



S4E2: Transcript

A Case for Spiritually Informed Democratic Capitalism

with Dr. Arthur C. Brooks

Tavia Gilbert:

Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm producer Tavia Gilbert, and in every episode of this podcast, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you conversation about the newest scientific research on human flourishing, and how those discoveries can be translated into practical tools.

Today we hear from Dr. Arthur C. Brooks, Professor of the Practice of Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School and Professor of Management Practice at the Harvard Business School. He's also the former president of the American Enterprise Institute, a leading public policy think tank. You may be familiar with Brooks from his work as a writer – he's the author of eleven books, including the national bestsellers *Love Your Enemies* and *The Conservative Heart*, a columnist for *The Atlantic*, host of the podcast "The Art of Happiness with Arthur Brooks," and the subject of a 2019 documentary "The Pursuit."

In this fascinating interview, Brooks discusses democratic capitalism, why the bottom 30% – those historically shut out of economic opportunity in the United State – are our country's greatest untapped assets, and the gift of a pen from the Dalai Lama.

But we'll begin the conversation with Brooks as he describes discovering a passion for economics nearly three decades ago, when, in his late 20's, he was ready to move on from a long-time professional career as a French horn player in the US and Spain. As Brooks began to explore various college courses he might pursue . . .

Arthur Brooks:

What really caught my imagination was economics. This was just sort of mind-bending stuff, I'd never heard anything about it when I was a kid, there was no interest in commerce or economic issues from my childhood at all, my dad was a professor of mathematics, but I didn't know anything about business, we never talked about it.

But when I took a required economics course for the first time, it was like the scales falling from my eyes, because I realized for the very first time that the free enterprise system had pulled billions of people out of poverty. This was this revelatory fact that, I mean, I had never apprehended that, I just thought like everybody else does, that capitalism is good for making rich people richer, and doesn't help the poor very much.

But the truth of the matter is very clear when you understand economics for the first time, that since 1970, four fifths of worldwide starvation has been eradicated because of things like free trade, and globalization, and property rights, and the rule of law, and just the basic culture of entrepreneurship that came out of an understanding of the private enterprise system.

That was a fact, a set of facts that changed my life. I studied that and I thought, I want to dedicate the rest of my life to this. I mean, I really cared a lot, care a lot still today about poverty, and how we can eradicate poverty. I think that's our duty, our obligation, even our privilege to look at the least of these brothers and sisters and say, What can we do to lift them up so they can lift themselves up?

And I found this like, the Rosetta Stone, which was the American free enterprise system spreading around the world after 1970 that pulled billions of my brothers and sisters out of poverty, and still most people don't understand that. So I thought huh, this is what I'm supposed to do. I'm supposed to look at this and study this and understand this and help other people understand that.

So I quit music and I started, I went to get my PhD as a matter of fact. And I finished my PhD and became an economics and public policy professor, did that for ten years, and then felt still not enough.

It's not enough. I want to glorify God and help others by spreading this message even further, how the free enterprise system can reach to the periphery of society and lift people up. And so I left academia and came to the American Enterprise Institute, where I've been president for the past ten years. And finally, finally I can really live my mission.

Tavia Gilbert: Brooks can see a clear link between his past pursuit of meaning and purpose as a professional musician, and his long career pursuing and sharing meaning and purpose as an economist.

Arthur Brooks: Bach made me into an economist. When I was a musician, my favorite composer was Johann Sebastian Bach. And he said, this is what really had a big impact on me, not just his music, but his philosophy. He was asked near the end of his life why he wrote music, and he said, "The aim and final end of all music is nothing less than the glorification of God and the refreshment of the soul."

I left music because I couldn't, I couldn't say that. And finally, as a free enterprise economist, I can answer like Bach.

Tavia Gilbert: Brooks calls from history another artists' contemplations that guide his thinking about the higher calling of economics:

Arthur Brooks: The last line of John Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn," which he wrote in I think 1810, that, "Truth is beauty, and beauty truth, that's all ye know on Earth and all ye need to know."

The truth of the matter is that there's a kind of a seamless garment between the beauty that we find around ourselves, the beauty from the arts and music, and the truths that can actually lift people up. What we have to find is that seam between them and obliterate it. So, I feel like I'm doing the same thing I did in music, but better. Because now when I talk about these things, when I talk about the concept of solidarity and global brotherhood and how we can actually use systems to work while we sleep to lift each other up. I think it does refresh the soul of other people.

Tavia Gilbert: Brooks is a proponent of the free enterprise system that has so vastly improved the lives of countless people on the planet, but he uses different language to define that system.

Arthur Brooks: A shorthand for the system that we love in the United States and that we've been trying to promote around the world is democratic capitalism. That obviously has two parts to it, the democratic part and the capitalism part. The capitalism part basically talks about the beauty of private markets and individual initiative to create explosive value. It's not fair to say that radical or exclusive capitalism does that, the free enterprise system is a little bit different, because markets can fail, we need regulation, and we need government. But as a short-hand we call that capitalism.

