

## IDEAS AT FORD WITH CHARLES BLOW

# Courage and Leadership with Darren Walker

Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation and author of the new book *The Idea of America: Reflections on Inequality, Democracy, and the Values We Share*, joins host Charles Blow to talk about the promise of America. They discuss Walker's collection of reflections, essays, and speeches, which are built on the central belief that by recommitting to our common values and shared humanity, we can create an America that is more prosperous for everyone.

**ANNOUNCER:** Please welcome to the stage, Charles Blow.

[Charles Blow, a Black man with a gray beard wearing a black suit, host]

**CHARLES BLOW:** Hello, and welcome to "Ideas at Ford with Charles Blow," where we bring together some of the world's best thinkers and activists to tackle some of the world's biggest problems. Tonight, we're talking about leadership and courage. And it is my pleasure to introduce someone who needs no introduction in this audience: the boss, Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation.

I've seen you interview so many people from this same stage. Now you're in the hot seat. So get ready. So you've written a book! *The Idea of America: Reflections on Inequality, Democracy, and the Values We Share*. Why did you write this book? Now?

[Darren Walker, a Black man wearing glasses and a light blue suit, president, Ford Foundation]

**DARREN WALKER:** Well, first, this is really a compendium of things I have written, speeches I've given, and reflections I have had on occasions over my 12 years as president. Occasions like the 50th anniversary of the Selma Massacre; the moment of recognizing, realizing that there was a pandemic; the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. So we had moments and I would often write something and basically a year ago, I was approached by Wiley Publishing, who suggested that maybe some sort of anthology might be useful. And the jury is still out whether it actually will have any impact or anyone will care. But I'm happy we did it.

**CHARLES BLOW:** It's so unrelentingly positive and patriotic. And in an era where people strain to find something to be positive about, they despair a lot. In an era where, you know, people may have more complicated views about their connection to the country, it feels to me almost like an antidote to the times. How do you think of it in this moment?

**DARREN WALKER:** Well, when you start by observing that it feels patriotic. Because it is patriotic. And I think of the people whose shoulders I stand, we stand, and I think about the arc

of Black people in this country. There is no population of Americans who have been more patriotic—and who have believed in America—than Black people, Black Americans.

I absolutely feel called to be patriotic and compelled to believe, because they believed in America. How can you read Frederick Douglass' speech in 1852, "What does Independence Day mean to a Black man?" I mean, how can you read Langston Hughes' "Let America Be America Again," and in which he opens with his, with his rage? "America never was America to me." But he ends with the last stanza in which he says, but "Oh, yes, someday America will be." And so Langston Hughes is saying, in his moment of rage, recognizing that he lives a marginalized life because, in spite of the fact that he is a genius, because he is a Black man—and yet he ends by saying, oh, yes, but one day! And so I think he is speaking to me and to us. And so when I—on those days when I am dejected and depressed, I remember them and I remember my own privilege. And so that's how I stay positive. That's how I remain hopeful and centered.

**CHARLES BLOW:** But in your book, I would argue that you're making a case that in some ways your patriotism is even deeper than Hughes or Douglass. Because what you say is that you always believed that America was rooting for you to succeed, which is not really the Douglass framing. It's not the Hughes framing, but your framing of your success is that what was propelling you was that you believed that America wanted you to be Darren Walker, to succeed. Well, how do you tap into that?

**DARREN WALKER:** Well, first, I think there is no doubt that I believe that hope and optimism in a moment like this is radical. And, and so I embrace the radicalism of that idea. And I, I believe I articulate in that essay that I was the first generation of Blackness in this country that could possibly have had America rooting for it. Right? So there is, again, there is no doubt that before our generation, the manifestation of the, the kind of tailwind that I felt. Right? And what I mean by that is the cost of education was never a barrier to my getting on the mobility escalator. I had scholarships, I had—but even if I hadn't, tuition was so cheap at the University of Texas, and the cost of living and everything that I did, from Head Start to the Pell Grant program, all of that propelled me. And all of that was actually a manifestation. For the first time in American history, at the, the first period of time when this country truly, realized the ideal of democracy, at least, that everyone has the right to vote, was in our lifetime. Right? So America, in spite of what we may say to ourselves, was not a democracy until 1964. If you define democracy as a nation where all citizens have access to the core belief of democracy, which is that voting matters and is something that every citizen is entitled to. So we did not have that until our lifetimes, and we did not have until our lifetimes the manifestation of what, when I say I felt like America was cheering me on. The larger society and the systems and structures made me feel that I could get on the mobility escalator and ride it as far and high as my talent and my determination and sacrifice would take me.

**CHARLES BLOW:** Let's stay on that for just a second, because you give a lot of commencement addresses, and some of them are included in the book. What do you say to

young people now who enter life in a different set of circumstances? What do you say to those young people when you give commencement addresses?

