there was a lot of talk about the failure of marriage, the

divorce culture, the problems of, you know, single parenthood, and things of that sort. But that there was absolutely no discussion whatsoever about how you get married and how you go about finding and winning the right one, or maybe we should say right-enough one with whom you could make a life.

And absolutely nothing. And there were no cultural norms, there were no teachings, it was just silence. And I did this article in *The Public Interest*, I think, '97 on the end of courtship. And about the same time we started – we were involved in this project on the ethics of every day life. Richard Neuhaus, Gil Meilander, Tim Fuller, Mark Schwener, Amy and myself.

And we decided we'd try to put together some readings that could address this theme.

AMY: We were all asked to take a gerund.

LEON: This was dear to our hearts as a result of this experience, coupled with the fact that quite frankly as people who have been very lucky in our original choices, we were just profoundly sad that there were so many people just missing out on one of life's great adventures and the most deeply enriching friendship and partnership that life has to offer.

So, we began putting together readings. We convened a model class by invitation only to try these things out. This was, I think, '97, '98 – and tried out some of these readings with hand-picked people who we thought wouldn't mind.

Turned out to be very interesting and very successful. And with the help of suggestions from this class and other things, we put together this anthology, which isn't a how-to book, I mean, it's a series of selections from the great authors through the ages, from Homer and the Bible to Miss Manners.

AMY: We were vilified by *The Chicago Herald*, because imagine teaching a course or doing something on courtship. These are people who taught the great books. They had never looked at the table of contents of this book.

LEON: And the questions in the book are partly on some readings on taking stock of our current situation. A series of discussions – why marry? The questions of men and women – what's the meaning of sexuality? What does love want from us? – a discussion of Eros. A discussion of courting – how you actually find and win the right one? Questions on what can married life be like, and the promises and blessings of marriage. And with great heterogeneity, great diversity.

And it's a big tome. I mean it's 600 some odd pages, if I'm not misremembering, maybe more. But – and then we decided we'd try it out in the classroom with – listed in the first catalog and – for undergraduates.

We got about, I think, 25-27 students who did this class with us. And this was a – this is a wonderful example of both the problem that's out there and, at least, at first pass, what you can do to address it.

I think for the second class we had them read the selections on relationships from *The Closing of the American Mind*, where Alan Bloom pulls no punches. I mean, he lays it out for what he sees. And they protested too much. They didn't like it and so on.

AMY: It was clear that he hit a nerve.

LEON: They recognized themselves in this, the protest was much too much. But then to talk about the themes of the course, a young man says, "The idea of being married to the same woman for 25 years is preposterous." And young woman says, "Casual sex between men and women is a great blessing, because it gets the sex thing out of the way so that men and women can now be friends in ways they never were able to be friends before."

And a third young woman says – this is the second day of class – I mean, the first time they'd had readings – "Well, we know we're not supposed to get married until we're at least 28, so all of our relationships with men now are supposed to be impermanent."

KRISTOL: Right.

LEON: Right. And I came home for dinner and I said to Amy, "I'm not going back there. I mean, these people are from Mars." I mean, these are the beginning sentiments – we live in just completely different worlds. And Amy is her usual self, she says, "Don't worry about it, don't take those opinions too seriously. We'll go in there, we'll do what we do. You'll see."

And, I mean, the reading list includes the myth of Ares and Aphrodite from *The Odyssey*, Jacob meets Rachel at the well –

AMY: Parts of *Pride and Prejudice* –

LEON: Oh, the Garden of Eden stories, sex in the Garden of Eden. And then a series of courtships: *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy and Elizabeth, Pierre and Natasha from *War and Peace*; Kitty and Levin, Rosalind and Orlando from *As You Like It*.

And we're seven or eight weeks into the course. And we're doing a little colloquy from Erasmus, 16th-century colloquy called *Courtship*, in which Erasmus is trying to show a new pattern to replace arranged marriage, in which a young man who is in love with love or lusting after Maria, comes to in a way to try to get her to yield.