The democratic part says that we as citizens in free society should have a voice, and we set up democracies because we believe that authoritarian systems are misguided, they wind up subjugating people and are deeply sub-optimal, and usually morally wrong.

So what does democratic capitalism mean? It means that we have a system of markets that's based on the morality of individual autonomy and individual voice. The democratic part is people having an individual voice, a say in their own destiny. Democratic capitalism is making sure that we have an economic system that's free and productive and where each individual has a part in that.

You can have capitalism that's not democratic, that's basically state managed, that's what we see in China. You can have a democracy that's not very capitalistic, where people vote, yet they don't actually have freedom over their economy and freedom over their initiative, they don't have as much freedom as they could possibly have. Democratic capitalism is sort of the key that turns in the lock of what free people can have and what they deserve, and, as such, I think it's a moral good.

Tavia Gilbert: Why does Brooks think there is so much pressure on democratic capitalism at this moment of extreme political polarization in America?

Arthur Brooks: People are questioning capitalism and even democracy today, but that's nothing new. What we've found is that in moments of real hardship, particularly economic hardship, where economic growth is not even throughout the population, where most of it's occurring at the very top of the income distribution, that people in a population, they start to question the very system in which growth could occur.

That's really normal. We have seen that outside the United States almost constantly, but inside the United States a couple of times a century there's a very serious questioning of whether democratic capitalism is the best way to go. That follows on typically a financial crisis, and this is no exception. The financial crisis of 2008-2009, it led to a deep recession, of course, but the real problem was not the recession, it was when the growth came back, it was not symmetrically distributed. The bottom 80% of the income distribution got zero percent income gains over ten years. That's hugely problematic because people are saying, the system's not serving me. So what should we do? Maybe we should consider alternatives.

Some people, the most radical, would consider alternatives to democracy, and a lot of people, reasonable people, would say that capitalism is simply not distributing the benefits widely enough and fairly enough. And so the result is that we have an obligation, those of us that are proponents of the democratic capitalist system, to make sure that free enterprise is distributed, is shared, all the way to the periphery of society better.

Tavia Gilbert: What does Brooks see as the upsides and the downsides of democratic capitalism?

Arthur Brooks: Democratic capitalism is a great system for people that believe in themselves. It's a great system for people that want to live at the frontier, and see life as kind of an adventure. It's a quintessentially American system, insofar as that this is a country of immigrants, of outsiders, of basically ambitious riff raff. You know, people don't come to the United States or traditionally have not come to the

United States as gentry, as land-owners, as rich, fancy people, they come here because they want to make their way.

Well, what do you need to make your way? You need market systems that reward merit, and you need democracy such that people can express themselves and are not held down in the political system. It's the perfect system for the American ethos, effectively.

The downside is that, in fact, it can penalize people if we don't understand that accompanying the democratic capitalist system, we need a safety net. We need morality. We need rules that govern our behavior, and we have to remember that there are the least of these in our society that may or may not be able to compete economically, in the wild west of pure capitalism such as we understand it. So, the threats that come from democratic capitalism can and should be attenuated by the systems that we build on the basis of our individual morality.

Tavia Gilbert: One long-held critique of the social safety net is that the American welfare state has grown too large, is too all-encompassing, and that people are not being moved out of that welfare system into entrepreneurship. Does Brooks share those concerns?

Arthur Brooks: The welfare system in this country has taken a mistaken turn. Not on the basis of bad intention, but when we go back to the mid-1960's, when the American welfare state really accelerated, it was based on the idea that people deserve dignity, and that "doles" as they were called in the day by Lyndon Johnson and the head of his war on poverty, Sergeant Shriver, that doles would corrode the individual soul.

The problem is that's exactly what happened. The American welfare state turned itself almost entirely to helping people, which is great, but it cut into the ability of people to be needed. In other words, it took poor people and turned them into charity cases, and you wouldn't make a charity case out of your worst enemy. You certainly wouldn't do it to your own child. You wouldn't say to somebody who was falling behind, you're nothing but a charity

case. That's an insult, yet that's effectively how the American welfare system has treated people at the margins of society, and in so doing it has demobilized them by telling them, "you're not necessary."

There's no greater indignity than not being needed. The wrong turn that we took was that it obviated the need for a whole class of people, such that they were liabilities to be managed in the economy and in society, as opposed to assets to develop. Anybody who has a business has both assets and liabilities. Assets can be really expensive to manage. But you develop those things because they're, in the long run, something that you need. And liabilities you'll manage, you won't necessarily get rid of them immediately, but you will get rid of them as soon as you can.

When people are treated like liabilities instead of assets, you're going to get predictable results. These results are going to be dysfunction and despair, and long-term unemployment and a lack of ability for people to have a sense of their own dignity. That's ultimately the wrong term that our welfare system took, and in that, we see the seeds of how it can repair itself, how we can repair it as Americans.

We have to remember that there's nothing wrong with the safety net—I believe that all of us should declare peace on the safety net—but the safety net should always require that we remember that everybody's an asset to develop in our society and we need these people.

