Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

DARREN WALKER INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON ONE

Darren Walker, President, Ford Foundation
Interviewed by Noah Remnick
Total Running Time: 30 minutes and 48 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

DARREN WALKER:
Hope is the oxygen of democracy. When we have more hope. We will have a better democracy. But in order to generate hope, people have to believe in something.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories
Darren Walker
President, Ford Foundation
Hope And Courage In Action

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NOAH REMNICK:
You made a point of discussing how your early years continue to shape your work today. I'd love to hear how you would describe your childhood. What was your family and community like?

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DARREN WALKER:

I was very, very lucky. I lived as a boy in a country that believed in my potential. I was born in a small town in Louisiana and a charity hospital. My mother fortunately moved my sister and myself to a small town called Ames, Texas had about a thousand people living in that community at the time. We lived on the dirt road and a little shotgun house, and I, on one occasion in 1965, had a life changing experience. We were visited by a woman talking about a new government program that President Johnson was instituting that summer called headstart. So I was very lucky to be in the inaugural class of Head Start in Ames, Texas, in 1965.

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NOAH REMNICK:

Tell me about your parents and what influence they had on you as a boy, and what influence they continue to have on you to this day.

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DARREN WALKER:

Well, I never knew my father, so I can't really opine on him. But I can certainly say, knowing my mother very well over all these years, that she left an indelible mark on my life because she was supportive of me in every way. Although she didn't have the means to always, um, provide for luxury. We were never poor in my mind. Uh, we, uh, always, um, felt like we had what we needed. Uh, so I was lucky. I think when I reflect on my work here at the Ford

Foundation today, and I reflect on my work, what prepared me when I was a 13 year old boy, I got my first job. I was a busboy in a restaurant. And what I learned from that job first is about hierarchy. When you're the busboy, you and the dishwasher are the lowest of people in the organizational hierarchy of a restaurant. And when you are the busboy, your job is to first and foremost be invisible and often to the guests. I was invisible, I wasn't acknowledged, I wasn't necessarily extended any real dignity or recognition for the fact that I was a human being standing in front of someone. And when I think about the problems of the world today and our work at Ford, I think about what it feels like to be invisible, to feel that others don't see your own humanity and others certainly don't extend dignity to you. There are too many people in the world today who feel this way, and our work at Ford is to ensure that as many people as possible in the world experience dignity.

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NOAH REMNICK:
You've discussed before the fact that growing up, several of your cousins ended up entangled in the criminal justice system. Um, tell me about that. How did that shape your understanding of you and the world around you?

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DARREN WALKER:
Well, there's no doubt that as a boy growing up, I, um, had wonderful experiences with my cousins. I recall playing in open yards with them. I recall just doing the things that young boys and girls do with their cousins and

siblings. But I also remember the divergence in our journeys. Um, because I didn't live in the towns where they lived in Louisiana. Um, and I had a very, um, engaged mother. My life. Um, I saw what happened in their communities. I saw, um, being swept up in a system, um, a system that, um, had low expectations for them. A system that provided very, uh, weak, um, educational opportunities and very little, if any, economic opportunity. So there's no, um, avoiding the fact that by the time I was a young adult, my journey and the journey of so many of my cousins, for example, diverged significantly. I was in college and many of them were in prison. And that is very painful because. Um, they were as talented as I. They. I think with the right support. Could have also been in college and not in prison. I think one of the things you learn as a child, when you experience trauma is you begin to master. Compartmentalization. Compartmentalizing is a critical ingredient to success if one is to stay focused and. Clear in your aspirations, your ambitions, and your goals in life. Um, and I absolutely, uh, learned that as a young child. And it's something for good and bad that as an adult, I realized, uh, I know a lot about you.

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NOAH REMNICK:
You experience fear as a child. And what role has fear played throughout your life?

