The Tyranny of Merit


Transcript begins.

KADI HUGHES: Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to the Tyranny of Merit, a conversation with Michael Sandel and Darren Walker. Please welcome Darren Walker.

DARREN WALKER: Hello, everyone. I’m delighted to be with you on this very special occasion. Again, I’m Darren Walker, and I have the great privilege of serving as president of the Ford Foundation. I am an African American man wearing glasses with a navy blazer, a blue checked shirt, sitting in my office here at the Ford Foundation headquarters in New York.

I am with today a man who is someone I have followed, admired, revered, and has taught me so much over the years. His name is Michael Sandel. He’s written half a dozen books and edited many, many more. But today we are here to talk about a seminal publication, The Tyranny of Merit, a book that in many ways is a book for our times.

I’m delighted to welcome my friend, Michael Sandel.

MICHAEL SANDEL: Well, thank you, Darren. Thank you so much. I’m joining you here from my study in Brookline, Massachusetts. What a generous introduction, and thank you so much for joining me and inviting me for this discussion of The Tyranny of Merit. I really appreciate everything you do, the leadership you’ve shown. You are a hero of mine, Darren.

DW: Well, I think, Michael, we first met because I wrote once a document about the importance of philanthropy moving to look at the issue of inequality. And you were kind enough to write me about what you read. And I was so inspired that the great Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel would write me! I was just incredibly, incredibly honored and have learned so much from you.

But this book, Michael, this book is in some way a radical book. You are in The Tyranny of Merit challenging a fundamental tenet of American life: the idea that we are a meritocracy, and the idea that you just need to try hard and you, too, can do well.

MS: Right.

DW: Talk about that.
MS: Perhaps the place to begin, Darren, is with the subtitle, which is in the form of a question: “What’s Become of the Common Good?” *The Tyranny of Merit* is an attempt to diagnose what’s gone wrong with our civic life.

Now, a big part of what’s gone wrong has to do with the deepening inequality of income and wealth over the last four decades. And we’ve had a lot of discussion about that, even though we don’t attend to it sufficiently in our politics. But there’s something deeper that’s gone wrong, and that has to do with the changing attitudes toward success that have accompanied the growing gap in income and wealth.

And this is something that has been subtler, but I think more far-reaching in poisoning our politics and driving us apart. It’s the tendency of those who land on top to inhale too deeply of their success, to believe, “My success is my own doing, a measure of my merit.” And, by implication, that those who’ve been left behind must deserve their fate, too. It’s this attitude toward merit—I call it “the meritocratic hubris of the successful”—that has led to and fueled the polarization and also the resentments, the deep and understandable resentments of people who feel looked down upon by meritocratic elites.

And so for all of the debates we’ve been having, Darren, about what’s gone wrong and what fueled the populist backlash and what lead people to elect Donald Trump or in Britain to go for Brexit, what we’ve missed, I think, is meritocratic elites looking in the mirror and asking, How did we contribute to the anger and resentments that have now boiled up and contributed to this deeply rancorous polarized politics?

DW: You think the cultural sort of, the cult of the individual—

MS: Yeah.

DW: —which is something unique to the United States but something that has been celebrated since de Tocqueville—

MS: Right.

DW: Do you think this has had anything to do with that?

MS: I think it’s a background condition. But I think meritocratic hubris adds a dark element to the tradition of the American individualism. In many ways, individualism is one of the great glories of this country—the idea that we don’t have to accept our fate as handed down by the accident of birth. The idea that we have some sense of mastery, agency, freedom—as individuals—to define our future and our fate.

There is something deeply inspiring and admirable in this tradition. But what’s happened in recent decades is that the positive, the affirmative, the inspiring side of American individualism has been connected to—somehow, merged with—a couple of things: a kind of market triumphantist faith, the belief that market activity and market competition is the arena for the expression of individualism, and with it, the idea that whoever wins the race to the top, whoever wins—whoever makes the most money, enjoys the greatest
rewards of the market—must deserve it, must deserve it in virtue of his or her effort and striving and talent.

And I think that’s where the dark side of meritocratic competition has tainted—even corrupted, I would say—the affirmative inspiring aspect of American individualism.

