

# Philosophy in Our Time of Imperial Decay

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The American empire, they said, "We want to be a living spirit and a beacon of light in such a moment of catastrophic realities." Grim, dim. All you leftist intellectuals talking about the spirit.

You don't say. Mm-hmm, a subject to alternative descriptions and interpretations, but there's something that's gonna sustain us more than just our materiality and our interest. There's something called integrity, honesty, decency, principles, ideals. There's something that's bigger than us. There's something majestic and bigger than us called what? Truth, the quest that we never possess of truth, but the quest and the condition of that truth is to allow suffering to speak. Beauty, yes, The New School, given all of its concerns about politics and social analysis and ecological vision and on and on and on, there is a crucial role of beauty. I've been blessed to meet my dear brother Zed Adams who was the distinguished professor of the philosophy of art. And he's locked into talking about beauty in his own subtle ways under the influence of my dear brother, the the one and only Stanley Cavell and the host of other teachers. Now it's the University of Chicago. We won't hold that against him. The great Leo Strauss, I'm reminded, taught at The New School more years than he did University of Chicago. That's what Brother Simon reminds me. And I love Leo Strauss because he loves the life of the mind. I oppose Leo Strauss because he is wrong on a whole host of things. That's all right. That's part of the robust conversation and dialogue that ought to take place, that does take place, that has taken place at this grand institution. Mighty brothers, Brother Simon, though, I mean, I could just stay up here and sing a song. You know, he's my fellow blues man. We've been together at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and we made some music in that academy. Philosophic music, theoretical music, personal music. So not just friendship. He's not just my friend. He is my brother. He's my soul brother. And he loves Curtis Mayfield the way I do. And his corpus is a magisterial corpus that has so much to do with what I've been talking about these last few hours, last two days. Philosophy is vocation, philosophy is invocation and now philosophy's provocation.

What does it really mean to take seriously the calling, the love of wisdom and the recalling of those earlier voices that wrestle with that love of wisdom in such a moment? And I want to begin with this category of beauty, its relation to truth and its relation to goodness. And

for me as a revolutionary Christian, as a relation to the holy and of course my secular brothers and sisters can have sacred values without believing in sacred entities 'cause there are such things as horrific realities. Barbaric realities that violate sacred values, violate the preciousness of fellow human beings. We talked about, it was invoked with our precious Ukrainian brothers and sisters. What they're undergoing right now is barbaric, it's criminal. It's what happens when an empire is wounded and feels as if its back is against the wall with its repressive and regimenting practices already operative within the Russian Federation building on some of those practices that were already operative under the Soviet Union. But how do we talk about that in such a way that is not truncated in the forms that we see, corporate media, mainstream dialogues, especially the very deodorized neoliberal discourses that are really fearful of keeping it funky. 'Cause then we might talk about the US invasions and occupations of Iraq. Oh, then we might talk about Saudi-based invasions of our precious Yemen brothers and sisters. Or they might talk about our friendliness with gangsters and dictators in Latin America and various parts of the world. Or we might get to the West Bank in Gaza. Oh wait a minute, wait a minute. Any slice of humanity ought to be the very source of our deep concerns and solidarity, not uncritically. You see our Jewish brothers and sisters almost everywhere they go, they still have to deal with prejudice and hatred and attack and assault. France, Russia, Pittsburgh, across the board. But you know and I know that all of us as human beings have the potential, especially elites in high places, to accommodate ourselves.

