



Library podcast

Clifford Thompson and Charles Johnson discuss 'What It Is'

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[00:00:35] Hi, everybody. I'm Stesha Brandon, the Literature and Humanities program manager here at the Seattle Public Library. As we begin this evening, I would like to acknowledge that we're gathered together on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people. We honor their elders past and present, and we thank them for their stewardship of this land. Welcome to Central Library. And thank you all for joining us for tonight's program with Clifford Thompson and Charles Johnson, presented in partnership with Elliott Bay Book Company. We're grateful to the Connie and Gary Kunis Foundation, to Seattle City of Literature and the Seattle Times for their generous support of library programs. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the Seattle Public Library Foundation for their support of library programs and events. Private gifts to the Foundation from thousands of donors help the library provide free programs and services that touch the lives of everyone in our community. Thank you to any Library Foundation donors here with us tonight. Now, I am delighted to introduce tonight's speakers. Clifford Thompson's work has appeared in publications including the Best American Essays 2018, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Threepenny Review and the Village Voice. He's the recipient of a Whiting Award for nonfiction and teaches at New York University, Sarah Lawrence College, and the Bennington Writing Seminars. He'll be speaking tonight with local luminary Charles Johnson about his new book, *What It Is : Race, Family and One Thinking Black Man's Blues*. Dr. Johnson is a novelist, essayist and literary scholar and is professor emeritus at the University of Washington. A MacArthur fellow, his fiction includes *Nighthawks*, *Dr. King's Refrigerator*, *Dreamer*, *Faith and the Good Thing* and *Middle Passage*, for which he won the National Book Award, and, oh, gosh, twenty five years ago now? 1990, yeah, yeah. In 2002, he received the Arts and Letters Award in literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the format tonight will be remarks by Clifford Thompson, then a conversation between Dr. Johnson and Mr. Thompson. And then we'll have time for your questions. So without further ado, please help me welcome Clifford Thompson.

[00:02:51] Thank you. Thank you all for coming. And thanks to the library for hosting this. It's great to appear with Dr. Johnson. I thought what I would do is read the first few pages of the introduction to my book, *What It Is*, and then kind of lay out the way the rest of the book is set up.

[00:03:13] So, and I put on my old man specs so I can see. Alright, so this is from the introduction.

[00:03:26] I am a black man, Brooklyn-based, 54 years old as I write this. For nearly as long as I can remember, there has been at the core of my being, making me who I am or who I feel that I am, the belief that I must treat everyone as an individual, that I must not base my judgments on anything as inconsequential as skin color. And for most of my adult life, I have chosen to see myself as an American because of the contributions black people have made to this country, because of how inextricably this country is tied to my heritage, and despite white racist beliefs that this country is theirs more than it is mine. Living according to these principles has sometimes been tough. In my late teens and 20s, moving from the all black environment where I grew up to integrated circles in college and beyond, I sometimes felt like the only black person I knew who was not reluctant because of distrust, dislike or both to be in the predominantly white settings where my interests often took me. I clung stubbornly to my beliefs, and in my mid-twenties I found what I considered to be support for my point of view when I picked up, somewhat belatedly, the books of James Baldwin. Leaving aside for the moment the music of Baldwin's sentences, the grandness of his vision, the wisdom and lyricism he brings to expressing the anger and ache of being black in America,

[00:04:41] He was the first model I found of one who brought everything he had to bear on opposing racism without being racist himself. His fiction, particularly the underappreciated *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, and his non-fiction, none more eloquent than *The Fire Next Time*, are the work of a man who rages at injustice but loves deeply and without regard to pigmentation. While the assassinations of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., along with other aspects of the backlash against the civil rights movement, left Baldwin embittered and disillusioned, they did not ultimately compromise his humanity or make him into a racist. He remained, for me, a model of how to conduct oneself with regard to race. And yet I still felt some confusion. There was one substance of difference between me and the white people in my circle. Being white, I discovered, seemed to make one exempt from the question of who one is. They were Americans, these white people. And it never seemed to occur to them, and certainly no one ever indicated to them that they should think otherwise. Many black people, of course, are exempt from this question of who they are too, by virtue of living and working largely or wholly among other blacks. But if a person's life and interests take him, as mine have taken me, to places where he looks different from most others, that person may begin to ask where the similarities between himself and these others end, and the differences beyond the obvious one begin.

[00:06:00] What the basis for these similarities is, and what the basis for the differences is, and into which camp, similarity or difference, nationality falls. And with regards to the very question of whether nationality constitutes a bond or barrier between oneself and others, the basis of this question is an unspoken assumption that runs so deep, that is reinforced so often and in so many ways that I pass three decades of life on Earth before I questioned it. The assumption that being American means being white. At best, the place of blacks in all this seems to be the one described by the comedian Chris Rock, who said that for us, America is like the uncle who molested you and then paid for your college education. As much as I would like to say that I began to question that assumption on my own, I had help. It was the work of the essayist Stanley Crouch, which in turn led me to the work of

his mentor and soon to be mine, Albert Murray, that opened my eyes. Murray's books, beginning with *The Omni-Americans*, proposed an alternate view that America, rather than simply being a white monster that feeds on people of color, and that only the most self-hating of dark skinned folks would identify with, is in fact largely a black creation in terms of everything from culture to physical labor, and that the blood, sweat and investment of generations of blacks makes America our home as much as it is anyone's.