**DARREN WALKER:** So I think for young people today, putting into historical context this moment we're in, but also reminding them that each generation has a call to action. And I think our generation, that call to action of, of realizing our full humanity. Right? So we were also the first generation where our full humanity could be acknowledged. So as a gay man, that was something my heroes, Bayard Rustin, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes. I mean, the ability for them to stand, sit in an audience and say, "I'm gay." Like, that was just not possible. So we lived in the first generation where our full humanity could be embraced. So now this generation, yeah, their full humanity is, is to be embraced. But the challenge of identity, and the challenge for our country as we have fully embraced, is to ensure that we maintain a common sense of identity. Right. And I think we have lost that in many ways. And I'm not blaming the fact that I feel, I say, "I'm gay, I'm Black." I mean, those identities define who I am. But the most important identity is that I'm an American, because that is the identity that we all share. And around which we build a set of common values by which we live with each other. And I think we have to do a better job with the next generation of that. And we also have to ensure that they demand of us that we deliver on the promise of our generation. Right? Because we haven't delivered on the promise of our generation. And, and I think they need to demand that of us.

**CHARLES BLOW:** I think that's a really important point about how people are able to be themselves. But do you believe that the opportunity escalator/elevator that you were describing exists for young people today the same way that you think it existed for you then?

**DARREN WALKER:** Absolutely not. No. Absolutely not. I mean, any, any economist who studies social mobility will tell you that depending on who you are and where you are in the country, the mobility escalator may be going. But for the most part in this country, the mobility escalator has either slowed down or has reversed, right? So one of the things that I write about and one of the startling trends 12 years ago that I wrote about, was what was happening with inequality in the country and connecting growing inequality with threat to democracy.

And part of the reason I felt compelled to write about that was because of the impact of growing inequality on working class white Americans. Because when we, when we consider the threat to democracy, and as we move from really a poverty analysis at Ford to an inequality analysis, there were some who questioned whether that was prudent. And it is true, poverty remains a major issue in our society.

But poverty is not a threat to democracy. It's a moral challenge. And a reason for moral revulsion in the richest nation in the world. But it's not going to destroy our democracy. Inequality will destroy our democracy. Because if there are enough people who feel angry, aggrieved because they feel they are being left behind, they're being left out of an economic system that has marginalized them, that their children don't have a future. They will do things that don't seem rational to those of us who live with privilege. They lose hope. And hope is the oxygen of democracy. And if they lose hope, they lose a belief in institutions and government. In

community. How they even think about community, particularly in a democracy that aspires to be a successful, multiracial, pluralist democracy.

What we see with inequality and some of the work that we supported at Princeton a decade ago, was for the first time seeing indicators that we've never seen before. So indicators of well-being among working class white households. Average life expectancy going down. Indicators of health. And obviously the opioid epidemic had a big macro impact on that. Joblessness, educational achievement, actually, in those communities going down. And so for the first time, what became clear is that we have a population of white Americans who are downwardly mobile. And the implications for that and our democracy, there is a correlation. And so the divergence in our experiences and expectations, and sense of both connectedness to community and each other, becomes frayed. That's what inequality does.

**CHARLES BLOW:** To write this book, you had to look back over 12 years of speeches, writings. What did you see in the evolution of Darren Walker's thinking emerging in those 12 years?

**DARREN WALKER:** I became more concerned about and wrote about the need to be better listeners. You also see a growing unease with some of the work around ideology, having a negative effect, and my concern about extremism being a challenge. There are a few essays in which I write about capitalism in which I say, "I'm a capitalist, but this system is not working."

**CHARLES BLOW:** You say you're a committed capitalist.

**DARREN WALKER:** I am!

**CHARLES BLOW:** What does that mean?

**DARREN WALKER:** What it means is I have not seen a better way to organize an economic system. And so I believe it is. But I don't believe the way it is currently organized is producing the kind of shared prosperity that our democracy needs. And this is, we call it "democratic capitalism" for a reason. And my view on that is democracy can't lose to capitalism. I mean, we cannot have a system where inequality and where opportunity is so out of reach for people.

**CHARLES BLOW:** But you see no contradiction there between fighting for less income inequality and equality for human beings and capitalism.