There are so many cases of this. This year 600 thousand people will come out of prisons in the United States. They'll have an approximately 70% unemployment rate, and 50% will be re-incarcerated in 24 months. What a waste! What a waste of human capital. In point of fact, we need these people to work in our economy, to be productive in our economy, to be good citizens and to be good parents and be good spouses. To throw that away is an indignity that they will suffer, but it's a cost that we'll all bear.

Tavia Gilbert: So what does Brooks see as the way forward, especially in a society that is moving rapidly but at political loggerheads?

Arthur Brooks: We need a couple of different things. Number one, we need a new consciousness of what's going to save our country, and the second is, we need unifying leaders. So I'll start with the first part. American entrepreneurship, particularly tech entrepreneurship has been incredible at increasing productivity. It's just been amazing how productivity has been enhanced.

You and I have computers in virtually every device that we use, but the personal computing at our disposal has increased our productivity by orders of magnitude, it's unimaginable. We have the effective creativity and intelligence of Leonardo da Vinci, and it's just been, simply because of what we have at our disposal, simply with search engines. It's extraordinary.

The problem is that the productivity advances from relatively recent tech entrepreneurship have been disproportionately concentrated in the top ten percent of the income distribution. You can't do that forever. I don't know about you, but I'm maxed out. I can't be more productive, the people in the top ten percent of the income distribution simply can't drag the cart any faster. At the same time, the bottom 30% of the income distribution has largely been left behind in productivity enhancements.

We see the downside of this all the time. We see populism, we see despair and we see people that are repudiating a lot of American ideals that we took for granted, but that's actually not the way we should see it in its entirety. On the contrary, we should see that as an opportunity. If we could actually crack the code of trying to enhance the productivity and opportunity of the bottom 30%, then the increases that would come from that would literally save our country. I believe that only the poor can save America. But it's going to require American entrepreneurial acumen and creativity and deep thinking to help make it so.

The second thing that is really important is unifying leaders. When you see a period of relative despair, that's usually an easy

opportunity for dividing leaders. Why? Because they're political entrepreneurs that are conventional. They see demand out there for leadership that divides people and is negative and pits American against American, that's really easy to see when people are competing over scarce resources. They're more likely to put their hand in somebody else's pocket and to discriminate and even to blame an outsider for the despair that they feel. And so, leaders come along and as conventional entrepreneurs, they meet that need.

The key thing that we need are unifying leaders who are more visionary political entrepreneurs and leaders across the economy, people who say, "Look, right now there doesn't seem to be a demand for unity in this country, where we band together to lift each other up, but I can create that demand curve." And in key points in American history, visionary entrepreneurial political leaders have come along with unity, at a time of division, and have really knit the country back together. I think that's what we need today and I think we can get it.

Tavia Gilbert: Who does Brooks point to as examples of such visionary, entrepreneurial leaders, leaders who united the country?

Arthur Brooks: Ronald Reagan. Franklin Roosevelt. Different parties of course, but both of them were visionary, entrepreneurial, political leaders, that at a time of division, answered with unity. And we need it again.

Tavia Gilbert: There is a deepening sense of political polarization in our society that has raised the specter of fear that hasn't been since so threatening in 50 years or more, maybe since the Great Depression. What is Brooks' analysis of that?

Arthur Brooks: America does have, not a historic, but a pretty high level of polarization by recent historical standards, and there's a lot of good research on this. You find that the two political parties have less in common, that people who identify with one party are more likely to be more hostile to the other.

My favorite statistic these days is the percentage of people that would be upset if their child married a person who belonged to the opposite political party. Historically it's about 6-7%, right now it's about 30%. So you find that, you know, 3 in 10 Americans if they come from the Republican party, if their son or daughter married somebody from the Democratic party. I mean, that's an emotionally deep kind of polarization that we see.

Now, it's not ahistoric, it does happen from time to time, and a couple of things attenuate it, or wipe it out entirely that can bring us back to a climate and culture of greater unity. One is more opportunity. You find that economic growth solves a lot of problems, quite frankly. It's when you see economic growth, particularly that that works all down the income distribution, people are a lot less likely to blame other people who disagree with them for their problems.

It also lowers the demand for polarizing ideas, polarizing politicians, and polarizing media. The media and politicians in a divided political environment, a highly divided political environment, they're responding to the demand conditions from the population. When there's less appetite for that, markets tend to punish that, and politicians and media will respond, with greater unity.

But the second thing is remembering that, usually politicians come along and leaders come along in society that create more demand for that unity itself. Leadership is really critical, I mean, people tend to think that, that leaders always respond to conditions—no, leaders create conditions too. There are leaders, and then there are leaders who are actually followers. Those who see a parade going down the street and then go run out in front of it and say I'm the leader, well that's, you know, that happens a lot.

But occasionally somebody will come along who says look, like in a current environment, what you see in polarization is that indeed there are polarized sentiments, but largely polarization is being driven by about 30% of the population. About 15% on either side that have a pecuniary or some sort of cultural interest in keeping people divided.