[00:07:18] According to this view, the struggles blacks have historically faced have provided the obstacles over which we demonstrated the ability to triumph. As Murray wrote in *The Omni-Americans*, quote, "The legendary exploits of white U.S. backwoods men, keel boatmen and prairie schooner men become relatively safe when one sets them beside the breathtaking escapes of the fugitive slave beating his way south to Florida, west to the Indians and north to faraway Canada, through swamp and town alike, seeking freedom. Nobody was chasing Daniel Boone," end-quote. To say I am an American then is not an act of capitulation. But the first step toward claiming one's birthright, recognizing the setting of one's ancestors' triumphs and adventures, it is tantamount to saying I am home. The symbol for this idea, the art form that allows me to celebrate this notion of laying claim to a home birthright and identity is jazz. The basis of jazz, a black contribution to American and world culture, is improvisation.

[00:08:14] A metaphor for the story of black Americans who have historically had to make a way where none existed before. A way that brought about both the Underground Railroad and the civil rights movement. Every time a jazz musician improvises a passage, he or she celebrates this history. I embrace the sound and what it stood for, the fleet footed sweetness of the alto saxophone as Julian Cannonball Adderley, the crusty vulnerability of Ben Webster's tenor sax, the spare melancholy of Miles Davis' trumpet, the sheer might of the original tenor man, Coleman Hawkins, the beautiful eccentricity of Thelonious Monk's piano, the deceptive laziness of Billie Holiday's voice, the doggedness and inventiveness of the young Freddie Hubbard as he played trumpet lines over and through the thundering drumbeats of Art Blakey, the doggedness and inventiveness necessary for survival for any jazz musician, any black person, anyone at all. And so in my early thirties, a youngish man and new father to a bi-racial child, a budding essayist who earned his living as an editor and copy editor, a seeker after cultural knowledge with Murray in my head and Baldwin in my heart, I set out into the big bad world reading book after book while strap hanging on my way to and from work, listening at night to those jazz records that were the record of my people's contribution, believing all the while in the rightness of calling myself an American.

[00:09:31] As years and then two decades passed, along the way the first black president was elected, which appeared to confirm what I had already decided. Along the way, events may have shifted at the outside of my beliefs. Killings of blacks from Trayvon Martin on through Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice and so many others may have led me to question whether I really wanted to call home a place where the police were seemingly paid to kill people who look like me. And yet neither Baldwin nor Murray had ever said that I wouldn't have to fight to protect my place in this land I called home. With many others, I took to the streets over those killings and believed I was doing so in service of my country. Perhaps some black and white wondered how I could be so even keeled. And

perhaps some, white as well as black, wanted me to be angrier. Some whites in particular appear to think I should act through my anger as their conscience. The problem was that I already had a job. I did not have time to be anyone's conscience. And there was a word for one who does others' work for no pay. And I'm not thinking of intern. And so my beliefs at bottom held steady.

[00:10:35] And then came the election of Donald Trump. So I'll stop reading there and just say that, so that the 2016 election kind of challenged the sort of foundational beliefs that I've just read to you about. And so the question for me became how to proceed in the face of this, in the face of this reality, because especially after it came out that the majority of white voters supported Trump, even though he had received the endorsement of the Ku Klux Klan and had run a campaign that was, that was just founded on divisiveness and xenophobia. So that became sort of the question that led to the writing of this book. And in search of the answers, I decided it would be, what I needed to do was, was kind of go beyond my little New York bubble and and talk to folks who thought differently from me. So I went to different parts of the country. I talked to a small but but highly varied group of people and conducted in-depth interviews with people, including people who voted for Trump, as well as I talked to a social worker, I talked to, you know, other people. And so the, so the book has five chapters. The first two chapters kind of trace my path from youth to middle age and and trace the development of my thinking. Chapters three and four encompass the interviews and my responses to the interviews. And the fifth chapter is a kind of a reflection on the whole. So that's how I would describe the book. And now I think we talk. Right?

[00:12:21] Testing. OK.

[00:12:25] Oh, it's an honor for me to sit here and talk to this gentleman. We have corresponded over the years, but we never met, I don't think, face to face until tonight. I have admired his work from afar, not just the, not the essays and nonfiction, but also his paintings, too. And one of Cliff's paintings precedes every one of the sections of this book. We have friends in common. The writer novelist Mark Sarvis was one of your students. And poet Ethelbert Miller in Washington, D.C., an arts activist, has interviewed you twice, he told me, on his radio program. So this is a pleasure for me because this is one of the best writers in America. And the subtitle of this book, *One Thinking Black Man's Blues*, he thinks, okay. This man thinks, he thinks hard, he thinks critically. There is no cliches, no bullshit. You know, there's no assumptions in his thought. This is somebody who wants to know the truth, even if it's painful. And you, you even commit yourself in terms of some of your own assumptions and, you know, self-congratulatory actions, when you talk about your transgender students and how, you know, you talk about, well, you know, am I really as good as I think I am? So, so reading this book, which I finished about 5:00 this morning, was a great pleasure. Cliff just explained basically what it's about. He and I grew up much the same way. I've always seen myself as an individual. And the only way I will approach anybody in this life is as an individual. Okay. I came over here in a Lyft and the driver said to me, where are you going? I said the library, he said Why? I said, well, there's a guy there, Clifford Thompson, I gotta talk to. And I showed him your book. He was from Brazil. He's been in this country 21 years, he told me. He got really excited. A lot of stuff he wanted to talk to me about, about his 21 years here in America and why he thought we have the divisive, the divisiveness that we do.

[00:14:33] So this book is of the moment. It is important at this moment, which I think is a critical moment in the history of this country. What happens right now, today, tomorrow? Next, two to three years, I think will determine the situation of black America for the rest of this century. That's my fear. So, you and I both believe in individuals. We believe we're Americans. I think our story in America is a story of heroism. That's what I think.