The empire, domination, subjugation, exploitation. And the great legacy of the best of The New School, I'm thinking of my dear sister, Agnes Heller. Oh, I loved her so. Never met her. Felt like she was my sister with her text. Part of it's because we come out of Georg Lukacs. I don't exist without Lukacs, his history and class content, as wrong as he was in his inferences, I love the quality of his synoptic vision and his synecdochel imagination that connects parts to wholes. I loved his synthetic analysis that was always kindly critical of the disciplinary division of knowledge and professional managerial sites called universities. So he was very suspicious, young brothers and sisters of all colors. What are you majoring in? X. What are you majoring in? Y. Oh. Where is your sense of the whole? Don't polish your nut in the corner if you have no sense of what the forest looks like. That's intellectual work. But the forest looks like the relation of the parts, the interdependence of the parts, the way they're intermingled, the way the existential goes hand in hand with the economic, the way the social goes hand in hand with the spiritual, the way the political goes hand in hand with the personal, the ways in which the national, the most powerful ideology of the modern world, and by modern world I mean the age of Europe between 1492 and 1945 when the European colonial empires, those between the Ural Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean reshaped the whole globe in their interest and in their image, 35% of the world by 1835, 87% by 1914, before the guns of August of 1914, you see? So none of us escape from that Europeanization, too often colonization. And yet what is distinctive in part about The New School is what I love, which is that it wants to stay in contact with the humanity of yes, even our intellectuals, those European intellectuals who were aware of European crimes, but could bring critiques of those European crimes as Europeans because they believed in intellectual integrity.

They believed in freedom for everybody. They believed in mechanisms of accountability, namely, democratic practices on the ground. That is the level of the philosophy as vocation. Finding one's voice. Weber talked about it in those two essays in 1917 and 1919, didn't he? That science is a vocation and politics is a vocation. What do you mean, brother Max? What do you have in mind when you talk about the ethics of conviction versus the ethics of responsibility? Are you disproportionately accommodating yourself to the nationalism of your day? Because nationalism remains the most powerful ideology of the modern world that people are willing to live and die for. No matter how much we talk about class and race and gender and sexual orientation, the international versions of those fall in the face of the nationalism. For most Black folk in America, they're waving the flag. They're gonna fight for the US Army before they fight for race. Most women tied to the nation state before they fight for an international version of feminism or womanism. Most workers, unfortunately, fight for the nation rather than fight for class solidarity across that most powerful of ideologies, of nationalism. How do we stay at the deep levels of what Vico called humando? We're talking about that today 'cause I tell you, you got some magnificent students here at The New School. I can tell you all that. Oh, we had some conversations. I see some of 'em right now. Oh yes you are. Let's give the students a hand in The New School here. Give the students a hand at The New School here. Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord. When I was at Harvard and my dear brother Jim Fuerst, I don't know whether brother Jim is. There he is. Oh, I love that brother. What a rioter he is. We're gonna be together, my brother. We used to steal away right there in the Casablanca. At the club, not the club, but it was kind of a.

.. It was a bar. But it was after my class on modernity and the problem of evil so we wasn't doing anything but just wrestling with Dostoevsky and Turgenev, and Chekhov and drinking some Cognac. For me in the name of Jesus, but that's all right. But I said, "How blessed you are on your way to The New School." And he's been at The New School, and what a major force for good. He has been here dealing with what? Humando. What does it mean to be human tied to the fact that we are the kind of creatures with language on our way to burial or cremation. The centrality of death in all of its various forms. Not just physical death, social death of slavery, psychic death, spiritual death, national death, imperial death. Empires come and go. 1991, the Soviet empire is over. British empire, over. French empire, Belgium empire, Spanish empire, Portugal's empire. Now we got the US empire. Oh, what a moment. And are we in any way ready? Can we get beyond our sense of feeling so innocent? The great F. O. Matthiessen who gave the money for "Monthly Review" in 1949 to Paul Sweezy and Baran. He used to begin his lectures at Harvard. "Would America ever be able to move from perceived innocence to corruption without a mediating stage of maturity to grow powerful and grow rich, but not grow up?" Disneyland mentality, you see. The green light that "The Great Gatsby" talked about at the end, that F. Scott Fitzgerald talked about in the language and the words of Gatsby. "He believed in the green light. Tomorrow will be better." Tomorrow will solve our problems. We have no constraints. We have no limits because we're on the permanent road to perfect union on automatic, progressive all the time. Really, really? Well, you see, I come before you tonight, or at least this evening as a very, very small moment in a tradition of a great people at our best. A Black people who at

our best never been duped in a massive way with the claims about ignorance. The genius from Harlem put it so well. James Baldwin, of course.

