

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 1 Episode 3: Ford Foundation President Darren Walker
Is Everything That Matters Metric-able?
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Darren Walker: Um, add a device in Bluetooth, right? Make sure your device is turned on and discoverable...they'll edit this out, not to worry. It's amazing what editors can do, as you're probably learning.

Abigail Disney: Yes.

Darren Walker: Okay, it says your device is ready to go. Connected.

Abigail Disney: I'm Abby Disney and you're listening to All Ears, my podcast about inequality. Each week I get to call up some of the smartest and best people I know, and maybe even some I don't. We talk about the hot mess we've made of the economy and how this pandemic might just be our chance to understand and address some of the huge problems Americans are facing.

We've got to start somewhere and sometime, so why not here and why not now?

Okay, so here we go. I'm so excited about my guest today, partly because he's kind of my friend and we were neighbors for a long time, and I'm really missing his beautiful smile in the lobby and his beautiful bulldog. He is the president of the Ford Foundation, but really Darren Walker has done some of the best and most profound thinking about inequality that I know of. And long before COVID, he was talking about battling inequality through philanthropy and-- so we're going to talk about that. So welcome!

Darren Walker: Thank you for having me. I'm honored to be your guest and I miss you too. And so, does Mary Lou. Um, she always enjoyed seeing you and, um, your family in the building. But, um, yeah, life moves on and, uh, I'm happy though that we get this chance to catch up.

Abigail Disney: So, let's maybe start with your background, where you came from and how you went from a small Texas town to, you know, probably one of the biggest philanthropy jobs on earth.

Darren Walker: Well, Abby, I don't know if it's the biggest philanthropy job on earth, but it's certainly one that I'm honored to hold. My journey has in some ways been, um, a function of the generosity of philanthropists and as well a function of a government that believed that little boys and girls who lived in low-income, poor, um, and sometimes challenging environments deserved an education. We lived in a small town, Ames, Texas population, 1,200 and my mom and sister and I lived in the little shotgun shack of a house, maybe 500 square feet, and a woman turned up in our yard and said she was there to tell my mom about a new government program called Head Start.

So, I had the great benefit and privilege of being in the first class of Head Start in the summer of 1965 and with that experience, my thirst for knowledge and my love of reading and my curiosity was sparked. And I owe so much to President Johnson and Lady Bird who

had a vision for ending poverty in America and understood from their rural Texas experience what poverty looked like, even though they were privileged, they understood.

And this program, which in fact was piloted in New Haven, with support from the Ford Foundation was taken to scale. And so, in some ways, being president of the Ford Foundation is truly coming home.

Abigail Disney: That's a beautiful story. You're talking about a circle in a lot of ways, which feels to me like a better, um, a way for a society to function, right?

Darren Walker: I believe, um, we have to really understand the structures that produce so much inequality and the way in which our systems are designed to generate any equality. That's why when I read something that Dr. Martin Luther King said in 1968 about philanthropy, I was astonished because it was so powerful and what he said was the following: "Philanthropy is commendable, but it should not allow the philanthropist to overlook the economic injustice, which makes philanthropy necessary." Um, and, and that's our focus.

Abigail Disney: You know, I was going to read you that quote. I have it written down on a piece of paper next to me because it really is kind of extraordinary how he put that into words so long before anyone else had put it into words. And that's why I love your title of your book that talks about from generosity to justice, because we do really want to think of ourselves as generous people, and that's great, but that's about how we feel.

Darren Walker: Philanthropy has always been in part about the philanthropist. We know from the research that when you write a check or put money in the Salvation Army bucket, um, there are these enzymes that go off in your brain and you feel good about yourself. We want that to happen. What moving from generosity to justice does is it actually makes the giver, the donor, the philanthropist uncomfortable.

Because you are engaging in the questions of Dr. King's admonition to philanthropists. Why is this person on the street homeless or unemployed? Could there be something wrong with the system?

Abigail Disney: Yeah. And I, I know from, you know, my life that, um, the, the very first impulses around philanthropy have to do with kind of negating a bad feeling.

Everybody thinks that you should never ever feel guilty about anything. And I think it's been maybe the most constructive emotion I've, I've worked with in my life because it was motivating and it, and it forced me not just to hand out the money to the hungry people and so forth, but to stop and say, wait a minute, why are they hungry?

Darren Walker: So that dialogue is what a justice frame requires of the philanthropist, which is very difficult because philanthropists are by nature, privileged people. And privilege buys you insularity from having to engage in these kinds of uncomfortable, dark, and, and, and unappealing conversations.