[00:15:05] I think it's about overcoming odds that were put in the way of my ancestors, my grandparents. And we were heroic in the way that we not only overcame them, but did what was necessary to liberate other non-white people in this country during the civil rights movement.

[00:15:20] So, you know, we have a reason to be proud. But that was the civil rights movement was half a century ago. So the question now, it seems to me is, Can you hold on to your belief in the priority of individualism?

[00:15:38] And being.

[00:15:41] Being happy to be an American. The guy who drove me over here from Brazil? He wasn't happy. He says other people who're coming here right now to America? They don't like America.

[00:15:52] Yeah, I don't blame them.

[00:15:55] Yeah, me that, that question can, can we continue to, to hold on to our beliefs and, and being individuals and evaluating people as individuals and and embracing America is very much the question I set out to answer for myself.

[00:16:14] And.

[00:16:16] I mean the, the answer, my, my answer is a qualified yes. I guess I would say, yeah, um.

[00:16:24] Yeah, um.

[00:16:26] It seems to me that not just, not just in America in 2019, but it, but in life generally, you know it, it's, um, as you get older I think that the, you find one of the, one of the challenges of life is to,

[00:16:41] It's almost, it's almost a kind of a game in which the object is to hold on to yourself, you know, and you can come to a point, as I have come to, and I think many of us have come to, at which you find, you find yourself and what you've always believed,

[00:17:02] To, to be challenged and the question then becomes well do I, am I a fool for holding on to these beliefs in the face of this, of, of this newly revealed reality, or is now the crucial time to, you know, the most crucial time to hope, to hold onto those beliefs? And so I felt that it was of course, it is important to hold onto your integrity. But I also wanted the, I wanted to see, I wanted to get a clear

idea of just as much as I could, of what that reality is. And I wanted my ultimate decision to be informed by that reality. And so that is what led to the series of interviews that I

[00:17:50] That I conducted.

[00:17:55] The interviews, there are several people that Cliff talked to who voted for Donald Trump. Bob is one. I think Jack is another. And then there is a black man, the last of the people you talked to and you end the book with this. He has started an African-American gun range.

[00:18:14] And you went to it for the first time, I guess. Talk about, if you would, talk about why do the people who voted for Trump like him? What do they see in him? First, right? Right. What do they see in Trump?

[00:18:36] I think.

[00:18:37] Well, I talk a lot in the book about what I call rootedness. You know, just the idea being that it is very difficult to get through this life without a kind of a basis and a set of beliefs or a community or just something that is larger than you, and I think for

[00:19:00] I would, I would say that a lot of his, of Trump's base is made up of people who are not necessarily racist, at least not necessarily identifying themselves as racist,

[00:19:13] But, but people who are rooted in the certainty that America is a land of fairness, you know, so. And they are resistant to sort of anything that challenges that belief because, because that belief is, is so central to who they are, so that when somebody like Trump comes along, who seems to,

[00:19:41] Yeah, who seems to stand for what they already believe then they will, they will and they will embrace that. And, you know, part of being rooted in that, in that belief in America's fairness is not seeing a lot of what is happening, you know.

[00:19:58] So, so I think, so when, when Trump talks about building a wall and, you know, I think that just, I think that just speaks to a certain, a particular kind of rootedness that, that these people have.

[00:20:17] So they're, they're rooted in a belief in the American dream.

[00:20:22] And everybody you asked,

[00:20:25] You talked to, you asked them what's most important about this country and your experience of this country. And they all said just the same thing. Freedom. They believed that this was a country of the free. And they believe that if you worked hard, pull yourself up by your bootstraps and so forth, then you do well. There wouldn't be any obstacles to your success in America. And they saw people and they did not believe in big government. They want small

government. A lot of very Republican kind of, you know, talking points before Trump. They've been there for a long time, but they believe that if you didn't make it in America, it was your own fault. Right? You had to be the cause. And you even ask yourself throughout the book, is there something black people could have done? Something we could've done to make our situation today better?

[00:21:18] What do you come to rest with, with that, right?

[00:21:21] Right. Yeah. I mean, in saying that I was trying to be as honest as I could about my own feelings.

[00:21:27] And, you know, in past years, just about about the situation of black people in America and,

[00:21:35] And, you know, there was often a kind of a, you know, it I know, of course, about, about racism in and pretty much every area, every area of American life. And yet I wondered if in spite of that, there was, as you say, you know, something, something that we, something that we could be doing that we weren't doing, you know.

[00:21:56] And this, this feeling was not kind of rooted in any sort of data or anything like that. It was, it was, it was more of a feeling based on, you know,

[00:22:06] I don't even, I don't even know what, you know. And the thing is, I mean, I think, I think when it comes down to an individual, to the individual level, often there are things that, you know, there are things that some individuals can do that they're not doing, but that's not the main problem.

[00:22:26] You know, that, that's not the main challenge facing us. And I think that's, that's the difference in my attitude now and my attitude in the past. What's the main problem?

[00:22:35] Well.

[00:22:38] And as I said, I you know, just racism and so many, in so many areas, so it's institutionalized racism. You know, there's, there's, there's redlining. There's, there's, there's underfunded schools. There's, there's that what they call the, the school to prison pipeline. You know, just the lack of opportunity.

[00:22:58] You know, I could go on and on. So, so I think that, that is what I would call it.

[00:23:04] You not only interviewed Trump voters. You interviewed a woman who,

[00:23:11] What is her name? She, she is a social worker. Yes, a social worker. Yeah. What was her response to your questions and what did she see as being the necessary solution for the problems that we face?