Whereas she's got her eyes set on marriage, and she puts him through his paces, making him answer all the questions in the right way, concluding by leading him to go off to ask her parents to pronounce blessing on what would be a marriage.

AMY: And we had them enact –

LEON: We had them enact this colloquy. It's eight pages. It's – it was novel for its time. Right now, it looks barbarically quaint. Right.

To the end of this thing when he's just about to go off he says to her, "Would you please – as I'm going off, would you please give me a token of your affection, a kiss at least?" And she says, "Would you like me to bestow my kisses on others?" He's says, "No, I want you to save them all for me."

She says, "Well, I'll save them for you then. Here, let's shake hands, and here's a sachet, a something as a token of my affection." And where –

AMY: He's to go off to her parents.

LEON: To her parents, just as he's leaving, it's, you know, the last couple of lines of the colloquy. And we're thinking this is it. They've been playing ball up to this point, and they're finished.

So, I don't remember which of us asked those in the class at this point

AMY: We stop at the end of this.

LEON: Stop at the end.

AMY: And I think it was, I asked, "What is a kiss?"

LEON: And these same barbarians – the first four answers within two minutes were follows:

"A kiss is the most erotic thing imaginable." "A kiss is the sharing of the breath which is the spirit." "A kiss is a promise." "And a kiss is a small consummation." Same class.

AMY: Same people.



LEON: One or two of the people –

AMY: It's amazing.

LEON: And I think what this shows really is those early opinions are a defense against disappointment. Opinions that they need to sort of negotiate the politically correct world in which they find themselves. But deep down there are still inarticulate longings of which they're somewhat afraid, but which can be encouraged.

AMY: This is a wonderful example of teaching to the better selves of the students.

LEON: And the way in which having to go through and enact the parts, say, in *As You Like It*, of Rosalind – of Orlando and Rosalind – and Amy stopping them at every point and saying, "What's going on here?"

AMY: Or, why did you say that?

LEON: Why did you say that? And to really have – in other words to get into the – into the scene. It was one of the golden moments really of 34 years of teaching, I mean, to see – to see what they were capable of saying, which they would not have been able to say at the beginning of the course. They would not have been able to say it.

KRISTOL: Were they able to stick with this after the course – do you have sense – I mean, did it really change them, or is the culture so strong that they kind of revert back in a year or two? I mean – what most do, but not all, I don't know.

LEON: This is the question. I mean there's – one young woman – the one who said that getting the sex thing out of the way is now happily married and –

AMY: A tutor at St. John's College and the mother of three children.

LEON: There was a marriage of two people in that class. I'm not sure whether they came as a couple or they met in the class.

AMY: There's a third person whose wedding we attended whose wife later wrote to me thanking us for the Courtship course, which humanized the man that she married.

LEON: But on the other hand –

KRISTOL: That's great.

LEON: I mean, it's tough out there. It's very tough out there and –

AMY: And it's very lonely. It's very lonely for young people.

LEON: And it's –

KRISTOL: Especially women? But not only.

AMY: Not only, but especially. And the kind of expectations are known, and many will concede to them, but they don't really believe in them.

LEON: At one of the Hertog Program final dinners – we were seated at separate tables – and different conversations – but there was a lovely young woman at my table.

And she began by – this was – you had done *Antigone*, and the question of the family and parents and children and marriage were among the themes of the discussion. And she sort of – she's an immigrant from a Latin America country, so a little bolder.

She turned to the rest of the table, all young men, and she said, “Do any of you want to get married?” I thought this was terrific –

KRISTOL: Right.

LEON: Something good might happen right here under my eyes. And they all said yes. They all said yes. And she said, “Well, how are you going about this?,” and they were all flummoxed and they – they looked like deer caught in the headlights before this kind of question and this concern.

And that old sort of unreconstructed romantic – I said, “You know, what the heck’s the matter with you? I mean, you’re on campus, there are lots of attractive young women. You meet them in class, or you know them from social clubs and so on. What’s to keep you from asking them to go for coffee or see a movie or go out for dinner or something like that?”