Our dear brother McBride is founder of the James Baldwin Review and magnificent scholarship. He said, "Innocence itself is the crime if the authorizers of devastation view themselves as innocent." That's part of the slice of the genius of James Baldwin. That's the lifting of voices, the anthem of Black people to lift every voice, not lift every echo and be an extension of an echo chamber, but to lift one's voice, to have a dignity in your voice the way Ben Webster or Mary Lou Williams or John Coltrane has dignity in their sound. I don't have any hatred of Kenny G, but he just doesn't have that. It's too cotton candy. You can't have dignity of your sound unless you have the William Butler Yeats-like sense of examining the dark corners of your own soul and recognizing it takes more courage to do that than it does for a soldier to fight on the battlefield. You see, that's tremendous spiritual power. That's substantial power. That's where I come from. Oh, what a blessing to be born Clifton West and Irene West, my mother and my father. Just lost my mother a few months ago. Never be the human being anywhere near their integrity and courage and vision and depth and scope of love. Might be more famous. Fame means what? Well, go listen to David Bowie on fame and you get a sense of what I'm talking about. And I like his funk, too. Which shows his funk is not a function of skin pigmentation, is it? Looks like it sometime, but no. No, Bowie is funky. Meaning what? Trying to tell the truth. Get beneath sanitized and sterilized discourse. It's having the courage to cut radically against the grain and take a risk and be willing to pay a burden in what you have to say just like Malcolm X. Say what you mean and mean what you say and take the consequences. Even if you're wrong you recognize you're putting something out there that is at stake bigger than your ego. Oh, what a wonderful way of being in the world! That's the tradition that I come from. I don't even ask to be shaped by that tradition.

I consent to be a small part of it, of people who've been hated chronically for 400 years every day with their own bodies and memories and minds and so forth. But in the face of that kind of chronic hatred to keep dishing out love warriors every generation. Every generation. I saw brother Cory Booker last night talking about Harriet Tubman. Did you all see that exchange last night with our dear sister Jackson? A lot of people surprised. "Oh my God, I can't believe the Republican Party is treating our dear Black sister in a racist way." And the sky is blue and grass is green. And all of us try to love our mamas. No, no. What's going on is a Harriet Tubman who goes far beyond even fighting for a slot in the Supreme Court. It's a beautiful thing to see Black brilliance and Black arete and Black success, but I expect that. I'm not surprised. A lot of vanilla brothers and sisters really get surprised. "Oh, she sounds so eloquent." Wow, you don't say. I grew up with eloquent Negroes. Brilliant Black folk don't surprise me at all. Whole lot of 'em in jail. A whole lot of 'em shot down by the police. Whole lot of 'em dealing with all kind of mess. But what's important is the Harriet Tubmans in the face of so much systematic hatred decided to be love warriors, in the face of so much trauma decided to be wounded healers rather than wounded hurters. In the face of so much overwhelming terror, decided to be freedom fighters. Almost echoes of Rilke. Remember those early moments in his "First Elegy." Beauty is the first touch of the tear that we think we can bear. There's no discourse of beauty that's not wrestling in some

way with the varieties of terror of the soul, of society, of structures, of institutions. And when it comes to Black people, what makes Black people lovers of wisdom at our best. I didn't come here to talk about the history of Black thugs and gangsters. I could spend a lot of time on that, but I'm talking about Black people at our best.