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DARREN WALKER:

I never experienced fear. There was no doubt. There were times I experienced physical fear, for sure. Uh, but, uh, I was always, um. Clear that I wanted to to do better. Uh, I was motivated more by a desire to please than I was by fear, if I'm to be honest. Um, the, um. One of the things that you learn as a child is, um, when you do something, um, good or that is perceived as a positive, it pleases your parents. When you did well in school. You. Please, uh, I please my mom when she go to the beauty parlor and someone would say, I saw Darren and he won this award, or this very positive thing happened while she glowed with pride. So I think I was more, um, motivated by by that than I was a fear of of anything.

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NOAH REMNICK:
Was there an event in your early life that required you to show courage? And what role as Courageousness continue to play in your life today?

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DARREN WALKER:
Well, there's no doubt that courage is in short supply today, and that's in part because courageous leadership is not always rewarded. Indeed, many of our leaders are discouraged from being courageous because the consequences of courageous leadership can be ending of a career, can be public scorn or ridicule, loss of status, loss of job. Um, and so to be courageous today requires, uh, a sense of, uh, self-awareness, um, and purpose, uh, and a willingness to live with the consequences. As a child growing up, there were absolutely

times when I felt it was important to be courageous, to take a side, um, to, um, do something that, um, would not necessarily be popular with, uh, either side. Or I can think about times when, um, it was important to build bridges, to build bridges between the white students in my high school and the black students in my high school, who at times were at odds. I always felt that my role was to be a bridge builder, was to not benefit from the division in our school. Uh, but to see the possibility that could come from our coming together. And and for me, I think about today, um, leaders who are dis incented from doing that, who are indeed incented and encouraged and rewarded for dividing us, rewarded for not building bridges, but building walls. And I don't see that as courageous. I see that as, um, the easy way out. I don't see that as courageous leadership. I mean, I just think we need more of it.

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NOAH REMNICK:
You grew up without a whole lot materially, but one thing that seems to have really profoundly changed the circumstances of your life was the support of good old fashioned government programs. How did benefiting from those programs inform you? And how did we get to a place where that vision of America seems so distant?

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DARREN WALKER:

Well, I was very lucky to grow up in a country that believed in me, and the way a country commits itself to its people, in part, is committing itself to the potential of the human capital in its society, especially that human capital that has historically not been able to be fully realize the potential to be fully realized. And so the Head Start program, public schools, the Pell Grant, um, private scholarships, all of these investments. Made it possible for me to get on the mobility escalator and ride it as far as my talent and my ambition could take me, and that is something I wish for every American. Unfortunately, too many people in this country believe that government is not serving their needs. That may be true, but it is also true that there has been an effort to discredit the idea of government. So we have to take that on. We have to acknowledge the threat posed by those who would seek to destroy. The institutions that our democracy relies on. And that is why investing in hope is so important. Hope is the oxygen of democracy. When we have more hope, we will have a better democracy. But in order to generate hope, people have to believe in something. Part of what they have to believe in in a democracy. Is in their actual government. And I think what we are saying today in America is a contestation of the idea of government. My hope is that democracy wins.

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NOAH REMNICK:
So after law school, you moved to New York City, where you dabble in law and finance, and you've said that no small reason you took those jobs was financial security. When did you realize that you wanted something more out

of your professional life, that you wanted to make not only a dollar, but a difference?

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DARREN WALKER:
I always knew that my life's journey would not be in the for profit world for me. I was aware from the beginning that my time on Wall Street had an expiration date that I would not be happy simply waiting for the bonus each year and piling up money. And so for that reason, I was always engaged outside of work and in the community. It's how I first became involved in Harlem, because I volunteered at the Children's Storefront School up on 129th Street while I was working as a banker at UBS. And ultimately, the pull of Harlem, uh, the chance to do work that was really meaningful to me, um, became, um, compelling. Um, and I, after a few years, made the jump, and I never looked back. I've never been happier. I certainly never regretted leaving Wall Street.