They said, it’s impossible. They said you could maybe get to go to coffee. But if you invite them to dinner the expectation is that there are expectations of being so treated. And the women are absolutely leery and you can’t go to a movie.

And the three or four young men, four different campuses announce that this is absolutely *de rigueur* in all those places. So that the ordinary ways of getting to know you – I mean it’s very easy for people to hook up without knowing each other at all. But the ordinary way where there are sort of gradual times of learning a person’s soul and mind – and the physical attraction can be there from the beginning – but finding out what you need to know in a slow-paced way.

I don’t know – I really don’t know – I mean, reading short stories is very nice, but if you go outside of class and all of the –

AMY: Actually –

LEON: All of the norms are hostile –

AMY: Actually, we saw this even before this conversation very vividly. After our courtship book came out, Valentine’s Day was a big event. But we were also invited by a group that got started at Yale or Smith.

LEON: Yale and Georgetown.

AMY: Well, Yale, Georgetown, Harvard, Smith, there were girls – women from each of these places who organized a movement called “Take Back the Date,” and they invited us to speak to them.

And the first question I asked was, “Well, what do you mean by a date?” And they were silent. I mean, they were taking back something they had absolutely no idea about. And it was incredible to me.

KRISTOL: But they wanted the right thing?

AMY: They wanted –

LEON: They had a desire –

AMY: They had a certain –

KRISTOL: Sense

AMY: – word. But they didn’t really have any kind of content to it.

LEON: Yeah, and, I mean, you know, it’s over-determined why we’re in the circumstance, and that probably since this is conversation of goodwill, we shouldn’t turn cranks and sort of complain about all of them.

KRISTOL: It's okay, crankiness has its places.

**V: Dating, Love, Friendship (1:07:45 – 1:18:51)**

LEON: But, I mean, I just don't know culturally speaking how one could begin to turn these things around when – I mean – actually I learned this from you a hundred years ago. You gave a talk for us as an adjunct lecture to the "Human Being and Citizen" course –

KRISTOL: Tocqueville. Bad talk, but any way –

AMY: It was not very bad.

LEON: It was a good talk. It was the first time that I ever paid any attention to those chapters, and it was the first time that it occurred to me that your talk, and Tocqueville's especially, that it's in a way the women who are the teachers of mores and that to say such things now is, sort of, to be accused of a kind of old-fashioned sexism, and to expect restraint and modesty on the part of women when the men are, you know, unrestrained and where it looks like women have gained their new liberation.

But certainly our experience and it's – you know it's second-hand – we have fortunately spared them to be out there in the chase. But our sense is that all this liberation has been very, very bad for the women in the long run.

KRISTOL: Yeah, those Tocqueville chapters are striking since they're both a beautiful tribute to American women but slightly grim also. I mean the picture – what women have to put up with in order to actually civilize –

LEON: Exercise their –

KRISTOL: Civilize to some degree their husbands – but more the children, I think, is implied – is sort of striking, and there's a real –

AMY: You're thinking of the pioneer women at the end. I read that very definitely. I think that she's a marvel but not because she's long-suffering, but because she has the presence of mind to anticipate necessity.

KRISTOL: Right. Well, fair enough. But liberation is – I mean, in a way what's most amazing about – first of all, before this overnight change, had been somewhat stable – some exaggeration, but settled for quite a while, let's say, basic gender roles and the whole question of sex and marriage, chastity, and so forth – at least, in principle, if now what happened in real life – for all that to get overturned so quickly and so thoroughly is pretty unusual actually.

You know there – we know about huge social changes over time, but for it to happen in 10-20 – really 10-20 years, I would say, 60s and 70s – is striking. Another thing that's striking, and I would be curious – I remember Mansfield saying this, I think he said it – that you know sexual liberation is one thing, that was partly somewhat technology and perhaps more ideology you might say and that had a huge effect.