**DW:** So it’s this idea that it has actually been corrupted—that individualism and that idea of the American exceptional way in which we promote the agency of the individual to act in society is actually a good thing. But that idea has been perverted, has been distorted.

But isn’t it true, Michael, that if we were to accept what you write, that we’re just going to think generally that rich people are bad people? That they are just arrogant and selfish and greedy?

**MS:** Well, I wouldn’t put it that way, and I don’t quite put it that way in the book, as you know. Although I appreciate your putting the question in that blunt form, Darren, because some people may imagine that that’s what this is about. It isn’t about greed, really—though meritocratic hubris can feed into a lack of concern with those who are left out. It’s the dark side of an inspiring ideal. The meritocratic ideal says, if chances are equal, if we can achieve equality of opportunity—and we always fall short, but we strive for it—if only we could do that and provide an equal chance for upward mobility for rising, then we would have a just society.

And what I’m suggesting—and maybe this is the radical suggestion you were pointing to, Darren—what I’m suggesting is, even a perfect meritocracy where everyone had equal chances would not be enough to be a just society and a good society. In some ways, it would sharpen the divide and fuel the hubris of those who landed on top. Because then, those who landed on top would be able to say to themselves, “Chances were equal; I earned it. I rose thanks to my own effort and talent.” But that forgets the luck and good fortune that helped them on their way. It forgets the fact that the talents and gifts that you or I happen to have, they’re not wholly our doing in the first place. It forgets the role of luck and living in a society that happens to prize and reward the talents we have in abundance. That’s not our doing. Take LeBron James. He is a great basketball player and he worked hard. But the fact that he lives in a society that loves basketball, the thing he’s very good at, that’s not his doing. That’s his good luck.

And so I’m trying to recover an appreciation for the role of luck in life, contingency, some would say even grace, good fortune, and to connect that with a more generous sense of what we owe one another, a deeper sense of indebtedness to the communities that prize our talents, that allow for the cultivation, that help us on their way. And therefore, a greater sense of responsibility for those who haven’t flourished, especially in this new economy, a greater appreciation of the role of luck in life, makes it easier to see ourselves in other people’s shoes. There but for the luck of fortune or the grace of God or the accident of fate go I.
And it's that humility and the civic sensibility that can flow from it that I'm trying to reawaken in *The Tyranny of Merit*, because that seems to me to point to a more generous conception of the common good.

**DW:** The common good. You talk about in the book something that hits close to home for you, Michael, because you're a professor among the most elite, highly prized colleges in America, and you talk about the race to the top by the parents of this elite meritocratic class and the extreme circumstance they will go to, and, of course, you reflect on the scandals.

**MS:** Right.

**DW:** Talk about this whole vignette and how it relates to the thesis of your book.

**MS:** Part of the moral appeal of a meritocratic society is by way of contrast to aristocratic or hierarchical societies, where your fate is fixed by your birth. But what we've all seen is that today's meritocracy has hardened into a kind of hereditary system of elites—privileged parents have figured out how to pass their privilege onto their kids.

Now, it's not in the old-fashioned way, where you simply inherited land or wealth, though there’s plenty of that, too. But the primary instrument for passing advantage down from successful parents onto their kids is the system of higher education. And so even with a system, as many of these elite universities now have, of generous financial aid—even with all of that, the system enables disproportionately the children of the well-off to have a leg up in the competition for admission.

Here's a stunning, to me, a stunning statistic. If you look at all of the Ivy League and highly selective colleges and universities—Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, Yale, these kinds of places—there are more students at these places who come from the top one percent than from the entire bottom half of the country combined.

And that’s with generous financial aid. So part of the problem is that privileged parents now have ways of passing on the advantage to their children, even when education—we would like to think—is an instrument of upward mobility that is blind with respect to class and race and family background.

But there’s more than that. Universities, especially highly selective universities, have become not just educational institutions—they have become the arbiters of opportunity in our society. They confer the credentials, the meritocratic credentials that largely determine the allocation not only of material rewards but also of honor and recognition and social esteem. And this is a problem.

**DW:** Michael, is this different than—in the past, I seem to recall a recent president who himself was a C-level student at a prestigious prep school, who found himself educated at an Ivy League college? He was the scion of a wealthy family, a legacy. Has this really changed, Michael? Are things worse now?
MS: I think it’s become accentuated. In fact, it’s interesting now that we’re in the week of the Democratic convention. It’s worth reflecting that Joe Biden in a way is a pathbreaker in ways that haven’t really been noticed. He is the first Democratic nominee for president not to have attended an Ivy League school since Walter Mondale in 1984.