[00:23:27] Well, her, her big thing was fairness. So she, she's a social worker in the South Bronx and she works with schoolchildren often.

[00:23:35] And what she sees is just the inequity of the way that black and brown children are treated as compared to white children. She said, you know, if, if there's, as she put it, if something horrible happens in a, in a predominantly white school, what do they do, you know?

[00:23:56] You know, if there's, that there's a killing or some some other traumatic event, what do they do? They send in psychologists and social workers and then they, and they try to, you know, work and make sure the children or the students are OK. In black and brown neighborhoods, they send in cops. You know, they have metal detectors. And that's, that's the response.

[00:24:16] You know, it's punishment. Yeah, yeah. Rather than trying to help or provide support.

[00:24:26] So how does she see this? Well, the fairness, but what else? Is there anything else that she points out as being necessary?

[00:24:33] I think, I mean, I think her, I think her big thing was, was fairness. You know, and there's, there's an apparatus in place. It was interesting to me that she, she talked about

[00:24:47] Families are very fearful of being separated from, having their children separated from them, you know, which, which is a, a reality in the communities where she works, you know, so. And so, they, they will go to

[00:25:09] You know, great, great lengths, like it, you know, if they have a child in their family who is who is misbehaving or doing poorly in school

[00:25:17] They will kind of isolate that child, and so that the rest of the family is not, is not split up.

[00:25:25] It's, it's, there's a great, there's a great inequity and some bureaucracy that gets in the way. What struck me about what she said, though, it really left this as a take away for me. She said nobody wants to fail. Nobody wants to fail. Everybody wants to succeed.

[00:25:44] But sometimes people don't know how. And so you have to help. You have to provide them the means by which they can understand how to succeed. So she would be somebody who would feel, I guess this is my assumption, as President Obama did, as Bill Clinton did, that government has a place in the lives of people to help.

[00:26:08] Conversely, the others, the Trump supporters, they want limited government, as little government as possible in people's lives. So you got

[00:26:17] I think you point this out, two conflicting, polarizing visions of what America is and what its potential is. Sometimes you can hit a middle zone, maybe.

[00:26:28] America is not completely indifferent to the plight of people that since, you know, the New Deal, when we first addressed this. So this book is very important for our discussion right now. I'm curious, why did you end, what's this guy's name?

[00:26:53] Philip Smith. Philip Smith? I guess that's his name, with the African-American Gun Association. Yeah. Why do you put that in there?

[00:27:00] Well, in, in trying to talk to a kind of a varied group of people, while I was thinking about that, it came to my attention that there was this organization called the National African-American Gun Association.

[00:27:16] And I thought about that name. And, you know.

[00:27:20] The term African-American has been around for a generation or more, and yet now and we almost don't, you know, we use it, we almost don't kind of hear it, you know. But if he's, I still find this and especially, especially in this era.

[00:27:32] I still find the word African-American to be a very provocative term because of the way that things and people of African origin are, are often just despised and marginalized, thank you. And if, and if you, if you put that, if you put that word African together with American like does that, what are you saying when you use that term?

[00:28:04] You know, are you, is it, is that, is that a, is that a term of defiance? Are you saying that yes, I'm an American of African descent and, and, you know, to deal with that, or is it an act of kind of capitulation, you know, to, to attach the American to, to the African part? You know, I come down on this on the side of it's being, you know, defiant and proud.

[00:28:29] Well I think it's political. So I think African-American as a term was political from the very beginning. It was championed by Jesse Jackson for very political reasons. I don't use it. I use black American. Yeah. And I have a reason for that. I've got a buddy in San Francisco who's a screenwriter, but he works with young black males in the prisons. He is furious whenever he sees the phrase African-American. I don't think it's accurate. I have friends who are African. The chairman of African American Studies, Boston University, Louis Chude-Sokei was my colleague at UW before he took the job at B.U. and he can clearly say I'm African-American because he's from an African country. African hyphen American, okay?. Native born black people that's are different. And you point out, well, there are cultural differences, too. They have, he has a rich cultural history, you know what I'm saying? And so we have one here, too. So I always use the term black American for a very specific reason. But you're right, it has political intent. And you point out what it is, is to bring together the African diaspora in terms of your thinking and who you identify with. You still identify, you can still identify, just like the guy at the end of your book, because he says he talks to people who are African and he feels a connection. Right? Talk about this guy a little bit. Yeah.

[00:29:54] So, yeah. So when I heard that the name National African-American Gun Association, I mean, it's just I've been thinking about the term African-American. And so you throw, you throw guns in there and things become very interesting. You know, we're just, just the notion of self-defense or, you know. And so I wanted, I thought it be very interesting to talk to him at this, at this moment in history, just, just to get his take on, on things that were happening. And somewhat to my surprise, he is actually fairly conservative politically. He, but he, he did not vote for Trump. He voted for Hillary Clinton because he's, you know, he describes himself as as being, as being pro-life, pro-family and and all the rest.

[00:30:38] He could not bring himself to vote for Trump. So.

[00:30:44] He was interesting. I mean, he, he talked, he wanted to talk a lot about guns, actually. Probably I shouldn't have been surprised by that. But I, but I eventually managed to steer the conversation around to the way that, toward his feelings about his being an American, which, which he was very proud to call himself, even though he feels, you know, when he's, talks to people from Africa, he feels, he says he feels like kind of a spiritual connection. But he also very much identifies as an, as an American.