The rest of us are not of that opinion. We will kind of follow along and we do have sentiments and maybe even some resentments, but I think about 70% of Americans, the way I read the data, they're hungry for some sort of unity, of lifting each other up. They love somebody, actually, who disagrees with them politically and they don't like the fact that their political party is telling them that their sister-in-law or their brother or mother or father is an idiot. I think that when we come along and create a demand and meet it for greater unity, that we can actually see the end of the polarization as characterizing this environment.

Tavia Gilbert: How can we begin to move beyond our polarized moment? What is needed from each of us to heal our divides and contribute to building healthier conversations and communities?

Arthur Brooks: The funny thing is that every conflict is not war. Just because I disagree with somebody politically, it doesn't mean I should treat them with the same contempt I might treat ISIS, or terrorists, or Nazi Germany. It actually doesn't even make intuitive sense. These are my fellow Americans, or these are my brothers and sisters.

It's completely crazy how we're being driven into this polarized space because there's a lack of leadership for the 70% of us that don't agree with these types of things. And again, the answer, by the way, is not agreeing. I mean, a society in which there's lots and lots of agreement is usually a society that has stagnation and mediocre ideas. You need lots of disagreement because that competition per se creates excellence.

But competition doesn't mean hatred, competition doesn't mean war. On the contrary, you know, we have a system of laws and we have basic morality, that say that we should appreciate excellent competition, whether its sports, or politics, or even just the competition of ideas, and that's the ethos that we need to bring back.

You know, sometimes when I'm talking to members of Congress, particularly really partisan crowds, I'll say, "Ok, let's have a show of

hands, how many of you wish we lived in a one-party state?" No hands. No hearts, actually. If you are glad we don't live in a one-party state, you've just told me that you're grateful for the other party. Axiomatically.

Remembering that is incredibly important. If you're a Republican you don't have to agree with the Democrats, nor vice versa, but you should be really glad that we have a system in place in this country that protects their point of view just as it protects yours, and that we can disagree with each other, and there's no knock in the night and there's not jack-booted thug who shows up at your door. Rule of law protects minority opinions, it protects our ability to say unpopular things, and I'm grateful for that. I'm also in my heart grateful that it protects people that I disagree with. God bless this country, remembering that is critical and it's the role of unifying leaders to make us remember that.

Tavia Gilbert:

Nearly sixty years after Lyndon B. Johnson launched a war on poverty, where are we? Have we made any strides?

Arthur Brooks:

The war on poverty was intended to be just that. It was not supposed to lessen poverty, it was not supposed to make poverty more bearable, it was supposed to make poverty more escapable and indeed to make it rare. Those were the goals of the war on poverty.

On that face it's not been a success, I'm sorry to say. We've spent about \$20 trillion since 1964, but that's the least of it, we're a very rich country, and we can afford to do that. The real problem is the percentage of people that are still in poverty. Ever since that time, it's hovered around 15%.

The problem is that poverty has not been meaningfully lessened. How can you go through 50 years and tens of trillions of dollars and opportunities wasted, and still have this percentage of the American population in the greatest country economically, socially, democratically, in the history of the world that still can't earn their success.

Here's the human tragedy, here's the problem: Poverty today, and this is the great indictment of the war on poverty, is not as hard as it used to be. If you go to towns in Appalachia or marginalized neighborhoods in America's cities, or the Rio Grande Valley, in places where immigrants have not been able to get a foothold in the American economy, you're still going to see running water. You're going to see electricity. These are advances. You find that the average person in the 10th percentile of the American economy today, which is to say poor, has more square footage per person as the average middle class family in 1980. There's been material progress.

The problem is, there's not progress, there's not enough progress with respect to opportunity. The, a real war on poverty doesn't say I'm going to make it easier on you materially to be poor. It's going to make poverty more escapable. That's the way you morally score on poverty, and using that rubric, we haven't succeeded.

Tavia Gilbert:

So who's to blame?

Arthur Brooks:

There's a very, there's a real tendency for conservatives to blame liberals, to act as if political liberals, progressives in this country wanted to subjugate the poor so they would vote democratic forever. I can't tell you how many times I've heard this argument. It's complete claptrap. Total nonsense.

I come from a liberal family, in the most liberal city in America, and I've never once heard somebody say, "Ha ha ha, this is how we're going to get poor people to vote democratic forever!" On the contrary, there was a good faith effort put forward to lessen the severity of suffering and, indeed, to lift people up. It's just the execution has been deeply flawed in this.

What we need to do as a society is not to cast blame on one political side or another, where the right talks about the subjugation of the poor and the left talks about the stinginess of the right. That's really unhelpful. We need to band together to understand that the safety net is a good thing, but it's helping people without

needing them, which is the central philosophical flaw in the way that we do welfare.