That the highlight, that strength and the sources and resources that allow us to persevere in the face of the hatred and terror and trauma. See, that's why when my dear brother Simon says, "Brother West, blues man in the life of the mind," he's exactly right. But I stand with Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey and Howlin' Wolf. I stand with Robert Johnson and Leroy Carr. I stand with various blues persons, the blues in Aretha, the blues in Luther, the blues in Billie not as entertainers, but they're persons who decide to be love warriors in their artistry, wounded healers in their artistry. It's hard to find a figure who's spread more joy in the most barbaric of centuries of recorded time, which is the 20th century. It's hard to find a figure who spreads more joy than Louis Armstrong or Moms Mabley. Some of the graduates of this grand institution. If not graduates, they passed through. We were just there. The 95th anniversary of our dear brother, Harry Belafonte. He's got that New School stamp. The genius from the South Side of Chicago, Lorraine Hansberry, got that stamp, New School stamp. Marlon Brando, we know he's not chocolate, but he's about as chocolate as he can get. He's like Harold Arlen. He's about his chocolate as they come on the vanilla side of town. Marlon Brando's got that New School stamp. So does the great Stella Adler. We could go on and on and on. These are they who have tried to stay in contact with Du Bois's great challenge, which is to muster the courage to face oppression with integrity and to face deception with honesty and to face insult with decency and to face brute force with courage. And to live at a moment in which the commodification and the marketization of nearly every nook and cranny of our society makes it very difficult to even keep alive certain memories of genuine integrity. It's just been reduced to cupidity. And by cupidity I mean not just love of money, but I'm using it in the Augustinian sense the way Hugh of Saint Victor used it.

The dominant ways of the world that reminds us of Clausewitz, the philosopher of war. What Hegel meant when he said, "History is a slaughterhouse." What Gibbon meant when Gibbon said, "History is a series of crimes and follies." And I like that last word, follies, because we talked today about Sebastian Brant's "Ship of Fools" of 1419, two years after the encounter of Europeans with precious Indigenous brothers and sisters and the embarking on the subjugation, you see. And then "In Praise of Folly" a text that I hope every undergraduate and graduate student gets a chance to read in these dim times. There's no way you could engage in philosophical, intellectual resource gathering without some sense of the comic and the humorous and the satirical. Let me just raise hands of all of the students who are undergrads and graduate students in the place right now. Raise your hand. Let's give 'em a hand. Let's give 'em all a hand. And I hope you all... I hope and pray. I hope and pray that this is not just some kinda off-the-wall lecture that you go to and go back home and don't feel in any way subject to self-interrogation and transformation. No, there's some texts to shake your world, take you into the lower frequencies of the funk master activity. That's what Erasmus does in 1511. But Lucian, the greatest of all comic writers in the West that would mean so much to Mark Twain and Ishmael Reed and



Nathanael West and Charlie Chaplin, Lenny Bruce, Phyllis Diller, so many of the great comic. I'm not talking about these comedians these days just coming and talk about whoever's sitting on the front row. No, that's Hobbesian conceptions of humor. It's just sudden glory. You're just reveling in the misfortunes of somebody else. That's not the comic in its deepest sense. We're talking about Lucian, we're talking about Erasmus. We're talking about Joyce. We're talking about Beckett. And of course the deepest of all for me is Chekhov along with the blues, the tragic comic at the deepest level.

And there's no way that we will ever be equipped to deal with our present circumstances, the effects and consequences of the various structures of domination and exploitation. The ways in which the market has so thoroughly colonized our minds and hearts and souls, that it's hard to even conceive of being agents collectively organized or even individual in our relationships because intimacy and vulnerability have been so thoroughly called into question. That's one of the reasons why we're experiencing a moment of not just polarization. Again, that's just deodorized talk. America's not polarized. America's polarized and gangsterized. And gangsterization is different than polarization. It cuts much deeper. Where is my dear brother who was teaching at NYU, dealing with Black Lives Matter? Just wave your hand, brother. It's so good to see you. Give it up for this brother. He's now at The New School, now at The New School. Oh yes, we had a wonderful time together in class. We talked about it then. Gangsterization is about the enactment of wholesale nihilism, which is not simply epistemic skepticism or ontological skepticism. It is lovelessness. It is touchlessness. It is meaninglessness. It is what Dostoevsky called hell in "Brothers Karamazov," which is wrestling with the incapacity to love because the gifts that one has been given have not been cultivated in such a way that you even know how to love anymore. So even the discourse of love and justice, and any justice that's only justice soon degenerates into something less than justice. If all you got to offer is just justice, and you're not doing it because you really love and have a caring concern about the people catching hell, it's just a lifestyle choice. It's not a fundamental way of being in the world. That's what we learned the best in The New School. Oh, yes. Even when we have contested conceptions of what justice is. That's how dim and grim our situation is. And we were talking in class about that line of Immanuel Kant, in the "Critique of Pure Reason" where he says, "Examples are the go-cart of judgment.