Abigail Disney: Darren, you have kind of come from the world of money yourself. I mean, not just the years you spent in banking, but also you went off to the development corporation in Harlem. How has your attitude toward money changed over the years?

Darren Walker: Well, Abby, you and I started in different places in the world because I think, uh, you I think always felt, uh, guilty and that, uh, you weren't worthy of just all of this bounty that just by sheer luck of name and lineage came your way and you your entire life, I think, have sincerely and deeply, profoundly grappled with that privilege.

I always wanted to have money, not gobs of money. I grew up with my mother, uh, always worried about whether she would have money to pay the rent or the utilities not being shut off or the car not being repossessed.

These were features in my life until I literally went away to college and I was so scarred by that experience that I knew I needed to seek financial security. I didn't need wealth, but I did want to not be worried uh, the way my mother was. So, I came to New York, I went to Wall Street and I was a banker, and I did relatively well, and I'm happy about that, but that was not what I wanted to do in terms of my life's work.

I was always interested in my community and what I needed to do to make it better.

Abigail Disney: What have you seen come into focus, um, since COVID-19?

Darren Walker: COVID has revealed the people who are most vulnerable in our society today are the people who have always been most vulnerable in our society. And so, um, when you look at the health disparities, it isn't a surprise that, um, the people who are most likely to die of COVID-19 are black and brown people because black and brown people are the least likely to have access to a primary care physician. The least likely to be engaged in preventative medicine.

This virus is like a heat seeking virus for poor people and black and brown people in this country.

Abigail Disney: I'm on so many phone calls and so many zoom meetings lately with people who say, this is our chance. We can reset. There's this, there's a way to change this, but we're all locked in our houses, and that's what I'm trying to figure out. Is this a chance to reset? And if so, what would that look like? How would that work? How would we go about resetting?

Darren Walker: We must have a recognition by our leaders that something needs to change. I actually don't want to restart the old, uh, economy that we had. Um, I want an economy that can be more generative of opportunity for more people, not fewer people.

And I believe we're going to uh, have to have a reckoning in this country of who we are as America. Are we the generous, thoughtful people who, uh, believe that opportunity should abound in this country? Or are we going to, uh turn off that escalator and say that people who haven't gotten on it already aren't going to get on it.

Um, and I think if we move in that direction as a country, uh, it will bleed to a calamity that is far worse than this pandemic.

Abigail Disney: You know, you say that you believe in capitalism. Um, and you know, we have a significant chunk, especially of younger people who are saying capitalism is irreparable and, and inherently problematic.

Darren Walker: Well, it doesn't surprise me that large swabs of young people question the efficacy of capitalism as a way to organize an economy. For me, I have written pretty extensively about the failure of capitalism in the last decades to deliver shared prosperity and capitalism in most of my adult years has delivered inequality. It has delivered more hopelessness and more insecurity, all of which contribute to a weakening of people's trust and belief in their institutions, and ultimately capitalism, if not changed, will sync our democracy. And of course, the pandemic has exacerbated what was already a system that quite honestly was, it was broken.

Abigail Disney: Well, okay, let me, let me just go backwards for a second. Do you, do you think that the capitalism we are currently living is different than it was before?

Darren Walker: Well, capitalism has definitely changed in my lifetime, and I think there are reasons for that. We designed systems, whether they're economic systems or justice systems or education systems, and those systems by their design get us what we got for a reason.

So, what I mean by that is that there were decisions, choices that were made that changed, uh, our allocation of capital towards management and compensation of executives. For example, in 1982, the SEC, uh, changed a policy on stock repurchases by companies. Until then, stock repurchases were considered manipulation of the shares in changing that-- so making that choice, that then triggered what is now common practice of companies prioritizing its capital to buy back shares. Of its own company, right? Of its own stock. And there are things like that were designed into the system that created the imbalance that we see today. The way in which labor has lost so much ground is not by happenstance, there have been intentional political and policy decisions that, that brought about those outcomes.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. And, we have for a long time just accepted as Americans, the idea that the, the wide inequality that we're now looking at, is just a sort of necessary side effect of the free market, right?

Darren Walker: That was Andrew Carnegie's idea when he wrote the famous, uh, Gospel of Wealth in 1889. And in it he said there was nothing wrong with inequality. Um, it was, as you say, Abby, it was just a, it's a byproduct of a system that works. And our job as philanthropists is to take the proceeds of that inequality and seek to ameliorate the conditions of people who are harmed by it.