**DARREN WALKER:** No. Know? Yes. But just to be clear, we're not going to get better capitalism without better policy. Right? So we're not going to get capitalism if we have a tax policy that is skewed to benefit people like me. I mean, that's not going to produce the kind of equalizing effect or at least a system of fairness. Because this system is not fair. It's simply not. And so I am a committed capitalist, but only, it will only work if we have policy that produces the kind of shared prosperity that we need. And I, and I write about that. My grandfather was semi-literate. He had a third grade education because when he was growing up and the Black— the

colored schools—stopped in primary, and they went to pick cotton and work in the fields as boys. But he worked as a porter and a shoe shine man for an oil company in Texas. And every employee, including the porter, had, was part of a profit sharing plan. Those were typical in American corporations in the 1950s and 60s. What happened to those? Policy changed, and the tax treatment of those programs for employers changed. It became less beneficial for corporations to have those kinds of programs. That was a tax. I mean, that was a policy change. And we could look across the whole system and see the way policies changed that have contributed to the level of inequality. So there are solutions to this.

**CHARLES BLOW:** Right. One of the things, you know, in addition to democracy and freedom and inequality that you write about is the very real, enormous task of coming into this enormous space, in this job and with a vision, which you have to have as a leader. What advice would you give to Darren Walker 12 years ago having lived out this life?

**DARREN WALKER:** Understand that leading Ford or leading any large, complicated organization is not a popularity contest. You hope to be respected, possibly admired. Don't expect to be liked or be popular. That leadership requires making decisions that will make some people unhappy. I also would say be comfortable following your instinct and wisdom. You need to listen more. You need to have a more participatory, consultative approach. And that is true. But you have to also be clear that you are the only person in this building responsible for the entire enterprise. But I just wish that I had listened more to myself on some of these decisions. And not, I mean, and understood that actually, you can consult and you have people participate, but you're the only person with decision rights.

**CHARLES BLOW:** Is that what you mean when you write about the tyranny of strategy or is tyranny of strategy something else?

**DARREN WALKER:** No, that—what I meant in, in that Stanford Social Innovation Review was more how foundation and foundation strategy tyrannizes our nonprofit partners, right? That they are terrorized by our strategies. And I said, when I was running a nonprofit in Harlem in the 90s, I never had anyone from my foundation actually say that to me. Like, “How can I help you? How can we help you at our foundation?” What people more, most often said is, “We have a community revitalization strategy for low income, disinvested Black and Brown communities in America, and we've chosen Harlem as one of the communities. And our strategy is to...” and so—rather than coming and saying to us, “What do you think our strategy should be if we want to revitalize Harlem?” And so that's the tyranny, right? That's the way in which foundations, in our arrogance, in our hubris, have sought to control. I also write about how the kind of funding that we do, which is, which has been primarily project based, is a way of, of controlling our grantees and, and in many ways constraining them. And how and why the imperative, and the call to action, needed to be, to go from being big project funders to being unrestricted, multi-year, general operating support funders, right? That we would fund nonprofits, if you actually believe in them, that you would give them unrestricted support to allow them to best deploy that capital. And so, part of this was, this essay was my saying, you know, at the Ford Foundation, we have committed, and I'm happy that we, we went from less than 20% general operating

support and, you know, 80% project support to now, the last data I saw we were 82% general operating support and multiyear support. And that happened because when I suggested that we look at making more multiyear grants, the CFO and the general counsel, not because they were being defensive, but they said because we—the board doesn't approve multi-year budgets, you can't, you're not authorized to make those grants unless you can do it out of the annual budget, which you can't really. And I thought, well, the board can approve multiyear budgets. They've never been asked to do that. But let's have a conversation about that. And come to find, actually, the board—the finance committee, the investment committee—went through an analysis and you demonstrated that we were mitigating the risk and making sure that even in the worst case scenarios, the whole stress test, we would be able to make pay out and pay our grant. And so, we now, our board does a three year grant. I mean, we did a five year BUILD initiative. And so we had to demonstrate, you know, pretty rigorously over five years we're committing this. We're committing \$1 billion now, but the market goes down 50%. Well, will we be able to pay those five years of grants? And the answer was yes. We can create a culture of yes. We can create a culture where we are open to and curious enough to say, well, yeah. And this was a great thing. Our, our investment—when I sort of raised the idea of a \$1 billion bond, the first person who said yes was the CIO. He was like, “Yeah, that's a really interesting idea. Let's.” Look, I mean, you know, but but like, I know some other CIOs would have been like, the answer is no. Or General Councils, the answer is no. And so to me, that's the whole point about being cultures of yes. And too many of us are cultures of no.

**CHARLES BLOW:** It's striking to me to, for you to, for me to read in the book about all the times when you were able to acknowledge that you were getting something wrong. Like, or, for instance, like the disability conversation.