And, in the years between the end of the Second World War and the 1980s, before this intense hardening of the meritocracy took place, people were routinely nominated for president who did not have that background. But the deeper problem with making selective universities the arbiters of opportunity is this: Those of us who spend our time in the company of the credentialed can easily forget that most Americans don’t have a four-year college degree. In fact, nearly two-thirds don’t. So creating an economy that requires, as a condition of dignified work and a decent living, that you’ve been to a four-year college, that’s folly. That’s a mistake.

And the way we’ve addressed—including progressives, Darren, including liberals—the way we’ve addressed the growing inequality of recent decades has been essentially to say, in the new economy, the way to get ahead is to go to college, get a degree. What you earn depends on what you learn.

We heard this from Democratic presidents over the past three, four decades. And it really reaches across the political spectrum. But there is an insult embedded in that advice. The insult is, if you don’t get a degree, if you don’t go to college, if you don’t flourish in the new economy, your failure must be your fault. And because of this emphasis on the rhetoric of rising, and the credentialism that has come to govern the allocation of opportunity and social recognition, progressives have lost contact with working people, with a great many working people. And so in a way it’s no surprise that if meritocratic elites, highly credentialed elites look down on those who lack meritocratic credentials and create an economy in which the majority of Americans don’t flourish—median wage has been stagnant for four decades—it’s no wonder that resentments will gather and ultimately find political expression. And we’ve seen how those resentments can find ugly, dangerous political expression.

So contending with the “tyranny of merit”—the tendency of meritocratic elites to look down on those less credentialed than themselves—this has had deep political consequences.

DW: And the thing that you and I talked about this summer when I was lucky enough to read the galley of your book, which will be out September 15—

MS: Right, right. Thank you.

DW: Preorder now!

MS (laughing): Thank you.

DW: The thing we talked about after I read that was race.

MS: Yeah.
DW: And how you think about the context for both the cult of the individual, these notions that we live in a free society, the idea that we pick ourselves up by our bootstraps. With America’s racial history—

MS: Yeah.

DW: —and how, I mean, I’m reminded of the idea that Black Americans—to use Langston Hughes’s words when he writes in “Let America Be America Again.” He says, “Let America be America again … America never was America to me.”

MS: Yeah.

DW: How do you think about race in the context of the tyranny of merit?

MS: Well, I think that we have separated racial injustice and class injustice. We’ve separated them too starkly. And that undermines a serious attention to both. So if the message is, “All we need to do to address racial injustice is to remove barriers to meritocratic competition so that everyone, regardless of racial background, can have the same chance to clamber up the ladder of success,” that’s not enough. It’s not enough because it doesn’t question the fact—in fact, it may lead us to ignore the fact—that the rungs on that ladder are growing further and further apart. And that the social recognition and esteem accorded those who manage to clamber to the top is out of any proportion to the contribution to the common good they actually make.

So the agenda I would like to see, the politics of the common good, I would like to see speaking to racial injustice. And this is a moment when we have an opportunity—for the first time in a long time, really, to do this—to speak to racial injustice in a way that isn’t limited to telling people, if you get a degree and if we can remove those barriers, then you, too, can engage in the meritocratic scramble to land on top and enjoy an elite professional job.

Removing the barriers is morally urgent and necessary, but we should not consider that the job of racial justice has been addressed or served or finished, even if we could go further in that agenda, clearing those barriers.

And so I’m hoping for, hoping to prompt an agenda that connects racial injustice with these broader class injustices and educational inequalities that have deepened in the last recent decades and that fester and that generate these resentments. But what do you think, Darren? Do you think—am I right, right there?

DW: No, I do. And I think the importance of understanding the connection between race and class—which another great writer I admire, Isabel Wilkerson, is taking up in her new book, Caste—is very aligned with what you have argued in your new book. Because I do think that there has been a concerted effort to divide Americans who share a common journey in this moment of growing inequality, who are actually more alike than they believe and that they are told they are. So I think that there is an opportunity for unity here. But I do think, Michael, it’s difficult, because some would say that what has made America unique is this idea that you can fight your way through
hard work, merit, and get to the top, and that that is the ultimate gestalt. That’s where we want to be.