" That you have to have concrete exemplars. And I'm not talking about abstract market-driven role models. So and so's my role model. Oh please, spare me. Probably just talking about some market success. You just want some big move in your career. We're not talking about career tonight. We're talking about your calling and the way you use your career for your calling. And you can't have a calling without a recalling, a relation to the voices, the figures, the exemplars who have come before who shape us and mold us. And if there's going to be any kind of serious philosophy, love of wisdom in a moment of imperial decay, countervailing truth-telling against the present status quo, countervailing organizing against the status quo, countervailing arguments, countervailing stories, countervailing analysis, counter-hegemonic ways of being in the world, it has everything to do with basic things like trying to get us to see the world more clearly, comprehensively with a subtlety and sense of complexity that is inseparable from feeling deeply and shattering callousness and

indifference so that we actually can have genuine care and solidarity. And last but not least, most importantly, being willing to act. It's no accident that irony remains so often the dominant trope of the professional managerial classes when it comes to education 'cause irony allows us to revel in how smart we are, which is a beautiful thing. I'm not promoting stupidity up here. But if we're reveling in our smartness and unable to acknowledge the forms of complicity and complacency and cowardliness, given what we're willing to adopt ourselves to without being truthful about ourselves, then smartness becomes just another kind of rationalizing the hierarchies in place, the forms of silence in place, the forms of taboo in place. And none of us, not one of us are free of spot or wrinkle.

What I mean by that is that all of the lenses in which we view the world have blind spots. Adorno reminds us of this. "The splinter in one's own eye is the biggest magnifying glass." You start with yourself. No one of us have a monopoly on truth and beauty and goodness of the whole, no one of us a part of any pure social movement that allows a Manichean analysis as if we are on the one side all light, good, and purity, and all those who disagree with us are to be demonized. No, leave that for Disneyland and the popcorn on Main Street and come back to history with all of its contradictions and incongruities and the history deposited inside of us. We wrestle with this these days in terms of a robust conversation. How far do we go in listening to people who we fundamentally disagree with? Are we to wrestle with the genius of an Edmund Burke who was so cold and callous when it came to precious brothers and sisters in the French Revolution? But had a powerful critique with British imperial practices in India. Disagree, wrestle, find your voice, but don't shut him out. Not at all. We wouldn't have had the responses of Mary Shelley. We wouldn't have had the responses of Diderot and others in the conversation, you see. I had a challenge the other day. Somebody in my class said, "You know Brother West, I'm a white sister and I just feel as if I can't say too much about the great brother Ambedkar." You know the great Ambedkar. The great dollared intellectual critical of Gandhi because Gandhi was against untouchability but did not call for the dismantling of caste. I said, "Well, what makes you think your white body's getting in the way?" Please don't fetishize this thing. Use your imagination and your empathy. John Brown wasn't no joke. Lydia Maria Child, white sister, wasn't no joke. Close to David Walker. What are we talking about? Rabbi Heschel ain't no joke writing that telegram to Kennedy. "I think Americans oughta forfeit the right to worship if they can't treat Negroes with humiliation.

" Kennedy said, "I think we invited the wrong rabbi here 'cause we got some more moderate rabbis out here who just can't wait to get to the White House and sip tea. Well, Heschel's not gonna do it. He's not doing it just because of his skin pigmentation. He believes in something deeply. He's got a calling. He's got a sense of invocation. His conception of piety is grounded in remembrance of the best, reverence of something bigger than him, and a resilience and a resistance in the light of his prophetic understanding of his own Judaic tradition. What a magnificent witness. Does he have a monopoly on truth? No. Does he have some truths that are indispensable? Absolutely. Say the same thing about my prophetic brother, Malcolm X. I don't exist as a Christian without Malcolm X. Does he have some blind spots? Absolutely. Early Malcolm, later Malcolm less so, but still has 'em. And I'm just using brief examples because you can't be one who wants to take seriously my own