And women's liberation is a huge thing, overturning centuries, I suppose, sort of, assumptions about the relationships of the two sexes. But having them happen together is really – I mean, leads to a kind of social revolution that's almost unimaginably deep and what's striking is that they cut against each other. One would have thought they would have cut against one another. . . .

AMY: That's true.

KRISTOL: But they somehow both happened and both seem to still be sort of dogmatic – going strong in a way – and sort of the dogmas of the age –

AMY: They also coincide with the high-rising rates of divorce. And I think that has a lot to do with it.

KRISTOL: On the ground.

AMY: A little while ago you asked about our favorite books to teach. Well, one of the books I loved to teach was *Hamlet*. And I love to teach it because Hamlet really is interested in doing something great. "The world is out of joint, oh cursed spite that I was meant to set it right."

And a lot of people talk about its indecisiveness and all of that. But it's trying to find something significant to do and that's how the students finally latched on to it and saw this and saw this – that's a real question for their own lives, what am I going to do and what significant contributions can I make.

Well, in the later years when I taught it, it had nothing – their interest in it had nothing to do with that. But poor Hamlet whose mother remarried –

KRISTOL: Is that right?

AMY: And this was expressed by many students, most of whom came from divorced homes, whose parents had subsequently remarried.

LEON: Yeah, I mean that contributes to a certain kind of caution, I think, amongst the young – and not an unwise caution. They've seen mistakes and they are careful – try to be careful not to make them again.

And some of them, I think, are very much animated to try to do better. They're not simply burned and turned off. I mean, they would really like to – there's another absolutely great – one of the great moments of teaching – is related to this.

I had an undergraduate student who was my advisee, he was in the Fundamentals program and he was sort of floundering at the beginning of his senior year. And I summoned him to the office and I said, "What's going on with you? And he said, "Well, Mr. Kass, I'm a rising senior, and I'm rather disillusioned with college."

I said, "Well, what were your illusions?" And he said, "Well, college I thought would be two things. One I would be sitting under a tree and I would have an epiphany." That I sort of understood. "And second I thought college would be a house." I said, "What are you talking about?"

He said, "Well, when I was seven years old my parents were divorced. The family home was part of the settlement. I've never lived in a home, and I thought that in college I would meet somebody and I would again have a home and it hasn't happened." And there are lots of other features of the conversation, et cetera, et cetera.

He's in my Genesis class that same term. We read the story of Jacob meets Rachel at the well which he'd never read before. He's absolutely blown away by this story. He writes – "Can I write my essay on this, about?" – beautiful, beautiful essay about this he writes.

AMY: He's a member of the Fundamentals.

LEON: He's going off to graduate in the spring. I helped him get a job here in Washington. He comes to see me. He says, "Mr. Kass," he says – a Jewish fellow – he says, "I'm moving to Washington. Do you think if I start going to the synagogue I could meet Rachel?"

KRISTOL: Wow.

LEON: And somebody through my mouth said, "Mr. So-and-So, if you go to the synagogue looking for Rachel, you won't find her. If you go to the synagogue looking for Judaism, you might find Rachel."

KRISTOL: That's good.

LEON: He goes to Washington, I don't hear from him for a while. Amy and I are teaching the Courtship

class several years later. It's the day we're doing the Jacob and Rachel story in class, I'm preparing in my office. I get a call from this fellow, he's in Jerusalem, he's inviting us to his wedding.

And this was a fellow who, in a way, had acknowledged his longings and unlike lots of the other contemporaries of his, he knew – he knew what he was missing in his life. He had spiritual longings and he had longings for someone to make a life.

And in some ways, I think, despite all of the stuff on the surface that looks lousy, I think a lot of these kids really would like to meet someone with whom they could make a life, someone that would take them seriously, someone who would be there for the long haul. Someone they could really share the richness of experiences.

And they're scared and there aren't particularly good forms, and they don't really know that there are no times like being in college where you actually can get to know people at leisure rather than at the water cooler or in singles or at eHarmony or whatever else people these days do.

