On Being's Krista Tippett on Finding Wisdom in a Time of Flux & Uncertainty: An Interview with About Campus Executive Editor Frank Shushok, Jr.

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Krista Tippett shares her perspective on wisdom, the reemergence of hope, and the need to talk about values in this wide-ranging interview

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**Shushok:** First, thank you for making the space for us to spend this time together. As I shared with you, I have been your fan since your early days. I never miss an episode of On Being, so sitting with you in your office is nothing short of a thrill. I learned from you to have a “hallmark” question to ask all those I interview. I would like to begin there today. I am interested in learning how people have changed. Could you reflect about the ways the 25-year-old Krista is different from the 40-year-old Krista and the 56-year-old Krista? What are the most salient lessons growing older has taught you?

**Tippett:** I am so glad I am different! At 56, I spend a lot of time on college campuses, and I really like it—I enjoy college-age humans. I have been writing about wisdom, and one thing that people ask me is, “Do you have to be old to be wise?” There is an idea that wisdom is linked to age, but I also think there is a certain wisdom of a four-year-old, and there is certainly a wisdom of the late teens and early 20s. There is this ability to see the world, as it should be, and a great impatience and energy in throwing oneself at that possibility. I think I had that when I was 20 as well. I understood many things, but the problem with that intensity is that it is hard to sustain. Our cross-generational relationships have also gone away: that was supposed to be a limiting agent to that impatience. I rather wore myself out. I was very passionate. What I wish is that I would have also given myself permission to enjoy myself more, to be kind to myself. It is hard to get perspective at that age—everything feels like it has to be done today, or this year—or it
will never matter. I definitely saw myself in that mode, and I had a lot of really exciting experiences that I threw myself at with that energy. You could not pay me any amount of money to go back. Now, I am sure that intense person is still me. I know it is me. Yet I have learned to take pleasure, to be kind to myself. I have really learned the value of my friendships. I was so much about throwing myself into experiences, and I met people by way of experiences. Now, I understand the value of meeting people as people.

Shushok: Do you think about friendship differently than you did even a decade ago?

Tippett: One of the greatest gifts over the last few decades is how I started really to invest in my friendships, especially with other women. Even in my 20s, I have always had at least one good friend who is much older. I usually have had a good friend, a woman, who is much older than I am, often in her 70s. This was the case even when I was in my 20s, and that has been really nourishing for me. As I get older, I am thinking about how I want to be a friend to women younger than me. I think there is an intentionality about friendship that was not there before, and I have a sense of just how rewarding meaningful friendship is.

Shushok: I want to skip back to something you mentioned a few moments ago about wisdom—whether wisdom is acquired with age. Are there things you could share with college students about living life wisely? Or is wisdom something mostly taught through time and experience?

Tippett: I think it is a combination of both. What I experience with this generation is that young people do not want to be told what to do. Maybe that has been true of young people forever, but they feel a real freedom today. I find this generation has a confidence in asserting, “You’re not going to tell me what to do.” However, they do want to be accompanied. They do actually want elders. As I said when I was writing the book, this idea of getting “old and wise” includes a reality that everybody does get old. While all people get old, some just don’t get wise. It is not that wisdom comes automatically as a guarantee of age.

Wisdom as Practice

AS I DELVED INTO THIS, what I found with truly wise lives is a wisdom that emerges through the raw materials of life. These are raw materials that we all possess—the words we use, the bodies we inhabit, the love we possess. I use the word “love” as a very multifaceted thing. There are so many forms of love in our
Wisdom is a kind of umbrella term for many other qualities, and no one possesses all of those qualities. But the component parts of wisdom, which include compassion, patience, a sense of humor, willingness to smile at one’s self, and good listening, are all things that can be practiced—like playing a piano or throwing a ball. These are actually qualities that we can decide we want to possess. You do not have to be born this way, or be born good at it. Character can be cultivated.