What you seem to speak to is the broader dignity that every person should be entitled to expect in American society, and how this meritocratic hubris, this theology of merit has been harmful to that idea, the dignity of every man and woman. And that as we think about how we go forward, to put justice and a more just society as our aspiration, too—and how we can contribute to that.

**MS:** Could I pick up—I love that, Darren. And I’d like to pick up on this idea of dignity that you’ve just emphasized. Part of what—because someone could be listening to this conversation and say, all right, how should our public discourse, how should our political agenda be different from what it is? What’s an alternative to a political agenda that says simply, if you work hard and play by the rules, you should be able to rise from wherever you are, whatever your background? How can a deeper notion of equality and the common good—how would it look different?

One way it would look different, I think, would be to put the dignity of labor at the center of our politics. Because the meritocratic emphasis on credentialism, on rising by gaining lustrous credentials and then you will have a chance to land on top, as the top is defined by the market rewards, the idea of the dignity of labor says that the way to deal with inequality, the deep inequality that the last four decades have produced, is not just to enable some people to escape their condition. It’s to enable people to flourish in place. And that requires a politics that emphasizes the dignity of labor. And that leads to questions about how to reconfigure the economy to accord those who perform important work without a fancy university credential, but important work, not only to be rewarded materially in ways aligned with the importance of that work but also to enjoy social recognition and esteem.

In the speech he gave, Martin Luther King, in the speech he gave in Memphis, Tennessee, shortly before he was assassinated, he was onto this theme. And it’s potentially a radical theme about reconfiguring the economy. And he talked about the sanitation workers who were on strike. And he said, in the last analysis, the person who picks up your garbage is as important as the physician, because if the sanitation worker doesn’t do that job well, disease will be rampant. “All labor has dignity,” he ended. So enlarging the political agenda to include a serious discussion about how to reconfigure the economy to accord dignity to all labor would pitch us into a public debate—I think a healthy debate—about what contributions to the economy and to the common good really are the most valuable.

These days with the pandemic, we talk about essential workers, by which we mean not only the people in the hospitals but the people delivering stuff to our door, the warehouse workers, the truckers, the nurse assistants, the home health care providers, the childcare providers. We call them essential workers. We put up signs thanking the essential workers. But the bigger question is how can we redesign the economy as we emerge from this crisis in a way that treats essential workers and rewards them in a way that is proportionate to the value of their contribution to the common good?
And that may mean debating also whether the people who engage, who invented, let’s say, high-frequency trading or who figured out the idea of stock buybacks that yield enormous rewards and social recognition—is there something out of alignment here if we aspire to have rewards match merit?

So that is why this debate about the common good is really a much broader debate about what we owe one another as fellow citizens, and what does it mean to reward people according to merit? Do we simply take the market’s verdict on what counts as a valuable social contribution? Or should we deliberate about that democratically and design an economy that answers to what we are prepared to consider and defend as a proper understanding of who contributes what to the common good?

DW: Well, I certainly think you have elevated a core challenge in our democracy that is really about the intersection of democracy and capitalism.

MS: Yeah.

DW: And democracy and capitalism in this moment are absolutely in a fight. I hope democracy wins, but in order for that to happen, we do have to put labor and the dignity of work over the pursuit of capital by elites. We need to recalibrate that capital-labor equation.

And that’s the conversation we need to have in our society so that we can be a society where we do feel like we are all in this together.

MS: Yeah.

DW: I think a message of your book, Michael, is that we have lost that ethos.

MS: Right.

DW: This notion that all of us are in this together.

MS: Yeah.

DW: Our fates are inextricably linked, and we cannot have a vibrant, healthy, robust democracy if millions of us feel disaffected from our institutions, disaffected from our economics, and completely alienated from the ideas that really undergird—and cynical about the ideas that undergird—our society.

My colleague Kadi Hughes is going to open up the floor, because I know there are questions.

KH: Fantastic. Thank you all so much for sending in your questions. If you would like to submit a question, please use the Q&A function in the Zoom window.

