

AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

< 'Becoming Wise' Is A Meditation On Meaning

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MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:

Our next guest almost doesn't need an introduction to fans of public radio. Krista Tippett has spent more than a decade exploring important questions of life, questions that often involve faith, science and spirituality on her popular radio program and podcast, "On Being." That work has been honored with a Peabody award and a National Humanities Medal.

Now, she's distilled insights gleaned from these years of deep conversations with important thinkers into a new book. It's called "Becoming Wise," which I have found moving and difficult to describe, so I'm going to let her do it.

KRISTA TIPPETT: Oh, thank you.

MARTIN: Why "Becoming Wise" as opposed to smarter, richer, thinner, taller...

TIPPETT: (Laughter).

MARTIN: ...Or even more faithful or nicer?

TIPPETT: Well, to me, wisdom is - it's hard to define, but one of its qualities - that it is about joining inner life with our outer presence in the world. The litmus test of wisdom is the imprint it makes on the world around it, the imprint a wise life makes

on the world around it. And that's a step beyond other qualities we admire.

MARTIN: One of the things that's fascinating about this book is that - and I want to emphasize to folks that it is not just repurposed excerpts from your interviews. It's not just, like, transcriptions of previous interviews, although I confess that would be pleasing to many of us it were.

(LAUGHTER)

MARTIN: But what you do is you kind of thread the needle in ways that might be unexpected. I mean, it's organized around what you call five of these raw materials - words, the body, love, faith and hope. The one I wanted to focus on because we don't have time to talk about all of them is the flesh - the body, or "The Flesh," as the chapter is titled. I was fascinated by this because often people think of - when they think of kind of the life of the mind or the deeper existence, they think of getting away from the body, right?

TIPPETT: You know, sometimes we become wise by making discoveries. And sometimes wisdom is a process of relearning things we knew forever and then forgot. And I actually think, you know, kind of a tragic move of modernity was disconnecting us from our bodies. I think Western religion in general is kind of a chin-up experience. And even medicine divided us into parts.

I think most of us have had some experience of that, where you know your frailty because, you know, our minds will let us convince ourselves that we're not frail, but our bodies bring us back to this. And when we are ill or experience a loss or even when, you know, when you do something physical - when you run or do a yoga class - you know, you really get in your body. You sweat.

There's a way in which you do feel not only more connected inner self, but more connected with the natural world, with the world around you, with other people. And this has become, for me, a big image of spiritual life as well, kind of paradoxically.

MARTIN: What you also say is that (reading) 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, which is a pretty heavy statement if you think about it. I mean, in essence, are you saying that we have to stop looking at the people we normally look to for leadership and look elsewhere? Like, you know, the politicians, the celebrities, that maybe we need to turn away from those?

TIPPETT: There are so many beautiful lives. There is so much goodness. But we have been trained to not treat that as seriously, you know, to not treat that as a data point. And that is disheartening and diminishing, I think, our ability to have a hope muscle - to be courageous, to be as resilient, to be as creative as we are called to be in this moment in time.

MARTIN: You know, it's interesting that your work arrives - this book arrives at a moment that we are continually told is a very angry moment.

TIPPETT: Yeah.

MARTIN: You know, the voters are angry. The people are angry. All kinds of people are very angry. Do you disagree, or do you feel that that's, as you said, not the whole story?

TIPPETT: Well, I think that that is absolutely a good description of what's happening on the surface. But anger is what pain and fear often look like when they show themselves in public. You know, we're not great in American culture at dwelling with pain and with fear, just letting them be in the room.

But I think a calling in this - kind of as we move into this part of the 21st century for some of us is to be calmers of fear, to help create spaces where some of that raw pain and fear can actually show itself instead of acting like anger and instead of being attracted to voices and energies that can turn it toxic, that can make it dangerous.

MARTIN: But what are people to do in this moment? What is your prescription?

TIPPETT: My prescription is that we take back our ownership of our public life. And we have to start having the conversations we want to be hearing and not expecting, you know, the media, in quotation marks, to deliver it, not expect the politicians to necessarily be the grown-ups in the room. So the news is bad, but that news also is good. It just does ask us to step up.

MARTIN: How do you hope this book will be used?

TIPPETT: I think hope is making a comeback. I think that the spirit of this age is aspirational. I think that young people now are aspirational. It's not so much about what they're going to be as how they're going to be and who they're going to be. So I hope that this book can be a companion for people.

MARTIN: That is Krista Tippett, host of On Being. Her latest book is called "Becoming Wise: An Inquiry Into The Mystery And Art Of Living." Krista Tippett, thanks so much for speaking with us.

TIPPETT: Oh, thank you, Michel.

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