Shushok: I was taken by a couple of sentences early on in your book. You wrote: “I am a person who listens for a living. I listen for wisdom and beauty and for voices not shouting to be heard.” You emphasize that wisdom, beauty, and love are literally all around us—not just in the “big names” we’re drawn to for wisdom. For many of us working on college campuses, our greatest hope is to introduce students to such a way of living. How did you learn to listen, and tell us about the voices of wisdom that surround us all that time—the voices that we sometimes miss?

Listen for the Whole Story

Tippett: We often think that big names will tell the story of our times, but they just tell a part of a story. Listening and being a good listener is a basic social art and an act of hospitality. I have gotten better at listening as I have done more of it. That is one of the simple answers to the question. I think the radar we have relied upon to tell us what is important, and who out there is important, is broken. It does not tell the whole story of our time.
The other thing about the mode of listening that journalism is in, and a lot of our public and media forms are in, is a sophisticated ear toward what is catastrophic, corrupt and failing—and reporting and investigating those things. Those pictures are real and they need our attention, but they are not all that is real. I do write, and I do believe and experience every single day, that there is an abundance of goodness, beauty and generative living in every system, institution, and personality type that is in front of us.

There are amazing people creating and having new realities, but we don’t shine a light on them in the same way. They do not have publicists. They do not rivet in the same way. If enough intelligence and care were invested in telling these stories, we could come up with efforts to cover goodness in a way that would make it as thrilling as evil. I suppose that is kind of an overdramatized way to talk about the work I do, but, I try to create a media space that has different values, that is looking for something that was missed. I want to draw out humility, hospitality and humor—voices unlike the strident poles by which we tend to frame our deliberation of important issues. The people I draw out—like most of us—are between those poles.

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Life has a lot of nuance, right? Everything is messy, especially the big questions of our times, the challenges. Even when we find answers, they still come with more questions. So, that is what I am interested in—the people who hold their questions and their answers together. And they are everywhere! They are we. Nevertheless, we do not take them and ourselves as seriously in our cultural equations. That has to change. It is a shift of perspective as much as anything else.

The Importance of Hope

SHUSHOK: What is so attractive to me about your work is that you have created a whole new holding environment for goodness, beauty, and the bigger questions of life. I think many of us who work on college and university campuses are hopeful to create similar spaces. We hope such spaces might transcend difference in understanding and curate a hopefulness about the world that often feels fleeting. I think I heard you say recently that hope is making a comeback, especially among young people. Is that correct?

TIPPETT: Yes, it is! I also think that cynicism is the easiest, laziest stance in the world. It may be intellectually respectable, but it is such a cop-out. “I’m not going to be surprised if that is appalling, and I’m not going to lift a finger to change anything.” We can’t afford that. We can collectively no longer afford that luxurious standpoint right now.

SHUSHOK: Is that behind your idea that hope is making a comeback with young people? Do you think young people have said “enough with the cynicism?”

TIPPETT: Yes, but they are also a little bit paralyzed, quite reasonably so, about what they are up against. Between the times they were young teenagers and now, their imagination, and their parents’ imagination, about their economic futures has been on shifting sands. So there is that, and then, there is the fact that we do live in a world of flux. I think the human drama of dealing with this flux and uncertainty is what is going on with our political lives. Young people have to reckon with the reality that they cannot look to public figures and generally see maturity and leadership modeled or for reasonable ways forward. That’s not where it is right now. That is not where it is going to be. I think young people are asking “Where do we look?”

Young people are also asking questions like you are asking in the pages of About Campus about what it means to be a whole human being. In my view, this is related in part to the spectacle on display through the recent election cycle. The 21st century has celebrated people with huge public lives, but their interior life was optional. I see young people absolutely rejecting this approach. They are going to insist on being whole people, and they want to be the same person on the outside as on the inside. So, they’re having to struggle with systems and expectations that are a holdover from another era.

SHUSHOK: This is no doubt one of the conversations we are having in higher education. In many ways, the last 30 years have deemphasized education as a holistic endeavor. A college education has been more directed toward skill development and job training rather than many of the larger questions associated with what it
means to be human—a good human. Perhaps this defi-
cit is what has opened the door for welcoming spiritual
questions, even in the public sector. Character develop-
ment has become more important than ever.