So I will start with a question for Professor Sandel. What advice would you have for what foundation presidents and college and university presidents—especially those
from selective ones—can do to counter the forces that you described and create more equity?

**MS:** Well, beyond the standard and important agenda of increasing access to college and universities for those who can’t afford it—that’s a crucially important part of the responsibility of foundations and universities, improving access for those who can’t afford it—I think we also have to recognize the importance of forms of learning and training and education that can enable people who don’t go to four-year colleges and universities to flourish, to equip themselves with the educational tools they need to flourish.

Now, that’s partly an economic matter. We need to shift investment or increase investment in vocational training and technical training for those who don’t acquire four-year college degrees. But it’s more than a material challenge, a matter of investment. It’s also a matter of social recognition and esteem. We should check our tendency, overcome the habit to assume that people who have jobs that don’t require a four-year college degree are contributing something of less value to the economy or to the common good.

So partly it’s a shift in emphasis, equipping people for success who may not go to a four-year college or university, but also according greater dignity and respect to those contributions. So I think we need to recognize—we often debate, is this populous protest the resentment about the economy or is it about the culture?

Part of what I argue in the book is economy and culture go together. The economy of esteem and of social recognition matters as much as the economy of income and wealth. And inequalities in income and wealth matter, but they matter in part because in our society they are so closely bound up with inequality of social recognition and dignity and esteem.

And I think the role education plays, I think, has a big part to do with this and to creating a broader sense of appreciation for the various contributions people make to the economy and to the society.

**DW:** Michael, if I could add, I think your institution and my institution also have capital, and that capital can be used to challenge some of the things that we see that you’ve talked about: How we invest our billions—

**MS:** Yeah.

**DW:** Toward what objectives.

**MS:** Right.

**DW:** How we use our bully pulpit to call out injustice. And I will say, Michael, I had a very disconcerting experience a few years ago after a commencement address at which I called out and spoke about the pernicious consequences of inequality and the ways in which wealth is exerted to influence privilege of the already privileged.
MS: Yeah.

DW: And a university president said to me, I could never give an address like that, because I couldn’t offend my wealthy alumni—

MS: Right.

DW: —who I depend on for my next capital campaign. I think that is a tragedy, because one of the consequences of growing inequality is the degree to which private capital, private individuals’ own interests are elevated over the common good. And so you have people like university presidents and foundation presidents who don’t talk about fundamental issues of injustice in society because it might make our investment committee or some person connected to money unhappy with us. I think that’s an issue.

MS: I think that’s very powerful, Darren. And you’ve been a powerful example of how this can be done. But I’m curious, what was your reply to this college president?

DW: I understood—

MS: Yeah.

DW: —their predicament.

MS: Yeah, yeah.

DW: This is what happens when there is a concerted effort to degrade the common good.

MS: Yeah.

DW: We’ve also seen, this is not—the symptoms that you so beautifully articulate in your book are not the result of happenstance.

MS: Right.

DW: There has been a concerted effort that has generated the outcomes that we have seen in our society. Everything that is public has been degraded. And I love your point about Joe Biden. It’s something that I would like to do as well, because I am the product of complete public education system, from Head Start through college and law school. And I say that often, not to call attention to my educational credentials, but to say that it is rare that I am in a room at a foundation, at an event, on a panel, at the Aspen Ideas Festival, or wherever, where there’s anyone else who can say that.

MS: Yeah, yeah.

DW: I don’t know of places in the near kind of circles where—elite circles—where someone can say, I have never attended a day of private education in my life. I think that’s a bad thing for America.
**MS:** Yeah, yeah. This is so powerful. And this matters—this is right at the heart of the issues of inequality we’ve been discussing. And it also matters in a broader sense, the public spaces, the public institutions, the common spaces where citizens have shared experiences across race and across class and across ethnic backgrounds.

Those public spaces, the infrastructure of a shared civic life have been withering and drying up over this same four-decade period that we’ve been discussing. And that has—those who have been able to buy their way out of public places and institutions and services increasingly do so and retreat to privatized places.

I call it—this is in my earlier book, *What Money Can’t Buy*—the “skyboxification” of American life. And this, too, is corrosive of the common good. And to connect it back to the tyranny of merit, it allows for the reinforcement, the uncritical imbibing of the meritocratic hubris that I think is so dangerous.