AMY: And they don't understand that friendship might be an intrinsic part of marriage. They take their friends very seriously, but they don't transfer that to their relationship.

KRISTOL: In that respect, maybe they're too romantic. In a funny way they think marriage is something totally different from the friendships they have. Well, I guess Tocqueville – I mean, just to close on that since we discussed it – I mean, of course, his account of the American family is intended in part, at least, to emphasize to his French and European readers how different it is from the traditional family and not romantic, really. That's at least his account.

And his – if you just have nostalgia for the old days, in effect he's saying you're not going to have a stable family life. It needs to be accommodated to or consistent with this modern bourgeois commercial society.

And I suppose one could argue in the spirit of Tocqueville that, I mean, if one is to find a way back to healthy marriages – or society as whole with a lot of healthy marriages and healthy relationships –

LEON: It can't be like it was. And it has to be on the basis of the education of women and careers for women –

AMY: And support of the superiority of women.

KRISTOL: Right. But it's supposed to be unspoken superiority, according to Tocqueville.

LEON: So don't speak it so much.

KRISTOL: She couldn't count on us to mention it, though.

## **VI: What So Proudly We Hail (1:18:53 – 1:37:16)**

KRISTOL: Okay, let's talk about America. You've fairly recently put out a terrific collection, *What So Proudly We Hail*. Let me see if I can get this subtitle right. I always bollix it up. *The American Soul in Songs* –

AMY: *Story*.

KRISTOL: *Story, poetry* –

LEON: Go to the back of the class.

AMY: – *Speech, and Song*.

KRISTOL: Anyway, it's a terrific anthology, and it's not only a book, it's videos, discussions with many of the stories and poems and songs. And why the interest in America? I mean, I think you've all both been interested in American citizenship for a long time, or was one of you more the sponsor of this – cause of this than the other?

LEON: Amy is much more of an American than I am. Why don't you start?

AMY: As I mentioned before, I've had a long-standing interest in American citizenship. But after Sputnik, there was an urgency about emphasizing more than just science education. But after 9/11, we were still at the University of Chicago, we moved here in January of that – of the next year.

LEON: 2002.

AMY: Right, so this is fall 2001. And the first day of "Human Being and Citizen" class, which took place about three weeks after 9/11 – and many of the students had missed orientation week, because they couldn't get to the university. Planes were not flying, and transportation was very difficult.

And they come in there and – so this was their real first experience with the university. And I said in my usual way, "Well, rather than tell you about the course, let's talk about something and since none of you know each other, how about we just start by – I'll ask you to identify yourselves, but think about in a very quick short way – think about your core identity and think about it in terms of your aspirations, your ambitions, your interests or hobbies, geography, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or anything else like that. But something that really – you think is revelatory about yourself."

KRISTOL: These are freshmen?

AMY: These are all first-year students –

LEON: First class.

AMY: First class in college. And they started around the room and some people talked about their aspirations and what they were interested in doing, but the hard core was, "I'm an Asian American." "I'm a Korean American." "I'm a Mexican American." "I'm a Catholic American."

And it went on in this hyphenated way until one person said, "I'm – well I'm American, I guess that's means I'm nothing." And everybody in the room looked at this young man as if – and yeah, feeling sorry for him.

And this is right after 9/11, with flags flying from every conceivable place. And I thought, "Our work again is really cut out for us." So, I began the course on "Human Being and Citizen," then, "Well, all of you are in some sense American. What do you think it means?" And they had no substance to fill that question.

And then we moved to Washington in January. I left this class. And they were progressing, but it wasn't – I did not have the occasion of discussing the American documents with them, that would have been in spring quarter.

But when we moved to Washington, I decided rather than continue doing something in research or something classical, which is usually my wont, I said, "I'll do something Washington." And it was right after Bush had started the USA Freedom Corps and there was a heavy-duty emphasis on service, service, service.