Abigail Disney: Philanthropy is a funny word, right? It really does um, make people feel like you're talking about some kind of swanky club that everybody's not in. When I was just starting out, there tended to be no funding for things like activism and organizing and

advocacy, because you couldn't really actually tell me the number of people who were changed by what you were doing. Do you think that all the emphasis on measurement and evaluation was good for philanthropy?

Darren Walker: I think that much damage has been done by the idea of quote unquote strategic philanthropy. This notion that a group of foundation staff and technocrats can design theories of change and organize around that theory and expect that the desired outcomes will be achieved.

We privilege the highly credentialed class in philanthropy over the wisdom and knowledge that comes from living in, living with, and being impacted by the problem. And so, the people who are closest to the problems are the people who most likely can help design the solutions. But unfortunately, they are often the last consulted in the design of the solution.

And it's one of the reasons why the, uh, roads of villages in Africa and the, uh, streets and slums, um, in favelas are filled with the detritus of past failed development initiatives because these programs were done and, and placed in and put upon people rather than engaging them in the first place.

While I believe in accountability and metrics, we have to ask ourselves, what are we measuring for? And - is everything that matters metricable, and I can just off the top of my head name things like our support for a project on Sally Hemings at, um, Monticello. At the time, the narrative about Sally Hemings was that she was, was basically a concubine, but then she was not, uh, Jefferson's that there were all the other men.

And that it just so happened, yes, she had these mulatto quote unquote children, but they were not Jefferson's. One of the greatest moments of my time at Ford was being, uh, two summers ago on the lawn at Monticello with 300 of the Hemmings descendants, and to see the opening of the Sally Hemings exhibition there, I asked myself, how would we measure Sally Hemings getting her dignity back? How would we put into, uh, a metric? Uh, the fact that America is coming to grips and must come to grips with its racial history and, and that investments like this contribute to that. How would we measure that?

Abigail Disney: Yeah. You know, I often think about the Highlander School, and all of the effects that school had on Civil Rights in this country. For people who don't know what it was, it was a folk school that was established in rural Tennessee, and they taught civil disobedience. They taught the organizing, and tactics and strategy. Rosa Parks attended. Martin Luther King did many, many, many of the leading lights in the Civil Rights movement.

Of course, it's like one of the great crimes that we treat Rosa Parks as though she was just sort of some kind of natural, she was tired, she sat down on the bus. She was sitting down strategically. She had a plan. She was thinking about it. Um, but I keep asking myself what a place like Highlander find funding in contemporary philanthropy.

Darren Walker: I think the challenge for philanthropy today is that we don't invest in institutions. And what we get enamored of in contemporary philanthropy is the, uh, social entrepreneur who has the coolest idea, or the app developer who has figured out some tactical way to improve, uh, water and sanitation or whatever it may be, which is all

important, but without an understanding of the role of institutions over time when you are seeking social justice, social change.

And I can think about such an institution, the NAACP Legal Defense and Education fund, the LDF as it's known. We were making grants to the LDF in the 1960s in support of its litigation against the States of Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia to, uh, demand access to voting by blacks who were denied access, whose votes were suppressed through all kinds of subterfuge and poll taxes and literacy tests and all sorts of things.

We literally just made a round of grants to the LDF for lawsuits in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia on the issue of voter suppression. And, and I say that to say, if you are working on social justice, if in a democracy you are working on, uh, ideas of social change, you can never take for granted that progress will be permanent.

And therefore, you must have institutions that are resilient and durable and ready at the drop of a hat for whatever the challenge may be. And so, thank God for the LDF.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. You know, I think there's a lot of people talking about getting back to normal. Um, but nothing was normal about where we were before.

Darren Walker: You're so right! Abby, I'm getting a signal that I have an 11 o'clock zoom call that I'm hosting!

Abigail Disney: Oh no! I'm so sorry.

Darren Walker: No, don't be sorry. I'm sorry. This is a great conversation, Abby. I want to thank you for inviting me to be on your podcast.

Abigail Disney: Thank you. And it's my job to thank you. Anyway, you've, usurped my job of thanking you. You are wonderful, Darren Walker. You really, truly are. Thank you so much for coming on.

Darren Walker: Thank you, Abby. I enjoyed it and I send lots of love to you.

Abigail Disney: To keep up with Darren Walker and his work at The Ford Foundation, follow him on twitter @darrenwalker. And if you enjoyed our conversation, be sure to check out Darren's book *From Generosity to Justice: A New Gospel of Wealth*, which can be found wherever books are sold.

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Our theme music was composed by Bob Golden.

Thanks for listening.