**DW:** Kadi?

**KH:** Great, thank you so much for that. Professor Sandel, is there a country or are there countries that are on a more dignified path for the common good? Can you tell us a little more about what this societal reimagining could look like and if anyone is doing it in a way that we should model?

**MS:** I don’t think there’s a single example that we can model. I think we can start with more discreet examples of success stories that gesture toward the common good. If we look at countries that have done a better job than we have in contending with the pandemic, and in some cases, this is simply due to better public health facilities, also better leadership.

But also connected to those differences are broader orientations to the common good, a greater sense of being in this together than we have. This moment of pandemic is a time when we need solidarity. We need actual practices and institutions that give expression to our mutual obligations.

And we Americans don’t do solidarity all that well, at least—except perhaps in times of war. We’ve not done it very well in the face of this pandemic. So I don’t think there’s a single exemplary country with regard to the common good. But if we begin with questions of health and public health and a culture that nurtures a sense that we are all in this together, I think some of the countries that have done a better job contending with the coronavirus can at least suggest places we might—where we might learn something.

**KH:** Great, thank you. The next question: What do you think is the role of religious faith writ large in the underlying moral values that stress justice, common concern, compassion, and the effort to build a greater sense of common good in our country and in the world?

**MS:** Well, that’s a deep, far-reaching question. In *The Tyranny of Merit*, what I try to do in gesturing toward what a more generous approach to the common good might look
like is to create space and opening for those whose sense of obligation to one another comes from religious traditions and those who may come from purely secular traditions. I don’t think there’s one path to a conception of justice and of the common good and of mutual responsibility. But what I do think—and this is really at the heart of the diagnosis of *The Tyranny of Merit*—is that, in recent decades, we have embraced a conception of success that so relies on the idea that we are self-making, self-creating human beings. And therefore, we are wholly responsible for our success if we land on top, and therefore we think those who land on the bottom they must have no one to blame but themselves.

That idea that we are purely self-making creatures is at odds with many religious teachings of various traditions. It’s also at odds with many secular understandings, robust understandings of community and mutual obligation and social justice that says, “Wait a minute. Even if you don’t believe in the grace of God, don’t you recognize the role of luck and good fortune and teachers and coaches and family members in a society that helped you on your way?” So I think there’s no single route to a more capacious understanding of social justice and the common good. But I think religious traditions that destabilize the confidence of those who think, I did it all on my own—I think any way we can destabilize or question that kind of meritocratic hubris is a resource worth taking seriously.

I’m interested, Darren, in what you would say about this.

**DW:** Well, I think it’s interesting to reflect on what you said about holding the mirror up and having successful people interrogate their success. And what you say in the book—your notion of asking yourself the question, how did I become so successful, and what do I attribute that to—I think it’s very, very hard. And we’re talking about successful white men primarily here. It is very hard to have that community of successful Americans unwind, unbound their privilege, because the whole idea of privilege and the lives so many of these people live is to be insulated from that kind of discomfort. And, in fact, the opposite is reinforced every day.

So what is reinforced is that you are uniquely talented. You are special and deserving. There are so few of you that we should pay you inordinate amounts of money, and that the markets should deliver for you extraordinary wealth.

And how we balance the fact that there are people who are more talented than others, and so let’s be clear here. What we don’t want to do is to diminish the idea of true—of talent and rewarding that talent that produces benefits for society accordingly. We should not in any way send that kind of a message out.

I do think, though, that so many of the people who are so successful today are in industries that are not necessarily generating more shared prosperity, higher levels of employment, doing the kinds of things that we need in society.

And, you know, Michael, next month is the 50th anniversary of Milton Friedman’s publication of his famous essay in the *New York Times Magazine*, in which he—for the
first time to the public beyond an academic audience—wrote that the purpose of the corporation, the social responsibility of the corporation is to make money for its shareholders.

MS: Right.

DW: That was the first time to the broader public that this idea that the social responsibility of a company is to generate returns for its shareholders, and that—and he roundly rejected the emerging consensus from men like David Rockefeller and Walter Wriston and Thomas Watson that their companies needed to take on social responsibility. Friedman rejected that idea.

MS: Yeah.

DW: And I believe that that has contributed, that has provided some of the scaffolding that has made possible the kind of hubris that comes and was encouraged by the cult of the individual to get us where we are today.