tradition of Black folk who have chosen to be love warriors and freedom fighters and wounded healers and joy spreaders. You violate Frederick Douglass, you violate Ida Bell Wells-Barnett, you violate James Baldwin, you violate Aretha Franklin, you violate John Coltrane, you violate Mary Lou Williams. All of these were human beings who somehow mustered the courage to be lovers of beauty and truth and goodness and sometimes the holy. Mary Lou became a Catholic under the influence of Barry Ulanov and a few others. She had been very much secular in her own way. Dorothy Day, another great example. Thoroughly secular for a minute and then is converted to Catholicism. People are, "Oh my God. What happened to Dorothy?" No, she still has anarchistic sensibilities. No, she's in love with poor folks. She is a leftist to the core in terms of her hybrid spirit as Catholic Dorothy Day. Mary House just right down the way here, still going 89 years later. Why do I mention all this? I could talk about a Buddhist who New School had the vision to bring, our dear sister bell hooks.

My God, we miss sister bell. What does this got to do with wrestling with imperial decay? Everything, everything. Because if we are unable to be blues-like, be Chekhov-like, to be Beckett-like and have a sense of the tragic comic, which means that oftentimes the best of who we are, democratic movements, democratic ways of life are episodic. They come and go like the great Sheldon Wolin taught us in "Fugitive Democracy," often crushed. Well, what do we do in the face of being defeated? What do you think? What do we do in the face of failure? What do you think? What do we do when it looks like at times that our very movement has the chance of a snowball in hell? Do we give up? Do we succumb? Blues men, blues women, what you got to say? O, Brother West, I've been down so long that down don't worry me no more. That's why I just keep keeping on, and I'm strong as I can be. Ooh, I like your blues. Ain't nothing innocent about it. Nothing sentimental about it. Nothing romantic about it. Nothing naive about it. It's grounded in the funk and the realities of struggling. But at the same time, it understands hope as a verb as well as a virtue. You got to, as Curtis Mayfield say, "Keep on pushing." Stay in motion, not just by yourself, some isolated ego. And that's subversive piety. What is subversive piety? Well, we can go back to the Euthyphro and wrestle over definitions. Or we can go with John Dewey and say, "Ah, I'm a naturalist, I'm secular." Piety is a virtuous acknowledgement of the sources of good in our lives. So that even we atheists and even we agnostics know that there have been people in our lives who fundamentally shape and mold who we are. I loved that about Sister Jackson the other day. I don't get a chance to watch TV too often. She starts with her parents. All of the cynicism and skepticism and even threats of nihilism in the world should never allow any of us to overlook the forces of good in our own treks from womb to tomb.

Who loved us? Who cared for us? Who sacrificed for us? How did it spill over in family and community? How did it spill over in school? How did it spill over in sports? How did it spill over in music? And then how did it spill over for those who were no longer quick and breathing but the dead? Feeling down and out, turn on some Stephen Sondheim and let that brother's genius float through your soul. I'm talking about the tragic comic sections, not just those upbeat ones that he got from Oscar Hammerstein. This is not June busting out all over. This is no more in part two of "Into the Woods." This is the Stephen Sondheim who says dreams come true but not free because when Cinderella finally gets her prince, she



finds out he's not worth a dime. What you gonna do now, Cinderella? That's part two. That's after Disneyland. That's after the sentimentalism once upon a time thing. No, you got to live a life in the dark, in the grim, in the dimness, blues-like. And let us be very clear, not just in the American empire, but in the world, ecological catastrophe and pending nuclear catastrophe, gangsters have their hands on the button. Economic catastrophe, thank God for Brother Bernie. People call him Johnny one-note. The critique of Wall Street over and over again. At least he's got that critique up front 'cause it's tied to corporate greed. It's not just economic, it's moral, it's spiritual. And then the political catastrophe of our elected officials wrestling with colonized bribery and normalized corruption shot through their practices. What are we to do? How do we sustain ourselves? Vocation, invocation, provocation. You can't do it by yourself. You've got to situate and locate yourself in a tradition that has been able to empower others before you. That's why we talked about Vico today. That's why we talked about Montaigne today with the eight wars of religion from 1562 to 1592. Thousands and thousands of precious folk in Europe's heads cut off, parts mutilated, Huguenots against Catholics, Catholics against Huguenots, class struggles going on, catastrophe, nothing new.