Tippett: You know, we are living in a remark-
able time, and the same things that make it terrify-
ing make it remarkable. We are questioning so many
basic definitions. To live in a moment when we rede-
define family, marriage, and gender—if that were all we
were doing right now—that would be a lot. However,
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An Education in Asking Questions

Tippett: That is such a big question. I had an experi-
ence that will never be repeated. I grew up in a small
town in Oklahoma. I was never asked to read an entire
book in school. I did not really know what it was to
study for an exam, did not really know what it was to
write a paper the way I eventually understood what it
was to write a paper. But I did Drama, and I did Debate,
and my mind came alive in those things. Then, just
because I met someone at summer debate camp who
wanted to go to Brown University, I applied to Brown
University. I got in but she did not because she went to
a high school in Illinois where 50 kids applied to Brown,
and I was this interesting outlier—and completely
unprepared. As it happened, I could handle it, but it
was hard. The first year and a half was me just trying
to get my bearings. What I treasure when I look back at
college, and that I continue to use in my writing, is that
I learned to ask great questions. That is the one thing I
have to say about what I learned in college. I ended up
majoring in History because I liked the questions they
asked—they were so grand and so interesting.

I fear that students now cannot luxuriate in some-
thing like being a “good asker of questions” as the
point of a great college education. Of course, I was at

Shushok: I want to try to push a couple topics
together; so hang with me for a moment. Since college
educators read About Campus, I would like to offer
your own educational journey as context. Will you tell
us about your formal education? How did it form and
shape you? In what ways did it prepare you or fail
you? As a parent, what did you observe about your
kid’s higher education?

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leadership, authority, and community. Once you start
redefining these things, none of the institutions that
we are organized around makes sense. That is where
we are. These young people are the ones who see the
failure, and they are the ones to help create the future.
It is a lot we are asking of them.
Brown, which meant I felt like I was in a good position to look for jobs, but I really did not worry existentially about whether I would be able to do something with my degree. I think students now do.

With the education of my own kids, one of whom is currently at the University of Oklahoma, I have a more clear critique of high school than I do of college. My son went to a public high school and my daughter went to a small theater arts charter school. It did not feel like those high schools made sense. It felt there was something broken about the high school experience. It feels like high school is going to have to be reinvented.

**Shushok:** Intuitively, what do you think is not working about school?

**Tippett:** You know, it is fundamental. Sometimes my kids would put their finger on it because of things like memorizing answers and taking exams when they are growing up in a world where they will always Google multiple answers. Instead of succeeding on an exam, they will be working with teams and collaborating to create something innovative, and something practical.

Our generation would never have said “I don’t want you adults to tell me what to do.” These students will say “I won’t be told what to do!” In fact, once upon a time, we pretty much thought that was our lot in life as children—to be told what to do. So we would go into really uncomfortable classrooms, and sit on uncomfortable chairs, and be bored most of the day with bad lighting and bad lunch. Now, it is not just that it is unpleasant, we know from neuroscience and all the learning about our bodies that the whole high school experience is just numbing—numbing! It is just the opposite of the environment you would create for one’s imagination to open up—to even have good energy. So, there’s so much that fundamentally wrong with it.

That is why I am saying this is a wild time to live. I say that a lot, and I think it is a good thing for us all to remind ourselves of it occasionally. Otherwise, it can just feel like we are just failing and flailing. In fact, we are faced with extraordinary circumstances, so a sense of humor and a sense of patience and a little kindness toward ourselves about the complexity of the materials we are given to work with can be soothing. We should let ourselves be soothed every once in a while.

Here is the other thing. Every discipline is having a version of this conversation. Journalism is having its “Oh my God, nothing we thought was the only way to do it is working anymore.” Medicine is having this, education is having this, and religion is having this.

**Shushok:** Higher education is having this. We are asking all over—what is the purpose of higher education and the benefit of a college degree? What does formation look like for our students?