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NOAH REMNICK:
So fast forward to 2013 and you're named the president of Ford. Was that daunting? Thrilling. How did you begin to settle into that role and set your priorities?

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DARREN WALKER:

Well, it was a huge, um, thrilling moment for me. In some ways, it was like coming home. So many of the investments that were made in me, the Pell Grant, um, headstart or programs of the Ford Foundation. They were pilot programs of the Ford Foundation in the 1960s. Um, I worked for a community development corporation, which was also a creation of the Ford Foundation. And so when I came to Ford, in some ways it felt like coming home. This institution is a remarkable place with unparalleled heritage in the area of social change, social progress and human achievement. To have the privilege of serving this institution was something I could never have imagined. And so I, I was humbled, and every day I am humbled and challenged to rise to the opportunity and the expectation of service.

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NOAH REMNICK:
Since becoming president of the Ford Foundation, you've been tackling inequality. I'm wondering how you define inequality and how you came to see it as the defining social problem of our time.

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DARREN WALKER:
Well, inequality is the defining social problem of our time because inequality is harmful to hope. Inequality makes hope, makes opportunity less a reality. And with inequality comes hopelessness, a growing sense of a lack of opportunity, which leads in a democracy to behaviors by the citizenry that are ultimately harmful to that very democracy. What goes through my mind

leading the Ford Foundation is my accountability and responsibility to the mission, to the demands of our time, to being effective and relevant and having impact ultimately. And what are the pathways to impact? How does one think about strengthening democracy? Sitting here at the Ford Foundation.

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NOAH REMNICK:
What have been some of the toughest choices you've had to make at Ford? And on the flip side, what have been some of your proudest moments?

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DARREN WALKER:
I think some of the most difficult choices are the programs that you did decide to wind down. I mean, there were things that the Ford Foundation supported for many years that we started to wind down our work in K-through-12 public education is probably the most prominent example. Ford for decades had been a leader in funding um K through 12 education reform in America. But over time, our investments and our impact became limited, and we took the time in 2013 to review our work and those investments and came to the determination that we weren't having the kind of impact that we desired, and that there were other foundations who had come into the space and were indeed having more impact and investing more. So we made the decision to bring that work to a close. And the question for us was, what are the best and highest uses of our philanthropic dollar for social change? And so we took

some of those funds and invested them in criminal justice reform and addressing issues of misinformation and disinformation in this new digital era, um, where there was very little foundation funding. And yet the impact, the harm that could be done to our democracy and our education systems were real.

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NOAH REMNICK:
You've often returned to the theme of democracy. Why is that so central to your work here at Ford? What is the importance of that?

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DARREN WALKER:
Henry Ford this second, reimagine the Ford Foundation's mission in the 1950s. In part, it was restated to focus on strengthening democracy and democratic practice. Democracy, in my view, is the greatest way a society can be organized. It is the greatest aspiration of a people in the United States. Democracy is even more rare because our aspiration is to have a multi-racial, pluralistic democracy. That may not have been the idea of our founding fathers, but they indeed did create the mechanisms, the legal foundations for a multiracial, pluralistic democracy. And I believe that experiment is worth fighting for, but that we cannot take it for granted, that we cannot presume that it will exist merely because we wish it to. We have to invest in democracy and democratic institutions and in ensuring that everyone participates.

Democracy cannot, um, be passed out. Um, it can't be rationed. It must be available for everyone.

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NOAH REMNICK:
You released a book called From Generosity to Justice. What motivated you to write it, and what does it mean to you to move from generosity to justice?