[00:31:14] So I thought that was very interesting. And, you know, he's, but he's very much about the right to, the right to own a gun. And he's a Second Amendment guy. Yeah, he's a Second Amendment guy. And talking to him sort of gave me an idea for kind of the very last image in the book, which is What am I? So we met, I talked to Philip Smith at a gun range. And, um, which kind of planted the seed of wanting to just experience what that was like to be at a gun range to shoot at targets, you know. So I did that and, and that, that sort of provided the last, the last image in the book. If you [unintelligible] at the gun range and kind of, I sort of have a, sort of a I guess you could call it a fantasy about, about being a different kind of person who, who has had a kind of a harder life and who was acquainted, more acquainted with guns and what that individual might, might think about doing in this era. So that.

[00:32:26] I wanted to use that as a kind of a symbol for justified, justifiable black anger, as not, not a call to arms so much as just a symbol of of anger that I feel about what occurred during the 60s or during the civil rights movement, there was a Deacons of Defense, right?

[00:32:45] There's the Deacons of Defense.

[00:32:48] And then during the slavery era in the North, there were black people who were armed who would protect recently freed black people who might be, you know, taken back. So black Americans have always got, we, we have always been into self-defense.

[00:33:08] And, you know, Nation of Islam and Malcolm X and all that kind of emphasize that.

[00:33:14] So why that image at the very end? Do you think we need to arm ourselves?

[00:33:23] Not necessarily.

[00:33:26] I could not, I mean the occasion for writing the book was, was the, just how, how, how badly my, my world was rocked by this election and I could not bring myself to end the book on a completely placid note. And I thought it was, I thought it was necessary to kind of have, have an image that registered how much I felt unsettled and and

[00:33:54] And what a volatile moment we're in. And I, and that is, that's, that's what went into that, that final, that final image in the book.

[00:34:04] It's a very interesting image to, to end the book with. I say that primarily because I think that I'm very saddened by and unhappy by all the violence that I see happening in this country every week, mass shootings and killings in places like, you know, schools and so forth. To me, it is extraordinarily disturbing. You know, let me put it this way for you. I was, I did an event at the University of Michigan, and the writer founder of that program is a guy named Nicholas Delbanco. He founded the MFA program. This is some years ago. He's retired now and we had dinner and I was, you know, talking about something. We're talking about life and politics. And I said, you know, I don't think Americans like each other very much

[00:35:00] Right now. Americans don't like each other? You know, right now, I don't think we like each other. And Nick jumped in because he grew up in the U.K. and he said Americans have never liked each other. That's what he said. And I thought, oh, you know, you're right. OK. So where do we go from here? We, we haven't liked each other from the very beginning of the founding of the republic.

[00:35:25] How do we deal with this? You can't. Nobody can answer that. But hear it, yeah, yeah.

[00:35:33] Well, it's.

[00:35:37] That is a really good question. You know, it's, um

[00:35:41] I like to say I grew up in in the era of, before, before cable TV, when there were three, three news stations and the most popular news anchor was, of course, Walter Cronkite, you know, Uncle Walter. And, you know, this was a time when, even if, you know, even if Americans disagreed about what was happening, they all kind of, you know, even if they disagreed about the news, what was in the news, they got the same news, you know. And now, you know, I pull up my phone and I look at the newsfeed and there are news stories that are like tailored to things that I've Googled, you know. I'm getting my own damn news. OK? And if you're, if you're getting your own news, then, then how do you know what's going on with anybody else? You know, you don't. And the, the people I talked to, the interviews I conducted were part of what I found revealing about them was how little, or rather how often, you know, I would respond to one thing, and that would be very important to me and the person I was talking to didn't know what or who I was talking about and vice versa. Right?

[00:37:07] So, you know, I said, you know, there's, there's Eric Garner, who was, who was, was killed, who was strangled, and his crime was selling cigarettes on the street. And you know, he said I can't breathe, which did not stop the police officer from, from choking him to death. Now, this to me is a symbol of what's, what's wrong in this country. One of the guys I talked to, as I mentioned the name Eric Garner, and he said, well yeah, that's name is familiar, it's coming to me, I can't, yeah, but he couldn't place it. Now for him, his equivalent, equivalent of that was a woman named Lois Lerner, whom I didn't, a name I did not recognize. Now Lois Lerner turns out to be an employee of the IRS who was accused of denying tax exempt status, tax exempt status to conservative organizations. That to him was a symbol of what was wrong in this, in this country. You know, that liberalism had run amuck. And so, you know, so, so we're sitting across the table from each other and we, and we live in the same country. But, you know, we, we may as well live across the world from each other for, for all that we have in common in terms of our responses to what's going on or even to our knowledge of what's going on. So, you know, so when you talk about our liking each other and not liking each other, I don't even know if that, I don't even know, I don't know if that's possible. I don't. But I think maybe what needs to be worked toward is, is some sort of, some sort of commonality in terms of, just values and information. How, how we do that, I do not know.

[00:38:54] The open question for me is do we have shared values anymore?

[00:38:58] Do we have. Well, did we ever. You know, I, I don't know. I mean, as I write in the book, it's, it's, um

[00:39:09] So much of the divide, I think, comes down to just a fundamental difference in attitudes about, about how the country should work, you know, so as you pointed out, when I, when I talked to people and I said, what's, what's the great thing about America? They would say, the first thing I would say is freedom. You know, you're free. And I think for them, the flipside of that is, as I say in the book, you know, it means you don't, you don't have a jailer, but you also don't have a nanny. Right. So for them, because they don't understand the challenges facing people of color, if you talk about things like affirmative action or giving somebody a hand, that to them runs counter to the notion of freedom, which in their definition is all about, you just make it on your own. You know, you're free to be whatever you can be, but you have to do it yourself. You know, so. So any sort of, you know, big government assistance to them just runs counter to, to what they, to what they believe in.