**DARREN WALKER:** That was a disaster. That wasn't just wrong.

**CHARLES BLOW:** Well, explain it to us. What was the disaster in that?

**DARREN WALKER:** Well, the disaster was I wrote an essay in the *New York Times* in which I said, inequality in our country. And it was a whole thing about inequality in our country. And, and I, and I mentioned all the ways in which inequality manifests. And I never mentioned disability. And there was a lot of blowback. And I totally missed the boat, totally missed the boat. Noorain Khan, who's the great, is a great director in my office and introduced me to Judy Heumann who, like, changed my life. Because Judy, like, taught me about disability and how insidious the attitudes and the policy that—and it just was like, such an eye-opening experience for me. And it was embarrassing that it had to all be eye-opening before the public, before the staff, and everyone the way it was. But, yeah, I think it's really important.

**CHARLES BLOW:** I want to go back to one thing you said in the last answer. Why is it so important for you to, to steer Ford towards supporting more resilient institutions rather than just dealing with the projects?

**DARREN WALKER:** Well, I think we—I think philanthropy is, is easily dazzled. And we are looking for silver bullets, and we like shiny new objects and, and so something like a program to focus on strengthening institutions, it's just not sexy. It's not. I mean, helping the LDF get a new technology infrastructure is not sexy. There's no naming opportunity. But these things are the essential elements of success for these organizations. And yet it's so hard for donors because there's some wonderful new cool app or there's some wonderful new developer who has designed something that is dazzling. And so at the end of the day, institutions matter. We need these institutions that will be there on the front lines to remind people of what democracy looks like.

**CHARLES BLOW:** Is it possible for you to name a favorite essay from the book?

**DARREN WALKER:** I struggled with how much of this book to be personal policy solutions. And the policy and the solution part were straightforward. Actually, the hardest thing I puzzled over was including my eulogy to my David. And, and the reason I included my eulogy to my David was because he was so essential in my becoming president of Ford, and he was so incredibly proud of me, and he took such pride in my—the joy that I got. And he loved being at Ford and loved being the partner of the president of the Ford Foundation. And he loved traveling with me to our foreign offices. And because he really I mean, his sensibility around the visual arts so informed my understanding of contemporary art. And so I decided to include it. And I'm actually happy I did. It may feel a little disjointed. But he was an essential part of these last 12 years and before.

**CHARLES BLOW:** You know, the last time I interviewed you was in Atlanta. You were receiving an award from a Black philanthropist organization. And the person who introduced us said that you were one of her mentors. And she says that when you got this job, she said, “Oh, my God, Darren, you got the job?” But she said, you—but you leaned over to whisper to her, “Girl, can you believe they gave me the keys to this building?”

[laughter]

What has been your kind of fondest memory of being the president of Ford?

**DARREN WALKER:** I think that among the things that I am most proud of, and that has given me the most joy—and it may surprise some people—but has actually been our reconciliation with the Ford family. Because we—Henry Ford the second's departure from the Ford Foundation in 1976, was a blow to this institution, to our reputation, to our standing—not, you know, I mean, the Ford Foundation is the Ford Foundation. But it did not sit right with me that there was no visual representation of Henry Ford or any Ford in this building. When I came to Ford, we did not talk about Henry Ford. And understandably, Henry Ford has, to put it generously, a challenging narrative associated with him.

**CHARLES BLOW:** Diplomatic language.

[laughter]

**DARREN WALKER:** However, I have embraced Henry in all his complexity because he's a metaphor for America. I mean, on the one hand, Henry Ford was the first of the capitalists to talk about the threat of inequality. That we cannot pay our workers a wage that does not allow them to buy the products that they're manufacturing. And so he actually was the first to say, "I'm going to double the wages of my workers."

Now, he has some labor issues later on, but let's just be—on that issue, he was way ahead, out ahead. Right. And so it's like this country. I am willing to embrace the noble things that have come, and I'm willing to embrace the things that I regret and that have, and that are a stain on our history. And I've had many conversations with various members of the Ford family that they live with that stain. Right? And, and so when we had the opportunity to, to really reconcile, and it was really where, really happened because during the bankruptcy, when I chaired the, the philanthropy committee, as we were working towards a resolution, Bill Ford, the executive chairman and Henry's nephew, was interviewed and they said, "Well, congratulations. The Ford Foundation has done some important work in helping Detroit with the bankruptcy." And his response was, "The, what happened with the Ford Foundation broke my family's heart." But it ended with a real, you know, big gathering of, you know, several generations of Fords, of the Ford Foundation, and our having our first board meeting in Detroit, since the 50s, and then ultimately electing Henry Ford the third to our board.

And I think that I'm very proud of that because I think we are a better foundation because we are connected to the Fords. As I look back at the essay that I wrote with Edsel Ford, on the rapprochement with the family, is one that I'm particularly proud of. Well.

**CHARLES BLOW:** Well, I want to thank you so much for giving us time today. Congratulations on the book. Thank you so much. Thank you guys.

[applause]

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[The Ford Foundation logo is stacked in a bold black serif font, then transforms into a single letter “F” set inside a black circle.]

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