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DARREN WALKER:
I learned about American philanthropy first by reading Andrew Carnegie's seminal essay, his 1889 Gospel of Wealth, in which he outlined the contours of American philanthropy, what men like himself should do with their wealth. He talked about charity, generosity. He talked about, uh, religious reasons. Moral reasons for giving. I was also inspired, many years later by the words of Doctor Martin Luther King, which he wrote in 1968 about philanthropy, about philanthropy. Doctor King in 1968 said the following. Philanthropy is commendable, but it should not allow the philanthropist to overlook the economic injustice which makes philanthropy necessary. So what Doctor King was saying was something in contrast to Carnegie's words. He was saying that, yes, generosity and charity are important and necessary, but not enough. Doctor King said that the work of philanthropy must be about dignity and justice, not just charity and generosity.

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NOAH REMNICK:
But I'd be remiss not to ask you about David. Tell me a little bit about him and your relationship and how he shaped your life.

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DARREN WALKER:
Well, um, David Bytes, old, came into my life, uh, almost 30 years ago. He was a remarkable man from a very different background, very different personality, but a person of remarkable integrity and character. He taught me about everything I know in the arts, especially, um, the visual arts. Um, David taught me, um, what love looks like. I didn't really know what love looked like or felt like until I met David Batesville and his, um, death, um, was sudden, and, um. I, um, every day miss him. And, um, the grief that I feel, I know is a function of the love I had for him. And, um, I'm lucky, though, because David Beitel gave me enough love to last a lifetime. And when you're lucky enough to have that happen to you, you live every day with gratitude.

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NOAH REMNICK:
The tragedy of his death was so senseless and unexpected. How did you push forward after that?

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DARREN WALKER:

The good news is, when you, um. Are healing from that kind of profound loss. There are things that make it possible to heal. And for me, I had the full checklist of those things. First family. David's family and I, um, were and are very close. Um, second is the state of your relationship with him when he died? I was very lucky because David loved me so much, literally until his last breath. And I felt that, um, I was lucky because I had friends, and I was lucky because I had a fantastic, meaningful career. Not just a career, but a calling. And so the healing process for me, um, has been, all things considered, relatively easy because I didn't have a lot of the demons and things that are suppressed and that, uh, leave you wishing you had, uh, done something different. Um, I know David knew how much I loved him, and I felt that from him. And so I don't have any regrets, which is another way that allows for healing. Um, and so, uh, while, um, I know that, um, my life will never be the same because it won't. And it hasn't been since he died. Um, I also know that I am incredibly lucky, incredibly fortunate and blessed. And I feel that every day.

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NOAH REMNICK:
You've obviously gained a great deal of wisdom over your lifetime. Is there one lesson or observation that you've learned above all others? Um.

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DARREN WALKER:

I think the lesson for me is something that I was taught about, um, being gracious and generous. I was told this at a very young age, and it's been something that has stayed with me as a guiding principle, a North star for my own comportment and for the moments when, um, I. Find myself feeling angry or selfish or egotistical or self-centered or indifferent. I'm reminded that people who live with those qualities are not happy people, and I. I know because it's so true. Grace and generosity are critical to happiness in life. I find that I am happier when I extend grace and generosity to others, and when I don't let the negative things crowd that out. Um, and it's so easy today to let those negative thoughts crowd out the goodness. Uh. The light. It's so easy during these dark times to let the darkness overtake your psyche, your emotions.

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NOAH REMNICK:
So you're 62 years old now. Does time seem to be passing by quickly for you?

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DARREN WALKER:
Well, no one wants to get older. Let's be clear. None of us wants to get older. I think the question is, can we? As we get older, embrace, uh, the pleasures, the privilege of getting older, but recognizing that, uh, our time is running out and therefore asking ourselves, what am I doing with the time I have left? What am I doing with the privilege that I've accreted over these years? Uh, what am I doing with the influence, the money, the access to power and networks?

What am I doing to leverage that? To help others? So for me, one of the privileges of being 62, being the president of the Ford Foundation, is that it gives me access, access that I would otherwise not have. My job is to use that access, to use those networks to remind people of what's important, at least what I think is important. What we think here at the Ford Foundation is important, and that is working for a more just, fair and equitable society.

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