[00:40:07] So there's. I can talk to this gentleman all night long and ask him questions, but I want there to be time for people here to respond and ask questions as well.

[00:40:20] Insofar as those who ask that insipid question, if you're so smart, how come you're not rich? That boils back down to what you just said about people not understanding what people of color endure. That lack of understanding is the problem. The commonality that you seek can only come from education. The problem is freedom. To be ignorant. To be apathetic. To be nihilistic. To be cynical. Case in point. We have the freedom to believe where we came from, what our origins are. As it stands, you've got a swath of the population who believes that the paintings and the stained glass windows that you see in churches are supposedly, supposedly photographs taken by time travelers,

as if time travelers went back in time, found basically a naked version of Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston walking around Central Park, having a conversation about a talking, about a magic apple with a talking snake. All right. So they believe that this is where we came from. So that's millions, well let's see, 60 million out of 300 million voted for Trump. So we're talking about a fifth of the population that ignorant. Now Neil deGrasse Tyson, apprentice of Carl Sagan himself, would say that we evolved from Africa and they can boil that down to about two hundred thousand years ago when the Planet of the Apes looking monkey people lost their body hair and had to sew clothes. Basically, African fashion is the origin of human civilization because they found clothing lice, scientifically like CSI forensics said, you know, they did the science and they found the lice in the clothing that proves that African fashion is the beginning of civilization. What you have to do is, you have to mandate this knowledge. You have to accept that this is objective reality, not subjective, not a difference of opinion, a scientific fact. They can't even accept that climate change is a reality. And now we're going to have the challenge of trying to convince the 60 million out of 300 million that voted for that monster that we all evolved from Africa. The commonality, is that we're all human. A shared value is Bernie Sanders' economic bill of rights.

[00:42:40] Question? Hi there. Thanks for your coming. Your observations are complex, to say the least. My question to you is, what is your perspective on the impact of the kind of shrinkage of American significance on the world stage and globalization?

[00:43:03] What profound impact it may have had, these issues that you're talking about. What impact do you think it may have had on these issues you're talking about, because I think there's been a reduction in shared community or even awareness of other communities, I think.

[00:43:21] I'm sorry.

[00:43:22] What's the impact of globalization and the shrinkage of American significance on the world stage on these issues that you just discussed?

[00:43:34] Well, that's true. Yeah.

[00:43:37] I may have to toss that one to you. This is the danger in these forums is that someone will ask you a question that is so far out of your area of expertise that, that you will start to sputter.

[00:43:50] So I'll turn this one over to you.

[00:43:54] Well, I'll take a shot at it. In the last century?

[00:43:58] All right?

[00:43:59] It was predicted that the 21st century would be the Chinese century. And then America would become, it wouldn't disappear, and disappear in terms of its influence, right? But it would be first among equals. In other words, that, how long do democracies last? Historians have said 200

years, roughly 200 years for democracies. We passed that point in 1776. So where are we, as in Where is this country in relationship to the other countries in this world that want to assert themselves in terms of their own interests and so forth, like China or Russia, which really would like to see, I think, the breakup of NATO and [unintelligible] you know, pull, pull England out of that. This is a dangerous time. It's not just dangerous, in my opinion, for America. It's dangerous for the world. We see lots of Trump-like people popping up in other countries, right? And what does that mean? I mean, it's kind of, this is not a replay of the 30s, you know, with the rise of dictators, then. We don't have a depression then that we're coming out of. But this is a really dangerous time. I think globalization works against the notion of nationalism. We are interconnected, obviously, in every possible way. Martin Luther King pointed that out time and time again when he said you get up, you know, and you're getting ready to go to work and you get some soap. It's made in another country, right. And you, you get your towel is made by a Turk. Before you get out the door, you depend upon half the rest of the world. He said that back in the 60s. So we are interconnected. I'm Buddhist, so I happen to believe in that anyway, and the interconnectedness. That works against the nationalist impulse. So, I mean, this is a very interesting and dangerous time, I think. I would hate, you know what I really wouldn't, I don't want to see? I don't want to see the rise of fascism.

[00:45:56] Here or anywhere else. And I think, I think freedom

[00:46:02] Is fragile? And one of the natural tendencies that human societies do when they organize is to suppress the individual and take away freedoms. And you have authoritarianism and totalitarianism and you have fascism. And that's one thing I do not want to see for my grandson. What he said.

[00:46:26] We have a question over here.

[00:46:28] Hi. Thanks for coming. You touched on a lot of points, that like, you know, I would like to address, but I don't know if I'm going to be able to.

[00:46:40] But like I find like as I grow and evolve as a human being, as a so-called American, that I'm constantly questioning and redefining and relabelling and evaluating what that term means.

[00:46:57] Like like, for instance, you talked about African-American. That's a term that I find, like, disgusting. Absolutely. Just because I feel like it marginalizes us. Like if especially if it's coming out of a white person's mouth? You know, my question is, do you ever call, define yourself as European-American? I don't know. You call yourself white. I say it's okay to call me black. You know, I just call myself a person of African ancestry. Just to kind of pay respect to those who came on those ships. You know, I call myself an American by default.

[00:47:33] We forget that there were people here, tribal people, indigenous people here way before the rebel Europeans or even Africans.

[00:47:41] But with that, I'm thinking like, this term American, right? So.

[00:47:52] What exactly is that supposed to mean? Like, I constantly find myself having to put that word in quotations, like, you know, I know, I know there's supposed to be like liberty and freedom, democracy and all these things, but, like, do we ever see the hypocrisy behind these ideals and values?