MS: That is striking. This was 50 years ago. And there’s a tendency when we hear “Milton Friedman”—those in progressive circles say, “Ah, well, yeah, but he was a conservative. He was a libertarian economist.” But striking, and this is part of what I think some people may find provocative about my book The Tyranny of Merit, is I try to point out how these ideas began with libertarians like Milton Friedman 50 years ago.

Over the past 30, 40 years, important elements of that basic market-driven way of thinking about the economy and about reward has insinuated itself across the political spectrum. And so the deregulation of finance, for example, that we saw in the ’90s that contributed to the conditions that led to the financial crisis in 2008, this was a bipartisan undertaking.

And so part of what’s happened is that the market faith—though there are political differences, of course—but the market faith, the belief that markets are the primary instruments for defining and achieving the public good or for defining the meaning of merit, these ideas have become almost the background assumption of mainstream center-right and center-left politics in the last decades.

And in The Tyranny of Merit, I'm trying to point that out and lead us to critically examine those deep background assumptions about how we understand a just society and the search for the common good.

KH: Great. I think we have time for one last question. So how do we teach or educate for humility, and what is the potential role of arts and culture in doing that?

MS: Well, teach for humility—that’s a great question. I suggest—we talked in this conversation, Darren, you and I, about humility. I see it as the antidote to meritocratic hubris. I think humility is the civic virtue we need at this moment, not only because it’s an admirable quality of character for a person but also because it opens space for a broader understanding of our obligations to one another, a broader understanding of the
common good. So what would an education in humility look like? Well, it has to begin—I loved, Darren, your phrase about the successful interrogating their success. I think that’s—figuring out how to do that is an important step toward a greater sense of humility.

Being more alive to the role of luck in life is an important—can be an education in humility. I have a suggestion in the book that I think many of my colleagues may challenge, which is maybe when universities that get, as Harvard and Stanford do, thousands and thousands more qualified applicants than they can possibly accept—over 40,000 apply for about 2,000 places at Harvard and Stanford—maybe what those admission committees should do is cull out those who are not qualified to do the work and do it well and contribute to their classmates. They would still be left with a lot. I don’t know, 25,000, 30,000. And do a kind of lottery. It could be a weighted lottery to ensure diversity along various dimensions. But it’s a way of teaching the students who are admitted, very explicitly, that there’s a lot of luck in this anyhow, with or without the lottery.

There is a lot of luck in this. So that’s one device. I remember—I tell this story in the book of a high school biology teacher I had. Mr. Farnham was his name. And I went to a public high school, Darren, but it was heavily tracked—you know, with AP tracks, honors tracks, standard track. And so the AP kids, the kids in the so-called upper track, were so grade-obsessed, so competitive, always worried about who got what on which test or exam. It became an utter distraction, a kind of corruption.

This biology teacher one day said, “We’re having a quiz. Number from 1 to 15 and answer true or false.” The kids said, “Yeah, but you didn’t give us the questions.” He said, “Make up a statement and write down whether it’s true or false.” And they said, “But will this count for our grade?” And he said yes.

I thought it was an eccentric joke at the time, but what he was trying to do—he was trying in his way, this biology teacher, to challenge the tyranny of merit. He was trying to educate us in an appreciation of the role of luck in life. And it was a kind of education in humility for those of us who took it seriously.

So I think we need to look for opportunities, Darren, to do exactly as you suggest, to encourage the successful to interrogate their success, and for ways to build out a more generous moral culture that cultivates a greater sense of humility, sense of accident, fortune, contingency, grace, indebtedness among those who land on top. Because only once we shift these attitudes, I think, will we really be able to have a politics of the common good.

**DW:** Michael Sandel, we are indebted to you for all that you do to teach, educate, stimulate, and challenge us to be better people and contribute to a better society by building the common good.

Thank you, Michael Sandel, for all you do. We’re looking forward to buying your book when it’s out in just a few weeks, and seeing you and reading about you in the coming
months. This book is going to be a best seller—another Michael Sandel best seller, I might add—and I’m looking forward to sharing it with friends and family. Thank you so much, Michael, for being with me today.

**MS:** Thank you, Darren. I so appreciate it. Thank you.

**End of transcript.**