We should not necessarily spend less, in the competition of ideas, that's what we should adjudicate, and no side is axiomatically right. But we must change the philosophical center of how we administer and how we understand welfare in this country. It has to be focused on work, it has to be focused on dignity, has to be focused on communities and on families, and making sure that people can pursue their value to the context of the traditional family values and the sanctity of work that brings dignity to every individual. And until we do that, we're simply not going to make the kind of moral progress that was promised by Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

Tavia Gilbert: So what's the solution? How do we create opportunities for more people?

Arthur Brooks: There are a number of things that we need to do, as a practical matter. The first is that welfare should require work. Not because it's efficient or that we want to punish people with work—it's a very interesting thing that I see is the one that right and left often agree on is that work is a punishment. So I'll hear liberals saying, "Don't punish people by making them take these low-wage jobs." And conservatives will say, "We're going to make them work for their welfare," as if it were some sort of terrible punishment. That's them agreeing that work was a punishment, it's not. Work is a blessing. And in finding, administering the welfare system that expects work in return for support from the state, support from fellow citizens, is a just thing to do and indeed it's a humane thing to do for people. That's first.

The second thing that we need to do is to remember that economic growth creates opportunity. It's a problem in this country that we have an economic system where growth is always slowing, never rising. It's been decade after decade that we have in general lower rates of economic growth. Economic growth is one of the great reasons that we went from a country that was largely working class and lower-middle class to one that is much more prosperous.

It wasn't anything having to do with the welfare system, it was everything having to do with entrepreneurship and opportunity and initiative and especially economic growth, that it was the rising tide that indeed has lifted all boats. So we need more of that, we need more policies that bring business to the United States, that create incentives to start organizations that create economic value, and that indeed create jobs and opportunity for people at the periphery of our society.

And the last thing that we need to do—and this is the most important—is to create more human capital so that people are more productive and are more necessary to the economy. You can't fake that. You can't fake whether people are needed by corporations by subsidizing wages. They'll be needed, or they won't be. They'll create value in the workplace, or they won't. And the main thing that's holding people back in the bottom quarter of the income distribution, is a lack of human capital, it's a lack of skills. And the reason that we have a lack of skills is because we have an entirely inadequate education system to meet modern America.

It's interesting that people will say, "Well, then we need to push more people into college." That's nonsense, too. The college for all mentality has held back poor people in this country, because it's actually not gotten people ready for the skills that are largely unfilled in this country. There are somewhere between five and ten million unfilled jobs. Most of them are jobs that require blue collar skills. The problem that we have, in virtually every community in America today, is that we don't have enough people with vocational and technical skills to fill these jobs.

If you live in a major city, try to get gutters put on your house. You'll wait six weeks, because nobody knows how to do these things. If you're in a construction site, you have an actual incentive to hire illegal immigrant labor, because very frequently, illegal immigrants in this country have blue collar skills that Americans don't have. We need more vocational and technical education, we need more apprenticeships, we need more shop class. Most importantly, we need a culture that says that real skills, particularly beyond high school, are what people need, such that they can lift themselves up

to earn their success, to earn their chunk of the American dream, without being on the dole, where, as Lyndon Johnson reminded us, there just isn't enough dignity.

Tavia Gilbert: Is this truly a mission that can be accomplished? What would it actually take?

Arthur Brooks: This is absolutely a mission that can be accomplished. Look, there's nothing that the United States has failed to be able to do so far with respect to American opportunity. We just have to set our minds as a national project to this, and this is a great opportunity at the moment. We have both political parties that are more populist, and that almost seems like a threat or it seems like something we need to eradicate, but that's not right. Populism is always an opportunity, which has turned the American attention to people at the margins.

Now, you can use it as a sort of a ghastly metastasis of American democracy, where whatever the average voter thinks becomes right, and where leadership is abdicated to common opinion, but that's not necessarily what has to happen. When people are focused on the dignity and the plight of people who are mostly at the margins, people who have been left behind, that sort of populist sentiment can and should be turned toward making sure that we have greater opportunity.

Now, we're going to have a competition of ideas on this. People on the left are going to talk about more income distribution and more taxation of wealth. I understand that. And people on the right are going to talk more about work and more about growth and more about business creation, but that's exactly the kind of competition of ideas that we need, is to say what are we trying to do to create more reliable opportunity for the people who are being left behind? And when we turn our national attention to that, with unifying leaders, that want to find common solutions, I think we can solve the problem.

Tava Gilbert: Is it possible that we must accept some amount of poverty simply as the cost of doing business as we know it?

Arthur Brooks:

I think that defeatism is unwarranted, and the reason I think that, simply thinking of 15, more like 25% of the population is the cost of doing business, is ignoring a tremendous resource. What we need to do is to shift our thinking away from trying to help the bottom 25% toward saying, that bottom 25% needs to help us. That's real American thinking.

See, what entrepreneurs do is they go into a community, and they look at what everybody else is saying is a shame, is a tragedy, is a need that's being unmet, and they go, "Haha, big opportunity!" You know, an entrepreneur goes into a community and people say there's no good bars and restaurants around here. The entrepreneur says, opportunity. Or a social entrepreneur, hears people complaining about crime and drugs in a neighborhood, and they say, that's an opportunity to do good. Well, social entrepreneurs, political entrepreneurs, should look at the fact that we're all talking about the fact that we're kind of pulling 25 percent of the American population in the back of the cart, as this huge opportunity to save our country.

