

Chapter One

Introduction: The Age of Us

“This book is for people who want to take up the great questions of our time with imagination and courage, to nurture new realities in the spaces we inhabit, and to do so expectantly and with joy.” —Krista Tippett

OPENING QUESTION

“Listening is about being present, not just about being quiet. I meet others with the life I’ve lived, not just with my questions.” Krista Tippett begins nearly every interview by asking her guest about the spiritual or religious background of their childhood—and in this introductory chapter of her book, she begins to share some of her own story.

Take a few minutes and have each person answer the question What was the religious or spiritual background of your childhood? Listen for the questions that reside in your own story of this part of your life, questions you might have followed your whole life long.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

“We watch our technologies becoming more intelligent, and speculate imaginatively about their potential to become conscious. All the while, we have it in us to become wise. Wisdom leavens intelligence, and ennobles consciousness, and advances evolution itself.”

How would you describe the qualities of the wisest people you’ve known? What makes them wise as opposed to merely intelligent or accomplished? What was the imprint they made on the world around them?

According to Tippett, the great questions of religion and philosophy are being reframed in this century of vast open questions and technology that binds: What does it mean to be human? What matters in a life? What matters in a death? How to love? How to be of service to one another and the world?

Reflect on the way your understanding of some of these elemental aspects of human experience has shifted with new technological and spiritual tools at hand.

Mystery will be a theme in these chapters. Tippett calls mystery “a common human experience, like being born and falling in love and dying.”

Are you comfortable with the concept of mystery? Tippett and her conversation partners describe mystery as an adventure—and as a companion to truths deeply held. Does this ring true in your experience?

Einstein once said that the qualities of “spiritual genius” (exemplified by figures such as Gandhi, Moses, Jesus, Buddha, and St. Francis of Assisi) were more necessary to the future of human dignity, security, and joy than objective knowledge. Of her life of conversation, Tippett says, “Spiritual geniuses of the everyday are everywhere. They are in the margins and do not have publicists. They are below the radar, which is broken.”

Is there someone in your world who exemplifies this observation?

Tippett says, “We are in the adolescence of our species, not by any measure in full possession of our powers.” She goes on to compare our twenty-first-century citizenry with the teenage brain: dramatically uneven; immensely powerful and creative at times and in places, reckless and destructive in others. *What effect might this kind of “long view of time” have on your approach to this moment in time we inhabit?*

Giving examples such as battles with illness, childhood pain, disability, and even birth itself, Tippett marvels, “We are made by what would break us. . . . What has gone wrong becomes an opening to more of

yourself and part of your gift to the world. This is the beginning of wisdom.”

Does this idea ring true for you? Can you share a personal example, whether dramatic or ordinary, when the thing that went wrong carried with it a hidden gift? Can you translate this to the public sphere in terms of common life as well as individual life?

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Change has always happened in the margins, across human history, and it’s happening there now. Seismic shifts in common life, as in geophysical reality, begin in spaces and cracks.”

“The interesting and challenging thing about this moment is that we know the old forms aren’t working. But we can’t yet see what the new forms will be.”

“The question of what it means to be human is now inextricable from the question of who we are to each other.”

“Our spiritual lives are where we reckon head-on with the mystery of ourselves, and the mystery of each other.”

“The human condition, in all its mess and glory, remains the ground on which all of our ambitions flourish or crash.”

“History always repeats itself until we honestly and searchingly know ourselves.”

“My work has shown me that spiritual geniuses of the everyday are everywhere. They are in the margins and do not have publicists. They are below the radar, which is broken.”

“The digital world, though a new Wild West in many ways, is on some basic level simply another screen on which we project the excesses and possibilities of life in flesh and blood.”

“We create transformative, resilient new realities by becoming transformed, resilient people.”

“Listening is about being present, not just about being quiet. I meet others with the life I’ve lived, not just with my questions.”

“Great leaps, however exhilarating, are hard on mortal creatures.”

“There are places in human experience that politics cannot analyze or address, and they hold more possibility for change than we can begin to imagine.”

“Our spiritual traditions have carried virtues across time. They are not the stuff of saints and heroes, but tools for the art of living. They are pieces of intelligence about human behavior that neuroscience is now exploring with new words and images: what we practice, we become.”

“We have outlived our faith in facts to tell us the whole story or even to tell us the truth about the world and ourselves.”

“The world right now needs the most vivid, transformative universe of words that you and I can muster. And we can begin immediately to start having the conversations we want to be hearing, and telling the story of our time anew.”

“I’ve come to believe that our capacity to reach beyond ourselves—experiencing mystery or being present to others—is dependent on how fully we are planted in our bodies in all their flaws and their grace.”

“I hear the word *love* surfacing as a longing for our public life everywhere I turn.”

“I believe that mystery is a common human experience, like being born and falling in love and dying.”

“I define hope as distinct from optimism or idealism. It has nothing to do with wishing. It references reality at every turn and reveres truth. . . . Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a habit that becomes spiritual muscle memory. It’s a renewable resource for moving through life as it is, not as we wish it to be.”

“A long view of time can replenish our sense of ourselves and the world. We are in the adolescence of our species, not by any measure in full possession of our powers.”

“I have yet to meet a wise person who doesn’t know how to find some joy even in the midst of what is hard, and to smile and laugh easily, including at oneself. . . . [Humor] is one of those virtues that soften us for all the others.”

“I’m not surprised by the fact that inexplicable and terrible things happen in a cosmos as complicated as ours, with sentient beings like us running the show. But I am emboldened by the fact that surprise is the only constant.”

“I am emboldened by the puzzling, redemptive truth to which each and every one of my conversations has added nuance, that we are made by what would break us.”

“What has gone wrong becomes an opening to more of yourself and part of your gift to the world. This is the beginning of wisdom.”