[00:48:15] That this country was supposedly built on? Oh, some of us do, sure. Yeah, I mean, being an American to me...

[00:48:29] Well, that the thing is, the thing about humanity, the thing about humanity is or no

[00:48:41] I mean, start again. The thing about any sort of organization or organized entity, the problem with any sort of organization or, or, or entity like that

[00:48:55] Is that it's run by humans. Okay. So if something is run by humans, it is by definition going to be imperfect because humans are imperfect. Right? So you can come up with, you can found something called the United States of America. It is based on the principles of freedom. And then you have to run it. Human beings have to run it. And that's where the problems come in.

[00:49:24] So the, the,

[00:49:28] The, the sort of progression of the story of America to me, is a necessarily imperfect attempt to realize these, these grand ideals.

[00:49:41] Yeah, or dream. And, but since we, since we are human, we're going to mess it up.

[00:49:49] But, but, but the beauty, though, is in the attempt and to me, the story of, the story of black America is the story of a group of people trying to get the country to live up to its ideal, to the ideals that it professes. That's why I call myself an American. I call myself a black American because I'm proud of the fact that, that, that my ancestors have, have contributed these, this effort to, to, to bridging, to narrowing the gap between the ideals and the reality. So that's what it means to me. Actually, like Dr. Johnson, I actually prefer the term black. I mean, I use African-American.

[00:50:36] Well, they did a poll, they did a poll when it, that this debate first came up. The majority of people, black people polled wanted black American. Didn't stick. It became accepted for journalistic use. You know, part of style manuals everybody uses.

[00:50:50] I just, I like black for aesthetic reasons. I just think it's cool.

[00:50:55] You know, black, you know. Other questions, I have one down here.

[00:51:05] Mr. Thompson, you mentioned interviewing people who thought differently from you. And you mentioned that among their values were freedom and fairness. And I'm wondering if you also observed in that, in the people you interviewed

[00:51:26] Grievance. I'm sorry? Grievance, of fairness and grievance

[00:51:34] Because perhaps they felt it wasn't fair for them.

[00:51:41] The, you mean the Trump voters, that I? Yeah.

[00:51:47] So what became clear in a few of these conversations was that the people I talked to had a very limited understanding of what people of color were facing in this country, so that, and as I say in the book, like if you don't understand what, what, what black and brown people are up against, then if you're a generous person, you might think, well, these people, you know, there's a group of people who were enslaved and, and, and they learned these habits in slavery and they've just, you know, perpetuated them through the generations. And I think this is what these people actually, actually believe. And so, and so, any, and so, in their minds, what has to happen is that they just need a different mindset in order to succeed. So that the answer is not any sort of government intervention or or anything like that or affirmative action. And so when, you know, when, when there, when there are things like affirmative action, or then that's where the grievances come in, because to their thinking, these are just unfair measures for people who just need to help themselves.

[00:53:07] I think we have another question up here.

[00:53:11] So can you just really dumb it down for me and kind of give me the top three or four reasons why a black person voted for Trump?

[00:53:22] Why a black person voted for Trump? Yeah. When I find them, I'll give them. I'll give them to you. I didn't, I didn't interview any black Trump voters. I actually don't know any. Do you? Well, there seem to be some. Okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:53:41] You know, it's interesting. Um, I, I get together at Christmas with family in D.C. where I grew up, and my brother, who's much older than I am, has a girlfriend, and we were sitting around talking about Trump at one point and, and she said what I've, what I've heard other people say, she's,

[00:54:03] And you know, it's a line about Trump. At least he speaks his mind, is what she said. Now I don't know if she voted for him. I don't think she, maybe she did, I don't know. But, but there seems to be this perception, or in my opinion, misperception, that that's, that's what's happening. That he speaks his mind. You know, you can trust him because, you know, as insulting and as crude as he may be, at least he's telling you what he thinks.

[00:54:26] Which I don't think he is.

[00:54:30] I heard the same thing from my Lyft driver. He shoots from the hip. He, he, uh

[00:54:35] He isn't part of the political, professional political class of Washington. He wants smaller government. Me, I heard some of that from him coming over here, about why people might potentially like this guy.

[00:54:50] Looks like we have a question here in the middle.

[00:54:55] I actually wanted to just follow up on that because what I've, what I'm sensing is to the fact that he shoots from the hip and he speaks his mind. Is it, it's ultimately giving license for folks that actually have racist ideas or thoughts to then speak it freely and not be as covert

[00:55:16] Or, you know, use discretion or choice words when they're speaking. And do you think that's all [unintelligible]? Sure, sure.

[00:55:24] And I think, what, I mean

[00:55:28] People complain every day about, about the things Trump does and says, but to me, one of the, I think we may see this, one of the most damaging aspects of his presidency is just the, the lowering of the standards of civility.

[00:55:45] You know, and if, children growing up watching him, I don't,

[00:55:52] I fear to think about what, what the effect will be on them. You know, if you got, you've got two kids in a playground and they're calling each other names. How do you tell them not to do that? When the leader of the country does that every day, you know, how do you explain that? I think, I think, I think among the kinds of damage that he's doing, I think that's, I think that's higher up than we may, than we may know.

[00:56:22] So I think we have time for one more question. I have one here, I think. Yes.

[00:56:28] Yes. OK. So we have one more question here.

[00:56:34] Last one, what do you think of this? I think in today's environment, everything is about showtime. Showtime. And I think that Trump is a real marketer. And a real entertainer, and he's picked up on that trend because if you look at stylistic music and all that, rapping and all, I'm not putting any of that down, but it's all shot from the hip. You say what you want. People relate to that. They appeal because that's how they talk. Mm hmm. And some of these other more profound individuals come across as somewhat elitist.