People that are being pulled in the back of the cart, they don't want to be pulled in the cart. Everybody wants to earn their way. I realize that some people will make suboptimal decisions, some people will be in cultural circumstances that seem really, really dysfunctional. But I've met a lot of different people. I've met people who are rich and people who are poor, I've met people in all different parts of the country, people who don't speak English, from people who are immigrants, people who have been three generations living in public housing. I've never met anybody who says you know, being poor and dependent is just awesome. I just love it.

Why? Because we all want a sense of our dignity, and dignity comes from working, from being generative, from being creative, that's where it comes from. Again, when you don't see those opportunities, you will take the dole. I get it. If I didn't see opportunities and my family were hungry, I'd take the dole too. So, when we see the fact that Americans of all different stripes, of all different circumstances, they really do want to earn their success,

then an entrepreneurial population with entrepreneurial visionary unifying leaders will say, that's not a tragedy, that's not a cost of doing business, that's the biggest opportunity that's come along in American history. And in point of fact, I think that if we stimulate that, it can be the source of American growth and make this the new American century.

Tavia Gilbert:

Why are the concepts of meaning, purpose, and dignity so important in understanding one's work or one's life?

Arthur Brooks:

There's a lot of social-psychological research on how work affects people. You find that one of the biggest predictors, especially among men, of suicide is unemployment. You find that depression virtually always follows people losing jobs. It's grim to not be needed in the workforce. And work is a source of dignity for people as such. It doesn't just avoid bad things, it brings good things.

There's nothing more satisfying to people's lives than being needed. You just have to remember, when you're a parent and you've got teenage kids that, you're at wits end, but man, they need you. And that's the source of meaning in your life. The same thing is true in democratic capitalist economy, where people actually need you to do your job, and you want to do a job well. That's the nature of men and women, whether it's in the market or whether it's in the family.

So that being said, you have to ask why is that? Because our purpose in life is actually to be needed by others, to create value in the lives of other people. We are other-serving creatures at our core. Our soul needs to actually serve others. You know, these existentialist philosophical viewpoints that man is inherently selfish? People are selfish, people behave selfishly a lot, but that's, I don't think that's our nature. Our nature is to serve by creating value. And that's where we get our sense of pride, that's where we get our sense of meaning, that's how we know who we are.

You know, people always define themselves with respect to what they're doing. I suppose I wish people could say something that's a little bit more philosophically robust, or something really spiritual

when they say that. But, you know, people say, you know, what do you do? And you say, "Well, I walk around all day long being a child of God." That would be great. But what you always say is something about what you do in your job, because that's the sense of meaning and pride in your life. Everybody deserves that. It's crazy that our national objective is not giving that to more people, because in so doing, we would lift them up, and they would lift us up.

Tavia Gilbert: Brooks brings spiritual wisdom into economics, which is an area generally viewed as part of secular, rather than faith-based, culture. Why is he unique in finding harmony between those two areas of focus?

Arthur Brooks: One of the great frustrations that I have as a social scientist, is that social science is generally super secular. It is secular because social scientists define religion as an adaptation to deal with the sort of vicissitudes of day-to-day living. I reject that. I think that people are naturally spiritual, and as such, the expression of spirituality in religion is innate.

That's a really important distinction, that's a worldview that I have, and it's one of the ways I part company with virtually, not all, but a lot of my fellow social scientists. I don't think it's an adaptation. I think it's actually hard-wired, and so I think that we're always looking for the sense of the divine in all the things that we do. I can't tell you any number of conversations I've had with fellow behavioral social scientists, where they'll talk about religion as if it were a really efficacious way to keep poor people from robbing liquor stores. Or something.

And I'll say, I don't need religion keeping me from robbing the liquor store, I need religion because I need to know who I am. You know I find my faith defines me who I am because, I believe I'm a son of God. That God is creative and God is generative, and God made me to be generative and creative. As such, the parallel search for who I am, the understanding of my own soul, that's parallel to how I'm trying to understand the creation itself.

It's interesting that during the 1970's when the Soviet Union, which was an officially atheist government, sent a rocket up into space and one of the things that they came back with, it was sort of big news, was that they looked for evidence of God and didn't find it, and this was more evidence that God doesn't exist.

So what's the problem with that? The problem with that, besides being sort of insulting and ridiculous on its face, is that's basically the idea of looking at a painting by Picasso, and saying, "I didn't find Picasso in there, so therefore he doesn't exist." What we need to understand in our lives is there's a parallel structure between the painter and the painting. And that we have an opportunity, not just an obligation, we have an adventure that comes along in trying to understand both.

That's the beauty, in my view, of looking at the creation and understanding it in the context of the benevolence of the creator at the same time. For me, we simply can't separate the idea of the spiritual and the non-spiritual, the physical and the non-physical, the instrumental and the innate.