I could hear my grandmother telling me now. "Little Cornel, don't you ever be surprised by evil. Don't you ever be paralyzed by despair. You wrestle with despair." Goethe used to say, "He or she who has never despaired has never lived." And he's not the most greatest of artists when it comes to the tragic sensibility. Tragic sensibility scared Goethe. His very metaphor is a cloudless sky. That's not the blues-like orientation I have. When the sun comes out, I love it. I get all I can 'cause I know it's not gonna last too long. And I'm not just talking about Seattle. I count my blessings. My mama passed. I count my blessings I had her for so many years. I lose James Mtume. I count my blessing for his music. I lose bell hooks. I count my blessing for what she gave. That's what hope is about. Nothing to do with optimism. Nothing to do with upbeat. Nothing to do with the green light. Nothing to do with tomorrow, things are gonna get better. That's Chekhov. Chekhov is deeper than the blues. You say, "Ooh, that's blasphemy in America." Truth often is blasphemy in America. He's deeper than the blues. 'Cause the blues is still American shot through with certain romantic and sentimental elements thinking that tomorrow things might get better. Good morning heartache. Maybe the next morning there won't be. No, Billie, it's gonna be there waiting for you, sister. Don't you think? No, no, but we Americans always think that somehow we ascribe almost metaphysical status to the future. Russians don't worry about that. Chekhov doesn't, Dostoevsky doesn't. Why? Because they know energy must be focused on not just staying woke. I love that language with my young brothers and sisters, but I tell 'em, "If you stay woke, you're going to suffer from insomnia." Don't you stay woke, stay woke, stay woke, no. Well brother, it's just a slogan. Well, I just want to get my insights right on this.

You got to stay fortified. When you're fortified you're like a jazz woman or a blues man, you got good timing with phronesis, practical wisdom. So you know when to be woke, when to take a nap, when to sleep, when to get your work done, when to bring together your talent and your discipline and your energy in such a way and when to laugh at yourself, when to criticize yourself. When they acknowledge that you can be better than you can be, when to listen to your best friends, when to listen to your enemies, when to listen to your critics. It's

all in the timing. And Alfred North Whitehead even went further in "Adventures of Ideas." That was the first book that I told my brothers and sisters to read yesterday. "Adventures of Ideas." Oh, what a classic. 'Cause he talks about what? He talks about not just noble discontent and radical discontent that flow from the Socratic legacy of Athens and the prophetic legacy of Jerusalem. He says, "I'm concerned with the tone of a thinker." See, that's jazz-like. See, Ben Webster got a sweet tone that gets all inside of you and makes you feel like you want to be tender and kind and sweet. And then we got some other horn players that's a different tone. That's all right, that's their tone. They're just loud. And it's their temperament that William James would pick up. The temperament of a thinker and a philosopher and a human being wrestling with decay and decline and loss and catastrophe. Crucial is the tone and temperament of how we relate to each other. And if we measure American culture in terms of tone and temperament, oh, we're in deeper trouble than we thought. It's not just the ideas exchanged. It's the how. And the only way to be counter-hegemonic is to point it out. And when in one's own practice, you see, try to enact it. As to what happened in Charlottesville. We went down to Charlottesville. Gave a talk at sunrise. We must have had 2,000 people at six o'clock in the morning, which is a miracle for me 'cause I don't get up early almost for anything other than trying to catch a plane to be part of some movement.