So, one of the privileges I had being married to Leon was I had access to lots of people. So, I went and introduced myself to John Bridgeland, who was the head of the USA Freedom Corps and I said, "It's very interesting that you're emphasizing service and service learning."

"But are you aware of the fact that civic understanding is at an all time low, do any of these people know what it means to serve a party or what the party consists of. Are you doing anything about civic

education?" At which point he asked me two questions: One is "Are you controversial?" And I said, "Only by marriage."

He then said, "And do you have any ideas?" I said, "Oh, of course, I have some ideas about what you would do." "So, why don't you go think about them?" And, so I started thinking about civic education initiatives for the White House, really. And that lasted some time, about a year.

And then I guess I decided to quit for lots of reasons. But in any case, I joined Hudson and I decided, why not really do this project, where I could have both responsibility and authority? When you work for the White House, you don't have any authority whatsoever. It has to be passed X number of people.

And, so we started these seminars on American citizenship, American identity, and the idea was to have a mixed group. We had some seasoned scholars, but a lot of people who were working on the Hill, young people right out of college, who were really unable to articulate what – here they were obviously committed to something and interested in government and interested in our party. But unable to articulate why.

And we used short stories mostly because my – our firm belief is that civic education has to be a matter of the heart as well as the mind, so you educate the sentiments, attachment really comes from the heart. And it was overwhelmingly successful.

And people wanted to do this more and more, but they were exhausting, and I thought – and Diana Schaub and Leon were part of this group. And we then – I guess it was Diana's idea – she said, "Are you going to do anything with any of this stuff?" I said, "What do you have in mind?"

And she said, "Well why not collect it? I said you interested in working on this?" And then Leon chimed in.

LEON: Yeah, the – these seminars were really extraordinary. They were 2008, 2009 – eight winter evenings, three hours, discussing a story either on the American identity, what it means to be an American, or the second year on the virtues requisite for robust citizenship. And –

KRISTOL: These were young people in Washington or –

AMY: We found them on the Hill, who were young staffers.

LEON: Or in think tanks.

AMY: Or in think tanks.

KRISTOL: But not people you knew already?

AMY: We didn't know any of them.

LEON: And –

AMY: In fact, we invited some of our former students, and they didn't come. Actually, the first one, two of them came.

LEON: I got a tremendous education out of putting together this volume. Most of the short stories were new to me. Many of the great speeches that we included, the discovery of Calvin Coolidge, for example, or some speeches of Teddy Roosevelt on "True Americanism," Washington's Thanksgiving Day Proclamation.

And we found a way to organize this volume thematically, to raise questions about national identity and why it matters, to lay out some of the – through speeches – sort of the American creed of liberty, quality, enterprise, freedom of religion, religious toleration.

And then to look at the American character – what kind of people grow up in a regime that’s informed by these principles – both the strengths and weaknesses of these characters – and their use in stories like Jack London’s “To Build A Fire,” to look at the excesses of individualism and enterprise, “Harrison Bergeron” in a story on the pursuit of equality to absurdity, et cetera, et cetera?

And then discussions of the virtues, self-command and self-control, courage, justice and law-abidingness, tolerance, civility, charity, public-spiritedness. And then what went beyond the original discussion was to have some short stories and speeches that raised questions about, well, all right, if these are the virtues of citizens, what should citizens before, what really are the goals of equality these days and to what extent should they be organized around lifting the floor for those who are disadvantaged, to what extent should be – be it to encourage excellence in the arts and sciences, and so on? And to what extent is it not so much change, but the perpetuation and preservation of our institutions and our attachments?

And then the last question for a multicultural – and you really want to talk some about – your anecdote really does evince the dominance of the hyphenated American as the mode of identity, but the last section of the book really is to raise the question: How in the present age does one make one out of many again? Not just one union out of many states, but one union out of a heterogeneous and diverse populace –

AMY: One people.