Tavia Gilbert:

Where does Brooks' sense of spirituality come from?

Arthur Brooks:

I grew up in a Christian home, although I had my own path, like everybody does. One of the important things for people of faith is always that they have to understand their faith journey in the context of their own deep thinking. As a Catholic, I-- most Catholics spend time in mental prayer, which the Buddhists call analytical meditation.

Basically that's just spending time trying to figure things out, trying to understand who you are, trying to understand the nature of things, and that's ultimately what leads to the deepest spirituality per se. Most non-religious people don't understand this, they think that religion and spirituality are a feeling, and if you don't have that feeling you can't take the action.

Religious people understand that that's wrong. That in point of fact, it's really all about not how you feel, but what you do. You've made

a conscious decision that this is what you believe to be right, and that your feelings about it are going to vary across the days and across the hours. But you still engage in the action, perhaps the attitude follows, perhaps it doesn't. And just because I don't feel something in my physical environment doesn't mean I don't act on it if I believe it's real, and it's the same thing that comes from this point of view.

In other words, what I'm saying is, I probably have some innate spirituality, but it's developed over the course of my life because I think it's right, and I think it's good, and frankly, it's who I want to be.

Tavia Gilbert: How does Brooks connect that spirituality to an understanding of poverty?

Arthur Brooks: Like most Christians, I consider myself to be guided by the 25th chapter of Matthew. The 25th chapter of Matthew has two distinct parts to it that inform the way I see the world. The first is in the 14th verse where it's the parable of the talents, where there's a moral of good to using what God has given you, and it's deeply immoral, it's wrong to squander the resources that God puts at your disposal, and some people have more resources than others. And therefore, those who have more resources are expected to do more with those, that's an important insight, to spiritual people who also believe in free enterprise, actually.

The 40th verse is what we quote even more, of the 25th chapter of Matthew, which is, "As you did for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did for me." And what Jesus Christ is saying in this chapter, is not you should go help poor people. It's good to help poor people, but really what he was talking about was the cosmic unity of all people to each other and all people to God. As you did for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did for me.

He's saying the poor? They're me. The poor? They're you. That cosmic unity is incredibly important for understanding that it's not just alleviation of poverty because poverty is uncomfortable, alleviation of poverty because we can, because we're rich. But because they are us. And all we're doing is that we're being one

with each other. That's a much more profound understanding of what poverty is and how we should act toward it.

Tavia Gilbert: For nearly a decade, Brooks has been in relationship with the Dalai Lama, with whom he has met regularly in pursuit of deeper wisdom about that cosmic unity.

Arthur Brooks: In February of 2018, I spent some real quality time in Dharamsala with His Holiness, and one of the questions that I had this time was this concept of emptiness. So, for Buddhists emptiness sounds sort of nihilistic, it's the illusion of my autonomous existence. And the reason I was thinking about this is because I read an interesting book that looked at Buddhist thinking about death, that death is an illusion, and the reason is because autonomous individual existence is an illusion.

And that's the doctrine of emptiness, and I wanted to understand it better. So I was talking to some Buddhist monks about this, and they said, "Think of a stand of aspen trees." So when you look at a bunch of aspen trees you think it's a bunch of trees. It's not, it's one organism. The largest living organism in the world is the aspen plant. So you go to Aspen, Colorado, it's one tree. That each one looks like an autonomous individual, but they actually don't exist autonomously in the absence of the others.

That's the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, which is very close to the idea of the unity of all life and all individuals under Christianity. It's that I exist, you exist, and indeed we have a consciousness of our individual existence, but we don't exist autonomously of each other in a very real, moral way. That's very important for us to understand. You know, all of the mysteries of the east, when we talk about what is the sound of one hand clapping? Well, the answer is it's an illusion. If you actually hear the sound of one hand clapping, you're fooling yourself. The answer is, it's an illusion.

In the same way, the idea that I am different than the poor, it's an illusion; that I am different from God, it's an illusion. And understanding that helps us to get the adventure that comes from living together, supporting each other, and then downstream, it's all

so prosaic, it sounds so materialistic, to deal with something like the free enterprise system, no, you get to instantiate that, that's the adventure of living in communion with one another.

Tavia Gilbert: Why the Dalai Lama?

Arthur Brooks: For years I've thought that the Dalai Lama is somebody that would create an interesting conversation with my colleagues at the American Enterprise Institute. Why? Because he talks about the morality of economic systems quite a lot, and so in the spirit of a competition of ideas, I wanted to meet the single most respected religious leader in the world and understand his views about, spiritually, how we should understand free enterprise. Even if he disagrees.

That was the basis of our original conversation, I went to Dharamsala to meet him for the first time and ask him to come to Washington where I would interview him, and I interviewed him several times. And a very beautiful friendship formed, in a way that has led to all of these strange and important moments in my life.