And by the time we got out to march, we had about 100. And by the time we got to the Robert E. Lee statue, we had about 16 of us. I'm just singing "This Little Light of Mine," about to get crushed by thousands of sick white brothers. There was a few white sisters. Sick white brothers, neo-Nazis, and the Klan. I walked by the park, they're listening to Motown. I said, "Ooh, very American." Motown, you're gonna kill me and wanna listen to the music we produce. 'Cause that music speaks to you on a very deep human level, but you decide to be a gangster therefore you can't respond humanistically to the humanism in the music. Then they come to me and spitting and cussing and carrying on. An example of imperial decay. He said, "I got one question for you, so and so. How come you call everybody brother and sister? I see that S-H-I-T on TV all the time. I can't stand that." And I looked over I and said, "Well brother, I'm not naive. I'm not sentimental. But I recognize you, a human being on the same continuum that I am as a human being." And I know I got some elements inside of me, gangster-like that is hegemonic at the moment and for a good while in your soul. So this is not a moment for Socratic dialogue now. You see, but it's also not a moment for self-righteousness and self-indulgence and easy Manichaeian perception, the product of the same culture that I am, you see. The hypocrisy of neoliberal elites, same continuum of humanity, talking about democracy and freedom, but willing to drop drones on innocent people. Don't wanna move against a grotesque wealth inequality. Just simply wanna make the empire more colorful at the top. And I'm concerned about the structures, you see. Same critique. And then I went into my Christian mode and I just told him, I said, "You know, you choose to be a gangster, but you are made in the image of God.

You're a human being and you have the capacity to be different. It's just that at this moment and maybe for a good while that you're gonna remain my foe." I said, "I was a gangster before I met a Palestinian Jew named Jesus, and now I'm a redeemed sinner with gangster proclivities." See, don't mess with me. I'm a Christian, but not a pacifist. But then I

recognized without Antifa, we would've got crushed like cockroaches 'cause they came at us with loaded ammunition, with their face mask and we singing, "This Little Light of Mine." I wouldn't recommend that under any circumstances. Why is that important? Because without some kind of deeper commitment to integrity, honesty, decency, solidarity, you see, the very hope that we need to be enacted and embodied will in the end be too superficial. So it's a spiritual and a moral issue as well as a political and an economic one. And we need to be very explicit about this as the world continues to slide down a slippery slope to multiple catastrophes, and that in our thinking, in our philosophizing, let us not reduce the catastrophic to the problematic. There's never been a woman's problem. There's never been a Black problem. There's never been a working people's problem in America. There's been catastrophes visited upon them. There's never been a non-binary problem. There've been catastrophes visited on them. Never been a homophobic problem. That's a way of trying to reduce it to something that is not just manageable, but it downplays the role of the moral and the spiritual. And that language of problem is so often a language of our social scientists. And I love social science work at its best in The New School. I'm gonna hold on at its best, now. But we're dealing with a time now where the catastrophes are so intertwined and intermingled that if we don't have the seeing required, the deep feeling of compassion and the courage, I cannot stress more, courage. That is the enabling virtue. All the other virtues are empty without courage.

And being a spectator won't do it. Ironic consciousness won't do it. That's the critical moment, the ironic consciousness. We need intervention, being a participant, being an agent, being part of collective actions on a variety of the catastrophes with which we're dealing. And so in the end, I know I've been going too long, but I'm just so blessed to be here that I do want to end on a blue note. I started on a blue note. That now that the whole nation thoroughly has the blues, there's a fundamental sense in which if we don't learn from the best of a blues people, a world historical people who have disproportionately shaped the sonic world, the cultural world out of sheer spiritual fortitude and creativity and moral action, if we don't learn from a blues people, we're gonna lose everything. It's just that simple. Hearing, seeing, and it's not a question of some kind of a sensitivity to the people who have been excluded for 400 years. No, no, no, no, no, no. It has everything to do with how seriously we take our quest for truth and beauty and goodness and justice. And all persons, all colors and genders and sexual orientations can contribute to the quest for those particular ends and aims by taking very seriously a variety of the voices raised and the examples enacted and the movements created. And in the end, that still might not be enough. So what? We go down swinging. And I come from a tradition that says with all the style and a smile, it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing. That's nobility at its height.

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