LEON: One people where the elite opinion is that a melting pot is an insult and what you want is a salad bowl where – one shouldn’t say, each fruit stands out on its own. So, you want to add something –

KRISTOL: No, I mean what struck me I’d say – I went through the book again the other night and what strikes – two things struck me about the book, and I say this as someone who taught a little bit of American political thought and my youth as a professor – a few years as a professor at Penn and then at Harvard – I think the selections from the great American political documents and even some of the features have been collected in other places and – pretty well – and by people we know in some cases.

But what’s really distinctive, A, it’s a good selection in any case here, and it goes a little beyond the normal, you know, most famous documents and speeches and so forth. But two things really struck me about the book, one is the short stories and poetry. The non-directly political aspects of the book, those are not, I think, found often in one place.

So, then I found in one place with the more political excerpts and speeches and articles – and maybe you should say a word about that, and I’m curious in terms of reaction to the book whether that’s been particularly – I would guess that maybe that’s been a strong part of the interest in the book – talk about the American soul in that broader sense, not just about American politics, and, you know, separation of powers and natural rights and so forth.

And the second thing, I think, is that you do pose a lot of these – it’s not – you mention the American creed, you also mention questions, and I think the book does raise as many questions as it answers. I mean, it’s clearly for a strong American citizenship, but it isn’t preaching and it isn’t doctrinal, really. And it in fact shows that there are problematic aspects to American principles, American history, tensions among some of these principles.

I think that’s important. I do think a lot of the civic education that has been done or tried to have been done over the decades – a lot of it well-meaning – tends to fall flat, because it tends to be – you should believe this, but it doesn’t really engage people’s intellect and, you know, the actual questions that address – that they – that they could be gripped by, I guess.

AMY: Actually there – historically there used to be a course, when I was in high school, called “Problems of Democracy,” which really was an opportunity to talk about problems in democracy and what democracy means.



But that was later taken over by “Government” and “Government” people. So, it became like everything else, an expert’s course. And, so what you’ve learned – were – people could tell you how you could make a bill into a law, but they are very detached. I mean it’s an intellectual exercise, it has nothing to do with who they are or whether it matters for them whether they’re part of that people who is part of that government.

And that it seems – that’s where our real work was, and I think the real interest in the book has to do with the fiction.

LEON: Yeah, I mean there has been a revival of effort in civic education, and it’s really been of two sorts. One is American history, documents, court cases, very important. I mean, one can’t really have citizens who are ignorant of these things. But it’s largely a cognitive effort to correct ignorance.

The other Amy’s already alluded to it, which is service-learning and to engage people in community service and volunteering to give them a stake in their local communities. Much of it doesn’t differ from – and I’m not disparaging it, but it have just as easily be social work of some sort and a lot of community – a lot of what it means to live in a community is, in fact, to care for your neighbors through voluntary associations and the like.

But the second, which might be a way of habituating the disposition to serve and to some attachments, has no intellectual content. And the stuff, which has the intellectual content doesn’t really begin to address the attachments.

And the use of literature, it seems to us, perfect, because literature furnishes the imagination, it does appeal to the sentiments. By identifying with the characters, you begin to be able to see the circumstances in which they find themselves – be able to accompany them as they make their choices, live with the consequences.

And because the stories are not usually didactic, because they’re filled with ambiguities, the very difficult questions, the complexities of what it is to be an American citizen, and the various competing strands that pull us in different directions, that comes out in literature in a way in which it doesn’t come out with a more catechetical approach to what we believe.

AMY: But I think the really unique thing about our collection is a story like “To Build a Fire,” which is read in just about every high school class, but never with an emphasis on what’s American about it. Is there anything American about that man who builds a fire? What does it mean to be able to build a fire?

So, the kinds of questions that we bring to it, bring together – I guess, harks back to what we do in liberal education all together. A kind of thoughtfulness in both senses, to get people to think, as well as to get people to care.

KRISTOL: Okay, on that note, we should let people pursue these studies online. But thank you both so much for taking the time here for this conversation.

AMY: Thank you.

LEON: Pleasure to be with you.

KRISTOL: And thank you for joining us for CONVERSATIONS.

[END]