And I'll give you an example. One time I was interviewing him in Georgia for a couple of days. It was a wonderful meeting and it was really meaningful and the audience that heard it was moved by it. And he was leaving early in the morning the next day after our event, at six o'clock in the morning. And he was giving me a blessing. And we had worked together several times and he said you know, you're my friend and I want to give you something, but I don't own anything. And I said oh, your Holiness, you know, you don't have to... He says, no, no, no. And he starts rooting around in his little satchel that he has, his little orange satchel, and he pulls out a ball point pen. And he gives me a ballpoint pen. And I'm holding it like the holy grail, you know.

And then he left and I thought, what am I going to do with my Dalai Lama ballpoint pen? And so I put it in my briefcase, and I carried it around for a year. And I didn't ever use it. So a year passes, and I'm with a Catholic bishop who's a really good friend of mine, and we're having a conversation over lunch, we're eating these sandwiches at

a sandwich shop. And we have paper napkins. And I said something and this bishop says, oh, I want to write that down, do you have a pen? And I looked in my briefcase and there's my Dalai Lama pen shining out at me.

And so I pull out my Dalai Lama pen and I, it's kind of prideful, so I'm kind of ashamed of this, but I said, well you know, the Dalai Lama gave me that pen, and the bishop says, oh, I love him. He's really influenced the way that I do my apostolic work. And, and at that moment I could hear the Dalai Lama in my ear saying, you know what to do. So, and I said to the bishop, Bishop, would you please take that pen, I'd like you to have it. He said, no, I couldn't. I said, trust me, I have to.

And I realized in that moment, and this is this sort of Dalai Lama magic moment, that the gift wasn't truly in the giving, and I expanded the generosity and the experience and the beauty of that giving when I gave it away again. So, last month I saw the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, and I told him the story. And I said you just blessed me, you blessed me so much. And he gave me another pen. [laughs]

Tavia Gilbert: What do Brooks see as the promise for spiritual progress in the US – from DC to New York City to Silicon Valley?

Arthur Brooks: Just as I believe economic progress is possible, I believe spiritual progress is possible. I'm a progressive. Maybe not politically in the sense that we use it today, but that doesn't matter. I think progress is possible. And spiritual progress, especially so. Why? Because people are searching. And when people are searching, they're vulnerable, when they're vulnerable, they're open to ideas. And we need to serve that openness.

We need to be better spiritual entrepreneurs, because there's a lot of demand out there. Is it conventional demand? No. Are they basically going to churches and synagogues and mosques and saying show me the light!? No. But there's openness, because people realize – to go back to the metaphor of Picasso and the artist in the painting, they've been staring at the painting and staring

at the painting and staring at the painting saying, I can't find Picasso.

That frustration that comes from that, means that they need to understand and hear more about the painter. That's a huge moment of opportunity, you know, the engineering solutions to a better life, the tech that's going to lead us all to nirvana, it ultimately leads to frustration—not because it's bad, it's wonderful. But because it can't give us what we seek.

Aquinas in the *Summa*, the key insight that sums up a lot of how Thomas Aquinas saw the world, was his doctrine of the four substitutes for God. He believed that there were four things that people pursue instead of God: Money, power, pleasure, and fame. They're a little divine, they're good, and so we think they're God—and by the way they're much easier than actual religion—so we pursue those things, but we're always hungry.

This is basically what's going on in a highly technologized United States which is pursuing dramatic material progress all the time is, we think we're going to get where we need to go but it can't get us where we need to go, and because of that, that hunger, we have an opportunity for spiritual entrepreneurship. Those of us who have spiritual beliefs, and we believe that true progress ultimately is found on the human soul, that's our opportunity, and we have to take it.

Tavia Gilbert:

In this conversation, you've heard Arthur C. Brooks elegantly link all human brothers and sisters together, clarifying how we are all one family. The South African word "ubuntu" articulates this undeniable bond — as Brooks puts it, this "cosmic unity" — between the rich and poor, the privileged and those without. Once we remove the man-made boundary and division between those with abundant opportunity and those with far fewer choices, what is left is an urgent call to action to address what poverty is and how we should act toward it.

“I am one with you” is real. That idea demands a response, and it offers a gift of kinship with every person with whom we share our planet and our human family.

We'll return in our next episode with a deeper exploration of “ubuntu,” an idea that offers a space for connectedness, opportunity, inspiration, and optimism for young people. Our episode will focus on youth radio in South Africa, and here's a preview of what you'll hear in that episode:

Nina Callaghan: Ubuntu, the classic definition still resonates with me, that I am because you are. I am, because of how you affirm or not affirm me, how you reflect or don't reflect me. And Ubuntu is about that practice of humanity. It's about the practice of acknowledging that we are in this together, and that we don't exist without each other. Ubuntu is described as an African philosophy and an African practice. But I think that we can see its resonance in all kinds of communities across the world.

Tavia Gilbert: That was Nina Callaghan, speaking about the value system behind the Children's Radio Foundation. In our full episode, we'll hear more about the foundation, which aims to change lives and communities through radio. We look forward to bringing you the full interview about Ubuntu, along with additional episodes from this most timely and important season of conversations about human flourishing.

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