**Tippett:** Yes! This moment of flux is where formation is happening. But to your point, “formation” is a word I like. Another word I like is “discernment.” Those are kind of counter-cultural activities, right? We “train,” and we “inform.” But places of higher education as places where formation is happening, in and of itself, is compelling. The word suggests that you are forming more than just a mind. You are forming a human being. You are forming a citizen. You are forming someone who is going to be a member of the community and someone who is going to be a member of a discipline—somebody who is going to have a vocation as opposed to having a job.

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**Shushok:** We certainly agree here. I think it is why I resonated so much with a part of your book that talked about the language of virtue as the connective tissue of the entire text. You acknowledged that virtues might sound old-fashioned but suggest finding it magnetic to new generations who “instinctively grasp the need for practical disciplines to translate aspiration to action.” Would you talk more about virtue, because that feeds into an attractiveness to a kind of education that is quite different from just informing?

**Embody Virtue**

**Tippett:** Yes. One thing is that virtue is embodied and lived; it is not merely cerebral. It is another way of talking about connecting outer life and inner life and acknowledging that both of those matter in my formation as a human being, as a student, as a professional person in the making. Virtue is a way of talking about being a whole person as opposed to just being a qualified graduate. Right?
Shushok: Yes. An engineer, a landscape architect, right? What about a virtuous engineer and landscape architect?

Virtues speak about wholeness, they speak about a life being graceful rather than merely effective—having a nourishing effect on others as opposed to being merely successful.

Tippett: Yes, virtues are tools for living. Here is one way of seeing this. I experience younger people who sometimes say they feel like what their parents care about, and what the system they are in cares about, is what they will do. Students care about that too, but they are equally passionate about who they will be, how they will live, and they want those questions to work together. Virtues speak to that; they speak to what kind of person you will be. They also speak to what kind of leader you will be or how effective you will be working in teams in a workplace. It is not that these things are impractical. Virtues speak about wholeness, they speak about a life being graceful rather than merely effective—having a nourishing effect on others as opposed to being merely successful.

It is not the way we usually talk about these things and not the way we talk about these things in public. We get much more formal-sounding language, but if you say it this way, it is hard to argue that human beings who are committed to all of those things together are not going to create a better world for us and for their children and for their children’s children.

Talk about Values

I WAS AT A BUNCH of universities recently, and I had an experience that I have not been able to stop thinking about. It was very poignant. I was at Princeton, a stellar institution of higher education. A student came to me in the line and he said, “How can we get them to start talking to us about values?”

Shushok: “Them” being the institution?

Tippett: Yes. He said it with this real longing. He seemed to be so bright and, like young people at that age, just radiating energy and intelligence. It was such an important question, you know? I had this brief conversation with him, and I said something like “It’s ironic, especially at a place like Princeton, that has an expressed mission to be talking about values.” Then he said, “Yes, but especially a place like this, because if we don’t find ways to talk about that and get some formation, we are just going to become part of a machine, part of the capitalist machine.” It was a short exchange, and there are different ways he could have said it, but I know and you know exactly what he was talking about. That is why people 19- and 20-year-olds are listing to my podcasts. We have this huge influx of millennials, which blows me away. That is also about technology. When I was in college, we didn’t have podcasts.

I am amazed how this generation is reaching out for and finding places of substance. One of the things young people say to me (something I did not like when they started saying it to me, but I have started to understand this common compliment): they say my podcasts are very soothing and calming. I realized that these students have so few places in their lives that are soothing and calming. Everywhere they turn, they are being whipped up or spurred on, or they are falling short. Or they are meeting the goals and exhausting themselves.

I am just going to give myself over to being soothing. But soothing does not mean lacking in intellectual heft, right? Another journalist said to me, “You’ve been accused of being soft on reason.” You know, I’ll take that because there are a lot of hard edges out there. Shushok: It is a hard world. We need soft edges.

Tippett: It is a hard world, and I will take soft. In talking to these kids about values, it is also talking about just being present for each other in a place that is congenial, hospitable, and caring. Soft does not mean you are not thinking clearly. You can still ask a searching, challenging question and be soft, and that is kind of a win-win in my mind.