[00:57:13] And I think there's a major distrust of that. Right. And so what do you think of that? I think, I think you're right. I think.

[00:57:25] At some point, it seems to me that there, there was a shift in people's, what people looked for or valued in a leader

[00:57:34] You know, it went from and, and maybe, I mean, maybe the myth is that this time ever existed when we wanted our leaders to be smarter than we are and know more than we do.

[00:57:46] Maybe that, tell me what you think, I don't, I don't know if maybe that time existed or maybe it didn't.

[00:57:53] But I, at some point we got to the point where the most important criterion was, you know, do I want to have a beer with this guy, you know? So more people want to have a beer with Bush than, than Gore? I suppose.

[00:58:07] I have a couple of thoughts real quick on this? 1971, 1971, Saul Bellow, the Nobel laureate, published an essay called *Culture Now*.

[00:58:18] And in that essay he said ours has become, this is in '71 he's saying this, an amusement society like decadent Rome. And what this gentleman was pointing out is the fact that that's what Trump is. It's about showtime. It's about amusement. It's about surfaces. Right? It isn't about depth in any sense of the word. And that, to me is extraordinarily troubling. And the other thing that comes to me are two points that you came to it with your conclusion when you looked at all of the Trump supporters. One, you said the one thing that characterized them, all of them were two things. But one was indifference and the other one was ignorance. And they sort of go together. Could you just to conclude, talk about indifference for one quick sec? Sure, sure.

[00:59:10] Yeah. I mean, that, that was a large part of the conclusion that I came to, was that I sort of identified three factors beyond just like simple out and out, you know, fire-breathing racism of reasons that people might have supported Trump. So I, you know, I asked one of the voters, as I said, can you tell me why you voted for Trump? I said, what do you think of the fact that the Klan endorsed Trump? And I should, should he have, should he have renounced that? And he said, oh, yeah, if somebody does that, you take two giant steps back. And I said, well, given that he did not, you know, why did you vote for him? And he said, well, to, you know, to a lot of us, it came down to [untelligible], you know, a lesser of two evils. And we just could not, couldn't stomach Hillary Clinton, basically. So. Even though he agreed that it was not a good thing that Trump had, had received this endorsement, it was not an important enough factor in his decision to, for him, you know, for him not to vote for Trump. So.

[01:00:15] And the like. And the other thing, too, you noticed with these people is they would say something like, well, you know, that's, I don't know much about black people, you know. Or I don't know much about these other people. It doesn't affect me.

[01:00:27] Exactly. Exactly. I mean, it, at bottom, people are selfish, you know, and they, and they vote what their interests or what they perceive their interests to be.

[01:00:35] And even though, I mean, they may not want to hurt you and me? But, but at the end of the day, they got to do what they gotta do, whatever it may mean for, you know, for people who look like us.

[01:00:48] So. So I think, I think indifference is a huge, a huge factor in what we've seen lately.

[01:00:55] How you overcome that, I'm not sure.

[01:00:58] I mean, you can overcome ignorance. Denial, I think denial is an important, is an important factor. Denial is hard to overcome because, but the thing about, the thing about denial is that in back of it, I think is, is

[01:01:15] Is morality, because if, if you don't, if you don't want to think that you're doing the wrong thing, then, then you deny that, you know, if you think it's, you don't want to think it's wrong to vote for Trump. So, so you, so you deny the conditions that, that you and I are talking about. So maybe that can be overcome because at bottom of it, there's, there's a guilty conscience, I think. And if you have a conscience, you know, that's something to build on, however hard it may be. Ignorance, of course, you know, you can overcome with, with education. What do you do about indifference?

[01:01:50] You know? That's the tricky one. Something happening to me I don't care. Right? Right. That one's, that's really hard. I'll leave it at that.

[01:02:04] On that cheerful note, yeah.

[01:02:07] You know, I, I don't want to turn this into the mutual admiration society, but I've respected, I've loved and respected, you work for decades now. And I was rereading your novel *Oxherding Tale*. And the last line, the very last thing in *Oxherding Tale* is it's, it's about, it's narrated by a fugitive slave. And at the very end, Andrew the slave says, this is my tale. And which, and that ending, on the, on the surface may seem like, you know, just like, you know, an innocuous ending to a story. But I think that every word is important in those four words. And the one I focus on is, you know, this is MY tale. This is, this is my story. I'm an individual and my experience may not be yours. It may not be the same as other black peoples'. But this is, this is my tale. And, and I think this is an important story because it comes, because I'm a human. And this and these are my experiences and

[01:03:08] That, that sort of attitude actually is kind of, it helped inform the writing of my book, and so I was, I was happy to come upon that ending again because I felt like we were kind of on the same same page there.

[01:03:23] Thank you for reading that again. As a pivotal book for me in terms of my life, if I hadn't done that book, I would not have cared to do anything else. But somebody who you might take a look at mentioned by Clifford is Albert Murray and his writing. I used to encourage my students to read, writing students, his essay, *The Hero and the Blues*. But I guess you'd say one of his major works is



The Omni-Americans, which is his word for African-Americans or black people or Negroes or colored or whatever we used to be called. He called us Omni-Americans, and there's a reason for that. So that is a book I would recommend.

[01:04:06] That's a good place. That's a good place to start.

[01:04:09] Well, thank you so much. Let's give both Dr. Johnson and Clifford Thompson a round of applause. That was wonderful.

[01:04:21] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.