Shushok: Well, let me tell you some do you good news. I shared your book with several students on my campus—I am always interested in how they will react to the things I am reading. One student, Akshay Rajendran (as I suspect many of us), was intrigued by the chapter on the “flesh.” You have organized the book around five raw materials—words, the body, love, faith and hope—but flesh—that was such an intriguing addition. What does the body have to do with becoming wise?

The Wisdom of the Body

Tippett: I think this is relevant to everything we are talking about here. So many of the ways that we
have done formation for a few generations, like me being born in 1960, has disconnected us from our bodies in very disparate strains. I grew up Southern Baptist, and the body was a problem in religion because if you go there, it is dangerous and problematic. In addition, the enlightenment said, “I think, therefore I am.” Then, I went to Brown, and it was all about me as a cerebral being. Again, when we look at what counts as leadership and success, we look at these very external measures, and abstract measures.

Our bodies tell us truths that our minds can deny. In fact, always as much frailty and fragility remind us we will never be perfect and that things will go wrong.

Our bodies tell us truths that our minds can deny. In fact, always as much frailty and fragility remind us we will never be perfect and that things will go wrong. If there is one truth about wisdom, it is that moments when things go wrong are breeding grounds for growth, even though we would never choose them. Our bodies anchor us in reality in the way that our minds take us away from reality. This is something I have heard, but this is something I have also lived into during the course of doing these conversations over the years.

We are learning so much now scientifically about how these distinctions we have made between body, mind, spirit and emotions. Trauma actually lodges in our bodies; memories have physicality. There are ways we are learning that it is probably better to treat things in our bodies rather than talking about them.

Inhabiting our bodies and all their flaws and their grace is really the ultimate in being a whole person. Even as we have embraced this language about the whole person, even in education, we have still kind of left out the body. The body is also the way in which we are present to others, and ultimately, that is what gives life meaning. That is probably the ultimate thing that we still do not know how to talk about in a place of higher education or in many of our public spaces.

Shushok: There are many people who will read this who are in a classroom, or maybe they are working in a student activities office or in a residence hall—maybe they work in a president’s office. They care about this enterprise because they think it has something to do with how we create better human beings and, therefore, potentially a better world. Do you have any counsel, suggestion, or advice for those people who are in the trenches, who want to make a difference?

Change is a Long-term Project

Tippett: It is such an important question. When I am on campuses these days, I keep finding myself wanting to say to students, and the same thing I would say to faculty members and staff, is how important it is to be kind to yourself. To understand that these kinds of structural changes, the questions we are facing, are a long-term project. You are not going to come up with the solution tomorrow. I think we are so “can-do,” action oriented, deliverables oriented in America, I think that could sound like a cop-out, or also you could despair when I say, “you’re not going to solve this right away. You may not solve it. It may be for the next generation to solve it.”

To me, if you say we are in the midst of a long-term project, these are civilizational changes we are making, and they are going to take time, then we have to walk there together. To me, that is relaxing, because it takes some of the pressure off the next hour and tomorrow. It leaves room, and it lets in space to say, “not only do we need to gather our facts and information, we need some space for discernment here, for reflection, for the quieter processes.”

I actually think another American thing we do, especially in our smartest places, is we have this rush to make the call, make a decision, and make a change. But if you act without discernment and without reflection, you often make the wrong move, and in fact, you waste time. You make the wrong move, you move into it, you spend money on it, and then later on, you are going to end up rolling it all back.

Have a more generous view of time, a more generous view of yourselves, and try to embrace today. We are so focused on a crisis mentality. Everything is a crisis in politics and a crisis in higher education. I do think a lot about this. The Chinese character for crisis holds opportunity as well. It is another strange thing about us as humans, but something that sometimes works in our favor—we are mobilized by crisis. Crisis actually unleashes creativity and innovation. Crisis also prompts us to reach out to others in a way that is good for us. So, try to see and to live into some of the energies that crisis is unleashing that are life
giving, that are redemptive, and that can lead us to wisdom.

**Shushok:** Thank you for being our teacher! It has been really fun to talk to you today. I hope you know how important your work is, and I am certain About Campus readers will cherish the wisdom you have offered today. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.